

## **ON THE CATWALK – WIT LIBRARIES LEARNING SUPPORT MODEL**

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### **The authors**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The need for Learning Support programmes in academic libraries is discussed. The development and progress of WIT Libraries programme, from its origin in 1996 to its present day initiatives, is documented. The service began on a small scale in a small library building in 1996. Today, seven years and a new library building later, the service is going from strength to strength. Advances have been made in line with learner needs and expectations and according to the goals of the Library Strategic Plan. The programme currently consists of a number of modules, including a specific programme for 1<sup>st</sup> years, one for 2<sup>nd</sup> to final years and tailored research sessions for postgraduates and staff. Furthermore, it incorporates a combination of modes of delivery. Face-face training is complemented by an evolved online element.

### **KEYWORDS**

Academic libraries, Learning Support, Information Literacy, Lifelong Learning, Integrated programmes, Hybrid courses, Blended learning, Curriculum integration, Online courses.

## Introduction

The Luke Wadding Library at Waterford Institute of Technology, one of the most modern academic library buildings in Ireland and one of the most innovative in Europe, was officially opened in 2002. A Strategic Plan for the library's future development was agreed in the same year, which made a specific commitment to learning, stating that *WIT Libraries will contribute directly to learning outcomes by being at the forefront in the development of integrated information literacy programmes for lifelong learning.* (WIT Libraries,2002,1).

This article describes the creation and progress of such programmes and suggests a strategy for their future development. The library's Learning Support model is outlined. It incorporates formal and informal practices for both on-campus and distance learners and provides a framework for the development and delivery of *"various programmes of instruction, education and exploration provided by libraries to users to enable them to make more effective, efficient and independent use of information sources to which these libraries provide access"* (Fleming,1990).

## Learning Support

The Learning Support model was first formulated in 1996 when a structured service, following best practice in libraries abroad was established in WIT Libraries. From the outset, the initiative prioritised user needs: its initial remit reading as follows:

- to train staff and students in the effective use of library resources
- to provide staff and students with transferable information seeking skills
- to encourage staff and students to seek the assistance of library staff when necessary

The scene was set for the creation and development of the following programmes:

- walk-around library tours
- 1 hour tutorial on general aspects of the library service for students
- training on specific databases for specific groups, such as the Barbour Index for Engineering students
- one-to-one training sessions for academic staff

The service was phased in over the 1996-97 academic year. From the beginning, it aligned itself with the principles of information literacy and lifelong learning and its ultimate goal was the creation of independent, information literate, lifelong learners. In 2000, the service faced new challenges. In that year, the library re-located to a bigger, better building that housed a dedicated Learning Support Centre, library staffing and library resources increased. Library skills training provision to library staff as well as the learning community became more relevant than ever. Expanding resources and rising student numbers meant that Learning Support was under pressure to expand and adapt to meet user needs.

To quote, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (The Irish Library Council) on this point,

*"The quality of higher education can be determined by access to library facilities, adequate library funding, sufficient library staffing and availability of information technology. As a result of larger numbers attending third level education, there has been a strain on the libraries of these institutions. The diversity of courses offered, project work, increased research and postgraduate programmes have also contributed to greater demands being placed on third level libraries".* (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna,1999,33).

In order to cater for these demands, extra staff were allocated to the area of Learning Support and improved training facilities were made available in its learning centre. As numbers grew and resources expanded, and as information literacy began to be recognised as a subject in its own right, the need for a methodical approach to

training became evident. It was recognised in WIT, as in elsewhere, that *“purposeful and well-planned programs need to be put in place to expand the integration of IL or information fluency throughout the curriculum and as a basis for lifelong learning”* (Dewey, 2001,xv).

The need to equip staff and students with transferable information seeking skills for lifelong learning was prioritised. The service sought to create information literate individuals, who *“know how to learn because know how information is organised, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them”* (ALA, 1989).

Plans were put in place for the further development of WIT Libraries Learning Support programmes with a more systematic, organised and specific approach to training. The initial 1-hour student tutorial underwent expansion and a follow-up 2-hour module for 2<sup>nd</sup>- final year students was also implemented, as were postgraduate and staff research skills programmes.

### **Undergraduate Programme**

Today, three years later, the Institute considers that the Library’s Learning Support Centre is a very successful initiative. The Learning Support Centre currently hosts a series of programmes, including introductory information skills sessions for undergraduates, refresher courses for 2<sup>nd</sup> to final years, and research support sessions for postgraduates and staff. The ultimate aim of all programmes is to equip participants with a transferable set of information literacy skills, so as to improve the quality of users research output and ensure lifelong learning.

The current undergraduate library instruction module is an extension of the initial 1-hour tutorial. It specifically targets first year students, who despite some arguments to the contrary - the idea, for instance, that students today are so computer literate that they do not need research classes anymore; that they know all they possibly can know about searching for information because of their years of computing experience – have very limited knowledge of library research.

Classes are conducted by Learning Support staff, who provide a ‘one stop shop’ for information skills training. A familiar teacher presence (academic staff are present for most classes) puts students at their ease, and is an ideal setting for the initial delivery of information literacy concepts. Given that many topics need to be tackled within a single session, the classes are ‘hands-on’, practical and informative. Sessions are held in a traditional, face-to-face classroom environment, and include interactive components as well as breakout sessions for group work.

The programme, which was first offered in September 2001, has been designed to help students to become sophisticated information users. The training sessions in the Centre focus on the concept of giving the learner access to resources and ultimately, then, more control over his/her own learning experience. The programme aims to combat ‘library anxiety’ among first years by introducing them both to the library and to a basic set of information literacy skills. Students attend a library orientation tour, plus a 3-hour broad based programme, which builds on the foundations set by the original 1-hour session (Lee et al, 1999).

The 3-hour programme covers such aspects of information literacy as critical thinking, researching and referencing and evaluation of print and electronic resources. The first hour concentrates on introducing and developing critical thinking concepts, subject specific searching and evaluating and referencing print and electronic resources.

Students are encouraged to question the basics of information and to cultivate critical thinking skills. In this way, they develop an understanding of the nature of information

and realise that they need to learn to control information, rather than allowing it to control them. In other words, they gain an awareness of the importance of information literacy, as noted by Breivik

*“Within today’s information society, the most important learning outcome for all students is their being able to function as independent lifelong learners. The essential enabler to reaching that goal is information literacy”.* (Breivik, 2000)

The second hour introduces and explains the basics of our electronic database collection. The final hour concentrates on the Internet, on tips for searching online resources and for citing references. In line with Dewald’s characteristics of good library instruction, (Sharpless-Smith, 2001, 5-6) the idea that, *“the retention of materials is much higher when it relates to a specific subject being taught to them -- students are more highly motivated to learn”*, hours 2 and 3 are pre-planned according to the requirements of individual classes.

Learning Support staff liaise with academic staff to integrate the information skills sessions into courses and to tailor the content according to the needs of specific groups. Marketing students are, for instance, shown how to use the library catalogue to search for material relevant to marketing. The database tutorial focuses on the library’s business databases, while the Internet element emphasises useful Internet resources for marketing.

The process occurs in co-operation and consultation with individual lecturers and is a first step towards what Farber describes as the ideal co-operative relationship. *“where both the teacher’s objectives and the librarian’s objectives are not only achieved, but are mutually reinforcing – the teacher’s objectives being those that help students attain a better understanding of the course’s subject matter, and the librarian’s objectives being those that enhance the student’s ability to find and evaluate information”.* (Farber, 1999, 233).

The undergraduate programme is heavily advertised and booked in the first term. Adverts are placed in the Institute’s newsletter and in the Library Bulletin. The programme is promoted on the library website. Demand is greatest in the lead-up to Christmas when the Learning Support Centre has a busy schedule. Academic staff are more willing to ‘free up’ their classes at this stage of the year and are also anxious that their students attend library skills training as early as possible in their first year. WIT Libraries is also conscious of *“its moral responsibility to teach students information retrieval skills at the earliest opportunity. These skills enable users to pursue personal interests and fulfil study objectives”* (Clarke, 1999, 242)

### **Response Rate**

On many levels, the undergraduate programme serves its purposes well. The students who attend the programme benefit from it. They have an increased awareness of a selection of information literacy skills and are likely to become capable library users who ask informed questions of the library staff. Their coursework is, as a consequence, also likely to improve. This, in turn, reinforces lecturer recognition of the library’s role in the learning process and gains Institute wide support for the library.

Those who attend the 1st year programme generally return to the Learning Centre in their 2nd and subsequent years for refresher courses, reinforcing the point that *“Library and information literacy skills cannot be acquired instantly in one bibliographic instruction session or course-integrated effort. They are developed over time”.* (McCartin, 2001, 173)

A tiered approach - where each programme systematically builds on the previous one - is adopted throughout. The Undergraduate programme for 2nd to final year students expands upon the 1st year programme, its key elements being:

- Effective use of WIT Libraries for research purposes
- In depth examination of online databases
- Effective research on the Internet - tips for search strategies etc
- Critical evaluation of print and web-based resources
- Citing references using the Harvard System

The programme is directly relevant to student assignments and thesis projects. This is its unique selling point. Students are offered a helping hand in their hours of most need. Not surprisingly, attendance is high.

### **Current Position**

Despite some initial efforts, our Learning Support programmes are not yet fully integrated into the curriculum at WIT. Library training is not a compulsory component of any course, thus students attend at their lecturer's discretion. Programme participation relies on lecturers initially booking the classes, and subsequently 'giving up' their own class time for the library class. Although, a percentage of lecturers are strong proponents of the library, this haphazard approach to attending training is not ideal. It results in some students receiving regular library instruction across their years at WIT, while others receive none, and makes for an overall unevenness of information literacy skills among graduates.

Our recognition of this reality is a first step towards amending it. The need to establish the library as an active partner in the educational process in line with the goals of the Institute, is well enunciated by management of the Institute. The Library Service has placed curriculum integration high on its list of priorities for the coming academic year and has launched a whole-hearted campaign in its favour.

This involves not only working with academic staff, so that principles of information literacy may be integrated across the curriculum in a variety of classes, but also campaigning for campus wide policies to embed information literacy into the curriculum as a subject in its own right.

*"Library services should be regarded as an integral resource and not merely an optional part of higher education ---- libraries alone cannot accomplish the task. The teaching faculty can contribute to effective IL programmes by encouraging the students to use libraries and build information usage into their teaching programmes".( Kavulya,2003,221).*

The Institute Librarian uses opportunities to advocate the integration of these courses, and the impact of high profile events, such as the launch of OLAS, Ireland's first online information literacy programme, have been very successful.

### **Library Information Desk**

Information Desk staff act as facilitators and communicators and have a key role in promoting information literacy at WIT. In dealing with face-to-face enquiries from students, they are in a position to promote the use of Learning Support programmes for those learners who find the transition from passive to active learner difficult.

By its nature, the Information Desk can target those who are not always reached by the formal Learning Support programme. The Librarian has emphasised that Information Desk staff must be as approachable and informative as possible about all library operations. The library service's 'roaming librarian' policy, where those on duty at the desk make themselves available for queries beyond the desk – at the open access PCs, for example, or in the photocopying area – is successful, and leads to many opportunities for student participation in Learning Support programmes.

## **New Initiatives**

While these initiatives are reasonably successful and while WIT Library Service strongly advocates its formal and informal Learning Support programmes, the library service does recognise shortfalls in these programmes and is working to amend them. It is clear, for instance, that a once-off contact programme held in the first term - a time when new students have many other concerns - is not entirely adequate. It is also clear that an on-site course that is restricted as to time and place will not be an option for every learner, and it is especially clear that for its ongoing future development, the Learning Support programme needs to be integrated into the curriculum at WIT. This is why WIT Libraries have developed comprehensive online supports.

## **Online Learning**

In 1999, Barnard predicted that

*“Greater demand for educational opportunities and information services that are no longer place-based will challenge institutions to evolve and redirect resources to serve a growing non-traditional student population, a population that will increasingly expect university and library services delivered to their desktops.”* (Barnard, 1999)

In WIT's case, this prediction rings true. Library staff are very aware of the influx of non-traditional learners, and recognise their diverse learning requirements. Given that the library aims to support these needs in as comprehensive a way as it supports those of traditional ones, one of its priorities is to keep abreast of developments in teaching, training and learning. Online learning is a case in point.

This phenomenon is not specific to WIT, but is a universal one that is further explained in terms of the changing nature of teaching and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The great majority of library practitioners are well aware of the move beyond classroom-based education towards online learning and demands for flexible modes of course delivery. Information skills online courses are a reflection of this reality and an active response to it.

It is worthwhile to recapitulate the benefits of online courses briefly: they are capable of reaching a broad range of learners any time, any place, anywhere - and they advantage learners in a number of ways.

- They offer an alternative to traditional classroom based education - new and exciting and more independent modes of learning. Learner autonomy and choice are maximised.
- They offer greater access to a wider mix of learners and can feasibly be accessed round the clock – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.
- They offer greater convenience and flexibility to each individual learner and are not place or time dependent. The expense of travel and time away from home/ work is obliterated. The online learner can study from her own desktop and can schedule the course according to her own particular lifestyle.

Online courses bring particular benefits to the non-traditional learner whose learning requirements are not synonymous with those of traditional learners. Non-traditional learners generally follow rigid schedules and therefore need more flexible learning environments that are broadly unrestricted to time and place. WIT welcomes non-traditional students. Entry is not, for instance, restricted to those who have completed second level education. There is a variety of other entry mechanisms including the mature student option and the special needs case.

## **Online Learning Support**

WIT has a policy of providing a range of learning opportunities to attract school leavers, second chance students and mature students alike. This, coupled with its

belief in the principles of lifelong learning, has necessitated the development of an online learning support mechanism at WIT Libraries. This necessity is further intensified by the fact that WIT has recently purchased WebCT, its first VLE, and has subcontracted the library as an implementation manager.

To this end, WIT Libraries website has been, and will continue to be, instrumental in providing online information literacy training to a broad range of learners at the place and time of their choice, when most convenient and when most relevant. The website was initiated in 1996 and has developed in tandem with the Learning Support programme. It currently incorporates a strong learning support element. Classes are advertised on the site and details of the various courses are listed. An Internet tutorial, which has recently been updated, was created and hosted on the library website in 2000, while a series of subject and help guides were put online in 2002.

The site's latest feature is OLAS\*, WIT Libraries' online, self-paced information literacy tutorial. OLAS was created according to international best practice and was launched in October 2003. Its overall structure accords with SCONUL's Seven Pillars Model of information literacy, while its learning outcomes are based, with kind permission, on those produced both by CAUL (Council of Australian University Librarians) and by Peter Godwin (South Bank University, London).

OLAS consists of nine online modules, each of which covers a particular aspect of information literacy, and each of which can be accessed on a 'need to know' basis. It is place and time independent, available to all learners 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. It offers greater flexibility and convenience to each individual learner, and complements, and where necessary, replaces, our existing face-to-face offerings.

OLAS advantages students in a number of ways. Those, who have availed of the undergraduate programme, can refresh their skills from any PC connected to the Internet, while those who have no background in information literacy can develop an understanding of its concepts by working through any or all of OLAS' modules at their own pace.

OLAS enables us to potentially reach more learners than we can through classroom sessions alone. It takes the learner beyond the classroom walls, and indeed, beyond the library. It offers learners out of hours, year-round support, at the place and time of their choice, and in a manner that is convenient and flexible. Information literacy concepts are available at the touch of a button, all across the learner's lifetime and not just in pre-Christmas term.

\*an adaptation of the Irish word, *eo/as*, meaning knowledge.

### **The Future**

In line with the goals of the Library Strategic Plan, WIT Libraries undergraduate learning support model forms the basis of an integrated information literacy programme at WIT. The service currently incorporates a combination of modes of delivery. Formal and informal initiatives co-exist alongside supplementary online components. The programme consists of face-face classes, an information service and the newly created OLAS. It caters for diverse learning styles and provides comprehensive learning support mechanisms for a broad range of learners across their lifetimes.

Curriculum integration is the next challenge. Learning support staff are collaborating with academic staff to build an information literacy programme that can benefit students for the rest of their lives, and will also seek their co-operation to integrate this interdisciplinary programme into the curriculum at WIT.

First steps towards this end involve moulding our current Learning Support model into what Pincas defines as a 'hybrid course', that is, "combinations of web-based on-demand learning and some form of tutoring" (2002). Hybrid courses offer learners a best of two worlds - the convenience of online courses, without the complete loss of face-face classes, and make for a type of blended learning, whereby online activities are supplemented by a certain amount of classroom contact. Their ultimate goal is to integrate the finer features of face-to-face learning with those of online learning to promote active, independent learning and reduce class time.

Re-designing traditional courses into successful hybrid courses is challenging, but highly possible where user education and online services are sufficiently evolved. In our case, we are proposing that the tutorials offered in the Learning Support Centre be re-modelled to work in harmony with OLAS and with the services available at the Information Desk, and that all three together form a version of Pincas's hybrid course.

Our starting point is OLAS, which we will shortly be developing as a complete, online information literacy course on WebCT. The potentials of WebCT are great – they will allow us to enhance 'the look and feel' of OLAS and to further improve its interactive elements and quizzes, while consistently maintaining quality control measures. OLAS will satisfy the web-based, on-demand element of our 'hybrid course'.

As regards, the tutoring element, we will be relying on an adapted version of our face-to-face tutorial. Further enhancements are necessary before we can claim it as a comprehensive course component. To this end, and in a bid to match WIT course standards, its learning outcomes are currently being documented. The outcomes identify the tutorial as a subject-specific class-based programme, tailored according to the needs of particular groups, and set it within the overall framework of OLAS. The two are seen to work in tandem towards the production of information literate, lifelong learners at WIT.

The Information Desk will continue to provide informal learning support. It is envisaged that its role will be expanded to include an online support element, such as an e-mail facility, to deal with information literacy related queries. Staff training will be managed accordingly. Information Desk and Learning Support staff will undergo shared training in the future.

Following this model, the individual strands of our current Learning Support programme will combine to form one core skills or hybrid information literacy course. The library's traditional teaching formula as applied in its Learning Support Centre will be integrated with its online tutorial to provide comprehensive learning support mechanisms for a broad range of undergraduates across their lifetimes, and to achieve what Salmon describes as "*a balance between applying useful older concepts about learning and the implementation of innovation using the best of networked technologies*". (Salmon, 2002, 2).

If we are to officially integrate our proposed information literacy course into the curriculum at WIT, our first step is to formulate a specific plan of action, and our second is to proceed accordingly. Our plan agrees that our integrated course will be a compulsory element of every undergraduate programme, that it will be delivered by the library and credited by WIT, and that it will be rolled out on a pilot basis in conjunction with each faculty.

Within this framework, the following scenario is feasible: a class group will begin their information literacy training by attending a compulsory face-to-face session, which will consist of an introduction to information literacy in general, and to OLAS in particular, as well as subject specific training on our print and electronic resources. The students will then be instructed to complete OLAS and complete quizzes within a particular time frame. Grades will be generated by WebCT and returned to the

lecturer in charge, who will credit the group accordingly. Results will count towards end of year mark.

Institutionalising the system involves a number of stages. Formal procedures must be adhered to before it can be put in motion. These include writing up our proposal for an integrated information literacy module in the correct format for a prospective WIT course, discussing its potentials with the Registrar and various Heads of School, adapting it according to their suggestions, and finally, partnering with them to propose our course to the Academic Council for ratification purposes.

### **Conclusion**

Our roadmap is set. It has been drafted according to the goals of the Library Strategic Plan and in response to learner needs and expectations. It proposes integrating our information literacy programmes to form a version of Pincas's hybrid course, and in doing so, signposts a high impact, economic route for strategic development of Institute Library services.

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