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## **From the web to writing: the role of collaboration in providing first year university students with the skills to succeed**

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## **From the web to writing: the role of collaboration in providing first year university students with the skills to succeed.**

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### **Abstract**

*In contemporary university environments not only have student populations become more diverse, but also institutions have embraced technological advances to create new facets to the teaching and learning process. The challenges offered by virtual learning as well as the impact of email and e-learning remain largely under-researched both broadly and in relation to first year transition. First year students are now expected to not only acquire the implicit academic discourse in a timely fashion but also master the computing skills so central to contemporary university delivery. Skills central to effective and efficient academic research and writing are often perceived in an atomized and disparate way. The information skills program outlined in this paper seeks to forge connections between the processes involved in locating information and producing essays. Utilising the requisite knowledge of staff from two areas, the objective is to highlight to students how skills required to obtain information in an often virtual environment can further inform assignment preparation. In this way the role of information literacy is negotiated as intrinsic to the essay writing process as opposed to something that is seen as external. The program has been developed in consultation with academic staff to ensure that relevant research topics are demonstrated. The paper will highlight facets of the workshop and explain the reasoning behind its construction and ongoing enhancement, as well as provide justification of the need for such programs within university environments in the light of increasing diverse student populations.*

### **Introduction**

The increased access or ‘massification’ of higher education has led to a more diverse student population and it is the responsibility of all university staff to make sure that the “open-door” university does not become the “revolving door” university (Cope & Hannah, 1975). The problems that students encounter upon enrolment include issues related to finances, lack of knowledge about technology and little understanding about university expectations. Undoubtedly, many commencing students encounter educational situations with little or no understanding of expectations or structural frameworks, forced to navigate an institution’s ‘hidden curriculum’ in isolation. This situation is further complicated by the increasing reliance on computer technology and the need for students to acquire skills in searching and locating material in an information rich

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context. First year students are expected to adapt and acculturate to the new university environment in a timely and fluid fashion, however, this is a radical adjustment and the use of technology adds additional facets to this first year transition. Gatz and Hirt (2000) argue that the increasing usage of these technological forms has altered the intrinsic character of university life and suggest that 'the theories and models we use to understand students should reflect those changes' (p317). This paper charts the development of a workshop program designed to better prepare and orientate first year students to the demands of academic literacy in this technologically demanding environment. The workshop program responded to perceived student need and the paper highlights how this is an evolving initiative informed by evaluation and feedback. The paper also highlights how this activity had further unexpected outcomes, relating to both the resulting cross-fertilisation of skills of the staff involved and also, a better conceptualisation of how the 'business' of both university libraries and academic support services can be blended in efficient and effective ways.

### **Technology in the Learning Context**

Embodiment theory recognises the importance of integrating mind and body as opposed to differentiating between the two (Beckett, 2003). This theoretical perspective can be related to the educational field to indicate how the actual physical bodies of students and teachers as vital to the learning process; however, the increasing technolisation of the classroom has led to an absence of this physicality and can lead to a 'disembodiment' of learning. Obviously, this situation not only has pedagogical implications but also effects the transition of first year students as the academic and social engagement perceived as vital to successful engagement with the university environment may be absent from more virtually orientated learning scenarios.

*Current, emerging and as yet-undreamed-of information technologies are forcing serious reconsiderations of our assumptions of how, when and where instruction (and education more broadly) can be delivered and learning promoted.*  
(Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998, p161-162)

Ultimately the reliance and integration of technology within university structures is only going to grow given the market forces that most institutions are forced to compete within,

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but as Allport (2001) points out, access to these technologies is skewed towards certain populations and social groups. Older students and those from low SES backgrounds may have had only limited exposure to the technological applications now vital to the university teaching environment.

The so-called massification of higher education has led to what Rendon (1994) terms a 'tapestry of differentiation' (p.33) amongst students. No longer is the typical candidate a school leaver originating from predominantly white, middle class enclaves where the tradition of attending further education is well established. Instead, many students now access university through non-traditional modes of entry and as such, may not readily identify with or adhere to the values and practices found there. Mann (2001, p. 11) refers to the beginning student as being relatively powerless, placed within an alien environment. Mann argues that students may not readily engage with this environment as they lack of a 'sense of ownership' (p. 11) about the university experience struggling to 'bridge' between prior experience and the new world of knowledge they are entering.

### **Taking responsibility**

In the past, there has been a tendency to consider students as responsible for their academic experiences, particularly their failures within the institutional framework; but increasingly there is an acknowledgement of the key role played by university frameworks (Thomas, 2002). Indeed, in the British Select Committee on Education and Employment's report (2001) on retention within higher education, the British Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, is quoted as stating that the rate of withdrawal is reflective of the 'culture and workings of the institution' rather than the 'background or nature of the students' (cited in Thomas, 2002, p.424). The recognition of university responsibility is particularly pertinent in this era of massification when university populations are increasingly diverse. Australian Universities are similarly challenged to provide the necessary academic skills set to first year students in a timely and economic way. Kantanis (2000) points out that while independent learning is presumed and expected within the university environment, the actual definition and behaviours associated with this practice are rarely made explicit to students.

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This collaborative information skills seminar was one approach developed to off-set such assumed and implicit knowledge. The program was offered at a small subsidiary campus of a larger metropolitan institution, located in a region that is recognised as being economically and socially disadvantaged (ABS data, 2001 -2003). The Ourimbah Campus is multi-sectorial and has three partners including the University of Newcastle, TAFE NSW and the local community college. An array of university programs are offered at this location and in turn, these attract a diversity of students ranging from school leavers right up to students in their sixties and seventies who are often simply interested in enriching their life and increasing their knowledge. Most of these students have a number of responsibilities and activities competing for time in their daily life and only a tiny percentage of the students live on campus, the rest either live in the surrounding suburbs or commute. For many of this student body, there may be little understanding or prior knowledge about this educational setting, this *'foreign language'* of university life (Stone, 2004).

### **Development of the Program**

The Bachelor of Oral Health commenced at the Ourimbah Campus of the University of Newcastle in Semester 1, 2005. The Subject Liaison Librarian worked closely with the Oral Health Program Coordinator to build up the library collection, and offer training to students in research skills in catalogue searching, using Journal databases and effective internet searching. Late in the first semester of the Oral Health program, the Oral Health Program co-coordinator discussed with the librarian her concerns about the poor level of research and essay writing skills displayed by the majority of students in their first submitted assignment. The majority of these students had not completed their HSC and had little or no experience of writing an academic paper. In the discussion, the idea of combining a research skills presentation with an essay writing skills presentation was discussed. A two-pronged approach was devised which would draw on the skills of both library and learning development staff.

This collaborative project seeks to better initiate information literacy skills for first year students. The program was designed to connect processes involved in seeking

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information and producing essays into a seamless continuum rather than present these as disparate and isolated skills. Utilising the requisite knowledge of staff from two areas, in an innovative, team teaching approach, the objective was to highlight to students how skills required to obtain information in an often virtual environment can further inform assignment preparation.

**Research skills as part of lifelong learning.**

The program sought to negotiate information literacy as intrinsic to the essay writing process as opposed to something that is seen as external. The program has been developed in close consultation with academic staff to ensure that relevant research topics are demonstrated. The Oral Health Coordinator was asked to provide a typical essay topic that could be used for each example in the research and writing process.

The initial session was in the form of a 1.5 hour seminar to 60 students utilising a defined tandem method to illustrate the logical processes involved in researching and writing an academic paper. The students were shown the flow of scientific information from a research idea through to publication, and subsequent peer commentary. The presentation detailed the skills in topic analysis; ways to determine what information resources are required; the importance of keywords and incorporating Boolean operators and truncation; NEWCAT and Journal Database demonstrations; essay structure and writing process; and finally, a significant amount of time was spent on referencing using Vancouver style and academic integrity.

**Developing the program**

Comments and questions from the students during the seminar indicated that the students comprehended the skills that were being demonstrated, and could not only see how they could apply them to their own research and essay writing but also how the processes could be blended to facilitate more time efficient and relevant approaches to researching and writing. Feedback from the Oral Health Program Coordinator was very positive

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Thanks heaps for this mornings session. I thought it was just perfect....The one problem with doing such a good job is that you do realize I will want it every year now.(Taylor, 2006)

In a follow up email after the final year assessment tasks had been marked, the Coordinator stated:

Very well done I say. ... I thought it was a good session...my perception is that the essays were better constructed and on the whole more effort made to improved research. Some students took advantage of the learning centre and this was obvious. (Taylor, 2007)

The success of the program led to other members of academic staff requesting similar joint sessions. In 2007, a session in the Bachelor (Sports) Science was requested. Again, a typical assignment question was provided by the academic to enable the workshop to have the highest relevance to Sport Science students. Particular attention was paid in this instance to the skills required for a literature review of refereed journals. The workshop also further addressed the issue of plagiarism as this was identified as an ongoing need. The format was changed for this subject, with a one hour lecture to 90 students, followed by a one hour Question and Answer session three weeks later, after the students had an opportunity to research their topics. Feedback was again very constructive and will be incorporated into future sessions:

My students had positive feedback on your lecture sessions for SPOR1010 in week 3 and 6. They learned a lot in the session, but they still had trouble actually finding journal articles. I guess a more practical session (where they look up papers themselves) would be great, but that would be very hard for 90 students! I think the second session provided them with a good opportunity to ask you questions, but not many students used this opportunity. I was thinking of maybe setting them the task to all come up with at least one question to ask you for the tutorial before the repeat lecture, so that we all get a better idea of what they don't understand/know yet. (Janse de Jonge, 2007)

On reflection there may have been several reasons why the Question and Answer session was not as successful as anticipated. Several students did take the opportunity to ask questions about search strategies in specific journal databases. Clarification was

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sought on the effective use of truncation symbols in different databases. However, numerous students were confused about how to find a copy of an article, when the full-text database being used only provided a citation. Other students may have been reluctant to ask questions in a lecture theatre environment, which can be quite intimidating. Indeed, some students may not have actually begun their research yet, while others may have had the same questions that had already been asked.

Oral Health requested a repeat session for new students in 1<sup>st</sup> Semester 2007. The seminar was adjusted to reflect a different topic and more emphasis was placed on the value of attending the Library's hands-on Journal Database workshops. Students were also urged to come to the library to seek assistance when required, and the subject librarian noticed a marked increase in reference questions from Oral Health students.

### **Where to from here?**

The success and the popularity of the program continues to grow. Recently, an additional session was offered to the Bachelor of Oral Health in the "Communicating as a Professional" series, which was conducted in early September. Oral Health, Sport Science, Nursing and Podiatry have all indicated that they would like similar sessions in 2008. It is hoped that other Schools and Faculties on the campus may also adopt the program with their respective Subject Liaison Librarians. In recognition of the success and the relevance of the program, this collaborative teaching model has also been picked up by the University of Newcastle's Quality Service Assessment project, which follows International Customer Service Standard protocols, as an example of effective and innovative partnership between service units. The Collaborative program will be included in the final report to Library Senior Management.

However, not only have students benefited from this endeavour but also the staff involved have gained vital exposure to related specialist areas, which further informs effective practice. The program will be further evaluated in 2008 with plans to conduct formal student feedback both immediately after the session and after assignment submission. Changes will be made to future sessions, with additional hands-on journal database searching workshops scheduled as a follow-up for the students to attend. More time will also be spent discussing plagiarism, and the need for thorough referencing



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**Conclusion**

Adopting the collaborative cross-team teaching model has had numerous benefits. A tool for teaching effective lifelong information skills has been developed through the professional skills and specialist knowledge of qualified staff from two service units. The session is easily adaptable to cater to the information needs of other faculties and schools at the Ourimbah Campus, and requires minimal instruction of other library staff to use it. The program could also be easily adapted to suit the needs of TAFE students, by adapting the PowerPoint to reflect the resources available to them. Feedback from students has revealed that students enjoyed the tandem teaching, and found the interplay of two teachers both interesting and informative. The intrinsic relationship between research and essay writing is now more apparent to the students who have participated in the program, and is reflected in the more scholarly assignments they are submitting. There have been unforeseen benefits to the Library and Learning Development staff involved, who both gained an insight and increased knowledge of the other's work, and were subsequently able to incorporate this new knowledge into their own individual teaching roles.

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