

Mind the Gap! : Supporting Graduate Teaching Assistants and bridging the information skills gap

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Context

SOAS is a University of London college which focuses on Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences relating to the countries of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. There are approximately 5000 students, split pretty evenly between undergraduates and postgraduates. This article outlines the benefits and challenges of Library involvement in the university's training programme for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs).

SOAS has had an information literacy programme for many years and there have been some successful examples of embedding skills development into course programmes. However, this success is not uniform and the student's experience varies considerably based on the attitude of course convenors and the student's motivation to attend voluntary sessions.

The Library established an Information Skills Working Group in 2009, which seeks to influence policy and introduce new techniques. This group has evolved alongside institutional needs and currently focuses upon skills delivery. In 2012 a draft information literacy policy was produced with an implementation plan. However, there have been some problems implementing the policy:

- Convincing school managers of the importance of information and digital literacy skills.
- Communicating the importance of these skills to teaching staff.
- Integrating skills within the everyday learning experience of students.
- Time pressures. Academic timetables are already full and constantly being squeezed.
- Competing priorities e.g. employability.

Our aim was to adopt different approaches to address these problems.

- To include information & digital literacy in the School's Learning and Teaching Strategy (SOAS, 2012).
- To collaborate with colleagues in the Academic Development Directorate to create a SOAS-wide "Skills for Success" Moodle site.
- To engage teaching staff directly in information literacy. The LLiDA (Learning Literacies in the Digital Age) and ANCIL (A New Curriculum for Information Literacy) reports both highlighted the importance of embedding information and digital literacy in the curriculum (Beetham et al., 2008; Coonan and Secker 2011).

An opportunity for collaboration

In 2012, a proposal for an HEA accredited training programme for new lecturers came to Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees: in addition to the existing GTA programme. GTAs are SOAS research students who are employed as part of a programme aimed at providing training opportunities and teaching experience. This was seen as an area where the Library could become involved. The proposal was approved and became the Professional Development in Higher Education Programme.

- The programmes offer a series of modules that provide lecturers with skills to encourage effective and creative pedagogical delivery and enhance learning support. The programme of modules is open to all staff members at SOAS. Broadly, the aim was to demonstrate to lecturers that information and digital literacy skills can be developed in students through teaching, without additional burden.

Outline

There was a lot of preparation involved in running the course, which continues each time the course is run, as it is important to ensure that the trainers are up-to-date with the latest research.

The session had to be informative, reflective and interactive and covered the following points:

1. Brief introduction to the concepts and existing models.

2. The importance of information literacy for Higher Education students, supported with evidence from research.
3. Good practice examples of integration of information and digital literacies into the curriculum: both within and outside of SOAS.
4. Pedagogical theory.
5. Reflection. How can participants include these skills in their teaching?

Delivery

The aim was to demonstrate how easy it is to include digital technologies and information literacy skills into teaching so the sessions were made quite interactive (Figure 1). All links and tasks were included on a Moodle page and a printed handout.

Figure 1: Interactive elements	
1	To introduce the concepts of IL participants were asked to go online to find a definition of information literacy. They then had to explain how they found their definition by completing a Google form. Presenters used the responses to create a Wordle or Text is Beautiful image
2	Used Polleverywhere to seek answers to a question and to start a debate.
3	Created a Padlet wall of ideas that participants could add to during the workshop and which were then discussed.
4	Respondents were asked to create a lesson plan. This was changed for the last session into an assessed exercise (5&6).
5	Google forms was used to answer a scenario-based learning assignment. Participants had to outline a proposal for an amendment to their course which would allow them to enhance their students' information and/or digital literacy skills.
6	Completed assignments were distributed to the whole group after the submission date for further reflection.

Feedback

The session was changed each time it was delivered to reflect participant feedback and findings from new research which makes comparison between sessions difficult, however, overall, feedback from participants was very positive. Comments indicated that staff learnt a lot for their own benefit as well as finding the session worthwhile for helping their students. Issues identified were the need for more time for discussion, the irrelevance of the lesson plan (in session three) and concern that as the GTAs did not construct courses, they were unable to benefit from the activity.

Problems

- Content. To make the sessions more academically relevant it was felt important to include pedagogical rationale. However, after the first sessions it became apparent that this section could be reduced and limited to one or two key thinkers.
- Library staff are not qualified teachers. Staff had to research pedagogical method and seek peer review from colleague in the Academic Development Directorate.
- Getting people to attend. Changed the title of the workshop several times to attract participants.
- Practical e.g. forgotten logins for Moodle.
- Expectations. Some GTAs thought the session was to improve their own information literacy skills.
- Time to implement activities.

Some hints and tips if considering running a similar session:

- Give it an engaging title. Attendance increased when "Google" was included.
- Apply some pedagogy, but not too much!
- Make it interactive. Get the participants to do the work. It's more interesting and less work for you.
- Have clear learning outcomes so participants know what to expect
- Don't be afraid to experiment with new techniques and technology

- Don't get too discouraged if things go wrong. Prepare prompts to stimulate discussion.

The future

The Library's participation in the training programme is still a new development and there are several areas that could be developed:

- The course will become more interactive to really challenge the participants, and may be extended to two sessions, to allow more time to examine the issues.
- Adoption of new tools for presentation and interactivity.
- More effective use of Moodle. A staff development Moodle site is currently in the pipeline and will allow better course support and publicity.
- Creation of online tutorials to support the workshop.
- The success of this session has encouraged the Library to consider further cross-departmental collaborations.

Now that there has been some success with information literacy for new staff, the Information Skills Working Group needs to focus upon how to reach long-standing lecturers. This might take the form of running slightly amended sessions using a theme of "reconnecting with students" or "refreshing skills". Thanks to the audience at ALISS's AGM, we now have some fresh ideas on this which we hope to explore further.

References

Beetham, H. et al. (2008). *Thriving in the 21st century: Learning Literacies for the Digital Age (LLiDA project)*. Available: <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/projects/llidareportjune2009.pdf>> Last accessed 16th June 2014.

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