Information Literacy in Context: the way forward

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Introduction

Embedding information literacy into the curriculum of a subject is not a new idea. The challenge lies in the practicalities of implementing this change, especially within the context of increasing academic workloads for permanent as well as casual staff. This presentation showcases one method of embedding which has been trialled at Charles Sturt University. This project consists of a portable module which aimed to embed information literacy and critical thinking skills into the curriculum of a first year, first semester foundation subject for Criminal Justice students.

Background

The subject which is being showcased here is JST104 Foundations in Criminology, a foundation subject for Criminal Justice and Policing students at Charles Sturt University. This is ordinarily undertaken by students in their first semester, so there is a large proportion of recent school leavers within student cohorts as well as students from diverse backgrounds returning to study or taking it up later in life.

In the past, the subject has been prone to high rates of failure both in individual assessments and overall. A number of factors were at play but, most consistently, there were problems with academic skillling – notably referencing of sources and avoidance of plagiarism – as well as more deeply rooted difficulties relating to critical thought and the ability to apply theory to practical analytical tasks. Aside from the question of distress and difficulties with progression for students, this also had flow-on effects in terms of academic workload. Marking and remarking of assessment items is labour-intensive, and it is frustrating to seemingly endlessly repeat the same comments and suggestions. In the same vein, consulting with students face-to-face is time consuming and subject to the same frustrations as have already been noted in relation to marking. Simultaneously, there were growing concerns regarding plagiarism within student assessments not just in first year but at all stages of undergraduate study as well as, to our dismay, in the work of honours, masters and PhD students, suggesting that problems which developed early in a student’s tertiary education were not being addressed and were becoming systemic. It became clearly evident that a change was needed.

Phase 1

The approach to curriculum development applied was one which divided student contact hours into three discrete sections: Lecture, Tutorial and Workshop. This system was developed in response to the challenges posed in the Background section.
above, as well as to feedback from students who wanted curricula and assessments which were more hands-on and vocationally relevant.

The lecture provides the theoretical, formal educational foundation for the subject. The tutorial provides students with a relatively informal and open space in which to discuss the theoretical subject matter and issues relating to intersections between theory and personal experience. Students may offer anecdotes to illustrate topical points, but they are encouraged to attempt to situate this within a theoretical context and substantiate their arguments.

The workshop has been designed in a modular fashion to provide students with allocated time to engage with questions of critical thought, personal reflection and academic skilling. Plagiarism and techniques for avoiding it is a key topic. During phase 1 of this project the information literacy module was only offered to internal students, who are in the minority at Charles Sturt. In the workshop students move systematically through a workbook which is at once a pedagogical tool and an assessment item. Students work through the subject matter by completing online exercises with the aid of the workbook. One of the key advantages with structuring the subject in this way has been the level of portability this introduces. The information literacy workshops and workbook can easily be adapted for application in other subjects and disciplines. Interest has been attracted in this project from Nursing, Agriculture and a number of other disciplines which are seemingly far removed from the study of criminology. There is only minimal work involved in tailoring the information literacy module to suit other fields, as the focus is information literacy, critical thought and academic skilling generally rather than criminology specifically – the slogan is “critical thinking for life, university and everything”. The ultimate goal of the module is to develop what are seen as crucial faculties for university students as early as possible in their tertiary career.

Phase 2

This is the current state of the trial. The information literacy module, which had already been embedded into the internal offering of JST104, was adapted to allow its offering to distance students. This entailed increasing the online component of the module and developing tasks which could be as easily undertaken at home as on campus. An outline of the current contents of the information literacy module has been attached for perusal.

Because of the continuing interest expressed by academics in other fields, the development of the module has been driven by the logic of portability. The aim here has been to produce an instrument for facilitating the development of skills which are equally relevant in any field of study.

To assist further development of the project, there are plans under development for ongoing longitudinal evaluation of the success of the information literacy module to track student cohorts from first year through to third year, making use of three key subjects as the evaluation points. To facilitate this, grant applications are being written to secure funds both for evaluation and for ongoing development of the module.
Challenges

Some of the challenges faced during development have been related to resistance from within the university environment itself, often relating to perceived disadvantages in terms of workload distribution. A common objection to the project has been that (variously) academic, library and learning skills staff do not have the time to devote to such innovations. This seems largely a question of perception, as, development costs in time and labour aside, the information literacy module requires very little in terms of ongoing investment of academic and other specialist labour.

One of the practical challenges faced has been that the subject Foundations in Criminology is also offered to students in postgraduate courses as Criminological Practice. Whilst this could be addressed in terms of course design – Criminological Practice could be redeveloped as a postgraduate subject with a different structure and curriculum – it appears at least anecdotally that many of the problems which have initiated this project at undergraduate level are reflected in the experience of postgraduate students who may be returning to study after a lengthy period of absence, or who may be undertaking postgraduate study on the basis of recognition of experience rather than academic qualifications.

Distance students pose a number of practical questions. One of these is a diversity in access to technology, especially to reliable Internet services. This poses a difficulty to economically disadvantaged students as well as to a large number of students in remote and regional areas. Underlying this practical difficulty is the philosophical question of mandating the use of computers and online electronic communications.

Incarcerated students pose a number of very specific and thorny problems. Inmate access to computers and related communications technologies such as email and online forums varies by state. This poses a number of challenges in terms of practical implementation and have indicated that the way forward for the information literacy module is to further pursue the end goal of portability to its logical culmination in a self-contained resource which can be distributed in print as well as in electronic form as a CD-based module. This in turn raises fundamental questions of design which form the basis for current plans for further development.