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Is a standalone IL course useful?

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One size fits all? MOSAIC+

Most Higher Education institutions are involved in the creation of online materials to support their students' information literacy skills development – which is labour intensive, and inevitably results in a great deal of duplication of effort across the sector. A recent project, run jointly by SCONUL's Advisory Committee on Information Literacy¹ and The Open University, addressed whether it is possible to create a generic information literacy course that can be delivered anywhere. The OU's standalone module, MOSAIC, which has been running for the last three years with positive feedback from students, provided an ideal starting point for the investigation.

A customisable version of MOSAIC was piloted in Reading, Nottingham and Southampton/Portsmouth Universities as 'MOSAIC+'. The OU provided MOSAIC as a 'shell', to allow participating institutions to add in their own site-specific content.

The model of delivery in each institution varied from site to site. Reading worked with students in the School of Continuing Education, where the course was accredited and worth 10 continuing education credits. Southampton/Portsmouth chose to link to the materials as part of an optional suite of resources designed to provide support in different study skills areas. Nottingham used the materials with groups of students and staff.

The Reading University experience

Reading already had some experience of running MOSAIC for students. In Spring 2002 MOSAIC was offered to a number of undergraduate students in the School of Animal and Microbial Sciences. It was hard to draw any firm conclusions but it provided the basis for the development of MOSAIC+.

The School of Continuing Education (CE) hosted the course, and 21 students registered after a brief presentation at their first session of the year. Students had a demonstration of the course, were given background information on the project, and were told how to get support and that they could do the course free of charge - a good motivator. In return, they were expected to help evaluate the course. An email group was set up and used to exchange information, rather than for the discussion originally hoped for.

The OU provided templates with criteria against which the assessments were marked and a 'skills audit' for each student was produced. The assessments were marked jointly by two markers, the skills audits written and comments fed back to CE.

There were remarkably few problems – some technical work to mount the course, entitlement to ATHENS usernames to clarify, work to translate the outcomes and skills into 'real' marks, and one or two small technical glitches and issues around access.

Although it was promoted as an online course, some students only really became aware of the implications of this when they got started, such as tying

up the family phone line, the cost if they did not have an unlimited use deal from their internet provider, and working and reading from the screen. Most were competent users of the internet, though one student had never accessed the web or email before. Some students were not really aware of the amount of time it would take, spending too much time working through the material, and not allowing sufficient time for the assessment.

Student motivation may also have been an issue. Some needed the 10 credits in order to gain their Certificates of Higher Education, for others these were extra credits and this may have influenced completion rates.

All students were given evaluation sheets for each section of the course. There were end-of-course meetings in the form of directed discussion and evaluation questionnaires. Students generally liked the course and felt they had benefited from it. Comments on the 7 sections were overwhelmingly positive or neutral. We had only 9 negative comments out of a total of 49. Students gave us useful suggestions in our feedback sessions, for example, one student produced a grid to record progress and related tasks associated with each section.

CE staff were so impressed that they wanted to run the course again. We plan to make significant changes to the student support to maintain motivation and improve the completion rate. It will be proactive, involving more contact with students via email to encourage discussion: milestones, reminders to leave enough time to complete the assessment as well as working through the 7 sections, plus regular offers of support. The introductory session will be sharper to help them hit the ground running.

Students made many positive comments and library staff learned a great deal about marking and assessment, online learning and distance learners. Additional positive links have been developed with CE and the profile of the Library, and of information skills, have been raised.

The Portsmouth/Southampton University experience

MOSAIC+ was presented to staff and students in the health and social care disciplines across the Universities of Southampton and Portsmouth as part of a range of learning resources in the context of Common Learning – to meet the agenda of the Kennedy Inquiry findings, the Laming Inquiry report and now the results of the Shipman Inquiry to support learning about inter-professional working across health and social care subjects in Universities.

A raft of learning resources specifically developed to support the learning of the students were offered in various formats right from the start of their inter-professional learning. Material focussed on a variety of skills areas, such as working in groups, being an independent learner, and reading academically, as well as developing search skills.

We had asked the Student Reference Group – a group of ‘critical friends’, undergraduates from the range of programmes represented in Common Learning – for feedback on the resources made available to them; their

reaction had been overwhelmingly positive and the feedback appreciative in terms of the form as well as the substance of the information which was being presented. In addition, the students recognised the reward they were being provided with in terms of access to high quality learning resources at no cost to themselves (other than providing feedback).

Since there were such rich resources specifically tailored to the requirements of this curriculum development, we were able to make MOSAIC+ available on an opportunistic basis for all staff and students working in Common Learning. Access was via the Common Learning website and the resources were visible on the same basis as all of the other learning resources. In addition, we removed the assessment option from MOSAIC+ since Common Learning Units themselves are assessed and we did not want to confuse students.

All those who were introduced to MOSAIC+ were consistently positive and enthusiastic about the resource. In particular, the access to such a detailed information literacy resource electronically and independently was regarded as a huge benefit. On the downside, we had in reality very few people who used MOSAIC+, or if they accessed it, even fewer who worked all the way through. As part of a suite of resources which were regarded as very substantial anyway, this represented a 'resource too far'.

Those who did access MOSAIC+ confirmed our suspicions that providing electronic access without additional face-to-face guidance and support is not sufficient. Greater success was achieved when users were given detailed information about the nature of the resource, its aims and content, and a member of staff sat beside them to provide reassurance.

The Nottingham University experience

The pilot study at Nottingham was focused around fifty first year physiotherapy students at the beginning of their first term. Arranged through their tutor, MOSAIC+ was a compulsory part of their workload. Before starting the course the students were given a short introduction, after which they had approximately two months to complete the work. Finally they were asked to fill in an evaluation sheet.

The majority of students in the group were either very confident or fairly confident with computers and none required help. Of the 41 evaluation forms returned, 12 students had not attempted the course due to time constraints. Most admitted that they only did the course because it had been compulsory and probably would not have otherwise considered it. Many complained that workloads were such that priorities had to be addressed and MOSAIC+ was felt to be too generic and more importantly, time-consuming.

On the positive side, the majority did feel that it was very user-friendly and would help with the development of specific skills. Around half felt that it would also help with generic skills. They would recommend it, but mainly to beginners – many felt that they did not fall into this category.

Feedback from academic staff indicated that they felt MOSAIC+ would be more effective if targeted at pre-entry students, as much of the content overlaps with induction/departmental training already provided. It was also felt that it was difficult to keep track of student progress, and therefore students did not treat it with the respect they should.

Although departments showed an interest in MOSAIC+, we found it difficult to persuade them to participate. Most reiterated the fact that their students were very busy and MOSAIC+ too generic, so in our institution, 'one size' does not 'fit all'.

We also attempted a small staff pilot within Information Services but again, lack of time was an issue, in that most staff found it was only possible to work on MOSAIC+ in their own time. However, those who did part of the course felt it was both useful and user-friendly.

Conclusion

So, what are the lessons from this modest experiment? Those of us involved in this kind of work are only too aware of the complexity of trying to embed information literacy into the curriculum. With institutional and academic commitment to this process we would indeed have no need of stand-alone offerings like MOSAIC, as every programme would include the development of these skills. We do, however, have some way to go. In the meantime it would appear that there are both pros and cons to putting all one's information literacy eggs in one stand-alone basket. While students who recognize the value of being information literate have the opportunity to focus on developing these skills and to receive credits and recognition which can feed into personal portfolios, many who see it as peripheral will resist having to allocate their study time in this way. For this latter group, it would be far preferable to have their IL 'medicine' disguised with a coating of subject context. It might be possible to tentatively suggest from our study that 'standard' undergraduate students may be more likely to fall into the second category while returners to study or students on access-level courses will tend to fit the former. This picture is further complicated by the level of students' pre-existing skills in this area – some may find a generic course less than challenging, while others may struggle. This is of course influenced by a whole range of factors and it helps to explain the recent move towards offering diagnostic tests in information literacy to help students identify their needs, and enable learning materials to be more accurately targeted. With this model, the generic stand-alone offering can be deconstructed and offered in chunks as appropriate. If accreditation is required, there would have to be a satisfactory way of assessing prior learning (beyond the simplicity of a test) to enable credits to be awarded.

Are we any closer to addressing the question of the potential usefulness of a generic stand-alone module? Perhaps all we can say at this stage is that such a course can be effectively delivered in different settings and with different groups of students. Some students will identify a clear benefit, while others may be less sure. It is however not clear whether students who do not see any benefit would have a similar reaction to a less generic and more targeted

offering. From a broader perspective, however, if we assume that the integration of information literacy into the curriculum will progress steadily over the next 4-5 years in HE, the generic stand-alone course can be regarded as a pragmatic and cost-effective short term solution.

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¹ http://www.sconul.ac.uk/activities/inf_lit/