Beyond the Bookshelf

Bringing the Library to Distance Learning Students through Technological Innovation *Richard Cleverley*

ABSTRACT

This column presents a case study exploring innovative approaches to digital librarianship within a distance learning Higher Education institution based in the UK. Key initiatives included asynchronous information literacy instruction, Python scripts for auditing course materials for broken links and copyright compliance, and management of physical extracts via a digital content store. It examines the challenges of building an online library service, balancing learner-centric practice with efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The study analyses the work done and presents future initiatives, offering insights and sharing practices for solo or small team librarians navigating the evolving landscape of both distance and face-to-face education.

BACKGROUND

The Open College of the Arts (OCA) is a registered charity and distance learning provider of undergraduate and postgraduate higher education, accredited through the Open University as part of the Open University Group in the UK. All learning is delivered online through a Moodle-based virtual learning environment (VLE). Most library resources are delivered through the accrediting partner, the Open University, for around 1500-2000 part-time undergraduate and postgraduate learners. The College also delivers foundation courses and personal development short courses to a further 300-500 non-accredited learners. The author was appointed as the college's librarian in January 2024 and undertook a number of steps and strategies to better deliver a digital-only library model that bridges the gap between the online collections available from the central Open University library and the college's learning content.

DIGITAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

A major challenge in resourcing for the arts is the prevalence of print-only resources. OCA possesses a small print collection primarily used to support the digital titles available through the Open University's core library by providing scans of print-only resources to embed in course materials. This collection of around 600 titles had been tracked only through a spreadsheet and was not catalogued or available to staff or students in an Open Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). A staff-facing OPAC of this collection was investigated and implemented to better support course development. A number of light, low-cost, subscription-based Library Management Systems were comparatively analysed to assess their suitability for the management of the collection. Bailey Solutions' Simple Little Library System was chosen for the ease of cataloguing, low cost of subscription, and ability to use the college Google accounts for single-sign-on.

Content scans are facilitated primarily through the use of the Digital Content Store (DCS), offered as part of our Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) licence. In this platform, scans can be managed centrally, and course instructors can embed permalinks to the scans, which are then viewable in a

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Kortext-based e-reader. The crowdsourcing of all DCS scans among user institutions alleviates the need for every institution to scan every item.

CASE STUDY: URL LINK REVIEW THROUGH A LEWIN'S CHANGE MANAGEMENT MODEL

A recent review of course materials and a surge in student support requests highlighted that course materials in the virtual learning environment (VLE) contained out of date URLs. Many of these URLs were linked to resources provided in the library of the previous accrediting institution, the access to which was revoked at the end of January 2024. This presented a unique challenge in how to effectively review and replace these links on an institutional level while ensuring manageability of workflow. A Lewin's force field analysis, Figure 1, shows the driving and restrictive forces attached to the condition at that point in time.



Figure 1. Forcefield analysis of embedded VLE URL updates.

While the driving forces demonstrated a need for immediate change, restrictive forces acted as barriers to finding a solution. Once a method for updating links was established, courses were "unfrozen." During the change period, an innovative, custom python script was used to assess PDF course materials and extract URLs. Fortunately, the course management process at Open College of the Arts lends itself to this method since PDFs are easily generated from course content documents imported into the VLE from a centrally-managed authoring system. By utilising the custom code and a simple process, 160 active courses were successfully assessed and checked in a single calendar month. Next came a consultation period in which the results were shared to academics for feedback before updates were implemented as part of the annual course review. After this review, course materials were "refrozen" for the academic year. The process itself was then subject to an identified set of changes for the next annual iteration. There remains a need to be agile and dynamic in the "unfreezing" and "refreezing" of course materials, and improvements are to be identified and implemented in subsequent applications until a best practice can be established.

CASE STUDY: DELIVERING ASYNCHRONOUS LIBRARY INSTRUCTION THROUGH ARTICULATE

At Open College of the Arts, all learning is delivered online via the Moodle VLE to distance learners, as there has been a need to pivot established in-person instruction in the library to a style which better complements asynchronous online learners. Woollard stressed that while e-

learning may use the same pedagogic principles as in-person learning, such as behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism, an institution must recognise the discrete needs of online learners and develop what he called a cybergogy, enabling a more person-centered practice that allows for collaboration and autonomy.¹ To address this need, a course of self-led e-learning activities that build core information literacy, academic study skills, and digital/AI literacy was developed by the Open College of the Arts' librarian.

Gibson emphasised a need to control quality and quantity and be mindful of "time on task" in the development of meaningful e-learning activities.² Research has shown that using a variety of interactive content types within a single online learning activity can help sustain interest and maintain engagement; as such, the tasks used in OCA's learning design are short and agile, moving through a variety of types of task and content.³ The different activity types are mapped against Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle to ensure a sense of pragmatism in the way tasks prompt theoretical knowledge, deliver task instruction, and encourage collaboration and reflection.⁴ A number of tasks within the plan utilise an "explain, watch, try" model, designed to help mimic the breakout tasks of a live lesson. Woollard states that preparing, rehearsing and then simulating a real experience is one of the strongest tools for cognitive engagement in online learning.⁵ The use of gamification, small game-like activities to embed learning, help create a sense of active learning for learners, whether activities are sophisticated or otherwise.⁶ The learning design uses a number of tools of this type, such as digital flashcards and online quizzes.

Social engagement with online learners, especially those working asynchronously, is a challenge; however, common tasks and scenarios can help to add social context to learning.⁷ Stuart-Buttle states that a sense of social presence within an online community of common inquiry can be established by using such tools to encourage learners to interact in their online environment.⁸

A growing area of importance in the development of online courses and e-learning materials is the need for equitable features that ensure accessibility. Rather than working reactively, courses must be accessible from the point of design, prior to any content creation or writing of materials, to help ensure access to learners and instructors with disabilities.⁹ Technology-enhanced learning is not only about exposing information, but also allowing all learners, including those with disabilities, to set their preferences and feel a sense of control in engaging with their learning.¹⁰ Poorly-designed digital courses threaten to strip disabled learners of this control, as they will need to seek out support and assistance to access their learning. It is vital to take an approach that does not make presumptions about what must be accessible. Delivering all learning, from building basic skills and processes to more specialised knowledge, must be accessible at all times. It is also beneficial to use plain language to help all learners make clear and cohesive sense of content while still imparting the key messages.¹¹

Taking all this into account, the learning was designed for delivery on Articulate, a web-based platform which allows different tools to be embedded into a single, adaptable feed that works on all devices, with all external links opening into a new window to maintain the original feed.¹² While there is differing opinion on the user experience involving links that open in new tabs, particularly for people using screen readers, , this approach was discussed with the college's digital accessibility specialists and ultimately was deemed an exception to this guideline, as it maintains the original feed and minimises need for repeated login to the secure course area. The platform further allows for embedding alt text, captions, and voiceover audio at all stages, adding equity for learners with an auditory or visual disability. Learning designs were intentionally framed to be available in a continuous one-hour session or chunked into smaller tasks to help add

equity for neurodiverse learners and those with different cognition types. The course uses various discussion and reflection points, with Padlets to encourage engagement between individual learners and the wider cohort, which addresses the need for social engagement to embed learning.¹³ Technical processes are presented as step-by-step guides supported with screenshots and captioning and are delivered through Scribe and embedded into the learning activity.¹⁴ Many stages of the course also use a "theory, demonstration, and implementation" model, which Woolard suggested as a strong tool for cognitive engagement.¹⁵ Finally, an end point quiz and a Padlet to share user experiences are provided for all learners in order to ensure agility of teaching and a sense of participatory design to teaching review and future versions.

NEXT STEPS

The library service at Open College of the Arts is very much a work in progress. The initiatives detailed in the above case studies represent the beginning of the work being undertaken. There are a number of areas being developed in the new academic year to build a more robust and bespoke library service for this unique community of learners. As a small higher education institution, there is ongoing potential to be agile and innovative in the approaches adopted and to be reactive in their application.

As of September 2024, the first three units of the library skills development course have been made available in the VLE for learners to engage with and attempt. This is in essence an alpha testing stage of the new offering, with ongoing feedback and engagement tracked centrally. This testing approach allows for the review and further adaptation of the offering and informs ongoing development of new courses and activities. Already there are some considerations around the integration of Google quizzes into the activities, and whether these could be better embedded using native functions in Articulate and potential automations of course tracking and digital badge implementation. Likewise, the first implementation of the automated course URL review has given rise to the need for some change to the process and associated script. Incorporating page numbers in the output will help better locate the URLs in source material and indicate when a link needs further investigation. This should help to further reduce workload and increase throughput in the next implementation.

A new digital initiative this academic year aims to further develop the new OPAC and in-house provision of materials by deploying a small demand-driven acquisition collection of eBooks. This helps to fill a gap in library provision for non-accredited learners who do not have access to the main university library. This also feeds into the development of the library skills course. Instruction on use of the OPAC and eBooks can be integrated into a single meta-activity for non-accredited learners, giving an introduction to basic library and research skills and establishing a baseline of information behaviour for learners who progress to undergraduate study.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁴ "Scribe | Visual Step-By-Step Guides," *Scribe*, accessed 30th October 2024, <u>https://scribehow.com</u>.
- ¹⁵ Woolard, *Psychology for the Classroom*.