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Options for Integration: Creating a Flexible Library Research Module for the First Year Experience Curriculum

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Options for Integration: Creating a Flexible Library Research Module for the First Year Experience Curriculum

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Conference Abstract: A recent collaboration at the University of Tennessee between the University Libraries and the First Year Studies (FYS) program led to the creation of a module designed to integrate information literacy and research skills into the freshman course. This paper will explain module creation, content, organization, and integration into FYS.

Handout - http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/firstyearstudies/2007tlahandout.pdf

Slides - http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/firstyearstudies/2007tlaslides.pdf

Introduction

The University of Tennessee's first year experience course, First Year Studies, is a one-credit class offered to all incoming freshmen. It is not required, yet it is strongly encouraged for students that might need help with the transition from high school to college. Historically the course did not have a standard curriculum; therefore, some FYS students might be introduced to research skills and the UL Libraries while others were not. A new, more standardized curriculum for the FYS program created the opportunity for the University of Tennessee Libraries to become a regular part of the course.

In response to this opportunity the Instructional Services program developed a module that covers some basic topics related to research skills and the UT Libraries. The module needed to be flexible so that instructors can decide how he or she wants to integrate it into their particular section. It also needed to serve as an introduction to the information literacy concepts that are taught through three freshman level courses and serve as a tool for decreasing library anxiety. The increased standardization of the library skills content also made it easier for instructors to integrate these concepts into their course. This paper will explain the process that the Instructional Services program went through to develop and implement this library research module for the First Year Studies curriculum.

Module Development and Tutorial Creation

In the creation of content for the First Year Studies research skill module it was essential to understand the primary audience. The focus would be on new students to the university and new users of a large research library. The content stressed the essentials of understanding the library and information. The module was separated in three manageable portions including a basic introduction to the libraries and information literacy concepts. These portions are *Introduction to the UT Libraries, Information: What is it?* and *Information: How to find it?.* The hope was that students would learn about using services and begin to understand how these services can meet their information needs.

The introduction of information literacy concepts was the foundation of module development. The curriculum for each portion contains a learning objective, learning outcome, content and learning activities. For example, within *Introduction to UT Libraries* the content provides an overview of the library and its services. The last two portions focus on introducing information literacy concepts by defining and locating information in the UT Libraries. In the second segment, *Information: What is it?,* information is defined and the information cycle is introduced. In the third, *Information: How to Find It*, the catalog and databases are introduced. The simple structure provides a concise and informative first step into the UT Libraries.

The active learning components of the module were developed by members of the Instructional Services program and proved useful in delivering instruction. The activities reflect the content presented and serves as an assessment for the class. The exercises engaged the students to investigate the library's resources. For example, real life scenarios were presented as problem-solving activities to understand where students could find resources and receive help. The content developers utilized actual service issues that undergraduates at UT might experience. An activity comparing search results in catalogs, databases, and internet search engines is presented as and way for students to evaluate and recognize different types of information. The activities help to reinforce learning of the content and make the module more that just a presentation of information. The module content and suggested options for integration were combined into a teaching guide for FYS instructors. This was placed on the FYS Instructors' Super Site on Blackboard.

The next part of the module creation process involved designing three methods for integrating the content into the FYS course. These options will be explained in more detail later in the paper. One of the options for integration was an online method. The online version of the module is divided into three tutorials, one for each of the main topic areas. In the fall of 2005, UT Libraries Instructional Services Coordinator applied for a grant through the University of Tennessee's Innovative Technology Center. This grant, called the Faculty First Grant, offered faculty members expert assistance in creating and using technology in the classroom. The grant application specified that the grant would be used to create online tutorials for the University's First Year Studies program. The grant was awarded in December 2005, and work on the project began in spring 2006. The tutorials were ready for the fall 2006 semester.

The first step in creating the tutorials was developing an interface design for these tutorials. Each tutorial needed to have the same streamlined, clean look and needed to be easily accessible, even on slow internet connections. An additional concern was making the tutorials simple to navigate, and appealing to students with different learning styles. All design related ideas and concerns were presented to the experts from ITC who then developed several options for interface design. These were reviewed, tested and revised until one design emerged to form a template for all three tutorials that formed the basis for the First Year Studies module.

As with any large project the creation of the tutorials presented several challenges. These challenges included the number of people involved, technology, and content creation. Working with the Innovative Technology Center was a privilege, but it did have some challenges. The project was assigned to an ITC staff member who worked with the library team on the vision and technology needs for the tutorials. This staff member would then assign an undergraduate student to work on the project. The students were talented; however, they had competing interests, limited time and were not very personally invested in the project. During the course of one semester three different students worked on the project. Each time a student left or was reassigned the project coordinator has to spend time acquainting the new student to the work. This caused significant delays in the implementation of the tutorials. The high number of people working on the project also resulted in redundant and/or competing code that required a lot of debugging. To use an old saying, "there were too many cooks in the kitchen."

Another challenge was using technology to create active learning exercises. Much of that was trial and error. For example, one of the tutorials included an interactive crossword puzzle using an online educational tool called Hot Potato. While it was a fun and fairly easy software to implement, the FYS students had trouble using it. This feedback was evaluated and the crossword was redesigned using an interactive PDF.

The last challenge during the creation of these tutorials was content creation. These three tutorials needed to serve several purposes: first, as the basis of teaching First Year Studies students about library research; second, as a tool that anyone new to the UT Libraries could use to learn these basic concepts; and third, as an introduction to an entire series of tutorials teaching users about the research at the UT Libraries and information literacy. The content had to serve one very specific purpose, teaching FYS content, and one very general purpose, teaching anyone needing these concepts.

Implementation

Once the FYS tutorials were completed, the next step was implementation of the entire module into the FYS curriculum. Instructors were offered three options for integration: online, instructor-led, and librarian-led. The online option meant that the instructors would assign the three tutorials and assessments to the students, allowing them to function on a "stand-alone" status. The instructor-led option allowed the course instructors to present the content to the students within a class session, utilizing materials and assessments created for in-class learning. The librarian-led option was designed to allow the instructors to schedule a session in the library where the librarian would work the students through the content in an instruction session.

To aid in making the module more accessible to the course instructors a Word document of the module content was added to the FYS Instructors' Blackboard Super Site. This Super Site placed important information and links for all the FYS programs into one location for easy accessibility. The FYS module was added under a link for "Library: Research Skills." To further prepare the instructors to use the module, an instructor training session was offered by the Instructional Services Coordinator. This session was offered in a brown-bag setting, and attendance was not mandatory. Last minute room changes and inclement weather caused difficulties with the session and in the end only six instructors were able to participate.

Implementation of the module did encounter a few challenges. Related to the individual FYS sessions themselves, it was found that most instructors still wanted the librarian-led sessions and did not want to consider the online or instructor-led options. It was also noted that not all instructors required the module assessments be completed, losing out on the reinforcement of skills that the activities were designed to provide.

There were challenges also related to the FYS program itself, with timing of collaboration with the FYS program directors being most important. By the time the module was completed and ready to be implemented many deadlines within the FYS program had already passed, hindering the ability to seamlessly integrate the module directly into the program. Another challenge was caused by a lack of standardization in the FYS curriculum. While the curriculum was much more consistent than in the past, nearly every session had a distinct focus, with some being more research based and others being less research based. The research-based sessions benefited more from and were more likely to utilize the module than the sessions that were less research-based. Finally, it was a challenge for the libraries to identify which sections actually utilized the module. If a program did not schedule a librarian-led session it was highly unlikely that the libraries would know that they had chosen to use the module through one of the other implementation methods offered.

Next Steps

With the module implemented and the first semester of use completed, the libraries will now consider next steps for future use of the module by FYS. Continued collaboration with FYS will be the first order of business. The libraries will address and discuss the challenges that use of the module met during this initial roll-out. The libraries will also work to offer additional training for the FYS instructors. These sessions will be designed to make the instructors more comfortable and confident with the use of the module and thus also decrease the number of instructors who request librarian-led sessions. The libraries hope to also increase the use of the online option for integration. Further, in fall 2007 the FYS program will implement an even more standardized course curriculum which will make the module more seamlessly integrated into the course. The libraries hope that this move will also open the door for further integration of the module into the new standardized curriculum.

Additional steps in the future include utilizing the tutorials in other undergraduate programs. The Communication Studies 210 courses at the university are already utilizing the tutorials to complete a pre-library assignment. Many English 101/102 courses also utilize the tutorials as a way of introducing the UT Libraries to their students and it is hoped that other lower-division classes in other disciplines will be able to utilize the tutorials in a similar fashion. Wide-spread use of the tutorials in this fashion may help to level the playing field for students who come in to use the libraries. All students who have been introduced to the libraries via the tutorials will have the same knowledge base when they do get the opportunity to have a research session for a course in the libraries. This could make it easier for librarians to offer maximum amounts of information during short sessions if they are no longer required to spend time introducing students to the basics. A final future step also includes the development and integration of additional tutorials that will move students further into the information literacy process.

The final aspect of the FYS project will be assessment. The libraries will encourage instructors to utilize the active learning activities included with the module as a way to assess the students understanding of the material. It is also hoped that the libraries can collect the completed activities in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the module. The module activities also offer the opportunity for pre- and post-test situations where students can complete an activity prior to completing the module and then again after. This would allow scores to be compared in order to quantify the usefulness of the module. Finally, the FYS instructors and students can be surveyed to assess the tutorial usability and relevance according to their experiences with the modules.

Appendix A. Relevant Links

First Year Studies Course Guide

http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/firstyearstudies/index.html

Course Guides, Tours & Tutorials

http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/learnhow/

FYS Instructor Super Site Document

http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/firstyearstudies/2006fys-instructormodule.pdf

TLA Presentation

Handout - http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/firstyearstudies/2007tlahandout.pdf

Slides - http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/firstyearstudies/2007tlaslides.pdf

Appendix B. Contact Information

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