The development of a joint library / academic module on information retrieval skills for nursing and health care students

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Most library or information workers supporting nursing and healthcare students will agree in the need to allow hands on practical experience in using a library and finding information. This has increased greatly with the use of computers and the Internet. At Anglia Polytechnic University library we deliver many user education sessions of varying length, content and level. Here I will describe the development and running of an assessed course on information retrieval.

Development of the course

A few years ago discussion between a member of academic staff in the School of Community, Health and Social Studies and the library led to the development of a module on "Information Retrieval for Advanced Study". This is a ten credit assessed module on information retrieval skills, delivered over one semester. It was originally developed as an option for the students undertaking the BSc (Hons.) in Health and Social Care but in theory it could be a negotiated option for other post registration healthcare students. This degree covers four core modules of Health and Social Care in Europe, Research Appreciation and Critiquing, Ideology and Collaboration and Undergraduate Project /Dissertation along with a range of other choices. To succeed in the

degree students will need a good grasp of information searching skills and the variety of tools now available for use. Some students on the course are part-time, juggling work, study and family commitments, so the development of life long learning skills is crucial.

Delivery and content

The course covers the skills of finding, evaluating and referencing information and is delivered in the library training room, which has twelve computers linked to the Internet. Although, we could try to run the module with more than twelve people, owing, to the limit on computers and the practical nature of the course twelve is the usual maximum. The first year the course ran it was held in a computer suite within the nursing department which was less flexible and practical and things like student logins went wrong. Learning from experience, students now get much more information in the module guide as to what they need to do for housekeeping purposes and this is reinforced on the first day e.g. ensuring registration with the library, email account, computer registration and obtaining an ATHENS password. This therefore ensures that once the course starts time is not wasted in administrative type activity. The sessions last for three hours and are held every week.

The course content has evolved over time to reflect the changing nature of resources and means of access. The delivery of the course is planned to ensure that skills are taught, used and built up over the weeks. Through feedback and reflection on the sessions the course has evolved over the years of delivery and during this last semester emphasis has been placed on the development and practice of core skills using a set topic for all students. This allowed learning to be cumulative and for consolidation of theory and practice to occur. Although the assignment is yet to be marked and formal evaluation received, reflection and

verbal feedback during sessions suggested that this worked better than in previous years.

The course covers the following themes:
- Information sources and terminology
- Literature searching strategies and Boolean operators
- Referencing resources (print, multimedia and electronic) via the Harvard system which is the APU designated method.
- Record keeping
- Searching databases
- Searching and browsing gateways (general e.g. BUBL and specific such as SOSIG, OMNI and NMAP.
- Using the Internet and search engines
- Statistics
- Government information (including Department of Health and NeLH)
- Newspapers
- Evaluation of resources
- Critiquing methods

No specific session was spent on finding conference papers and theses but was covered in the general session on information sources.

Each week students were given worksheets and handouts. Some weeks included some form of homework and this was discussed at the start of the next session. Each session always had a discussion / question and answer section to help iron out problems and aid clarification and learning. Often one person will pick up on something and through discussion it turns out that a few people needed help in the same area. Handouts supported each session and included further reading and web sites.

Other sessions covered putting the assignment together and individual tutorial support.

Assessment

Assessment is by a 2000 word assignment. This is not a normal essay but a piece of work which aims to show that the student can undertake a literature search successfully and understand the process involved, is able to reference correctly and also able to critique and evaluate information sources.

The assignment is broken down into sections:

• Search topic, rationale and strategy.

Here we ask for documentation of the search strategy, including reference to the literature on information searching. They are given a reading list of books, journal articles and web sites within the module guide on information searching and evaluation techniques.

Students are encouraged to reflect on the searching process. Charts, tables and flow diagrams are suggested methods of documenting how and what was searched and found. Students are free to choose a search topic for themselves.

• Critical evaluation of one item of information.

Students must include a copy and / or full bibliographical details as an appendix (so we can read item during marking). We did think about asking them to compare and contrast two items, but went with just one item, although I think most students would probably find the latter easier. Students can choose any information source and although most seem to choose journal or newspaper articles one student did choose a radio programme.

• Full bibliography of information sources found on the topic from the search. This must be done in the Harvard referencing system format. Within this list we ask for six items to have an abstract or summary written up to consolidate techniques of evaluation and comprehension.

Feedback and evaluation of the course

Feedback for the student is given throughout the course verbally during sessions, in tutorials and obviously on the marking of the assignment. Students are very well supported on this course and those who are timid at first make great progress under the intensive nature of the teaching and learning environment.

Feedback from students on the teaching and module content is picked up verbally during sessions (questions and answer sessions for example), in tutorials and formally by completion of evaluation forms. On the hand in date we also hold an informal discussion for all students about the course. The feedback obtained is used during the course by changing some sessions slightly and also going over other sections where perhaps greater depth or clarification was needed.

One of the main problems is the varied experience of students on the course regarding use of IT. Although the course is for students who have little formal experience of using a modern IT filled academic or health library, it is difficult to teach the group when some students are still trying to grasp how to use the mouse! An audit of IT skills prior to the course may be introduced to allow students to gain more support and help. Students on this module are at an advantage though, as they get lots of practice and the students are given every encouragement and the aim is to make all students feel at ease throughout the course.

Future

It is hoped to target a wider audience in delivery in future semesters. The content of the module could be delivered as an open learning package both in paper format and also online and this may be considered

in the future. A lot of the students undertaking health degrees though, lack confidence in using computers and the ability to obtain support and feedback during the sessions is crucial to their learning process. I would also like to adapt the module to see if it could be used in other nursing and health courses. More students will then be able to experience a good grounding in information retrieval skills and feel confident in using library and information sources whether in a library building or virtually via the Internet.

If any one helps to run similar courses or has any comments please feel free to contact me by email: j.shelley@apu.ac.uk

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