

'USING THE LIBRARY': A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Antony Brewerton

In many institutions, library skills are lacking amongst nursing students (Davies, 1994). Academic diffidence, a fear of IT and the fact that nursing studies are often afforded a low status in educational establishments have all contributed to the situation. It is little wonder that Wakeham (1990) concluded that between 'one half and two-thirds of students were commencing courses of study without knowledge and skills which will enable them to approach their studies in the most efficient and effective manner'.

It was the desire to impart this knowledge and these skills that lay behind the conception of the Academic Development Programme at the University of Reading.

Background

I am a rare and fortunate librarian in that I have very close links with my academic staff. I represent the Library on the Board for Community Studies. We have always worked very closely together in planning library skills instruction, a relationship that has been strengthened with the Library's move towards electronic reference services over the past few years. All students receive initial induction training with dissertation-level sessions provided at a later date. Weekly surgeries are also available for LINNET (the Library OPAC), ASSIAPlus and HealthPLAN (on CD-ROM), BIDS and FirstSearch.

When a distance learning course was planned for community (nursing) students it was decided that the intake should have the same opportunity to develop their library skills as their 'on site' colleagues. It was also decided (by the course co-ordinators) that the best person to write the library skills unit was their librarian.

The Academic Development Programme

The Academic Development Programme was created to overcome some of the problems outlined above. Practitioners, expert and well qualified in their own professional fields, would be given the opportunity to gain the academic skills required for graduate or post-graduate study. The market audience would be individuals who felt that they needed to improve or refresh their study skills, prospective students who need further accreditation in specific academic subjects for entry courses within higher education or practitioners unable to attend traditional courses. It could act as a foundation course or a unit of study in its own right. The distance learning format would allow students to study at their own pace and convenience and balance study demands with work, family and personal needs. Although four evening sessions would be timetabled (for tutorial work and registration to the library and other university services) the rest of the study time planning would be left to the individual student.

The Academic Development Programme was devised by the course co-ordinators, Althea Allison and Sandy Tinson, and first presented to a team meeting of community health tutors and related staff (including their librarian) in January 1995. The course would comprise a core module of six units

covering various aspects of study skills and a subject module. Unit 2 was on using the library.

By February the structure was more or less firmly established. The core module would consist of the following units:

Unit One:	Studying and you
Unit Two:	Using the library
Unit Three:	Introduction to study skills
Unit Four:	Making the most of your learning
Unit Five:	Learn through experience
Unit Six:	The interactive workbook

Three subject modules were commissioned (An introduction to sociology; An introduction to social policy; Research methods) with a further seven options planned for 1996 (funding permitting).

Everyday I write the book

The timetable for producing the course was very tight indeed, with the first intake planned for June 1995. An outline plan was required from the authors by the end of February and the first draft by the end of March.

Before starting to write I collected together examples of other written guides of library instruction to consider format and style. I have always been very impressed by the study/teaching help provided by nursing journals, so on top of library guides produced by other academic institutions I soon had a pile of articles from the *Nursing Times*, *Nursing Standard*, *Practice Nurse*, *Nurse Education Today* and *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing* to wade through as well. The information I wanted to convey was quite straightforward: a sort of 'user education greatest hits', based on my induction and dissertation-level lectures. I wanted the course to be progressive (starting with the basics of library use and working up to more advanced information skills) and I wanted to stress the importance of evaluating the tools available.

It was decided that the course should cover general principles rather than specific practices. Although the Academic Development Programme was developed by the community health team, examples of topics and sources would be such that the course could be usefully used by any social science student. Because some students would not be using Reading University's facilities to complete the course, references to search tools were kept very non-specific. Hence, instead of telling students to 'attend Antony's ASSIAPlus surgery at 3pm on a Monday' they were invited to 'see which CD-ROMs your library holds and arrange to attend a training session'. This approach would allow students to make use of any relevant special/academic library to complete the course (it is a distance learning package, after all) and should make the course more sellable to the outside world.

A learning experience

Although I wasn't told 'could do better', I was told by the course co-ordinators that I could do it differently. The first problem concerned length: my masterpiece had to be cut in half. The second problem involved interactivity: I told the students answers rather than told them to find answers. The third problem was level: my book covered too much over too wide a spectrum.

The lack of interactivity was overcome by the addition of activity boxes. Each section soon had an introductory paragraph (or line!) followed by a box telling the students to attend training sessions, obtain guides, mark up maps, list keywords or evaluate search tools.

To tackle the problem of level the course co-ordinators provided me with my favourite solution: 'make this book an introduction to the basics of library use and (if it is any good and if we can get funding) we'll commission you to write a higher level one later on!'

My revised text was received with far greater enthusiasm. Although some problems remained (usually in overlap with the other units that I had not seen) these were largely unavoidable and easily cleared up at the editorial stage.

A limited print run of the core and subject modules was produced and trailed with the first course in June 1995. Although course assessment forms showed that there were a few points that needed to be ironed out (like spelling out that the workbook could be used in any relevant specialist or academic library and stressing that students should book for training sessions in advance if they wanted in-depth instruction in the use of search tools) feedback was generally positive and a full print run of the first (revised) edition of 'Using the library' was ordered. In December 1995 I became the proud owner of my first ISBN (Brewerton, 1995).

The future

We are just about to embark on the third intake for the Academic Development Programme. The response to the programme has been very positive and it is being viewed increasingly as a valuable preliminary to the one year BA in Community Health Studies course, especially by those students lacking a 'traditional' academic background. The Academic Development Programme co-ordinators have managed to secure funding for seven more optional modules, including one on developing information skills ('Library skills for research students') to help tackle some of the problems faced by higher degree nursing students. Although this is still at the editorial stage I found this one much easier to write: it is shorter, more interactive and concentrates on a narrower area of information handling. It also follows the same format as its sister publications, with clearly marked aims and objectives, learning outcomes and skill development reviews. Indeed, my distance learning package has provided a valuable learning experience and I don't just mean for my students!

Antony Brewerton is Community Studies Librarian at the University of Reading

References

- Brewerton, A (1995) *Academic Development Programme, Unit Two: Using the library*. Reading, University of Reading, Department of Community Studies, 1995
- Davies, P (1994) Access to library services. *Health Visitor*, December 1994, 67(12), p.433
- Wakeham, M (1990) Information skills in nurse education. *Nursing Standard*, 14 November 1990, 5(8), p.35-37