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ALISS Quarterly article

Title: Good things come in small packages - developing online bitesize learning objects for researchers

Strategic context

Increasing emphasis on research is shifting Northumbria University's traditional focus of learning and teaching more towards research, which presents challenges and opportunities for support services. The University's Corporate Strategy for 2013-18 states that the University's Vision 2025 is to be a "research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence...to maximise student and stakeholder satisfaction...and foster a culture of continuous improvement" (Northumbria University, nd, 1).

Building on existing research support, the Library supports this agenda by having a focussed Research Support Team, established in 2013, which covers scholarly publications, collections development and research skills. The work highlighted in this article is the responsibility of the Research Skills part of the team. Our researchers could be located anywhere in the world, facing time pressures including teaching commitments and family responsibilities. We deliver a successful Researcher Development Week (RDW) several times a year, dedicated to supporting postgraduate research students and staff with face-to-face workshops – see <http://library.northumbria.ac.uk/info-researchers/RDE> for further details.

Skills Plus

We ensure all materials used in those sessions are available on Skills Plus, which for many years has been the University Library's portal for help guides. It covers a range of topics including academic writing, referencing and plagiarism, searching techniques and information evaluation (www.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus). Support is given in a range of formats to support different learning styles. In recent years the focus has expanded from being mainly aimed at undergraduates to include support for researchers. Due to ongoing development of materials, the list of learning objects particularly pertinent to research students and academic staff was becoming unwieldy, so over the summer of 2014 we worked on a more user-friendly 'Research Skills' section, now available at www.northumbria.ac.uk/researchskills.

Information for....

The University Library Online provides a series of 'Information for....' pages for different customer groups to help highlight services of particular relevance to each group. The Information for Researchers guide www.northumbria.ac.uk/resources-for-researchers is our online presence that complements the skills support available in Skills Plus. We provide guidance on the range of opportunities for skills development, referencing management, collection development, engaging with our institutional repository, and how to contact us.

Bitesize developments

Having the RDW materials online means researchers can access them 24/7 at a time and location convenient to them. We recognised some of the learning objects were

rather long and may benefit from being developing into 'bitesize' objects to make them more easily accessible. Discussion took place within the team to discuss possibilities and priorities, with explorations into good practice at other universities through a Jiscmail request (Kitchin, 2014), and this has resulted in an action plan for developing bitesize materials. Topics for new learning objects included journal table of contents alerts, citation alerts, and effective searching within subject-specific databases.

Deciding on priorities included consideration of topics not currently supported, or help hidden within longer guides, and exploring emerging subjects such as altmetrics. Our bitesize remit included creating shorter free-standing items, whilst retaining longer help guides for use within teaching workshops. This helps eliminate the need for researchers to read information they are already know, and focus on the current information need.

Partnership working

Partnership working and using technology as an enabler are two drivers which underpin our services. We work closely with the Library's Learning Support team who are responsible for developing Skills Plus. They manage the Library's commissioning process through which ideas for online and face-to-face teaching materials are created, and includes quality assurance mechanisms and advice on potential formats. This can involve having an 'inception meeting' before starting work on a learning object, to share ideas and explore potential formats. Creation of learning objects always prioritises pedagogy, not just using technology for technology's sake.

There are currently three main formats used for our learning objects, and examples are given about recently produced materials.

- Short help guides created in Publisher and finalised as pdfs allow for versatile layout and styles. Our Grey Literature help guide was developed as part of the bitesize action plan – you can access this through the Research Skills section of Skills Plus www.northumbria.ac.uk/researchskills
- Camtasia is a useful tool for creating screen capture videos <http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.html>. You can insert PowerPoint slides, thus having the benefit of repurposing materials from our face-to-face workshops. For example, we have developed a series of short videos on using EndNote - <http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/topics.html?l3-12>.
- We have used an iPad and sound recorder to record a member of academic staff talking about his experiences of using social media to support his PhD. This developed in response to a customer conversation, and complements our face-to-face workshop on research and collaboration using web tools and social media. Rather than having one long conversation, we divided it into separate elements to reflect different stages of the research lifecycle. This includes behaving appropriately online, creating opportunities and complementing traditional publishing outputs. This was an exciting project and the output can be viewed via YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/nuskillsplus> and Skills Plus <http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/sublist.html?socialmedia>.

Evaluation

The process of developing online learning objects has been a great learning opportunity for both teams. Creating help guides in Publisher and using the Camtasia software for creating videos were established methods within the Learning Support team. Filming

using the iPad and sound recorder was new for both teams and valuable lessons have been learned. This has included pre-production issues such as filming location and sound levels, and consideration of what is visible in the background of your filming. Our city centre location means avoiding background noises such as ambulance sirens can be a challenge! Exploration of technical possibilities meant the team were able to blur out people in the background to ensure anonymity.

Part of the initial discussions included how we can make the most of the significant staff resource involved in the development of the learning objects. Time spent at this stage is strongly recommended as we are also able to use the social media videos in our face-to-face workshops. Ideally we would like to involve 'real researchers' in our workshops, as real life case studies, but as we deliver each session three times within our Researcher Development weeks, we recognise this would be a significant time commitment to ask from researchers who also have teaching commitments. Including some of the social media films in our face-to-face sessions helps endorse the message we are delivering, and increases efficiency in ensuring multi-purpose use of this new resource.

Conclusion

The partnerships and many of the processes used in our development of online learning objects for our researchers have evolved over a number of years. This was beneficial as we did not have to start from scratch, thus saving us much time. Working within the context of a new team and significant changes in strategic priorities means it takes time to establish best practice. However, we have researchers who need help and support now, so it has been important to get on and do something, whilst at the same time balancing workload allocations with achievable objectives. This activity is not something which is contained within one academic year's business plan, but will be an ongoing development as we continually learn about the needs of our researchers.

References

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