At the edge, collaboration and the blended lecture room: breaking the mould to improve student learning

Abstract

Using one subject class as a case study, this presentation will discuss the value of innovation in constructively aligning the teaching of information literacy skills into a subject in terms of student engagement and outcomes. In the context of reimagining an existing subject, the library lecture was completely redeveloped. The results of the first assessment, an annotated bibliography, showed that all students found relevant scholarly resources and all passed.

The foundation BA subject has been taught for 4 years with lectures video conferenced across 2 campuses in a traditional format of 2 hour lectures and a 1 hour tutorial. Library staff taught a 1 hour lecture and a 1 hour tutorial. The format changed to a 1 hour lecture followed by a 1 hour lectorial focused on skill building and assessment – a blended leture room; and a 1 hour tutorial focused on discussing the lecture content.

The teachers requested a lecture demonstrating specific skills. They requested and participated in a practice run of the class. The library lecture and resources demonstrated, set the foundation for the following lectorial. Students were engaged and actively participated in tasks and demonstrated sound understanding of information literacy concepts demonstrated in the lecture in terms of credibility, authority, audience, bias and usefulness.

The redeveloped library lecture took about 40 hours to prepare. This included the development of a detailed run sheet and an assessment question analysed using a People, Events and other Considerations (PEC) methodology. A themed 13 slide PowerPoint presentation used to conclude the lecture was also prepared.

At all times the process was a true collaboration between library and teaching staff. Student outcomes were at the centre of planning. The teaching staff, were integral to developing an effective library lecture which was constructively aligned with assessment questions and assessment tasks. The library in class time commitment for the subject was reduced from 7 hours to just 3 hours making this innovation in learning support more sustainable.

The reimagined library lecture was made possible by a willingness to accept constructive criticism; a willingness to work at the edge of comfort zones; a willingness to devote a large amount of time at a very busy time of year; and a willingness to take risks. As Librarians we need to embrace new ideas and practices to facilitate emerging teaching methodologies.

Introduction

This paper discusses the process, in collaboration with subject academics, of creating a new information literacy lecture for a first year humanities core subject. In line with the University's blended learning policy, a new teaching format for a core humanities subject was implemented. By working collaboratively with academic teaching staff, a new and different finding information lecture was created. The new library lecture took the students on a journey of the process of finding information and evaluating that information and demonstrated good practice in determining search strategies and evaluating search results. The library lecture was followed by a lectorial where students practices some of the skills demonstrated in the lecture.

Resources found in the lecture were used in the lectorial. Responses to the new lecture from teaching staff and student outcomes are discussed.

Literature review

There has been significant studies and writing on the topic of librarian and faculty collaboration, its barriers, shortfalls, misunderstandings and successes. Librarians are in the business of sharing, we reach out to our clients; we collaborate and cooperate within our organisations and externally (Christiansen, Stombler, & Thaxton, 2004). Librarians have a culture of collaboration. However, academics tend to be lone operators, separated from the library physically and by work practices. Academics work schedules are more flexible; library staff tend to be stuck to rigid work hours (Christiansen et al., 2004)

In 2014 some things are still the same, work practices and hours are still the same. Academics are still separated from the library physically. However some things have changed. University policies now focus on graduate attributes and outcomes. Academics are required to demonstrate how their teaching addresses university teaching and learning policies (Pham & Tanner, 2014). Pham and Tanner (2014) also discuss the relatively recent collaborations of librarians and academics along with educational advisors to provide information literacy classes and other support in subject based classes.

However there is still a disconnect between librarian and academic collaboration. There is still some lack of understanding of the skills of library staff and some resistance to librarians taking time in a course of study (Pham & Tanner, 2014). Librarians also need to have a clear understanding of the skills required to teach an information literacy class (Gwyer, Walton, & Stubbings, 2012; Pham & Tanner, 2014). Libraries need to ensure their staff have the capabilities to deliver teaching in new teaching and learning environments and reassess workloads to facilitate the participation of library staff as collaborators with academics and others in the curriculum.

JCU blended learning policy defines blended learning as

> Learning design that strategically, systematically and effectively integrates a range of face-to-face, online, mobile, distance, open, social and other technology enhanced learning across physical and virtual environments, as informed and driven by student needs and support for desired learning activities and learning outcomes. (James Cook University, 2014a)

The lecture / lectorial approach adopted by teaching staff for this subject reflected the JCU blended learning policy by "encouraging interaction, collaboration and communication between staff and students (James Cook University, 2014a). The approach also encouraged digital literacy development for students.

In his 2013 article, "Watering the shoots of knowledge through collaborative learning", Helfand describes a typical classroom - the teacher out the front speaking to a PowerPoint, the students only barely engaged. He states that our brains and our student's brains, "are instinctively collaborative, innately cooperative, and structurally wired for small group interaction." Helfand (2013) also reiterates the Confucian wisdom of "tell me and I will forget; show me and I will remember; involve me and I will understand" The new lecture / lectorial format mirrors these observations; demonstrating good practice followed by doing in groups each doing a different task and reporting back to class with findings.

Background

James Cook University is a regional Australian University with a strategic focus on making life better in the tropics worldwide (James Cook University, 2014b). With 2 main campuses in North Queensland, a campus in Singapore and micro campuses in Mackay, Mt Isa and Thursday Island, many subjects are taught across campuses via video conference. The Australian campuses run on semesters; the Singapore campus runs on trimesters. The University also has a growing distance education student cohort. Students are drawn from local communities, with about 20% coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. There are some international students. Over 60% of the student population are women.

Over the last 5 years the University has undergone a curriculum refresh, revising content, study modes and teaching methods to reflect the JCU strategic intent and contemporary pedagogies. This process resulted in the development of two Bachelor of Arts core subjects. Library staff were invited to participate in and contribute to the development of these subjects, embedding information literacy lectures and tutorials as key components of the academic skill building aspects of the subjects. This was the beginning of successful collaborations between library and lecturing staff

This paper centres on a core Bachelor of Arts subject titled "Time Truth and the Human Condition." It is a first year, first semester subject and is taught on 3 campuses - Cairns, Townsville and Singapore. It is a kind of taster subject and aims to build academic skills as well as introduce students to the various disciplines and philosophy of the Arts. Assessments are designed to build abilities in academic writing in the arts, develop information seeking and evaluation skills as well as critical reading and thinking. The subject was taught in a traditional 2 hour lecture followed by a one hour tutorial. The subject had been run for 3 years. Librarian contributions included a lecture on finding and evaluating information and a tutorial centred on the first assignment, an annotated bibliography.

A teaching and learning grant was obtained to trial a refreshed teaching format for the subject on the Cairns campus. This was in response to student feedback on the Cairns campus regarding the frustrations of video conferenced lectures and too much tutorial time taken up with assessment discussion instead of content discussion. The new format reflected a more student centred approach with the 2 hour lecture time replaced with a one hour lecture followed by a one hour lectorial and a one hour tutorial. The lectorials were focused on skill building and assessments; were conducted in the lecture theatre and students worked in groups. Lectorials reflected a blended learning pedagogy focused on group work, experiential learning and preparing for assessments(James Cook University, 2014a). Assessment tasks included an annotated bibliography, a document analysis, a group assignment and a poster. All assessment pieces (except the document analysis) were based on the same topics and had to address the same question: what is the truth or truths and ways of knowing in a prescribed time and place. Tutorials were focussed on discussing lecture content.

Library contributions to the subject has always been embedded into the subject, focussed on assessment and supported by a detailed LibGuide. Face to face contributions included a one hour lecture focused on finding information based on a detailed PowerPoint presentation. The PowerPoint presentation was text heavy, instruction heavy; some text was unreadable – you know the kind, we've all done them. This PowerPoint also served for the distance education students. Library support also included a one hour tutorial focused on constructing an annotation and

referencing. The tutorial commitment across the two Australian campuses was 10 - 12 hours of contact time, a significant commitment of library staff resources. In the refreshed subject, library staff were asked to present a 1 hour lecture on finding information and were requested to attend a 1 hour lectorial on evaluating information and a 1 hour lectorial on referencing.

The journey

The lectures were now held in a technology enabled lecture theatre where students sat at long desks with movable chairs, their computers could be projected on screen, microphones were everywhere and the teachers console enabled us to zoom in on specific areas of the theatre. Part of the refresh included revisiting the library contribution to the subject. The existing lecture and PowerPoint were no longer appropriate! The academics had very specific requests for the content of the finding information lecture. Requests included:

- That the lecture be entirely different and new.
- Tools to use for searching.
- Specific searches to find usable sources for a relevant topic.
- Discuss search results in terms of appropriateness, scholarship, bias and usefulness.
- Have a practice run about 2 weeks prior to the actual presentation.
- The lectorial following the library lecture used specific resources found and demonstrated in the library lecture.
- The searches be based on a previous assessment topic.

The topic of 'Australia at the time of federation' was chosen to enable effective student participation. That is "what is the truth or truths and ways of knowing in Australia at the time of federation".

A detailed lecture plan was developed. The lecture wove a story (Hubspot, 2013), about, and demonstrated the process of finding and evaluating information to answer a specific question. A key part of this process was student participation in brainstorming the topic using a People, Events and other Considerations (PEC) framework. The PEC analysis enabled students to see possible ways of approaching the topic. The students gained the understanding that the People aspect wasn't just about individuals but included organisations, professions and social status. The Events aspect not only included federation itself but the political and social events leading to federation and beyond. The other Considerations aspect included economy, political mores and places. The completed PEC provided a range of search terms and a search was chosen.

Only Summon (a federated search engine) was demonstrated. The searching demonstration began with a very basic search, and then was built on by adding limits and more keywords. Results were discussed in terms of appropriateness, bias, scholarship and usefulness (Bundy, 2004). Hard copies of some materials were produced and discussed. Selected electronic sources were also discussed. The key messages were: "is it scholarly" and "does the source help to answer the question - truth and ways of knowing in Australia at the time of federation." All of the demonstration was done live.

The last 10 minutes of the lecture was a summary using a PowerPoint presentation of just 13 slides. The criteria for the presentation were that it has a theme; reinforce the lecture messages; reinforce the assessment questions of the subject; and

engage the audience. The theme for the presentation was truth. The PowerPoint was image heavy; reinforced the assessment question of truth and ways of knowing in a particular time and place; and the key messages of the lecture. The PowerPoint also reinforced the 'truth' aspect of the subject.

A draft of the complete lecture and PowerPoint were presented to teaching staff about 2 weeks prior to the actual lecture. This presentation included demonstrating resources found and discussing their relevance (or not) to answering the question. The new format was applauded; there was much comment, appreciation and enthusiasm for the resources demonstrated. The teaching staff provided valuable feedback that improved the final lecture. The teaching staff also chose several of the demonstrated documents to use for group work exercises for the lectorial.

Outcomes / Reflection

The lecture preparation required creating a very detailed step by step run sheet showing search terms, when to apply limits and which results to point out and discuss. Specific resources demonstrating the key messages of the lecture - scholarly resources and usefulness in answering the question needed to be carefully chosen to facilitate the lectorial activities. Creating the short powerpoint was also time consuming and required skills in photo editing.

Feedback from Teaching staff

> "It is so exciting how your lecture, and the lectorial … is tying in to the subject. We are still running with the federation examples (which I am loving) and I am hoping that the two weeks of talking about it will set them up for the in class writing task on Friday, especially as we are giving them two sources direct from your session."

> "Just wanted to let you know that using those two books full of primary docs in your lecture was inspired. I have used them in tutes to illustrate a way of finding primary doc for the poster and that it is a form of source they can also write about in the An Bib. I saw quite a few light bulbs go off when I mentioned them and your lecture today."

One tutor reported that all her students (half the cohort) found scholarly resources for the annotated bibliography assignment and all students passed this assessment piece.

Conclusion

Lessons learned in preparing for this lecture have informed other library information literacy teaching. While this library lecture was developed in collaboration with academics, the lecture suited a particular style of delivery. The challenge is now to enable others on other campuses to teach the same class, ensure they have the same access to resources found (the university may only own 1 copy of the printed resource demonstrated). Another challenge is to convert the face-to-face student experience into an effective online teaching resource for distance education students. One size does not fit all; a teaching resource for face-to-face interaction does not provide student centred learning for distance education students.

The lecture modelling good practice followed by a lectorial with active learning components reinforced learning and follows blended learning pedagogy. The lecture and lectorial content was constructively aligned with the first assessment piece of an

annotated bibliography and also strongly supported a following assessment piece of a researched poster. Working closely with academics and tutors to develop effective, relevant and targeted teaching provided a more engaging, more embedded, more focused learning experience for students. Student learning was reinforced by the following lectorial which drew all content from the library lecture. The library lecture set the foundation for future lectorial and tutorial reminders about analysing a topic, evaluating and selecting suitable resources for assessment pieces.

While the preparation for this class was very time consuming, the resulting product was very well received, is usable in the future, with minor revision, for this subject and is a more sustainable approach to supporting students than attending many tutorials. The time spend on development was certainly reflected in the end product.

The success of this collaboration shows that librarians need to be responsive, open to constructive criticism and be open to new and different ways of working. Librarians need to be risk takers, be innovative in working collaboratively with academics to achieve better outcomes for students.

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