

## **Information Literacy at Newcastle University – a case study**

### **Introduction**

This case study describes the Newcastle University Information Literacy Toolkit and Forum. It examines the processes involved in bringing such a project to fruition and highlights the strengths of this approach in embedding IL into an organization. Practical examples of how the toolkit can be used to support a variety of teaching styles and learning habits in different disciplines are given. The value of the Forum as a Community of Practice able to take forward information literacy principles independently of the Library is also examined. Issues and challenges which arose in the implementation of the toolkit and Forum are highlighted, with suggestions for minimizing these in similar developments in the future

### **Background**

Newcastle University has over 17,000 students in 3 Faculties covering Arts and Humanities, Medical Sciences, Science, Agriculture and Engineering. Distance learning is increasing, as is the number of mature and international students, so the range of abilities and experiences of the students and staff in relation to information literacy is wide. There is no institutional Information Literacy Policy, so that although the IL which takes place has been of a high quality, it is inconsistent in terms of delivery and availability to students.

### **Project drivers**

- To provide a demonstrably coherent approach to the delivery of information literacy across the curriculum and to all levels of undergraduate and postgraduate student,
- To create a learning environment in which students will develop as information literate people
- To provide a mechanism by which academic staff can integrate information literacy into their teaching.

We want Newcastle graduates to be equipped not only with subject specific knowledge, but to have also acquired a life long approach to learning and information. The rationale behind this project was also to engage academic and library staff more deeply with the concepts and processes of information literacy, rather than the products. "Information literacy demands a different way of thinking about what and how we teach as well as thinking about the impact on learning" (Moore, 2002). The aim was to emphasise the importance of students understanding the process rather than just finding a set of results, and to engage both academic and library staff in delivering activities which encouraged students to explore different aspects of information literacy. The rationale for this approach draws on a number of theories, particularly the development of self-regulated learning (Zeidner et al., 2000) and at staff level, activity theory (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström, 2003) .

### **Challenges and benefits**

The challenge of this approach meant that the project deliverables would be a mixed collection of ideas, activities and approaches that would take into account a range of learning and teaching methods. The outcomes of the project are thus not just a set of learning objects, but an ongoing range of activities relating to information literacy across the institution; a much less tangible, more difficult to describe outcome. This fuzzy, slightly unfocused approach was deliberate because of the differing disciplinary demands placed on students.

### **Implementation**

#### **Timescale**

The project ran officially for one year, from summer 2005 to summer 2006, with the specific objective of "providing Schools with a suite (toolkit) of interactive learning activities relating to information literacy that can be integrated seamlessly with curricular provision" Although we

have achieved most of our main outcomes in terms of a practical toolkit, this timescale did not allow for the process of institutional embedding, publicity, evaluation and the development of an exit strategy for the project. Longer term maintenance and development also needs to be factored in. It has been agreed that the project team will continue for a second year, but as yet, no extra budget has been allocated.

## **Resources**

The project team included academics, librarians, a web designer and educationalists. As well as providing essential expertise, this mix contributed to the perception of the project as a university initiative, rather than as 'just another library project'. It has been one of the strengths of the project and a major factor in its success to date. The budget allowed the appointment of a short term project officer, whose role was to develop the toolkit structure and populate it with resources (resources including ideas and links as well as specific activities). This was one of the least successful aspects of the project. As the post was short term, it was not easy to find a suitably qualified person, and the project officer left before the end of her contract. This created pressure on other team members, who all had full time jobs and little time to devote solely to the project and as a consequence the project fell behind. Lack of dedicated time from the web development officer has also seriously affected the toolkit development. Although the toolkit is available, it does not include all the potential resources and the internal launch has been delayed.

## **Outcomes**

### **1. The IL Toolkit**

The Toolkit is based on the Sconul 7 pillars model (SCONUL, 1999), setting benchmarks for information literacy development through university life. In order to make the SCONUL model more accessible to the user group, each of the pillars was referred to as a 'standard' which, in turn, is made up of a number of 'criteria'. Each criterion is then mapped to a range of activities designed to appeal to different learning attitudes and teaching situations, thus providing pick and mix opportunities for staff. The toolkit itself consists of a database containing a wide range of activities, ideas and examples of best practice which can be used and adapted by both library and academic staff to embed information literacy into the curriculum. It is available via a secure webpage to all staff, who can also add their own (vetted) contributions in order to share good practice. The design and implementation of the toolkit have been informed by pedagogical theory, so that it can be used to support many different teaching styles and learning habits.

The toolkit can be used in a variety of ways. Perhaps an academic wants to reinforce the dangers of plagiarism with his class. Searching through the toolkit he will find a range of different ideas to help him (see fig 1) There are suggestions for a group activity, an online quiz, a set of lecture notes and some examples of high profile plagiarism cases. Any or all of these can be combined to create an appropriate session for his students. It may be that for some attributes, the best "tool" is just an idea, or an example of best practice from another subject area, rather than an actual activity to download. It is hoped that the range of tools means that there will be something which is suitable for the teaching style of the academic or librarian, as well as something which appeals to different learning attitudes of the students.

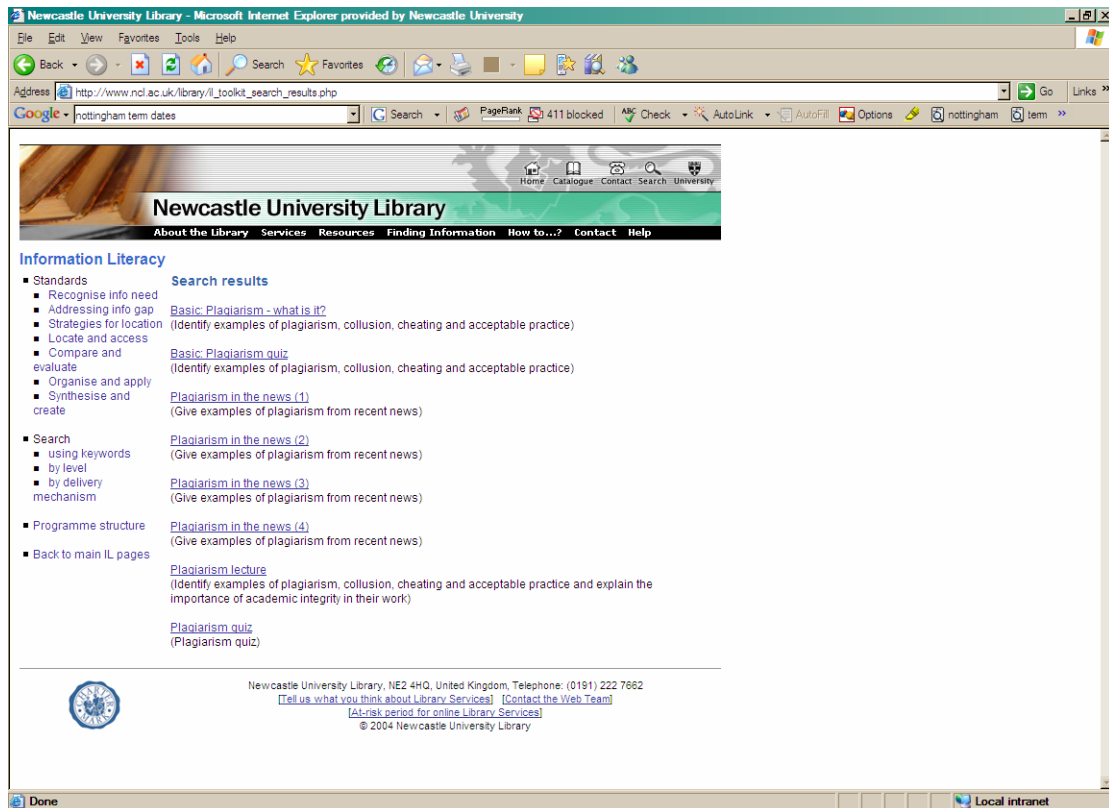


Fig 1

Alternatively, the toolkit can be used to support specific learning outcomes in a module and we expect that this will be particularly attractive to teaching staff. This example demonstrates how the Information Literacy Toolkit could be used to support the intended skills outcomes of a first year module.

### Step 1

Look at your module's intended skills outcomes and identify which ones relate to Information Literacy – see the two highlighted below.

Intended Learning Outcomes for this module:

1. Gathering of information from a variety of sources
2. Understanding and applying theoretical concepts
3. The ability to use library sources effectively
4. The ability to work independently

### Step 2

Map these learning outcomes to the Information Literacy Seven Skills Model:

[http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/infolit\\_model.php](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/infolit_model.php)

1. Gathering of information from a variety of sources – maps to Standard 4 -The ability to locate and access information
3. The ability to use library sources effectively – maps to Standard 3 – Construct strategies for locating information

### Step 3

Go into the Information Literacy Toolkit ([http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/il\\_toolkit.php](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/il_toolkit.php)), and you'll find activities listed at Basic, Intermediate and Advanced levels for each of the criteria belonging to the standards above.

In support of learning outcome 1 (gathering of information from a variety of sources) you might choose a powerpoint presentation and associated handout on 'Mind Mapping for developing a search strategy'

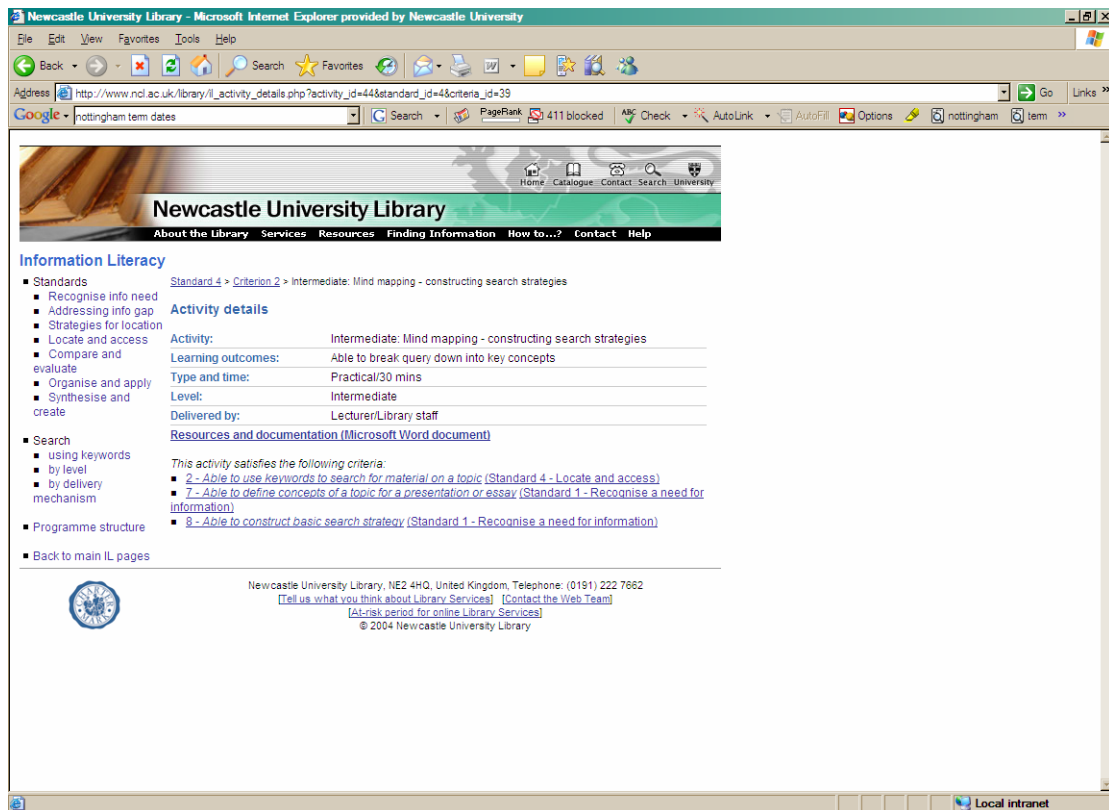


Fig 2

In support of learning outcome 2 (ability to use library sources effectively) we can choose the treasure hunt activity called 'Using the Robinson Library'

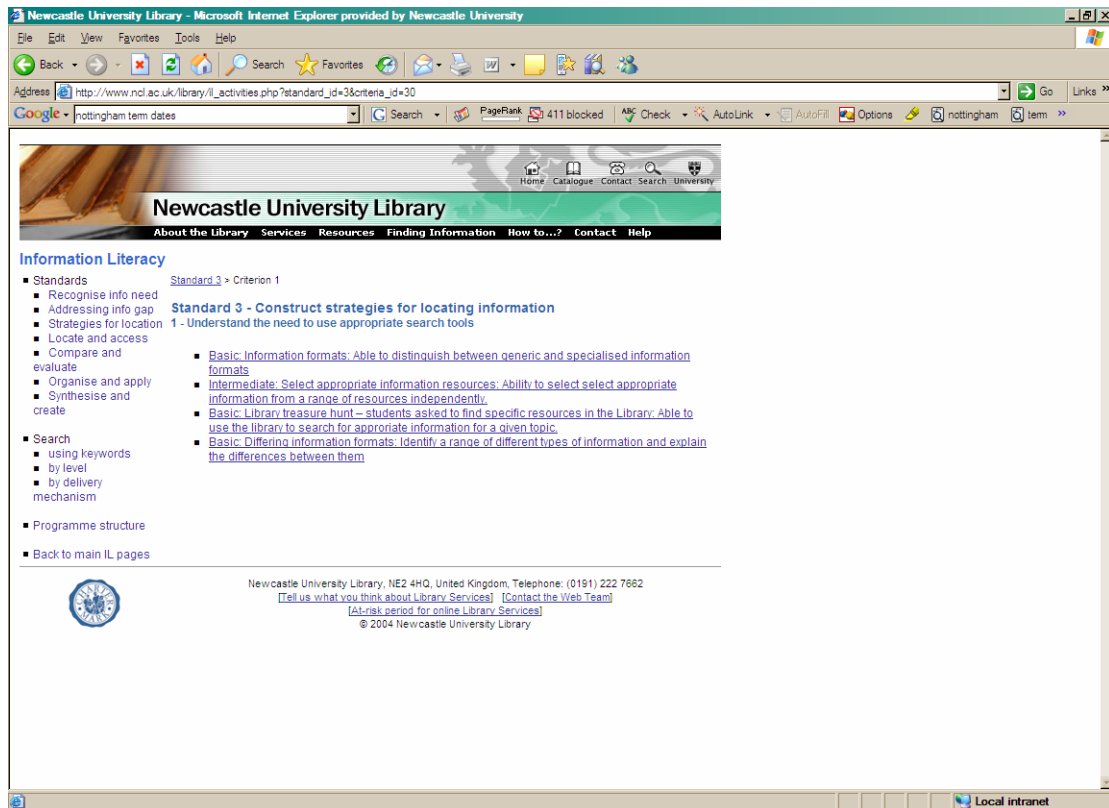


Fig 3

These activity selections will be provided for each faculty, giving staff a contextualised demonstration of how to build sets of activities into modules and across programmes to ensure all 7 standards are covered. We believe this practical and pragmatic approach is crucial to the success of the toolkit.

We have been influenced by Bruce Ingraham's work on readability (Ingraham, 2004) and are currently wrestling with the need to ensure that the Toolkit is transparent and usable for staff whilst at the same time maintaining its complexity. This is a challenging task and does require further input from our web designer!

## 2. The IL Forum

The Toolkit was the anticipated product of the project, but the process itself has engendered a much more interesting and potentially valuable outcome - the Information Literacy Forum. The Forum was initiated as a consultation vehicle to discover more about academic attitudes to information literacy and their priorities for activities in the Toolkit. Feedback from the Forum indicated that as well as providing this data, lecturers involved had found it a useful networking opportunity; contacts had been made with colleagues in other disciplines, discussions on the different approaches to information literacy had provided much food for thought. The Forum is developing as a Community of Practice and with regular meetings and online communication is a successful outcome of the project.

## Evaluation

### The toolkit

Content of the toolkit has been evaluated by library and academic staff, both as material has been added and during subsequent use. Feedback from academic staff piloting the toolkit activities has ranged from reporting of broken links or technical issues to suggestions for

changes to activities, adjustment of levels or indicating that the material or documentation was not easy to use. The toolkit will be officially launched in Dec 2006.

## The Forum

The Forum is creating a dialogue amongst practitioners across the institution. Evaluation of its success at this stage can only be subjective, based on the enthusiastic response of participants and their continued attendance at meetings and events. As with all other outcomes of the project, future success of the Forum relies on the further investment of time to organise meetings and facilitate communication until it becomes self-perpetuating.

### Long term impact.

Within the timescale of the project it has not been possible to evaluate the long term impact of the project on the information literacy of our graduates and staff. However, there are several smaller ongoing activities which it is anticipated will give valuable feedback. A parallel project looking at integrating information literacy into the chemistry curriculum will use the toolkit to design module outcomes and will apply diagnostic tests to students at various stages of their programme. Similar activities are taking place in other disciplines and will report back via the Forum.

### Lesson Learned

- The budget is never enough!
- Dedicated project staff are essential in order to meet deadlines and ensure a quality outcome
- The timescale must include space for embedding, evaluation, maintenance and development
- Cross institutional project teams help with the acceptance of initiatives which might otherwise be viewed as "Library projects"
- Early consultation with stakeholders can result in a much stronger outcome
- Underpinning the project with pedagogical theory has helped academic staff to appreciate its relevance.
- Projects must be designed to be sufficiently flexible to change and adapt to new directions as appropriate (eg the Forum)

Ingraham, B. (2004) Guidelines for producing Readable, Accessible Onscreen text *BB Matters*. [http://www.bbmatters.net/bbmattersProject/Articles/article\\_item.asp?SubmitArticleID=67](http://www.bbmatters.net/bbmattersProject/Articles/article_item.asp?SubmitArticleID=67)

Moore, P. (2002) *Information Literacy, what's it all about?* New Zealand Council for Educational Research: Wellington.

SCONUL (1999) *Information skills in Higher Education : a Sconul position paper prepared by the Sconul Advisory Committee on Information Literacy*. Society of College, National and University Libraries.

Tuomi-Gröhn, T. and Engeström, Y. (Eds.) (2003) *Between school and work: New perspectives on transfer and boundary-crossing*. Pergamon Press, Amsterdam.

Zeidner, M., Boekaerts, M. and Pintrich, P. R. (2000) 'Self-regulation: Directions and challenges for future research', in Boekaerts, M., Pintrich, P. and Zeidner, M. (Eds) *Self-regulation: Theory, research, and applications*. Academic Press: Orlando, FL, pp. 749-768.