Librarians behaving badly: moving from a supporting role to a central role in the academic curriculum - some how, why and what issues.

INTRODUCTION

Library staff at the Lilydale Campus of Swinburne University are responsible for the design, delivery and assessment of twenty percent of a compulsory first year, Bachelor-level subject. We design and develop curriculum, compose the relevant section of the learning guide, deliver lectures, set and assess assignments and examination questions. This paper briefly describes our program with reference to a few how, what and why issues.

HOW

How did we manage to capture 20% of the curriculum content, delivery time and assessment tasks of a 12-week course? In some academic institutions librarians have to fight hard for space in the mainstream curriculum. We have found it relatively easy. So how did we do it?

The Lilydale Campus was designed to be a virtual learning community and in the high-tech environment that existed not only in the library but throughout the Campus it was fairly obvious that many students would have difficulty surviving. And after the first semester on our new campus (1997) it was even more apparent. Many students faced a very steep learning curve before they were comfortable and competent with the range of technology confronting them. As most of them worked on their assignments in the library any distinction between information literacy and technology literacy became irrelevant. As library staff taught students research skills and electronic database searching, we were simultaneously teaching them how to use the software, and often the hardware as well. Additionally, we have to deal with students working through computer-based packages, in accounting, applied science and statistics. To some extent it is true to say that we got Information Literacy into the curriculum on the coat-tails of technology literacy.

As a group the library information staff were clearly the best qualified members of staff to teach technology literacy and information literacy together. So getting into the curriculum was not difficult for us and we have had a favourable response whenever we have asked for more student contact time or more time to prepare courses. The Applied Science Faculty have paid our salaries when we have had to work extra time. The Information Methods course as a whole and the component taught by the library staff have evolved together - we have never felt that our module was grafted on.

We also have research skills components in traditional subjects but these are dependent on the interest level of individual co-ordinators. We would like to move into some more systematic and structured programs for our second and third year students so that we can develop higher level information literacy skills such as analysing, synthesising and evaluating resources. So far two lecturers, one in sociology and one in marketing have expressed interest in enhancing the library's participation in their subjects. Perhaps this is another example of librarians behaving badly because it impacts on our time so much and takes us away from other duties but we believe it is a priority.

WHY

Why we got ourselves into the course is pretty clear. The library information staff were best able to devise an intensive, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary program which would give entry students some survival skills for life in an electronic environment. Also, we needed the students to develop independence if WE were going to survive. A bigger question for us now is not why we did it but why we are STILL doing it. I am referring to the constant, unrelenting, unavoidable task of the extensive revision we have had to undertake every semester. Our program is coming up for its 9th incarnation in the first semester of 2001. This
is largely caused by the ever-changing electronic environment but also by pedagogical issues. The three of us have been on a learning curve too, trying to develop a one-size-fits-all program for students of varied ability levels and discovering the hard way what works and what doesn't. Perhaps it is another example of our 'bad behaviour' but we take a more realistic view now of what we can reasonably expect students to do. We used to structure our program around an online tutorial but found that very few were prepared to work methodically through it. Most students prefer face to face teaching where possible and we certainly want to retain the human touch in our dealings with our customers.

We have sought help from instructional designers and test developers but are still finding we have an enormous workload. The marking of assignments and examinations is a particularly onerous and time-consuming task. Some other librarians think it is an example of librarians behaving badly. They have been aghast at the notion of librarians grading papers, believing it to be beyond the scope of our jobs. I see it differently. If we are going to be in the curriculum, if we want to be accepted as academics, we have to see it through - we cannot opt out of those tasks we find irksome. Student achievement in our unit needs to be evaluated just as much as it does in the rest of the subject and I would feel we were shirking the issue if we refused to assess our own assignments and exam papers. Besides, we find that assessing the students gives valuable insights into assessing the program too.

From next semester we are hoping to streamline things a bit - an increasing amount of our assessment will be online rather than paper based. We are hoping to develop an item bank of questions and assessment tasks so that we could vary the set of questions from student to student which will improve security.

WHAT
Students are enrolled in Business, Social Science and Applied Science degrees but they all do the same Information Methods subject. The subject itself has been revised nearly as many times as the library component. Currently the curriculum looks like this:

**Topic 1. Introduction and Information Literacy**

**Topic 2. Searches and data research methods**
- Electronic libraries
- Databases and collections
- Search principles

**Topic 3. Information fundamentals**
- Information defined and contextualised
- Information semiotics

**Topic 4. Information quality and timeliness**

**Topic 5. Information in a global and / or cultural context**

**Topic 6. Structuring and collecting data resources**

**Topic 7. Creative and critical thinking**

**Topic 8. Writing and referencing**

The library effort is concentrated in the first few weeks. Specifically we cover:
- the library catalogue, constructing search strategies, Boolean operators, using a thesaurus,
- using indexes and fulltext databases, using wildcards and truncation, analysing an essay question, searching outside Swinburne - Coolcat, other library catalogues, the Internet.
We are proud of the fact that our unit is so well integrated into the curriculum. The transitions between what we teach and what the subject co-ordinator teaches are not obvious. There are no jarring notes. This is well illustrated by looking at our questions on the second semester exam. We set the first 14 questions but the 15th question is 'Define information literacy and describe why it is relevant.' The transition is quite seamless. The subsequent questions are just as consistent as with the message we are trying to impart.

So, although being an integral part of the mainstream curriculum has been a big undertaking we are happy with what we have achieved and have lots of plans and ideas for the future.

Bibliography


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Swinburne University of Technology *Library Home Page (and links)*
http://www.swin.edu.au/lib