Effective use of forums

Elizabeth Newall
Libraries, Research and Learning Resources
Effective Literature Searching module

Background

In the first instance, we (the librarians) acted as tutors on a separate Graduate School online course, *Introduction to the Literature Review Process*. Whilst it was never the Graduate School's intention that this course would deal with literature searching, it was evident from tutoring on this course that one was needed. Researcher experiences shared within the discussion forums clearly showed that those who were participating in this online course needed support in developing their literature searching skills and strategies. We created an online moderated course for postgraduate researchers on Effective Literature Searching.

What did you do?

This course has been designed for postgraduate researchers across all disciplines at the University. Whilst it is intended for those at an early stage in their research, it is open to all. Due to the flexible nature of the course (it being delivered online with a suggested time commitment of 1 hour per day for each of the 5 days of the course), it is of particular benefit to those who are studying part-time and/or at a distance. It is run by experienced and trained online moderators not as a self-study course.

The course participants are invited in the first instance to “Show and tell” whereby they consider their current search strategies and the extent to which they think these strategies are effective. In “Spreading your wings” and “Compare and contrast”, the researchers are given a rare opportunity to give themselves a break from thinking about their own research. Whilst broadly aligning themselves with one of four subject areas (Arts; Medicine and Health; Science and Engineering; and Social Sciences), they are invited to explore the advanced search functionality within a number of example databases. They are then given a pre-defined search to apply in each of the same databases in order to evaluate the results generated. Next, in ‘The matrix’, they return to their own research question but are introduced to a new methodology for developing a search strategy, which they then put to the test. Finally, they are encouraged to explore ‘Saved searches, citation searches and alerts’ before a final reflection on how they are going to move forward with what they’ve learnt.

It has the same resources every time it runs – but new forums (activities)
How did it work out?

A recent course participant wrote in one of the discussion forums in which participants are invited to share their experiences of the day’s set tasks, “Today, and more than ever, I FEEL LIKE A RESEARCHER”. The use of asynchronous discussion forums facilitates this reflection and the set tasks instil how fundamental information searching techniques are to research methods and practice.

The forums also engender collaborative learning and offer opportunities for participants to provide peer-to-peer support. Whilst the course has been specifically designed to develop literature searching skills and strategies, it is intended as a pre-cursor to the Graduate School’s Introduction to the Literature Review Process, thereby sitting within a broader – yet connected - professional development context.

What did students think?

The final discussion forum within the course is entitled, “Next Steps”, in which participants are invited to consider where they might go from here in terms of search strategies and reference management, and to reflect on everything covered on the course and suggest what will be most useful to them from now on. The following reactions and feedback were captured within this forum:

“I enjoyed the course tremendously. It is not just the course materials, e.g. tutorials on various databases and the search matrix, which are useful, it is the forum with students’ participation and experience sharing that gives me motivation to learn more and more... I guess this is the beauty of the Moodle design for off-campus research students like myself. The feedback from the tutors is immediate, constructive and specific.”

“Thanks to you and all the other tutors. You made this course very interactive with your comments and support throughout this course. I also appreciate the comments from other students.”

“Experimenting with search techniques in different databases and participating in this type of learning to see how it works. I enjoyed the way that I could fit in the tasks around the rest of my day and didn’t have to travel into the university… this is a good way of giving everyone the ability to say what they think and ask questions without being dominated by ‘strong’ voices.”

“The course was very useful. When I started my PhD, I received a lot of papers to read through. I have found many more papers in the meanwhile, but it was not very structural and I did not know how to use and choose the databases from the eLibrary-gateway properly. Things have become much clearer now, and I learnt how to set up an alert, etc. I just did not have/take time to explore all these things, and the course captured it all in a clear and compact way.”

“While I initially wasn’t sure what I could learn from this course that I didn’t already know, I found the matrix session really helpful, and the whole thing got me thinking about using other databases, since clearly they aren’t all overlapping. Hopefully I’ll be able to miss fewer papers in future thanks to a better search strategy.”

“Thank you for supervising this course, I really enjoyed it. The most useful was to learn more about other search engines I haven’t used before (suggesting the tutorials was a very good idea) and having an open forum where I could read other researchers comments on the subject was also very useful.”

“I found the course very helpful as it allowed me to develop my searching methods to yield a more refined set of results. As a result of this course I will also incorporate Scopus into my searching methods as this enables me to gain a high number of quality hits. I have also implemented citation alerts on several key articles to help me keep up to date with the fast moving literature. The matrix is a good process for systematically filtering results based on the search terms.”

“First of all, I shall say a big thank you for your nice supervision for this online course Elizabeth. And also I say thank you for the whole team working on the course as well for the nice job done. It was a beneficial course for me and I really can say with confidence that my searching capabilities are more effective now. The matrix I developed in this course was really very beneficial for me and I was always saying that I want to do something like this and this course allowed me to take some time and just think about different keywords and synonyms to
improve my searching abilities and refresh my findings. Also I found the alerts especially the email ones very important and I will surely keep using such alerts in my future searching processes. I will be working more on my referencing and maybe considering Endnote as a way to improve this side”

“I found this course really helpful. The matrix system was a very good idea, and in addition I actually did learn a lot of new databases to search through. I also found the comments from other students in similar situations really helpful. It’s good to know that everyone has a bit of trouble with this process!”

“This course really challenged the way I do my research. I really found useful the immediate feedback that you gave us. Thanks a lot. Working alone is not easy. Such online courses help me in finding support.”

“Thank you, it’s been a really useful week & as someone already said it was good to do in a group & to be able to look at other comments & pick up other bits from this.”

“This is a life-changing course for me in terms of academic study. I hope to digest more when coming back to review all these useful things. I also hope to be able to ask our lovely librarians in future. I need more training such as how to use Endnotes etc, but at least I know where I have been now. Previously I was in darkness. I see the dawn now. And I never feel scared about doing research any more.”

“I’ve enjoyed the course and found it challenging. It’s demonstrated to me the power of information organisation, as well as how interesting and encouraging it is to read everyone’s messages, going through the process together. Thanks everyone. I’ve learnt to be more confident in exploring databases and then in starting to arrange the results of searches.

**Recommendations and tips**

The biggest challenge has been the extent to which the course has been time-consuming for tutors. We timetable our online support so that one tutor is always online from 9am – 5pm, Monday through to Friday, each time the course runs. The time is usually split into 2 hour sessions. It has been necessary to give this level of commitment in order to ensure participants feel supported and are able to have any specific questions answered in a timely fashion. However, this does not assist those participants who want to come online in the evenings. As such, we are currently looking at engaging international partners from our overseas campus at UNNC as well as making approaches to HEIs in North America.

Another challenge has been to ensure that discussions within the forums remain on track. On occasion, a participant has not quite understood the daily task and unless a tutor responds quickly, it is easy for other participants to follow suit. Ensuring that tutors are live in Moodle throughout their 2 hour sessions has effectively managed this problem.

This is a very intensive course, however – with other courses you need to establish the pace at which your course runs and in what timescale to respond

**Award-winning course**

This course was an example of good practice that made the final shortlist for the RIN/SCONUL-funded Research Information Literacy and Digital Scholarship (RILADS) project

RILADS full report and short list including this course [http://rilads.wordpress.com/](http://rilads.wordpress.com/)

**More information**

How to achieve this:

- Moodle Help Guides
- Forums
- Ask Learning Team Support about training in online facilitation