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Citation: Baughan, P. (2011). StudyWell: an interactive web resource to promote positive study and better understanding of plagiarism prevention. *Brookes eJournal of Learning and Teaching*, 3(2),

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BROOKES eJOURNAL OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

PROMOTING GOOD PRACTICE IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

StudyWell

Vol. Three - Issue Two - Jul 2011

Authors

Abstract

The StudyWell project involved the construction of a new website for students and staff at City University London. The purpose of StudyWell is to integrate existing resources in the University on plagiarism prevention and good study into a single place, and supplement these with a range of new, interactive resources for users. The site takes a positive approach to good study and plagiarism prevention, through its provision of quizzes, activities and case studies, and is aimed at users at both the host institution and to the external community. This paper discusses literature and other data sources which informed the development of StudyWell and argues that, when developing enhancement initiatives of this type, a meso educational change approach should be deployed: one that accounts for the diverse needs of different users and workgroups in school and departmental contexts. The paper also considers the design and construction of the site, summarises results of initial evaluations, and comments on the aforementioned theory and literature in light of development of the site.

Biography

Patrick Baughan is a Senior Lecturer at the Learning Development Centre, City University London. He leads and teaches on several modules of the University's MA Academic Practice (staff development) programme. His research is focused on various areas of the study of higher education and educational development, including assessment, feedback, and academic conduct; he has additional interests in workplace issues, such as organisational cultures and the psychological contract. Patrick is a Convenor for the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE), and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). He is currently undertaking PhD research, supervised through the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

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Introduction

This paper introduces and discusses the StudyWell project, the first phase of which was undertaken by a small group of staff at City University London, between 2009-2010. StudyWell is an interactive website, the aims of which are to integrate existing resources in the University on plagiarism prevention and good study into a single place, and supplement these with new resources for students and staff. The paper offers an illustrative approach, focusing on a number of aspects of the project: the rationale for developing the website as a teaching and learning tool, its inclusion of a variety of perspectives and 'voices' on plagiarism prevention, the actual process of developing a website of this type, the initial evaluation, and plans for its continued development. Reference is made to literature which informed the project, including that of Blum (2009) and Carroll (2007). The work is also theorised with reference to Trowler's (2005, 2008) meso approach to educational change. Finally, suggestions for colleagues involved in comparable schemes are offered. It is hoped that the paper will be of value to colleagues who have a teaching and learning role, particularly those involved in the development of positive study skills, plagiarism prevention, and the more general promotion of a climate of academic honesty within their institutions.

Rationale

Like most other higher education institutions, City University London has well established regulations and support mechanisms concerning academic honesty and conduct. However, evidence suggests that during the last 10-15 years, there have been increased opportunities for students to become involved in different forms of academic misconduct arising from mass internet use (Carroll, 2007; Sutherland-Smith, 2008), financial hardships (Brown, 2001), a decline in the tutor-student ratio (McDowell & Brown, 2001) and intensified pressures on students to achieve good grades (Blum, 2009). Consequently, senior staff at the University indicated that there was a need for further steps to be taken to ensure that students and staff were furnished with a fuller understanding of relevant academic conduct issues. Following this, a number of successful institution-wide plagiarism prevention initiatives were organised, such as the former Educational Development Associate initiative (discussed in Baughan, 2010), whilst

regulations and guidance about assessment and academic misconduct were also substantially updated. The result was a wider range of sources of information related to plagiarism issues across the University.

Whilst these represented positive developments, they also contributed to a more subtle problem, as information and guidance was left situated in different places and managed by different sections and departments, such as the Library, the Student Centre and the Students' Union. It seemed to be sensible, therefore, to try to integrate the relevant information and policy in one place, whilst refreshing guidance on good study and academic honesty at the same time. It is these factors that led to the creation of StudyWell.

Background

The topic of plagiarism is widely and rightly documented as negative and problematic (see for example, Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2009) and one that many people would rather not engage with. Consequently, the decision was made to try to imbue a positive approach in StudyWell, encouraging the development of good study skills and plagiarism prevention knowledge. The project team also strived to make the site interactive, as policies and information about plagiarism prevention is so often provided in the form of unappealing text based documents. To make it dynamic, the site was designed with activities, quizzes, videos and a number of fictional characters to help convey key messages. In addition, attempts were made to make the project as inclusive as possible, with staff and students from different sections of the University invited to contribute and feedback. For example, individual students were asked to comment on both content and presentation issues, to ensure that account was taken of the 'learner voice' (Porter, 2008). In this capacity, the project team was informed by the work of Blum (2009), who has considered incidents of academic misconduct from the experiences of students studying at a number of North American colleges. Blum argues that academic misconduct may take place as a result of the existence of different cultures within institutions: a staff culture that regards plagiarism as a serious and punishable academic offence, and student cultures based on the need to obtain the qualification as the first priority, as well as the influence (for many) of the more general student experience of '...growing up in a college bubble' (p. 91). Blum points to the need for greater alignment between staff expectations and student practices, towards a joint understanding of the issues. Such a view was accounted for in developing StudyWell, its aim being to provide a resource for both students and staff.

In planning the site, the project team accounted for research about student writing and plagiarism prevention (Stefani & Carroll, 2001), and student centred assessment (Falchikov, 2004; Pickford & Brown, 2006). Of particular value in the planning stage was the holistic approach to plagiarism prevention (Carroll, 2007; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006). This seeks to provide a structured approach that institutions can follow, involving a common understanding of what plagiarism is, 'designing out' opportunities for plagiarism, 'designing in' guidance for students and staff, and creating a culture where plagiarism is not accepted. Effort was made to ensure that the site addressed the various stages of the holistic approach by providing definitions and examples of different types of academic misconduct, through the inclusion of activities that users can undertake to check their

understanding, by incorporating a sub-section on detection issues, and by providing fictitious case studies of actual plagiarism cases. The work of Sutherland-Smith (2008) was valuable at the design stage, too, as it provides an insight into some of the 'grey areas' of academic misconduct. As well as exploring the complexities of understanding what constitutes plagiarism, Sutherland-Smith has devised a 'plagiarism continuum' which '...suggests lenses through which issues of plagiarism and classroom practice can be explored both by teachers and policy makers' (p. 4), and draws on the notion of shared responsibility – this being another value which characterises StudyWell, with advice on plagiarism prevention strategies offered for both students and staff. Further, and as might be expected, the project team were mindful of other organisation-wide initiatives based around plagiarism prevention, including those documented in Morris (2010), Carroll (2005) and Park (2004). Finally, in making decisions about how the website should be structured and presented, the project team consulted related websites, such as the [academic integrity website of Curtin University of Technology](#).

Employing an appropriate approach to educational change

Whilst an understanding of previous research and earlier initiatives was important in guiding the approach taken, there was also a need to account for more immediate, local-level needs: those of the departments and schools of the institution which StudyWell now serves. In developing educational enhancement initiatives, there is often a temptation to deploy 'top-down' or technical-rationalist approaches (Sadler-Smith & Smith, 2006), which pay only secondary attention to local but diverse teaching and learning contexts. However, for such a scheme to achieve positive effects, a 'top-down' approach may not be enough. As a devolved, geographically distributed organisation, City University is better understood as comprising 'loosely coupled systems' (Weick, 1976, p. 6), characterised by different needs and priorities amongst its constituent departments and workgroups. Trowler (2005, 2008) provides a framework for understanding educational change at the meso level, that is, a change approach which considers more local level needs and cultures, such as those of the department and school. He uses the conceptual device of Teaching and Learning Regimes (TLRs) to provide insights into meso level dimensions in universities which relate to teaching and learning and to change processes; a number of cases studies of TLRs in situ are discussed in Bamber, Trowler, Saunders & Knight (2009). In a similar way, Silver (2003) is amongst those authors who argue that more attention needs to be paid to the disciplinary level, as opposed to assuming the existence of a unitary, organisational culture in a university or similarly complex organisation. Therefore, in creating the site, attempts were made to account for the varied needs of different groups of students and staff, through both the composition of the project team and through the collection of feedback. In particular, a number of students and staff were invited to look at early prototypes of the site.

How StudyWell works

StudyWell was launched in autumn 2009 and is structured under three sections. First, the Understanding Academic Misconduct section seeks to demystify the terminology, explaining terms such as plagiarism and collusion, and how they relate to one another. This is accompanied with a video,

made by staff at the University Library, on student understandings of plagiarism. The video has attracted some positive comments on the basis that it provides narratives about plagiarism for students, by students. This section also signposts users to the regulatory framework on assessment and plagiarism, as provided by the Academic Development Unit at the University – which leads on academic policies and regulations for managing the quality and standards of educational provision. It is worth drawing attention here to a recent publication which aided the construction of this section of the site: Williams & Carroll (2009) provide helpful accounts of various types of academic misconduct, as well as numerous examples.

Second, the Preventing Academic Misconduct section offers a range of tips for students on how to avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, guidance on citing and referencing, and a related online quiz, so that users can check their understanding of the issues. Turnitin software is introduced with respect to how it can be used as a preventative tool. Finally, the Dealing with Academic Misconduct section addresses ‘what happens’ in cases in which a party is accused of academic misconduct. For example, information about Academic Misconduct Panels is given here. Further, through the provision of a series of illustrated, fictitious case studies, examples of academic misconduct are presented, so that students can identify what practices they should avoid in undertaking their own work.

An initial evaluation

A small-scale, informal evaluation was undertaken, which involved surveying the views and experiences of a range of users by means of a short, emailed questionnaire. There were eight responses, four from students and four from staff. In addition, verbal feedback was provided by two academic colleagues at an external institution, both of whom have used the resource in their own teaching. The feedback suggests that StudyWell is viewed as an effective teaching and learning tool, which has succeeded in its aim of consolidating a range of information and guidance into a single location. More specifically, students have found the case studies on the site particularly helpful. One stated that the explanations clarified a number of issues, with the fictitious characters providing a sense of reality. Second, the definitions section – in which related terms such as ‘plagiarism’, ‘collusion’, and ‘cheating’ are separately defined – was viewed as useful and innovative, two respondents adding that the ‘umbrella metaphor’ used here provides a valuable learning aid. The site is also being used by the Student Union as part of a training programme for Student Advisers: thus, there have been some benefits gained from its creation which were not expected.

However, the feedback also shows that there remains work to be done, as well as – paradoxically, perhaps – a slight overlap with another institution-based online resource. In the case of the first point, feedback suggests that there remains a need to develop further resources for staff users – this is discussed in more detail below. For the second issue, it has transpired that there is an area of overlap between StudyWell, and another online facility entitled Upgrade, which formed part of a separate project within the University, focused on referencing techniques. It is not untypical for such scenarios to occur in large organisations, but the project team were aware of the need to rectify this overlap, to prevent an occurrence of ‘information overload’ (Cameron & Tschirhart, 1992) or associated user confusion. As a result, the purposes of, and rationale for

StudyWell have been further explicated.

The project team will organise a larger scale evaluation following implementation of the second phase of the site, plans for which are summarised below.

Discussion

StudyWell is a fully functional website but there are opportunities to further broaden its offering. At present, it incorporates a series of activities for students, but this needs to be balanced with more staff resources, including teaching ideas and case studies about how opportunities for plagiarism can be reduced through the use of diverse assessment methods. These staff resources will enable the site to be embedded more fully in actual teaching, helping – it is hoped – to further reduce future incidences of academic misconduct. The project team would also like to use StudyWell to provide the opportunity to explore some of the ongoing debates about academic misconduct: for example, to what extent should intention to plagiarise matter (whether an academic misconduct offence was intentional or accidental), when a case is detected and confirmed? This issue has already been given some discussion in the work of Sutherland-Smith (2008). Third, the site includes a Frequently Asked Questions section, but there is scope to extend this based on user enquiries and ideas. Whilst StudyWell is being used around the University, there are different levels of take up in different sections: there is more profile-raising work to be done, therefore. With respect to this point, the project team would like the continued development of the site to be informed by as many workgroups (staff and student groups across the University) as possible, accounting for the educational change approach developed by Trowler (2005, 2008). Finally, the project and feedback received about it enable some comment to be made about plagiarism prevention frameworks, such as those of Carroll (2007) and Blum (2009), both of which were drawn upon in the planning stages. Each provides discussions of culture in relation to plagiarism prevention: the former makes reference to the need to develop a culture in which the profile of academic misconduct is raised and addressed through its adoption of a holistic approach; the latter discusses the need to account for the existence of different student and staff cultures. Carroll's work was found to be very helpful, and her approach has been influential in both the UK and overseas. Nevertheless, a further degree of sophistication might be added to such frameworks if they too considered the cultural concept in more depth, taking greater account of the meso level.

Lessons learned

StudyWell represents a distinctive and valuable project, so it is worth drawing out some of the lessons learned which could be relevant to colleagues working on comparable schemes. First, there are benefits to be gained by integrating advice and policy on plagiarism prevention in one place. At City, as at other institutions, information and policy on plagiarism prevention became rather scattered, leading to different understandings of where to go to obtain information – this point became clear in committees, for example. The website has undoubtedly been useful in enabling users to rely on

a single site for information and link to other resources.

Second, particular benefit was gained from involving staff and students from various sections of the University at the outset. This helped ensure that more interests and concerns were addressed, and represents our application of the meso approach (Trowler, 2005, 2008), as detailed earlier in the report. Indeed, the experience of developing the site would lend some support to the meso approach.

Finally, for colleagues interested in schemes of this sort, it needs to be pointed out that the development of a web resource – even a small one – requires a significant time investment. Whilst this might be an obvious point, a positive study website needs to be continually updated and developed, particularly as external issues and needs change. In summary, a commitment to a study skills and plagiarism prevention resource is a long term commitment: for the developer, there is always that concern that another update is due or something else needs to be added.

Closing comments

The above paper has discussed the development and evolution of StudyWell, a web resource focused around the related issues of positive study and plagiarism prevention. Reference has also been made to literature and theory which informed development of the site. The closing sections have considered ideas for further enhancement of the site and offered some suggestions and reflections for colleagues at other institutions. For the project team, a key aim is that StudyWell continues to be as relevant and supportive as possible for all its users, for there are many staff and students at City and beyond for whom we would like this site to have a positive, learning role.

[StudyWell website.](#)

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