Pleasures and pitfalls: developing faculty-specific online writing modules for first years

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The beginning

- Widespread concern about undergraduate academic English writing skills.
- Early detection + support = better outcomes
- STUDY Smart team won funding to deliver faculty-specific online writing units for first years to be delivered by WebCT.
- www.studysmarter.uwa.edu.au

The next steps

- Contacting lecturers and students
- Conceptualising the content and format
- Choosing a platform

Engagement - lecturers

- Relevant lecturers, Associate Deans etc contacted & project explained
- Lecturers wanted modules available to all students
- Essay questions provided by 1st year lecturers (not in Law)
- Names of students who received a HD provided
- Feedback on paper versions of modules provided

Engagement – students

- Focus groups
  - analysing the question
  - marking criteria
  - structuring assignments
  - referencing, paraphrasing, quoting
- HD essays supplied
- Student use will be the real test
  - "I probably won’t use it if it’s voluntary"
  - "the best students are the most likely to use it"
- Evaluation survey part of final version

Platforms

- Choosing a suitable platform was frustrating and time consuming.

Reason

- lack of knowledge (mine and others)
WebCT

- WebCT was nominated as the platform to deliver the modules.
- Its capacity to do so was questioned.

Reasons
- Assumption that it was widely used was unfounded
- Enrolment in unit required

Compared with WebCT reportedly
- easier to use for developers
- easier accessibility for updating
- more accessible to more students

UWA review of CMS planned
- no guarantee Moodle preferred option
- no ongoing funding

Open source software for producing internet-based courses and web sites. It’s … designed to support a social constructionist framework of education.”

Getting comprehensive information & a nuanced understanding of the ramifications of using moodle proved difficult.

MySource Classic

- Content management system used for STUDYSmarter website
- Support and training available (in theory)
- Easy accessibility for students within UWA and beyond.
- BUT not straightforward

Pitfalls - dealing with technology

How do I translate the material I have developed in a word file into modules that are:
- interactive
- appealing
- accessible
given my skills and the ‘clunkiness’ of MySource Classic?

The consultant

- Produced some interactive diagrams and quizzes.
- Advised on what types of quizzes were possible.
- Enabled the project to move to a ‘live’ version.
- Fixed up the ‘live’ version when the interactive components ‘disappeared’.

Academic writing

www.uwa.edu.au/academicwriting
The idea, the translated idea

- A consultative committee of staff and students
- A series to be worked through in order
- Audios of staff and students
- Initial discussions with staff and students, collaboration with staff
- Sections to be accessed when required
- Limited audio, lack of staff volunteers, students not yet approached

The pleasures

- Feedback from staff in Business and Law – success indicator.
- “I can let you know that the law staff at the recent education committee meeting thought that your work was great (I hope you have been thanked)” (Associate Dean Students).
- “I just read through the businesswriting page and I would certainly refer my students to this; I’ll suggest that we discuss this at our T & L meeting as I’d like to see it being used across the faculty so that there’s a standard set of guidelines for our students rather than each lecturer providing slightly different advice.” (Director Undergraduate Programs)
The future - STUDY Smarter team

- Evaluation lecturers/students – success indicator
- Web stats – success indicator
- Updating
- General maintenance
- Staff time

The future – UWA

- UWA changing to MySource Matrix which doesn’t support javascript (needed for interactive components).
- UWA changing to a new course structure in 2012, = short shelf life for online writing modules?
- UWA’s web systems and support will need to be up to the challenge of 21st century students.