Somerset College: Interactive tutorials enhancing student research and citation skills

Summary

Research and citation skills are important competences for students to possess, particularly when moving into higher education. At Somerset College, Jolanta Peters, Research and Library Services Manager came up with the idea of producing interactive tutorials for students. This unique student-led project has helped to provide 24/7 resources and enhance communication and project management skills for students.

About Somerset College

The College provides further and higher education courses, as well as a variety of part-time courses for adult learners. Qualifications offered include NVQ, BTEC First Diploma, BTEC National Diploma, GCSE and Foundation Degree. The College is part of The University of Plymouth Colleges network.

The college believes that it leads the way in developing innovative teaching and learning practices for its students and staff. Its facilities are continually improving and recently it points to Genesis, Hot House, the Somerset Centre for Enterprise and the Francesco’s Graduate Hair Academy as examples of its enterprising and exciting approach to education and training.

The challenge

To help administer the project, Jolanta worked closely with Samantha Batten, who is the Curriculum Area Manager for ICT at the college. Samantha felt that Jolanta’s idea to produce interactive tutorials was something that the students could undertake as part of their coursework. This presented many challenges with organising the students and providing more of a support-based teaching role, rather than a ‘taught’ model.

With this in mind, students were tasked with researching for software that they could use to create interactive tutorials via the internet. One of the stipulations was that the software had to be freely available.
The students considered many different types of software such as Flash, but eventually decided on using Xerte, which is open source.

A big challenge was for the students to develop their skills by working as a team to produce a working and functional product that could be used in a professional capacity.

The project had a greater emphasis on the whole because the final objective was to produce interactive tutorials that the college could use as part of its resources.

**The activity**

Foundation degree students studying computing and internet technologies were assigned the task of finding a way of making the task of referencing and citation a more interactive medium.

Xerte was selected as the preferred software to produce the interactive tutorials primarily because it is accessible and can be easily embedded into a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment).

“We have seen Xerte demonstrated at the RSC forums and felt confident that the students had picked a good tool to use to develop the interactive tutorials” – Sue Lockett, Learning Technologist.

![Screen shot of a page from the Xerte interactive tutorials](image)

Part of their study also involved a year-long professional project where the students work collaboratively with a live client. This focuses on real-life
activities, which are designed to get the students to think laterally and experience developing for a real business.

The activities involved in this process include:

- Compiling a SWOT analysis
- Writing a business case
- Developing the project outcomes
- Organising groups and meetings/taking minutes
- Regular meetings with the client

Once the students had developed their product, they had to conduct their findings in a final presentation, where they would pitch their ideas to the prospective client.

One of the major benefits of these student-led activities is that the students have to think about working as a team. So the impact of having this style of teaching and learning is that students can help each other and peer support. For example the group will contain members that will have different specialisations, such as being good at;

- Presenting work to a client
- Developing software
- Taking accurate minutes
- Good at designing and visual aspects
- Leading activity and organising

So the benefit of having students with different skills is that they can feed off each other and for example, if they want to learn about how to present and gain more confidence, then they can work with the student that already possesses that skill.

“The benefit of having students with a range of different skills is that they can peer support each other and learn about other areas of interest to them during the project lifecycle.” – Samantha Batten, Curriculum Area Manager, ICT

Alongside this project Jolanta also asked the Performing Arts students to produce a video around how to carry out effective research. She provided the students with scenarios, which they could use to plan their video. The students also had assistance from staff in the media centre who helped to introduce effects into the video.

“It’s trying to engage students at different levels of study, with different learning styles to try and help the student to retain the information provided” – Lucy Fortt, Lecturer.
The outcomes

With so many tools available on the internet, it is important that students need to know how to use these tools effectively, but also why it is important to cite resources correctly.

“Students need to know how to reference correctly, whilst you can go on to websites that can show you how to reference, the Xerte tutorials show the students why and the reasoning behind referencing.” Sue Lockett, Learning Technologist.

At Somerset College, students are benefitting from using interactive tutorials that have been created by students for students. One of the advantages of this is that the students are creating resources as they would expect or like to find themselves.

It has also meant that Jolanta has not had to produce the tutorials herself, which she would have found very difficult due to the demands of her role.

The only real difficulties that the students had with the project were that they found Xerte quite a learning curve and it was hard to find support online. The students overcame these issues by using online forums, but they also had to contact the Xerte development team to try and seek help and support.

The video produced by the Performing Arts students has proved to be so useful and effective that Jolanta uses the videos when she holds research sessions with her HE students, and they really like them.

A screen shot of one of Jolanta's videos helping to instruct students about good research skills

The instructional video produced by the performing arts students has been effective because students have been able to use their acting skills to demonstrate different scenarios and show some of the pitfalls of bad citation.
They have also had the chance to immerse themselves in an activity that is helping to enhance their performance skills.

**The impact**

Students now have access to a set of interactive tutorials, which they can use 24/7 through the college VLE. With the tutorials students can learn how to cite and research more effectively than before. This can potentially lead to students achieving better marks and having a greater understanding of the importance of citation.

“It’s about ensuring that the students know that the web can be like the wild west because there is so much out there, but it’s about being able to find out what is quality, what has been written by subject experts” – Jolanta Peters, Research and Library Services Manager

“It’s also a 2 way process, so students that are carrying out their research and find something good, send that through to staff and it can then be shared with everyone in the group” – Lucy Fortt, Lecturer

The Xerte tutorials will be available on in the college VLE in their research hub, so all students can have access to them.

“It’s a really engaging experience for the students to project manage something and produce a tangible working product” – Samantha Batten, Curriculum Area Manager, ICT

“Students can now learn how to reference properly rather than going to the internet and conducting a random search, the tutorials show the students the best methods for conducting their research” – Jolanta Peters, Research and Library Services Manager

*Screenshot featuring a handful of useful web 2.0 tools that the college have used*
Through the help of the Jisc RSC South West Jolanta and her colleagues have additionally been able to find out about many other online web 2.0 tools, that they have been able to show their students. This has also enabled them to filter this knowledge to the students for their projects.

The lessons learned

One of the pertinent questions raised and answered through this case study was how research and citation skills could be taught effectively to students before they enter higher education.

It has also been important that staff have helped the students to feel more confident in knowing where a range of resources are and how to use them. So it’s not just about having the resources, but also enabling the students to know how to use them effectively.

“It is possible that on the success of this project that the college can produce a whole library of study skills resources, which will be of benefit for both staff and students at the college” – Lucy Fortt, Lecturer

Be proactive and enable the students to lead their own projects, but also ensure that they have the tools and support needed to guide them.

Useful links

- Somerset College website
- Jisc South West website
- Xerte – Open source elearning
- Xerte – discussion list

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