

## **A long & winding road: Library staff involvement in an institutional elearning strategy**

In 2010 an urban polytechnic launched an institution-wide eLearning strategy as part of a reconceptualised approach to teaching and learning. Library staff responded to four objectives in this strategy:

1. Providing creative solutions for students' access to online tools via Wireless Mobile Devices
2. Providing learning environments that embed academic literacies
3. Up-skilling all teaching staff in eLearning capability and building institutional capability that enables continuing learning development and leadership
4. Ensuring students have equitable opportunities to participate in terms of access to equipment and resources and support for digital skills development

This paper backgrounds the eLearning strategy and shows how library services, staff and resources are integral to its success. It examines how library staff responded to the strategy and reflects on

- The projects that were initiated
- implementation
- and their outcomes

The paper identifies and addresses the 'big issues' and possible solutions. It also looks into the future of library services, staff and resources in an elearning institution.

## Introduction

### Institutional context

In 2009 the New Zealand Government's Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) for 2010-2015 indicated that Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) had to improve their educational delivery and performance (*Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015*, 2010). ITPs would receive regular external evaluation and review to ensure improvement occurred. The TES was a powerful factor for an Auckland-based ITP when it revealed, as part of its strategic framework, an initiative entitled the *Living Curriculum*.

Living Curricula can be described as "living because they are not designed then enacted. Experiences and pursuits are driven by curiosity and questions that arise within the learning process and lead to inquiry and by the learning needs that emerge on a day to day basis. Students thus participate in curriculum design on a day to day basis" (*eLearning strategy draft*, 2009). The Living Curricula goal was to reframe learning as conversation, deliver programmes that are integrated with the world and are genuinely dynamic. Conversations are the way in which knowledge is socially constructed between peers, with texts and between teachers and learners. E-learning is an important component to this approach to learning and teaching.

Consequently, the institution created an e-learning strategy. The vision for e-learning is "linked to both the academic strategy and innovation in teaching and learning and will involve the development of both curricula and staff" (*eLearning strategy draft*, 2009).

The eLearning Strategy's objectives include:

- Providing learning environments that embed academic literacies
- Providing creative solutions for students' access to online tools via Wireless Mobile Devices (WMDs) (e.g. laptops or netbooks)
- Establishing wireless computing infrastructure
- Aligning all teaching and learning spaces, systems, support and infrastructure
- Ensuring students have equitable opportunities to participate in terms of access to equipment and resources, and support for digital skills development
- Build institutional capability to enable continual learning development and leadership

These objectives provide a major sponsor for change at the institution, affecting facilities, services, staff and teaching and learning. As the eLearning Strategy was embedded, the library was ready to make changes and had much to offer.

## Literature Review

### E-learning and libraries

Libraries are well positioned to contribute to e-learning within an institution. As a consequence of the relentless evolution of information technology, libraries have been early adopters of new trends and have frequently experimented with their pedagogical approaches in response to these new tools (Beard & Dale, 2008; Godwin, 2009; Lippincott, 2005; Saw, Wai Wai, & Fei, 2007).

Before the eLearning Strategy<sup>1</sup> was developed a variety of projects were being undertaken by the institution's library. The eLearning Strategy validated some of these projects and gave a necessary boost to others that were more embryonic. For example, the library had already produced online

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<sup>1</sup> The institution chose to use the term eLearning to signal that "embedding the 'e' in learning [indicates] the direction proposed, which sees the utilisation of a range of learning technologies as integral parts of contemporary and engaging teaching and learning experiences (*eLearning strategy draft*, 2009)." The literature uses the term e-learning, hence the different terms used in this paper.

tutorials, had an instant messaging reference service and Web 2.0-enabled subject guides. As others have found, institutional policy is vital to having e-learning success (Dadzie, 2009).

### **Information and digital literacies**

In a systematic review of the literature, Childs, Blenkinsopp, Hall & Walton (2005), suggest that support, skills training (in information literacy and digital literacy), and assisting in e-learning package evaluation or developing e-learning objects, are areas where librarians can contribute to e-learning. Childs et al (2005) point out that these are not new roles for librarians but there is a perception problem from non-librarians about the contribution the librarian can give.

The TES and the Living Curriculum both have requirements for improved literacy. An eLearning Strategy objective is to ensure students have equitable opportunities and support for digital skills development. It was apparent that literacy development, specifically information literacy and, as a part of that, digital literacy, was an area that librarians could provide support and training for students.

Information and digital information literacy<sup>2</sup> are necessities for all aspects of tertiary study, from enrolment to researching and writing assignments (Bundy, 2004; Macpherson, 2004).

The library, both physical and online, is a central work space that most students use at some point in their academic lives. The library deals with many student questions as they use technology to study and prepare assignments<sup>3</sup>.

The four institutional branch libraries already had a collaborative arrangement with many of the academic staff to provide library orientations and information literacy classes for their students.

In 2010 there were 522 classes comprising an estimated 9697 students. These classes represent a starting point for developing information literacy and often digital literacy too, because they provide an opportunity for students to explore technology outside the normal rush to complete an assignment. According to Hegarty et al (2010), students need opportunities to play in order to develop digital literacy (2010, p. 11).

Embedding information literacy into courses either as an online component or as part of a blended learning experience is still the most effective way to engage with learners and increase their success academically (Andrews & Patil, 2007; Dadzie, 2009; Lupton, 2004; Proctor, Wartho, & Anderson, 2005; Williams, 2010). Some students at this institution are confident users of technology and e-learning resources, other students are not, though this does not necessarily mean they will not respond to e-learning (Dadzie, 2009). Whatever their technical competence, we concur with others that the ability of this generation of students to discern quality and value is less developed (Beard & Dale, 2008; Smith & Salaway, 2009).

E-learning tools such as screencasts and virtual learning environments (VLEs) can assist with embedding, but require cooperation and buy in from academic staff (Corall & Keates, 2010). Ideally, librarians should be embedding their presence on the campus VLE, complemented by face to face teaching. We have begun to do the former and the potential is enormous. The push from the eLearning Strategy combined with the more open nature of the current campus VLE has made it easier from a technical point of view for information literacy to be embedded into the learning spaces.

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<sup>2</sup> The American Library Association (1989) defines an information literate person as one who is "able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information". In the context of this paper, digital literacy refers to the ability to use technology in various ways to gather and process information.

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, students asked 15,462 IT/technical/digital literacy questions at library information desks. This number excludes similar queries via Library Chat instant messaging service or telephone and email enquiries.

## Access to resources and equipment

As with many institutions who have implemented e-learning, issues relating to the availability, cost and functionality of software and hardware have caused difficulties (Childs, et al., 2005; Dadzie, 2009; Mercado & Domantay, 2010). In our case, these issues resulted in delays in online tutorial production and the need for the e-learning librarian to learn to use the hardware and software.

Integration of the library's federated search engine<sup>4</sup> into Moodle, linking to electronic content or embedding videos, has been reasonably simple. However, there are still issues with playback speed and buffering times. This makes it difficult to seamlessly include the media in a classroom environment either online or in a physical classroom.

To address the Strategy's objective to provide creative solutions for students' access to online tools via WMDs, the library purchased some iPads and a Galaxy tablet. This has enabled interested staff to use and become familiar with some common WMD platforms. These have been used successfully with small groups, partially because of the "cool" factor and also because of the intimacy the smaller devices promote. The devices are smaller, reasonably intuitive to use and therefore less intimidating for some groups.

## Change and Building Capability

According to the project draft, one of the ways of recognising the project has been successful will be when digital and information literacy skills tuition is provided for all students as required. The library can collaborate in facilitating system-wide cultural change necessary for implementation of the eLearning Strategy. This can be done either directly through a programme, or online, through the library or the institution's learning centre.

The eLearning Strategy provides both the impetus for and the vehicle by which professional development can be delivered successfully (Booth, Carroll, Papaioannou, Sutton, & Wong, 2009). Library projects launched in response to the eLearning Strategy forced staff to embrace new ways of working and teaching. As e-learning offers flexibility in terms of asynchronous engagement, self-regulation, format and delivery, it was also used as the delivery mode for professional development initiatives (Booth, et al., 2009).

As part of the library's involvement in the eLearning Strategy roll-out, two librarians became "eLearning Community Co-ordinators" (eLCCs) and an eLearning Librarian was employed on an 18 month contract. The eLCCs were to champion the development of the eLearning Strategy, create and drive the community of practice, and help build capability through modelling and support<sup>5</sup>.

In response to the eLearning Strategy, the institution changed the online course management software to a more open, intuitive VLE called Moodle. This fresh start, combined with strong leadership directive to have all online courses on the Moodle environment by the end of 2012, has given the library an opportunity to collaborate with academic staff to enhance online courses with a library presence. We have proved, as Corall & Keates (2010) discovered, "a key factor affecting library participation was the extent to which academic staff recognised the SL's [*liaison librarian's*]<sup>6</sup> role in relation to the VLE and whether they allowed access and permission to update materials." E-

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<sup>4</sup> An information retrieval system that allows the searching of multiple searchable resources. For example, the simultaneous search of a library catalogue and multiple bibliographic databases.

<sup>5</sup> Three eLearning Development Advisors (eLDAs) were also appointed by the institution to assist with elearning within departments.

<sup>6</sup> A liaison librarian or subject librarian (SL) is responsible for collection development and teaching in a particular subject area. Normally, this librarian would have some subject knowledge of the discipline and liaise with a specific school or department with respect to library resourcing and support.

learning can be a vehicle by which collaboration between institutional divisions like the library and academic units can occur (Ritchie, 2010), but we found where the liaison librarian already has a collaborative relationship with academic staff, it was easier to participate in the delivery of library resources and services via Moodle.

Getting buy-in from library staff around e-learning initiatives related to their teaching has been slow. Traditionally, our teaching fits well with demonstration-style techniques and does not lend itself easily to the Living Curriculum model of teaching and learning. "The individual SLs [*liaison librarian's*] response to technology-driven change also has a significant impact, as some clearly prefer the face-to-face approach for delivering information skills" (Corall & Keates, 2010, p.45). Unfamiliarity with some technology and associated fears of failure when trying something new, contribute to staff reluctance.

The eLearning strategy identified communities of practice (CoPs) as the best way to develop staff capability. CoPs are "communities where the learning component is central" (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009, p.3). The community usually forms because of a common interest or 'domain'. Learning is formal as well as informal, with members learning from and with each other to improve their practice. It becomes a community because participants know that they can share knowledge and learn about their practice from the other participants (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009).

The library initiated an Information Literacy CoP to generate some discussion around issues relating to information literacy, elearning and the Living Curriculum. The CoP provides a safe platform for experimentation with new technologies, teaching techniques and is considered an appropriate mix of enquiry and social learning suitable for librarians (Yukawa, 2010). To complement the physical CoP, an online group on the institution's Teaching and Learning Ning<sup>7</sup> was also created. Involvement of staff from outside of the library has been welcomed. Unfortunately, we have yet to find a way to reach staff, from the library or elsewhere, who choose not to be involved in this CoP.

While the Information Literacy CoP membership on the online Ning community has grown, the discussions there are slow, suggesting most participants are content to be lurkers. There is a strong culture of email readers within the library resulting in reluctance to visit elsewhere to have discussions.

Generally, the use of CoPs as a vehicle for staff capability development has been beneficial for the library eLCCs and eLearning librarian. The traditional formation of groups within an institution can become a barrier to institutional strategies (Schneckenberg, 2009) so participating in CoPs outside the library walls has enabled productive conversation and ideas to form and be nurtured. The eLearning Strategy has been a common goal for all these parties which has made collaboration easier and with more purpose than in the past. As Yukawa (2010) mentions, the CoPs have assisted in the identity formation and empowerment of the librarians involved in implementing the eLearning Strategy.

## **Implementation**

### **1. eLCCs and eLearning plan**

The library's eLCCs introduced the library staff to the eLearning strategy and explained how liaison librarians were to work with lecturers to include library resources into e-learning. Once the eLearning librarian was appointed, a library eLearning plan was written. The plan focussed on three things – embedding information literacy through technology, building capability, providing access to resources and equipment.

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<sup>7</sup> A Ning is a social media platform where people can create a custom social network based around a particular area of need. It contains areas to post photos and videos, provides fora and the ability to have subject specific discussion groups.

## **2. Embedding literacies**

### **2a. Moodle block**

A Moodle “block” dedicated to the library’s services and resources was created. This can be embedded into any Moodle course that desires to include it. The block is tailored to the needs of the course in which it is embedded. For example, the construction courses have links directly to the New Zealand Standards database and language courses have links to dictionaries.

### **2b. Online Tutorials**

The appointment of the eLearning librarian made it possible to focus on developing more online tutorials. Online tutorials can be embedded into Moodle courses and elsewhere. These tutorials ranged from video tours, screencasts on database searching, APA referencing to narratives about evaluating websites.

Online tutorials add a visual element to potentially heavy text based learning resources. Attractiveness of materials in a learning environment is an important feature (Booth, et al., 2009), particularly for those whose learning styles favour visual or auditory style learning.

### **2c. Embedding liaison librarians in Moodle**

Liaison librarians have been encouraged and assisted by the eLearning librarian to participate and have a presence on Moodle courses relating to their subject areas. Promotion of ebooks and RSS feeds from journal contents are two areas that have been incorporated by departmental eLCCs in collaboration with the liaison librarian and eLearning librarian.

## **3. Change and Building Institutional Capability**

### **3a. Community of Practice**

At the beginning of 2010 Unitec librarians set up an Information Literacy Community of Practice. Its purpose is to provide a forum and support for teachers of information literacy, both librarians and academics. Gatherings have included:

- A “journal club” discussing articles about active learning
- Using social media to connect with our users
- Information literacy and Maturanga Māori
- The best things in life are free - using online software in our teaching
- A technology “petting zoo”

The community aims to:

- Create a repository of examples of information literacy-friendly assessments and teaching plans
- Encourage a collaborative approach with lecturers to teaching the skills
- Link in with the academic literacy and the various eLearning communities on campus
- Upskill us all in technologies useful for teaching and learning
- Ensure that work done in one community will benefit others and bring new people into the information literacy community

The CoP has a dedicated space on the institution’s Teaching and Learning Ning where discussions can take place asynchronously and outside of face to face gatherings.

### **3b. Professional Development Moodle course**

A professional development Moodle course for library staff was created to address the capability in wireless mobile devices and elearning.

### **3c. Inter-departmental Collaboration**

Collaborative relationships between the elearning librarian, eLCCs, eLDAs<sup>2</sup> and between the library and the institution's learning centre have been forged and strengthened. This was already happening in an ad hoc way, with the information literacy librarian working with the academic literacy advisors on various other initiatives. The eLearning Strategy formalised and upgraded that collaboration.

The eLearning Strategy has brought a more collaborative atmosphere amongst those involved in creating Moodle courses. There appears to be more opportunities to work with lecturers to embed information literacy skills into online courses. Doing so would both meet the needs of both the strategy and fulfil one of the Library's goals.

### **4. Access to resources and equipment**

Three iPads and one Galaxy Samsung tablet were purchased by the library to investigate their use with library services and resources. The library was subsequently successful in obtaining funding for a further ten iPads for the use in information literacy teaching.

A significant aim for the library in 2011 has been the development of a mobile accessible website and resources. At time of writing, there has been some progress made in this area and the website will be launched in beta<sup>8</sup> for feedback shortly.

The library rates very well in the annual Student Satisfaction Survey initiated by the student union, but it is clear from an INSYNC<sup>9</sup> survey there are issues with access to equipment and study spaces. Provision of both space and equipment to support information and digital literacy requires significant financial outlay from the institution and budget has yet to be forthcoming.

The number of wireless connections available in the library has been increased to help with the increase in connectivity of WMDs used in the library. Even so, the prioritising of network data means the connections can be unworkably slow for netbooks.

### **Issues and possible solutions**

The first few months of implementation were difficult as the boundaries of the library eLCCs and eLearning Librarian appeared to have a lot of overlap and the contractual timeframes placed doubts about the completion of all planned activities. Fortunately these roles evolved, and the library managed to secure permanent hours for an eLearning librarian into 2012 ensuring continuity.

Libraries are having to do more with fewer staff and therefore less time. While eager to take a hands-on role and embed ourselves into Moodle courses, in reality there are many other pressing jobs to be done in the library. The information literacy and eLearning librarian need to work with liaison librarians to set goals and provide exemplars encouraging involvement in Moodle. With a focused move to up-

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<sup>8</sup> i.e. the mobile site will be feature complete but requires user testing and feedback

<sup>9</sup> Using gap analysis methodology, the INSYNC survey company provided the library with quantitative and qualitative data and written analyses about students' perceptions of the importance and performance of library services, facilities and collections. The contracted company Insync, which is Australasia's most experienced tertiary libraries' survey company, used their standard survey as a template – with some customised variables for our institution's unique student mix. Their database was used to provide service benchmarks with approximately 30 Australasian tertiary libraries.

skill library staff via Moodle and other planned professional development opportunities we hope to address this.

Efforts to improve student information literacy are most effective when skills and competencies are embedded into courses and in this the library struggles. A small number of programmes have embedded information literacy into their courses in collaboration with their liaison librarian. In these cases, information literacy skills are there as part of learning outcomes, assessments and in-class activities.

Not all library staff are interested in the use of WMDs. This may change with greater market penetration within the student population and overt plans to use these tools in teaching library classes.

Some library staff are tentative in embracing e-learning - and the Living Curriculum - as part of their teaching practice. Using a mixture of self-directed learning and the communities of practice model, we seek to encourage exploration and up skilling within the library to build capability.

IT infrastructure, provision of space and equipment needed to support the library's efforts towards e-learning are still a problem. Support, both financial and in terms of leadership, needs to be given to those involved in the eLearning Strategy delivery if the momentum attained is to be continued.

### **Future of the library in an e-learning world**

Experience tells us there is a clear place for libraries and librarians in an e-learning world.

Abram (2011) points out that the power of libraries is not information; it is clarification and the value of the resources they deliver. When released from the tether of physical space, library resources and librarians can be useful where ever learning takes place either online or in a brick and mortar classroom.

The challenge for the library is to have flexibility to meet the learning needs of all groups in the institution, within the institutional drivers. Rather than being a disaggregated service, deployed at particular points in the learning cycle, the library needs to be proactively integrated to support students' learning development and different learning pathways (Beetham, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2009). Integration will lead to a transformative rather than transactional relationship with learners.

### **Conclusion**

The library's involvement with the eLearning Strategy has given new opportunities to embed library services and resources into learning spaces, while experimenting with innovative ways in teaching and learning to improve information literacy. Innovation in academic libraries can be challenging, as Robinson says, "The great problem for reform or transformation is the tyranny of common sense. Things that people think, 'Well, they can't be done any other way because that's the way it's done'" (Robinson, 2010).

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