Developing online content to support students: the Remote Learning SkillsGuide

Lee Fallin
University of Hull, UK

The challenge

17 March 2020 was our last day of campus-based operation for the Skills Team at the University of Hull before lockdown. I had held my last face-to-face appointments that morning and spent the afternoon re-programming our appointment and workshop system to issue webinar URLs instead of physical locations. That bit was relatively easy. The challenge came upon realising the team's extensive range of online self-help SkillsGuides (see University of Hull, 2021b) included nothing that would support remote or blended learning. While support for academic literacies such as writing, critical thinking, and referencing could remain largely the same, this was not the case for all our guidance. Topics such as time management, note creation, lecture participation, and academic presentations, need to be addressed differently in the context of remote learning (Ebner and Gegenfurtner, 2019).

In hindsight, students were generally well prepared for how to manage their time within the structured campus regime, but nothing really prepared them for the freedom of remote learning during the lockdown. Furthermore, any existing research or support for online learning did not cover the same context as the pandemic. Most students would not choose to learn this way and, during the pandemic, may have found themselves with competing priorities such as childcare. The global pandemic forced online learning upon them, and they needed support that was sensitive to this. As per the phrase coined by Hodges et al, this was not just online learning, but emergency remote learning (2020). This too needed consideration.

The response

With all students and academics suddenly thrown into an online learning context, it was clear further content and support was needed. The team's current SkillsGuides provided a suitable environment and template to add new content. On discussion, we were unsure how deeply to embed online approaches to learning, so we built a standalone remote learning SkillsGuide (University of Hull, 2021a). This focused on online learning, time management, and how to use online library tools. It also included social elements like how to collaborate online with other students, which was important for modules that adopted more socially-based approaches to learning (Brieger, Arghode and McLean, 2020). This mode of content delivery for the new SkillsGuide included written pages, visualisations, and videos to offer multiple means of communication. Putting our pandemic-related support into a single guide made it a convenient place for students to pick up advice for the move to remote learning. It also helped address the context of the students who were experiencing this 'emergency' remote learning (Hodges et al., 2020) in a supportive way.

To support students learning in this new context, the guidance produced for this SkillsGuide focused on what I felt were the core literacies of online learning that students would need to develop. It is important to assert that these 'skills' are complicated literacies (Lea and Street, 1998; Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019). For example, how to behave in a lecture is not inherent; how students attend, participate, think, and create notes within a lecture varies greatly. In outlining the Remote Learning SkillsGuide, I had to reflect on how students would be transitioning those literacies to the online space. It is not an easy move for students (Hodges et al., 2020), and it would also be contextualised based on content delivery. As such, the guide focused on things like how to engage with lecture recordings as well as live webinars. It also linked in our existing guidance, for example, on note creation to reinforce other literacies in the context of online learning.

From a learning theory perspective, SkillsGuides are a content-driven mode of learning delivery. This is akin to Salmon's 'Planet Contentia' (2011), based on the transmission mode of teaching. While this does not afford the interactive and active learning opportunities associated with good learning development interventions (such as Mansfield,

2020), open content-based approaches ensure that a self-directed base level of support is available (Blake, Grayson and Karamalla-Gaiballa, 2019). This was exactly what we needed in the face of the pandemic. When considering broader theories of online instruction, it was also clear that unlearning (Brieger, Arghode and McLean, 2020) would be an important aspect, as students adapted to new learning contexts. For this reason, we contrasted face-to-face experiences with online learning to assist students making this transition.

Recommendations

The Remote Learning SkillsGuide launched on 26 March 2020, just a few days after our campus officially closed. It quickly built towards hundreds of views a day, with a total of 19,961 views from launch to the end of the academic year. The content was also embedded into 24 modules within the university's Virtual Learning Environment, especially in nursing where teaching continued to run over summer. This demonstrated the benefit of rapidly turning around content to be responsive to student needs. It is something the team plans to take further.

Open online content is notoriously difficult to evaluate (Blake, Grayson and Karamalla-Gaiballa, 2019) and while the new SkillsGuide was not formally evaluated, we received plenty of anecdotal feedback from staff and students on how beneficial they had found the guidance. We also received constructive feedback which helped us to develop the SkillsGuide further. For example, one addition was our Manifesto for Better Online Learning which contextualised Netiquette (Shea, 1996) for contemporary online learning. This was requested by academic staff, to help support students with the often-unwritten rules and etiquette of online learning. A next step for this SkillsGuide, and for similar online resources, is to develop an evaluation framework and process. This will allow learning developers to better understand the success of such resources.

In recognition that this guidance may benefit students beyond our institution, all our content was licensed under Creative Commons (2020) BY-NC-SA. This was the first learning development resource the Skills Team explicitly licensed under Creative Commons. I found it heartening to see how this resource was copied, remixed, and

adapted by others in the sector, as allowed under the licence. I am happy to see that this SkillsGuide has been reproduced in many different forms across over at least 20 different institutions, under the same licence. I hope to recommend this licensing model for further implementation on our guides.

References

Blake, J. R. S., Grayson, N. and Karamalla-Gaiballa, S. (2019) 'Investigating impact: exploring the effect of 'open' support on student success', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Issue 16, December, pp.1-17. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i16.540.

Brieger, E., Arghode, V. and McLean, G. (2020) 'Connecting theory and practice: reviewing six learning theories to inform online instruction', *European Journal of Training and Development*, 44(4/5), pp.321-339. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2019-0116.

Creative Commons (2020) Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International. Available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/legalcode (Accessed: 9 May 2021).

Ebner, C. and Gegenfurtner, A. (2019) 'Learning and satisfaction in webinar, online, and face-to-face instruction: a meta-analysis', *Frontiers in Education: Frontiers*, 4(a92). https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00092.

Hilsdon, J., Malone, C. and Syska, A. (2019) 'Academic literacies twenty years on: a community-sourced literature review', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education,* Issue 15, November, pp.1-47. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i15.567.

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T. and Bond, A. (2020) 'The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning', *Educause review*, 27, pp.1-12.

Lea, M. and Street, B. (1998) 'Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach', *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), pp.157-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079812331380364.

Mansfield, S. (2020) 'Changing the face of academic skills workshops', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education,* Issue 17, May, pp.1-23. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi17.508.

Salmon, G. (2011) *E-moderating: the key to teaching and learning online.* 3rd edn. New York: Routledge.

Shea, V. (1996) *Netiquette.* San Francisco: Albion Books.

University of Hull (2021a) Remote Learning SkillsGuide. Kingston Upon Hull: University of Hull. Available at: https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/remote (Accessed: 23 April 2021).

University of Hull (2021b) SkillsGuides. Kingston Upon Hull: University of Hull. Available at: https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/SkillsGuides/ (Accessed: 23 April 2021).

Author details

Lee Fallin is an Academic and Library Specialist (Learning Developer) at the University of Hull with a specialism in academic and digital literacies. His research interests focus on the intersections between education and geography, inclusive of physical and digital spaces.