

INFORMS: the Information skills project
Oxford University English Faculty Library report

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The Informs Project at the English Faculty Library, University of Oxford.

The INFORMS project is a continuation of the INHALE project¹ and aims to provide new ways of teaching information skills to students within an online virtual learning environment. Oxford University was invited to take part in the project which was

¹ INHALE Project - <http://informs.hud.ac.uk/inhale/>

rolled out in 2002/03 to include English, Politics and Medicine. Staff participating in the project were based at the English Faculty Library, the Social Studies Libraries and the Cairns Library.

The English Faculty is one of the largest in the UK, with over 70 academic staff, approximately 850 undergraduates and over 200 graduate students. The broad syllabus covers English language and literature from Anglo-Saxon to the present day. English at Oxford is supported by the English Faculty Library (EFL), the Bodleian Library and the colleges. The EFL aims to support both teaching and research in the Faculty, and holds almost 100,000 volumes including rare books and special collections (Wilfred Owen and Old Icelandic) as well as over 200 journals and large audio-visual collections. Students have access to OLIS (Oxford's online catalogue) as well as to OxLIP (Oxford Libraries Information Platform) – a large and expanding collection of networked databases and web-based resources.

Staff at the English Faculty Library were particularly keen to get involved in the INFORMS project for two main reasons. Firstly, the Faculty as a whole is in the process of developing its own online teaching strategy in conjunction with the establishment of WebLearn - the new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for Oxford University powered by Bodington. Information about the Faculty is now available on WebLearn and academic staff are starting to mount online, interactive learning and teaching materials including reading lists, lecture notes and bulletin boards.² The INFORMS project provided an ideal opportunity for exploring new methods of teaching information skills to students within the context of the VLE. Secondly, it was felt that providing virtual training tutorials would complement the current information skills programme run by EFL staff and encourage more students to use the many databases and electronic resources available to them. Library staff already run formal induction and training sessions for students and provide written documentation as part of the general reader services programme. The INFORMS project offered a new perspective on information skills training which library staff were keen to pursue alongside more traditional training.

The first phase of the project involved discussions with academic staff to identify several key electronic resources on which to base the online tutorials. English students have access to a wide range of online resources including bibliographies, dictionaries, journal citation indexes, e-journals and full-text works of literature and criticism. We decided to focus on two different databases which would teach students how to find both journal articles and the full-text of books online: the Modern Languages Association Bibliography (MLA) and Literature Online (LION). The key issues to be addressed before writing the actual tutorials were: at what level should the tutorials be aimed (beginner, intermediate or advanced), how much prior knowledge and general familiarity with databases could we assume the students had, how long should each tutorial be, should they be written as one long tutorial or broken down into smaller, individual units, and where would students expect to find the tutorials – through library or faculty web pages?

² Lee, Stuart (2003). Old classics find new life in webworld. Times Higher Education Supplement 02 May 2003 p.24.

We decided to take a different approach for each database. The MLA tutorial (*Introduction to the MLA*) assumed no prior knowledge of the database and guided students through the entire search process from accessing the database and doing a simple subject search to marking relevant records and printing/emailing results. The tutorial was quite long and detailed (eight separate steps) but aimed to provide students with enough information to be able to go on and do more complex searches themselves. Whilst the LION tutorial was also aimed at beginners, it was divided into three shorter units (*Introduction to LION*, *Searching LION for literary criticism* and *Accessing full-text works on LION*) so that students could clearly identify what topics were covered in each unit and what might therefore be more helpful at a particular time in their research. Both tutorials were made accessible through the library's webpage and from the main Faculty homepage, although eventually students will access them directly through the VLE.

The actual writing of the tutorials proved fairly straightforward as the INFORMS program is highly intuitive and requires only a basic understanding of HTML tags. Several aspects of the program need some modification (for example a new window opens up every time a change is made to the tutorial) but on the whole the tutorials were relatively easy to write and mount on the web. The tutorials were completed by Christmas 2002, ready for testing in the spring.

Trials of both tutorials took place over two days in March, with students encouraged to participate by both academic and library staff. An email and poster campaign was used to advertise the project, and students were offered a free bottle of wine in return for half an hour of their time. The first day of testing was hampered by a university-wide network problem, but in the end over fifty students tested the materials and provided valuable feedback through pre- and post-test questionnaires; individual interviews were conducted in some cases. The questionnaires invited students to critically evaluate the tutorials, as well as encouraging them to think more widely about their general information skills and how they go about finding material from the Internet and other electronic resources.

The results from the trial sessions and completed questionnaires were generally very positive. Many students had never used the databases before, so for library staff it was an excellent opportunity to raise awareness of the range of resources available in Oxford. Students liked the fact that the tutorials were short and easy to navigate, and would allow them to access specific help on databases at a time that most suited them. The main problem students experienced was actually linking in to the live resources, as one of the databases used placed a limit on the number of concurrent users which meant that access was denied occasionally. This is something that should be considered when writing tutorials. On a more general level, the questionnaire results highlighted a number of issues that library staff need to address including an over-reliance by students on search engines rather than using bibliographic databases for literature searching, and a lack of knowledge about constructing good search strategies and subject keywords for retrieving relevant information from databases as well as the Internet.

The INFORMS tutorials are now embedded in the Oxford University VLE and will act as a framework for teaching students how to locate, select and exploit relevant information sources in the future. The aim now is to write similar tutorials for all the

main databases used by English students and to link them in to information about courses on the VLE written by lecturers and tutors. Students studying Shakespeare, for example, would find a link on their course homepage to a tutorial on a key Shakespeare database alongside their weekly lecture notes, reading lists and any PowerPoint presentation slides from the lecture. Students might not even be aware that the tutorials had been written by library staff, but would assume that they were part of their weekly assignment together with essays and background reading. The success of the tutorials will inevitably be linked to the success of the VLE and how students respond to changes in teaching and learning across the University. Librarians and academic staff will need to liaise closely to achieve this, but the results should help improve the information skills of students and contribute to the new role of library staff in our increasingly changing information environment.

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