Strengthening partnerships

Swinburne Research

Our research office is an innovative and proactive area, and we have worked together to identify a range of areas where a reliable source of publications data can be of use to them. Rather than conducting a full data collection process each year, our research office can now rely on a data extract from Swinburne Research Bank to help meet publications reporting requirements. They can also call on the knowledge we've gained through dealing with publications to help classify areas of research interest for Swinburne academics.

Swinburne Marketing

Our marketing area needs an easy way to stay in touch with the activities and achievements of Swinburne researchers. Swinburne Research Bank provides them with a 'one-stop shop' to see what Swinburne academics are publishing. Our cross-disciplinary coverage helps them identify stories of interest that represent Swinburne's research successes and strengths.

Swinburne academics

Swinburne Research Bank has helped the library strengthen its relationship with individual academic staff. We're building our knowledge of how they choose to make their research findings available, as well as better understanding the cultural differences between disciplines and strengthening our dialogue with them.

Building partnerships with all our user groups helps make Swinburne Library services more responsive.

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Swinburne: engaging TAFE students within a university environment

Having worked in a TAFE library for over a decade, I didn't think it would be all that different working in the TAFE sector of the dual sector Swinburne University. It did, however, become clear that there are challenges associated with providing library services to students undertaking a range of study from pre-apprenticeships through to PhD research. These challenges the library staff at Swinburne work daily to meet, and do so with some flair.

Of the five libraries at Swinburne, two primarily serve TAFE students (with three mixed), and that allows the staff to experiment with a range of services aimed solely at this cohort. For example, at the Croydon campus, with a range of Child Care and Trade courses, the introduction of a Wii for use in the library has been a great way to reduce the 'academic' stigma often associated with the library. The introduction of lunchtime comedy screenings this year is also aimed at getting students to walk through the doors of the library. As students feel comfortable not only being in the library but also talking to library staff, it will no longer be a scary prospect to ask for help when it comes to working on assignments.

Engaging TAFE students with the library and encouraging them to seek help with research and assignments has become all the more crucial with the introduction of the Victorian Skills Reform Agenda. With the introduction of contestability and a change in funding agreements, keeping students engaged and achieving in their course is vital for the TAFE Division. The library will play a significant part in not only helping students achieve educational outcomes, but also feeling welcome and at ease on their campus. For some students the library has become their 'third place', that community space which is not home or work where they feel comfortable to socialise and connect online.

There is also an issue of matching electronic access to information with students' needs. Accessing the current Swinburne library homepage can be quite daunting for many of our TAFE students, with the extensive range of options available. More electronic information available to TAFE students because they are part of a university can be a double-edged sword: the difference between access to a limited number of targeted electronic databases compared with hundreds, which for the most part are of no relevance to these students.

But are TAFE students really that different to Higher Education students when it comes to library needs? A client survey done in 2008 asked students to highlight those areas of the library and its service that were important to them and to rate how the library was performing. For both TAFE and Higher Education undergraduate students 4 of the top 5 issues of importance were the same, issues of access to PCs, photocopying and printing, and interactions with the librarians. And when it came to areas for improvement, both TAFE and HE undergraduate students highlighted numbers of PCs, the need for suitable study facilities, noise levels in the library, and adequate photocopying and printing facilities. Maybe there isn't such a big difference providing library services for TAFE students within a dual sector environment.

As the range of TAFE courses continues to expand with the introduction of vocational degrees, librarians will also need to meet the information needs of an ever expanding cohort, a challenge we at Swinburne University already meet.

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Building literacy skills within the university library

Literacy skills are a fundamental component of many work tasks required in the typical jobs for which a university graduate might apply. But for some students being literate in English can become something of a challenge, particularly if literacy problems have not been dealt with adequately at the secondary or early tertiary levels. So how do some students get to university with limited literacy skills? And what role does a university librarian play in helping students with lower levels of literacy?

The importance of literacy skills in the library

In a library situation, literacy skills are vital. Students need to effectively collect, collate, organise, manage, analyse, and interpret vast amounts of written material for their various subjects. There are many situations where a lower literacy student may struggle in the library. Here are two examples:

- A student with a reading age which corresponds to a lower secondary level may struggle to read required papers and articles written to suit extremely competent readers. Struggling readers tend to read more slowly, which in turn reduces their ability to read fluently, which then reduces their comprehension level. As reading speed slows, comprehension becomes harder to maintain.

- A student who has problems with their visual processing skills will find it hard to read small text or closely-spaced lines. They may struggle with online information complicated by advertisements, animated visuals, multi-coloured text, or banner headlines. Their eyes will tend to follow the brightest or most visually attractive parts of the screen and they will quickly lose focus, attention, and comprehension.

Why do some students struggle with literacy?

There are many reasons a student may struggle with literacy. Sometimes literacy in English is a simple reflection of not being a native English speaker. If English is learned as an additional language, often written communication competence will be closely related to spoken English skills. As one area increases, so will the other. But there are some students who have English as a first language who still seem to struggle with literacy. What is the background of these students, and how have they come through a schooling system without being competent readers and writers?

There is no single answer to this question. For some students, reading disabilities such as dyslexia can be the reason. For other students, visual processing problems are an issue. Visual processing is skills such as changing focal length, following text from one line to the next smoothly, or being able to track a moving object (such as a cursor which moves quickly across a computer screen).

Librarian strategies for helping low literacy students

There are a few strategies librarians can use to help students with lower literacy levels. These include:

1. Encouraging relationships with liaison librarians who are available to students in particular faculties on an ongoing basis. A student is more likely to ask for help if they are dealing with a familiar, friendly face.

2. Assisting tutors and lecturers to provide information in alternative formats, such as taped or electronic versions of lectures. A tape of a lecture can be played at home at the speed needed by the student, and without the need to write quickly or monitor complex auditory and visual information at the same time.

3. Limiting visual distractions in the library's reading and study areas. Visual distractions such as coloured banners, book displays, and screen presentations all take visual attention away from the task of reading text.

4. Provide written information on white paper with black text using a large, clear font with sufficient white space to make it easily legible. Avoid fancy headings, coloured backgrounds, or unusual fonts.

5. Use simple technology tools such as text reading programs (Texthelp Read and Write Gold), text writing programs (Dragon Naturally Speaking), and spelling tools (Wordweb, Tiny Spell) to support student learning.

6. Provide subject specific keyword lists which show students some of the typical keywords needed for research tasks in their subjects. A list of pre-prepared keywords reduces the complexity of the spelling task required by lower literacy students to research a given topic.

The importance of literacy skills at work

Literacy skills are important both to enable students to manage their studies effectively, and also to set them up well for their future careers. A worker who is unable to communicate effectively using written and spoken English may struggle in a work environment, where high levels of literacy are often taken for granted. Literacy is required in tasks such as:

- Creating a monthly report
- Writing emails and letters to a manager
- Designing a sales brochure
- Presenting a new concept to a client
- Completing general administrative tasks
- Documenting work procedures and flow charts

Without good literacy skills, students may struggle to maintain their position within a workplace or to advance their careers to a level which reflects their skills in other areas. Librarians who are pro-active in providing practical help for literacy problems and supporting students in a friendly, positive, and knowledgeable way can make a significant difference to the long term outcomes for these students.

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