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# Introducing first year psychology undergraduates to information handling: comparing two institutions



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## **AIMS**

The aims of the research were to compare the learning experiences in information handling of first year Psychology undergraduates at two institutions with broadly similar intakes, one in the north east of England (126 students at the University of Teesside) and the other in the north west (56 students at Edge Hill College of Higher Education). Although the sessions delivered were not identical, they were broadly similar and the same evaluation methods were used.

## **BACKGROUND TO DELIVERING INFORMATION SKILLS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEESSIDE**

The involvement of Library and Information Services (LIS) in teaching information handling on psychology programmes, has grown steadily over the years. Eight years ago, the session took place in a large lecture theatre, with a member

of LIS giving a projected demonstration of the PsychLit CDROM database. Six years ago, it was recognised, given the central importance of information handling, that students needed to be more actively involved and, subsequently, the session was incorporated into the research methods module. This was by nature of a 'guest appearance' by the LIS staff member and involved teaching the cohort in a number of smaller groups. The sessions consisted of a demonstration of the library OPAC and the PsychLit CDROM followed by students' completion of a written exercise, produced in collaboration with the subject lecturer. In 2001/2, given that web-based PsychINFO had become available, and potentially accessible from students' homes, where LIS staff are not on hand for help and advice, it was felt that the sessions would be better realised as a 'hands on', in a laboratory situation. The 90 minute session covered use of the OPAC, electronic journals and the web version of PsychINFO.

LIS relations with the Psychology subject group are, and have always been, very good. However, as the 'guest appearance' by LIS personnel in the research methods module does not appear in the course documentation, the success of the venture relies on personal relationships and could be lost or misunderstood with a change of personnel. Indeed, as the management of research methods seems to change hands quite often, there is an annual 'hunt the research methods lecturer' every autumn!

#### **BACKGROUND TO DELIVERING INFORMATION SKILLS AT EDGE HILL COLLEGE**

Information & Media Services (IMS) have worked closely with the psychology department since it was introduced in 1998. Since then, learning support advisers within IMS have collaborated with psychology teaching staff to ensure that students make effective use of the psychology resources.

IMS relations with the psychology department are very good and have been strengthened through close collaboration during the inspection of psychology by the QAA in 2000 and the British Psychological Society accreditation later that year. Both these external bodies recognised the importance of the curriculum – based information skills workshops was recognised by both of these external bodies as being a crucial support mechanism for students.

The learning outcomes as set out in the definitive course document for single honours psychology makes explicit the key transferable skills that stu-

dents are expected to develop and these include information as well as IT skills. The document does not make explicit the role of IMS in delivering these skills but at the time it was drafted this was normal practice within the institution. Recent new course developments does make explicit the exact role of IMS in the embedding of information and IT skills within the curriculum.

The information skills workshop delivered by IMS is integrated within a core introductory module for level one students, introductory psychology 1: personality, social and individual difference. The one hour workshop is delivered in the psychology lab and students experience a range of teaching methods. The resources and search techniques are demonstrated to them and then they are given a 'hands on' opportunity. The workshop is supported by a comprehensive workbook written in an open-learning style.

Both workbook and workshop were written after collaboration with the module leader to ensure that the information skills link directly to specific resources and that examples and keywords used in the workbook and demonstration link directly to the curriculum. The module leader sets a piece of assessed coursework designed to ensure that students draw on skills gained in information skills workshops. Students are required to prepare a bibliography demonstrating that they have accessed a range of resources beyond their core reading list.

The emphasis of the workshop and workbook is upon the growing availability of full text electronic resources. Students are shown how to use the library catalogue to access full-text electronic journals. They are also shown how to access and search collections of full-text journals, e.g. Science Direct. Level 1 students are required to develop basic information skills and awareness of the range of psychology resources available to them. At level 2 students learn how to use the more powerful abstracting and indexing databases such as PsycINFO.

#### **DATA COLLECTION**

At the conclusion of the session, students were asked to complete an anonymous evaluation form (Teesside form reproduced in the appendix) and, if they were willing to take part in a one-to-one interview, for their contact details. Nine students were interviewed at Teesside, and three at Edge Hill. The interviews were tape recorded and subsequently analysed using 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1973).

## QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The two institutions had been chosen because of their shared characteristics. In fact in terms of age profile, gender and entry qualifications, the similarities between the two samples are remarkable: approximately one third of student intake of the sample is aged over 21 at both institutions; the sample is predominantly female (Tees 84%, Edge Hill 86%); the Edge Hill sample has slightly more 'A' level entrants, 64% as opposed to 55% at Tees. Student evaluation of the sessions is again remarkably similar, with the mean Teesside evaluation score of 22.14 and Edge Hill 22.21, out of a possible maximum of 25. See Table 1.

Some interesting differences are noted when the evaluation score is split by other variables. General awareness of the usefulness of the session, both immediate and long term, and appreciation of the organisation and staff attitudes is higher in those age 36 and over, although they are more critical of their physical environment. See Table 2.

Analysis by gender is interesting in that whilst males recognise more readily the usefulness of the skills they are acquiring, they are less appreciative than females in other aspects of their evaluation. See Table 3. Students with non-standard entry qualifications i.e. Access or 'other' are more generally more appreciative of the sessions. See Table 4. This was confirmed by the qualitative data collected at interview.

## QUALITATIVE RESULTS: THEMES EMERGING FROM THE INTERVIEW DATA

Again, there was great similarity between the two institutions: a disproportionate number of 'non-standard' students volunteered and there was similarity in their pre-occupations. The following general themes emerged when the tapes were analysed using 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1973)

### NEED FOR MORE TRUMPET BLOWING.

A number of students, since taking part in the seminar and after a period of reflection, had realised the value of what they had been shown, both in terms of usefulness and reliability of the data and in terms of monetary cost. They felt that it had not been sufficiently trumpeted either by the regular lecturing staff or the LIS staff actually running the seminars. Reputedly some students, when told the previous week that the next seminar would be given by LIS, had not attended because they felt they already knew how to use a PC and the library! The interviews were conducted several months after the event and a

TABLE 1

MEAN STUDENT EVALUATION SCORES BY INSTITUTION: TOTAL SAMPLE

Assigned Score	Teesside (N126)	Edge Hill (N56)
Useful now (Max. 5)	4.31	4.30
Useful in future (Max. 5)	4.56	4.54
Session well organised (Max. 5)	4.33	4.43
Staff friendly and helpful (Max. 5)	4.61	4.79
Room suitable (Max. 5)	4.34	4.16
Total Score (Max.25)	22.14	22.21

TABLE 2

MEAN STUDENT EVALUATION SCORES BY AGE: TOTAL SAMPLE

Assigned Score	Aged 20 & under	Aged 21 to 35	Aged 36 & over
Useful now (Max. 5)	4.27	4.27	4.60
Useful in future (Max. 5)	4.52	4.52	4.85
Session well organised (Max. 5)	4.38	4.25	4.47
Staff friendly and helpful (Max. 5)	4.64	4.66	4.85
Room suitable (Max. 5)	4.32	4.27	4.05
Total Score (Max.25)	22.13	21.97	22.83

TABLE 3

MEAN STUDENT EVALUATION SCORES BY GENDER: TOTAL SAMPLE

Assigned Score	Female	Male
Useful now (Max. 5)	4.30	4.36
Useful in future (Max. 5)	4.55	4.61
Session well organised (Max. 5)	4.39	4.19
Staff friendly and helpful (Max. 5)	4.68	4.57
Room suitable (Max. 5)	4.30	4.18
Total Score (Max.25)	22.20	21.93

TABLE 4

MEAN STUDENT EVALUATION SCORES BY ENTRY QUALIFICATIONS: TOTAL SAMPLE

Assigned Score	A Levels	Access & other
Useful now (Max. 5)	4.26	4.38
Useful in future (Max. 5)	4.48	4.66
Session well organised (Max. 5)	4.28	4.29
Staff friendly and helpful (Max. 5)	4.63	4.71
Room suitable (Max. 5)	4.35	4.37
Total Score (Max.25)	21.99	22.40

number of students were showing signs of really appreciating the value of accessing controlled databases rather than trawling the internet. The general failure to appreciate the value of both good quality information and the associated skills to retrieve it are already known to LIS professionals (Downie, 1999) (Hull, 2002) but this small research project did provide a useful reminder. Student evaluation of the seminar delivery

### IMPORTANCE OF ICT

Existing familiarity with ICT skills clearly informed student perceptions. Those who lacked them felt disadvantaged and were likely to protest that the session was too fast and tried to cover too

much. Those who had a facility with a keyboard were likely to see this as being the same thing as being information literate. Because the session started with fairly straightforward activities such as searching the OPAC and reserving a book, those who already knew how to do this tended to mentally switch off.

The pace of delivery of the workshop was deemed to be both 'far too fast' and 'far too slow' by different elements of student opinion. In the Tees-side delivery, the presence of a second person to troubleshoot and stop some participants getting totally left behind, was appreciated. It is clear that there is a wide range of skills in students arriving at university, and a perception, not always true, that the younger students are more at ease with ICT use. Some students expressed discomfort at the degree to which they needed to interact with ICT, a fact of student life which they had not predicted.

#### **NEED FOR INFORMATION SKILLS**

There was a general consensus that the sessions were necessary. A number of suggestions were made for improving future sessions. It is clear that the 'one size fits all' approach is not the best as students at the two extremes are respectively bored or overwhelmed. Some students suggested 'streaming' by initial level of skill but this would rely on students having a realistic view of their capabilities, or undergoing a diagnostic test. A feedback session was seen as desirable; not everyone had had time to complete the exercise within the allotted time. It may have been better to allow them time to do this over a period and then come together for feedback. Another suggestion was a second 'clinic' type follow up session for those who realised that they needed it.

In a world of assessment-driven students, it was thought worthwhile to ask the sample if they considered that the worksheet completed should be assessed in some way. The general feeling was that the exercise itself should not be assessed, unless this was with the intention of indicating the importance of the skills acquired. The less confident students had appreciated the friendly relaxed atmosphere of the sessions and those who had found it difficult would have been placed under further stress had the exercise been assessed. However, a number suggested that a clearly identifiable percentage of marks gained for subsequent assignments should be for the quality of their search strategy and items retrieved.

There was a general recognition that the session had raised awareness of online access to good quality information and the possibility of accessing these resources from home. This was especially appreciated by those with childcare responsibilities.

#### **COPING MECHANISMS**

What students perceive as the multiplicity of passwords (LRC network logon ID and password, different on and off campus passwords to databases) was seen as a major stumbling block, to such an extent that some reported that sometimes, if they could not remember passwords to databases, they just used a more readily available search engine such as Google, as 'you usually come up with something'.

Another coping strategy mentioned at both institutions was to ask another student, perhaps indicative of a reluctance to risk losing face by asking a member of staff and possibly giving the impression of not having paid attention during the session.

#### **PUBLIC LIBRARY USE AS A PRE-CURSOR TO THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

There was some evidence of the formative role of public library use, by which some students gain a general understanding of how libraries work, a knowledge which is not always present but which may be subliminally assumed by library and lecturing staff alike. Everyone knows how to use a library, don't they? This can lead to very capable and well-motivated students not taking advantage of what is available to them because of unawareness e.g. the concept of interlibrary loans is not always familiar; some students had heard about the British Library at Boston Spa and were planning to drive down there to use it at dissertation time.

At both institutions there was a perception that public libraries were not specialised enough for study purposes.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The research team considered that the quantitative data had not provided any surprises, but had tended to confirm previous findings e.g. that older students tend to be more appreciative of support services. The qualitative data provided a richer source of insights, but with the drawback that it implies a greater commitment both from the students in providing it and from the researchers in collecting and analysing it. However, the effort involved is worthwhile. For example on the basis

of this data, the mode of delivery of the session at Teesside was adjusted for the next intake of students 2002/3.

The research team would welcome further comments and discussion  
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**REFERENCES**

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**APPENDIX**

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**University of Teesside, Library and Information Services**

Please take two minutes to complete this brief questionnaire. You could win the star prize draw of £10 printing credit on your TUSC!

A. Overall: Please agree or disagree with the following by circling a number from 5 to 1. 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree

1. I found the session useful overall	5	4	3	2	1
2. I can see that it will prove useful in the future	5	4	3	2	1
3. The room used was suitable	5	4	3	2	1
4. The session was well organised.	5	4	3	2	1
5. The staff were friendly and helpful	5	4	3	2	1

6. Please circle which degree you are taking  
 Psychology single honours                      Psychology/Criminology joint honours  
 Psychology/counselling joint honours      Forensic psychology  
 Other (please state)

7. Please circle your age  
    20 or under                      21-24                      25-35                      36 plus

8. Please circle your gender  
    male                                      female

9. Please circle your entry qualifications for the course  
    A levels                                      Access                                      Other

10. Later in the academic year we would like to discuss (on a one to one basis) if this information session has proved to be useful. Would you be prepared to be interviewed?  
    Yes                                      No

If "Yes", please give your email or phone number so that we can contact you.  
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