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TO INFINITY AND BEYOND VIDEOS: CREATING A COORDINATED SUITE OF ONLINE LEARNING TOOLS THAT ENGAGE RESEARCHERS AND ENHANCE LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

Online education is growing, and libraries need to support the online learning community with better online tools. Many libraries focus their asynchronous online learning efforts on research guides and videos, and have not explored more dynamic and engaging online learning tools. Learning new technologies and exploring creative applications takes time, and monetary investment in new technology can be a challenge. Libraries have embraced videos because there are free and easy to use tools to create them, they are an easily recognizable medium, and they are accessible to most users. Videos are valuable and often effective, but different types of learning tools should also be used to provide variety and balance.

MULTIMEDIA MATERIALS AND INTERACTIVE TOOLS

“Students want a variety of tools that engage, multiple paths to information, and interactive opportunities.” (Mestre, 2010, p. 824). Mestre’s study showed that most students who only watched a video were unable to recreate the steps demonstrated (p. 821). This indicates that videos are lacking something, and we need to, at the very least, supplement them with alternative or supporting tools. No learning tool can be equally effective for all types of learners, so creating a coordinated suite of tools will help a greater audience. Current pedagogy supports information literacy teaching that takes into account diverse learning styles—such pedagogy can and should be applied to online learning tools as well (ACRL, 2012).

Librarians should be using a variety of multimedia materials to reach and teach users. Multimedia is the combination of two or more types of media, usually words plus images. These are the best types of learning tools, because they help facilitate active learning, which emphasizes learning by doing in addition to listening and seeing. There are three types of multimedia: static, animated, and interactive. All three types can be effective, but they are most effective when used together, and provide balance to an online learning environment. Videos are typically considered animated multimedia, in that there is continuous movement of features. But watching a video is a sedentary activity. While it is active, it is not interactive, and if all of a library’s online learning tools are videos, the library is not effectively engaging users. As said by Chickering and Gamson (1987) “Learning is not a spectator sport...time plus energy equals learning” (p. 4-5). By developing online learning tools that engage users, libraries can improve information literacy skills in their student populations.

CREATING COORDINATED TOOLS

At Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries, videos had been created on an as-needed basis without a strategic plan for developing tools that work together and complement each other. The VCU Libraries developed a plan to assess online learning tools, which consisted of mostly videos, and to create new tools that replaced or enhanced current offerings. The goal was to create

a suite of online learning tools that complemented each other and addressed information literacy skills in a strategic and coordinated way. Two examples of this are the tools related to evaluating information, and understanding how to obtain research materials.

Two existing videos explain how to critically evaluate websites, and how to distinguish between scholarly and non-scholarly articles. Assessment of these tools indicated that the videos could be supplemented, or even replaced, with a different multimedia format that better addresses the learning outcomes. Librarians began creating a series of hover maps that users can interact with to learn how to evaluate their sources. Hover maps are files that have “hot spots” or areas that light up, change color, or display a pop up when a mouse is hovered over them. Librarians created hover maps that pointed out different aspects of various resources that students should look for when evaluating a source. These tools will engage users, and allow them to practice their skills, rather than just reading, hearing or watching for clues in a video. One hover map is also accompanied by an infographic that provides enticing visual cues. The final stage of the project is to create an online game that will allow users to test their evaluative skills.

The second example is a flowchart explaining how to locate research materials. Each component must complement and support the others, and the flow chart is visually engaging, combining text instructions, videos, and images. The ability to embed different types of media into a single tool creates a dynamic, interesting experience for library users. Users will not watch a long series of videos, but they may watch a video or two that is mixed in with other types of multimedia. The flow chart also allows users to choose the media most appealing to their preferred learning style.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

“Coordinated” can mean anything from creating a set of best practices, standardizing language and color schemes, or developing tools that can actually work together, such as the examples provided. The major challenges in developing coordinated tools is time, learning curves, and consistency. But with good planning, developing tools that work together and address multiple learning styles will be beneficial to both librarians and users. Librarians should consider working on such projects collaboratively, specifically seeking out colleagues with learning styles that differ from their own since such individuals will have different ideas on what types of activities would be useful and engaging to users. Librarians should also avoid trying to learning multiple new technologies at the same time because overload of new information and skills will cause frustration, and hinder progress.

At VCU, the flowchart and hover map projects are continuing, in addition to many other projects that bring together different types of learning tools to address information literacy concepts. The new ACRL threshold concepts offer an interesting opportunity for us to evaluate our current efforts, and perhaps realign our goals. While following best practices and pedagogical standards, the impact of these efforts on student learning and engagement still needs to be assessed. After initial assessment, a strategic plan for continual assessment of online learning efforts will be developed.

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