

Revamping GXEX1401

Nor Edzan Che Nasir

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In 1998, the University of Malaya made it compulsory for all undergraduates to sign up for the Information Skills Course or GXEX1401. This is a one-credit hour 14 weeks compulsory university course for all undergraduates and the Library was entrusted to run the course. GXEX 1401 has been running for 13 years and throughout this duration, the course had changed considerably both in contents and delivery method. This paper will look at the development of the course since its inception and how the Library plays a significant role in inculcating lifelong learning to the students.

Keywords: *Information literacy; Information skills; Undergraduates; Lifelong learning*

Introduction

The University of Malaya, being the first institution of higher learning in the country, made it compulsory for all undergraduates to sign up for the Information Skills Course (GXEX1401) beginning year 1998. The Library was entrusted to run the one-credit hour 14 weeks compulsory university course for all undergraduates. Students have to attend classes for an hour each week totaling 14 weeks which is the time taken to complete one semester. Classes are conducted in a computer laboratory with Internet connection.

In 1989, the American Library Association introduced the concept of information literacy when it published its definition of information literacy as "Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information". Thus, the Information Skills Course (GXEX1401) was designed and developed with this in mind and this is reflected in its Course Proforma and Course Information. Having gone through the course in their first year and practicing the skills they have acquired throughout their subsequent years in the University, the students, upon graduation, should be able to apply these information skills in their day-to-day activities. Thus, the skills acquired would be applied throughout their lifetime and enhances their lifelong learning experiences into their adult life. In other words, the students are able to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, and create information.

Within the Information Skills Course (GXEX1401), students are taught not only the use of print resources but also digital resources. UML subscribes to a wide array of online databases and electronic books which are accessible from its website and on graduation, the students from the University should be able to put into practice the information skills they acquire to any format of information source. Up until the end of the 2010/2011 academic session, a total of 66,155 students have attended the course since 1998 and this in total should contribute to the development of an information literate society within the work force in Malaysia (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of students taught GXEX1401

Session	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total
No. of Students Taught			
1998/1999	3,081	2,003	5,084
1999/2000	3,348	2,666	6,014
2000/2001	3,021	3,895	6,916
2001/2002	2,940	2,724	5,664
2002/2003	3,089	2,687	5,776
2003/2004	3,004	2,181	5,185
2004/2005	3,192	2,185	5,377
2005/2006	3,243	1,836	5,079
2006/2007	2,809	2,131	4,940
2007/2008	2,821	1,558	4,379
2008/2009	2,756	1,452	4,208
2009/2010	2,292	1,525	3,817
2010/2011	2,417	1,299	3,716
Total	38,013	28,142	66,155

Developing, Re-developing and Evolving

From its inception, the entire course structure and contents was developed and taught by the librarians. The course started out the traditional way with the use of powerpoint slides and a white board as well as printed notes as guides. Exercises were printed in the form of a handbook and students use the computers for hands-on. The library catalogue at that time was using the telnet protocol. Initially there were sixty computers in the laboratory to be shared by more than a hundred students although ideally it should be one computer per student. Now we have a computer laboratory which can comfortably sit 80 students each with their own computers.

Breivik (1998) admits that text alone or text with only minimal picture does not reflect the normal life experiences of most students today, who spend far more time watching television than reading. This statement was written more than fourteen years ago. Now, students spend almost all their time using Internet search engines, mobile phones, PDAs, tablets and other devices coupled with social networking tools such as YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter. Using a combination of web technology is a commonsense approach to teaching especially for students during this information technology era where sources of learning and access to information include various technologies. Furthermore, the process of teaching and learning information skills became more innovative with the gradual replacement of the CD-ROMs with online databases and electronic journals. The Library's catalogue was upgraded to that of the web version in 2002. With this dramatic change, the Library had to modify the course contents to reflect the new method of information retrieval with regards to the online resources.

Table 2: Blended learning features of a skill-driven model
(Valiathan, Purnima. (2002). Blended learning models. *Learning Circuits*)

Contents	Technology based techniques	Non technology based techniques
Announcement	LMS, Email	Flyer, Mail, Phone
Overview session	Email, Webinar	
Self-paced learning	Web-based tutorial, E-books, EPSS, Simulation	Articles, Books, Job-aids, On-the-job-training
Query resolution	Email, FAQ, Instant messenger	Face-to-face meeting
Demonstration	Web meeting, Simulation	Traditional classroom
Practice	Simulation	Workbook assignment
Feedback	Email	Face-to-face meeting, Print report
Closing session	Email, Webinar	Traditional classroom
Certification	Web based test	Print test

With the various advancements made to the way how information is now presented to the masses, the Library had to seriously look at the course contents and mode of delivery. After various deliberations, the Library made a conscious decision to venture into a blended learning concept using a combination of web-based technology (self-paced assessment, video, audio, text); pedagogical approach (group discussion and presentation); and instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led training. The elements (Table 2) listed in the skill-driven model of Valiathan (2002) was used as a guideline. The reason for adopting this model is that the Information Skills Course is envisaged to be a skills-based course.

In Edzan's study (2006), both library and students are very concerned with the availability of information sources on the web, followed by referencing and citation styles. Although, the information sources are linked to the e-learning template, it can be further enhanced with web-based tutorials and interactive online sessions. The citation style taught in this course is the American Psychological Association style. This style together with links to other referencing styles was also made available via the web.

Initially, a specially designated website for this course was set up at UML's homepage and it had the following features :

- Rules and regulations of the course
- Names and emails of facilitators
- Course outline and timetable for the whole semester
- Power point slides of all lectures
- Instructions on doing the project paper and submission date

The course website also had links to the Library catalogue and online reference resources such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. A glossary of library terms and special library codes used in bibliographic records was put up to enable students to understand library jargon and use the collection independently. Students can view the contents of the website outside the classroom and they can also discuss with fellow classmates regarding the slides, project and exercises. Although the facilitators' emails were displayed, students were encouraged to meet face-to-face with their facilitators before and after each class instead of emails due to the large number of students who registered for this course.

The entire course content and website was then revamped and translated into the English language to cater for the international students. However, it was too much to be completed and after a brief brainstorming session, it was decided that only some contents of the course, such as such as lecture contents, course rules and regulations tests, links to information resources and assessments, would be converted into an e-learning format.

The course now uses the University of Malaya's e-learning platform known as SPECTRUM (Fig. 1). The Library totally abandoned the paper-based guidebook and exercise book in 2010. All forms of communication are totally electronic via SPECTRUM and any form of paper-based handouts is at point-of-need only.

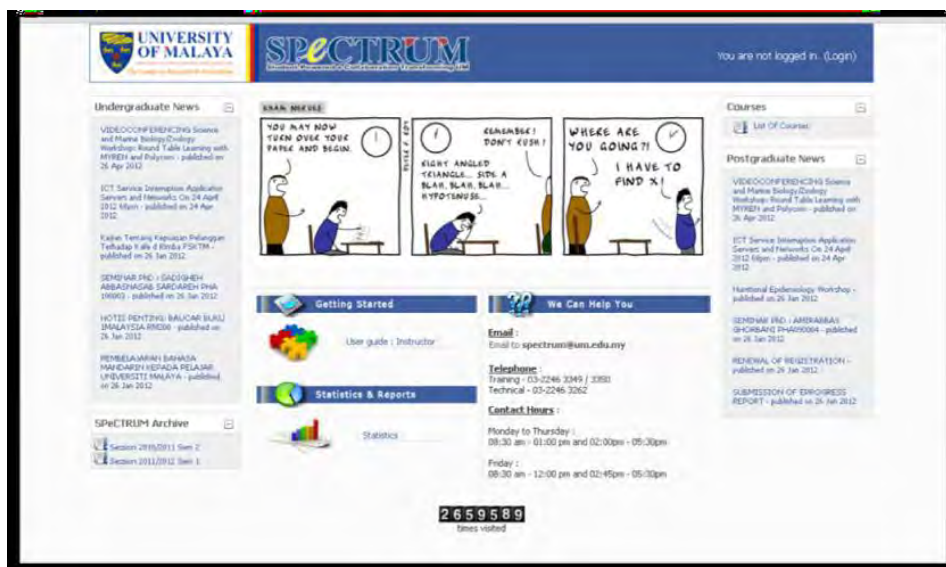


Figure 1: SPECTRUM (<http://spectrum.um.edu.my>)

Attempts were made to incorporate all the features available on SPECTRUM into the course modules such as: Announcements, Notes, Documents, Forum, Learning Tracks, Links, Reference, News, Assignments and Assessments. The Announcement feature describes the course outline and requirements, class schedules, course contents, date of test and examination. To enable self-paced learning, lecture notes in power point slides were made available using the Document feature. The lecture notes for the entire semester of 14 weeks were first translated into the English Language and both the Malay and English versions are then submitted online. Separate course contents with materials relevant to their discipline were prepared for the students from the Faculty of Law, Faculty of Dentistry and Faculty of Medicine. Students can view these downloadable slides whilst the lecture is going on and also during their free time outside the class whether in campus or remotely. Students are free to meet with their facilitators in face-to-face sessions to complement the classroom sessions. The mid-semester quiz is done online in real time and the students get to view their marks immediately after the quiz.

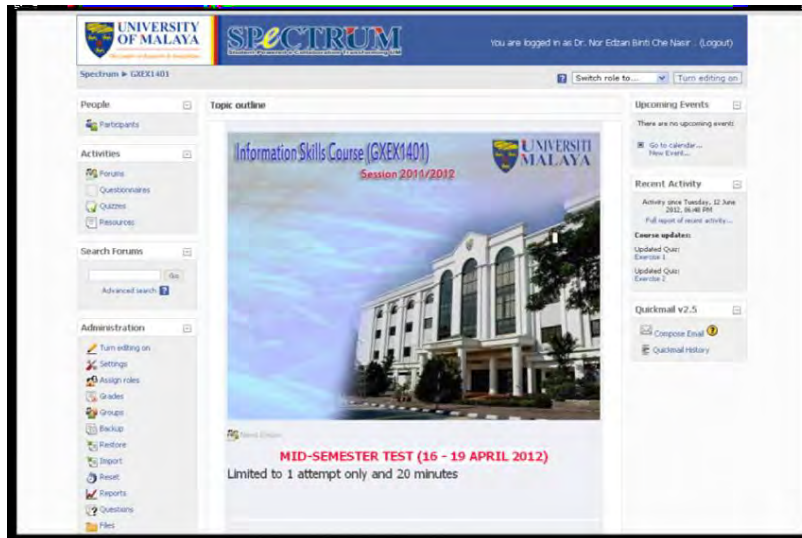


Figure 2: Interface for the Information Skills Course (GXEX1401)

The Library is solely responsible for uploading the contents of the GXEX1401 course (Fig. 2) and the task is given solely to the Information Skills Division. The division itself was established in 1998 but went through several name changes reflective of the needs that were placed on it. It started off as the Research and Information Management Division and moved on to Information Management and Research Services Division. In 2002, the name of the division was changed to Research and Academic Services Division and finally in 2008, the division changed to its current name. This division is staffed by four librarians and four support staff. In handling this course, the Division performs functions similar to that of an academic centre of responsibility with advice from the Examination Section of the University. The course is subjected to the rigours of the Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPIA) as stipulated by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency. In layman's terms, GXEX1401 goes through the same accreditation exercise undertaken by all the courses offered by the University of Malaya.

Conclusion

GXEX1401 is entrenched at the University of Malaya Library since 1998. It has evolved considerably to address the changes in the way information is now made available as well as changes in the way a user searches for information. The course contents as well as the mode of delivery have undergone major changes and we anticipate further changes. The availability of mobile devices and various mobile applications, either for free or for a fee, will be and can be the catalyst for further changes to be made.

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