Learning to learn online: creating an open-access learning development platform

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The challenge

In 2018, learning development (LD) at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) followed a mixed-delivery approach, mainly focusing on individual tutorials and embedded sessions in academic programmes. The generic offer of Blackboard resources was limited to a static repository, a collection of materials including PowerPoints and PDFs which lacked interactivity and opportunities to apply and evaluate learning.

In 2019, the Learning Skills Team (LSTeam), made up of faculty-aligned librarians and learning developers, began considering methods for upgrading their online repository. This was in response to analytics revealing the resource was primarily used to book tutorials, indicating students' limited interaction with self-directed learning materials (Calleja, 2020a). The project coincided with a substantial growth in digital technologies for e-learning and greater needs to harness these innovations to enhance online/blended learning (Phillips, McNaught and Kennedy, 2012, p.9). As lockdowns began in 2020, the need to provide students with quality online learning resources grew, exacerbated by increasing requests from programmes for materials on online learning skills and effective online research.

The challenge involved finding a short-term solution in response to the pandemic, whilst also considering a long-term approach to e-learning. Special consideration was given to identifying: a structured model of content delivery (Panigrahi, Srivastava and Sharma,
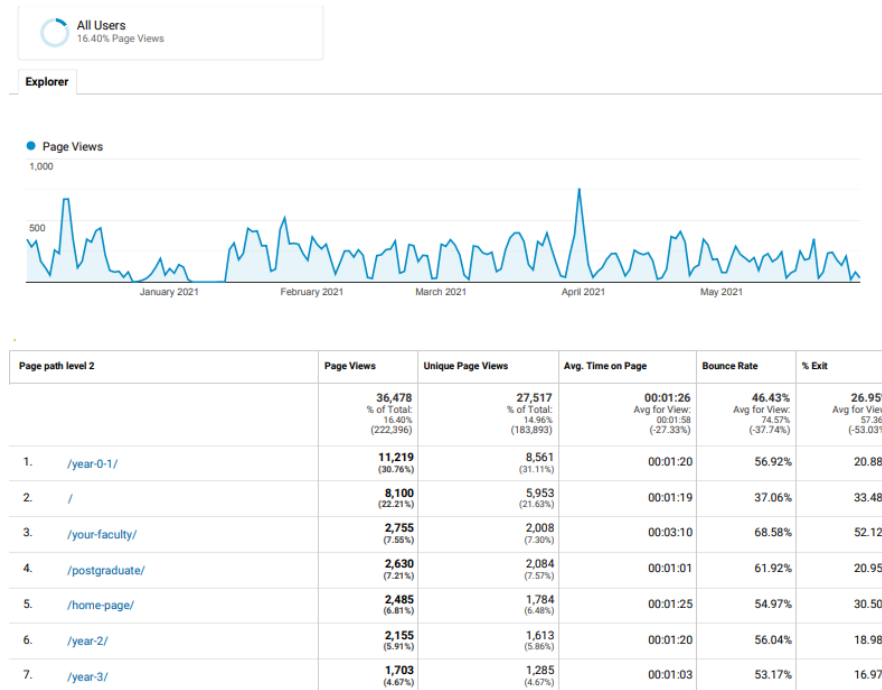
2018); a suitable platform for LD content (Francis et al., 2019); methods to engage and assess learning (Castle and McGuire, 2010). The modules needed to be appropriate to our diverse student groups (CCCU, 2021a), be inclusive of different learning needs and account for accessibility regulations (Central Digital and Data Office, 2018). Furthermore, the new platform, the Learning Skills Hub (LSHub) (CCCU, 2021b), needed to be available in advance of the 2020/21 academic year to support the university's blended learning strategy (CCCU, 2021c).
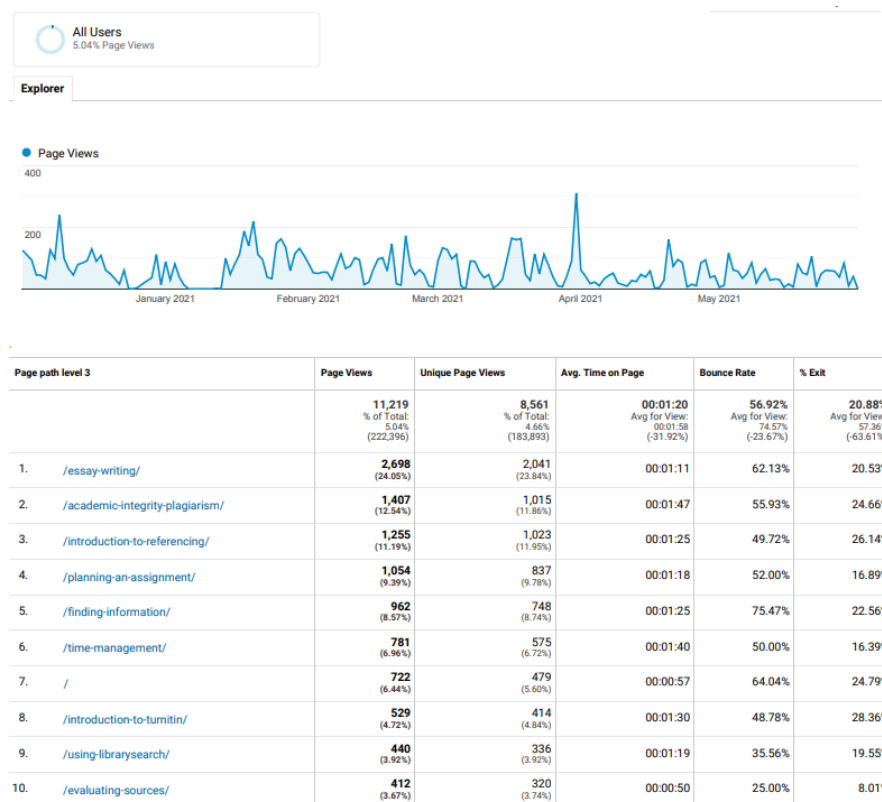
The response

The LSTeam proposed WordPress to host the LSHub due to its open-access capabilities, allowing access to resources beyond our institution. The design approach involved identifying themes and 'chunking' content to improve engagement and understanding, in line with a micro-learning pedagogy that delivers content in short manageable segments of learning (Major and Calandrino, 2018, p.2). This approach was applied through Hoffman and Ritchie's (1998) ICARE (Introduction, Content, Assessment, Reflection and Extension) model, offering a consistent structure to page design, with consideration to Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2021). Using this model as a template for all pages would offer students opportunities to practise, reflect on their learning, and extend that learning via links to further resources.

The LSTeam published 20 online modules by August 2020, grouped according to QAA's (2014) HE qualification levels. LSHub pages have been viewed over 36000 times, over six months (Image 1), making it CCCU's most popular non-course specific learning platform. The analytics identify Level 4 modules as the most visited (Image 2), echoing the notion of the first year at university as a key moment of transition in the student journey (Christie et al., 2016). The extensive use of the modules also demonstrates a positive change in user journey in comparison to the use of resources housed in Blackboard repository; greater numbers of students now access asynchronous modules rather than tutorials, which indicates that independent learning opportunities have improved ease of access and interest in development. The conclusion is further supported through student feedback (Image 3), with most respondents reporting the modules are useful, pitched at the right level, and boost confidence in the target skills.

Image 1. Google analytics of all user stats for the LSHub, 01/12/2020-31/05/2021.
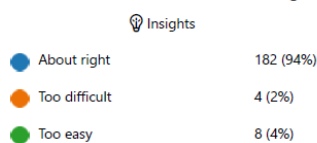

Page path level 2	Page Views	Unique Page Views	Avg. Time on Page	Bounce Rate	% Exit
	36,478 % of Total: 16.40% (222,396)	**27,517** % of Total: 14.96% (183,893)	**00:01:26** Avg for View: 00:01:58 (-27.33%)	**46.43%** Avg for View: 74.57% (-37.74%)	**26.95%** Avg for View: 57.36% (-53.03%)
1. /year-0-1/	**11,219** (30.76%)	**8,561** (31.11%)	00:01:20	56.92%	20.88%
2. /	**8,100** (22.21%)	**5,953** (21.63%)	00:01:19	37.06%	33.48%
3. /your-faculty/	**2,755** (7.55%)	**2,008** (7.30%)	00:03:10	68.58%	52.12%
4. /postgraduate/	**2,630** (7.21%)	**2,084** (7.57%)	00:01:01	61.92%	20.95%
5. /home-page/	**2,485** (6.81%)	**1,784** (6.48%)	00:01:25	54.97%	30.50%
6. /year-2/	**2,155** (5.91%)	**1,613** (5.86%)	00:01:20	56.04%	18.98%
7. /year-3/	**1,703** (4.67%)	**1,285** (4.67%)	00:01:03	53.17%	16.97%

Image 2. Google analytics of all user stats for the LSHub, Level 4 modules, 01/12/2020-31/05/2021.

Page path level 3	Page Views	Unique Page Views	Avg. Time on Page	Bounce Rate	% Exit
	11,219 % of Total: 5.04% (222,396)	**8,561** % of Total: 4.66% (183,893)	**00:01:20** Avg for View: 00:01:58 (-31.92%)	**56.92%** Avg for View: 74.57% (-23.67%)	**20.88%** Avg for View: 57.36% (-63.61%)
1. /essay-writing/	**2,698** (24.05%)	**2,041** (23.84%)	00:01:11	62.13%	20.53%
2. /academic-integrity-plagiarism/	**1,407** (12.54%)	**1,015** (11.86%)	00:01:47	55.93%	24.66%
3. /introduction-to-referencing/	**1,255** (11.19%)	**1,023** (11.95%)	00:01:25	49.72%	26.14%
4. /planning-an-assignment/	**1,054** (9.39%)	**837** (9.78%)	00:01:18	52.00%	16.89%
5. /finding-information/	**962** (8.57%)	**748** (8.74%)	00:01:25	75.47%	22.56%
6. /time-management/	**781** (6.96%)	**575** (6.72%)	00:01:40	50.00%	16.39%
7. /	**722** (6.44%)	**479** (5.60%)	00:00:57	64.04%	24.79%
8. /introduction-to-turnitin/	**529** (4.72%)	**414** (4.84%)	00:01:30	48.78%	28.36%
9. /using-librarysearch/	**440** (3.92%)	**336** (3.92%)	00:01:19	35.56%	19.55%
10. /evaluating-sources/	**412** (3.67%)	**320** (3.74%)	00:00:50	25.00%	8.01%

Image 3. Microsoft forms feedback for LSHub modules 17/09/2021-31/05/2021.

Was the module aimed at the right level for you?

💡 Insights

🔵 About right	182 (94%)
🟠 Too difficult	4 (2%)
🟢 Too easy	8 (4%)

Do you feel more confident after completing this module?

🔵 Yes	182 (94%)
🟠 No	12 (6%)

How useful did you find this module?

🔵 Very useful	102 (53%)
🟠 Fairly useful	83 (43%)
🟢 Not at all useful	9 (5%)
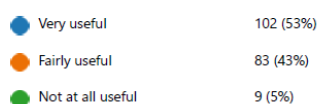
However, there were initially significant challenges promoting the purpose and application of the project to decision-makers, leading to delays in both project approval and access to funding for an appropriate platform. In addition, WordPress presented difficulties meeting accessibility regulations, due to imposed university limitations on licensing, which impacted on the ability to embed diverse and accessible content types. Furthermore, as a new and innovative project, there was no budget to purchase applications, which led to relying on free software with limited accessibility functions and design options. As the project was required to meet a short turnaround (Calleja, 2020b), quality assurance processes were not robust, resulting in some inconsistencies in module length, tone, and style.

Recommendations

By releasing resources, the LSHub has transformed institutional perspectives of LD, supported by significant user engagement data and positive feedback from staff and students. The LSHub has increased the visibility of the LSTeam and the recognition of academic skills development as an integral part of academic success (Magyar, McAvoy and Forstner, 2011). As a result of this success, the team is now acknowledged in promotional materials for current/prospective students, as well as staff guidance

documents. Additionally, LSHub modules have been incorporated into assignment briefs, and tutors are beginning to signpost specific modules in assessment feedback, to build opportunities to feed-forward. The prominence and use of the LSHub have led to further collaborations with academic and professional service staff to provide tailored e-learning modules, which will now shape the direction of travel of this project.

Formal quality assurance processes, including student reviews, have recently been implemented, offering the LSTeam and collaborators greater input concerning module development and design. From 2021/2022, the LSHub will become the central platform for all non-course content learning opportunities, to develop a coherent, comprehensive, and high-quality e-learning offer. This will coincide with the platform's imminent move to the university website, a change which will offer greater flexibility in content development, improve quality and ensure accessibility. The recent appointment of a student project assistant will allow the LSTeam to continue to measure success and engagement over the summer 2021. Research will also be conducted in 2021/22 on the impact of LSHub as an embedded learning tool.

On reflection, a similar project is viable with adjustments taken from our lessons learned. We would recommend spending greater time in mapping a similar e-learning platform, using a project management model; developing quality assurance processes from the start; consulting with stakeholders across the university to anticipate long-term development and promote interest in collaborations; gathering wider support for LD curriculum integration using innovative practices.

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