Feature Article

Referencing in the 21st Century: the LearnHigher website

Colin Neville (c.neville@bradford.ac.uk)

In January this year, a new website was launched to give information on academic referencing. It differs from most referencing websites in that it had not been developed by one education institution for its students, as usually is the case, but had been designed as a site for all interested in referencing practice.

The aim of the site was to present an overview of the main referencing styles found in Britain, explain the principles that underpin citation and referencing, and offer site users an opportunity to test their knowledge, through quizzes and other participative exercises, of referencing practice, as well as demonstrating what constitutes plagiarism.

The name of the site is the 'LearnHigher Referencing Learning Area', and it can be found at www.learnhigher.org.uk. 'LearnHigher' is a collective project involving 16 UK institutions of higher education. Each partner institution is involved in the research and development of learning support resources for both student and staff, and comprises 20 'learning areas'. These learning areas include academic writing, assessment, reading and note-making, group work, and time management.

I volunteered to develop and manage the referencing learning area, as I work as an 'Effective Learning Officer' at the Bradford University School of Management. Many undergraduate and postgraduate students, particularly those from overseas, struggle here to understand, not just the 'how' of referencing, but also the 'why' and 'when' aspects of it.

My research for the site began early in 2004, and I quickly realised what I did not know about referencing! In particular, although I was very familiar with the author-date (Harvard) style of referencing, and had a nodding acquaintance with the Vancouver-Numerical style, I was unaware how many other referencing styles were in common use within UK higher education, how they differed from each other, and how many issues there were concerning reference practice for both staff and students.

As a first stage of research, I contacted colleagues in learning development support units, and UK higher education librarians, via their respective JISC discussion sites, and asked them to complete a questionnaire to learn more about the range and predominance of referencing styles in Britain. I wanted to gain answers to three main research questions:

- Which referencing systems are currently used in UK/HE?
- Which systems predominate in UK/HE?
- What is the relationship of referencing systems to subject disciplines?

I also raised for discussion the issue of what particular difficulties students were experiencing with citation and referencing. I received a total of 25 replies, 24 from separate institutions of higher education, and one reply came from an educational research foundation.

From these, I deduced that there were five main referencing styles, although when you include sub-variants on these, there are eight styles in common use:

1. The author-date (Harvard) style.
2. The British Standard Running-notes numerical style, including the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA), and OSCOLA legal referencing style variants on this.
3. The British Standard Numeric style, and the variants on this presented by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (commonly known as the 'Vancouver' style), and by the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE).
4. The author-date American Psychological Association (APA) style.
5. The author-page Modern Languages Association (MLA) style.

The Harvard style of referencing had been adopted by nearly 80 per cent of Schools and Departments within the responding institutions. The range was from 40 to 100 per cent, but 18 of the 25 replies indicated that Harvard had been adopted by approximately 80 per cent of the discipline areas. Two institutions had adopted Harvard for all its courses, but in the majority of institutions, although Harvard style was dominant, most of the other styles mentioned in this chapter were also in active use UK institutions.

Relationship of styles to subject discipline

The relationship of referencing styles to subject disciplines was a little ambiguous, with science areas and information technology showing the most inconsistency. The author-date (Harvard) and author-page (MLA) styles were consistently linked by respondents with:

- Business & management studies
- Most social science (except Psychology)
- Health Education
- Many of the humanities areas
- Sciences, particularly life & environmental
- Most computing & IT
- Languages

The 'Running-Notes' style is more common in:

- Law (usually the OSCOLA variant of this)
- Humanities, particularly History, Classics, Philosophy & some English departments
- Art & Design
- Architecture
- Some social sciences

(Computer Science was also mentioned by some respondents.)

The British Standard Numeric style, and related styles, including Vancouver-Numeric, is associated with:

- Medicine
- Applied science areas
- Engineering & technology areas
- Journalism and media studies

(Again, Computer Science was mentioned by some respondents).

The APA style with:

- Psychology
- Some health studies areas, e.g. Occupational Therapy.

Discussion

The result raised the proposition that institutions should adopt just one referencing style to help standardise practice among staff and students. This raised lively argument both for and against on the JISC discussion site for learning development practitioners.

Those arguing for the proposition did so mainly on the grounds that it would reduce the confusion many students experience about referencing, and particularly students on combined studies courses that may encounter two or more referencing styles. They argued that some styles are already very similar, for example, Harvard and APA; and British Standard Numerical and Vancouver-Numeric, and that there is a strong argument for adopting just one author-date and one numerical style per institution, instead of two author-date and sometimes three similar numerical styles.

Those who argued against the proposition did so mainly on the grounds that departments have adopted referencing styles that suit the style of assignments offered in the disciplines concerned, and that students can easily adapt to referencing practice once the principles underpinning referencing are understood.

The discussion also broadened to include other areas of concern among practitioners about referencing. In particular, on the inconsistency among academic and learning support staff on **why** referencing is required, and **when** sources should be referenced, especially the issue of what is 'common knowledge' – which is not normally referenced. These issues had come to the fore because of the large numbers of international students now studying within British universities, and the wide range of previous referencing experience – or lack of it – they brought with them. The 'why' and 'when' questions had risen in increasing frequency on courses, but students were often receiving inconsistent answers to their questions.

I have addressed some of these issues on the new website, but spent more time over them in a book I wrote to complement the site: *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism*, which is to be published by The Open University Press in August 2007.

As to the website, it has been visited so far by over 1500 students and academics, and has been described variously as 'dull', 'brilliant', 'clanking', and 'excellent'. I have avoided a Wurlitzer approach: with things that flash, whirl and whizz in a hundred different colours, for something, I hope, that will stand the test of time. We'll see. Have a look, and judge for yourself.

Colin Neville is Effective Learning Officer at Bradford University School of Management.