

Digital issues in a small, specialised academic institution

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This article outlines some of the various digital issues faced by a small academic institution: Writtle College, part of the University of Essex.

Introduction

Electronic information is now prevalent in most libraries. Digital tools are fast growing within Writtle College and we host as much of our information as possible online. We do not have an official digital strategy but we consider digital issues when making decisions. We think a digital strategy would be useful as it can promote innovation and be used as a tool for creativity. Below are some of the digital issues that Writtle College Library is dealing with.

We are a small, specialist institution, partnered with the University of Essex, and focused on land-based subjects. There are approximately 1136 Higher Education students and 1614 Further Education students. To support these students we have some 375 academic and support staff members. Supporting learning, teaching and research within the College is the overall aim of Writtle College Library, where three full-time librarians and five library assistants are employed. As outlined in the User Charter, the Library “provides a range of learning materials in print and electronic formats, including books, journals, databases and audio-visual material ...” We stock in the region of 35,000 books, 350+ print journals (with many more available online),

approximately sixteen databases and nearly 200 e-books.

Library management system at Writtle

To manage all of these resources we use IS Oxford’s Heritage Library Management System. The system has an array of capabilities; however sometimes we do not use it to its full potential. We could make better use of the reports section to inform our decisions by using it in a more advanced way. Currently we only use the most popular books report and the multiple holds report to better guide our collection development and purchasing decisions. It would be helpful to look at the reports in more detail, for example to examine usage by different cohorts of students. Useful features of the OPAC (online public access catalogue) version of the library management system include students being able to log in to view their library record, to reserve and renew items, create lists of favourite items, view fines and borrowing history. The search functionality in the OPAC version of Heritage has some limitations given our needs. This includes shortcomings with class-mark searching and retrieving items via

title, as other less relevant items often appear first in the results list. A feature of our new library website will be an embedded catalogue search on our homepage (see figure 1). The Library's website forms a section of the larger CASTLe (Centre for Academic Standards, Teaching and Learning) website as it is a part of this group.

The downside of the embedded catalogue search is that only the simple search is available, which goes against our practice of encouraging students to use the OPAC's advanced search. All of our electronic holdings are searchable through the OPAC but this is limited to serial titles and years available. We tell students that to search within these journals they need to use our subscription databases and/or e-journal host platform.

We also use an SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information) function of the library management system. This current-awareness service offers users who have selected their keywords of choice from a range reflecting our subject areas to be sent an email when new items matching their keyword selection are received in the library. This is available to academic staff, although only twenty-nine are currently signed up. This SDI has never been marketed to students but we can assign them to their subject area automatically when they enter their first year at Writtle College.

Search and retrieval software used

One of our vendors, EBSCO, recommended we subscribe to, what was at the time, their new Integrated Search (see figure 2). We purchased this product as it met our needs and we had a

limited budget, so this was both an economical and suitable solution. The Integrated Search retrieves results from all of our databases and we can tailor it to search in specific databases based on subject areas taught at Writtle College..

All search results from EBSCO databases are retrieved. However, it only finds the top thirty results from non-EBSCO databases. We recommend students use the EBSCO Integrated Search as a starting point, and in our electronic subject guides and teaching sessions we point students to individual databases for a more comprehensive literature search. Lately, we have explored some of the newer Web-scale discovery service products such as Serial Solutions Summon. Even if we had a larger budget, Web-scale discovery service products like Summon are not ideal for us because our entire collection is rather small and thus not difficult for users to search our OPAC and several databases. Although Summon is particularly useful for introductory and interdisciplinary searching, it is well outside our budget.

E-books

This academic year, we have endeavoured to build our e-book collection and market that burgeoning collection more effectively. We first started to acquire e-books in 2008. In 2010 growth of our e-book collection from the previous year was only 12% due to low usage and demand for e-books in the previous two years. Due to high student numbers this academic year, we are trying to grow the collection as we cannot keep up with demand for print copies. Our e-book

collection has already grown 79% since 2010. In order to ensure that students and staff are utilizing our expanding e-book collection, we have had to promote it more than we have done in the past. We have taken every opportunity to “sell” e-books to our patrons, at staff meetings, teaching sessions, through posters, e-newsletters, our Library blog, as well as our Library’s twitter feed. As with print books, subject librarians purchase individual titles. Dawsonera is suitable as our e-book platform since we can purchase in this way rather than buy a whole collection. This is useful as we have a limited budget so we only purchase titles we need or expect will be heavily used. We build our e-book collection based on student and staff requests, which areas need development as well as looking at which books have been previewed by our users on Dawsonera.

How usage is promoted to students and end users

As with e-books, we try to promote our collection of resources, including electronic databases and print books in various ways. We make students aware of our resources during inductions and teaching sessions. Staff are reminded of and introduced to new resources at teaching sessions as well as during committee or departmental meetings. Increasingly, we have taken advantage of electronic marketing, including social networking to showcase our print and electronic collection. The Library maintains a blog, a twitter feed, electronic subject guides and a website. We liaise with Writtle College’s marketing department on the creation of e-newsletters containing a section for the library. We also rely on more traditional print marketing methods such as

posters, leaflets, and maintaining a notice board outside the library.

In the future

Several projects which we would like to see completed include setting up an institutional repository as well as digitisation of our collection of historical photographs and rare books.

Institutional repositories

The Directory of Open Access Repositories - *OpenDOAR* - shows that many of the larger Colleges and Universities have an institutional repository already. A number of small to medium-sized institutions are embarking on this, such as Abertay University Dundee and Elmwood College in Fife. In 2008 we put in a bid within the College to set up an institutional repository. This would store a wide variety of materials utilising the College’s Document Management System (DMS). This includes, but is not exclusive to, teaching and learning materials, (lesson plans, lesson materials, teaching aids, reading lists) and research and publications (successful research bids, completed research projects, published articles/e-books). Our intent was to create a location to show research within the College that would extend knowledge and benefit our students and staff. It would also promote research informed teaching and promote and raise the image of the College. According to our website the College “aims to expose all undergraduate and postgraduate students to research and

development” so the institutional repository fits well with the College’s goals. Ultimately, the bid was declined because the Learning and Teaching Group wanted a large amount of introductory work done on it, which was not possible due to limited staff time and budget constraints. At the time our DMS was not in full use, but now that it is, it would be easier to set up our institutional repository. This is especially important as Writtle College is keen to improve its research activity. The College plans on entering the Research Excellence Framework in 2014. However, with the current climate of government cuts, it is unclear if institutions will be awarded funding based on a points system where the more points an institution gets, the more funding it receives. The institutional repository would offer a venue to highlight Writtle College’s research activity. Writtle’s Research Coordinator Carlos de Luna comments:

“Writtle College, during the last years, has invested in expanding its research infrastructure. During this time research excellence has been identified as a key priority on the overall goals of the College. This research infrastructure not only has been developed in the form of equipment, laboratories, recruitment of staff and research students, but also on its bibliographic services ... The establishment of an institutional repository in the College is of great benefit.”

We would need to ensure that the institutional repository is not just available, but is searchable and easily accessible. We would need to determine whether it should be made available off campus as well as on campus and whether it is open access. Also we would need to explore and resolve all copyright issues, establish procedures

for deposits, write a deposit agreement and determine management rights within the College.

Digitisation of special collections

The other project we are hoping to complete is digitisation of a number of our historical and rare items, including books, maps and photographs. The material to be digitised includes roughly 1000 historical books, approximately 150 maps and several hundred photographs. At present the historical books are housed in a library store and can only be ordered for use in the library. Most of our maps are available via our Digimap database and so do not need digitising. However, we do have a number of hand-drawn maps of the College grounds that we would like to be made available electronically. A map guide would be a useful way of helping students use the maps and map software that we have access to. We estimate that we have somewhere in the region of a few hundred historical photographs of the College dating back fifty to a hundred years. Digitising all of the special collections would give improved access to students and staff and increase usage of these important collections. At present, we have neither the resources nor the budget to support a digitisation project of our historic books. It would be beneficial to put in a bid for digitisation equipment and staff time as we do not have adequate scanning technology at present. The digitised books would be especially beneficial to setting up new courses as well as for distance learners and other off-campus users.

On-campus versus off-campus

We have endeavoured to keep up to date with the modernisation of libraries in terms of making material available online. This is especially important in supporting part-time and distance learners who need electronic material as they are not often on-campus. Due to the specialised nature of our collection, not everything is available electronically. We have a sizeable collection of historical material that is not available online; as well, there are very few e-books in certain subject areas taught at the College such as floristry so we must rely on print. Further challenges include the prohibitive cost of providing access to electronic resources off as opposed to on-campus. As a result, some of our electronic resources are available only on campus which is problematic for part-timers and distance learners.

Conclusion

In future we hope to have an official digital strategy along with an institutional repository, as well as look for ways of gaining funding to digitise some of our historical collections. We will continue to expand our electronic resources, in particular our e-book collection. With growing student numbers, many of whom live off campus, it will be imperative that Writtle College continues to improve its digital effort.

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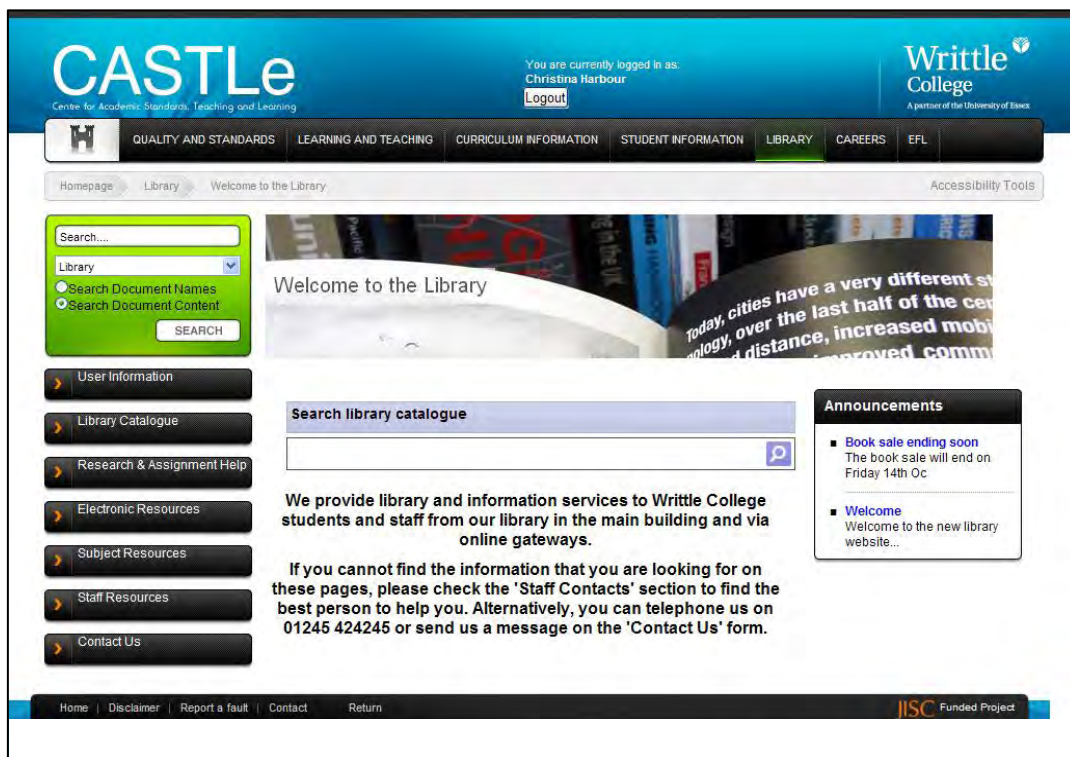


Figure 1 Library homepage of the CASTLe website with embedded OPAC simple search.

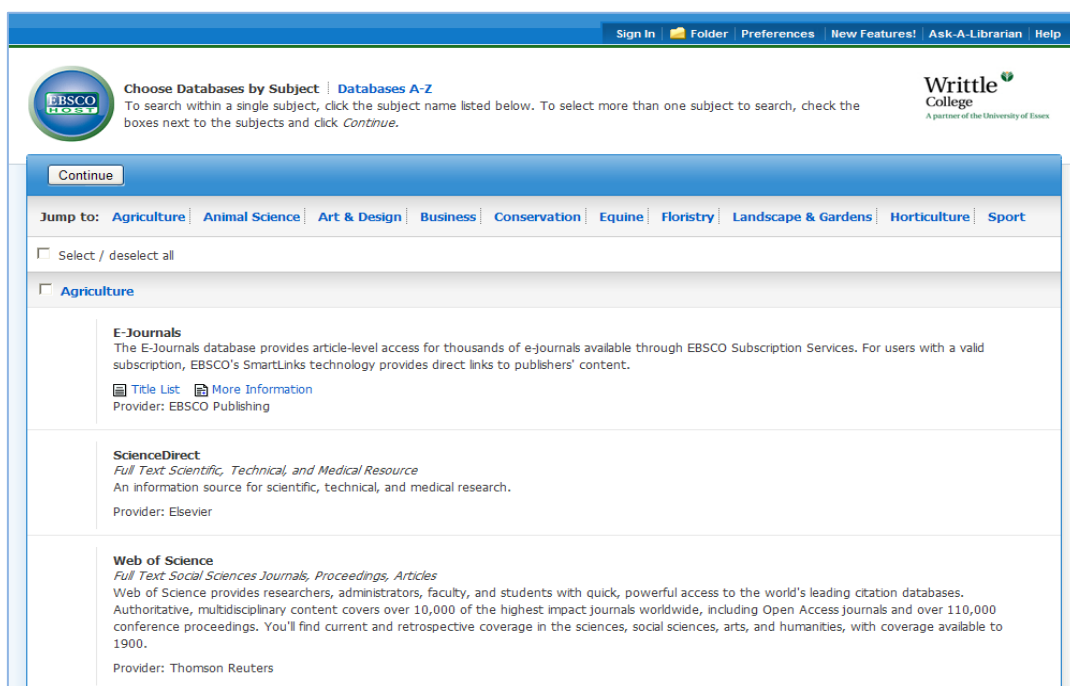


Figure 2 EBSCO Integrated Search. Tabs along the top indicate subject areas at the College