

International Summer School on the Digital Library 2002  
Course 2: Digital Libraries and Education  
8 August 2002  
KUB, Tilburg

## **Collaborative course design**

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## 1. Introduction

In institutions of higher education there is no tradition of collaboration between educational staff<sup>1</sup> and library staff. Both parties have their own focus. Of course, from time to time they meet. In general however library and library staff are considered to be solely suppliers of information. For research purposes educational staff requests information in the form of books, journals etcetera.

Course delivery and course design usually are the exclusive territory of educational staff.

Particularly in course design this could be an undesired situation. Lecturers are not all-knowing persons. In traditional education this all too often results in a course that is primarily shaped from the (table of) contents of one or two textbooks. But even within modern educational concepts like problem-based learning the course designer(s) draw from their own knowledge, experience and near at hand information resources.

In our own institution we observed a huge gap between the work area of educational and library staff. Some examples are:

Educational staff does not consider the library as the first place to visit when gathering information. It is common practice to build private mini-libraries, filled with complimentary copies of textbooks, purchased books and subscriptions to journals. This is despite the fact that these books and journals are ordered and supplied through the library. In this way, although their own needs are fulfilled satisfactorily, educational staff “forgets” to take care of the library collection. After all, they do not depend on it.

Due to this lack of active involvement of educational staff in library collection, study materials students are looking for, frequently are not available in the library. There are library committees (composed of library and educational staff), which should play an important role in collection development, but mostly they function not optimally.

Library staff does not actively participate in course design and course delivery. Often, they lack knowledge of information needs of and necessary resources for students. Only when students appear at the library desk library staff is confronted with special questions and information needs. In these cases library staff cannot always provide the correct answers or resources.

Lecturers are considered to be professionals in their field and they are used to work as an individual. They are not used to collaborate with other people, certainly not with people from other expertises like library staff.

Because of the increasing use of modern educational concepts like problem-based learning and project learning, in which the student has to gather his/her own information, the library should play an important role in achieving educational goals. Students spend more and more time in the library, which has transformed into an information and resource centre. Consequently the library has conquered a position in education alongside lecturers. The logical next step is active collaboration between the two.

**Our proposition in this paper is:**

***The overall quality of education can be improved by application of the different expertises of educational and library staff in course design and course delivery.***

We will demonstrate this with a project that has been carried out in our institution.

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid the frequent use of the word staff, in this paper educational staff is also referred to as lecturer(s).

## 2. Context

### 2.1 Hogeschool Brabant

#### *Higher education in the Netherlands*

In the Netherlands two types of higher education are offered:

- Universities (traditional universities for scientific education)
- Universities of Professional Education-Hogescholen

#### *Hogescholen: Universities of Professional Education*

Hogescholen prepare students for specific professions and tend to be more practically orientated than traditional Universities, where the focus is on theory and the generation of knowledge through research. Programmes of a Hogeschool are comparable to those of the *new universities* in Britain and the Fachhochschulen in Germany.

The Hogeschool Brabant, University of Professional Education, provides education for more than 12,000 students (full-time and part-time). These students are enrolled on 34 different study programmes, distributed across six faculties in Breda, Tilburg and Etten-Leur.

The study programmes are distributed across the six faculties of the Hogeschool Brabant:

- Breda Business School (Faculty of Economics and Management)
- Faculty of Science and Technology
- Faculty of Information Technology and Management
- Faculty for Health, Employment, Behaviour and Society
- Faculty of Fine Arts and Design
- Faculty of Teacher Training

### 2.2. The Department of Finance and Accounting

The Breda Business School offers a broad, practically oriented education to students wishing to prepare for middle and senior executive positions in both business and non-profit organisations.

The Business School offers a four-year course, consisting of a one-year propaedeutic (foundation) year and a three-year post-propaedeutic phase where students choose from a number of programmes:

- Accountancy
- Finance and Accounting
- International Business and Management Studies
- Marketing
- Management, Economics and Law
- Small Business and Retail Management

The propaedeutic year is common to all programmes and acts as a bridging-course from previous study, as well as providing the basis for selection and referral before progression to a particular programme.

Each education programme is based on a national profile containing the expertise and educational requirements of a particular functional area. The expertise requirements describe the subject and functional characteristics of the functions the student is trained for. The educational profile describes the required qualifications of the graduate.

In this paper we focus on the developments in the Department of Finance and Accounting. In this department students are prepared for functions in the field of financial management in both business and non-profit organisations. The education programme is now offered as an initial full-time programme, a cooperative education programme and as a part-time programme.

In 1994 the Finance and Accounting Department of the Breda Business School has adopted a new way of curriculum design and delivery - problem-based learning. As a result of external requirements and

internal discussions, the change was implemented as a radical move away from traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and reflects a commitment to student-, rather than teacher-, centred learning. Important changes to the educational model were:

- The use of problem-based learning supported by training.
- The reduction of contact hours from 22 to 11 per week, and increasing self-study time from  $\pm$  20 to 30 hours per week.
- The reduction of average student group size from 30 to 12 students.

Two main objectives of this change were:

- The need to change the student's participation in the learning process from a passive to an active role.
- The need to prepare students for professional functions in a continuously changing environment with access to an ever-increasing number of information sources.

Typically, especially in view of the second objective, the decision for this change and its implementation, were carried out without consulting or even informing the library staff members. It took another four years until the department management and staff fully realised the enormous consequences of the educational change for library design and collection.

In co-operation with the library the first Learning Resource Centre was created for the propaedeutic students in 1998, followed, in 2000, by a Learning Resource Centre for the post-propaedeutic students. Besides books, newspapers, journals, videos and other information resources, students find computers there for cd-rom and internet access as well as individual and group workplaces. From time to time, at specifically chosen moments, instructors are also present in the Learning Resource Centre for consultation and individual coaching.

## **2.2 Library and the Learning Resource Centre**

The main goal of the Library is to support education in the faculties by making available documentary and electronic information. The library is a central facility, i.e. without separate faculty or institute libraries. This central university library, however, is divided over seven locations in Breda (5), Tilburg (1) and Etten-Leur (1).

The electronic and print collections in the library are developed on the basis of faculty requirements; faculty staff members and library staff are together responsible for the selection of much of the literature for education purposes. Electronic databases, electronic documents and journals, and links to important Internet sites are supplied by the library and, if licences permit, made available campus-wide and at home.

The role of the library has rapidly evolved during the last two years. In order to provide adequate support to faculties, the library is turning into a "hybrid" library, a combination of the traditional and digital library. The focus is on 24-hour access to information, whereby it is possible to access information from different work or study environments, both on the campus and at home.

### *The Learning Resource Centre*

For the library the choice for problem-based learning as the Hogeschool's education system, adds an entirely new dimension to the library facilities offered to students. The aim of these facilities, the Learning Resource Centres (in Dutch: 'Studielandschappen'), is to offer students a wide selection of learning-materials, complemented by student study units (partly computerised) for use by individuals or tutorial groups. A 'Studielandschap' is a unique facility to support problem-based learning. Since several years both the main library and two departments have Learning Resource Centres, which are located in the immediate vicinity of the library and provide for both individual and group study, with or without computer facilities. The Learning Resource Centre also contains audio-visual units and an extensive collection of educational tools that are used in the faculty curriculum (books, videotapes, computers with access to databases, programmes and faculty databases). To promote efficient use of the library by both students and lecturers, instruction tools and programmes are offered.

### *Subject-librarians and library committees*

Library staff have different tasks. Subject-librarians (information specialists) are specialized in specific subject-collections and are thus assigned to the various faculties. Together with the educational staff the subject-librarians are responsible for collection development. This requires subject-librarians to maintain contact with the faculty staff. In addition, they also are to provide library instructions, which is a task of prime importance within the new educational model. Subject-librarians also carry out information desk functions.

To support collection development every faculty has its own library-committee, composed of subject-librarians and educational staff. This committee should provide the library with the information resources (books, videotapes, databases etc) that are needed for the students of the faculty in question. However, as already referred to above, this approach does not function optimally, predominantly because educational staff in practice give low priority to collection development within the library. This leads to vital information resources not being available in the library when students ask for them.

### **2.4 Brainstorm-sessions “Library and Education”**

Early 2001, on the initiative of the head of the library, several brainstorm sessions were held in which library staff, educational staff together with management, discussed recent educational developments and the implications they should have for library services. One of the outcomes of these sessions was the recognition of the ever-growing impact of e-learning and the use of the internet as an educational resource. It was also concluded that educational and library staff should co-operate much more intensively, not only in course delivery but also in course design. There was a growing wish to explore both observations further in a practical approach. This resulted in a pilot project that was to be carried out by the library staff in co-operation with the Department of Finance and Accounting staff. This project was called “Collaboration between library and educational staff”.

### **3. Collaboration between library and educational staff: a pilot project on behalf of the Breda Business School**

In spring 2001 library and department management drew up a proposal for this project. The project was to be carried out over a period of twenty weeks from September 2001 until January 2002.

The two main objectives of the project were:

- to gain experience with the collaboration between library and department staff
- to find out what different expertises are needed in course development.

A project group of eight people was formed in which different expertises were represented:

- subject-oriented expertise, provided by four lecturers
- educational expertise, provided by an educational officer
- information-structuring and -mediation expertise, provided by two librarians
- ICT expertise concerning the use of e-learning, provided by a library staff member.

The department and library heads acted as project managers. The project group worked on this project during one day per week.

The project group was given the following assignments:

- Determine the optimum composition of a course development team. A course is defined here as a theme-oriented field of study, in which a range of correlated subjects is represented.
- Investigate the nature and proportion of the needed expertises for course development.
- Develop a new e-learning course to be used in different business school programmes.

The project group decided to develop a new elective course on Logistics Management for the third/fourth year of study in the Finance and Accounting programme and the Management, Economics and Law programme. The course runs for ten weeks (one quarter) and has a study load of 360 hours (9 study points  $\approx$  13 credits).

### **The Course design process**

First each project members' role and contribution was discussed. This was followed by a brainstorm session of the lecturers to define the subject area of logistic management. The lecturers in the group were the subject-experts, so they had to design the main scheme of the course and also its specific contents. Using these results the subject-librarians subsequently explored the availability of relevant information resources. In a later phase additional literature searches were carried out to gather more specific information.

Lecturers intensively discussed the educational principles to be used in this course. This resulted in the following conclusions:

- The course consists mainly of project learning.
- Students have to work on a real world logistics assignment in groups of 6 students.
- Students' groups meet twice a week and are supervised by a tutor. Additionally, each week four hours of lectures and training are provided.
- The entire process of course information and communication between staff and students, and among student groups, is facilitated by Blackboard, the e-learning platform of our institution. This was the first business school course using this medium.

### *Blackboard*

As the project progressed the contribution of the library staff became more important. Since the lecturers had no experience with Blackboard, the subject-librarians supported them by gaining familiarity with the new e-learning platform of the Hogeschool. They investigated the possibilities of using Blackboard in education and reported their experiences in the meeting of the project group. It soon became clear that lecturers, because they were primarily focussed on the educational concepts of using Blackboard, were reluctant to explore the various communication possibilities Blackboard was able to offer. Since lecturers lacked experience with course design in Blackboard, they welcomed the contribution of the librarians. Thus, the lecturers were able to concentrate on the specific educational possibilities of Blackboard. The contribution of the librarians proved to be timesaving for lecturers.

### *Websites*

During the project the contents of the new elective course became more concrete. Subject-librarians carried out further literature research. Lecturers were surprised by the vast number and the quality of the items on the subject of logistics the subject-librarians were able to provide. This certainly helped in determining the course contents.

Library staff made a design in Blackboard for this particular course, using the possibilities Blackboard offers and subsequently lecturers began to fill in the course with the selected educational material. It was agreed that librarians would supply the 'websites'-part of the course. Thus, the subject-librarians selected useful web sites and discussed how these were to be offered to the student, directly in the Blackboard environment or via links (first from Blackboard to the library website and then on to the selected websites). It became clear that the present division of the library website into categories was not well suited for quickly finding the right information resources. Categories were too broad. Consequently part of the library site was redesigned. Instead of filling the Blackboard Web Sites page of the Logistics course with a large number of external links, just one link was added to the Logistics part of the library site. In this way lecturers do not need to check and update the links, but library staff can take over this task and ensure an up to date overview.

Following this project librarians developed an entirely new portal of the library website, specifically for the students of the Breda Business School. This new portal allows library staff and students of the business school to communicate more easily. Students are directed, not to the central homepage of the library, but to their own subject-library website. Thus students can be more efficiently targeted with information on new databases, contact persons etc.

The newly designed course first ran in the fourth quarter of 2001/2002 with a small group of 13 students from the Finance and Accounting and the Management, Economics and Law departments.

#### 4. Conclusions

Although the outcomes of a formal evaluation at this moment are not yet known, we can already draw some conclusions from this project:

- All project group members are very enthusiastic about the project. Working in a multi-disciplinary team has been very inspiring.
- Lecturers are very satisfied with the contribution of library staff. Especially their information retrieval skills and information-structuring skills were highly appreciated. Also, their help in designing a Blackboard course was very valuable.
- Library staff were positive as to their own contribution to the course design. By participating in this project they felt they were better able to “sell” their services to customers. Also, by knowing exactly what is happening in this course they are better prepared for helping students with their questions and problems.

Our overall conclusion is that this was a very successful project. Nevertheless we feel that in the future not all new course design teams necessarily need to have the same composition as ours had. We think there are other, simpler and cheaper, ways of involving library staff in course design.

However, there is no doubt that the quality of the new logistics management course has benefited from the collaboration of two until now separated departments.