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Flipping the classroom: revolutionising legal research training

Nicola Sales

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L.I.M. 231 **Abstract:** At the University of Salford it is a struggle to find sufficient timetable space to deliver in-depth legal research training to new first year students. The training delivered often alienated students due to the information overload they experienced. Timetable pressures resulted in sessions being librarian-led with little interaction with students. This left students feeling overwhelmed, often nervous of using the library and performing research. As a result law students resorted to using Google as their academic research tool of choice. To combat these problems the Law Librarian, Nicola Sales, implemented the innovative training concept of 'flipping the classroom'. Rather than using teaching time to instruct students in 'how to' perform research by demonstrating resources and concepts, the classroom was flipped so students studied online content before entering the classroom. Face to face teaching time was then spent actively learning through practical tasks and discussion to consolidate student learning. Students took responsibility for their own learning and teaching sessions were based on group work and discussion, facilitated by the librarian rather than being librarian-led. This article is based on the presentation, 'Flipping Training' delivered at the BIALL Conference 2013. It will look at how the 'flipping the classroom' concept works and how it has been implemented at the University of Salford. It will examine the benefits and drawbacks of flipping training as well as ideas for implementing flipped training within other organisations.

Keywords: legal education; legal research; skills training

INTRODUCTION

In September 2012 it was necessary to overhaul the delivery of legal research training provided to first year students at the University of Salford. All new undergraduate law students study the core module, Analytical and Research Skills. The learning outcomes of this module intend to equip students with the research, critical thinking and study skills needed for their degree and into their careers.

The module however was thwarted with problems, including poor student feedback and low attendance, often as low as 10-15% attendance for each of the four research training sessions. A lack of knowledge transfer by students from this module to their other studies showed that students were not achieving the intended learning outcomes. Due to timetabling pressures there were also the problems associated with teaching a skills module in a lecture room. The audience experience was mostly passive as training was based on demonstrations about how to perform research. To combat the passive learning in lectures practical training sessions were offered but with low attendance at lectures there was little uptake.

Students attending practical sessions replicated searches following tutor demonstrations and navigated library resources following the librarian's direction. The majority of attendees followed demonstrations on automatic-pilot. Although quality search results were achieved in the classroom, trainees weren't retaining the knowledge or transferring it to their own research.

To improve attendance and knowledge retention it was therefore necessary to look into new ways to deliver training. Training needed to engage service users, be effective and interactive and help encourage application of knowledge outside of the training room. After researching different training methods and reviewing their potential effectiveness for teaching legal research skills, 'flipping' the classroom appeared as a suitable new training delivery method.

L.I.M. 232 FLIPPING THE CLASSROOM

Flipping the classroom dates back to the 1990's. In 2000, J Wesley Baker presented a conference

paper called 'The Classroom Flip' where the phrase 'flipping the classroom' was coined. Baker described how flipping the classroom allows the trainer to become the 'guide on the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage'[1] . Flipping the classroom is a popular training method in America. It is used frequently by elementary and junior schools, high schools, colleges and universities. In 2004, the American based Khan Academy began producing videos containing learning content for use in schools and is now a leading force in developing materials for use when flipping the classroom[2] . The training concept is now rising in popularity with professionals and is becoming more widespread in the UK.

The diagram (figure 1) compares a typical traditional training model to the basics of a flipped training session. Using the flipped training methodology participants study content before coming to the training room. This pre-learning content is short and bite sized. In libraries this content often covers the 'how to' element of performing research. It can also be used however, to introduce concepts and ideas which can form the basis for a discussion or task in a face to face training situation.

Learning materials that are to be studied before a training session are usually made available online. Individuals can therefore study at their own pace and at a time or place convenient to them. The online learning content can be videos, guides, podcasts or screen casts.

It is important to remember that the flipped classroom does not replace face to face training. It is not an online course where individuals study in isolation, nor is it where face to face training time is used to study learning content via a computer whilst a trainer circulates the training room offering support.

Flipping the classroom is a blended learning approach. The face to face training element is a vital component as contact time is used to build on knowledge gained during preparation. Training sessions follow a simple structure and are fluid and participant-led rather than librarian-led.

RUNNING A FLIPPED SESSION

1. Start with a short discussion to answer any participant questions relating to the pre-learning content - adding in additional explanation if required;

2. Include practical activities to consolidate learning by implementing new skills;

3. End with a final review discussion dealing with any common problems or themes that have arisen during training.

Training sessions must provide opportunities for attendees to apply their newly acquired knowledge and test their practical skills. This helps consolidate what has been studied. Problem based learning activities are ideal in this setting as individuals can complete tasks with the course leader on hand to help support and guide them through the processes of research and assist with queries. It is during these discussions and activities that Baker's description of the trainer becoming the 'guide on the side'[3] comes to fruition as trainers facilitate sessions whilst individuals perform their own research using their newly gained knowledge.

L.I.M. 233 At the University of Salford practical activities have included planning search strategies and creating search strings during lecture time. As well as practical library based and electronic search exercises to find information relevant to topics being studied simultaneously in other academic modules the flipped training model is also used to teach OSCOLA (Oxford Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities) referencing skills.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

As with all training methods there are benefits and disadvantages to flipping a training room, it is hard to find a training method to suit all course participants. Flipping can, however, prove to be an excellent training method in the right situation and context.

Some of the benefits of flipping training are:

1. Individuals own and control their own learning and take responsibility for it.

2. As content is studied before training, individuals can study at their own pace, time and location. They can anonymously study as much, or as little, as they feel they need. Individuals who may have

felt lost in a traditional training session are able to gather more understanding.

3. Course participants understand the broad context for training before attending a session and therefore have appropriate expectations of the learning outcomes.

4. Content can be made available after training to support learners.

5. Flipping makes for lively training as participants engage with the learning process.

6. There is increased interaction between the group and the trainer through discussion and review.

7. As time is not required for demonstrations, more emphasis is placed on guiding and facilitating trainees learning. Through review discussions peer to peer learning occurs.

The disadvantages however are:

1. Letting go of the 'I have told them notion'! It is daunting as a trainer to hand over responsibility for learning to course participants.

2. Making too much content available before the session. This is easy to do, especially if there is only limited contact time with trainees or new students. It is hard to refrain from providing every piece of information about research techniques or a library service. It is necessary to focus on what training is needed.

3. Access to software and technology to create learning content and having a suitable place to host it may raise issues.

4. Having the time to create learning content may be difficult. It is important to commit to planning a flipped training session well in advance to ensure everything is created, released and promoted to your audience.

5. If this is a new training method your audience may need to acclimatise to the new methodology.

EXPERIENCES

When flipping training there are some important concepts to deliberate. Is it appropriate to flip your training? What content should be flipped? How much should be flipped? What aims and objectives are to be achieved? The answers to these will differ depending on your work environment.

It is important to consider how to encourage course participants to complete the preparation work required. Flipping training works at the University of Salford as training is embedded in an academic module. In 2012, four research sessions, a lecture and three seminars were delivered using the flipped classroom model and having the support of the academic teaching team was beneficial. Their support ensured that the practical activities used in face to face sessions could focus on topics students were studying in other academic modules. Participants could therefore, immediately visualise the transferability of skills being gained. By linking their activities for the lecture and the seminars to their other academic modules the programme leaders at Salford Law School were on board with the new style of teaching. They actively encouraged students to complete preparation work by reminding them of the benefits of attending the research training sessions.

The activity for the IT seminar for example, was based on finding information for a future public law seminar topic. Having relevant tasks engaged the trainees with their work as they could see the benefit for themselves. One student commented 'I had no idea where to start and now I've got it [the journal article], I won't be worrying now!'

The first session delivered at the University of Salford was a lecture. Around 70% of the students prepared for the session. These students were able to hit the ground running with the search strategy activities prepared for the session. Before the session it was prompted to course participants that there would be no recapping of any pre-learning content at length during face to face training. Covering pre-learning content again would have alienated those who had prepared and the relevance of preparing for a session would have been lost.

During the lecture students thrived on taking ownership of their work, they participated in discussion and were willing to share work with their peers. During the discussion course participants contributed tips and ideas for how others could improve their search strategies.

At the next seminar only 10% of the group admitted to not completing the preparation. This appeared accurate from the dynamics of the group discussion and learning activities. There will always be individuals who arrive *L.I.M. 234* unprepared for training sessions. Informal student feedback showed however that those who started off not doing the preparation would complete it next time as they didn't enjoy the feeling of being behind.

The impact on attendance at training sessions was substantial. In the academic year 2011-2012 attendance was limited to 10-15% of the cohort per session. Using the 'flipping the classroom' technique with the 2012-2013 student intake, attendance rose to a consistent average of above 91% for each group. The standard of questions students asked in the library after sessions was also noticeable higher. Students' feedback showed that they felt they had the confidence to use a database, even if they had never seen it before. Those students who achieved a good pass rate in the Analytical and Research Skills module also achieved well in other core modules. Student feedback showed they enjoyed the sessions, especially the interaction, discussion and control they had over their learning.

Feedback from academic staff included comment that the standard of referencing and sources used was noticeably higher with the 2012-2013 first year cohort than in previous years.

IMPLEMENTATION

The biggest challenge to using flipped training is how to encourage service users to complete the pre-learning content. It is important to 'hook' course participants into the training before they begin the learning process. Selling the benefits of studying pre-learning content is vital for its success. Some of the benefits could be promoting new resources and their time savings benefits or the quality and speed of information provided. One promotional idea is to embed learning content such as videos into emails and send them direct by intended course participants so they are only a click away from accessing materials.

Delivering short, interesting and engaging training are massively important factors to keep in mind when developing flipped content.

Before embarking on implementing a flipped training session it is important to decide where pre-learning material will be hosted. In the academic environment this may be a virtual learning environment (VLE) or a library or departmental website. For other organisations the intranet may be the ideal place. It is also simple to create a YouTube channel and host videos online. YouTube can be set to make content private if required. This would ensure materials are only accessible to intended participants.

If a suite of training materials is to be delivered over a period of time, it is useful to release pre-study materials shortly before specific training sessions. This ensures that course participant's study only what is required and prevents information overload. The length of preparation materials will also need to be finalised. A busy fee-earner may only be able to watch one video for three or four minutes; in academic environments there may be potential for students to study more materials for longer.

In terms of creating pre-learning content there is a wealth of reusable content available. Using reusable content saves time and enables trainers to focus on developing materials that are not already available. Many database providers have training videos online that can be embed in websites, emails or linked to directly. Academic organisations also have access to Jorum[4] and many library services have developed quality training materials freely available via YouTube.

For developing content there are a number of tools available: PowerPoint, which can also be voiced over to create a visual and audio presentation; Prezi[5] and free screen casting software such as Jing by TechSmith[6] .

TOP 10 FLIP TIPS

1. An individual's attention span can be limited when viewing videos and the aim is not to overwhelm them with knowledge. Create a short guide or series of short videos for people to watch or read covering specific topics rather than one long resource. Three to four minutes for a video is a good length.

2. If training resources already exist under a Creative Commons license, Jorum, YouTube or Prezi or

are provided by database company, save time and energy by linking to existing content.

3. If budgets are tight, use free software. PowerPoint can be used to record instructional voice over using a microphone. This can then be uploaded to YouTube and emailed directly to course participants. Advanced web design skills are not necessary when flipping a classroom.

4. When recording training materials use a natural, talking voice - it takes a few goes but does become more instinctive.

5. Limit content. Produce tailored, focused, small sections of content.

6. Release content when it is needed rather than in one block. This will avoid information overload if more than one session is being run.

7. Resist repeating pre-learning content demonstrations during contact time unless everyone is confused. Encourage individuals to catch up with pre-learning content after the training session and to participate in activities or group work.

8. Work with the principle that flipping training is not just putting up videos online for individuals to watch and learn from them. The face to face training element is a vital part of the process to consolidate and build on learning. Flipping does not aim to reduce training or staff involvement; it *L.I.M. 235* redirects staff from leading sessions to facilitating the learning environment.

9. As far as possible make the practical tasks during training sessions as relevant to trainees as possible. This may be linking to a piece of academic work or typical focused research task new trainees may be asked to perform in their first weeks in a new organisation.

10. Be flexible during training. Be prepared to adapt in response to how the discussion and the tasks go; training sessions can be tailored to the needs of individuals in the training room.

Biography

Nicola Sales has worked in the legal information profession for thirteen years, crossing from commercial law libraries in 2002 to the academic field. For the past six years Nicola has been the Law Librarian at the University of Salford. Nicola joined the University to design, create and open a library to support the newly created Salford Law School established in 2005. Throughout her career Nicola has had a keen interest in information skills training, developing online teaching resources and enhancing legal skills learning through the use of virtual learning environments and web technology. During her career, Nicola has been a member of the BIALL Professional Development Committee, held the position of Vice Chair of the BIALL Web Board, Chair of the Manchester Legal Information Group and is currently a member of BIALL Council.

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