OPEN E-LEARNING – A PART OF LIBRARY SERVICES

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Abstract

The article consequently presents the case of creation of the open educational Information Literacy Website in Vilnius University Library. The website is the first and rather successful library service of this kind, specially created for distance/non-formal learning. The website was created according to well known information literacy theories and using only library staff, their knowledge and open source software. It shows that six main information literacy steps could be taught in an attractive way and without many extra investments.

Keywords: information literacy website, open learning, academic library, web-services.

Introduction

Nowadays information literacy in libraries is considered as a daily activity and not something new or unknown. Librarians do not want to remain the only wizards able to understand and manage mysterious information world. Librarians more and more tend to expand their role from simple information provision to teaching and educating users how to manage information themselves. Different information literacy theories have one goal – information literate user. Librarians are also looking for ways and means of making each user feel self sufficient in searching and using the information.

Ways of teaching could be different. Practical experience could prompt which methods are the best for particular library users. Academic libraries usually prefer lectures, eye-on-eye consultations, distance learning courses. It depends on each library possibilities and the level of imagination.

Vilnius University Library case

Vilnius University – the oldest and the largest university in Lithuania, was founded in 1579. Vilnius University preserves its traditions and adopts various innovations. The University consists of 12 faculties, 7 institutes, 4 study and research centers, comprising more than 3 600 staff members and more than 22 000 students.

Library is one of the biggest non-academic departments in Vilnius University. Vilnius University Library (VUL) – is the academic library that provides up-to-date services for each university community member. Last year VUL celebrated its 440 years anniversary, however old history doesn’t make mean it is old-fashioned or afraid of modern solutions. VUL has 14 departments and 200 employees. VUL provides variety of library services, training in information literacy being one of them.

Information literacy at Vilnius University

Information literacy at Vilnius University takes not very long history. This activity, as it should be by all theories, is implemented for few last years. Before that it was more like librarian literacy and was not so popular around all University. Non-compulsory lectures were started for the first year students few years ago and were held in several faculties upon request of administration of these faculties. All this time librarians were making a policy of training information literacy skills in all University.
Despite this, students can improve their information literacy skills by themselves. Unfortunately, various lectures were not very successful and because of it were decided to give more electronic-interactive learning opportunities – video tutorials. This decision was taken because of the good practice which was gained from the other VUL service – Information Literacy Website.

Information Literacy Website

Training of information literacy skills is one of the academic library priorities, so the academic library becomes not only information supplier but also an active participant of educational process.

Information Literacy Website (http://www.ir.mb.vu.lt) is one of VUL successful activities, that is rather popular service at Vilnius University. Creation of this library service was inspired by a couple of challenges to be solved. The most important one – how to improve students’ information literacy skills considering not very favourable attitude of VU administration and lack of staff able to provide these trainings.

Background

Information Literacy Website was launched at the beginning of December 2009. Despite of existing few open e-learning courses on the internet this website was the first such library service in Lithuania. On the one hand it is a product of open e-learning; on the other hand it is an attractive and interactive website which helps to gain knowledge by using different methods.

Students receive great quantities of information every day, so he/she needs advice how to define the most valuable information and the most useful sources. This website presents a full view of information search options. The purpose of this library service is to fill information literacy education gaps and to present possible ways of work with information for academic community.

Information Literacy Website is mainly created using the Big6 Information Literacy Model by Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz which presents six lessons to obtain the main information literacy skills. Following differences in education systems PLUS, Seven Pillar models, etc. were also used. This model of Information Literacy Website which consists of main six parts is based on analysis of other similar websites from all around the world and information literacy theories’.

The content of Information Literacy Website is presented in a clear and understandable way. The main user group are students but it could also be used by academic staff and others who would like to improve their information literacy skills. The Website is open therefore senior schoolchildren could use it as well.

Structure

Information Literacy Website has main six steps which user has to make wishing to become information literate. These parts are:

- Identifying the topic;
- Information sources;
- Information search;
- Selection and valuation;
- Synthesis of information;
- Be ethical!

Each part consists of short presentation and basic description and a self-control test and/or game. All in all there are 4 tests and 5 games that make the website more attractive for students providing possibility to have fun while gaining knowledge. At the same time it is possible to make tests in identifying the topic, information search strategy, information sources and ethical use of information. The games are tailored for these topics: identification of primary and
secondary information sources, ways of information sorting, advices on writing research papers, making bibliographical records and use of Boolean operators.

Users also can find information about the Information literacy, the Website authors and Vocabulary of mostly unknown librarian terms in this Website.

**Technical solutions**

*Information Literacy Website* is an example of successful library project that could be implemented without big human and financial resources. At the same time this is an example of productive collaboration between different Library and University departments and of modern attitude towards e-services in academic library. Website was produced by a team of four information managers from one department. They were responsible for the content and technical solutions. Colleagues helped with design solutions, consulted on information law, user friendly navigation, texts’ editing, etc.

Technical solutions were not costly at all. The website is created using only freeware software:

- **Paint.NET** – a free digital photo editor that has layers, effects and variety of other tools. It was used to create most of the graphics.
- **XMind** – user friendly mind mapping application. It was used to create mind maps which are presented in the part “Identifying the topic”.
- **IHMC CMapTools** – powerful and feature-rich concept mapping application that is really easy to use. It was used to create concept maps.
- **jQuery** – “write less, do more” Javascript library. Coupled with some CSS provided a fast and solid way of building all the user interactions (drag & drop, animations, sliding menus, etc.).

User interface was created according to W3C standards. Google Analytics is used for website usage tracking. It enables to analyze users’ behavior in the website and to collected data for future website improvements.

**Success**

Statistics from the last year shows that *Information Literacy Website* is used every day by approximately 30 users who make around 40 visits in a website. Data revealed that website is mostly used in May and November that are months before the end of term-time (see Table 1).
Table 1. Visits of Information Literacy Website during 2010

The acknowledgement of success of Information Literacy Website is the fact that it was included into IFLA Libraries Success Stories Database (http://www.tribalpixel.ch/ifla/result.php?id=179). Moreover, VUL receives requests from other libraries in Lithuania to use it for their high school students and gladly gives permission to do it. It reminds that Information Literacy Website has its auditorium and is useful open e-learning tool for many users not only in Vilnius University.

Conclusion

Information Literacy Website is nothing unique; however VUL is glad to give an example of user friendly and useful open e-learning Library service which could be created without any additional funds. It proves that vision, competence and good management are often more important than availability of money. It indicates that e-learning could be an integral part of library activities and teaching of information literacy can be provided in attractive way.