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Volume 2 Number 1, December 2012

# Middlesex Journal of Educational Technology

Middlesex University

ISSN 2041-2762

**Volume 2, Number 1, December 2012**

**Middlesex Journal of Educational Technology**

**Middlesex University**

In Memoriam Alex Moon (1970 - 2010), the founding editor of the journal.

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Middlesex Journal of Educational Technology is available online (ISSN 2041-2762).

Middlesex Journal of Educational Technology is published annually.

# Creating an Integrated Online Learning Module for Information Literacy, Academic Writing and Communication Skills: a Case Study

**Adam Edwards**

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## Abstract

The paper describes the creation of online learning materials for information skills and academic writing to support teaching in the Business School at Middlesex University. It includes discussion of the origins of the project, the materials created (illustrated) and how a number of problems were solved during the project.

**Keywords:** Online learning, information literacy, academic writing, academic literacy

## Introduction

This paper is a case study describing our experiences creating an online learning module to support the BA International Business Administration programme taught as a Distance Education (DE) programme. The programme has yet to run, so what will be described below is how we came to develop the materials and the unique four-way collaboration between the Middlesex University Business School academic staff, the DE and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) experts from the Centre for Teaching and Learning Enhancement (CLTE), the tutors in the Learner Development Unit (LDU) who teach study skills, and librarians from Learning Resources (LR).

The completed series of units support students to find, evaluate and use information in an ethical manner. They learn to use the library's electronic resources (e-resources) to use the information to reflect on the topic being studied and to then communicate the ideas and information both in writing and as online presentations. The units sit on the University's VLE (Blackboard Vista) alongside the academic module on Global Business Strategy. In line with the University's Learning Framework, study skills are an embedded part of this module and the coursework and assessment for Global Business Strategy also assess the students' skills they have developed. For example, a major piece of work for Global Business Strategy is a report which requires the student to provide references to the information resources used and to demonstrate that they have learnt from and understood the academic writing units.

BRILO is the acronym used for this module which stands for Business Research and Information Literacy Online. The team decided to stay with this acronym even after the scope of the project expanded.

## Getting Started

In 2010, the Business School successfully validated a Distance Education version of the BA International Business Administration programme (BAIBA). This is a one-year long direct entry third-year programme which takes students from a variety of

backgrounds to degree level. One of the key requirements for any Middlesex DE programme is that it must deliver an equivalent experience to distance learners as that experienced by students on campus. The on campus BAIBA has a significant input from librarians and study skills tutors as many of the students, especially the international students, have little experience of what is expected in the UK academic environment, particularly when it comes to finding information of suitable quality or writing in a style suitable for academic submission.

Learning Resources staff were asked to discuss ways in which they could support this programme. It was agreed that video podcasts demonstrating access to key library resources for this programme would be embedded into the VLE. In order to fund this exercise, the librarians supporting the programme were successful in bidding for £1,000 from the Alex Moon Fund established by the Business School to pay for this work.

However, it became clear to the three librarians working on the project (Hilary Cummings, Samantha Halford and the author) that the video podcasts could not replicate the 2-hour on-campus training session for this programme. Subsequently, the librarians submitted another larger bid to the Business School, LR, and the LDU which would allow one of the librarians on the project team to be bought out full time to create the necessary materials for the VLE. The resource consists of 10 units, running in parallel with the Global Business Strategy module that was created by Business School academic staff. The BRILO units start two weeks ahead of the academic work, so that by the time the final course work is due in, all the necessary academic literacies are achieved. The structure of the resource is presented below.

<b>BRILO Unit Title</b>
1 – Understanding what your coursework is asking you to do (overview)
2 – Getting started with basic internet searching
3 – Finding online articles and e-books
4 – Advanced ways to find quality information
5 – Evaluating your search results
6 – Reading and note-taking
7 – Thinking/writing
8 – Report writing
9 – Giving effective presentations
10 – Referencing and avoiding plagiarism

*Figure 1: Structure of BRILO resource*

## **VLE Units**

The creation of materials was supported by the e-learning and DE experts in CLTE. A key piece of advice they gave us is that one cannot simply take existing face-to-

face learning materials and reuse them online. We have taken this advice on board and as a result the library materials used in face-to-face training became the starting point for creating materials for online use. The LDU team worked hard to revise and create materials and activities which would replace classroom teaching, such as the in-seminar discussion of the thinking required to take ideas from a journal article and turn them into written work.

We also needed to be aware that many students were returning to education after a long absence and therefore we needed to be careful in how we explained apparently simple processes, for example accessing e-resources and logging in to the University's network. Following the advice of our colleagues in CLTE, we have carefully considered the structure and length of units and decided that each unit should take about 30 minutes to complete.

As the project progressed, development work became an iterative process with the academic module writer, Paul Griseri, working on the Global Business Strategy academic material, LR and LDU teams working on their content, and the CLTE team acting as critical friends, reviewing the work and suggesting improvements. At the peak of working, the group was meeting every two weeks to discuss progress, review work done and agree changes. A good example of how this process impacted on the final product is in Unit 4. This is discussed in more detail later in this paper.

### **The SCATE Model**

The units have been based on the SCATE model. SCATE is an instructional design model developed at Middlesex University, based on the ADDIE model and is widely used for structuring DE programmes. The model has five major sections:

**Scope:** A description of the unit and any prerequisites.

For example, Unit 2 of BRILO includes a self-assessment test in the scope section, so students can formatively assess their current knowledge of how to find information before beginning the unit.

**Content:** Learning material with links to activities.

The team made use of a variety of real-life case studies. Unit 2 also addressed the problem of students' over-reliance on Google and free internet resources as their only source of information by highlighting some of the problems of only relying on this information. Indeed, we also made the point that not using Library resources means missing out on over £1,000,000 worth of free to Middlesex students information. A sample page from Unit 2 is shown below:



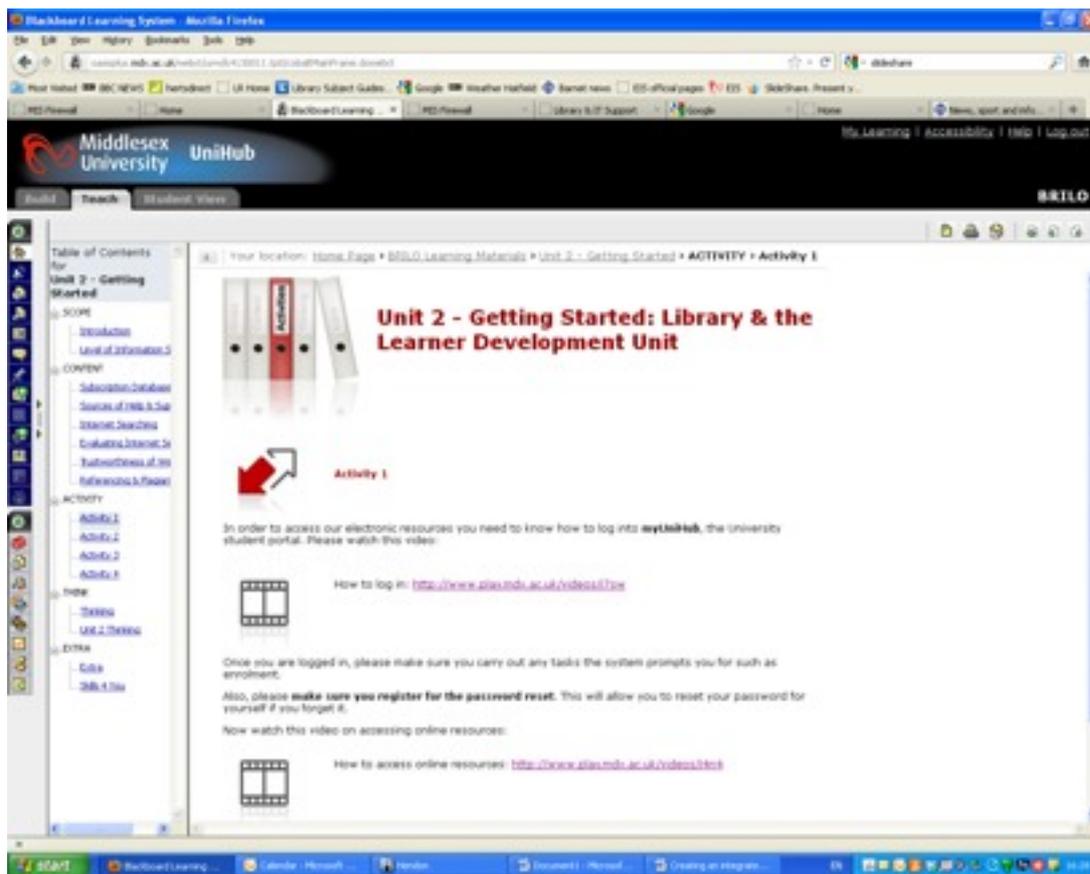


Figure 3: Unit 2 Activity

## Thinking

The units have a multiple-choice questionnaire at the end to enable formative assessment by the student. Students need to successfully complete these tests in order to gain access to the next unit.

**Extra:** Additional activities for the really motivated students.

For example, in one of the units students are asked to look at a spoof website on Dihydrogen Monoxide, partly for fun and partly to make the serious point that the internet can lie. 'If it looks good it must be true' is unfortunately a common assumption made by many web users, our students included.

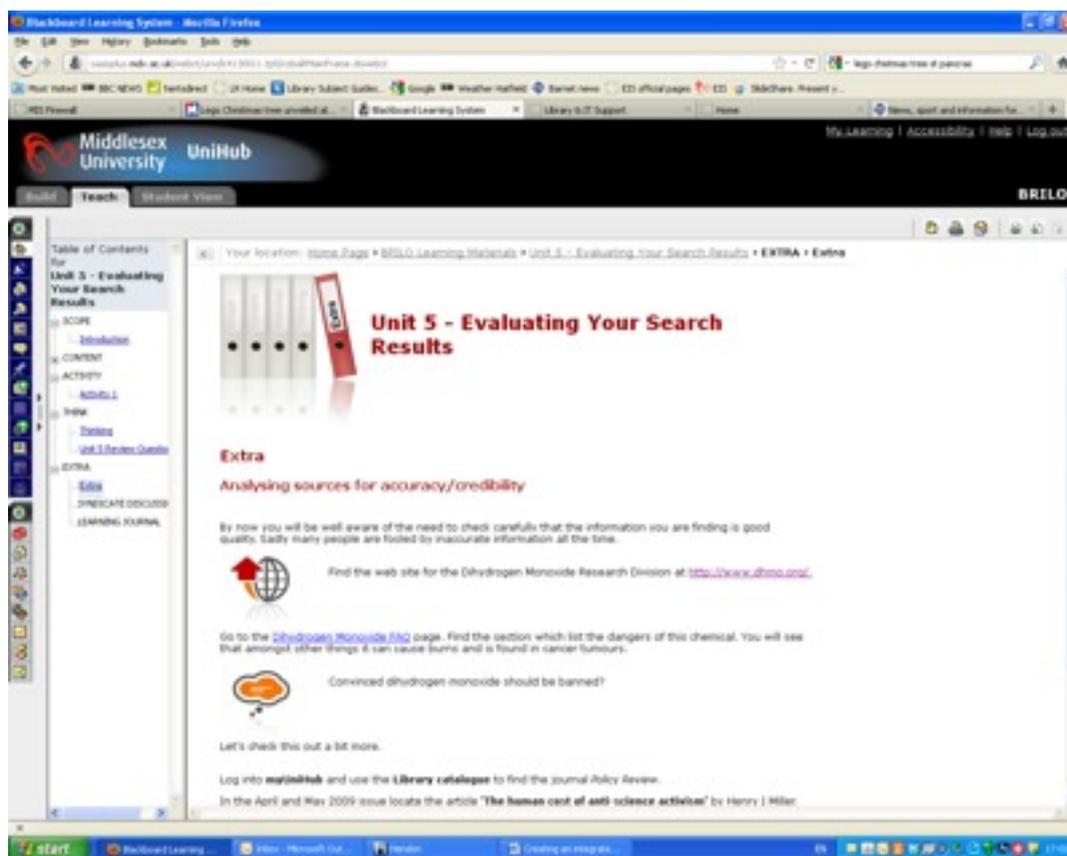


Figure 4: Unit 5 Extra

## Reviewing and Testing Material

The units are first drafted as a Word document and then transferred to the VLE as web pages by the CLTE team. The setting up of the test (multiple-choice questions) and the links are checked to ensure they really do work. This was a useful exercise as the process of editing and checking inevitably highlighted issues on the practicality of the learning materials.

A good example of this is in Unit 4. The original text included detailed descriptions of the different resources, but it was considered too long to work online. The revised version has the whole section condensed into a simple table, shown below. This also has the advantage of showing how the different databases compare, which then demonstrates to students why they will need to use different sources for different reasons. In short, the revised way of presenting the information is far better than the original.

	<b>Business Source Complete</b>	<b>GMID</b>	<b>ProQuest</b>	<b>Keynote</b>
<b>Scholarly articles</b>	Yes			
<b>News</b>	Yes		Yes	
<b>Statistics</b>		Yes		
<b>Company reports</b>	Yes	Yes		Yes (Company financials and directors information)
<b>Industry / market reports</b>	Yes	Yes		Yes
<b>Country/ international reports</b>	Yes	Yes		Yes (mainly the UK; some European reports)
<b>Linked into Summon</b>	Yes (articles and books) No (Market, company and industry reports)	No	Yes	No

Figure 5: Comparison of databases

## Materials Created: Video and Audio Presentations

Video materials were created for several parts of BRILO. These materials included simple videos, such as

- Induction from the module leader introducing the materials and explaining the importance of the library and learning materials.
- Concluding video from the library and LDU staff so their faces are seen.

There were also more complex materials, such as video footage mixed with examples of written materials. These were created by the LDU team using Adobe Presenter for Units 7 and 9 on thinking and writing and giving presentations.

On site, students would have a workshop session where they would be asked to read an academic journal article and then reflect on it in class, with the aim of teaching students how to use the material to glean information for written work. There was much discussion about how to replicate this in a meaningful way online. The eventual outcome was the recording of a small group discussion which is then intercut with images of the written material and with a commentary on what the

discussions are showing. This enables the distance students to see the process and get a sense of what the discussions would be like were they directly involved. Not surprisingly, this unit has been a significant challenge to put together and was one of the last to be completed.

The Library team created a number of video podcasts which were made using Camtasia software to capture live demonstrations of how to use library e-resources. The software enabled the editing of the recordings and the addition of a commentary. As with the written materials, LR and CLTE staff would review the draft video and suggest changes before the final rendering of the finished product.

The following how-to videos were created:

- Accessing e-books
- Accessing e-journals
- Business Source Complete
- GMID (an international business database)
- Proquest Newsbank (newspapers)
- Summon (the library's "Google" style search engine)
- Athens (as that was the authentication system at the time)

The flexibility of Camtasia to edit the videos became important later in the project, as will be seen below.

## **Challenges and Problems to Solve**

### **Staff**

There were several changes of staff members in the project's development due to individuals retiring, leaving the organisation for career development, or gaining promotion to other areas in the institution. These personnel losses were resolved by the transfer into the project of other staff members. In most cases these new project members had already been working on the periphery of the project at least, so were familiar with the goals of the project if not the detail of its construction. Thus the change in personnel did not cause undue problems in the overall development of the project.

### **Changes to University Systems**

During summer 2011, the University brought in a new portal system. This meant the links to resources and the videos had to be changed to reflect the new look of the web pages and the new login process for students. Fortunately Camtasia makes this easy to do. An example of one of the modified videos can be viewed on YouTube: [An Introduction to Summon](#). The silent section when the myUniHub log in is on screen is the section spliced in when the systems changed. Harder to change is the embedded links in the units, as at the same time as the portal change, single sign-on to resources was introduced. The change or upgrade of existing University systems is likely to continue to be a challenge as the current VLE system is likely to be replaced in the next couple of years.

## Changes to the Programme Timescale

Fortunately for the project team, one of the decisions made over the summer of 2011 was to delay the programme to a January 2012 start. This gave us time to make the changes shown above and for LDU to complete their units. However, at the time of writing it is not clear if the programme will actually run in 2012 if at all.

## Prospects for the Future

When the programme runs, we will be able to evaluate how the material works in practice.

As an early test we asked the Academic Advisors in the Business School to work through the material as students. The feedback we have from them and from the initial users, when it runs, will of course be fed back into the course materials.

We also plan to adapt the units for other programmes. There is interest from Engineering and Information Sciences and the Institute for Work Based Learning in using some or all of the material adapted to meet their needs.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank all those members of the BRILO group who contributed changes and improvements to this article. The project was very much a team effort and would not have succeeded without the energy and commitment of all those listed.

Business School

Heather Clay, Associate Dean – Academic Development

Paul Griseri, Senior Manager Academic Projects

Paul Merricks, Programme Leader for BA International Business Administration DE (retired 2011)

Centre For Learning And Teaching Enhancement

Kirsteen Macdonald, Senior Educational Developer

Celia Cozens, E-Learning Project Co-ordinator

Learner Development Unit

Nick Endacott, Senior Lecturer in English for Academic Purposes, now Co-ordinator of Academic Writing and Language

Luciano Celini, Pre-Sessional Lecturer (and project officer for LDU materials), now Senior Lecturer in English for Academic Purposes

Learning Resources

Samantha Halford, Liaison Librarian, Business and Marketing (to March 2011)

Ann Howells, Project Officer (April to June 2011)

Hilary Cummings, Liaison Manager for Business (to March 2011)

Adam Edwards, Acting Liaison Manager for Business (March to July 2011), now Liaison Manager for Engineering and Information Sciences.

Jamie Halstead, Liaison Manager for Business (July 2011 onwards)

Sarah Hudson, Liaison Librarian (Accounting and Finance) and Camtasia expert.