SPARK, the Virtual Learning Commons – An online resource for academic literacy at York University

Opportunity

To create an online resource to support students as they complete written research assignments, three units at York University in Toronto – the Libraries, Learning Skills Services, and the Writing Department – came together to create the Virtual Learning Commons. The project called SPARK – Student Papers and Academic Research Kit – is now underway with launch scheduled for September 2013.

This online resource will encompass research, writing, and learning skills directed to the needs of undergraduate students from across a range of disciplines, including direct entry, mature, and international students. Faculty are the secondary user group, with a module designed to assist them in integrating academic literacies into their courses. The needs of each group were assessed during an extensive needs assessment process and they continue to inform the development of SPARK.

Innovation

Focus groups with students and faculty probed the needs of each group. Upper year students were asked to think of themselves in first year, specifically the strategies and skills that they needed for successful research and writing. This list of needs was used to outline the modules.

An analysis of the primary user group of undergraduate students indicated that students want to find relevant information after two or three clicks, often spend no more than three minutes on a screen, and want to choose their own paths. If students encounter something they don't understand, they leave the site and do not return. These understandings informed the design.

Faculty identified key issues for their students around academic literacy; one of the outcomes of this was the recognition of the need for a unit on effective reading.

SPARK is structured for three different applications:

- Students can work through the site themselves.
- Students can be directed through the site with the guidance of the staff in the Libraries, the Learning Skills Services, or the Writing Department.
- Faculty can give assignments that integrate the use of individual or multiple SPARK modules.

Research and the development of the content have been spread over more than two years – with testing of each aspect of the design. For example, the students were asked what they thought was indicated by the titles of the various modules. Their input resulted in a revision of most of the module titles.

The modules are arranged to address different aspects of the research and writing process, rather than as a step-by step guide. There are 13 modules under three broad headings:

- Getting Started
  - Understanding the Assignment
  - Time Management
  - Academic Integrity
  - Choosing a Topic
  - Books, Journals & More

- Exploring
  - Gathering and Noting Ideas
  - Research Strategies
  - Effective Reading Strategies
  - Essay Structure

- Pulling It Together
  - Creating Bibliographies
  - Writing Strategies
  - Revising your Arguments
  - Essay Editing

Each module is designed to take eight to ten minutes, with additional resources and videos for more information. To help the students learn academic language, phrases and terms in the text are highlighted, offering pop-up definitions. Text, interviews, narrated screen shots, visuals, and other resources are integrated into the modules as appropriate to the content. Along with explanations and descriptions, students are provided with tools such as a guide to primary sources for research and work schedules for time management.

Some of the modules, such as Books, Journals & More, include a short quiz; in this case, the quiz pinpoints the differences between scholarly and popular sources.

The separate module that helps faculty integrate academic literacy into their courses includes quizzes that can be assigned for formal or self-directed assessment of student learning.

Outcomes and Benefits

SPARK is designed to respond to areas of student need by integrating the processes of research and writing that result in the completion of a quality academic paper. In the creation of this resource, the emphasis has been moved from the distinct functions of the three services to the student learning process.

It has been assessed by student and faculty focus groups throughout its development. In response to the characteristics of the primary user group, it is designed to develop academic literacy without overwhelming them. Students have responded positively to this approach in the formative evaluation studies.

By working together, the three units became more cognizant of the skills and approaches of the other services and so are better able to help students.

Videos and resources are integrated into the SPARK site; the recommendation was to keep students on the site to minimize distractions that might occur if students were sent to YouTube to view videos. This also avoids problems of off-site resources that are moved or deleted.

The content has been very carefully selected to be generic and not time sensitive so that the modules do not include references that quickly become dated.

Challenges

The project has been extremely time-consuming throughout the research and development phases, with ongoing testing to ensure that it meets student needs.

The collaboration of the three units – Libraries, Learning Skills, and Writing – has required learning about each other's approaches and ways of teaching and then integrating them into the modules. It has been a beneficial learning experience for all involved but has taken time and negotiation.

Multimedia components have been particular demanding as the technical services area on campus is extremely busy. Obtaining the copyright clearances for the integrated materials has also been challenging.

Potential

SPARK is being developed under a Creative Commons license so that other universities and colleges can use the site or re-use content from the site for non-commercial purposes with appropriate credit. The goal is that not only will other institutions make use of SPARK, but that they will also create other modules that can be widely shared.

The project has been funded under the Academic Innovation Fund. (More information on this is available in *Accessibility, Engagement, and Learning: Moving Ahead with Blended Learning at York University*). The project must be sustainable, and so a staff member is to become responsible for updating.

As more faculty introduce online learning, SPARK can be used to support students learning off-campus. The project described in *Intercultural Learning Online – Students on the Thai/Burma Border and at York University Share their Learning* is looking at using this resource to support the refugee students in Thailand.

A longer term goal is evaluating how students access SPARK and whether or not it leads to academic success and retention.

For Further Information

Sarah Coysh
E-Learning Librarian
York University Libraries
York University
scoysh@yorku.ca

Adam Taves
Research and Instruction Librarian
York University Libraries
York University
taves@yorku.ca