

ANORAKS TO THE RESCUE

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Abstract

*The University of Bristol's Learning Technology Support Service (LTSS) created the 'Anorak Rating System' in March 2001. The original purpose was to provide a simple method for rating articles and reports in the LTSS newsletter, *Interact*, for readability and interest levels. However, what started out as a simple rating system, soon developed into an effective and useful resource for engaging and motivating University staff to explore the use of learning technology in their learning and teaching practices.*

Keywords

Anorak, Bristol, learning technology, questionnaire, rating, level, resource

In the Beginning

The University of Bristol's Learning Technology Support Service (LTSS) offers a wide range of advisory services to support academics and lecturers with their use and adoption of learning technology. One of these services is the publication of a biannual newsletter, *Interact*. This is widely distributed (2,300 copies per issue) throughout the University and contains articles, reports and news items relating to learning technology use within and outside the University.

A major problem for university academics and lecturers in the UK is that they have little spare time to develop or innovate their teaching skills. This includes time to read the large number of publications that are sent to them. With *Interact* coming into this category, the LTSS were aware that many of those who received it very often just browsed through quickly, or, at worse, never got round to reading it at all. A way to make it more 'academically appealing' needed to be found. The greatest concern was that feedback from those we really wanted to reach, i.e. the novice and non-users of learning technology, indicated that many were finding some of the articles hard to understand and were confused by the terminology and acronyms. To put it bluntly, it failed to inspire them to read *Interact* or to use learning technology.

With this in mind, changes were introduced to try and make *Interact* more reader-friendly. We themed the next issue around 'Quick & Simple Learning Technology'. But even this had many readers still complaining they found it heavy going. A more specific solution had to be found.

Following consultation with the LTSS Advisory Group, it was decided to introduce a readability-rating system for newsletter items, flagged by a catchy logo. This we hoped would enable readers to quickly find items that were written at their level of learning technology understanding. The Chair of the LTSS Advisory Group suggested the logo be an 'Anorak', which in the UK is an affable slang term for people who are enthusiasts of computer-based activities. However, once this decision had been made, it soon became apparent that the system could easily be developed into a much more adaptable and useful learning technology resource.

And so, starting with the March 2001 issue of *Interact*, the Learning Technology Anorak Rating System was introduced, (see Figure 1). Every item in the 'Articles & Reports' section was given a readability 'Anorak' rating ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high). To encourage people to find their Anorak Level a

simple questionnaire, detailing areas of learning technology supported within the University, was featured in the centre-fold. Ratings were assigned according to the score attained.



Figure 1: Front cover, *Interact*, March 2001, introducing the Learning Technology Anorak Rating

Developing the System

Developing the questionnaire was not easy. It needed to take no longer than 5 minutes to complete (remember, academics have little spare time) and ratings had to act as guidelines that would be helpful. The questionnaire consisted of a list of statements that could be answered with a 'Yes' or 'No', plus a final question requiring the submitter to expand four commonly used learning technology acronyms. Because *Interact* is predominantly distributed to lecturers, the final ten statements focused on working with students. We advised those who did not teach, i.e. researchers, to tick the statements if they could apply them in a different context, e.g. with colleagues or collaborators. If they did not apply or they could not relate the statement to their area of work, we suggested they adjusted their total scores accordingly.

What we didn't want was people feeling discouraged if they come out at Level 1, or that there was nothing further to learn if they were at Level 5. Our aim was to encourage people across all levels to quickly find items in *Interact* focused at, or below, their level of understanding. We hoped this would give them the confidence to develop their learning technology skills within their teaching practices (all, of course, supported by the LTSS). To gain the lowest rating, users needed to score between 1 and 5 points. This level was deliberately loaded in that we wanted those who considered they had no learning technology expertise to recognise that basic email, word processing and web site access skills were in fact the foundation tools of learning technology. We therefore worded the first statements in the questionnaire accordingly: I have basic keyboard skills – I use email to communicate – I use the Web to find general information. To achieve Level 5, users needed to score between 46-52 points. Statements at this end included: I have implemented a virtual learning environment into my course – I use computer-based simulations within my working practice – I produce my own multimedia learning materials.

An online version of the questionnaire was also made available. This gave an immediate Anorak rating, plus feedback. Where a submitter had a low score, pointers directed them to appropriate articles,

expanded acronyms, workshops, contacts etc. This, we hoped, would encourage people to develop their learning technology skills and use them within their learning and teaching practices.

To add credibility to the system, the LTSS asked a selection of twelve key people from around the University if they would be willing to have their Anorak ratings publicised in the newsletter. Without exception they all agreed. All found it a useful exercise, two said it was fun and three that they were determined to up their level for us to publicise in the next issue. We were particularly pleased when our then Vice Chancellor Elect, Professor Eric Thomas, generously supported the system by agreeing to let us publish his Level 2 Anorak rating.

Comments and Feedback

Immediate feedback following the launch of the Anorak was invited and found to be extremely positive and supportive. The Anorak logo that filled the front page of the newsletter had caught people's attention; instead of placing it in their 'IN' trays they had glanced through to find out what was inside. Many then went on to try out the questionnaire and find their Anorak rating.

People found the system simple to use, informative, unthreatening and, surprisingly for us, said they had enjoyed the experience. Many reported that just filling in the questionnaire raised their awareness of the differing areas of learning technology available to them. A frequent comment was "I always thought learning technology was a bit beyond me, but now find it is something I can easily learn and use". One vehement critic of the former style of our newsletter wrote, "I am writing to thank you for the efforts you have made to make *Interact* more readable. I liked the idea of an Anorak rating and was amazed to find I scored 2 (hope for me yet!)". This particular critic, a lecturer in dental oncology, has been so inspired by the Anorak that she is now a regular attendee at our workshops and has upped her rating to Level 3.

The online questionnaire was even more popular. Submitters were impressed by the immediate clear view of what they did and didn't know about learning technology, what systems were available to them within the University and where to go for support with using them. For those new to learning technology it became a useful aid with helping them choose a system or resource that fell within their level of expertise and/or subject area. One lecturer commented, "The link to other resources where I had weaknesses was powerful", another said, "I'm sure the Anorak rating will go down in history as one of the great learning technology innovations".

The 'Anorak' expression was soon cropping up around the University, at committee meetings and in workshops. People were vying with each other to see who could up their rating first, indeed, the Director of Information Services managed to up his rating to Level 3 before his retirement. Where possible, the LTSS now Anorak-rates its workshops giving attendees a better idea of the learning technology pitch of the workshop, and tutors an audience with an appropriate level of competence.

Statistics

There is no doubt that the Anorak rating system has been a great success. Its simplicity and adaptability are its great strengths and it has certainly enhanced the provision of learning technology support to the University of Bristol. A focused survey indicated that 45% of our academics and lecturers had taken the Anorak test within six months of its introduction. Within a year, statistics taken from the online Anorak questionnaire showed rating levels:

Level 1:10% **Level 2:** 56% **Level 3:** 20% **Level 4:**11% **Level 5:** 3%

Outside Bristol

Outside the University of Bristol our online questionnaire has also proved popular with external 'browsers' who come across it in their search for learning technology focused sites. The system has also been demonstrated at our two National Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Conferences and at three Regional Learning & Teaching Support Network Centre Events. We have accepted invitations to

demonstrate the system to the UK's Institute for Learning & Teaching and the Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technology at the University of Cambridge.

A particular highlight was winning the Best Poster award at the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) Conference in September 2001. ALT is the UK equivalent of ASCILITE and is attended by an international assembly of learning technology users and experts.

We have now copyrighted the system, but are happy for other educational institutions to use it, providing it is used for *bona fide*, non-commercial academic purposes and that the LTSS and University of Bristol are acknowledged. To our knowledge at least eight UK universities now use the system and several others have recommended their staff and students visit the web site.

What next

The Anorak system is easily adapted to match specific areas of learning technology. The March 2002 issue of *Interact*, themed around Computer Assisted Assessment (CAA), contained a CAA Anorak rating questionnaire to accompany the issue. A VLE version is underway. Where demonstrated at conferences a 'generic' version is made available for delegates to try out the system.

There is no doubt that the Anorak system has raised the awareness of learning technology within the University of Bristol and that those from outside the University who see it demonstrated are impressed. While there is scope for it to be adapted and expanded as new technologies develop, does it need to go any further to be a useful tool? The answer is, 'Probably not'. Its power is its simplicity and if that simplicity is the key to helping people use and understand the issues of using (or not using) learning technology, then that is all that is required.

However, the LTSS is always open to suggestions - and who knows where learning technology will be heading in the next ten years?

References

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