Adding value to first year student learning with embedded library pod/vodcasts

Julia Gross
Library Services Centre
Edith Cowan University
Eva Dobozy
School of Education
Edith Cowan University

We begin with the premise that pod/vodcasts add an engaging and innovative mix to the university learning environment; they put the control of when and where to access information in the hands of the student and can be delivered through the university's learning management system (LMS). In this paper, we describe a semester-long trial in which library pod/vodcasts were provided to first-year teacher education students in the belief that basic library skills development is vital for academic success and an essential component of good information literacy practice. The pod/vodcasts were offered to support students at point of need in their learning and were optional. We used the learning activity management system (LAMS) developed by Macquarie University to deliver the library modules alongside the existing academic unit podcasts. The paper reports on students' usage and perception of the library pod/vodcasts and how they responded to this new approach.

Keywords: student engagement, library podcasts/vodcasts, information literacy, LAMS, net generation

Introduction

Students in their first semester at university face challenges pertaining to campus size, learning environment and discipline-specific paradigms and requirements. Often, students struggle to understand academic expectations at the higher education (HE) level and how to complete their first assignments to the required specifications, which can, and often do, induce stress and anxiety (Stallmann, 2008). However, universities are endeavouring to retain students and to help them overcome such obstacles. At Edith Cowan University (ECU) intervention strategies are in place to support students, especially those new to university life and culture; and student resilience and diversity is the focus of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded study by ECU researchers (Sparrow, Boyce, Middleton, & Kinnear, 2008). A noteworthy finding from the Sparrow et al. (2008) research project is that students who felt supported and assisted in their struggles to understand learning paradigms were more likely to persevere with their HE studies. Support and assistance can take many forms, from family and peer support to institutional interventions designed to help students adapt to HE learning and teaching.
In this paper, we report on a semester-long trial to better assist students in their learning endeavours and to help them acquire vital library skills via a set of library pod/vodcasts embedded in the unit's LMS. The library pod/vodcasts were not compulsory, but their access was greatly encouraged and their value was made explicit in early lectures that introduced the unit processes and expected learning outcomes. The aim of our approach of embedding library modules in an early compulsory academic learning unit was to emphasise the learning of foundational library skills, which are considered to be vital for academic success (Scott, 2008).

When faced with the need to conduct research for their first academic assignments, HE students tend to think that reliable and valid information on any topic is readily available on the internet. Yet it has been noted that many HE students lack the information literacy and critical thinking skills (Atlay & Harris, 2000; Branch, 2004; Grant & Berg, 2004; Schulte, 2008; Swanson, 2005) needed to distinguish between

quality information and mere opinion pieces and rely too much on superficial searches, such as through Google. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from academic support staff at ECU suggests that some students lack the skills to represent and reference their readings, contributing to problems surrounding plagiarism.

Library and information literacy

When 'Google' and 'Wikipedia' are perceived as being synonymous with fast and convenient e-research for HE assignments, how should university lecturers and librarians respond? And what are well developed information literacy skills?
The Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIIL) framework has become a benchmark standard for libraries (Bundy, 2004, p.11), setting the following six core competencies for the information literate person:

1. recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed
2. finds needed information effectively and efficiently
3. critically evaluates information and the information seeking process
4. manages information collected or generated
5. applies prior and new information to construct new concepts or create new understandings
6. uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information

In this particular first-year unit, students are expected to demonstrate beginning library literacy competencies in the writing of their first 1500-word 'learning about teaching report'. Students are required to use at least five quality references (none of which are allowed to be 'Wikipedia entries'), demonstrating evidence-based practice and developing understandings of academic writing conventions. In addition, students need to demonstrate, through the work in this unit, library research skills such as:

• where to locate information in the physical library and e-library
• how to evaluate information
• how to store information for later use in academic papers
• how to cite academic work used in assignments

To help first-year students acquire such skills, we implemented a collaborative pilot project that allowed the students, for the first time, to access additional library support through their regular unit LMS. The aim of the library pod/vodcast modules was to make information available 'at the point of need' and assist these students with the building of self-management skills, so vital for success in HE.

Recent Australian library research asserts that pod/vodcasting is an ideal medium for supporting distance education students with additional resources (Ralph & Olsen, 2007; Jowitt, 2008). Roberts (2007) cites a number of US university libraries where increased library-faculty collaboration is resulting in podcasts being developed to deliver specific information literacy content, such as:

• library podtours
• library search techniques
• referencing
• using endnote
• evaluating information sources
• borrowing from the library
• research guides
• database guides
• new book reviews

Convinced that similar strategies could greatly enhance the learning experience and be beneficial to our students at ECU, many of which are first-generation university students, we embarked on the pilot project discussed below.

The pilot project

In 2007, librarians in the ECU Faculty of Education and Arts library team received a Teaching and Learning Small Grant to develop pod/vodcasts to inform students about library services in general and provide instruction about particular library skills, such as how to construct a database search, and to give

step-by-step guides for searching a particular database. The literature on first-year university transition shows that there is a need for a variety of student support structures (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss (2008). One such addition support structure is the strategic embedding of ECU library pod/vodcasts to be effectively utilised, so that they can be applied to learning activities within an academic unit or program. In this pilot program four library pod/vodcasts were embedded within the already existing LAMS-plug-in within a compulsory Education Studies unit's LMS (Blackboard site).

The library-LAMS sequences were designed to match the unit's interactive lecture-LAMS podcast sequences, consisting of the initial pod/vodcast to be viewed, followed by a voting, forum and survey activity. The sequences were kept simple and uniform to increase familiarity with the new learning system and lower students' cognitive load (Dobozy & Pospicil, 2008).

This pilot program was designed to assist first-year teacher education students to acquire necessary library skills. The library pod/vodcasts were provided alongside existing academic unit podcasts. Early in the semester, the students had participated in a face-to-face library workshop in another first year education unit, when they were brought to the library with their tutors. The purpose of the additional pod/vodcasts was to build on the knowledge acquired from the earlier workshop and provide easily accessible support to first year students when they needed to undertake research for their first assignments at university. There were four separate library pod/vodcasts selected for the pilot program.

1. Borrowing from the library (3.30 minutes)
2. Education databases (4.00 minutes)
3. Developing a search strategy (5.50 minutes)
4. Wilson Web – Education database (7.45 minutes)

The 2009 cohort of students were predominantly school leavers. The students were required to access their units in Blackboard (the learning management system at ECU) and LAMS activities with embedded media throughout their 12-week course. In an early lecture entitled: *Personalised teaching and learning with Web 2.0 technologies*, the students were introduced to the blended learning mode of this unit and shown how the various online learning provision could be used to assist their learning. The unit's Blackboard site was set up as a 'one-stop-shop' to make information access easy and unproblematic (see Figure 1).
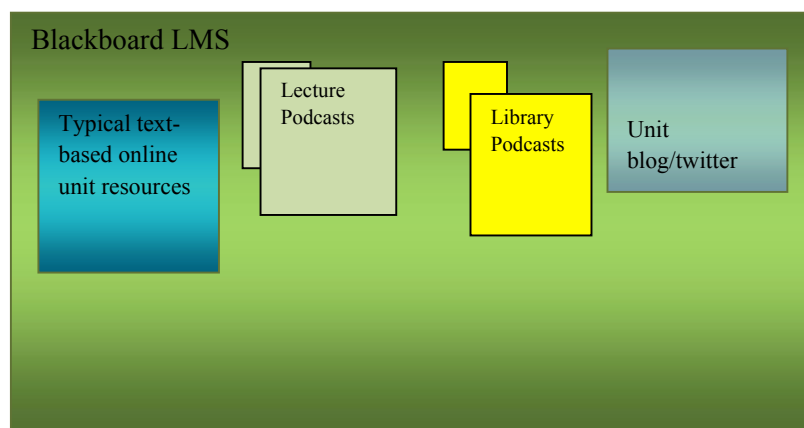

Figure 1: Embedded media in LAMS within a Blackboard unit

The four library pod/vodcasts were accessible through the LAMS plug-in within the Blackboard LMS. They were designed to assist students to familiarise themselves with some basic library skills and apply various skills sets when completing their university assignments in their first semester units complying with various, explicitly specified academic writing requirements. A written transcript of the information presented in the four modules was provided as supplementary information to cater for students of various learning styles. It was anticipated that some students would prefer to 'read' and 'hear', accessing the visual, auditory and written texts simultaneously. We speculated that the written transcripts of the short library pod/vodcasts would be utilised by students as 'note-taking help', preventing cognitive 'overload' and signalling that the information provided is easily accessible (see Figure 2).
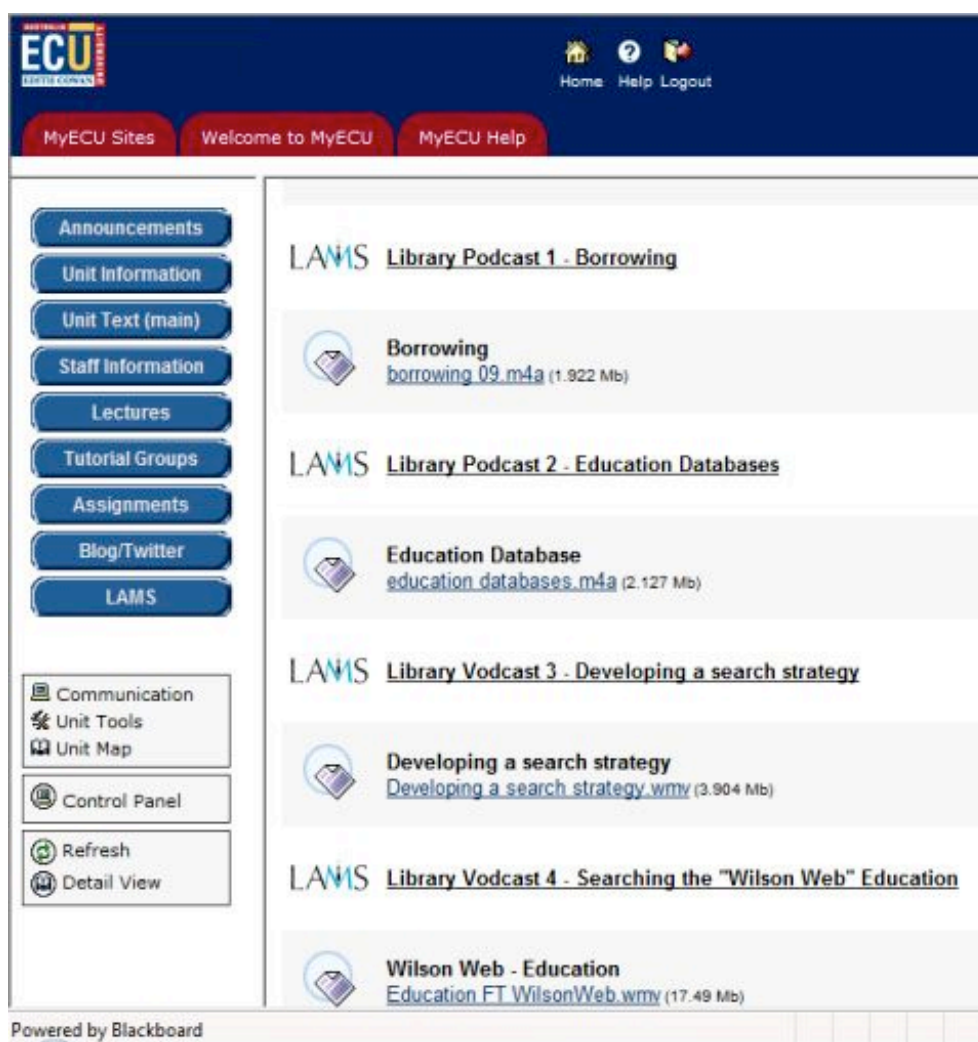
Figure 2: Library pod/vodcasts in LAMS within Blackboard

To provide an overview of the scope and sequence of the basic library modules, the following table describes the nature and purpose of each of the four basic library skills development modules. The modules were selected and introduced in a specific order, commencing with a less demanding podcast about ECU's borrowing system and increasing systematically in complexity to arrive at a vodcast demonstrating the use of a specialised database for high-quality, up-to-date information retrieval in the field of Education.

With each library pod/vodcast, the students were asked to follow the normal LAMS sequence: First, students viewed/listened to the pod/vodcasts. Second, they voted on their interest in and perception of the usefulness of the information. Third, they completed the forum activity, which was designed to elicit discussion and provide some qualitative evidence of students' interest in the information delivered through this media.

Responses to questions posed in the LAMS Forum provided a measure of students' understanding of and engagement with the material. Examples of typical comments are provided below (see Table 2).

Results

The results comprise the level of student engagement with the library pod/vodcasts, their perception of the usefulness and the interest value of the individual productions, as represented in the following graphs, table and figures. As stated above, the pod/vodcasts were presented in LAMS and embedded in the unit's LMS to provide students with an interactive platform (forum activity), which invites peer-to-peer collaboration and discussion of first impressions and arising issues. The voting activities are seen as simple but valuable evaluation tools.

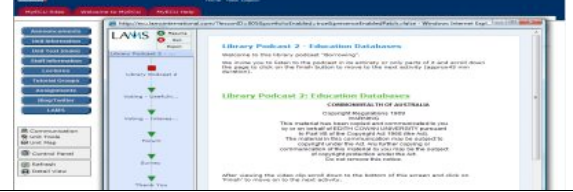**Table 1: Library podcasts/vodcasts and some Forum comments**

Library module	Type & duration	Description
Borrowing (1)	**Podcast (3.30 minutes)**	This module introduces students to the library's system for borrowing items: how to access material, rules and regulations of borrowing items from the library.
Education databases (2)	**Podcast (4.0 minutes)**	This module is narrated by an experienced librarian, explaining the importance of using journal databases for locating specific academic journal articles for assignment topics in education.
Search strategy development (3)	**Vodcast (5.50 minutes)**	This vodcast provides a step-by-step approach to the development of a search strategy for an assignment, using a specific research example to illustrate the effective use of online resources.
Wilson Web (4)	**Vodcast (7.45 minutes)**	In this longer vodcast module, the librarian demonstrates the sequence of search screens in the Wilson Web Education database, illustrating how students can conduct a search for an education topic.

Table 2: Histogram of podcast/vodcast utilisation

Podcast/ Vodcast title	Total Students commenced	Total Students completed	Sample comments about usefulness
Borrowing (1)	69	41 (59%)	I have borrowed many different books that have assisted me in researching for my assignments, both in the reserve reading section and the main collection. However, I have not borrowed any magazines or newspapers yet.
Education Databases (2)	57	36 (63%)	No, I haven't actually used it yet, but now feel after watching the podcast that when I eventually do I will know how to use it.
Developing a search strategy (3)	50	32 (64%)	I particularly liked the consistent use of examples to help us understand the theory behind how to develop an effective search strategy
Searching the Wilson Web – Education (4)	45	27 (60%)	It was very interesting to know that if you use a * next to a word in the search such as observ* that it will include searches for observe, observing, observer, etc

The results show that there was declining interest among these students. However, the completion rate was steady with approximately 2/3 of commencing students completing the modules. The implications of these results are explored in the discussion section below (see Table 2).
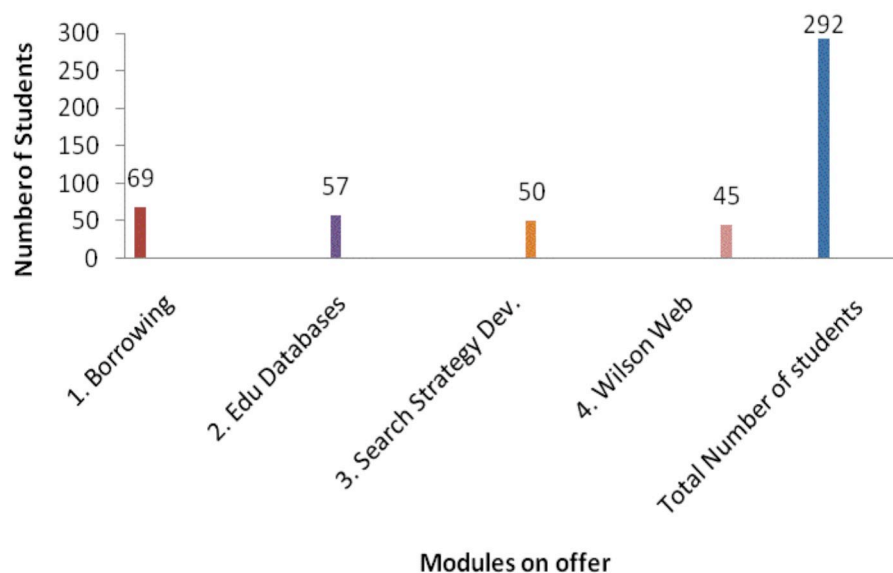
Figure 3: Student access data of Library Pod/Vodcast modules

Not only do the results indicated a declining interest and completion rate, but, to our great surprise, they show marginal take-up of the option to receive additional information at the point of need (see Figure 3). What do these figures tell us? Speculating about the significane of these results below, we arrive at the conclusion that they should not be ignored, but may serve as warning signs about the effectiveness of various support structures provided by universities today.
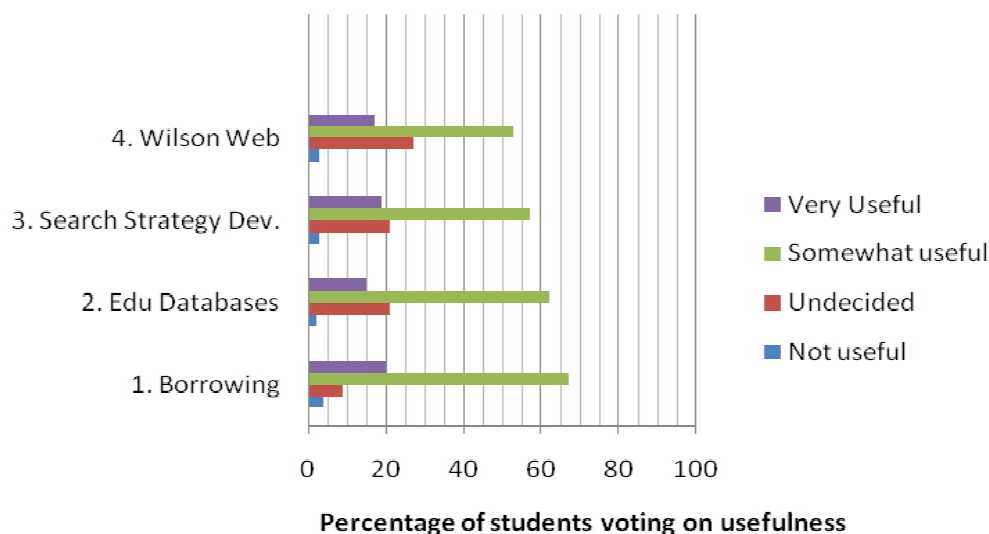

Figure 4: Student views on usefulness of Library Pod/Vodcast modules

As indicated above, there was interest in the library podcasts/vodcasts from a selected number of students; however, only 23.6% registered interest in the most accessed library module (Borrowing). The least accessed module was the one offered 4th (Wilson Web); the latter was accessed by only 45 students, which represents 15% of the unit student population (see Figure 3). In general, students accessing the library pod/vodcasts rated them as personally useful, although not always interesting.

Very few students (less than 5% of students accessing the library modules) posted comments on the forum page. Some discussed their lack of experience of physical libraries, referring to the past (high school), whereas others made comments about their present circumstances. The following is a further sample of the comments.

- I had never really been to a library until I started uni, and I find it great for researching and also for studying.

- I love the peace and quiet [in the library]. I find the library is a great place to do my study. I especially like the small study rooms that are available [in the new library building]. I find it is the best environment for me to study.
- I use the library to find books for my assignments, I don't use the internet to find resources, and I guess I just like using books.
- I have used the Metaquest database, which was helped me with my research for assignments.
- I do use the databases and find that they take up little time and are very easy to use. I would advise others to use them too.

Discussion

The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), as quoted by Page (2009), lists among the top teaching and learning challenges for 2009, the "development of 21st century literacies (information, digital, and visual) among students and faculty"(p. 13). A series of embedded library modules, such as the ones trialled here, addresses this challenge by pushing literacy support into a regular unit's LMS, where students will come across them without having to search the library website on the intranet or exert special effort to find information. The trial revealed tentative library awareness in first-year teacher education students who were enrolled in the unit. It was a significant finding that so few students took up the opportunity to engage with this form of library skills development. Nevertheless, students new to university life are in a process of orientating themselves to a new learning environment and to changed teaching and learning practices. It seems fair to presume that many of these students are not yet aware of how general library services can assist them to become more successful in HE.

The frequency of access suggests that as the pod/vodcasts information became more specific, there was decreasing interest, and less completion. The library 'borrowing' was the most successful module and this finding accords with results from a study at New Zealand's Universal College of Learning (UCOL) in which users of library instructional podcasts were surveyed (Jowitt, 2008). It is not particularly surprising that students values and see a need for increasing their personal knowledge about a university's borrowing system. However, our teacher education students did not seem particularly interested in database searches, such as the Wilson Education Web, which could, potentially, greatly assist them in current and future assignment work. Student comments retrieved through the LAMS Forum indicate a poor understanding of the library databases and what role they played in assignment research. Although only a very few students were willing to post a comment on the forum page, the feedback received highlight the fact that some students had had little exposure to education libraries and the learning resources and services libraries offer. One student seemed to demonstrate above-average levels of knowledge and thus could be classified as 'library information literate'. She accessed all the modules and provided advice on the usefulness of databases to her fellow peers.

Another key finding is that few students engaged with the pod/vodcasts. All students were strongly encouraged to access the podcast/vodcast material; however, this activity was deliberately made optional. We believe that a larger underlying problem, which is well documented, is students' readiness for self-management and self-regulation (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). This trial has highlighted the need for more pre-intervention analysis and the development of consolidated approaches within ECU to assist students in their learning endeavours. Simply providing more information through embedded library modules does not seem particularly effective. Conducting targeted tutorial activities in conjunction with the provision of embedded library skills development modules may help students understand the value of increased library literacy skills. Larger-scale, mixed method research may help shed light on the complex issues surrounding effective student support and their relationship with student engagement, motivation, autonomy and learning success.

Conclusion

This paper has described a semester-long trial of introducing library pod/vodcasts into the blended learning environment of a first year teacher education unit. The pod/vodcasts were able to be accessed asynchronously through the LMS, which accommodated the individual student's study pattern and provided students with choice and direction concerning the authentic and 'just-in-time' learning of library skills. The media chosen were a mix of audio (podcasts) and video (vodcasts) containing generic 'how tos' and subject specific information. Student access to the media content was monitored through the LAMS sequences within Blackboard, and this gave some indication of levels of engagement. A series of forum questions were posed in LAMS to spark online discussion and measure the level of awareness of and engagement with the library information. In order to reduce cognitive load on first year students, the

library pod/vodcasts were kept brief, with the longest being 7.45 minutes. The content chosen for the basic library modules ranged from practical information on library borrowing, to generic information on search strategies, to subject database specific information on Education databases, including a step-by-step 'how to' guide for accessing the Wilson Web Education Full Text database.

Our aims as teacher educator and faculty librarian were threefold: (a) to assist first year students by providing brief library information bytes (some of the information may have already been provided in face-to-face library workshop sessions), (b) to bring library support within the digital home of students, namely the LMS, and (c) to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach and gauge whether it could be applied more broadly across other units and courses. While the first two aims were met, there remain many unanswered questions in relation to the final aim, such as: What type of content is suited to this approach? Should such interventions (embedded library modules) form a compulsory component of a unit/course? Does this approach suit some levels and disciplines more that others?

This one-semester trial indicated a lack of library awareness in these first year teacher education students, who were still orientating themselves to a new learning environment. The level of student engagement with the library modules was surprisingly low and appeared to drop off in students making use of the media as the content became more specific and demanding. It is possible that unrelated factors, such as problems with LMS access, connection problems or ICT skills were important contributors to the generally poor uptake of the support offered. These and other questions, although of great relevance, remain unanswered.

In conclusion, our preliminary findings indicate that the jury is still out on the effectiveness of embedding library media content in a unit's LMA to provide strategic support for students at point of need. The trial could be replicated across different student groups, for example, students from other disciplines or more advanced or research students. Future investigations could also look into the wider institutional context in which library media interventions take place and whether these should be a set requirement of academic units.

References

Atlay, M., & Harris, R. (2000). An institutional approach to developing students' transferable skills. *Innovations in Education and Training International, 37*(1), 76-84.

Branch, J. (2004). Teaching, learning and information literacy. *Behavioural & Social Sciences Librarian, 22*(1), 33-46.

Bundy, A. L. (Ed.). (2004). *Australian and New Zealand information literacy framework: Principles, standards and practice* (2nd ed.). Adelaide: Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy.

Dobozy, E., & Pospisil, R. (2008). Exploring flexible and low-cost alternatives to face-to-face academic support. *Teaching English with Technology – Special Issue on LAMS and Learning Design, 1,9*(2), 73-92.

Grant, M., & Berg, M. (2004). Information literacy integration in a doctoral program. *Behavioural & Social Sciences Librarian, 22*(1), 115-128.

Heirdsfield, A., Walker, S., Walsh, K., & Wilss, L. (2008). Peer mentoring for first-year teacher education students: the mentors' experience. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnerships in Learning*, *16* (2), 109-124.

Jowitt, A. (2008). Perceptions and usage of library instructional podcasts by staff and students at New Zealand's Universal College of Learning (UCOL). *Reference Services, 36*(3), 312-336.

Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies. Final report*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Page, C. (2009). Uncommon thinking for the common good. *Proceedings EDUCAUSE Australasia Conference*. http://www.caudit.edu.au/educauseaustralasia09/assets/presentations/wednesday/Carie%20Page.pdf

Ralph, J., & Olsen, S. (2007). Podcasting as an educational building block in academic libraries. (Report). *Australian Academic and Research Libraries, 38*(4), 270-279.

Roberts, R. L. (2007). *Podcasting for Information Literacy*. Paper presented at the IFLA Conference. from http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/papers/133-LeeRoberts-en.pdf

Schulte, S. (2008). Integrating information literacy into an oline undergraduate nursing course. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly, 27*(2), 158-172.

Scott, N. (2008). An evaluation of enhanced student support (including podcasting) on assessed course work achievement and student satisfaction. *Learning and Teaching in Action, 7*(1).

Sparrow, H., Boyce, M., Middleton, S., & Kinnear, A. (2008). *Student diversity and the challenge of support for success*. Paper presented at the HERDSA Rekindled 2008 miniconference.
Stallmann, H. (2008). Students go it alone under stress. *Medical News Today*. http://www.medicalnewstoday.com.
Swanson, T. (2005). Applying a critical pedagogy perspective to information literacy standards. *Community & Junior College Libraries, 12*(4), 65-77.

Authors: Ms Julia Gross, Librarian, Library Services Centre, Edith Cowan University, 100 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, Australia. Email: j.gross@ecu.edu.au

Dr Eva Dobozy, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, Edith Cowan University, 100 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, Australia. Email: e.dobozy@ecu.edu.au

Please cite as: Gross, J. & Dobozy, E. (2009). Adding value to first year student leraning with embedded library pod/vodcasts. In *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009*. http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/auckland09/procs/gross.pdf