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# Summon, information literacy and 'Step Up To HE'

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## Introduction

This paper, originally presented by Eleanor Johnston as a Prezi, outlines how Staffordshire University's 'Step Up To HE' programme encourages students to become more effective critical thinkers in their studies.

## Introducing 'Step Up To HE'

'Step Up To HE' is a free, five-week programme that provides a 'taste' of university and is designed specifically to enable potential students to move towards their goals. It gives them the opportunity to see what it is like to study at university, particularly if they are concerned that they may not have the right qualifications or skills to study in higher education. There are many potential students who want to obtain a degree but are unsure what direction to take or what subject area is best for them.

'Step Up To HE' is aimed at anyone over 18 years old who is thinking about further study and may be unsure of where to start or what is involved. As attendance on the course is for two days a week (times 10.00am-2.30pm) this course is particularly useful for individuals who may have been out of education for some time, are currently working and/or have a range of commitments. Step Up is a good fit for an institution like Staffordshire University (a recruiting University) and an area like Stoke-on-Trent, as it provides non-traditional students with learning opportunities. In its current approach the programme has been running for five years; before that it formed part of a larger project called 'HE Full Circle'. (For a fuller account of the 'Step Up To HE' course see Taylor, 2012.)

The programme is designed to build individuals' confidence and develop existing skills. Many learners who complete the course progress onto a wide range of programmes at foundation or

degree level. The focus of this provision, through the development of a range of academic study skills and experiences, is to build learners' belief in their own potential for undergraduate study. This is not to solely increase their information capabilities for HE but also to provide them with information practices which reach far beyond HE to enable them to become engaged citizens.

Therefore, it is essential that the sessions delivered on Step Up are accessible, interesting, informative and enjoyable. One participant reported that 'Step Up To HE' had been effective preparation as it enabled "learning without being judged" (Taylor, 2012, p2).

## **The Library and 'Step Up'**

There has been an information literacy presence on the course for over four years. In the first three weeks of the course the library has three one-hour timetabled sessions with the Step Up students. Students are met on day 1 or day 2 of the course, then seen on two further occasions. This allows the library staff to develop a rapport with students, to act on feedback from previous weeks and to add additional information onto the VLE – for example, answering any particularly tricky questions received in session one. The three hours also mean that there is the time to listen to students, as opposed to simply rushing through what the library staff think students 'need' to learn. This enables the sessions to be student-centred and creates a sense of ownership for learners.

The three sessions follow the Walton & Cleland (2013) empirical model of information literacy and are structured as follows:

Week 1: Finding information

Week 2: Evaluating information

Week 3: Using information

### **Teaching methods**

These sessions have been team-taught from the outset, with Student Ambassadors and course leaders present as well as library staff. Currently, Eleanor Johnston delivers these sessions on behalf of Information Services with a 'tag team' partner - someone else from the service who has expertise and knowledge. Geoff Walton was the lead for the library sessions previously.

The sessions are as hands-on as possible. There is very little standing at the front talking; instead the emphasis is on interaction, collaboration and peer-to-peer learning. In essence, this is a constructivist approach where meaning is created and negotiated student-to-student and between students and tutors.

The technological aspects of Summon are not covered in the sessions. Rather, it is used to make access to academic resources as simple as possible.

## **Session 1: Finding Information**

Session 1 starts with a Q & A – ‘Ten things you want to know about the library, but were too afraid to ask’. It’s a nice ice-breaker: it creates a sense of ownership, gets the participants talking and gets a few unanswerable questions! Many of these questions are procedural, concerning how many? where are? who is? etc. This then leads on to ‘how to’ enquiries and the focus goes onto finding resources. In the first couple of years of Step Up, the source for finding resources in this session was always the library catalogue.

It is important to remember that this is a one-hour session covering a lot of practical information, and it has always been felt that the introduction of any of the subject-specific databases, showing their differing interfaces, search pages, results pages and displays, would be confusing for students and potentially lead to information overload. Yet it was an area for development, as no e-resources were covered in the early days in session one. With the University’s acquisition of Summon, it was finally possible to build in a demonstration and exercise for students to find e-resources.

Therefore, Summon was added to the Step Up programme in this ‘finding information’ session. It is used to demonstrate how easy it is to find material – whether these resources are books, ebooks, journals, databases or articles, in one search.

In the session, there is a brief explanation of the difference between the most popular search engine that Step Up students use (the same one as everyone else!) and Summon, for which the session tag line is ‘the academic Google’ - something that is expanded upon in the next session.

We show that Summon allows free access to resources that are either not available or charged for using other search engines, and introduce academic language such as ‘peer review’, ‘academic journals’ and ‘abstracts’ via a discussion forum and peer-to-peer conversations.

## **Session 2: Evaluating Information**

This is a very interactive and interesting session, in which students are asked to critically analyse a website using the pedagogical approach devised by Anthony Beal ([@redsontour](#)) from JISC. They are then offered alternative ways to find reliable sources - principally Summon.

Using the principles set out in week one, reiterating concepts such as peer review, and introducing new ideas such as analysing domains, this session really explores themes that are vital to a student in gaining a real understanding of the academic expectations at University. The example webpage critically evaluated is [www.martinlutherking.org](http://www.martinlutherking.org) – although the term ‘critical evaluation’ is not used until the exercise is completed.

There are three parts to the website evaluation exercise. Firstly, students look at just the name of the site, then read the Google description (“The truth about Martin Luther King: Includes historical trivia, articles and pictures. A valuable resource for teachers and students alike”), then finally go to view the webpage.

In classes, students realised that what they were expecting and what appeared were radically different. This was based on their misconceptions about the .org domain name and the accuracy of the Google description (who wrote this?). In fact, many students commented after exercise two that the Google description indicated the source would be useful for students. Instead of trying to run

through models such as The SCONUL Seven Pillars, or use terms such as critical evaluation, credibility, sources etc., students were themselves able to find out that using Google for academic research was time-consuming, unreliable and misleading. Indeed, some students were shocked by the content and intent of the website, and there were real 'light bulb moments' around comprehending the actual message of the site and the knowledge that the webpage was available, high in the Google rankings and not censored. Through this scaffolded approach (following Bordinaro & Richardson, 2004) students began to construct their own meaning regarding the evaluation of sources.

It is through this student-based group work and peer discovery that Summon is reintroduced from the previous week and additional features of the service are covered, such as using search limiters (for full text, peer review, by date etc.), finding keywords and subjects areas. When students run the same Martin Luther King search on Summon ('the academic Google'), their results are from academic publications, for example *History Today*, which is available in full text via a Summon search.

This session has been tracked for feedback, impact and results since February 2012 (there have been seven cohorts since then) and the feedback is immediate and shows impact: a typical student feedback statement was "Use Summon for researching – NOT Google".

### **Session 3: Using information**

Once students have located information (online and on the shelves), evaluated it and are ready to complete their assignments, they will be expected to reference their work.

The principles of referencing are introduced, again using group conversation, interaction and discussion. There is also a segment on plagiarism, as students are often confused on this issue. Indeed, some students will not use quotes or acknowledge their sources as they are unaware that correct acknowledgement is the difference between plagiarism and referencing.

Again, there is little in the way of talk from the librarians, as an 'in at the deep end' exercise gives an opportunity for groups to start thinking about what information is required in a reference and how to extract that information from a book, journal or online resource. This is very much an experiential approach (Kolb et al., 1991) where students complete a task for themselves with guidance from the teaching team.

The important aspect of this session is to create a very clear understanding in the students' minds about what information is required and, more importantly, why. Students work in groups, analysing a range of resources to reference them in the Harvard format. The library has a service called Refzone ([www.staffs.ac.uk/refzone](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/refzone)) with examples of a wide range of resources and details of how to reference them.

Some students found the mechanics of where to place punctuation and italics quite frustrating, as well as experiencing difficulties locating the essential information required for a reference, but all were able to explain why it was needed. All students use Refzone in the session and it is the librarians' roles as 'facilitators' to run visual and verbal checks that groups are comprehending and absorbing the information available.

It is indeed a relief then as part two of the session introduces referencing software and services to utilise in order to make this referencing job a little easier. There is no recommendation of a particular system to use, but the advice and golden rules are to save details of sources as students do their assignments and research.

A search is performed in Summon for *Psychology* by Gross – the ‘in at the deep end’ book that students were requested to reference at the start of the session. Recommended searches appear as the students start to type, and the ‘Save to Folder’ option is introduced. A selection of articles and sources from the results page are saved and the folder is opened to display the saved results. It is explained that this is a temporary folder that disappears when the session is closed, so the ‘Email Results’ function is explained. It is then that the search results format is changed to ‘Harvard’ and the reference list appears. There is usually a bit of a ‘wow’ factor when this is revealed, as the rest of the session was taken up with unravelling the minutiae of the parts of a reference, and then these pieces are put together by Summon. The caveat to check these (it is on the Summon page to ‘always check your references for accuracy’) is reinforced when the students themselves are asked to point out any amendments that are required. Summon 2.0 should allow for these folders and results to be saved and personalised, although Staffordshire University has not moved to this yet.

One response in class to the ‘reference reveal’ was that the work previously had been a waste of time, but other students in the session countered that without this explanation and practice use of Refzone, references would not be accurate and correct, leading to a loss of marks. This appreciation of the value of the session was immensely rewarding and vindicated the efforts of all on Step Up.

## **Reflecting on discovery, learning, and our relationships with students**

The Step Up students should not be scared out of academia by a relentless ‘push’ of information to them. Referencing or critical evaluation can be complicated and could be seen as something they ‘just don’t get and never will’. The principles of group work and peer assistance are used to counteract this. Group work is our preferred teaching method because the teaching and learning literature is full of the benefits of conversation in learning (e.g. Laurillard, 2002 and Osborne, 2010), plus our own long experience of the successful use of group work and peer-to-peer learning (e.g. Hepworth & Walton, 2009; Walton & Cleland, 2013). These techniques work because they foster active, experiential learning which in turn promotes reflection-in-action, where the learner adjusts behaviour as an action unfolds and is “smoothly embedded in to performance” (Moon, 1999, p42). These processes together enable students to become deep learners and critical thinkers.

The results speak for themselves. We found that students in these sessions will work together to produce what they are asked for, such as find information using more sophisticated keywords or an evaluation or a list of references and will often assist classmates who are struggling to understand concepts or to use technology. In other words, this is not a ‘dumbing down’ of information, it is simply a different way of presenting and conveying it. As emphasised in the introduction to this chapter, the aim of Step Up is to build learner self-belief through the development of a range of academic study skills and experiences. The principles of information literacy and the skills required at University are covered, but the informal nature and a move away from ‘chalk and talk’ sessions has made these principles easier to grasp for students. If they do not understand, they are not scared to say so – to their peers, to us or to the student ambassadors in the session. We believe

that this approach not only enhances their information literacy, but also significantly enhances their self-efficacy<sup>1</sup>.

Summon has been incredibly helpful in this aspect in all three sessions. In session one (finding information), it would have been impossible to illustrate the massive number of articles, databases and journals held electronically and to point students to the large number of subject databases. One hour was enough time to introduce the concepts behind finding information, and Summon is an excellent way to discover resources from across the range of platforms. Session two really cemented that idea of peer review and credibility and the final session elicited excellent responses when the folders were introduced.

The importance of Summon for Step Up is that three facets from the empirical model of information literacy - finding information, evaluating information and using information - are covered using just one resource. Like many other universities, Staffordshire has rolled out a programme to identify specific qualities that will make students stand out from the crowd. 'The Staffordshire Graduate' includes the skills of digital and information literacy, and the Step Up sessions are a great introduction to these. As an institution that highlights employability issues for its graduates, the Step Up programme is a real success story for Staffordshire, and the successful integration of Summon into the programme contributes to that success.

## The future ...

The library has been approached to continue with Step Up for at least the next 12 months (the sessions, staff and rooms have already been booked!) and, after a recent peer observation of teaching session, a request has been made to add an extra 15 minutes per session to allow for further exploration of resources and student input and feedback. The students are engaged for the full hour and they really are interacting with each other and with the staff. The library's sessions, in terms of their content and accessibility, have ensured that there is a real luxury of time (three sessions), compared with many other sessions that are provided to students in Faculty. Thus there is the incentive to develop material for shorter sessions and add online quizzes (perhaps for badges?) for other students. There will also be more use of Summon in future sessions. It is hugely popular with Step Up students as it is not overwhelming, it is easy to use, and gets the right results fast.

There could be the introduction of more interactive technology, such as the use of Socrative for the 'Ten things you want to know about the library, but were too afraid to ask' ice-breaker in Session 1. There has also been a move from writing on a board to live scribing, so the questions and answers are preserved per session (and added to the VLE).

Information Services have liaised with the course leader in obtaining the data presented in Table 1 (the results came back after the Information Literacy and Summon event), and this follow-up is extremely useful in assessing the success of Step Up in purely statistical terms and for thinking about future progress.

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<sup>1</sup> While at this point we can't demonstrate this directly, we are planning to test the next cohort of students' self-efficacy pre- and post the session to determine any effects, and will report on this once the results are analysed.

**What proportion of students attending continue to University?**

Between 60 and 70% of students who attend the course go on to HE. Some cohorts have 90% progression. The majority go to Staffordshire University.

**How do you advertise and then recruit for Step Up?**

Usually no need to advertise, other than on the website: word of mouth is a big factor.

**Where do your students come from (i.e. are they mostly local)?**

They are mainly local but some travel in from Birmingham, Manchester or London.

**Have many students who attended Step Up graduated from Staffordshire Uni?**

Each year there are graduates mainly achieving 2.1 - some get firsts.

**Table 1: Impact of Step Up**

In addition, we have collated data from feedback, discussions on critical evaluation and the meeting of learning outcomes, which needs to be analysed and reported on. This will include detailed analysis of statistics regarding the future paths of Step Up students and how the library sessions contributed to their knowledge, their confidence and their understanding.

We take a 'before and after' approach to measuring impact, and before any teaching begins we ask students to think about the concept of evaluating information and to write down on a post-it what it means to them. At the end of the session they are asked to write down on another post-it what they have learnt. A comparison of the statements reveals the impact of the session.

Students were asked to feed back on post-it notes their answer to the question "Write what you think 'critical evaluation for webpages' means". Their responses fell into four broad categories which fit to some extent with levels of information discernment identified by Hepworth & Walton (2009). Students' statements are reproduced verbatim in Table 2.



**Before the session: “Write what you think 'critical evaluation for webpages' means”**

| <b>Students had no concept (x4)</b>  | <b>Navigation/ease of use (x3)</b>   | <b>Some analysis (x5)</b>  | <b>Aware of the need to analyse and judge (x3)</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| No idea x2<br>Not sure<br>Don't know | Knowing how to navigate webpages<br>A detailed summary of a webpage<br>User friendly/easily accessed | Testing to see faults<br>Reflect on and document opinion<br>To extract reliable and relevant information<br>Evaluate whether they are safe<br>Following opinions and conclusions | Assessing pros and cons<br>Analysing the website looking for good and bad points<br>Making as judgement of a web page |

**After the session: “What have you learned in today's session?”**

| <b>Students had no concept (x0)</b> | <b>Navigation/ease of use (x0)</b> | <b>Some analysis (x14)</b>   | <b>Aware of the need to analyse and judge (x3)</b>  |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---|
|                                     |                                    | I have learnt sites are not trustworthy (x4)<br>Don't judge a web page purely on a Google quick search<br>Peer review (x2)<br>Do not be too quick to judge a website by its Google description<br>To be very careful about the reliability of websites/search engines<br>It's worth checking the author/host before looking at the content to ensure accuracy<br>Don't trust a website who's tagline is “The truth about...”<br>Not all .org websites can be trusted<br>Don't believe everything you see on the net. Do your own search on subjects<br>Provide feedback, reliability, accuracy, authors etc. | It is deciding whether a webpage is reliable or not<br>To check: site owner, reliability, accuracy, peer evaluation, double check work before using it<br>Learnt to be open-minded as to the reliability of websites. In evaluation interpretation will go a long way |

**Table 2: Students' responses pre- and post-session**

In summary, the statements from before the session show that students' grasp of the need to evaluate information is spread across a range from not knowing anything at all, through mechanical notions on look and feel, to an understanding of the need to make sound judgments about websites. After the session, at the very least students are demonstrating that they are aware that they need to do some kind of analysis of a website before using it. In other words, after the session, students' levels of information discernment have increased compared to before the session. It is noticeable that the number of students at the 'high end' of the cognitive scale remained constant.

This is a rewarding result and shows that our Step Up sessions do have impact. We will continue to monitor progress to ensure that the programme meets the needs of these students as they move from hesitant to confident traveller on their learning journey.

## Find out more

The Prezi used for this 20-minute paper can be found at  
<http://prezi.com/yd4nhfdytnzr/summon-information-literacy-and-step-up-to-he/>



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