

Use of the Traffic Light Tool with information literacy skills

Context

The Traffic Light Tool was adapted for use with a level 4 module concerned with developing academic skills. This module involved two sessions with a librarian, and the tool was used to help assess student confidence in a range of skills relating to their module assignment, all of which come under the heading of “information literacy.” As the librarian only saw the students twice, the tool was used in a simplified form.

Use of the tool

At the start of the first session, each student was given a set of ten statements. These related to the use of different forms of information, each of which was a requirement of the module assignment (a report about gathering information and evaluating its quality).

The statements were:

- Finding books in the library.
- Finding the information I need within a book.
- Accessing electronic books.
- Knowing what journal articles are.
- Finding journal articles.
- Using a search engine (e.g. Google) to find info.
- Understanding web addresses (URLs).
- Identifying information from reliable sources online.
- Judging the quality of information.
- Selecting the best information for my studies.

Each student was asked to rate their confidence in each area as green (confident), amber (unsure) or red (anxious). A1 posters were hung on the walls for each response, and the students attached the statements using sticky tack. Responses were anonymous, as there was no way to identify which individual students has provided each response. 14 students participated in the exercise.

Between the two taught sessions, the responses were analysed and the content of the second session adjusted to ensure that more time was given over to the skills which were reported as being the cause of greater anxiety.

Students completed some self-directed activities to practice some relevant skills between the two sessions. At the end of the second session, the traffic lights exercise was repeated. Each student was given the same statements and asked to rate them again. Staff made best efforts not to look at what students were doing, so that any unconfident students could feel safe to express that. 15 students participated. Another 2 students were present, but opted not to participate as they had arrived late to the first taught session and said they did not want to skew any results.

Results

Statement	1 st session			2 nd session		
	Red	Amber	Green	Red	Amber	Green
Finding books in the library.	1	5	8	0	1	14
Finding the information I need within a book.	2	4	8	0	5	10
Accessing electronic books.	3	7	4	0	3	12
Knowing what journal articles are.	4	6	4	0	4	11
Finding journal articles.	4	3	7	0	1	14
Using a search engine (e.g. Google) to find info.	0	0	14	0	0	15
Understanding web addresses (URLs).	3	5	6	0	0	15
Identifying information from reliable sources online.	2	7	5	0	5	10
Judging the quality of information.	5	8	1	0	3	12
Selecting the best information for my studies.	3	7	4	0	5	10

Analysis of results

Books – confidence regarding finding books increased dramatically, from 58% green to 93%. Finding information within a book also increased, from 58% to 67% green – this was less pronounced, and may indicate that this is something which should receive more attention in taught sessions. Confidence in accessing electronic books was significantly higher (rising from 29% to 80%) – probably largely due to being introduced to university systems in the taught session.

Journals – this was an area of general unconfidence for the group. Interestingly, more people were confident about finding journals articles than about knowing what they actually are (both before and after the session). Confidence increased by similar amounts for both statements (50% and 43% respectively).

Internet usage – perhaps unsurprisingly, students were 100% confident in their use of Google to find information. However, they were less confident about the information they found.

43% were initially confident that they understood URLs – this increased to 100% after the taught sessions. Confidence in identifying information from reliable sources increased from 36% to 67%, a notable increase.

Critical thinking – students had initially been least confident about judging the quality of information, with only one student (7%) initially ranking this as green. This increased to 80%. The related skill of selecting the best information was rated initially as 29% green, increasing to 67%. It may be that the link between these skills is unclear or that students feel to some extent overwhelmed by the amount of information available to them.

Reflections

The tool was useful as a way of shaping the material for the second taught session. It also allowed for a measure of how much student confidence had grown over the two taught sessions. Although this is not a direct measurement of actual skill, the evidence that student confidence had increased was encouraging. The lack of any red (anxious) responses after the second session was unexpected, but pleasing.

Students enjoyed participating in the traffic light rating activity, and it was clear that they were thinking hard about their responses to each statement.

It would be interesting to use the tool in a more fully developed way to assess, discuss and improve individual students' confidence in these skills. However, given the limited contact time available, this simplified adoption of the principles of the tool was highly beneficial.