

# **Living interaction and flexible solutions in the changing world of academic studies**

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## **Abstract**

This paper consists of two cases dealing with support for students in virtual environment.

Case 1 describes an information literacy project at Tritonia Academic Library, Vaasa, Finland.

Case 2 deals with a pedagogical development project at the University of Vaasa in which a Moodle-based virtual environment was used as a complementary element in the Master's thesis process.

Keywords: netlearning, collaboration between library and universities, support for students, mentoring, information literacy, information retrieval, thesis process.

## **Background**

The bilingual Vaasa Academic Library *Tritonia* is a joint library and educational information centre of Vaasa University, Vaasa Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration (Hanken), and Åbo Akademi's (ÅA) Ostrobothnian Unit in Vaasa. Since 2003 Tritonia has participated in planning education in information literacy in co-ordination with these universities.

The central aim of Tritonia's Learning Centre (LC) is to provide IT based services for different pedagogical purposes. The LC supports net-based learning platforms, gives training and support for teachers in the use of IT – also as regards pedagogical questions – and is engaged in the development of net-based learning.

The cases presented in this paper exemplify two of the many possibilities for collaboration in the field of academic studies between the University, the Library and the Learning Centre in Vaasa.

## **Case 1**

### *Pilot project and planning*

The objective has been to develop modules containing education in different aspects of information literacy – the universities and the academic library planned the project together. The Academic Library arranged a pilot course in *Information retrieval and information literacy* for a group of new students in the autumn 2004. This course was a part of Vaasa University's virtual orientation studies. Tritonia's part consisted of

both traditional lectures, workshops in information retrieval and self-motivated studies with the materials on the Internet. The Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education were used in the planning of the course.<sup>1</sup>

In 2004 the standard and quality of the education was evaluated by means of student feedback which was taken into account when a new course was held to all new students (about 600) in the autumn 2005. The course in information literacy and retrieval was now a compulsory part of the orientation studies. One part of the course now consisted of virtual studies. A continuous evaluation and improvement of the course is in process.

*Evaluation in the autumn 2004*

The students' information retrieval skills (Boolean logic, truncation, use of keywords etc.) developed notably after two workshops (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

Example 1: How would you truncate the word "immigrants" to ensure the best possible search result:

	Right	Wrong	No reply
Before the workshops	32	68	0
After the workshops	66	30	4

Example 2: After the lecture dealing with "Internet and ethics" the students realized that there are many actors "in the ethical field" that are violated by plagiarism (Figure 2).

Name the actors that are violated by plagiarism:

	Before the lecture	After the lecture
Author (producer)	90	89
Yourself	31	40
Academic society	53	69
Fellow students	50	60
Teachers	47	58
Publishers	68	78
No reply	0	5

The evaluation showed that the students have generally been satisfied with the course.<sup>3</sup>

*Improvements made in the autumn 2005*

The lecture "Internet and ethics" was replaced by literature and an essay. The course was evaluated by an obligatory examination.

*Teachers' feedback in autumn 2005*

The course is useful and valuable but the resources of Tritonia Academic Library are not sufficient.

*Planned improvements for the autumn 2006*

Students' information literacy skills will be tested before the course (those who pass the test are freed from the course).

The amount of self-motivated studies will be increased.

The lectures on "Internet and ethics" will be preserved.

The Swedish speaking universities (Vaasa Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration (Hanken), and Åbo Akademi's (ÅA) Ostrobothnian Unit in Vaasa) will also have the information literacy course as a part of their orientation studies.

**Case 2: Support for students in the thesis process**

Case 2 deals with one collaborative project between Tritonia and the University of Vaasa, a pedagogical development project in which a Moodle-based virtual environment was used as a complementary element in the Master's thesis process.

The students involved in the pilot project came from various backgrounds, different faculties and subjects. Although different as regards age, social situation, discipline and years spent on studies they had one thing in common: they had problems with starting to write their thesis or alternatively, finishing an already begun thesis. The main reason given by the students for these problems was mostly not dependent on the university. Family, work, distance – both as regards time and place – were often mentioned. In addition, the physical hindrances were without exception complemented with a psychological threshold, a feeling of the theses quite simply being too big a task to seize without help after having lost touch with the university and possibly also with the original supervisor<sup>4</sup>.

An academic thesis is often conceptualised in terms of the final product<sup>5</sup>. Attention is only paid to the completed printed version, and the actual research process with its different phases – finding the topic, defining the research questions, literature search, thinking, writing, revision, etc. – are rendered invisible. When the thesis is seen in terms of the final product instead of conceptualising it as a gradual working process consisting of several stages, it may grow into unrealistic proportions in the mind of the student. It becomes a massive undifferentiated lump impossible to get hold of.<sup>6</sup> If the student in danger of losing touch is not offered insightful support at that point, it is possible that writing the thesis is postponed, graduation delayed, and career prospects altered altogether.

At the University of Vaasa a pilot project was launched in October 2005 with the aim to find ways of supporting the students' thesis processes outside the discipline – specific supervision given by the departments. Partly, it was a question of aiding delayed students in danger of dropping out to get a better hold of their process and return to active work again. In addition, we were also interested in finding out how the concept which we had designed would work in practise. We named the project

“*Hatchery*” because of the positive and productive connotations of the word. Altogether 24 students were selected to the two *Hatchery* groups that met face to face once a month. The meetings began at 5.30 p.m. and lasted as long as necessary.

The *Hatchery* had three main focuses. The first one was to pay attention and support the students’ working process.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, we wanted particularly to make use of the internal dynamic of the peer group in the thesis process and thirdly, we introduced a Moodle-based virtual environment as a complementary supportive element for the working process.

Regardless of level or discipline the working process follows basically the same lines and all thesis processes have a number of common denominators. There has to be an idea, a topic, the topic will have to be delimited, research questions defined. There has to be a material, theoretical and methodological questions will have to be taken into account, the material has to be analyzed, results discussed etc. In addition, as mentioned before, a great deal of literature will have to be read, the research report has to be written, revised and once again revised etc. All of this does not happen by itself or overnight – a ready made thesis is always a result of several stages, and it is only through these steps the thesis will come into being.

We helped the students to work themselves through the thesis process step by step, from planning a realistic timetable to the final version. Each group meeting had an official theme based on what we had defined as the different stages of the process<sup>8</sup>, in addition to which the students were allowed an opportunity to present their work, introduce topical questions and discuss them with the supervisor and their peers. Particularly the support given by the peer group – or the social pressure as the students themselves defined it – was considered to be of crucial importance for the progress.

The basic aim with the Moodle environment was to provide the students with tools for the management of their own thesis processes, to promote self-directness and responsibility for one’s work within a social learning environment that simultaneously also provides support for each individual thesis writer. The environment could be conceptualised as consisting of three blocks each of which had a certain function. One of the blocks contained tools for organizing the thesis process, for instance a calendar, a notice board and a discussion forum for topical questions. In addition, there was a block with monthly exercises and tasks with the help of which the themes dealt with in the meetings could be developed further. The third block was an information bank with various kinds of informative texts and/or links from instructions for writing to literature lists and video clips.

In the student feedback the importance of the support given by the peer group was emphasised. As regards the supervisors, clear answers to questions and practical instructions were appreciated. The Moodle environment was found useful in certain aspects but more interaction and concrete material was wished for.

On the whole, the result of the *Hatchery* was very satisfactory. Four students finished their thesis within the time given. Another four will finish during the summer and those who worked more slowly have asked for two more meetings during next

autumn to make sure that they also can finish their work. Five students of 24 dropped out.

The Hatchery winter was a learning process both for the students and the supervisors. The students learned to write a thesis and became aware of the process as a whole. In their minds the monster lost its mythical dimensions and became what it really is: a longer piece of written work, progressing step by step and containing various different types of learning tasks. For us who supervised the processes the experience was extremely rewarding. We were given the opportunity to take part in the students' process in an untypical way. We broke the illusion of the supervisor as an authority<sup>9</sup> and became coaches, advisors or partners in a shared project.

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<sup>1</sup> The Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. (2000) Association of College and Research Libraries.

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm> 2006. 05. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Olli Mäkinen, Hanna Kuoppala, Katri Rintamäki (2006) *Informaation luonne ja plagiointi: empiirinen tutkimus opiskelijoiden käsityksestä tiedosta, sen käytöstä ja heidän suhtautumisestaan virtuaaliopetukseen*. (Teoksessa *Akateemisia opiskelutaitoja oppimassa. Opiskelijoiden kokemuksia verkkokurssilta ja tiedonhakutaitojen kehitys lähiopetuksessa*, toim. Olli Mäkinen, 59-118) Selvityksiä ja raportteja, Vaasan yliopisto, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Leena Manumäki & Sannakaisa Holmlund (2006) *Tuutoreille ruusuja! Vaasan yliopiston opiskelijoiden kokemuksia Akateemiset opiskelutaidot verkkokurssista vuosina 2003 ja 2004*. (Teoksessa *Akateemisia opiskelutaitoja oppimassa. Opiskelijoiden kokemuksia verkkokurssilta ja tiedonhakutaitojen kehitys lähiopetuksessa*, toim. Olli Mäkinen, 7-58) Selvityksiä ja raportteja, Vaasan yliopisto, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> It seems to be a typical feature of the Finnish academic tradition that the pro gradu-thesis has the tendency to grow into unrealistic proportions in the students' minds before the actual thesis work is begun. The myth of the monstrous gradu seems to be difficult to abolish despite the work of supervisors and several realistic guide books written about the process during the past few years. See for instance Olli Mäkinen (2005) *Tieteellisen kirjoittamisen ABC*. Helsinki: Tammi.

<sup>5</sup> Raija Nummenmaa & Liisa Lautamatti (2004) *Ohjaajana opinnäytetyön työprosessissa*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Antti Karisto & Ullamaija Seppälä (2004) *Maukas gradu. Valmistusvihjeitä tutkielman tekijöille*. Tampere: Vastapaino.

<sup>7</sup> Raija Nummenmaa & Liisa Lautamatti (2004) *Ohjaajana opinnäytetyön työprosessissa*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Our division was based on the one given by Juha T. Hakala (1999) in *Graduopas*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

<sup>9</sup> Marianne Liljeström (1999) "Parempi peikko ohjauksessa kuin pakkopulla suussa." *Iso Gee. Gradua ei jätetä*. Tampere: Vastapaino.