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Use of webinars for information skills training

Evaluation of a one-year project at Canterbury Christ Church University

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Introduction

The aim of this project was to introduce webinars as an additional way to teach information skills alongside onsite lectures, inductions, workshops and one-to-one meetings at Canterbury Christ Church's Augustine House Library. A changing student population with a growing number of part-time students and distance learners challenges the traditional methods of providing information skills training, and academic librarians are called upon to develop new ways to reach these students and to familiarise them with online library services. Webinars are one option among others (such as on-demand recordings or the use of social media) for achieving this goal.

The project

The project started in June 2014. Between October 2014 and June 2015 we ran 22 webinars with 181 students participating from our campuses in Canterbury, Medway and Salomons.

All the webinars were for students of the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing at Canterbury Christ Church University, including Nursing, Midwifery, Social Work, Occupational Therapy, Radiography, Speech and Language Therapy, as well as other Allied Health and Public Health students. The topics of the webinars ranged from basic library inductions to sessions about search strategies and about using reference management software such as RefWorks.

The webinars were organised in close cooperation with programme and module leads of the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing in order to ensure that they were relevant for students and were delivered at the point of need. Learning technologists helped to set up the webinar and supported the first sessions.

Our intention was to deliver interactive webinars and to make extensive use of features such as polls, chats and screen-sharing in order to give online demos of software tools or databases.

Discussions with colleagues indicated that technical issues are seen as one of the main barriers to offering webinars. Therefore, this project aimed to set up a generic design and a technical solution for our library that could be used by other subject librarians.

Background

A webinar could be simply described as 'a seminar conducted over the Internet' (*Oxford English dictionary*, 2015). Technically this is achieved by using video conferencing software allowing synchronous communication between participants. Libraries started to adapt this technology in the early 2000s (Reeves, 2005) to provide library inductions and information skills training to a growing number of distance learners. Although there is evidence that online library classes are efficient, offering these options to students isn't common practice in libraries yet. Most libraries prefer on-demand tutorials and guides, although 'distance learners report meagre interest in or use of these instructional tools' (Ritterbush, 2013, p. 35).

Technology

Since the university already uses Blackboard as its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), we decided to use Blackboard Collaborate as a software tool for webinars. This is a well-established piece of software, based on JAVA, offering basic features which allow you to create interactive webinars such as polls, chat, screen-sharing or a whiteboard.

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In addition to the PC/laptop software, Blackboard Collaborate offers a good app for tablets and smartphones, giving participants more flexibility in accessing the webinars.

In terms of hardware we used a PC or laptop, a USB Condenser Microphone, a webcam and additional light on the presenter's side. On the participant's side a PC, laptop, tablet or smartphone with headphones or speakers was necessary.

Implementation and set-up

Following initial research on the use of webinars for information skills training, we set up a project plan and contacted academics to organise two pilot webinars, which eventually took place in October 2014. The topic was RefWorks; the participants were radiographers from our masters programme in clinical reporting. In preparation we investigated best access methods for students and decided to embed the webinar in their Blackboard course site and to send them a guest link via email. This link offered them the opportunity to access the webinar without registration. We also developed guides and information material to ensure that participants were able to access the webinar.

To create interactive webinars we included live demos and polls. We used the chat function only to communicate with participants and gave no permission for the use of audio or video on their side; this allowed us to reduce the technical effort and to avoid common audio problems such as echo effects. After students had entered the online webinar room, they could see a slide instructing them to check their audio. The second slide explained how to use polls.

Initially we had assumed that we would always need one helper per webinar so that the presenter could concentrate on the presentation and would not be distracted by technical questions on the chat. However, we noticed that this is not necessary for webinars with fewer than ten participants. We scheduled the webinars for different times of the day. To collect feedback, we developed a feedback form on SurveyMonkey and posted the link to the survey at the end of the webinar on the chat.

Evaluation

The participation rate for all webinars was 33%. A feedback form, by means of which we tried to evaluate how students experienced the webinar and the technology, was posted at the end of each webinar and was filled out by 111 students.

As shown in Fig. 1, 95% liked the presentation. Although the webinars were based around a PowerPoint presentation, we tried to use interactive elements. In their study about library instruction webinars for distance education technology students, Moorfield-Lang and Hall (2015, p. 66) found that interactive practices such as 'demonstrations, live chat, polling, screen sharing... were the most popular'. Interactive elements could increase student engagement and satisfaction and enabled the presenter to direct questions to the students, and students to interact with the presenter. Students' questions could often be answered by the use of screen sharing and by the live demonstration of software features or search strategies. As a result, 96% of the participants thought the webinar was interactive (Fig. 2).

Another interesting finding from the feedback was that students prefer to see the presenter (Fig. 3), instead of just hearing the audio. The use of video seems to be important for a positive student experience. Moorefield-Lang et al (2015, p. 66) reported that distance learners often feel more isolated than on-campus students. Using video could give the library a face and could increase student engagement.



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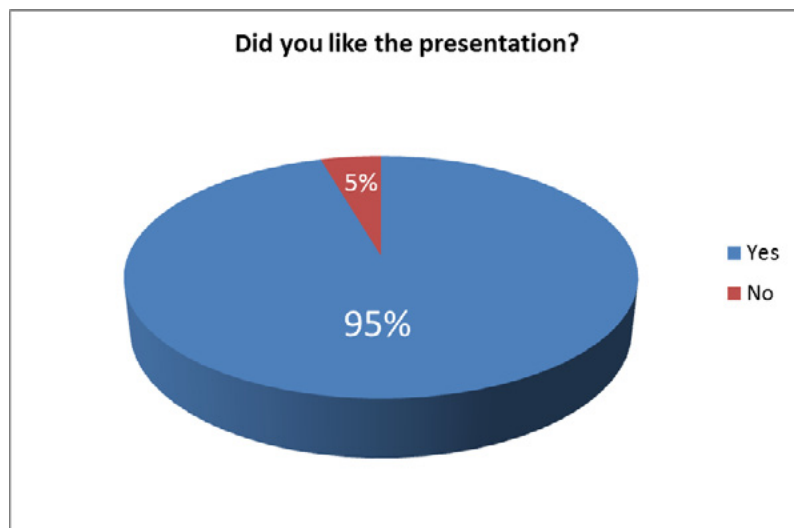


Fig. 1 feedback on the presentation

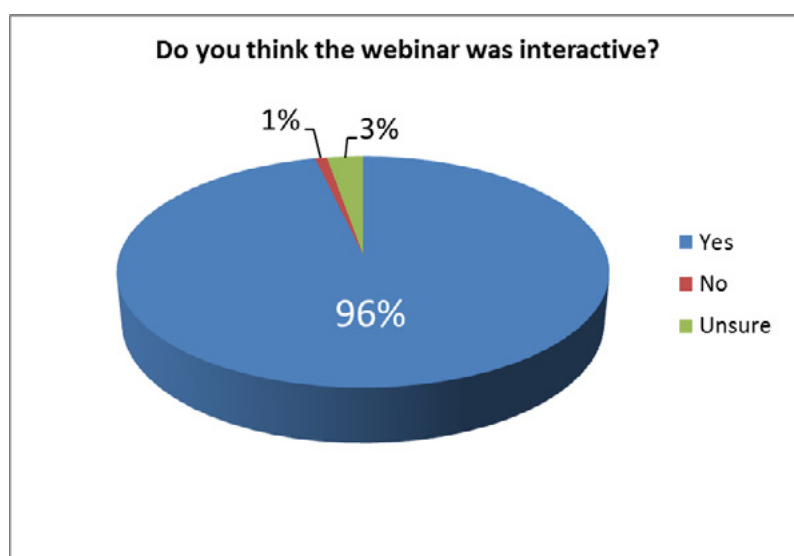


Fig. 2 feedback on the webinar

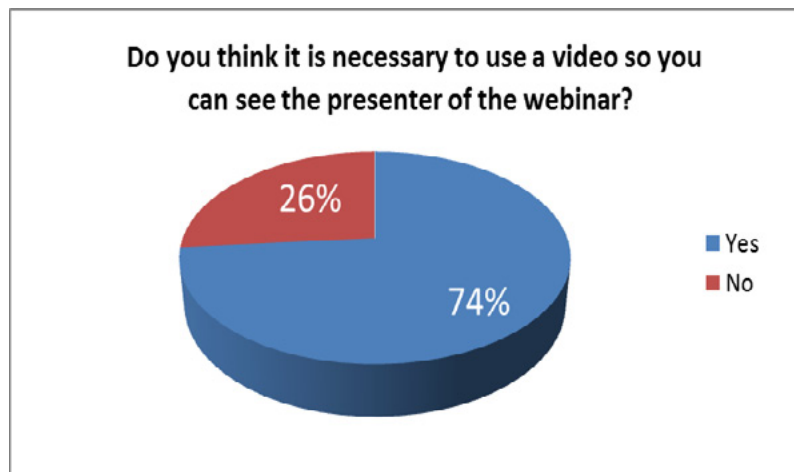


Fig. 3 feedback on the use of video

Technical aspects play an important role in how students experience webinars. As shown in Fig. 4, most of the participants reported no technical problems in accessing the webinar. Nevertheless, an attendance rate of 33% and random feedback from students and lecturers indicates that some students were not able to access the webinar at all because of technical problems. Investigating

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non-attendance in a more systematic way would be an interesting topic for future research.

Most of the technical concerns reported by students were related to JAVA and to difficulty with audio. With regard to JAVA, we produced detailed guides on how to launch a webinar, how to check the system and how to associate JAVA with the correct file extension of the launch file. Concerning audio, we created a slide that was displayed when the students first entered the webinar. This slide showed how to check your audio using the Audio SetUp Wizard of Blackboard Collaborate.

During this pilot we observed that the first technical set-up of the webinar caused users most problems. However, the learning curve was very steep. Once participants were able to overcome this technical barrier, they became more confident and had fewer problems accessing and participating in a webinar.

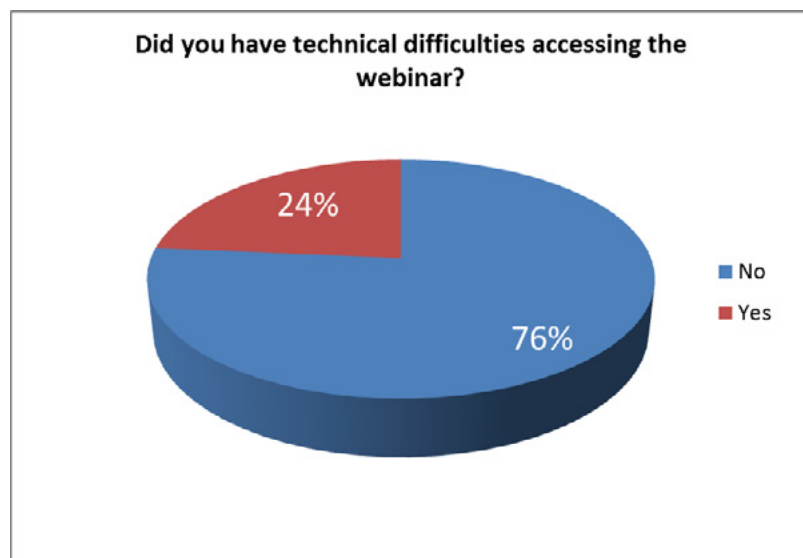


Fig. 4 feedback on any technical issues

One of the most positive results of the student feedback was that 98% of 181 students said they thought webinars were a useful online format for information skills training. A lot of positive feedback on the chat at the end of sessions underpins this outcome. These results are encouraging and indicate that students are open to using new technologies for synchronous online activities.

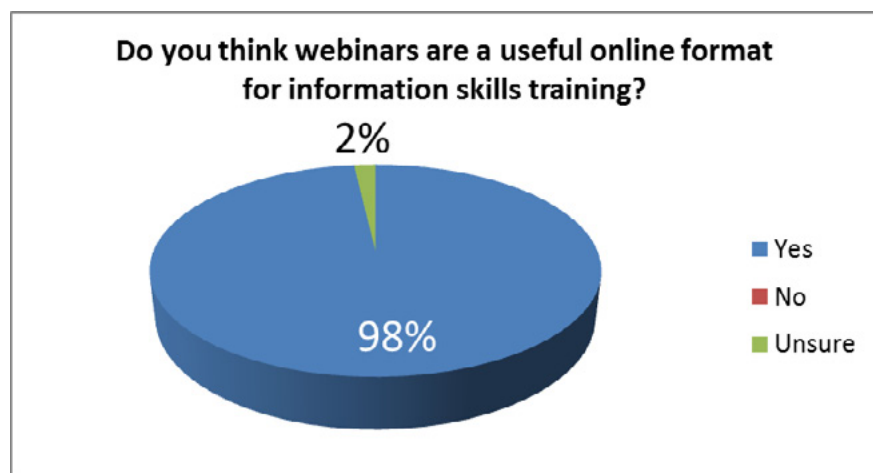


Fig. 5 feedback on the use of webinars for information skills training

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In the evaluation we also asked students to feed back why they had attended the webinar. As shown in Fig. 6, most did so because their tutor had suggested it. This supports the above-mentioned strategy of developing webinars for information skills training in close collaboration with academic staff. We noticed that announcing upcoming webinars on the students' VLE or mentioning them in lectures has a positive impact on attendance rates. Another main advantage of online webinars is that students don't have to be on campus to follow them. Thus webinars are convenient especially for part-time students, distance learners and students preferring to work from home.

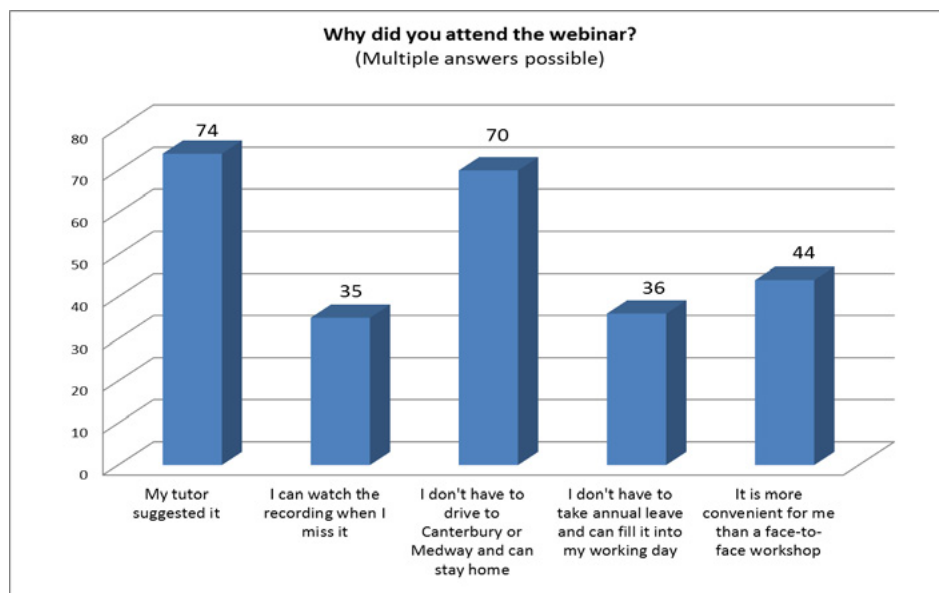


Fig. 6 Reasons why participants attended the webinar

Conclusion

The results of this one-year project show that webinars could be established as an additional way of providing information skills training for graduate and undergraduate students, alongside inductions, workshops, lectures and one-to-one meetings. An overwhelming majority (98%) thought that this is a useful format. Webinars help to address the problem of providing information skills training for a changing student population with a growing number of part-time students and distance learners.

Setting up a webinar for the first time is a challenge for both the presenter and participants. However, although the learning curve is steep, they learn quickly, and both running a webinar and participating in one can very quickly become routine.

Although most webinars tend to be based around PowerPoint presentations, in order to facilitate student engagement it is advisable to include online demos and interactive elements such as a chat or polls.

Blackboard Collaborate provided a stable software solution for this project but caused some difficulties amongst first-time participants. This was mainly due to problems relating to outdated JAVA versions on a computer, or installing JAVA on computers within the campus network.

Close collaboration with academics is recommended as attendance rates depend on their support and to enable us to provide webinars that are relevant to students.

Further research would be needed to understand why students do not attend webinars at all and might indicate ways of improving attendance rates; it could

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lead to the general acceptance of webinars as a common tool for information skills training.

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