

Transforming student learning through ResourceLists@Bham



Polly Harper
Subject Advisor
Library Services
University of Birmingham
p.harper@bham.ac.uk



Ann-Marie James
Academic Support Team
Manager
Library Services
University of Birmingham
a.m.james@bham.ac.uk

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Accessing and engaging with the right resources is one of the fundamental bridges between teaching and learning, whilst facilitating this is the central role of a library service. Here at the University of Birmingham we realised that reading lists lie at the very core of making such access successful. By investing our efforts into developing a genuinely effective, interactive and responsive reading list system, we hoped we could transform the teaching and learning experience for our students and academics.

Prior to 2015, the University of Birmingham used an open source system to collate reading lists. Its main function was to identify resources that needed to be purchased. Whilst this remains an important feature for any reading list system, if it is used only in this way, its value is limited. At Birmingham, we found that lists would often remain static throughout the academic year (or even years!), allowed for very little engagement with academics or students and, as a result, remained marginal to supporting teaching and learning.

The university therefore sought to reinvent its system through the implementation of the interactive reading list software, Talis Aspire Reading Lists (TARL). To move away from the idea of 'reading' being the sole method of engagement with materials, we chose to name our interface version 'ResourceLists@Bham.' This also highlighted our new system and its functionalities as a valuable resource in itself. As 'reading lists need to be easily accessible to students if they are to be of any benefit' (Brewerton, 2014, p. 84), the most important thing was to find a tool that integrated seamlessly with Canvas, our online virtual learning environment. This is widely used by students and academics for their communications and course information, and so is the most important point of access. We could thus ensure that ResourceLists@Bham was physically embedded in the university's teaching and learning sphere, creating a seamless pathway through to resources.

Making learning easier

If we are to take accessing and engaging with resources as an integral part of learning, then ResourceLists@Bham is already making learning easier. The system allows direct, one-click access to online resources and the library catalogue, meaning students spend less time looking for resources and more time actually engaging with and learning from them. As one student commented, ResourceLists@Bham 'inspired me to actually do the reading!'

Through Talis Aspire Digitised Content – a tool allowing digitised copies of chapters and articles to be uploaded and automatically copyright-checked – academics are saved a lot of administration time and can focus their energies instead on choosing the right resources for their list. Most importantly, though, items that would have ordinarily been restricted to print-only access can be made available. For distance learners especially, this is transformational; and it is notable that much of the earlier interest has been from distance-learning courses such as the university's online MBA course (University of Birmingham, 2016a). ResourceLists@Bham, at its most basic level, is opening up access to learning where it was not possible before.

Using Talis Aspire, academics can easily bookmark and add a whole range of resources to their list. These can vary from links to a hard-copy book on the library catalogue or an online journal article, to a website, video or documentary. Different learning styles can therefore be catered for and a variety of resources may be far less daunting for students than a seemingly endless list of lengthy textbooks. Furthermore, by including different kinds of information sources, students may be encouraged to make a judgement with regard to a resource's value and reliability. This is a more realistic experience of the variety of resources they would encounter in real-life research situations, and equips them with vital evaluation skills.

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Good (2001, p. 169) argued that 'technology will only bring true benefit to the learning experience when... seamlessly interwoven with pedagogy', and ResourceLists@Bham does exactly that. One of our most accessed lists is 'The US South: from plantations to NASCAR', primarily because the tutor has made concerted efforts to find and add electronic and digitised items, which analytics illustrate are the most used items. We also know that lists need to be 'mobile friendly for the mobile student' (Brewerton, 2014). Google Analytics data highlight that over 10% of traffic for ResourceLists@Bham comes from mobile devices, whilst some of that is from around the globe. Significantly, academics have observed mobile use during lectures:

I saw a group of three students in my lecture today looking on their phones in a discussion session... to my surprise, they were all using the mobile app version of ResourceLists... scrolling down the reading list looking for references. (Hadfield-Hill, 2016)

Communicating with students

We know that 'students can find long reading lists very daunting' (Brewerton, 2014, p. 86) and so the ability within ResourceLists@Bham to format each list into clearly structured sections (e.g. 'week one' or 'week two') allows learning to be much more scaffolded. Tutors can even choose to show only parts of a list each week within Canvas, allowing for greater flexibility in their course design. Students are thus faced with a more manageable set of resources at the appropriate time, which results in more targeted and focused teaching and learning.

Beyond simply accessing resources, however, ResourceLists@Bham goes a step further in communicating how to use a resource. Tutors may add clear guidance to individual items and sections within their lists, such as:

- Reading suggested in regard to this lecture
- Please undertake the reading listed here prior to the lecture on 3 November 2016.
- This article rapidly becomes quite technical, but is an interesting introduction as to how the work of Kosterlitz and Thouless came about. (University of Birmingham, 2016b)

There is the possibility of providing more personal touches:

- Emeritus Prof. Lote taught renal physiology and pharmacology to medical students in Birmingham for about 35 years... You may well see Prof. Lote lurking the ground floor corridor in the medical school. (University of Birmingham, 2016b)

Through the categorisation of each item (e.g. 'recommended' or 'background reading'), students can more clearly understand the significance of their reading in the context of their course. Moreover, each list provides a module view of the resources students need to access, and students are able to make their own private notes and mark up their reading intentions ('have read' or 'will read') for each item. This works in a consistent way across all lists on ResourceLists@Bham, providing a standardised method for students to organise and prioritise their time and study.

Reading lists have always served as a kind of 'medium or interface between tutor and student' (Stokes, 2008, p. 120), but through ResourceLists@Bham, communications are easier than ever. Students have increased access to their resources, but also can better understand the relevance of a resource through their tutor's input. Tutors can add or change items on their lists at any time and invite other tutors to contribute, making for a far more organic and 'flexible reading list' (Davis, 2012, p. 1). Whilst some academics update their lists every

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summer, others more regularly provide currency and interest for students: 'I see it as an evolving list and I tell that to students' (University of Birmingham, 2016c). If 'education is a collaborative exploration of ideas,' (Davis, 2012, p. 1), then interaction through the medium of ResourceLists@Bham truly enhances both sides of teaching and learning.

Engaging with academics

Rolling out an entirely new reading list system to a large university relies heavily on academics engaging with it and willingly adopting it as part of their teaching. Making this happen has, unsurprisingly, brought its challenges. Yet engaging with academics as part of this process has equally sharpened our understanding of how reading lists are, and could be, used.

Whilst some responded immediately and enthusiastically to the potential benefits of ResourceLists@Bham, others have been less sure. The notion of providing one-click access to key resources has been regarded by some as spoon-feeding, as they feel that 'we de-skill our students and... pander to the notion that everything should be... provided to them' (University of Birmingham, 2016c). The flexibility of ResourceLists@Bham, however, answers this point. Lists can be structured and used exactly as an academic wishes, acting as a starting point or 'indication for the student learner' (Stokes, 2008, p. 115) from which students can explore further resources. They could, for example, be link to key journal databases in the expectation that students would then search these resources themselves. Whilst Stokes (2008, p. 115) argues that too much dictation via a reading list could limit 'student development towards the condition of "autonomous learner"', we feel that the system's interactive functionalities give students more autonomy to better manage and understand their engagement with course resources.

With ever increasing responsibilities and time pressures, academics of course also question what appears to be yet 'another admin exercise' (University of Birmingham, 2016c). This is where we underline the numerous benefits of ResourceLists@Bham to the student learning experience, alongside its ease of use and longevity in that it can be readily updated each year. As 'any reading list will lose its effectiveness if not kept up to date' (Brewerton, 2014, p. 85), a new system provides fresh impetus and encourages academics to update lists that may not have been reviewed for some years.

While we have been liaising with academics as they develop their lists, discussions have also arisen around how much students are expected to read. With some lists containing up to a thousand items, we questioned whether these functioned more as a bibliography from which students can pick and choose particular items of interest. For lists of a hundred resources or more, we asked academics how students could prioritise their reading and whether the list should be condensed or merely better structured with clear guidance. Whilst informing our understanding of the variety of existing reading lists in use across the university, we hope we are also challenging academics' use and understanding of their own lists.

The future

For us, our ResourceLists@Bham venture is still very much in its early stages. With over seven hundred lists now actively owned by academics, and an average of a thousand sessions a day, this is encouraging progress. We recognise, nonetheless, that overall this is a relatively small proportion, and our ultimate aim remains that the entire institution will use this system. As both our own aspirations and ongoing developments of the Talis Aspire software reveal, there is still plenty more to be explored.

In terms of monitoring list usage, the 'dashboard' function (showing the 'number of clicks' for an item) and Google analytics provide useful metrics.

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Through their Lighthouse Project (Talis, 2016), however, Talis are exploring how the reading list system can provide more meaningful insights to better support teaching and learning. The Talis Player, for example, will collate more granular data around engagement, whilst additional functionality will allow academics to upload their own content (such as PowerPoint presentations) alongside existing resources. Commenting and tagging features will also be built in. Such possibilities are likely to change the future landscape of reading lists, or rather to blur entirely the lines between tutor-created and library resources, thus bringing together everything students need in one place. This will create a far more sophisticated understanding of how resources are really used, potentially transforming our provision of them.

ResourceLists@Bham is dramatically changing not only the way our students and our academics access resources, but also how they interact with them. Teaching and learning can be far richer and more organic when supported by a flexible, interactive and responsive reading list system. If ready access to the right kinds of information spans the gap between teaching and learning, then with the help of ResourceLists@Bham, we hope we are building the bridge.

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