Trivia, gaming inspire UWO-developed info literacy system

by Alex Hummel - Thursday, October 24, 2013

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There has been a "Dragonslayer" using the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's Polk Library. And library staff and administration are pleased, to say the least.

The "Dragonslayer" in question was, mere weeks after the start of the fall semester, the avatar already atop the digital leaderboard in the library's new "Active Instructional Videos on Information Literacy System," a new, digital jousting match enhancing each competitor's informational literacy.

"Active Instructional Videos on Information Literacy" might sound a tad daunting. So, consider its acronym – ANVIL.

Much more aligned with the target demo.

"Rather than make videos the fun part, 'let's make the assessment part the fun part,'" said Ted Mulvey, information literacy librarian at Polk Library, explaining ANVIL's genesis and aim to engage UW Oshkosh students in an information literacy challenge. "We thought, 'What if we did something like bar trivia?'"

Incorporating online instructional videos and building on the concepts of competitive, online trivia and gamification of learning, ANVIL is Polk's and UW Oshkosh's new approach to stoking an authentic, student-user appetite for and knowledge in information literacy. The campus-created, online system launched this fall and, already, hundreds of UW Oshkosh student users have logged in. Some have been required by their first-year UW Oshkosh instructors within the institution's transformed general-education program, the University Studies Program (USP), to log on and hone their knowledge. Others are jumping into the ANVIL arena with less prompting.

See how ANVIL users interface with the system in this video:

Whatever their motivations, students are taking to ANVIL. They are embracing the program and testing their informational literacy savvy. In the process, as they "play," they're learning how to use Polk's and other resources.

"Feedback from faculty, instructional staff and students has been very positive," said David Hietpas, a library web developer, former Polk Student Titan Employment Program (STEP) intern and UW Oshkosh alumnus who helped develop ANVIL. "I hope this application will be adapted by others, both on and off campus, to be used outside of the library department. One student stated '… if the education department had this application with education questions, I would play until I was number one on the leaderboard.' I think that says something positive about this new learning tool."

Polk Library Director Pat Wilkinson said the ultimate goals in ANVIL's development are to "be where students are" while, from the ground up and with staff and faculty input, develop a system that hones Polk's digital branch while strengthening students' information literacy.

Five years ago, Polk Library set a "strategic priority" to creatively use technology to enhance learning and research. "ANVIL is a great example of this," Wilkinson said.

"We're doing it with a purpose, and the purpose is to improve the educational research for students and faculty," he said.

How ANVIL works

By design, ANVIL is no simple one-and-done game.

The system's pool of trivia questions is offered in six modules, each featuring instructional videos within a portal on Polk Library's website. Students enter the gauntlet, develop a username, engage the videos and then test their knowledge in the battery of assessment questions. The categories include "Information cycle," "Understanding your assignment and developing a topic," "Searching for information," "Locating information," "Evaluating information" and "Citing and using information." The topics and outcomes are rooted in the Association of College and Resource Libraries' information literacy standards and competencies.

It's made clear to students that, when they finish, they are welcome to come back and try to boost their ANVIL scores. And, so far, they are.

Students are routinely asked the questions in different ways. So, a student who retakes any of ANVIL's 10-question modules will likely bump into a reframed question, if not a completely new set of questions from the program's cache of trivia.

Long story short, it would take several complete cycles through the ANVIL system to encounter all the questions. And that's exactly the point -- the more students play, the more the "game" caters to their competitiveness and the more they learn.

"Hopefully, students will take it multiple times to be 'number one,'" Mulvey said.

"There are two people who have been going at it – this Dragonslayer guy and this person going by (his or her) Net ID," he said. "I think people are taking the concept seriously and the competitive aspect seriously."

Designed with USP, instructors' needs, time in mind

ANVIL was also developed to with the goal of freeing up more instruction time inside the University Studies Program's "Quest One," or first-year courses, particularly Writing-Based Inquiry Seminar (WBIS). Currently, about 40 USP courses are connected to ANVIL.

Mulvey and Maccabee Levine, head of Polk Library Technology Services, said some UW Oshkosh Quest One WBIS faculty and instructors have assigned students to engage the program. Others have loosened requirements but urge students to seek out the system. The ultimate value to teachers is less investment of instructional time to introduce new students to Polk's research resources and the common research standards. ANVIL covers it.

"We're aware of how much instructors have to cram into their Quest One classes," Levine said, welcoming the prospect of students trying to improve their grades by repeatedly testing their knowledge through ANVIL.

Levine said, while it's early, he and other Polk colleagues have already had opportunities to share the ANVIL development story with peers around the nation. There has been some initial interest in adopting the program at sister UW System institutions and colleges.

"We do have this goal to put this out there into the world," Levine said.

First and foremost, ANVIL's developers want it to establish some strong roots and use at UW Oshkosh.

"I hope students will find this new way of learning to be fun and enjoyable," Hietpas said. "We hope more faculty and instructional staff will adopt this new tool."

"In the months ahead, Polk Library hopes to open source the application so anyone in the UW System and around the world can download and install the application," he said. "One of the features of this application is the ability to easily import and export content. With the import/export functionality, I would love to see a sharable repository grow for different learning categories which anyone can add to their application."

Learn more:

- ANVIL
- Polk Library
- University Studies Program