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Blogging toward Information Literacy: Engaging Students and Facilitating Peer Learning

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Title:

“Blogging toward Information Literacy: Engaging Students and Facilitating Peer Learning”

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose

This paper describes how a course-integrated blog was used to facilitate the learning of information literacy skills. It also reports on how the effectiveness of the blog was evaluated.

Design/methodology/approach

The blog was made the centerpiece of library support offered to a first-year politics course. With the support of the faculty member involved, students were required to post answers to weekly library research skills questions posted to the blog. The quality of student responses was examined using a simple assessment rubric. Also, a survey was administered to students to determine perceived usefulness.

Findings

The evaluation of blog posts showed that the quality of answers was generally very good. Students put effort into their responses and most gave accurate and thorough answers. The results of the survey indicated that most students felt the blog was useful to their learning, both in terms of general information skills, and in terms of helping research the term paper for the course.

Research limitations/implications

These results reflect just one course at a single university, therefore it is not possible to use the findings to make generalizations. The study could serve as a starting point for further inquiry into the evaluation of blogs as a support tool.

Originality/value

While others have reported on using blogs in a similar manner, this study also attempts a thorough evaluation of the efficacy of the blog in helping students learn. Given the positive results of this evaluation, librarians could consider using blogs and other Web 2.0 tools to engage students in their own learning.

Keywords *Blogs, Library 2.0, Course-integration, Collaboration, Hong Kong*

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Weblogs, commonly referred to as “blogs”, are very simple websites that are extremely easy to update and maintain. Over the past few years, the use of blogs in academic libraries has become quite commonplace. Much has been written generally about the versatility and flexibility of the blogging medium (Dearstyne, 2005), and the fact that blogs

can facilitate communication between the library and its users by allowing users to leave comments on the blog. Writers have also noted that blogs allow library content to be pushed to users through the use of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds (Draper and Turnage, 2008). These features have many potential applications in academic libraries. However, academic library blogs are currently used mainly to advertise library events, news, and resources, in the same way that static websites have done for many years. They could potentially be put to more innovative uses.

This article describes a pilot project that attempted to use blogging in a less conventional way than is the norm in academic libraries. A blog was set up to support a specific first-year undergraduate course. Unlike most course support blogs, it was not used to convey information about the course (timetables, assignment due dates, etc), or to provide lists of readings or resources. Instead, the blog was exclusively devoted to developing information literacy skills through a “Question of the Week” format. Importantly, the Library had the complete and active support of the faculty member running the course. Near the end of the semester, students were asked to complete a questionnaire asking for their opinions on various aspects of the blog. The questionnaire aimed to provide information to answer two main questions:

- How extensively did students make use of the blog?
- Was the blog effective in promoting library use and building information literacy skills in students?

Additionally, the content and quality of student postings to the blog were assessed to determine if this method of learning information literacy skills was successful.

Background

Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) is a mid-sized government-funded university with an enrolment of 8,300 students. Its six faculties/schools offer a wide variety of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. HKBU Library exists to support teaching and learning at the university, and one of its key aims is to provide high quality instruction in information literacy and research skills. Recently, the University and the Library have adopted an outcomes-based teaching and learning philosophy, and the University has made information literacy one of its graduate attributes. Nevertheless, as is the case in many academic libraries, most library instruction takes the form of one-off course-integrated library workshops. However, whenever the opportunity arises, librarians and faculty members participate in more extensive integration of information literacy instruction into their courses.

At the beginning of the 2008 fall semester, HKBU Library was planning instructional sessions for a variety of different courses. One such course was POLS1510, which was being taught by a relatively new faculty member who was very receptive to the idea of collaboration with library staff. As a result of considerable discussion and planning, it was decided that in addition to the usual one or two library sessions, the students would also be required to engage in a series of short library activities throughout the semester. When it was suggested that a blog might be used to post questions and answers, providing students with the opportunity to engage in teaching their peers as the semester progressed, the faculty member was enthusiastic. It was decided that different students would be assigned to different research-related questions, and all would be encouraged to read the blog regularly to learn from each other in preparation for researching their final term papers. Exploring the potential of Web 2.0 technology to support specific courses in an interactive manner and to engage students in their learning of information literacy skills was highly supported by both the librarians involved and the faculty member. Each had independently been interested in how such technologies could enhance teaching and learning in ways that went beyond instructor-driven lists of readings or resources.

Literature Review

Thorough planning should take place before the launch of any educational blog (Blair and Cranston, 2006). Defining the scope, identifying the audience, and coming up with marketing strategies will make success more likely. Furthermore, just as with any other tool used in library instruction, a blog should be evaluated regularly to determine whether its goals are being achieved. Blair and Level (2008) note that relatively little has been written on the subject of blog evaluation, and go on to suggest some possible evaluation criteria. One was to look at user statistics and the number of RSS feed subscriptions. The collection of this data is relatively easy thanks to a number of free tools available online, for example StatCounter and Feedburner. Another method is to conduct a survey of blog users to solicit feedback. One final method mentioned by Blair and Level (2008) is self-evaluation by the blog's author(s).

Commonly, blogs are used by academic libraries as an alternative means to keep users informed about the library. One slightly different approach has been to create a subject-based blog dedicated to keeping researchers in a particular field informed about library resources relevant to them (Blair and Level, 2008). This narrows the audience and makes it possible to post more specialized content on the blog. Another blog described by Schrecker (2008) restricted its intended audience even further, to just the students enrolled in one particular course. Course-specific information (regarding grades, due dates, relevant library resources etc.) was publicized on this blog. While these are examples of blogs being used to target particular audiences, the purpose of such blogs is generally similar to most other academic library blogs – to disseminate resource-related information and promote library services.

Although such blogs are useful, the technology could be used in others ways, taking advantage of the Web 2.0 capabilities allowing for user input and interaction. In the present study, a blog was used specifically to facilitate the collaborative and interactive teaching and learning of information literacy skills in a first year political science course. This literature review found few instances where this approach has previously been attempted. Coulter and Draper (2006) reported setting up ten separate blogs for each of the ten courses in which face-

to-face information literacy instruction was provided. However, the survey conducted at the end of semester indicated that 73% of respondents had never checked the blog set up for their course. Also, across the ten blogs not a single student posted a comment. In this case, one of the oft-cited advantages of blogs, the ability of readers to provide feedback and initiate discussion, was not utilized at all. This phenomenon of students being very reluctant to post comments to educational blogs has been noted by others. Nardi *et al.* (2004) describe a blog set up for an undergraduate archaeology course. All posts and comments were made by the professor and the teaching assistants, with students making none. The blog thus failed to generate a sense of community, although it did succeed as a website. Coulter and Draper (2006) believe that the answer to this is to cooperate with faculty in creating incentives for students to participate in discussions on the blog.

Cases where there is more student participation in library-related blogs have started to make their way into the literature, though usually in relation to credit-bearing information literacy courses that incorporate required participation in class blogs. Benefits described include active learning about the ever-changing tools of information with increased relevance (Smith *et al.*, 2007), and a deeper level of sharing and personal sense-making about information issues than is usually seen in the classroom (Bobish, 2007). Payne (2008) integrated a semester-long, blog-based, information assessment assignment into an information module of a business program. This sustained use of a blog, with posting requirements for students, provides an example whereby the medium and the message can work together – students increased their information world awareness while actively becoming part of it. Using blogs to involve students in the construction and evaluation of information is a natural use of this tool with great potential for expanded and refined use. However, approaching the idea from a somewhat different angle prompts the question - can Web 2.0 tools be used to allow students to construct their own learning with regard to search skills? To explore this question, this study tested the use of a blog as a platform for peer teaching/learning of basic search skills.

Method

Setting up

The first decision was to choose which blogging platform to use. As this was a pilot programme, no special software could be purchased. However, there are many richly-featured free blogging platforms currently available. It was decided to use Blogger, primarily because one author was already familiar with its use. Also, a colleague in a different section of the library was experimenting with another blogging platform, so it was thought useful to trial both in order to better inform future Library blog projects. A blog was duly created with an easy-to-remember URL - pols1510.blogspot.com. It was intended to make posting comments to the blog as easy as possible, so no restrictions were placed on comments, nor was moderation required before the comments were published on the blog. Like Bobish (2007), it was felt that students could be trusted not to engage in any inappropriate posting.

Defining the course support blog

While it took a matter of minutes to set up the blog itself, much more time was put into discussing exactly how the course support blog would function in relation to the needs of the course, and into how to make it as interactive as possible. Matthew and Schroeder (2006) note that if library services are not directly related to the class, instruction sessions are not meaningful and are difficult to successfully integrate into a course.

Having already determined that students would be assigned small research tasks throughout the semester, it was decided in consultation with the faculty member, that each post on the blog would take the form of a “Research Question of the Week”. Alongside the blog, two of the weekly tutorials were conducted by library staff, one at the beginning of the semester and one six weeks later. The workshops and the blog were designed to complement each other, with the blog supporting self- and peer-learning. Workshop content either covered

material independent of the blog questions, or reviewed questions that had been already covered by the blog in previous weeks.

The two course support librarians assigned to this pilot blog project would pose a question or problem regarding the use of library resources each week over the course of eight weeks, and each student would be assigned to answer one of the eight questions. With around ninety students, this meant that around eleven students would answer each question. The questions were designed to elicit responses from the students which would include examples, resources and search strategies that were directly relevant to political science in general, and the needs of this specific group for their assignments. Students' answers would take the form of a response to the relevant blog post that was written each week by the course librarians. It was here that the full support of the faculty member was invaluable, as he made the answering of the assigned research question compulsory. This ensured that every student would have to post a response, and therefore have to visit the blog at least once. At the end of each week, a final comment would be made by the librarians drawing together what had been discovered and reported by the students, and making additional comments as necessary. Students were encouraged to do a good job on their questions, not only for the sake of their own grades, but for the sake of their peers – students were charged with teaching each other what they had learned, so they could all collectively benefit from each of the research questions.

It was hoped that following this model would result in the course support blog eventually becoming a user-created reference and instructional tool, which students could go back to and consult when researching for their end of term papers. This was possible because one of the key features of blogs is the ease with which posts and comments can be archived. A well-run blog can become a history of accomplishments (Blair and Cranston, 2006). Using a blog in this way takes advantage of the unique features of the platform, and moves away from the typical application of blogs in libraries as alternatives to static websites developed solely by librarians.

The blog also encouraged students to contact library staff for help with their required blog response, and also for any other papers or projects that they were working on. This was

achieved by prominently displaying the direct telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of the two librarians working on the main page of the blog. The fact that library staff were available to provide research help was also heavily emphasised whenever the librarians interacted with students enrolled in POLS1510.

Launch and promotion

Students were introduced to the course support blog in their very first lecture of the course. The librarians were allotted ten minutes at the end of this lecture to briefly introduce the blog and outline how it would be integrated into their course. Also, a fifteen-minute section of the first library tutorial was dedicated to thoroughly describing the blog. Students were given the URL of the blog. They were shown how to access posts and how to comment on posts. This information was also provided on a handout. Students were asked to post a short introductory message to ensure that everyone was comfortable with using the blog.

Evaluation

The course support blog was evaluated on three fronts:

- The quality of answers posted by students
- The use of the blog by students beyond the minimum requirement to post response each
- Student opinions on how useful the blog was to them

For quality of responses, a simple assessment rubric was designed to score the quality of answers on a scale of 1-4. Each post was scored individually and scores were compiled per

question and overall. The assessment rubric and the student answers were discussed by librarians and the faculty member for the course, to ensure that outcomes were aligned with faculty expectations.

TABLE I Rubric used to assess the quality of student posts to the blog

<i>Category</i>	<i>Criteria</i>
1 - Needs Improvement	Did not adequately cover important points in response, or had major errors in any part of the response
2 - Satisfactory	Some important points were well explained, no major errors
3 - Good	Most of the important points were well explained, no errors
4 - Excellent	Important points were well explained with no errors, and went beyond what was required to provide a more fulsome response for peers

An evaluation of the use and the perceived usefulness of the blog was undertaken via a self-response questionnaire completed by the students. This was administered to students during the final tutorial (not during a library workshop). In order to minimise bias, the questionnaire was administered by the teaching assistant assigned to the course, and emphasis was placed on the anonymity of the questionnaire and the confidentiality of the results. The questionnaire was designed to ascertain how frequently students used the blog, and how easy it was for them to use it. As it was hoped that the blog would be used as a reference tool, students were also asked if they referred to the blog when doing the research for their term

paper. Students were further surveyed on the extent to which the blog had taught them about library resources and made them comfortable with using them.

Results and discussion

Quality of student posts

In total, there were eighty-eight students who posted answers to the blog over the course of eight weeks (and eight questions). The official enrolment was ninety-four students. Overall quality of answers was quite solid, with fifty-three students providing answers that were assessed as good or excellent. A further sixteen were satisfactory, leaving nineteen that needed improvement (see Table I for full descriptions of the assessment criteria used). Students did the work necessary to answer the questions, no doubt due to the fact that this was a required assignment within the course. This work included independent exploration, testing out different search strategies, and explaining the strengths and weaknesses of various strategies to their peers. They also seemed to take their responsibility to answer their question quite seriously, even when incorrect, giving fairly detailed answers intended to guide their peers.

Looking at the eight questions individually, there were a couple of questions that all students assigned to that question found challenging. These were questions that would not have been covered in their library orientation that all first-year undergraduates attend as part of the University's orientation week prior to the beginning of the semester. Students did not ask for assistance even though they were strongly encouraged to do so, as clearly seen in question six on how to find articles on a topic where almost all answers needed improvement. Encouragingly, after this poorly answered question, the following week had several students contact the librarians to ask for assistance with their question. It seems that students answering a question did in fact read the previous weeks' posts and the librarians' comments, and these students did not want to do as poorly as the previous group in this particular case.

The following week's answers were very strong, and in several cases were guided by the advice of librarians.

TABLE II Results of student post quality assessment

<i>Week</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Number of posts rated as:</i>			
		<i>Needs Improvement</i>	<i>Acceptable</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>
1	Finding Biographies	4	2	2	1
2	Finding Known Item - Books	1	1	7	2
3	Finding Known Item - Articles	1	5	2	6
4	Using AND	1	2	6	2
5	Truncation	1	1	7	4
6	Finding Articles (Databases)	11	2	0	0
7	Accessing full-text of articles	0	1	4	5
8	Searching for multimedia	0	2	3	2
TOTALS		19	16	31	22

The assessment results were shared with the faculty member to ensure that he agreed with our evaluation of student responses. His opinion on the quality of the postings and the usefulness of the blog as a teaching and learning tool were very enthusiastic. He suggested that next year he would not only require students to post to the blog, but that he would assign 10-15% of the overall grade to this activity. Given that students only needed to answer one

question in this pilot, the course librarians advised that a more substantial blogging assignment might need to be developed if a grade were to be attached to it.

Student use and perceptions

In total, seventy-six students out of the eighty-eight that posted to the blog completed the twelve-question survey instrument. The survey thus had a response rate of 86%. The first half of the survey consisted of questions that attempted to provide some insight into the student experience of using the course support blog. Overall, it was found that the blog was used more extensively than was expected. However, this was coupled with the finding that students tended not to exploit the full potential of the blog.

One initial fear was that students would only visit the blog once to post the response required by the course instructor. This turned out to be less prevalent than expected, with only 20% of respondents indicating that they paid only one visit to the blog. It can be speculated that after being compelled to make an initial visit, many students judged the blog helpful and therefore made return visits. If use of the blog had been voluntary, those same students may not have made any visits at all. On the other hand, the number of students visiting the blog five times or more was also relatively low at 16%. Clearly, very few (if any) students were visiting the blog every week to read the new research question and answers, as had been advised by the faculty and librarians. Most students (64%) fell somewhere in the middle, visiting the blog a few times over the course of the semester. Nevertheless, these findings stand in contrast to other library blogging efforts reported in the literature where student use was very limited. The requirement for students to make at least one posting to the blog appeared to be very effective, and the results suggest that it significantly increased student use of the blog even beyond the first compulsory visit.

TABLE III Number of times students visited the course support blog ($N = 76$)

<i>Response</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Once	15	20%
2 - 4 times	49	64%
5 times or more	12	16%
TOTAL	76	100%

Only a small fraction (7%) of students expressed having difficulty using the blog, which was not surprising given the general aptitude among Hong Kong young people in using Web-based applications. The very brief instructional segment delivered as part of the first library tutorial proved sufficient for most students.

TABLE IV Students' views on how easy it was to post their required response to the course support blog (*N* = 76)

<i>Response</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Very easy	44	58%
Somewhat easy	27	36%
Not at all easy	5	7%
TOTAL	76	100%

It was suggested to students that the blog would become a repository of useful research tips which they could make use of when writing their term papers. Only 22% (seventeen students) took this advice. However, out of these seventeen, just one student said that using the blog in this way was not at all helpful, with sixteen expressing that it was either somewhat helpful (eight students) or very helpful (eight students). Based on this finding, it is suggested that any future implementations of the course support blog further promote the use of the blog in this way.

TABLE V Students who consulted the course support blog for help when writing their term paper (**N** = 76)

<i>Response</i>	N	%
Yes	17	22%
No	59	78%
TOTAL	76	100%

TABLE VI Students' views on whether the course support blog was helpful when writing their term paper (**N** = 17)

<i>Response</i>	N	%
Very useful	8	47%
Somewhat useful	8	47%
Not at all useful	1	6%
TOTAL	17	100%

Finally, it was also clear that despite repeated entreaties, most respondents (73%) did not ask the course librarians for help in answering their assigned blog question.

TABLE VII Students who consulted with a librarian about their answer to their assigned blog question (**N** = 75)

<i>Response</i>	N	%
Yes	20	27%
No	55	73%
TOTAL	75	100%

When asked for reasons for this, most students said that it was not necessary (58%). However, judging from some of the answers posted to the blog, advice would clearly have been helpful for certain questions. It is likely that students are overestimating their own research competencies. Student overconfidence in research skills has been noted by other authors (Gross and Latham, 2007). A more surprising result was that only four respondents said that they were not comfortable with approaching librarians for help. This was a much lower rate of library/librarian anxiety than expected. The support of the faculty in encouraging students to ask for assistance may have helped alleviate the common Hong Kong attitude of preferring to be able to do things without asking for help.

TABLE VIII Reasons for not seeking help from librarians (*N* = 55)

<i>Response</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%*</i>
Not necessary	32	58%
Too uncomfortable	4	7%
Too inconvenient	12	22%
Other	10	18%

* total greater than 100% as more than one response was allowed

Student perceptions of learning

Students were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed that the course support blog had helped them in three areas:

- Learning about the resources held in the Library
- Learning about the search strategies needed to find information
- Feeling comfortable with regards to using Library resources

For each of the three areas, the results were broadly similar. Encouragingly, roughly nine in ten students either agreed or strongly agreed that the course support blog was useful to them. Across the three learning outcomes, not a single student strongly disagreed that the course support blog had been useful. These results clearly indicate that students believed that the blog was effective in enhancing their library skills.

TABLE IX Students' views regarding what they learned through using the course support blog (*N* = 76)

<i>Learning outcome</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>		<i>Agree</i>		<i>Disagree</i>		<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
	Learned about Library resources	18	24%	52	68%	6	8%	0
Learned about search strategies	21	28%	47	62%	8	11%	0	0%
Feel comfortable using Library resources	20	26%	50	66%	6	8%	0	0%

Conclusion

Before making some tentative conclusions, the limitations of the evidence presented here should be emphasised. As this was a pilot project involving a relatively small number of students in a single course, it would be inappropriate to make sweeping generalisations of the effectiveness of course support blogs based on this one example. Within the boundaries of this caveat, the quality of the posted responses along with the survey results on the use and usefulness of the blog are encouraging.

The students themselves engaged in discovering answers to the Research Questions of the Week, and did a good job in sharing what they had learned with their peers. This learning and sharing of information literacy skills amongst students is rare in itself, and was

certainly highly valued by the librarians and the faculty member. It is beyond the scope of this pilot project to say whether this form of learning is more effective than face-to-face library workshops, but a more thorough assessment of the retention and application of library skills learned in this manner is an area for further study.

The survey of the use and usefulness of the blog suggested that most students made use of this learning tool beyond the minimum requirement set by the faculty member responsible. Still, the cooperation of the faculty member in implementing this minimum requirement was critical to the high level of blog use by students. The survey clearly showed that a majority of students believed that the blog was useful in the development of their information literacy skills. Those students who consulted the blog when researching their term papers believed that it also had a beneficial effect on their actual assignments. Beyond student perception, the faculty member noted that final papers were of higher quality due, in his opinion, to being informed by better library-related research. He found the bibliographies to be greatly improved compared to other classes and previous semesters, in terms of the relevance, variety and quality of sources included. Again, it must be noted that this was the experience of one class of first year undergraduate politics students. Further research might address whether a similar outcome is achieved by students of different levels and disciplines.

The authors would like to note that although we believe that the “Question of the Week” blogging project was quite successful in itself, the importance that the faculty member placed on good library research should not go under-emphasized. The students were well aware from the first class onwards that learning about and utilizing library resources was an expected part of the course.

This pilot project aimed to test the usefulness/effectiveness of a course support blog maintained by librarians with the full and active support of the course instructor. The results indicate that this model shows promise in facilitating the development of students’ information literacy skills. While no definitive conclusions can be made given the limited scope of the project, there is a clear case for the further refinement and expansion of this type of library course support.

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Appendix – Course support blog questions

Research Question 1

There are many ways to find biographical information about famous political figures. One way is to use general reference sources like Wikipedia or Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

Describe one other way that you can find biographical information about famous political figures.

Include all the necessary steps you need to take to find and access the information.

Research Question 2

Use your course textbook (Alan Ball's *Modern Politics and Government*, 2005) to do the following:

From the bibliography at the back of the book, randomly select any one **book** (do not all pick one from the first page!) and determine if you can access this book at HKBU Library.

In your blog response, write out the full citation of the book. Explain how you can tell that this is a book. Then describe all the necessary steps that you took to find out if the book was available at the Library.

Research Question 3

Using your course textbook (Alan Ball's *Modern Politics and Government*, 2005) do the following:

From the bibliography at the back of the book, randomly select any one **article** (do not all pick one from the first page!) and determine if you can access this article at HKBU Library.

In your blog response, write out the full citation of the article. Explain how you can tell that this is an article. Then describe all the necessary steps that you took to find out if the article was available at the Library.

Research Question 4

A student wants to find information on Hong Kong's Basic Law. He goes into the Library Catalogue and types "Hong Kong Basic Law". The Catalogue returns fourteen results.

Actually, HKBU Library has at least 310 items related to this topic, and the student has missed out on some useful resources. How can this student's search be changed so that these other items are found? Explain why this change works.

Research Question 5

A student is looking for information on neoconservatism. She goes into the Library Catalogue and types "neoconservatism". The Catalogue returns seven results.

There are at least 23 other items in the Library that may be of interest to this student. For example, her search does not find the book entitled "America at the crossroads: democracy, power, and the neoconservative legacy".

Describe and explain how her search could be modified so that this and the other 22 items would be found by the Library Catalogue.

Also, come up with one other example to illustrate this search skill.

Research Question 6

If you were looking for **magazine or journal articles** on the subject of political theory, what would you do? Where would you start?

Trust us, you will want to ask for help on this one!

Research Question 7

Sometimes, the database you are searching will only contain an abstract (summary) of a useful article.

What would you do to try to find the full text of the article?

As we have repeatedly mentioned, please come and ask for help! Remember you are teaching all of your fellow students in your blog responses, so your answers need to be of very high quality!

Research Question 8

Current affairs television programmes are good resources for learning more about political events. Such programmes often invite expert guests for their analysis. For example, the recent presidential election in Taiwan was extensively covered in Hong Kong, with the discussion covering the election system, Taiwan's unique electoral culture, and the impact of the result on China and Hong Kong.

How would you search for local Hong Kong TV programmes at HKBU Library?