



**LearnHigher Centre for Excellence in Teaching and
Learning**

Third annual self-evaluation report, August 2008

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 LearnHigher is a CETL involving 16 English universities and covering 20 learning development areas. Among other purposes it aims to share learning development resources, some specifically created under the LearnHigher banner, and build an evidence base for enhancing the effectiveness of students' study practices, academics' teaching practices and of organizational structures and processes.

1.2 LearnHigher is structured as a collaborative arrangement of Learning Area Coordinators (LACs) who take responsibility for their learning areas in addition to their mainstream roles within their universities. LearnHigher is therefore a collaborative network striving to identify and disseminate excellence in its approach to learning development. It is not a project team.

1.3 LearnHigher has adopted an externally mediated critical self-evaluation approach to its evaluation effort and has this year worked with Professor Paul Trowler as its external evaluator and critical friend. Regional clusters evaluate the work of learning areas in each region and peer evaluation processes occur in addition to this. The reports that are produced each year are: manager's progress report, LACs' evaluation reports as well as financial reports. These were used in compiling this central report.

1.4 LearnHigher's level of activity continues to be high across the majority of its 20 learning areas. There is obvious synergy between partners that can increase output exponentially and that more than outweighs any peaks and troughs. There continue to be positive effects on student learning, greater involvement of lecturers in integrating learning development with other activities and some impact on university strategy policy and structures. Generally the challenge continues to be greater for LearnHigher partners situated in research-intensive universities. Activities involving students and some staff are impressive, but the challenge for the next period of LearnHigher is to develop a broader engagement with host universities and their policies and structures, and with consolidating and broadening the effects of LearnHigher's work with more staff and institutions external to it.

- 1.5 LearnHigher continues to address the issue of the synergies that can be had through forging more collaboration and meta-analysis within the network. As last year, the challenge has been to continue to move beyond being a set of disparate projects and strengthening its collective influence and this is being addressed well.
- 1.6 LearnHigher has made good progress in achieving an agreed conceptualisation of learning development both in terms of what it is and, especially, what it is not.
- 1.7 Key areas of work for LearnHigher now revolve around engagement strategies with host institutions and beyond, switching from innovation to consolidation and dissemination, as well as making decisions and taking actions related to the legacy of LearnHigher after its funding ceases in 2010.
- 1.8 LearnHigher continues to be good value for money in terms of the outputs and effects of its activity, avoiding against the odds (for such a large and diverse organization) the threat of entropy thanks to the energies, enthusiasm and commitment of its LACs.

2. Introduction

2.1 Purposes and audience

This report builds on the first and second annual evaluation reports. It addresses the issues raised in those reports and evaluates the progress made on them. In addition it looks to the future of LearnHigher as it enters its final phase (funding comes to an end in 2010). A third function of the report is to contribute to the process of dissemination of the achievements and lessons of the different parts of LearnHigher. Thus the audience for the report is slightly different from that identified in the first two annual reports. While those reports were written 'for LearnHigher partners, their local Steering Groups and Senior Managers, LearnHigher local networks and stakeholders, HEFCE and the central CETL's Evaluation Team' (2nd Annual Evaluation Report, p 2), this one includes those audiences but goes further. We intend this report to be read by Learning Developers more widely, and those with responsibility for planning and managing the learning development function in universities more broadly. For this reason we have included an extensive collection of case studies from LearnHigher's activities this year which, we hope, will help shape and illuminate practice in this area.

2.2 Evidence used in compiling this report

This report was written by LearnHigher's evaluator and critical friend, Professor Paul Trowler, and by the CETL's Acting Director, Michelle Verity. Paul attended a number of meetings, including a Development Day and two regional evaluation cluster meetings. He spoke to LearnHigher managers at Liverpool Hope University and to the Acting Director of LearnHigher at 3 other separate meetings. Conversations were had with members of the LearnHigher Steering Group and leaders of each of the 16 centres. Reports of meetings were reviewed and evidence was collected through the compilation of case studies. The individual centre annual reports and report from Liverpool Hope were analysed in compiling this annual evaluation and the documentation underpinning the LearnHigher CETL was read. In addition, as a member of the Lancaster team engaged in the national evaluation of the CETL initiative, Prof Trowler carefully analysed the findings of that project for relevant issues for LearnHigher. Discussions also took place between the external evaluator and the Acting Director of LearnHigher regarding activities and progress during the year based on their mutual reading of the individual centre reports.

Background

LearnHigher is a collaborative Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) involving sixteen English Universities and covering twenty learning development areas. As one of the 74 CETLs it has the overall aim to "reward excellent teaching practice and to increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community" (HEFCE).

For LearnHigher there are 7 central aims within this broad remit:

1. Building mechanisms for sharing excellent materials and resources
2. Building capacity in the LearnHigher Network
3. Creating institutional impact in each of the partner institutions
4. Evaluation of its own work for supporting its own development
5. Research to build an evidence base for 'learning development'
6. Dissemination through other networks to the wider sector
7. Effective CETL programme management

The partner institutions and their learning areas are as follows:

TABLE 1 – PARTNER INSTITUTIONS AND LEARNING AREAS

Partner Institution	Learning Area/s
Bournemouth University	Personal development planning
University of Brighton	Visual practices
Brunel University	1 Numeracy, maths and statistics. 2 Oral communication
University of Bradford	1 Group work. 2 Referencing
University of Kent	Assessment
University Lincoln	Doing research
The University of Liverpool	Understanding organisations
Liverpool Hope University (lead institution)	Mobile learning
London Metropolitan University	1 Note making. 2 Reading
University of Leeds	Listening and interpersonal skills
The University of Manchester	Independent learning/self-directed study
Manchester Metropolitan University	Information literacy
Nottingham Trent University	Academic writing
University of Plymouth	Critical thinking and reflection
University of Reading	1 Time management. 2 Report writing.
University of Worcester	Learning for all (inclusivity)

3 Achievements against aims and objectives

3.1 Aims for 2006-7

The first annual report (p 2) noted that “LearnHigher has the potential to do a great deal more if:

- A robust description of learning development can be adopted
- Projects collaborate so that developments and enquiries cluster to each one’s benefit
- Projects become seen as locally valuable activities that directly contribute to a coherent vision of LearnHigher.”.

In the second annual report (p19) the following features that LearnHigher needs to do were noted:

Understand change strategies:

- Needs to develop a theoretical basis for understanding itself as a change agent,
- Needs to focus on its growing power to influence, and develop a range of strategies to seek more sustainable impact at local level,
- Needs to consider how to influence the wider policy agendas.

Revisit the foci of its activities and its evaluative activities in the light of current learning:

- Revisit its central evaluation question,
- Re-visit what it means for other groups to ‘have a stake’ in the CETL,
- Develop methods for collecting evidence about the use of the LearnHigher spaces, (and collect some).

Take its understanding of learning development to a new level:

- Build further a consensus about ‘learning development’ and this needs to be taken to a higher level,
- Needs to develop a consensus on a clear theoretical model(s) for learning development.

Understand the nature of itself as a network:

- To give focus to how to use the ‘strength of the network’ for greater impact on learning development practices and improving student learning,
- To recognise its unique role in the learning development community.

Share what it has collectively learned:

- LearnHigher needs to reflect on what it has come to understand about resources and to agree about its resources focus so it can promote a clear and more sophisticated message about the effective use of resources,
- To review what it understands about effective learning development interventions,
- Needs to review its research focus and activities in the light of what it has learned.

3.2 Outcomes against aims and objectives

Each of the learning areas provided a statement of achievements during the year against a slightly adapted version of LearnHigher's broad aims (set out in section 3, above).

Under these are a series of more specific aims:

- 1. Share existing good materials, identify or develop new learner development materials and resources for learners and staff**
- 2. Surface and share our knowledge about the effective use of resources in supporting learning**
- 3. Build practitioner capacity across the LearnHigher network in terms of broadening expertise and staff skills.**
- 4. Develop the use of the LearnHigher spaces in new ways that promote learning development.**
- 5. Raise the profile of LearnHigher work within the HEIs for greater institutional impact.**
- 6. Develop effective monitoring strategies for use of the resources within learning development**
- 7. Building a research community and portfolio of evidence-based research that helps develop our understanding of effective strategies for supporting learners into new areas of higher education study.**
- 8. Raise awareness of LearnHigher CETL.**
- 9. Engaging others in LearnHigher sub-networks that are creating excellent materials, undertaking research or involved in embedding in their own institutions.**

Under each of these 9 aims a set of specific objectives for this third year of the project, 2007-8, were developed against which to evaluate progress this year, building on the comments set out in section 3.1, above:

TABLE 2 – LEARNHIGHER AIMS AND YEAR THREE OBJECTIVES

Building mechanisms for sharing excellent materials and resources		
	LearnHigher Aims	Year Three Objectives
1	Share existing good materials, identify or develop new learner development materials and resources for learners and staff.	Each area to signpost additional materials for use from their LearnHigher web-page Repurpose baseline information, and literature reviews, any links or specific resources located that would be useful to signpost to others, and make these available for the LearnHigher web-site Learning Area pages.
2	Surface and share our knowledge about the effective use of resources in supporting learning	Support the creation of a workshop series which will highlight effective use of resources in practice.

Building capacity in the LearnHigher Network		
3	Build practitioner capacity across the LearnHigher network in terms of broadening expertise and staff skills.	To promote the development of expertise in more areas by running at least three workshop sessions developed by LACs

Creating institutional impact		
4	Develop the use of the LearnHigher spaces in new ways that promote learning development.	Share good ideas for use of new spaces across the network by sharing practices and innovations both within own university, across the network and across the sector
5	Raise the profile of LearnHigher work within the HEIs for greater institutional impact.	Evaluate the use and impact of the LearnHigher spaces now created in all Universities and promote LearnHigher through these spaces, both to students and to Senior Management
		Run events/workshops etc to align with institutional learner development strategies to promote the branded LearnHigher work
		Identify and share strategies for making an impact at individual LearnHigher universities

Evaluation

6	Develop effective monitoring strategies for use of the resources within learning development	Set up at least two specific evaluation projects on use of resources in particular contexts
		Collect for baseline data usage of LearnHigher spaces
		Develop specific measures of success for local and network activities

Developing a research base

7	Building a research community and portfolio of evidence-based research that helps develop our understanding of effective strategies for supporting learners into new areas of higher education study.	Identify current research that underpins learner development areas and make this available to the wider community through the portal service.
		Undertake collaborative research projects across the LearnHigher network developing an evidence base in 'learning development'.

Dissemination

8	Raise awareness of LearnHigher CETL.	Offer papers and presentations at appropriate conferences
9	Engaging others in LearnHigher sub-networks that are creating excellent materials, undertaking research or involved in embedding in their own institutions.	Involve other HEIs through the development of Area sub-networks

Significant progress has been made against each of these broad objectives, aims and sub-aims. A summary of the categories of activities that have been undertaken this year is as follows:

- Creating lists of resources (sometimes annotated)
- Developing and disseminating guides, packs, tools and self-help resources (on-line and physical)
- Evaluating guides, packs, tools and self-help resources
- Developing literature reviews
- Running workshops for staff, students and others
- Providing learning spaces and monitoring their use
- Working with departments in host institutions
- Writing reports for university bodies and being involved in relevant committees
- Providing funds for innovation by others
- Giving conference presentations
- Organizing conferences, including student conferences
- Networking with learning development colleagues
- Writing books and journal articles
- Engaging in research projects

Collaborative work across LearnHigher has continued well. The new LearnHigher website has been developed and will be a valuable portal to many resources. Collaborative projects commencing in this year have included:

- Data analysis for all! (MMU, Lincoln, Plymouth, & Manchester)
- Overview of LearnHigher research (Reading, working with all partners)
- Year Planner project (Brighton & Reading)
- Learning Development Models in HE (MMU & Brunel)
- HEFCE funded First Year Experience project (NTU, Bournemouth & Bradford)
- The Learning Development in Action book writing project (involving all of LH)

3 Development Days have focussed on:

- evaluation strategies & approaches
- change management
- sharing theoretical thinking to inform our concept of 'Learning Development'

A two day book writing event developed writing capacity.

Website training days focussed on using WYSIWYG editor to create web pages and blog.

The individual centre reports evidence an extremely impressive range of innovations and activities. Analysing those reports, each structured in relation to the categories in Table 2 above revealed that under **category 1 (sharing and generating materials)** much good use has been made by all learning areas of re-developed LearnHigher website at <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/>. The case study of the WrAssE project set out in section 5 illustrates the effective use of the web for writing and critical thinking. Other case studies in section 5 illustrate excellent progress in sharing and generating materials, for example case study 5.8 on the study skills website. Progress has also been made by several learning areas in reviewing materials and texts.

Under **category 2 (surface and share knowledge about effective use of materials)** some learning areas have been able to develop a workshop series while others are still making preparations for this. Similarly **under category 3 (build practitioner capacity)**, several learning areas have been extremely active in this area, giving it priority, while others have devoted time and resources to other objectives for this year.

Under **category 4 (learning spaces)**, while many of the learning areas have invested in innovative and useful new or re-developed spaces there is limited evidence so far of sharing of good ideas and knowledge about their use. Case study 5.7 usefully discusses and evaluates the use of the LearnHigher learning spaces at the University of Manchester and such accounts represent a good way of sharing ideas and experiences.

Under **category 5 (institutional impact)** most reports concentrated on the use of LearnHigher spaces and attendance at events. *Specific* activities to raise the profile of LearnHigher have generally not been undertaken. The extent to which the objectives in this category have been met is generally more limited than other aims and objectives.

Category 6 (effective monitoring strategies) has been addressed by most learning areas and where there has been limited attention to this so far there are usually good proposals for future work.

Category 7 (research community and evidence-based portfolio) is addressed by all learning areas. The building of the research community is proceeding at a good pace but there is

limited progress on the *evidence-base* of effective strategies and bringing research projects together. An internal project is currently underway to measure and enhance the coherence of the research effort that is occurring within LearnHigher, and it is clear that as well as this effort on the ground there needs to be more meta-analysis of research outcomes in order to meet this objective. One way in which this might be done is through the book which the LearnHigher team has submitted to a publisher. While this will entail a considerable degree of effort for the team, it will have the effect of necessitating an overview of the work of the learning areas, including relevant research work, and this is to be applauded.

Category 8 (raising the profile of LearnHigher) has generally been well addressed this year. The level of activity generally is impressive and in each case LearnHigher's profile and 'brand' has been enhanced by association.

Category 9 (engaging other HEIs) has again been well addressed, with good evidence of linkages beyond the LearnHigher institutions, including outside the UK. While this appears to be happening in an organic way rather than in one which is particularly strategically directed, there is no reason to believe that this is not a good way to proceed.

3.3 Commentary on outcomes as against aims and objectives

The achievements this year have been numerous and impressive. There does need to be careful evaluation of the *effects* of activities and innovations, of the nature of changes they bring about in practices, knowledge and understanding. If learning development is to do with enhancing academic practices, knowledge, understanding, self awareness and critical thinking then evaluation activity needs to address itself to the extent to which this is being achieved. The case studies in section 5 usefully demonstrate a number of ways in which effects can be judged, assessed and measured. These include formal evaluation questionnaires, comments from students about how their behaviour has changed as well as discussions with staff (see for example case studies 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3, though others also demonstrate effects well).

Secondly, while the individual reports evidence an impressive amount of activity this year, some absences in them indicate that the work of LearnHigher would be improved by better strategic thinking. For example better specification of good engagement strategies with host

institutions would assist in overcoming the danger of enclaving of learning development within the work of universities.

4 Issues for consideration

There are seven areas which merit further consideration for the final years of LearnHigher. They are as follows:

4.1 Legacy issues

In its final two years LearnHigher needs to consider, and begin active planning for its legacy after HEFCE funding ceases. There appear to be at least three viable alternative pathways for the future:

- Incorporation into the HEA (www.heacademy.ac.uk)
- Incorporation into ALDinHE (<http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/>)
- Hosting by Liverpool Hope University

In the first the Higher Education Academy would be approached to host the materials and other features of LearnHigher, thus incorporating Learning Developers and much of their materials into the central organization in the UK for the enhancement of teaching and learning.

In the second LearnHigher would become integrated into the Association for Learning Developers in Higher Education, a subscription-based organization with an annual conference, discussion list (ALDHEN) and, in the near future, its own journal.

In the third, LearnHigher would continue in something like its present form but probably funded through membership subscriptions. The website would continue to be hosted by Liverpool Hope University and other features of LearnHigher would be co-ordinated from there as now.

Each of these scenarios has different implications for the nature of the LearnHigher 'brand' and its presence. Each situates the community of Learning Developers somewhat differently. Potentially each will configure LearnHigher into fulfilling a different mix of functions: broker of materials and ideas; warrant of quality; central web presence.

Each of these scenarios also has different implications for the location and character of the proposed final conference for LearnHigher, suggested for Easter 2010.

4.2 Focus, direction and synergy

Because LearnHigher is such a large and complex organization, there are a number of issues about focus, direction and the ability to extract the benefits of synergy. It is remarkable that the obvious potential for entropy has not in fact happened: the energy of the people in the other centres and 20 learning areas, their enthusiasm and commitment to a common purpose has kept LearnHigher together and enabled it forge new developments that would not be present if the whole were not present. However, this 'keeping it together' requires continued work on the part of all the participants, and requires an effort on top of their functions as Learning Developers.

Two related features are of particular concern:

Centre-periphery relationships: i.e. the balance between direction from the centre at Liverpool Hope on the one hand and the individual self-directed energies of those in the 16 centres on the other. This is an issue that surfaces and re-surfaces in meetings and discussions. It will come to a head as discussions about the legacy of LearnHigher move into a concrete planning phase.

Mission and mission drift: because of the diversity incorporated within LearnHigher there is a continuing tension around the developing aims, objectives and priorities of the organization as a whole and its individual constituencies. In one direction lies a breakdown of the guiding and synergising functions of LearnHigher if the ability to keep sight of the developing mission is lost, while in the other is a suppression of the very evident creativity and imagination of those in the 16 centres.

4.3 Theory, concepts and practices

If the concept of learning development as a set of practices, and learning developers as a community is to have analytical and practical purchase there needs to be a refined and shared understanding of what these terms and practices are, and what ideas underpin them. As noted above, the first annual report identified the need for a robust description of learning development, and much discussion has followed from that. One outcome of this has been to move away from the concept of *learner* development, as being too limited. The focus on the learner diverts attention from practices of academics as well as organizational characteristics which, while they do eventually impact on learners, require a focus in themselves.

LearnHigher's working definition of learning development is:

'Learning Development' is an emergent and increasingly recognised field of practice in higher education in the UK. Those who identify with the term are principally involved in areas of work focussing on student learning, working directly with students and in a consultative capacity with other HE staff. This work is sometimes referred to as 'learning support' or 'study skills', but most LD practitioners reject the remedial implications that such terms may carry.

The main aim of LD work is the empowerment of all students through the enhancement of their academic practices - such as skills for research, communication, self-awareness and critical thinking - in order that they may benefit as fully as possible from their experiences of, and life beyond, higher education.

Learning development is different from *learning* and *learning developers* are different from *teachers* because of the differences between their primary focus on *enhancing* personal capacity to learn as against a primary focus on *actual learning*. Another difference is that the object of the work of learning developers may not only be students directly but *institutions*, their learning architectures (Dill, 1999¹), policies and practices.

Learning development encompasses more specific areas which have developed and continue to develop an underpinning body of theory which guides practices. The prime example is the **academic literacies** community. Here the academic work of (for example) Lea and Street, Haggis and Ivanic has helped inspire and shape practice in writing centres within universities designed to enhance the academic literacy practices of students.

Whether the concept of learning development is too broad to encompass an equivalent body of theory, or whether instead there will, or should, develop *bodies* of theory (plural) within the area is an issue which learning developers need to consider. In terms of theory to underpin learning development practice, sociocultural theory is frequently cited, as it often is in the academic literacies area. This may have value in terms of a *learning enhancement theory*.

4.4 Vertical and horizontal engagement

Vertical engagement refers to the engagement of learning developers on the ground with their institutional structures and management. The issue around vertical engagement is that

¹ Dill, D. (1999) Academic Accountability and University Adaptation: The Architecture of an Academic Learning Organization, Higher Education, 38(2):127-154.

of embedding learning development fully into institutional planning, priorities and practices rather than it being a 'bolt-on' function.

Horizontal engagement refers to the engagement of learning developers within LearnHigher with the wider community who have an interest in this area of work, both in the UK and abroad.

To date the focus of LearnHigher has been on innovation, the development of materials and the building of the community of learning developers within the organization. Arguably the focus needs to change to one of consolidation and dissemination, both vertically and horizontally.

The national evaluation of the Centres for Excellence identified the need for better, and better thought-out, engagement strategies in order to prevent the problem of enclaving. That report suggested that factors which led to better *vertical* engagement included the following (Saunders et al, 2008, p 9):

- "Active rather than rhetorical connections to and support from institutional policy makers and the strategic planning process
- Representation of CETL staff on institutional decision making bodies
- CETL activities that have a cross disciplinary rather than uni-disciplinary focus (although we heard a convincing argument that there was nothing intrinsically uni-disciplinary about creative and excellent teaching simply because it takes place in a single discipline. It is often a matter of creatively reconstructing some core dimensions such that they can 'travel' across the disciplinary landscape)
- CETLs that have a robust framework of systemic or networked connections to other institutions or partners
- The pre-existing framework for reward and status within the institution that acted favourably toward teaching excellence
- The strength and dominance of traditional incentives for reward within the institution (promotion based mainly on research output)
- The status, success, recognition and priority of existing practices and frameworks constructed to support, enhance and reward teaching (e.g. Centres for Teaching and Learning within institutions)
- A relatively sophisticated approach to strategies of external engagement with the work and outputs of the CETL on a continuum from information giving to active engagement strategies

- The scope of pedagogic research as an authentic support for claims of ‘better learning’.”

The constituent members of LearnHigher, together with its central co-ordinators, would at this stage benefit from giving attention to improving vertical engagement.

Good progress has been made in relation to horizontal engagement, with networking happening with other bodies and universities outside the LearnHigher organization (the case studies instance some of these). However decisions about the legacy of LearnHigher need to be made in order to focus these connections (see 4.1, above).

4.5 Consolidation and ‘marketing’ of resources as against innovation

The case studies and commentary above attest to the impressive range and quality of innovation that has happened in the first three years of LearnHigher’s life as a HEFCE-funded innovation. However, as also noted above, the final two years represent an opportunity for consolidation and dissemination. This means giving attention to the reach and impact of the achievements of LearnHigher, which in turn means giving attention to theories of change and the practice of change management, especially in relation to shaping social practices in such a way as to enhance learning, on the basis of new understandings and knowledge. The national evaluation of the CETL’s identified possible innovation trajectories for the Centres, moving from formation of a CETL as an enclave of excellent practice at the start through creating bridgeheads to other parts of the HE system and so the creation of new enclaves to, finally, systemic change in which “A new community has emerged and is marked by common sites. New ideas are developing for taking the innovation onwards.” (Saunders et al, 2008², p 2). LearnHigher needs to ensure it continues to move along this trajectory.

4.6 Pedagogical research and the impact on practices

The national evaluation of the CETLs suggested that while 83% of the Centres engaged in pedagogical research, as LearnHigher does, there was little evidence of these research activities feeding directly into practices. LearnHigher has initiated an investigation into the research being undertaken across the network with a view to both cataloguing and identifying potential linkages between them. Attention could usefully be given to the identification and dissemination of the lessons for practices in learning development more broadly.

² Saunders, M. et al (2008) The National Formative Evaluation of the 2005-2010 CETL Programme. Final Report. Lancaster U.

4.7 Processes within LearnHigher

While LearnHigher works remarkably well as an over-arching organization, shaping and focusing the impressive energies of its constituent components, there are times when a more detailed attention to committee processes such as agenda-setting, minute-taking and the clear communication of outcomes of meetings with action points could enhance its effectiveness. Whilst the Steering Group meetings follow these routine procedures, practices such as the identification of action points, with clear identification of those responsible and timescales are sometimes not adhered to at the local cluster meetings. The routine follow-up of action points by those nominated as responsible is an important characteristic of effective organizations. However the multiple responsibilities of LearnHigher partners mean that this is sometimes not effectively done, particularly where only sketchy records of meetings are kept. It is acknowledged that the cluster groups were set up as an additional support mechanism within the CETL but it is suggested here that routine meeting practices may further enhance the contribution that these groups can make to the CETL's effective functioning.

The LearnHigher Director left the CETL on December 31st 2007. Since that date, the LearnHigher Manager stepped into the role of Acting Director. It is noted here that despite having been a 0.5 FTE post down for the last seven months of its third year, the CETL has adapted remarkably well and has nevertheless managed to have a highly productive year. The team looks forward to being at full staffing capacity early in its fourth year.

5 Case Studies

5.1 Stepping Stones 2HE: fresh thinking for introducing PDP to freshers

PDP Learning Area Case Study

Christine Keenan - Bournemouth University

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Introduction

This case studied describes an approach to introducing new first year students to personal development planning from the pre-induction phase. Stepping Stones 2HE (Keenan 2008, 2006) is an initiative that engages new students with an on-line resource which aims to ease the transition to HE by providing students with information, resources, learning activities and a reflective questionnaire prior to their induction week. The broad aim is to provide students with the information they need to make the transition into HE a less daunting process, and reduce the problem of information overload during induction week. Students are also provided with learning activities to work on prior to induction and then, during induction, collaborate with their peers to share the learning they have already been doing and work towards an output, for example, a presentation or poster. The resource also provides a section on Personal Development Planning (PDP) as a means of introducing students to PDP. We do this by explaining why we think PDP is a useful process for students and we point them to pertinent aspects of our PDP website, for example preparing for your first tutorial, study skills, etc.

This case study describes how the information provided within Stepping Stones 2HE is linked with induction week activities and provides students with the opportunity to contribute to the design of part of their curriculum. This activity took place with students studying Multimedia Network Systems within the School of Design, Engineering & Computing (DEC) at Bournemouth University in the autumn of 2007. Four seminar groups of ten students each were involved. The students were predominantly 18 year old males with just two females in the cohort.

This approach allowed students to contribute to the design of their curriculum content for the first term of a 20 credit professional studies module and allowed them to personalise their assignment for the module. Although for this example there is a focus on Multimedia Network Systems students, the concept is transferable across other disciplines. It aims to contextualise PDP and demonstrate relevance and applicability to the students to encourage their engagement.

What were we trying to achieve?

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to support the notion that engaging with PDP enhances the student experience. At Bournemouth University we believe that employability and personal development planning is about developing the whole person, and we encourage students to think about themselves not just in terms of understanding their learning but also in how they engage with the wider university community through clubs and societies and volunteering. We also actively work with our Student Union which offers a leadership award and who have PDP sessions every Wednesday afternoon, known as “Your Best You”. It is believed that developing metacognitive skills in reflection and self awareness provides a strong basis for successful student progress. However, it is sometimes difficult to persuade students of this, and engage them in the process. This case study describes a process by which we set out to achieve the engagement of students by promoting the perceived benefits of PDP in the pre-induction phase, and how we then developed this during induction and into the first term and subsequent student engagement within their first assignment.

The key features of this approach are:

- Development of pre-induction resources to promote PDP within the Stepping Stones 2HE approach;
- Allowing students to be involved in design of the curriculum in a way that contextualises PDP and makes it relevant to them;
- Allowing students to express their feelings about PDP within the first assignment (which had to be a 1000 word essay - within this constraint, students had autonomy in terms of the assignment title);
- As this was the first academic essay for these students at University, the students had a lecture on academic writing/critical thinking and a seminar session during which we explored examples of writing.

Description of the activity

New first year students receive a link to the on-line Stepping Stones 2HE resource once they receive confirmation of their place at the University. The resource provides information for students about university life, study skills, news about the broader university, an opportunity to provide us with their reflections on their previous learning experiences, and, think about their expectations of themselves coming to university and of the institution. There is also a section on PDP.

The resources introduce the idea of PDP to students in a way that makes sense to them. It explains why we think PDP is useful and important, and, it “walks” them through our PDP website, directing them to useful resources that will be immediately of help to them. In this way, we hope that students will arrive at university with a sense that this is “what we do” at Bournemouth University and that we value not just the learning that is taking place, but that we also actively support and promote the development of well rounded students who graduate with a strong sense of self, and with a strong understanding of themselves as global citizens.

Late in summer 2007, I was tasked with “teaching the PDP unit” to the incoming cohort of the Multimedia Network Systems course. I wanted to find a way to make this an active, relevant and contextualised experience for the students in a lively way, and, allow students to have some control over the content.

I wrote to all the students during September 2007 and reminded them to visit the Stepping Stones 2HE website and in particular to visit the PDP section, ensure they had carried out the learning activities provided by the staff, and complete the on-line reflective questionnaire. I also asked them to bring a number of job advertisements to the induction week. I asked them to bring examples of jobs that they might be aspiring to when they graduate, and, to include a range of other job advertisements not necessarily related to their own discipline area.

During my first introductory session with the cohort at induction I brought along members of the student union who worked with the students on an informal activity to help them identify what sort of learners they are as individuals, and, how they relate to others in

groups. This led to a very lively and stimulating session, which was particularly useful because it was led by union staff who related very well to the group. The students enjoyed the session and often referred back to it during the first few weeks.

During the first seminars, the students and I interrogated the job advertisements that had been collected. The students were encouraged to identify the skills, competencies, attributes and qualities that the job adverts called for. We had a scribe in each seminar group who noted everything down on a large sheet of paper. We then clustered what had been jotted down and the students identified a range of elements including:

- being self motivated
- team working
- creativity
- communication skills (and listening)
- organisation skills
- enthusiasm
- taking responsibility
- multi tasking
- interpersonal communication skills
- attention to detail
- being able to analyse situations
- commitment
- good health
- language skills
- time management
- personality
- professionalism
- using own initiative - working on own
- interests outside of the workplace
- hardworking
- flexibility and adaptability
- tenacity
- being trustworthy
- subject knowledge

This led to discussion about many "factual" requirements or "skills" "competencies", and "qualities", coming under the umbrella of what are termed transferable skills, and again I demonstrated how these transferable skills were articulated and described on the University PDP website. The next part of the activity was for me to cluster these together, and, negotiate the module programme for the rest of the term with the students.

Module design: Intended Learning Outcomes

The students were involved in developing the Intended Learning Outcomes for the first term module:

“On completion of the first term, you will have

- *started to develop your own ideas of what PDP is about*
- *understood how engaging with PDP can give you a clear idea about the kind of life and work that you want for yourself*
- *linked the idea of PDP with developing confidence in your skills, qualities and attributes*
- *thought about how to articulate your skills, personal qualities and competencies with potential employers*
- *developed a positive attitude and approach associated with success*
- *understood many of the terms associated with PDP.”*

With a paragraph from me on each of the following:

PDP is about enhancing your learning

PDP is about enhancing your experience as a student

PDP is about enjoying the present and planning for the future

Module Design: Schedule for Term 1

The term 1 content negotiated with the students from the list identified through the job advertisements was:

- Approaches to learning
- Group working
- Communication skills
- Presentation skills
- Critical thinking
- Extra curricular activities
- Self management
- Career management
- Leadership

I then prepared the unit guide, which provided students with the weekly schedule, plus a range of resources, reading and preparatory work, for example:

19.10.07 **Seminar:** Learning - approaches to learning, action plans, portfolio, evidence building,

Using the PDP Website exercises:

Set up a file/portfolio in which to keep PDP activities and evidence

Approaches to learning and studying questionnaire

Academic work and life in general survey

Goal Setting and Action Planning for learning

Read and critique Christine Keenan's PDP chapter [see Unit Materials in MyBU

Read Chapter 1 Essential Study Skills (Burns and Sinfield)

Read Chapter 3 The Study Skills Handbook (Cottrell)

Try : Your Best You - LearnHigher Room (Library Courtyard),
Wednesday pms

Where possible, speakers from the wider university were invited to work through the sessions with students, the student union were very much involved in a number of the sessions. This was particularly helpful as it ensured that students had a variety of people to interact with.

The premise for this whole approach was that if students had ownership of the module and saw for themselves that it was relevant and contextualised, they would invest in engaging with it.

Assessment: Assignment

Assessment for this module is prescribed as a 1000 word academic essay. This was the first academic essay of the course and so I delivered a special lecture and seminar on essay writing and critical thinking. We looked at Harvard referencing and I explained about marking criteria. We also talked about both formal and reflective writing styles and we looked at previous examples of student work.

The students were given the freedom to choose their own essay title, the criteria being that the title needed to encapsulate their thinking about this module. Students were provided with guidance in terms of developing the content of the essay, for example, reflecting on why they chose Bournemouth University and this course in particular, their personal strengths and weaknesses, and what they were looking forward to studying in year 2. The main point being to explore these issues within the context of the work we had been doing in the first term.

It was felt really important to weight the marking criteria in a way that would not penalise these novice writers. Therefore the marking criteria were weighted in favour of the content primarily and how students argued their case, and gave lower weighting to accurate referencing and structure. I felt this was important in order not to penalise students for their lack of experience.

Structure of essay:	(20%)
Quality of argument and reference to sources:	(50%)
Conclusions:	(20%)
Harvard Referencing:	(10%)

Some examples of titles students gave to their work were to the point:

“An explorative essay documenting my self development and understanding in order to choose my university and course of study”

“Career Ambitions and Gaining success at University”

“Why I am studying Digital Media Development at Bournemouth University and how I intend to gain the most from this opportunity”

Others were quite imaginative:

“Back to the future!”

“University life, the unit and me”

“My development, my future”

“Reflections of a DEC Freshman”

“PDP and personal exploration: A useful or useless process?”

Students were encouraged to reflect on strengths and weaknesses and marks were gained for self awareness and insights into personal characteristics developed through engaging in PDP:

“I need to let other people take charge sometimes and have control and lastly have more self control so I am not impatient all the time”

“I am now heavily involved with the wider university and feel that I am getting the best possible experience from the opportunities presented to me. I am to increase my involvement in the second year by joining the PAL scheme” (ie becoming a peer assisted learning leader).

“Before I can continue to develop further into the person I want to be, I need to look at past work, to reflect back on who I was back then and how I’ve developed into the person I am today”

“It is my intention to begin attending Yoga at the university to allow some time-out in this age where time is a precious commodity”

“In my opinion for many this self-objectivity or introspection [of pdp] is a difficult struggle, or fear of change too strong for the process to be of benefit, but for the others personal development planning offers focus for targeted personal evolution and growth, perhaps even the beginning of a lifetime’s obsession”

One critical student who was very resistant to PDP suggested:

“The course is not what I expected; there were a few contents on the course that I did not know about. These are Personal Development Planning and Marketing. However I will look to give time for these to adjust and for me to do research to enable me to not fall behind. I will have to motivate myself as the course itself is not doing this”.

Others commented:

“Within the first few weeks of starting the course I recognised certain strengths and weaknesses that stood out, which I realised I could improve or capitalise on”

“Choosing my course of study at university was not easy. The complex decision making process, my entire life in a single set of applications and projecting my future career was a daunting thought”

“I have been challenged by the idea of personal development planning, and now admit that I already find it extremely useful. I am looking at the subject

of learning in a completely different light than six weeks ago, and I fully see the benefit to myself of self analysis and recognising skills that I would normally just take for granted, with no real idea how to improve or change them in the past. I realise that I must regularly update these skills and ask myself "how am I doing".

Effectiveness and appropriateness of this approach

Further research with this cohort when they begin their second year of study will help provide evidence for what they consider to be the effectiveness of this approach in the first term.

Attendance did drop off once the assignment was submitted. The students who committed to attending throughout the term suggested that other students were using the PDP seminar hour (timetabled on a Friday) to prepare other assignments.

At the end of the first year, post exams, the first year students brought all the technical and "soft" skills developed during the year together into a simulated business week which also formed part of the assessment for the module. During the week they had to work in small teams and build a web and network system to promote the services of a garden centre. This integrated the subject knowledge they had gained during the first year across all the units, and, it drew on their increased understanding of team working, communication skills and dealing with conflict.

It is interesting that this cohort had one of the best sets of final results seen at a first year exam board in the school and the external examiner commented on the very high overall marks achieved by the cohort. I plan to work with the group next year to see if it is possible to locate this phenomenon within the approach taken to allowing the students to take ownership and some control over the content and direction of the PDP element of the course.

It would be interesting to carry out further analysis of:

- The students' perceptions of personal development planning as they enter their second year of study

- What elements of PDP students explicitly thought about in terms of their approach to study
- Whether students realised their stated aims of joining volunteering groups, clubs and societies, and other wider university activities
- Whether students have maintained their use of action plans, and evidence building in personal portfolios

What enabled the practice to work?

The first year student experience is a cornerstone of the university education enhancement strategy and Stepping Stones 2HE is integrated within this. As an institution we are developing expertise in understanding how to support students during the difficult and formative transition stage. The institution also has also stated that “PDP is literally and metaphorically at the centre of what we do here” (Curran 2006). This university also has responsibility for the learning topic area of PDP within the LearnHigher CETL, and, we are partners in a National Teaching Fellowship Scheme led by the University of Bolton investigating developing research practice in PDP. Within the university we have a range of provision and approaches of PDP and we introduce new students to PDP right from the very start of their University experience, through the pre-induction resource. We believe that it is important to overcome the perception that PDP is an inconvenience and it would appear from the outcomes of this case study that, to contextualise PDP within the context of the subject, and to demonstrate relevance to students by applying it to the outside world and its benefit to personal effectiveness, does make a difference.

The barriers or challenges faced

Although universities are required to provide opportunities for students to engage with PDP, there is a lack of published research in the sector to provide evidence to demonstrate that ‘it really works’. Academic staff often cite this lack of reliable quantifiable evidence as a reason for their lack of confidence in PDP. Although there are a number of case studies providing examples of practice available through organisations such as the Higher Education Academy and Centre for Recording Achievement, and the LearnHigher CETL, it is recognised that more research and evaluation in the subject would improve confidence. Funding through the National Teaching Fellows Scheme is currently providing an opportunity for a number of HEIs to conduct research projects over a three year period. It is anticipated that

the research outcomes will provide the evidence that the sector is seeking to give confidence in PDP as an approach to providing students with the scaffolding to develop their metacognitive skills; self awareness as individuals, understanding of how they learn, and of their relationship with their peers, communities and environments.

There was a pocket of resistance within one seminar group, led by a very vocal student who felt that PDP was a waste of his time. He wanted to get down to the more technical aspects of the unit and felt that PDP was an imposition that he did not want to subscribe to and, further, claimed that the course had been misrepresented to him because of it. I did extend this conversation to the rest of his seminar group who he claimed to be representing in his views, as I felt it was important to give voice to the other students. Although he was having an influence on the group, the rest of the seminar group did indicate to me that his strength of opinion against the principles of the unit was not felt by the rest of the group.

Key lessons learnt are:

- Engaging students with PDP resources in the pre-induction transition phase sets an expectation – students arrive with the expectation that this is what happens at university;
- Working with the students to contextualise PDP within their university, social and personal lives helped to provide relevance and a base to work from;
- Allowing students to develop the learning outcomes of the PDP element of the module gave them some control over their learning;
- Working with the students to develop the curriculum content was useful to empower them and provide relevance in terms of what they believe was important to them professionally academically and personally;
- Time put aside within the teaching schedule for giving insight into the requirements of academic writing and allowing discussion time to explore examples of academic writing was felt to be very helpful;
- Giving students the opportunity to provide the title for their assignment allowed them to shape their assignment but still work within the criteria;
- Providing marking criteria that rewarded reflection, insight, exploration of self in relation to university and the course, and that did not penalise them for what they

did not already know (for example accurate Harvard referencing) boosted confidence early on in the course

Conclusions

Although this case study describes the experience of Multimedia Network Systems students, the concept is transferable across all disciplines. The central concept is seeking to find a way to gain student engagement with PDP. This is clearly one of the key 'problems' of PDP and yet, it seems that when students engage it enriches the totality of their experience and provides them with the self awareness and self reliance that will underpin their personal, professional and academic futures.

This case study describes one example of engaging students with the concept of PDP. Students are introduced to PDP prior to enrolment within a suite of other transition support materials and resources. This introduction to PDP is developed further through supported activities during induction week. Students are then involved in the design of the curriculum by being allowed to include content based on their own aspirations and what they perceive to be important to them, personally and academically, in the first few weeks of term. The overall impression at the end of the unit is that the students in this particular cohort have done exceptionally well in terms of their progress and final marks.

It is hoped that further study with this cohort will help to identify what made the difference. Given the reflective nature of PDP, I hope to work with these students as they enter the second year of study, and again when they enter the final year of study, to see whether it is possible to identify the impact that the PDP section of the professional studies module made. Given the insights provided by the students in their assignment, it is anticipated that this style of working with them in helping them to determine the shape of the curriculum and assessment may well have made the difference in terms of fresh thinking for introducing PDP to freshers!

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Summary

Effectively engaging students is often cited as one of the key 'problems' associated with personal development planning. The approach described in this example aims to demonstrate how interest can be stimulated and sustained right from the pre-induction phase through induction and into the first term by contextualising it within the students own experiences and aspirations, providing students with ownership by involving them in the design of the curriculum and assessment. Whilst it is acknowledged that some students needed more encouragement than others to buy in to the idea, the overall results at the end of the year were significantly improved over previous years and, there was greater satisfaction within the cohort. It will be interesting to work with the cohort again as they enter the second year of their course to ascertain if they feel, on reflection, that their self awareness and better understanding of their learning made a difference that will sustain them in due course through placement and on to graduation.

5.2 Developing a website to support academic referencing – utilising client usage and feedback

Referencing Learning Area Case Study

Colin Neville, University of Bradford. July 2008.

The aim of this report is to provide a brief case study history of the development of the *LearnHigher* Referencing Learning Area website and to present statistics of usage and a summary of user evaluation of the site for the period January 2007 – June 2008.

Background

The *LearnHigher* Referencing Learning Area website was developed by the Referencing Learning Area Coordinator (LAC) alongside a consultant outside the University of Bradford - *Decifer Solutions* - over the period September 2005 to December 2006 and the site was made publicly accessible in January 2007. The research for the site was also used directly by the LAC to write a manual of referencing for students: *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism*, published by the Open University Press in 2007.

The website has its own URL: www.learnhigher.org.uk although users can also access the site via the main *LearnHigher* www.learnhigher.ac.uk homepage or through the University of Bradford, School of Management, Effective Learning Service website.

Most referencing information websites have been developed by institutions of higher education to serve the needs of their own students, although the majority of these are freely accessible by others. These sites tend to reflect the referencing styles found and applied within the institution, e.g. Harvard, Numerical, APA etc.

However, the *LearnHigher* Referencing site was developed as a referencing resource to offer a number of unique features that were missing from most other sites:

- An overview of all the main referencing styles found in Britain.
- A 'Why Reference' section giving particular emphasis to explaining the principles underpinning citation and referencing.
- Text written for two main users: undergraduate and postgraduate, with two levels of interaction with the site: 'Quick Read' and 'In Depth'. The former giving a brief overview of principles and practice; whilst the latter offered more detailed explanation.

- A FAQ section that allows users to communicate directly with the Learning Area Coordinator (LAC) and to post their own enquiry if they did not find an answer to their particular question within the existing FAQs. On receipt of a question, the LAC replies to it, then decides whether to add the question raised to the others in the FAQ section.
- A research and resources section for academic members of staff, or others interested in research in referencing. This currently contains an annotated bibliography, an article, *'The Challenge of Referencing'* written by the LAC offering an overview of the main difficulties and issues for both students and staff in referencing practice, staff development material on referencing issues, and paper exercises that can be downloaded on referencing and plagiarism awareness and which can be used in the classroom. Ten colleagues, from UK and overseas institutions have registered to join this section of the site to gain access to the material there, although the same material is also available via the main *LearnHigher* site (Referencing Learning Area).

The site also offers users an opportunity to test their knowledge, through quizzes and other participative exercises, of referencing practice, as well as demonstrating what constitutes plagiarism.

Usage

The site asks visitors to log as one of the following 'undergraduate', 'postgraduate', 'Academic', or 'Other', and to immediately choose between a 'Quick Learn', or an 'In Depth' option, although they are advised they can easily switch between the two. This has proven to be useful to provide a profile of visitors, although can be annoying to some visitors (see Feedback & Evaluation).

Over the 18 months of operation, there has been **4216** to the site, with an average number of **234** visitors a month. Of this total number:

- 47% were undergraduates
- 20% were postgraduates
- 19% were academics and
- 14% were other users

Of the total number of visitors, 44% of users used the in-depth option to view the site, 56% used the quick learn option, and 15% switched view options.

Of the total number of visitors, **360** (9%) completed at least one exercise and over half of these (57%) were undergraduates.

The monthly number of visitors will be plotted more accurately over 2008/9 to show the peaks and lows of site usage.

The FAQ-link to the LAC has been to date used on 20 occasions by students to gain answers to questions related to specific assignments. The LAC has answered all the questions raised, but only accepted one of these for inclusion with the other FAQs; as follows:

Q: When using references for cited sources, is it usual to enclose the quote in single or double quote marks? For example, Brown (2003) argues that fragmentation is 'one of 5 indicators of postmodernism' (Brown, 2003:5) OR Brown (2003) argues that fragmentation is "one of 5 indicators of postmodernism" (Brown, 2003:5)

A: Most British writing style guides favour the use of single inverted commas around quotations (but always check your own institutional guidelines for writing assignments). However, quotations within quotations would be enclosed in double inverted commas. Lengthy quotations, over three lines, should be set as an extract and indented within the text. Indented quotations do not need to be enclosed within inverted commas.

Feedback and Evaluation of Site: what difference has it made?

The site has generated responses from both sides of the response spectrum:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Excellent.• The presentation of themes and topics is extraordinarily clear.• I will certainly be showing this site to my students.• This will go a long way in helping me present a professional report.• I am starting university in Sept 2008 and will definitely be back to visit your site. As a mature student I have no idea at the moment how to reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clanking!• Dull.• I just want to use the site - I don't want to be asked whether I'm an academic etc. I just want answers.• Don't like the way it opens everything in a new window each time.
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Overall, 46 visitors have left written evaluations of the site or indicated their feelings by grading it on exit, as follows:

Grading & total number of responses	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Academic	Other
Excellent: 20	6	6	6	2
Very Good: 14	6	4	2	
Good: 4	2		1	-
Adequate: 5	2	3	3	-
Poor: 3	1	-	2	-
46	17	13	14	2

Of all the 46 visitors who left an evaluation of the site, 38 (**83%**) judged it to be within the bands of 'Excellent' to 'Good'.

The main criticism was received in the first six months of site operation and was directed at the amount and small size of the text, the slowness of operation, the number of windows that needed to be opened, and, for some, the perceived 'dullness' of the it.

The criticisms led to a major review and revamp of the site, with attention given to reducing the text, increasing the speed of operation, enlarging the typeface, improving the exercises, and making the site similar in appearance to the main *LearnHigher* homepages.

The feedback and evaluations received since the changes have been generally positive and within the 'Excellent' to 'Good' range. But the number of evaluations received on site to date is very small relative to the number of visitors: only 1.09%. At present, visitors are asked to leave their evaluations before they exit the site. But this means they have to remember, or bother, to specifically click on the 'Exit Site' tab.

However, another way of evaluating the site is to examine the number of institutions making web links with it, as this can be regarded as an indicator that, at least, the site is regarded as reliable. The Open University, for example, has made the site its main referencing link for its undergraduate students.

The website management system indicates that the eight most frequent link connections were made to the Referencing website from the following HE related sites:

Institution/Organisation	Visitors
University of Leeds	218
Open University	184
<i>LearnHigher</i>	83
Liverpool John Moores University	54
University of Bradford	41
University of Wellington, New Zealand	32
University of Glamorgan	31
University of Huddersfield	21

The management system indicates that, in addition to the main *LearnHigher* site, 25 UK universities, 2 overseas universities (in Spain and New Zealand), one professional association (Royal College of Midwives) and two FE colleges have made links for their students with the website.

Conclusion

The Referencing LA website, despite a shaky start, attracts around 60 visitors a week, although the exact monthly use of the site will be plotted more accurately over the 2009/9 academic year. Most of the feedback of the site has been positive. However, the LAC will explore with the site developer during 2008/9 the possibility of making the Feedback option more prominent to encourage a greater number of visitors to evaluate the site before they exit from it.

5.3 Using an action research approach to revise study resources for report writing

Judy Turner, University of Reading. July 2008

Introduction

This case study describes a project to review and revise paper study guides for students on effective report writing practices. Using existing guides as a starting point, the project employed an iterative action research approach of identification, reflection, evaluation and development. After an initial unsuccessful revision the cycle was repeated, resulting in the production of a set of guides that have been popular with both students and subject academics. Using the guides as a prompt for discussion, we have discovered new insights about the concerns of students and academics about report writing at university that have motivated changes in our own approach as learning developers. In addition we have made new contacts across the university, prompting possibilities for further research, and building our own professional status in the institution.

Details and contexts

As part of our examination of effective interventions to support report writing and time management practices, we examined our own practices as learning developers working directly with students to develop their study practices. Text-based guides were identified as a significant area for investigation and revision. Using our existing study guides as a vehicle for this investigation, we ran mixed focus groups with a total of 48 students from various disciplines and at different levels of study. Respondents criticised the A4 format (“gets lost among my lecture notes”), prescriptive tone, and “boring” presentation. They also felt that there was “too much text” – that it was difficult to find advice quickly on any individual aspect of the topic when needed.

We responded to this feedback by producing a new series of introductory level advice leaflets entitled Ten Top Tips. These comprised a single sheet of A4, tri-folded, with pictures and boxes to separate text and more emphasis on the different needs and preferences of individual students. A brief list of tips on the front cover provided a quick checklist, with each tip expanded inside, plus links to more detailed online advice. However, piloting this leaflet was problematic. Although the same format with advice on time management was popular with both students and academic staff, the report writing leaflet failed to engage enough departments to provide an adequate sample of students for evaluation. Subject

academics were sceptical that a single brief guide could provide a meaningful level of advice: when asked if they would like to take part in the pilot study, a typical response was “we provide our own subject-specific advice”. However, the number of students visiting Study Advice for support with report writing suggested that these ‘in-house’ resources were not fulfilling student needs. In addition, further reflection on our own experiences advising students showed that what was required for reports varied, not just (as originally thought) from discipline to discipline, but crucially from assignment to assignment.

We began to consider a new ‘building-block’ approach to resources, which used small units of advice on aspects of report writing (e.g. the function of different sections, how to structure information, using different styles of writing, writing to a brief and for a particular reader) that could be selected as necessary by students or tutors. This approach resulted in the production of a new series of study guides (which now replace our existing A4 guides in all learning areas). An A5 format was used to distinguish them from lecture notes, with colour used to identify different learning areas. Advice was provided in discrete sections on different aspects, which were then collated into three leaflets, each corresponding to a stage in the report writing process (understanding report writing, structuring your report, writing your report).

To continue the iterative process of evaluation and development, we held a series of mixed focus groups with 16 students from a range of year groups and disciplines to provide feedback on our new A5 guides in February 08. We repeated the same process and questions used with the first focus groups to enable a direct comparison. The results were far more positive: Students were attracted by the design (“The A5 guides look slicker, more professional, more authoritative and more modern than the old guides”); they also found the guides to be more targeted at their needs (“The tone of the guides is good – like my friend nagging me”) and less prescriptive (“I like the way the guide asks the right questions to get you thinking – it doesn’t tell you what to do”).

The process of evaluating the study guides continued with semi-structured interviews with academics in May and June 08. We were able to use our newly developed set of A5 report writing guides as a way of engaging with academics and capturing their interest. Previously we had been unsuccessful in getting academics to give their valuable time to participate in our research, but the promise of showing them our new resources acted as extremely effective “bait”. We interviewed 11 academics in disciplines that set reports as assignments. The semi-structured interviews served a number of overlapping purposes: We were able to raise awareness of LearnHigher research and resources; obtain evaluations of our study

guides from academics; find out what academics think are the key features and problems with report writing; compare the different styles of reports written in different disciplines; and gather examples of students' reports, marking criteria, and briefs. This has fed into our research into report writing showing that the types of reports students have to write vary not only between disciplines, but often within one module on a single course. Academics place a lot of value on the effective planning and structuring of reports, and on students ability to write reports that integrate their background reading and their empirical research findings.

Goals and effects

Our primary goal for the project was to develop user-evaluated text-based resources to support student report writing. The secondary goal was to use resource evaluations to gain greater insights into student report writing practices. Both of these were successfully achieved, with distinct effects for different groups of stakeholders:

- **Effects on academics:** The interviews and dissemination of the report writing study guides has encouraged academics to have a wider engagement with the LearnHigher project and with Study Advice generally. Three academics involved in the interviews have asked for further resources and information about LearnHigher. Also the interviews lead to us being invited to present our research findings to the English for Academic Purposes Research Group at Reading in May 08. Comments from academics on the report writing guides included "These will be very useful for my students; they provide a good overview to supplement the subject guidance we give". "Can I have copies of the guides to give to my students?" "These guides look just right and provide the right level of advice to be suitable for all kinds of report writing".
- **Effects on learning developers:** We are undergoing a complete revision of our study guides on all learning areas at Reading, with over two thirds of the guides now rewritten and converted to the new A5 format and the rest planned to be completed over the summer. An unintended effect is the change in the style of advice we give to students on report writing in our one-to-one sessions. A specific example is "Alice", a first year student studying Maths. She came to Study Advice because she was having trouble with an assignment for her careers module. Although this assignment was not called a "report", our research into report writing enabled me to recognise that it involved the

same kind of structured, informative writing that was required in a report. Whereas in the past I may have advised “Alice” to write and plan her assignment as an essay, I now used the principles of report writing and advised her to think about her intended audience, and to use subheadings to break down and organise the assignment. I advised her to think about what the intended audience would want to know, and to use these points as the basis of her subsections to structure her assignment.

- Effects on students: A wider range of students are picking up our report writing guides. The old A4 guide was entitled “scientific report writing”, so it was not aimed at other disciplines and put off students from social sciences and other areas. Now we are giving the guides to students from Archaeology, Real Estate and Planning, Psychology, and Agriculture, as well as the hard sciences. Comments from students at the focus groups included: “This really helped me to understand what a report is and why it needs the different sections”.

Analysis

The iterative action research approach was very successful as it placed the ongoing development of our study guides at the heart of all our LearnHigher research. We found that all our research and evaluations could be tied back to improving the study guides.

The interviews with academics were another success of the project, as they enabled us to gain a far wider understanding of report writing across the university. It gave us the depth we needed to further our development of our resources.

The ten top tips leaflets were not as successful as we anticipated for report writing, as they were not perceived as being sufficiently “in-depth” by academics. This showed us the need to tailor the resources to the perceptions of academics in order to get them on side to help engage the students.

The main problem we found was attracting sufficient numbers of students to our focus groups. This is perhaps because students are getting “evaluation fatigue”; increased attention on the student experience and student voice means undergraduates at Reading are being increasingly bombarded with surveys, questionnaires and feedback forms. Our solution is to use our increased contact with academics, so friendly academics could advertise our focus groups to their students and recommend specific cohorts of students who may be interested in attending. This would add more authority to the focus group requests and help them to be more targeted at the students.

Implications for wider contexts

The action research approach proved its value in this project, because the iterative process can be repeated until the resources successfully meet the needs of the intended audiences. The approach helps you to compare the effects of one change and adaptation with another. It also helps give you an ongoing focus, such as improving a resource, so even when a modification is not so successful, the information gathered still makes valuable contributions to the design and development of the resource.

Another recommendation from this project is the benefit of using resources as a way of enticing academics to participate in research. We found academics are more willing to give their thoughts and opinions on a resource which they can use and adapt, rather than a nebulous topic such as “report writing”. Moreover, a single method of information gathering can be a forum for a number of different purposes, so a semi-structured interview is an ideal chance to get an immediate evaluation of a resource, ask for examples of course material or work, gather opinions, and raise awareness of LearnHigher research.

5.4 Developing year planners to support student time management

Time Management Learning Area Case Study

Judy Turner, University of Reading. July 2008

Introduction

This case study describes the development and dissemination of a LearnHigher folding year planner, as a collaborative project conducted by the Learning Areas of Time Management (University of Reading) and Visual Practices (University of Brighton). Following initial discussions on format and content, the planner was piloted in a six month format with students at the University of Reading. Feedback from these users informed the development of a year planner. The success of the pilot project and the generally positive responses gained were used to 'sell' the planner to senior administrators at Reading, Brighton and other institutions. To date 6 HEIs have agreed to purchase a total of 22,000 planners for their students.

Details and contexts

The idea for the project originated in the success of Brighton's Big Draw project, in which a folding sheet format was used to produce drawing sheets. These were widely disseminated and used for a variety of purposes, which were recorded in photographs. The photographs were themselves disseminated via a website, as a set of visual examples to encourage users new to this unusual format. The original idea for the planners was suggested by the LAC at Brighton, who subsequently pooled her expertise in visual communication with our experience of student time management practices to develop the folded sheet format into a folding year planner, incorporating: day-by-day diary planning with space for associated notes; a timeline to give an overview of commitments and deadlines; tips on time management targeted at appropriate points in the study year; local useful information including term dates and important contacts.

The folded sheet format seemed especially useful for a time management tool for students, because it enabled the resolution of two apparently conflicting approaches to schedule planning. Research into student practices at Reading showed that students liked the portability of the student diaries they received each year. However, our experience as Study Advisers suggests that making commitments immediately visible on a single sheet year planner is more effective in improving students' ability to manage study time. The single

sheet provides an overview of commitments for individual modules and shows the connections and overlaps between each, supporting students in their development of independent study practices. We also suggest that students include non-study commitments, situating study time in the context of life generally. This prompts a more realistic approach to planning, and encourages a holistic view of university life.

The University of Reading piloted a 6 month version of the planner between January and June 2008. The pilot was conducted across 8 departments and 500 copies of the planner were distributed. Academics and secretarial staff were involved in promoting and handing out the planners to their students. Feedback from the pilot study was gathered in late May and June via an online questionnaire using Survey Monkey, and in small focus groups which involved a mix of years and subject groups. The questionnaire enabled us to further our research into students' preferred planning



methods and time management strategies. We also set up a Flickr site (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/25428894@N05>) for collecting photos of the planners in action and encouraged students to send us photos of how they were using their planners. The photos provide an important resource for demonstrating the flexibility and use of the innovative planner design. With such a tactile and interactive resource, we realised the importance of visual communication in demonstrating and promoting the planners.

The results from the pilot study were used to further refine and develop the planner design to produce a full year version for 2008-09. The evidence gathered in support of the planners was used to promote the product to Student Services, Student Unions, Senior Management and other potential stakeholders at both Reading and Brighton with the aim of getting funding to distribute a larger number of planners to students at both universities. It was also used to help launch the planners to the other LH partners at the LearnHigher Steering Group meeting in May. The planners were met with enthusiasm and interest, and the LH partners took samples to show to their universities, also with the aim of gaining funding to purchase them, or to stimulate interest for a possible purchase in future years. With this in mind we produced a powerpoint presentation using photos to show the different ways the planner could be used. This presentation was made available to all LH partners as a promotional

resource and can be downloaded here: <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/View-document-details/294-PowerPoint-demonstration-of-year-planners.htm>

Goals and effects

Our primary goal for the project was to develop a user-informed tool for student time management which responded to LH expertise in visual communication and effective interventions to support students in their management of time at university. Secondary goals were to produce a LH-branded resource which would be attractive to other HEIs, and to use resource evaluations to gain greater insights into student time management practices. Actual effects were evaluated with regard to particular stakeholders:

- Effects on institutions: At the University of Reading, the planners have increased awareness of LH research in the Student Services Directorate who agreed to purchase 10,000 planners for distribution to all Reading undergraduates after a successful funding bid to the director of Student Services. Also awareness of LH research has been raised in academic departments involved in the pilot study, plus we have been getting inquiries about the planners from other departments who have heard of our research, for example the English department wanted to know more about the planners and their use, and we sent them a copy of our powerpoint presentation and survey results.
- Effects on LearnHigher as a 'brand': The planners have also enabled the LH brand to be disseminated more widely throughout other institutions, as LH partners showed sample planners to stakeholders and funding bodies at their institutions. In addition to the 6 LH partners who have bought planners, we received inquiries and interest in the design of the planners from academics at London Metropolitan, Kent, Liverpool, and Leeds.
- Effects on students: Of respondents to the pilot study questionnaire - 92% of students said the planner helped their time management. 79% said they would like a full year planner for 2008-09. 41% were still using their planner after 6 months. Student comments about the planner gathered from questionnaire and focus groups included: "I found the tips useful and having plenty of space free to write in was really helpful"; "Nothing to improve but I received it towards the end of the year. Would be nice to get one at the beginning of the academic year"; "Hand it out sooner - I found it very useful. I used for revision planning and showing when exams are".

A specific example of the effect of the planner on one student was “Amy”, a second year undergraduate studying Speech and Language Therapy. She had been referred to Study Advice by her counsellor as she was having problems managing her time, leaving her coursework to the last minute. This meant she was getting stressed and demoralised, because she felt she had no time to socialise with her friends. As part of our study session on time management, I gave her a planner and explained how she could use it to take control of her time, balancing and integrating her study and social life. She found this very helpful and began to use the planner to motivate herself, writing in deadlines and also time off. The planner helped her see time management as a creative process, which she could control and “own”, as she added colour, stickers, and her own pieces of paper to the planner (see photo of “Amy’s” planner). She used the planner throughout the Easter vacation to organise her assignments, time at home, and revision. She successfully managed to complete all her coursework by the deadlines, after being behind in her work for the whole year.

Analysis

The folding year planner project has been a successful collaboration between Reading and Brighton, which has drawn on the expertise and research of these LH partners. The design process and development of the planners has been exceptionally creative, due to regular meetings and emails between the people involved. We are discussing the possibility of developing a new planner specifically for dissertation and project planning.

A key element of the project’s success was the thorough pilot study and research base that we gathered to provide evidence to encourage stakeholders to buy into the product. Also the distribution of the planners through departments was a success, as it responded to a need we had identified in earlier focus groups that students would like more time management support directly from their departments. The planners were well received and seen as authentic and valued because they had the department’s backing.

The main problems we found with the planners were some staff and students said that they were too large and difficult to unfold; some students were not sure how to make the best use of their planners. We realised that this could be overcome by more mediation on how to use the planners, and more use of visual examples and pictorial storytelling. We asked our designer to put a diagram of how to use the planner on the back of the new design, started the Flickr site, and produced the powerpoint presentation.

The other main problem that we encountered was timing of the launch of the planners to LH partners. As a result of a long development process at the beginning of the year we left the

launch quite late in May, which gave only a few weeks for the LH partners to find funding, and place orders for delivery in September. We countered this by producing the powerpoint presentation which partners could use as a marketing tool to their relevant stakeholders, and by asking the LH development fund to underwrite the cost of orders to give partners more time to find funds. As the design has now been developed and awareness of the planners is increasing, we anticipate that next year the process of applying for funding at partner institutions can start far earlier.

Implications for other contexts

From the experience of this project, we learned the great benefit of building on successful existing projects by transferring the design of resources from one LH learning area to another (for example, the Big Draw folding drawing sheets provided the basis for the year planners). We would encourage LH partners to see if there are existing projects at their institutions which they can use as a springboard for further LH research. We would also recommend well designed low-tech formats, such as paper resources, as a relatively cheap and effective means of disseminating the LearnHigher brand to thousands of students; something that students can carry, interact with, and use is more effective than a flyer. We also found that visual, “show and tell” methods of demonstrating the use of resources are extremely effective – use as many pictures and storyboards as possible, as opposed to written, prescriptive advice.

5.5 The Writing for Assignments E-library (WrAssE) project: difficult decisions and positive outcomes

Critical Thinking & Reflection Learning Area Case Study

John Hilsdon, Plymouth University July 2008

Introduction

The WrAssE project is about doing, assessing and researching academic writing. It aims to be an evolving learning resource, using real examples of student writing from across the HE curriculum with specific comments from academics, and open for online discussion.

This case study reflects on the process and the outcomes to date of the WrAssE project at the University of Plymouth. It examines some effects on both staff and students, and reflects on some difficult decisions that had to be made, and their rationale. Working with academic staff to generate content for WrAssE has been a very rewarding experience for the team.

Much has been learned and there have been many positive outcomes, some of which have been unexpected.

Innovation and context

The original project arose from a local study of students' academic writing (Hilsdon, 1999) and was based on the questions:

- What are academics looking for in students' written work?
- Are there generic qualities and functions in 'good' academic writing?

A small collection of extracts from student texts was given an online user-interface (Hilsdon and Evans, 2004) and made available to staff and students on the University of Plymouth's Learning Development intranet. The collection included comments from each academic marker of the texts, indicating what they thought was good. Feedback received from those using this pilot resource was very positive and provided impetus for proposals to make further use of the methodology in a project including a larger, more representative database. The new resource, 'WrAssE' covers a wider number of discipline areas and writing types, and embeds search capabilities on a variety of identified qualities and functions of writing. It will be offered for evaluation, initially in Plymouth and, to partners later in 2008/9. WrAssE promotes learning about writing through access to a growing range of authentic examples, with contextual information. These will provide a valuable basis for the development of further learning resources and for research. A key design feature of the project is an emphasis on encouraging staff to articulate what they want students to do:

their criteria for good written assignments in a range of contexts. The resource is therefore underpinned by discussion and attempts to clarify qualities and functions in student writing.

Feedback from students in response to initial pilot

“This will give ... feedback that tutors would normally never have time to give. Tutors seem to have different approaches ... This database is exactly what's needed, I think. It'll also help to remove a not uncommon perception (which I share, to some extent!) that critical writing is something of a black art. I think this will help remove some of the mystery, and will make the assessment process more transparent”.

“I think it's immensely valuable, and an imaginative use of technology. I can certainly confirm that many students in my year have a great interest in understanding what constitutes good critical writing, and some of us have found it useful to swap essays after they've been marked”.

“Being shown an example is really helpful – you wouldn't be expected to just know how to do the job in any other professional capacity”.

Process and workshops

Academic staff were initially invited to choose and submit student work that they considered to be examples of good writing. During 2006-7, twenty staff attended workshops and annotated pieces of student work. The aim of the workshops was to introduce participants to the rationale and processes underlying the project. They were also intended to provide opportunities to clarify the views of participant academics and thereby inform our emerging framework of qualities and functions of writing, and help us to refine and improve the model. A new selection of annotated student texts has enabled the development of the current version of the project, which will be ready for trial as a learning resource during the academic year 08/09.

Project outcomes to date

- a growing collection of examples of writing by students from a range of disciplines, at varying stages of study; tutor comments and feedback on the examples which focus on how they are effective
- a design and working model for a prototype framework of ‘functions and qualities of writing’ (underpinning categorisation and search functions)
- development of an online interface to enable students to access the resource
- conference presentations and papers outlining the development of the project (both prior to and since the provision of support by LearnHigher).

Discussion of impact to date

The project has afforded the Learning Development team at Plymouth improved access to, and ways of working with academic staff. The discussion generated has improved understanding about what academics expect in terms of student writing, and a range of important related issues have been raised. For example, there were difficulties associated with ‘correcting’ students’ language. Some texts had mistakes or miscues in grammar and punctuation which we didn’t want to reproduce. However, we did try to leave student texts unaltered as far as possible, since authenticity of the student writing is a key feature of the resource. The notion of using ‘professional judgement’ to decide when and how to ‘correct’ texts raised discussion about pedagogical aspects of the resource and the meaning of ‘errors’. We also considered whether to include ‘bad’ examples of writing; concluding that good examples gave a more ‘positive’ message overall, and that focusing on error might be counterproductive or demoralising.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome has been the learning experienced by the staff participants themselves. As the following comments illustrate, some have been encouraged to examine their own approach to marking and feedback, and to reconsider how they communicate with their students:

“Working on WrAssE has certainly helped me to focus again on the type and quality of feedback I give and to consider how I can improve its developmental attributes”.

“I have ... found that my practice has changed since I have been involved in the project. I think that the way that I mark has changed and that I now have a better balance of content and style and structure. This means that I also feel better able to give students much more constructive feedback particularly in the structure and style

of their writing. I am also finding that I am much more proactive as opposed to reactive in my approach to managing issues with writing”.

There have also been specific benefits for staff in using the WrAssE framework:

“I have also found this project extremely useful in helping to define ... what makes a good answer a good answer! (It) ... has also helped me to clarify model answers more clearly to my own students”

“...I think that the directions in the ... analysis exercises I set for first years can be mapped onto that scheme. This is quite unintentional on my part, but nonetheless reassuring!”

We are particularly interested in participants’ reflections (such as this one) on the WrAssE model of functions and qualities of writing, and how it might help them to refine the feedback they give to students. Preliminary responses suggest that WrAssE may be as useful for staff development work as for student learning about writing. We have had expressions of interest from a number of other universities from the UK and elsewhere and look forward to reporting on use of the project in 2010. WrAssE has already achieved some degree of success, but we are hopeful that it will evolve and grow beyond the current evaluation phase. By moving beyond Plymouth and incorporating more examples of, and comments about writing, the project could play a significant role in promoting learning, research and discussion about students’ academic writing in future.

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<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/eventsandnews/learnhighereventsandnews/researchreports.htm>

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Hilsdon, J. and Evans M. 2003: "Developing Student Writing: Example-based functional analysis" Paper delivered for the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing conference, June 2003, Budapest

If you or your institution would like to be involved in WrAssE please email jhilsdon@plymouth.ac.uk or Jdawson@plymouth.ac.uk for further details.

5.6 Tea Time seminars: an alternative reporting mechanism

Independent Learning/ Self Directed Study Learning Area Case Study 1

Ann Barlow, Alyssa Phillips. The University of Manchester. July 2008

LearnHigher in Manchester have established occasional tea-time seminars for recipients of small grants to report back on innovations and interventions supported by LearnHigher funding.

Three seminars have taken place between February and July of 2008. These were advertised to the University of Manchester LearnHigher steering group and more widely throughout the university via Faculty Teaching and Learning managers and, nearer the time of the seminars, with a notice posted on the all staff e-mail bulletin. Notices were also posted on the main LearnHigher website.

The topics covered were:

- Learning to “Love” Research – reporting on an evaluation of a student led research support group
- Real-World Problem-Solving – reporting on the development of a generic module for students of all disciplines which promotes the development of creative problem-solving skills
- The development and piloting of an online tutorial to support the use of Reference Manger within a distance learning Master’s programme

Staff delivering the seminar had received funding from LearnHigher either to conduct evaluation or to support dissemination through conference attendance. In allocating funding, consideration had been given to projects which fell within the University of Manchester’s Learning Area of Independent Learning.

Presenters at the first two seminars were academic members of staff from the School of Education and the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences respectively while the third seminar was delivered by librarians from the Faculty of Medicine and Human Sciences.

The seminars attracted attendances of 10, 10 and 11 respectively. These figures included the presenters, two in each seminar; members of the LearnHigher steering group (4, 5 and 4) together with 2 or 3 other members of staff. The first and third seminars were also attended

by the manager of the LearnHigher CETL, while a colleague from MMU also attended the third seminar.

The key factor in the decision to host the seminars arose from the difficulty in extracting reports from recipients of small grants. The key intention therefore was for the steering group to gain an overview of the innovations which had been supported by LearnHigher funding. In addition, it was expected that the seminar would produce material in the form of podcasts, PowerPoint slides or short reports which could be disseminated more widely on the LearnHigher website. The steering group were also aware that, due to restructuring within the University, opportunities for informal networking in the field of Teaching and Learning had diminished and a seminar series with refreshments could provide stimulation for such networking.

Observations identified that the seminars did provide networking opportunities:

- The presentations stimulated discussion among participants
- Presenters requested and were provided with e-mail addresses for participants for follow-up purposes
- Participants also exchanged contact details with each other informally with view to exchanging information.

In addition, all presenters were able to provide the steering group with evidence of the use of funding.

It had been hoped that the seminars would have attracted attendance figures of around 20 to 25 so the number of attendees was somewhat disappointing. However, despite low attendance figures, responses to the seminars have been very positive. While each seminar only attracted two or three participants in addition to the steering group, those have been different each time. Interestingly they do not appear to be people who were previously engaged with teaching and learning networks. Participants' roles in the University have varied from a research professor with an interest in teaching to student support administrators. Informal feedback from presenters has indicated that they have valued the opportunity to disseminate their approaches to learning within the university. The provision of tea and cakes facilitated informal conversations and a social atmosphere. Given the major changes which the university has seen in the last three years there is currently a need to

build networks and to facilitate conversation between staff in different areas but with similar interests. The broad scope of the seminars spanned boundaries within the institution and the series has generated dialogue between staff. As the seminars have provided an effective reporting mechanism for small grant work a further series is planned for the coming academic year and we already have offers of further presentations. It is anticipated that as the events become established they will attract more interest and support the development of a focused community of practice.

We recommend the use of seminars as a reporting mechanism. Our experience is that it is difficult to extract a written report even to a given deadline, whereas the idea of meeting with interested others appealed to staff. In addition the deadline of an advertised seminar is less easy to put off. We would note that, while it might be tempting to identify particular job roles as having a special interest in teaching and learning and to publicise events accordingly, our use of the all-staff board was more effective than we had anticipated and resulted in a broader spectrum of attendees. We would recommend that events are publicised as widely as possible within the institution.

PowerPoint presentations and summaries produced for the seminars together with edited podcasts will be made available on the LearnHigher website to facilitate wider dissemination of this small grant project work in the area of independent learning and self-directed study.

5.7 Developing the LearnHigher learning spaces

Independent Learning/ Self Directed Study Learning Area Case Study 2

Ann Barlow, Alyssa Phillips. The University of Manchester. July 2008

Capital funding at the University of Manchester was used to equip two small rooms for use as group workrooms and staff training rooms. Both rooms were fully equipped by October 2006 and the use has been monitored over the past two years.

At the time of setting up there was a lack of small rooms at the University which could be freely bookable by staff or students for use. There is at the university considerable access to large clusters but these are not appropriate for students wishing to undertake group work. In addition, there was no facility for staff to engage with new teaching technologies on a training basis. One room was equipped with a cluster of four computers together with an interactive whiteboard, while the other was set up as a meeting room with an Access Grid node. The intention was that the second room could be used as a video conference facility. As the Access Support Centre is based at the University of Manchester there was considerable encouragement within the institution for the use of the system.

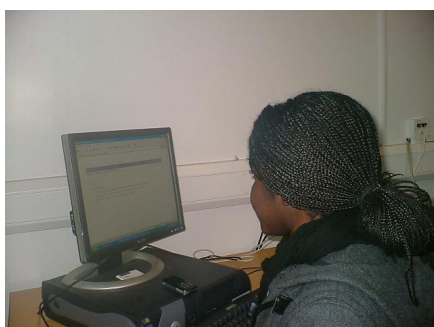
The then Centre for Continuing Education (now Courses for the Public) had a room booking system which enabled bookings to be made for the LearnHigher rooms and data monitored for identification of room usage. The total number of bookings made for the cluster since October 2006 has been 178 while the total number for the Access Grid Node room has been 81, however it should be noted that the use of the Access Grid Node itself has been limited to 5 occasions other than for quality assurance and demonstration purposes. While the use of the AG node room has been fairly constant over the two years the number of bookings for the cluster increased from 38 in 2006/07 to 140 in 2007/08.

The intention of providing rooms that could be easily booked by students was to encourage independent use of facilities. It was also felt that by providing space to trial the use of teaching technologies in a small informal environment staff would be encouraged to develop innovative methods of teaching which would enable self-directed learning. The facilities provided by the LearnHigher rooms were promoted in the first instance to staff with a known interest in self-directed study and in the use of technology for independent learning. Students users were directed to the rooms by their tutors. The spaces have been welcomed

with enthusiasm by both staff and students. In 2006/07 a numbers of students from the Combined Studies programme used the cluster for engaging in group work. With the availability of scanners and a heavy duty laser colour printer they had facilities to produce good quality design and publicity. In addition there was access to a data-projector so there was scope to practise presentation work. Among the comments were that it was good to have “a room where we can make a noise”.



In 2007/08 SkyPE was installed on the computers in the cluster and this led to increased use of the room by language students. Initially it was booked for use by students of Japanese – the tutor commented that it had “made him a happy bunny” – and this was followed by students on both the Italian programme and the French programme. All groups were using the SkyPE facility to converse with partners overseas. It was observed that the three groups demonstrated very different patterns of use. The Japanese group were engaged as a group on a timetabled basis. The room was booked on a regular basis by the tutor for the Italian group but students accessed the facility on a drop in basis. Italian students also seemed quite comfortable with the presence of others in the room. The students on the French programme made individual bookings and were clearly looking for a space where they would not be overheard while engaging in foreign language conversation.



The use of the rooms also increased in 2007/08 as a major strategic development in the use of e-learning emerged across the university. E-learning support teams have been re-structured and, purely coincidentally, the team for the Faculty of Humanities are based in offices adjacent to the LearnHigher rooms. The cluster has been an appropriate venue for the delivery of drop-in support for staff engaging in the use of the VLE as a teaching mechanism.

Other users of the rooms have included Post-graduate researchers, both in order to familiarise themselves with technology and to conduct technologically based research. The rooms have also been used to conduct focus groups and to demonstrate web-based resources.

In themselves, the rooms have been well-used and well received. Staff and students have appreciated the lack of restriction on the use of the rooms. With LearnHigher funding being used for small projects at Manchester we have been able to support small additional purchases as the need becomes apparent (e.g. scanners, headphones) and as a developmental project we have also been able to request the upload of software which is outside the usual University core. Some students did seem to find the self-directed nature of arrangements puzzling at first, "Who do we ask if...?" but on the whole they appreciated the undisturbed use of the rooms for their own purposes.

The limited use of the Access Grid Node has been disappointing. Its apparent lack of compatibility with systems outside the UK academic network has meant that communication with overseas partners has been more easily facilitated using commercial software. On the other hand, technical support for the Access Grid Node has been excellent, while for the generic machines it would have been useful to have more specific technical support.

Due to staff sickness there were difficulties with the booking system in 2007/08. While telephone and personal bookings could be dealt with, those made by e-mail were not picked up in time. The length of time allowed for pre-booking was in many cases very short and students appeared to expect instant replies to e-mails. We are currently reviewing our guidelines for student bookings in order to ensure that expectations are realistic and that our service can meet the demands.

The provision of small workrooms for staff and students does appear to be highly valued and, certainly in this university, fairly unusual. In establishing technological facilities it is difficult to assess what the most appropriate will be in the future. Institutional priorities change very rapidly as do emergent technologies. If facilities are to keep abreast of such changes then there needs to be contingency funding set aside in order to meet new demands.

5.8 Evaluation and Development of the Faculty of Humanities Study Skills Website.

Independent Learning/ Self Directed Study Learning Area Case Study 3

Ann Barlow, Alyssa Phillips. The University of Manchester. July 2008

LearnHigher in Manchester is currently funding a two-stage project centred on our Faculty of Humanities Study Skills website, the two stages being:

- a structural and evaluative review of the website and
- the implementation of recommendations of the review

The first stage of the project has focused on an evaluation of the effectiveness the Faculty of Humanities online study skills resources for independent/self-directed learning, from the perspectives of both students and staff. This took place over the 2007-08 academic year, with the final report due in August 2008. It is planned that the second stage of the project will take place over the 2008-09 academic year.

The website (<http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/>) was originally developed in 2003-04 for the Faculty of Arts of the Victoria University of Manchester. Its primary objective was to take study skills information which departments were providing to undergraduate students in paper form and transfer this to the online environment. The site was originally conceived as a static site and as a reference point for students for generic study skills advice. It was assumed that the discipline specific study skills advice and experiences would take place within the students' courses. Since the launch of the website, the university has merged with UMIST, the Faculty has expanded to become the Faculty of Humanities, and there have been a number of key changes in online technology as well as the teaching and learning strategies of the university. While the website has been maintained during these changes, no significant amendments have been made to the presentation and content provided.

More recently, there has been discussion within the university about updating the current website and expanding its context to cover other student groups (e.g. postgraduate students). LearnHigher in Manchester felt that before this development work took place, there was a need for a detailed evaluation of the current provision, with a particular focus on staff and student responses to the current material, and student requirements in terms

of online generic study skills support. It is hoped that through this project, LearnHigher in Manchester can identify a detailed understanding of the potential for this study skills website to support students in independent and self-directed approaches to learning. In the second stage of this project, we plan to put into action the development work of the website needed to realise this potential.

For the first stage of the project, LearnHigher in Manchester employed Patricia Wood, an educational researcher to undertake the evaluative work, to collate and analyse findings and produce a written report and recommendations. Chris Barker, a final year undergraduate student, was employed to provide technical and administrative support to the project, and to recruit students for evaluating the website. In consultation with LearnHigher in Manchester, Patricia determined that the most effective way to carry out the review was through a combination of student focus groups (3 groups of mostly undergraduate students), semi structured interviews with three members of staff and desk research. A qualitative approach was taken for this research, with the idea of capturing a series of snapshots at a particular time.

A draft report of this evaluation has been completed and is currently being reviewed by LearnHigher in Manchester. The final version will be made available to the sector through the LearnHigher website. The key findings from the draft report are summarised below. What is most pleasing about this report is the way it has incorporated detailed student responses and views of the website. The general consensus from the students is that this website is a good idea, but that it needs a higher profile. Most students in the focus groups had never accessed the website before. When looking at more detail at the website it became apparent that the students accessed the content on the site in different ways and at different times. A single reference site is unlikely to meet all their needs but it could certainly make a significant contribution. The students also felt there was too much information on the pages of the website.

With regard to the content of the website, the researcher, when first visiting the website, was initially concerned that student feedback was missing. While none of the students brought this up in the focus groups, when it was raised by the researcher there followed detailed discussion about the quality of feedback at university and how to interpret feedback. There was some disagreement amongst the students about whether two areas

were relevant for the website: PDP and Making Yourself Employable. The report also found that aspects missing from the website were student voices and faces. There was general consensus in the focus groups that showing real students in real situations could be useful to help students feel the website was about and for them rather than for the University. While the recommendations are yet to be finalised, the draft report contains key suggestions and ideas for developing and improving both the content and presentation of the website. This evaluation and the draft report have also produced some unexpected results. The second part of the focus groups centre on a more general discussion about what it was like to study at university, and as a result there is rich data here particularly on what it is like as a first year student, the importance of social networks and the value the students place on peer support. Most interesting, when students were asked by the researcher about what helped them most in becoming independent learners, the students talked about “doing it” and referred to their “friends”. Apparent in this focus group discussion is also the fact that students felt they were receiving mixed messages from the university about independent study. As Patricia summed up:

“Be independent – but only where we say you can. Aim to become a reflective, deep learner – but respond to these deadlines and assessments which may mean you have to embrace surface – or at least strategic – approaches to succeed.”

So where to now? From the draft report there are a number of key areas of development possible for the website, and it is envisioned that this development work will be taken forward into 2008-09. Reflecting on the findings so far, it is also evident that further discussion will be required to understand why students feel that they are getting mixed messages about independent learning, to ensure that the enhanced study skills website reaches its full potential (and does not just become a tool viewed by students as useful for strategic learning). Patricia Wood’s report argues for us to think very carefully about developing a website that more actively supports the variety of student learning, rather than just generic study skills.

In terms of the mechanism for evaluation we feel that the employment of an experienced educational researcher has enabled us to capture rich data. It was clear to the students that the researcher was independent of any course and they were able to respond without prejudice. In reviewing the website, enabling the students to spend time exploring the site before being interviewed was essential and observation of the way in which it was explored

has provided valuable information for the proposed redevelopment. It may also be useful to note that students were paid for taking part in the research.

5.9 Making Group-work work: the development, dissemination and evaluation of a web based resource

Listening and Interpersonal Skills Learning Area Case Study

Julia Braham. University of Leeds. July 2008

This case study describes the development, dissemination and evaluation of the web based resource - 'Making Group-work, work'.

The group-work resource is the result of collaboration between three LearnHigher partners; the aim being to evidence 'joined up thinking' across the learning areas of group work, listening & interpersonal skills and oral communication. Through this partnership we aimed to achieve a greater impact on our two main audiences – learners and teachers. We were also keen to explore how both groups used the resource as well as evaluating the impact and effects on both audiences.

Group work was chosen as the title and main vehicle of the resource with emphasis on effective listening and interpersonal skills throughout. By using a group presentation as the focus of the assessment, the resource was both consistent with students' experiences and allowed for the full integration of 'oral communication' as the third learning area. As higher education continues to embrace constructivist educational principles, and improving student employability continues to dominate the skills agenda it became clear that there was a lack of good quality interactive multi media resources suitable for students in higher education. We intended to produce a resource that was web based and therefore accessible to a wider audience (the project group acknowledged technology related arguments which question the accessibility of web based resources, but believe that in our constituent institutions IT facilities *do* support the use of web based resources).

Engaging in this project allowed us to meet the objectives of LearnHigher.

It is the development and collation of peer reviewed resources that underpin activity across academic disciplines. It takes a strategic approach to building and disseminating a sound evidence base which can be used to inform learning development.

The production stage of the project is now complete (although further supporting resources are needed to maximise its full potential) and dissemination and evaluation is taking place.

Again – there are two main audiences, staff and students. As with most aspects of resource development in higher education, dissemination through academic staff is the most effective way of reaching a larger audience, so a significant part of our early promotion and evaluation has been with academic staff.

Dissemination and subsequent evaluation has taken place through a number of conferences to staff:

LearnHigher Research Conference	July 2007
HEA Annual conference	July 2007
University of Leeds Learning and Teaching Conference	January 2008
Diverse Conference In Holland	July 2008

The latter provided an excellent opportunity to obtain feedback from an international audience. Although the mainly anecdotal comments are still being collated, the resource was very well received by our European colleagues – one in particular was observed smiling and nodding with appreciation at key points in the presentation “*yes this could have been filmed in Norway!*” Other more robust (but still narrative) forms of evaluative feedback came from judges of the forthcoming MEDEA Awards who made strong representation requesting to us to submit the resource to the Online Educa Berlin conference in December.

The presentation can be viewed online:

<http://collegerama.tudelft.nl/mediasite/Catalog/front.aspx?cid=dee883c8-79b5-4d9e-9fa8-2fb2e737208f>

Diverse2008/day02_Making group-work work- the process, challenges and results of using video in blended learning

Presenter(s): Elston, C., Braham, J., Hartley, P.

Status: Available

Air Date: 2008-07-02

Air Time: 2:35 PM WEST

Length: 27 Minutes 34 Seconds

The resource has also been linked to by MERLOT in America where it has been described as:

'an excellent resource for teaching students how to understand and overcome the challenges of group work'.

<http://www.merlot.org/merlot/viewMaterial.htm?id=295812>

User evaluation has led to a number of research opportunities. The group work learning area at Bradford University has identified a number of key questions they are interested in exploring:-

- How do/do students become 'teams'?
- What is the best way of creating effective student groups?
- Does student group work prepare students for the workforce?
- How does assessment affect group process?
-

These research questions are beyond the parameters of this case study but provide an idea of one strand of the theoretical context leading to the development of the resource.

For those who work in higher education, the perils and pitfalls of designing group work activities to enhance student learning are well known. There is a tendency to build group work activities into learning programmes without providing a supportive infrastructure which allows learning to happen. Instead, the focus is on the end product of the group activity rather than the process leading up to it. Students are expected to 'do' group work without any conceptual understanding of group process or dynamics (similarly they are expected to 'do' a presentation without guidance on presentation techniques etc).

The current research being carried out at the University of Leeds questions student use of resources. Will they use it – what will they think to it? What effects can we anticipate from engaging with the resource?

The evaluation that led to this research involved the resource being trialled with first year Combined Studies students at the University of Manchester. This trial provided a rich seam of feedback from students, who were asked to respond to discussion topics as part of their course work. Below are snippets of their comments, which we have permission to circulate amongst the LearnHigher network³

³ These student responses are available to be circulated amongst the LearnHigher network as informal feedback.

“Although I believe this group was fairly polarized and as such not entirely realistic, the videos did give me an insight into the problems I may face when going about my group community project. They made me aware that it is essential to set parameters for the group early on, and ensure that each person is happy with their job roles. Furthermore, it is clear that everybody should get the same amount of time to vocalize their opinions without fear of being shot down or being overshadowed by somebody with a louder voice. I will take some of these lessons with me when I begin my group project shortly”.

“I think that the videos give an exaggerated view of what it is really like to work in groups, just as an aid to highlight what can go wrong and what to do about it if it does.

Although, this is not to say that one or two problems may be encountered when working in our own groups and I think that the videos were a good way of visually representing what to do (and not to do) if such problems or dilemmas were to arise in our own group work. This tutorial has shown me strategies that I may use in the future for the community project; especially action plans which would help avoid any confusion over who is doing what task and the length of time they have to do it, according to deadlines”.

“I think this video shows some of the issues which may arise during group work. There are always people who are more forceful when putting their point across and those who prefer to sit back and let the others do the work for fear of having their ideas shunned. It is clear from the video that it is important that students listen to one another and try and incorporate everyone’s ideas and thoughts into the final piece of work”.

“The issues raised in the video, I think, were very relevant to problems that may arise in a group. However, the video also presented some good points on resolving conflict when working in a group, and it was worth watching especially now when we are about to start our group projects. It gave me a deeper insight into group conflict management”

One of the most interesting findings from this level of feedback is the ability of the students to relate to the experience they viewed and reflect on how their learning could be used to

change their practice. The other interesting aspect of the feedback from Manchester was the highly creative way in which the resource was built into a programme of study.

The research is ongoing and whilst these comments don't evidence the actual effects on the users' behaviour, they do evidence intent to change behaviour which is an encouraging observation!

As for the future, the project team plan to develop further 'additional resources' and continue with programmes of dissemination, evaluation and research. At this stage it is difficult to pinpoint any specific errors in our project methodology; we can think of many missed opportunities or abstracts that could have been submitted, but development of this resource is one small part of a much larger project. We need to keep monitoring effect and following up on opportunities to determine if the resource has influenced the learning experience of students both in the UK, Europe and further a field.

5.10 Brunel's Maths Café

Numeracy, Maths & Statistics Learning Area Case Study

Mundeep Gill. Brunel University. July 2008

Overview

The maths café was an initiative set up to help students with the revision of their quantitative modules during the revision period. The café was an initiative that was implemented by Brunel University with part funding received from the West London Lifelong Learning Network (WL LLN). This case study outlines our experience of implementing the Maths Café and reports back on students perception of the initiative. The case study ends with a brief section on how this idea can be used in other areas outside of Mathematics.

Description of the project

The Maths Café took place over the two-week revision period (14th – 25th April) and was open everyday from 10am – 4pm. The funding that we received was used to pay for academic staff to provide the tutorial support, refreshments, and paper-based resources. At any one time, two members of staff were present at the café to provide one-to-one support to students.

This section outlines the set-up of the café and the different strands of advertising that were used to promote it.

The set – up

The Maths Café was set up in the LearnHigher Centre since it is central and visible to students.

Since the theme of the project was a Café, the LearnHigher Centre was dressed to imitate one, for example, tables were covered with chequered red and white table cloths, and fresh flowers were placed on all tables (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The LearnHigher Centre dressed as a Café

Refreshments were provided to students, free of charge, as an incentive to access the café. Teas and Coffees were ordered in-house via the catering service but all other snacks were ordered online from a supermarket chain, as this was more cost effective. Refreshments were laid out at 10am and then again at 1pm.

It was anticipated that students would mostly be using paper-based resources, such as lecture notes, so only two laptops were set up so that students could access online resources. The paper-based resources that were made available to students were a combination of materials provided by the maths support tutor at Brunel University and from the nationally available Mathcentre (www.mathcentre.ac.uk). These paper-based resources were situated near the door, the idea being that students would be drawn to the freely available resources (see Figure 2). The paper-based resources covered a wide range of topics and initially only twenty copies of each resource was made available, since the uptake was not known.



Figure 2: Students accessing the paper-based resources which were displayed by the entrance to the room

Advertising the Café

Advertising for the café started a week before the event to inform both students and staff. Different strands of advertising were used to promote the event to as many students as possible.

- All lecturers teaching foundation and level 1 mathematics modules were contacted via email.
- An email was sent out to all students.
- Leaflets were designed and sent to the university's print room for bulk printing and distributed to all central services and to key Schools within the university.

- A web-page was developed.
- A banner advertising the café (which linked to the webpage) was loaded onto the university's virtual learning environment (VLE). This meant that anyone logging into the VLE would see the message advertising the café.
- The event was advertised via the various plasma screens that are distributed around the campus.
- A sign was put up on the glass window of the LearnHigher Centre.
- The final advertising strand was using paper that had the Maths Café logo on it throughout the duration of the two-weeks while working on material with students. This was done so that when students left the café their peers could see that they had accessed the support and hence might have been encouraged to take up the opportunity that was available.

Goals

One of the issues that many lecturers who teach quantitative modules to non-mathematicians experience is that students realise, at a relatively late stage, that they need help with the mathematical content of their course. A reason for this late awareness is that many of the quantitative modules at Brunel University are assessed summatively at the end of the academic year.

One of the aims of the project was to provide tutorial assistance on a one-to-one basis for any student requiring support as the examination period approached. It was hoped that not only would students access this additional support, and find it beneficial to their learning of the subject, but that this would also have a positive impact on the number of students successfully passing their quantitative module(s) and hence progressing to the subsequent level of study. This is especially important for students on quantitative courses who have not completed an A-level in mathematics and hence find it difficult to bridge the gap between GCSE and undergraduate mathematics.

Primarily the project ran as a pilot study to identify the main mathematical issues students needed help with and more importantly, to identify what courses these students were studying. This information will be used to design a more integrated approach to supporting students in the following and subsequent academic years. It is expected that by introducing a more integrated and structured support mechanism students will be less likely to leave

revision of their quantitative module until the very last moment, however, this will require further study.

Evaluation

The Maths Café was evaluated to identify which students were accessing the support available, in terms of level of study and course, and what topics of mathematics they had problems with. The café was also evaluated to identify whether the drop-in nature of the initiative and the overall idea was one that students utilised and was accessed by the target group (non-mathematicians and students who have not completed an A-level in Mathematics).

This section on evaluation will report on whether the initiative was set up successfully so that the target group accessed the support made available and will report on students perception of the project, since students were asked to give feedback about the service received.

Another method to measure impact will be to analyse students' examination marks to see whether more students have passed the quantitative modules in comparison to previous years (i.e. compare retention rates). However, this data is currently not available; once collected, relevant statistical analysis will be conducted.

A tally was kept by all tutors to monitor how many students were accessing one-to-one support. It has been estimated that approximately 352 students accessed one-to-one support during the two week period.

One of the aims of the café was to support non-traditional students, and those who are enrolled on highly quantitative modules and have not completed an A-level in mathematics. It was therefore important to find out students mathematical background (i.e. GCSE and AS/A-level mathematics grade, if applicable).

From the data collected from students it was found that students' GCSE grades were split relatively equally between grades A, B and C, 29%, 35% and 31% respectively, with a small percentage achieving an A* (4%). It was also found that the Maths Café was accessed by the

target group, i.e. students who had not completed an AS – or A-level in Mathematics (61% and 65%, respectively).

It was important to collect feedback from students to find out what their perceptions of the initiative were. All students were asked to complete a short feedback form, which was kept brief but general, so that students could make comments and suggestions for improvements.

To identify whether students found the support provided via the one-to-one tutoring useful, they were asked to complete a Likert scale question. The results from the Likert scale indicated that a large proportion of students found the support and advice given very useful (74%) or useful (25%). This shows that students found the one-to-one nature of the café useful in helping them to gain knowledge with the topic area they had problems with.

As part of the evaluation of the café students were asked how they thought the café could have been improved. From the total number of students that completed an evaluation form, 45% made at least one suggestion for improvement. Table 1 shows the suggestions that were made and the percentage of students that made each one.

Table 1: Suggestions students made for improvements

Suggestion for improvements	Percentage of students that made the suggestion
More tutors present	33%
Extend duration and opening times of the café	27%
More food to be available	8%
Tutors to have subject specific knowledge	3%
No improvements could be made	4%
Other comments (such as running the café more frequently throughout the year, running revision workshops parallel to the café, heater in the room etc.)	25%

All the suggestions made by students were positive and are feasible to implement, e.g. extended opening hours. However, most of these suggestions, if taken up, would depend on the amount of funding that is available.

The last part of the student evaluation was to ask students for any other comments they had about the Maths Café. The comments made in this section by students were messages of appreciation. A sample of some of these messages is:

- Thank you for your support.
- It was too good – no need for improvements.
- Explanations given were very good.
- Very knowledgeable and understanding teachers.
- I was amazed at the level of support that was given to me.
- Friendly and helpful.

This indicates that the café and the tutors involved promoted an environment that was friendly and open where students were not afraid to disclose what they did not know or understand. Students also appreciated the support that was given and found it useful.

Analysis

This case study gives a brief overview of our experience of implementing and running a Maths Café, which had the aim of providing tutorial assistance to students in order to retain them. The project was seen as a success by everyone involved, students and staff included. The biggest success was organising an academic student facing event such as this that students accessed and found beneficial to their learning. However, there are a few things that we would do differently when we run a similar initiative again, namely,

- bulk photocopy the paper-based resources in advance since demand for these was high;
- have a student helper involved with the project to help with the maintenance of the café;
- have a waiting list so that tutors can distinguish between students waiting to be seen and those that are using the facility as a learning space to work independently.

Advice for other contexts

The success of the Maths Café has led to the creation and thought processes of similar projects in other subject areas outside of mathematics. In September, there will be a u-Link Café taking place in the LearnHigher Centre, which will run in a similar way as the Maths Café where students can drop-in and get support with accessing the University's VLE. Requests have also come through from other central services who wish to use the LearnHigher Centre in a similar way.

The maths café has shown that using the LearnHigher Centre as an open learning space in a flexible manner works successfully and students engage with such activities and appreciate the support made available.

5.11 Get Ahead: promoting student success with a conference by and for students

Reading & Note Making Learning Areas Case Study

Sandra Sinfield. London Metropolitan University . July 2008

Students and their learning are at the heart of the three CETLs (LearnHigher, Write Now and RLO-CETL) at London Metropolitan University. We work with each other and with staff across the university to encourage a whole range of learning activities, which in turn is said to drive the Learning and Teaching agenda throughout the university (Deputy VC Paul Lister in Key Note at Get Ahead). This year we hosted our second student conference designed to promote the academic and employability success of London Met's students and to showcase the work of the three CETLs.

The conference itself is now an annual event and is designed to bring students from diverse backgrounds together to celebrate learning and teaching. Our reflections upon the conference, including presenting at the Student CETL Network conference in Plymouth July 2008, are designed to illustrate how learning development at its best harnesses student energy and motivation in active and emancipatory ways – and shifts learning development and support dramatically away from a 'remedial' backwater.

Our conference, as well as involving staff from the CETLs and many other academic departments, is an event for students, organised by students and supported by students themselves. A recent London Met alumnus took a lead role in organising Get Ahead – he has contributed to this case study and also to our presentation at the Student CETL Network Conference; his report upon *that* student conference concludes this case study (see below).

For a brief overview of what our conference consisted of, please go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/adm111>

The CETLs supported the conference by providing a free lunch and 'goody bags' containing memory sticks loaded with LearnHigher and RLO-CETL resources and with links to many useful websites. The conference offered academic presentations on various aspects of writing, reading and note making, to more technological sessions, such as using a mobile phone for study – with many of the sessions delivered by students, including our writing

mentors. Where students felt that they lacked the confidence to present, we trained them in successful presentation strategies and helped them to develop and deliver dynamic and engaging sessions.

Subsequent evaluation deemed the conference a high quality, high level event:

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/news/latest-news/student-get-ahead-2008-conference-hailed-as-great-success.cfm/>

(Though do note that well over 200 students attended on the day!)

Our Get Ahead conference directly impacts upon the students who attend on the day. Further the conference demonstrates to subject academics and to senior management that there are creative and innovative ways of supporting students – and that so much is achieved when students are actively involved rather than silenced. If you want more information on how to run a student conference or if you would like to be involved in our next conference (planned for 11 February 2009) please contact:

s.sinfield@londonmet.ac.uk

a.mitchell@londonmet.ac.uk

Please find below:

- Sample of Conference publicity
- Extract from Report on Student CETL Network Conference, including an illustration of our **conference planning toolkit**
- Link to power point presentation upon the Conference
- Link to PDF of conference planning toolkit.

Sample of Conference blurb (the conference was supported by a website and offered online booking)

Get Ahead 2008: Achieving Success at University

Please invite your students

A conference for students with the title 'Get Ahead: Achieving Success at University' is going to be held on 13th February, 2008 at the Graduate Centre, North Campus of London Metropolitan University.

The event is organised by the University's three Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), namely, LearnHigher, Write Now and Reusable Learning Objects (RLO-CETL).

The Conference aim is to raise students' awareness of strategies and resources for study success and the role of the CETLs within the university. As well as the academic sessions, the University support services are keen to share information about what they can do to help students make the most of the additional services on offer throughout their time at University. The University Library Services, the Career Development and Employment Service, Reach Volunteering, Learning Development Unit and the Students Union will be hosting stalls to offer advice and information throughout the day. We have invited publishers along, and a variety of text books will be available on the day at very attractive rates.

The outline of the day is anticipated to be as follows:

- ❖ 10.00 – 10.30 Registration & refreshments
- ❖ 10.30 - 10.45: Welcome – by the CETL Directors
- ❖ 10.45 - 11.00: Keynote from Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Development) Paul Lister
- ❖ 11.00 - 13.00 Parallel sessions on areas such as 'Writing for Success', 'How to achieve good grades', 'Reading for Success' and 'Employability'
- ❖ 13.00 - 14.00 Lunch and London Metropolitan University Choir
- ❖ 14.00 – 16.00 Parallel sessions on areas such as 'How to use PowerPoint', 'Getting a First' and 'Planning your Dissertation'.
- ❖ 16.00 - 17.00 Plenary session - Guest speakers
Entertainment from the 'Capoeira Society'

Closing remarks

For more information contact:

Andy Mitchell: a.mitchell@londonmet.ac.uk

Bookings via website: <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/getahead/>

Raising the student voice: Get Ahead at the CETL Student Network Conference, Plymouth - June 16th/17th 2008

Three of us (Andy Mitchell, Tom Burns & Sandra Sinfield) presented on Get Ahead under the banner of 'Raising the student voice' at the Student CETL Network Conference. It seems appropriate to end this case study with a report on a student conference presented at a student conference, written by our student organiser:

Short Report

By Andy Mitchell (CETL Student Rep)

The academic conferences I have attended previously have tended to be hurried affairs, with delegates rushing around from workshop to workshop or taking in the poster presentation whilst consuming whatever buffet is on offer. Some of those conferences have also included strands with the word 'student' somewhere in the title. However, on closer inspection these sessions are generally led by academics reporting their interpretation on something students have been involved in.

Probably the most important aspect of this conference was the opportunity it afforded students to present first-hand, in their own voice, a project they have been involved in during the past year. On occasion the presentations were delivered with an academic staff member, supporting the idea of collaboration and partnership. Students were encouraged to lead each workshop and supported throughout. It was sometimes difficult to tell who the staff member was and who the student was. And it was clear that the students and staff were very enthusiastic about what they were doing.

The conference itself followed a traditional shape (similar to our own one day event), with 16 workshops spread over two days. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, but more importantly it was not rushed which left time for delegates to digest what they had heard

and learnt and share observations and thoughts. It also left us with plenty of time to build ideas for our own CETL work.

Our own presentation, which discussed the **Get Ahead Conference** held in London Metropolitan University on February 13th 2008, was attended by the representatives from both the HEA and NUS. All expressed an interest to attend our Get Ahead conference next year. In fact, we received quite a few offers from academics to either present or to attend, which is excellent news.

Feedback on our presentation was also positive, with one student saying that "*Your enthusiasm for students shone through...*".

Another feature of our workshop was a simple conference planning resource – in the form of a laminated A3 'poster' (see Figure 1) - that we had designed to support the event.

Figure 1 – conference planning resource

I was surprised how well such a simple design had been received by those who used it. We ended up giving most away, notably to the HEA; for others to use in their own institutions, which I found puzzling but brilliant at the same time.

We also embedded a two minute promotional video of the Getahead conference into our presentation that I have now uploaded to You Tube. It can be watched here:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/adm111>

To end, I would say that this conference, like our own Get Ahead conference, was a really positive experience which demonstrates what students can achieve if they are given the opportunity – and how positive it is for staff and students to collaborate actively. The CETL Student Network is something I believe we should all be supporting in the future, as its aims and objectives are something that not only enhance the student (and staff) experience, but can also play an important part in developing education.

See the link below for a presentation on putting together a student conference:

<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/Download-document/642-Raising-the-student-voice-CASE-STUDY2008.htm>

See the link below for a pdf of the conference planning resource:

<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/Download-document/643-FINALposter.htm>

5.12 Learning for All: developing inclusive curricula in higher education through appreciative enquiry

Learning for All (Inclusivity) Learning Area Case Study

Val Chapman, University of Worcester July 2008

This case study describes and evaluates the research approach and three outputs of a project, led by the 'Learning for All' Learning Area Coordinator of the LearnHigher Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The project, *Developing Inclusive Curricula in Higher Education*, conducted at the University of Worcester (UW), was supported by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (Sept 2007 to Dec 2008) and yielded the following deliverables:

- A Step by Step Guide to Using Appreciative Inquiry
- An 'Individual Inclusivity Profile'
- An extended version of the web based resource: SCIPS (www.scips.worc.ac.uk)

In particular, this case study highlights the process of piloting an Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider,1999) approach within the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science (ISES). As a result of adopting this approach, the project team succeeded in engaging the interest and commitment of ISES academic staff in the further development of their inclusive learning and teaching practice, and the 'Step by Step Guide to Using Appreciative Inquiry' was created to enable the process to be rolled out to other departments within the Institution.

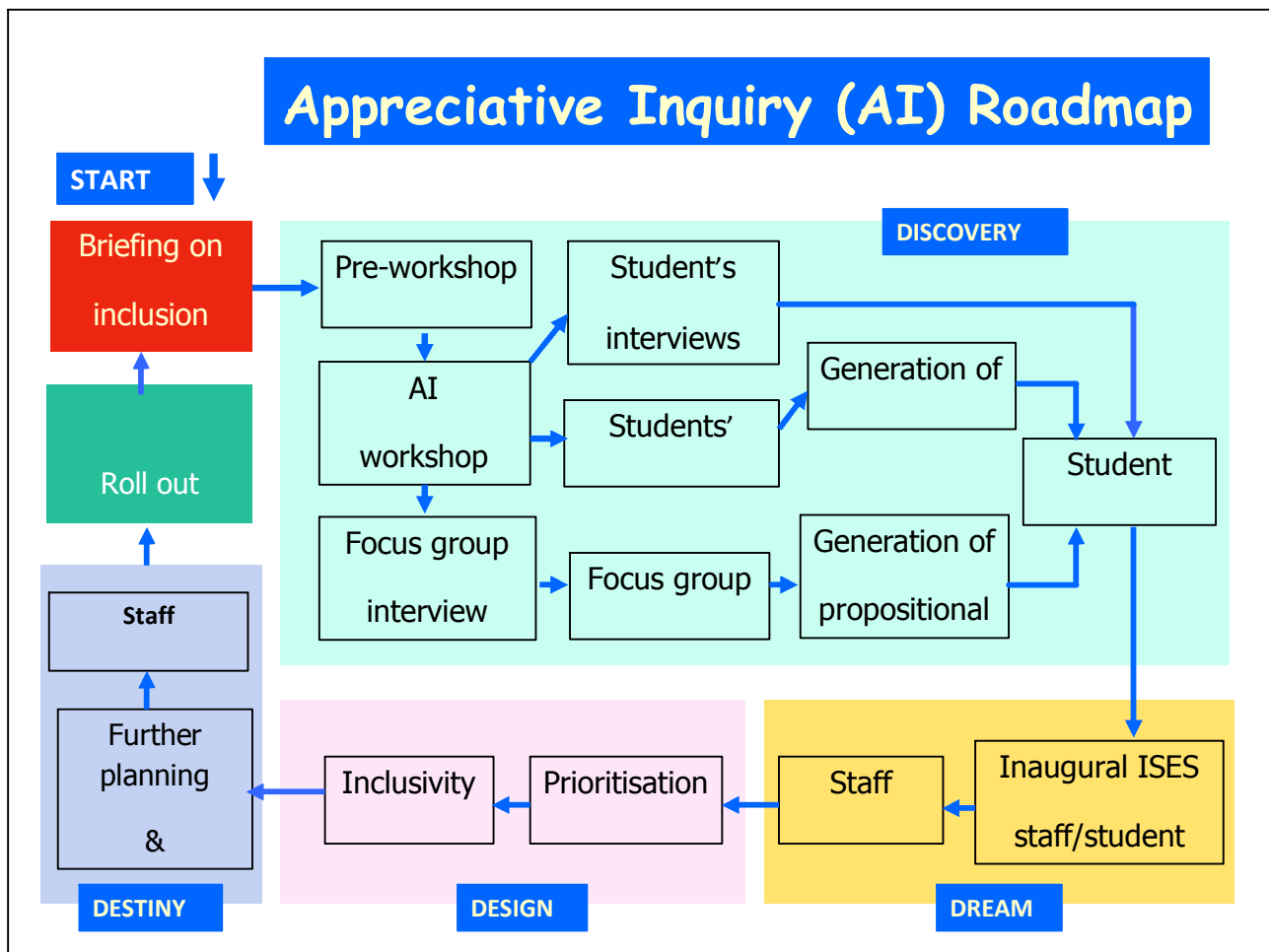
In developing the project proposal, the project's aim was clearly articulated as a drive to improve the learning experience of disabled students and embed effective inclusive practices in learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design within the University. It was intended that the aim would be achieved in two ways: through the implementation of an innovative staff development package on inclusion that would work "with the grain of subject communities" (Trowler et al, 2003, p5), and through the effective use of supplemental resources developed within the project under the auspices of the LearnHigher Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, in particular the web based resource, SCIPS (Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study), www.scips.worc.ac.uk.

By far the easiest aspects of the project were the development of the staff development materials and the further development of SCIPS through the addition another five subject

disciplines to the database. These aspects, though time intensive, were fairly straightforward, not least since the project leader had complete control over the processes and was able to draw on her considerable previous experience in both areas. The real challenge of the project - and consequently the far more interesting and rewarding aspect - was a crucial step that had been erroneously omitted from the original proposal: how to engage the interest and commitment of academic staff to further develop inclusive academic practice.

The project leader had substantial experience of delivering staff development in UW and in other Higher Education Institutions across the sector, and personal experience meant that the team members were well aware of the difficulties associated with physically accessing busy academics, let alone engaging their hearts and minds. Following discussion with colleagues from the HEA, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was selected as the preferred methodology to try and engage academic staff, particularly since this approach avoids a deficit discourse and the 'teachers need fixing' model as described by McAlpine (2006).

Diagram 1: ISES Appreciative Inquiry Roadmap



The distinctive features of AI are that the approach:

- asks “unconditional positive questions”;
- avoids being problem centred;
- asks what’s possible, not what’s wrong;
- asks about the positives and can infer the negatives;
- is the opposite of problem solving;
- is conducted in four stages:

Discovery Phase: Gathering data

Dream Phase: Thinking in aspirational terms

Design Phase: Action planning

Destiny Phase: Focusing on sustainability and on the establishment of a solution oriented approach

The 'AI Roadmap' illustrates the process of conducting the four stages of Appreciative Inquiry at UW. Prior to preparing the disabled students for engagement in the research (n=5), they were asked to complete a short questionnaire which required them to describe their own learning experiences in the ISES, as well as any significant interventions which had made learning easier for them. The students and three members of the project team then attended an Appreciative Inquiry workshop, led by a respected proponent of AI from the Higher Education Academy. At the workshop, three forms of evidence collection were discussed and agreed upon. These subsequently produced data that formed the basis of a research presentation to the staff of the ISES and other invited guests from the University and beyond. Due to the constraints on the student's time and availability as assessment deadlines loomed large, the student researchers were actively engaged in only the first two stages of the four stage AI approach.

a. Discovery Stage

Data collection was undertaken by the students using a variety of approaches. Following a lecture, four student researchers conducted a 'post-it' exercise. This involved asking the students, who had attended the lecture, to write down three adjectives which most accurately summed up their inclusive learning experience in the ISES. The fifth student, who has a visual impairment, conducted an interview with two fellow students who were similarly disabled; the interview was transcribed and added to the data set. All the student researchers involved in the project then attended a focus group interview. This was led by a (suitably briefed) student from the Art and Design department who was a member of the project team. The recorded interview was transcribed and the collated data analysed by three members of the project team to derive the propositional statements that were then shared with the ISES staff in the next AI phase.

b. Dream Phase

The results were presented to teaching staff (n= 30 of whom 24 were ISES staff) at the ISES Inaugural Staff/Student Research Summit in March, 2008). Also in attendance were the Vice Chancellor of the University, Chief Executive of the British Paralympic Association and the Director of the Academic Development and Practice Unit at the University.

Using a Powerpoint presentation, one of the students explained the principles underpinning, and the rationale for using the AI approach. Then each student, in turn, introduced themselves and spoke of the challenges they had faced in their educational and personal lives and how these had been overcome. The students described the 'Post-it' exercise conducted with their peers and, prior to revealing the top four adjectives describing inclusive practice in the ISES, asked staff to undertake the same activity. On being asked to think about which three adjectives students were most likely to have used in describing their own experiences of inclusive practices, the following were the most popular staff responses (n=72) :

- Challenging
- Rewarding
- Practical/applied
- Interesting

The student researchers then revealed the most popular student responses; the following four adjectives were comfortably ahead of the rest and were not dissimilar from the students' responses (n=265):

- Challenging
- Interesting
- Enjoyable
- Fun

Finally, the students revealed to those present the six propositional statements, determined from the data, that exemplified inclusive practice in the ISES:

1. All students make a positive contribution to the learning of their peers.
2. Students value the School's strong sense of community and being made to feel part of it.
3. Students love it when staff support and celebrate their achievements.
4. Staff inspire students through being role models.
5. Students really enjoy learning through doing.
6. The Institute of Sport and Exercise Science offers students a 'ticket to their future'; it gives them the opportunity to 'do things for themselves', 'become more independent', to 'reinvent themselves' and 'be their own person'. It offers a 'liberating' and transformative experience.

The student researchers' presentation was extremely well received by all the ISES staff and assembled guests. The immediate, overt enthusiasm of ISES staff demonstrated unequivocally the success of the early stages of this approach in gaining their interest.

Capitalising on this enthusiasm, ISES staff were then invited to engage in a 45 minute workshop where they were asked to work in groups to create a pictorial response to the students' presentation: they were asked to devise a poster that represented current inclusive practice in ISES. On completion of this task, they were then asked to envision a collectively desired future for inclusive learning and teaching within the ISES, a 'Rolls Royce' version of practice, and create another poster to highlight the differences and aspirations.

c. Design Phase

The following month (April 2008) the Project Leader invited ISES staff to an 'Evaluation and Prioritisation' meeting with the intention of producing priorities in relation to the further development of inclusive academic practice. Of the 25 ISES staff, 14 attended during a term time lunch hour which, in itself, demonstrated the engagement of the staff attained through the AI approach. As well as producing a list of personal priorities, seven key departmental priorities were drafted. Additionally, agreement was reached that staff would be invited to respond to a questionnaire (an Individual Inclusivity Profile), circulated via 'survey monkey', which had been designed to check staff confidence in their inclusive practices across 18 aspects of the curriculum, from admissions through to work placements.

d. Destiny Phase

76% of ISES staff responded to the survey, another indication of the effectiveness of the AI approach in sustaining staff's interest and focus on inclusion. Analysis of the results of the 'inclusivity survey' yielded clear priorities in terms of staff development needs. The survey was also helpful in determining the nature/format of staff development needs for different areas of practice. For example, some aspects required little more than a briefing paper to inform staff about appropriate practice; other areas require carefully planned, face to face sessions that will make appropriate use of the staff development materials developed by the project leader; other development needs may be addressed by the web-based resource, SCIPS.

Over the course of the project, the existing SCIPS online resource (Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study) was extended to encompass all key subject areas taught at UW. SCIPS, which has Google page ranking of 5/10 and is used 24/7, was first developed with Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) project funding (2003/04) and further developed through European Leonardo da Vinci funding (2005-2007). It is a substantial, complex, but user friendly resource that helps academic staff identify potential challenges to the achievement of learning activities/ outcomes and/or key skills for disabled students. The potential challenges are cross referenced with recommended adjustments to practice which academic staff can adopt to enable disabled students to meet the learning outcomes as described in their programmes of study. Recent installation of 'Google-analytics' has shown that 78% of all users who visit SCIPS through Google add the site to their 'favourite' list.

The project leader led a discussion at a meeting of the Learning Advisory Group (LAG) June 2008. The session focused on discussion of the identified draft priorities and the results of the 'Individual Inclusivity Profile' and resulted in the adoption of an agreed vision for ISES that, "*Within the next two years, the ISES team will have achieved an international reputation as leaders in the field of inclusive practice in sport and exercise science*". Other inclusive practice related action points were agreed and subsequently circulated in the minutes of the meeting, many of which will lead to the embedding of inclusion in institutional practice, for example, adopting the theme of inclusion for the Institute's peer observation scheme. In addition, the Institute's newly appointed learning and teaching research assistant will work alongside key members of academic staff with a view to conducting further research into the effectiveness of specific learning and teaching strategies which promote inclusive practice.

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