A ‘Holistic’ Approach to Support for Learning

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This article outlines an approach that combines innovative practices with tried and tested means to provide a ‘holistic’ network of support for learning geared towards the development of first year undergraduates as autonomous adult learners.

The strategy outlined has evolved on the Applied Social Studies Programme (soon to become the Community and Social Studies Programme) in the Department of Applied Community Studies. The Applied Social Studies Programme provides professional education and training in Social Work, Youth and Community Work and related professions. It is based on over 20 years experience of working with a richly diverse student body, largely composed of students from 'non-traditional entry' backgrounds. Based on an eclectic combination of experiential learning theories (Dewey 1933, Kolb 1984, Freire 1985) the strategy comprises a range of elements that have been combined together and, most importantly, integrated into the curriculum.

From the outset it is essential to acknowledge that many elements of the strategy will no doubt be familiar to colleagues and have, for some time, been features of courses/programmes across the University. No claim is made for the re-invention of the learning support ‘wheel’ and the range of specialist support for learning offered by Student Services and Learning Support colleagues continues to be acknowledged as vital.

The main emphasis here is on the integration of support for learning within the curriculum where it is central to the student experience. A brief discussion of the current context will be followed by a description of the main elements of a strategy for the support of learning and the way in which these have been woven into a holistic network of support for learning for first year undergraduate students.

Context and Rationale for the System

Attention must be paid to ways in which policies that promote greater access to Higher Education - ‘the widening participation agenda’- translate into successful outcomes for all students. Retention rates becoming performance indicators is one
concern for Universities but equally there is a growing concern among educators about meeting the varied requirements of an increasingly diverse student body. As providers for both the local and global market in Higher Education it is essential that we acknowledge the varied and diverse conditions that affect student learning. The specific requirements of disabled students, those with English as a second language and mature students returning to study, need to be recognised and deemed worthy of practical attention. Increasing numbers of students cope with complex and varying demands on their time and energy. Students with family and caring commitments, particularly single parents and those having to earn while they study, carry out remarkable time management feats. For some the process of becoming a self-confident undergraduate is made more challenging by negative memories of past education such as the impact of discrimination or oppressive attitudes and low expectations. It is crucial that the experience of gaining access to University does not compound such experiences or reinforce negative stereotypes. Failure to promote the success of all students and meet the challenges that widening participation brings would be a failure of Higher Education. The fear held in some quarters that ‘dumbing down’ of academic standards is a logical outcome in a widening access equation has to be replaced by an energised re-think in learning and teaching and support for learning strategies that are sensibly resourced to meet new challenges. This requires concerted effort to provide a carefully structured pathway between a ‘sink or swim’ approach to support for learning and a ‘spoon feeding’ one that stifles creativity and autonomous learning. The principles that underpin the strategy outlined below are the promotion of equity of experience and of outcome for all students and the ultimate goal is the empowerment of all our undergraduates as they progress towards becoming self-confident adult learners capable of achievement and success. To this end the system offered is universal rather than remedial, with support for learning available to all students in the early stages of undergraduate study.

The support for learning strategy

Figure 1 shows the complex network of support for learning available and the different ‘elements’ of the system. It is unnecessary to describe each element in turn, as it is more important to emphasise the pro-active and ‘holistic’ nature of the strategy and the various ways in which it is integrated into the curriculum. The integrated approach actually involves merging a ‘system to support learning’ into the Programme’s ‘learning and teaching strategy’ so that the development of learning permeates the delivery of the curriculum.

The First Term

Concerted effort is made in the initial weeks of the course to provide information and support on studying in Higher Education. Prior to the start of term new students are provided with an online facility offering pre-course information, guided reading, preparation for study, diagnostic essay opportunities and online contact with a tutor. In addition students have the chance to attend short ‘taster’ courses and workshops at the University. In the first week a carefully designed Induction programme provides information as well initial sessions on approaches to learning and study skills. In the first hour of the time-table each week in the Autumn Term an Approaches to Learning
unit is delivered to all first year undergraduates providing both ‘study skills’ and the
theory and practice of reflective and experiential learning (Kolb 1984). The
philosophy of this unit is that students are not simply being taught how to study but
that they are empowered to learn through the acquisition of knowledge of learning
theory and its application in practice. This enables them to become reflective and
reflexive learners and thinkers (Schon 1983, Boud et al 1985) and subsequently the
skills, knowledge and understanding gained provide a valuable foundation for further
study and/or their professional futures.

Approaches to Learning

Part of the curriculum of Approaches to Learning is dedicated to the
acquisition of ‘study skills’ so all the usual features of this are present,
including preparation for study, learning styles, reading and note taking etc.
Preparation for the first three assignments provides the focus for planning and
writing essays, using evidence, creating an argument and referencing. The
provision of support for the construction of assignments is carried through
curriculum delivery with each unit offering an assignment briefing session and
diagnostic assignments and formative processes form part of the assessment
strategy.
The Approaches to Learning unit is delivered in such a way as to allow both
time for input and for an associated experiential activity. An online learning
course provides a continuation of the curriculum throughout the first year.

Peer Support and Small Group Work

Student led participatory and experiential learning opportunities are created to
maximise peer support through designated tasks associated with curriculum content.
When students have been asked in evaluation exercises to identify other sources of
support for learning outside the formal provision of the Programme ‘Other students’
regularly features as an important source of support. While the support gained from
each other may occur through informal networks, friendships and identity groups, the
importance to students of learning together has led to further peer support and student
led activities and tasks being introduced into the curriculum. Some of these are
directed towards induction to the Library, online learning and the use of the internet
and may involve researching sources and information to expand knowledge of
curriculum content.

The imperative to deliver teaching to large groups of students can lead to an over
reliance on didactic teaching methods. Following large-scale lectures with seminars
or small group work, whether tutor led or student-directed, can maximise learning
from lectures. Problem-based exercises, related to the lecture content, facilitate
students to process information and enable them to draw on collective knowledge and
experience to maximise learning from lectures. For example, work carried out in
student-led groups, to deliver presentations, is supported with inputs on group work
theory and practice within the curriculum.
All student-led activity has a clear rationale and guidance and briefing for the
activities are a formal part of curriculum delivery.
**Professional Development Groups** (PDGs) provide another small group opportunity whereby students following the same route of study meet fortnightly and carry out tasks set in Approaches to Learning. PDGs provide the opportunity for students to relate course content to their specific professional route and help to preserve their professional identity in a large programme of studies. While this practice is perhaps of specific relevance to professionally orientated courses, it is again based on the principle that small group work opportunities are an important aspect of a learning and teaching and support for learning strategy.

A **mentoring system** is one whereby students are asked to work with a learning partner from within the same professional grouping. This provides another opportunity for peer support. This is carefully managed and not simply left to chance. Students are given the opportunity to choose a method for establishing a working relationship with a learning partner and guidance is given on contracting and reviewing the progress of the relationship. For many students the process of working closely with another has very positive outcomes and there have been some excellent examples of this activity working well.

The construction of a **Portfolio of Learning** provides the opportunity for students to systematically develop a reflective approach to learning and to identify their accruing skills, knowledge and understanding. It is used as a tool in the development of critical and analytical skills and is useful as a means of synthesising learning from the various course components. The construction of the Portfolio is a **process** that is designed to empower students to gain ‘ownership’ and control of the direction their studies are taking (Knights, 1992). Through regular audits of learning, students are asked to record, reflect on and analyse learning taking place and to assess the extent to which they are meeting learning outcomes. In addition to identifying learning achievements, students recognise gaps in learning and this provides impetus for a more focussed approach to learning or perhaps a renewal of priorities. While there is scope for a creative and individualistic approach to the construction of the Portfolio there are also guided student-directed tasks provided in course units together with time for reflection and recording in the Approaches to Learning unit. As a requirement on all three levels of the course it has a specific set of assessment criteria and on successful completion it attracts 10 credits at each level. (A fuller discussion of the Portfolio and Mentoring system will appear on a Support for Learning web facility currently being designed for the University- see details below)

The **Library** and the growth in **e-learning** are of huge significance in the contribution they make to learning and careful induction to both is essential for first year undergraduates. Some students have more experience and confidence than others in the use of these facilities so it is essential that ways are found to ensure that nobody gets left behind and that all students in their first year gain the assurance and skills to make use of these important sources of support for learning. Consequently, opportunities are built into the curriculum to induct students with the Library facilities, again using peer support and small group opportunities for student-led study. Likewise peer support is emphasised in induction to the use of the **online learning Courses** that form part of the curriculum. It is pleasing to see that students collaborate well in offering each other support and advice (see Kirk, 2002 for more...
details of how this works). A formal induction process to e-learning takes place in the early weeks of term.

The role of tutorials and tutor support.

Not surprisingly, tutor contact and the role of the tutorial regularly features as the most valued aspect of support for learning on the Programme in student feedback. This concurs with the staff view of the tutorial as an important focal point for the support and development of learning and for monitoring student progress. However, with an increasing staff/student ratio the provision of tutorial opportunities requires the careful management of the ‘budget’ of staff hours. Individual tutorials are provided with a tutor who remains constant throughout the academic year and, in addition, a ‘drop-in’ rota has been devised to ensure tutor availability at key times. Attendance at tutorials is required and guidance on preparation for them is given in the Professional Development Group and in Approaches to Learning. While the tutorial has an agenda to ensure consistency it is not overly prescriptive and does allow for individual matters affecting learning to be discussed. Students with particular learning requirements, (e.g. disabled or dyslexic students) may work with the tutor to establish a learning plan so as their requirements can be met. Communication between individual tutors and the University’s Student Services and Learning Support provision is vital and this relationship forms an important aspect of the support for learning system. Tutorials are learning focussed and, most tutorials will be used to discuss planning assignments and the production of the Portfolio. Sometimes students may need to discuss personal matters affecting their learning but as tutorials are not strictly opportunities for ‘counselling’ links with the University’s student counselling and pastoral care services for students are vital.

Pre-requisites for a cohesive system

Three interrelated necessities for an integrated and smoothly functioning system are:
- Sound administration
- Good communication and
- Teamwork

(Figure 2)

Administration

A sound administrative structure has two interconnected features. The first, an internal system, within the Programme of studies, with Programme staff having clearly defined roles and responsibilities together with established procedures for monitoring and reviewing student progress. The second is the provision of a Departmental administrative structure to support delivery of the system. This includes updated and accessible databases, essential for tracking student progress together with administrative systems to support early intervention if students fail to complete course
requirements (e.g. assessed assignments, attendance etc.). Early intervention through contact with a student can help establish why students have failed or failed to submit an assignment. This can result in the provision of appropriate support at a key point and enable the student to stay on track. This is part of the function of the tutorial system described above and its success is dependent on sound administration and good communications systems.

**Communication**

It may be self evident that good communication systems have to permeate the strategy and the example of early intervention to keep students on track highlights this. It is also worth mentioning two other areas where this is vital. Firstly, in the formation of ‘learning plans’ for students with individual and specific learning requirements. The production of these relies on good communication among Student Services, tutors and students. Secondly, in the co-ordination and dissemination of information on the specific requirements of dyslexic and disabled students so that particular account of these can be taken by all staff in curriculum delivery. This could, for example, involve the requirement to make adjustments to the learning environment, provide resources or re-schedule deadlines for assessments.

**Teamwork**

Finally, good communication and teamwork go hand in hand within the Programme staff group and within the Department between administrative and teaching staff. Hopefully teamwork and good communication are reflected in the strategy outlined above as they are intrinsic to the ‘holistic’ approach to the support of learning. A commitment to inclusive and equitable learning experiences for all students underpin the strategy and colleagues have contributed to the design and implementation of this in creative and practical ways.

The system described has evolved over many years and has been modified and reconstructed to take account of student feedback and staff review. However, in the current context for Higher Education, there is much work to be done, and further research and evaluative work will be carried out to assess the impact of the strategy on the student experience and to inform further developments.

There will be a number of further opportunities for colleagues to gain more detailed information on the system and/or on different elements in both web based forums (http://ltu.mmu.ac.uk) and in forthcoming workshops and seminars (see below).

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References


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Good Practice in Support for Learning and Retention.

Workshops to be held in the Spring Term

Monday 20 January 2003  Friday 31 January 2003

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