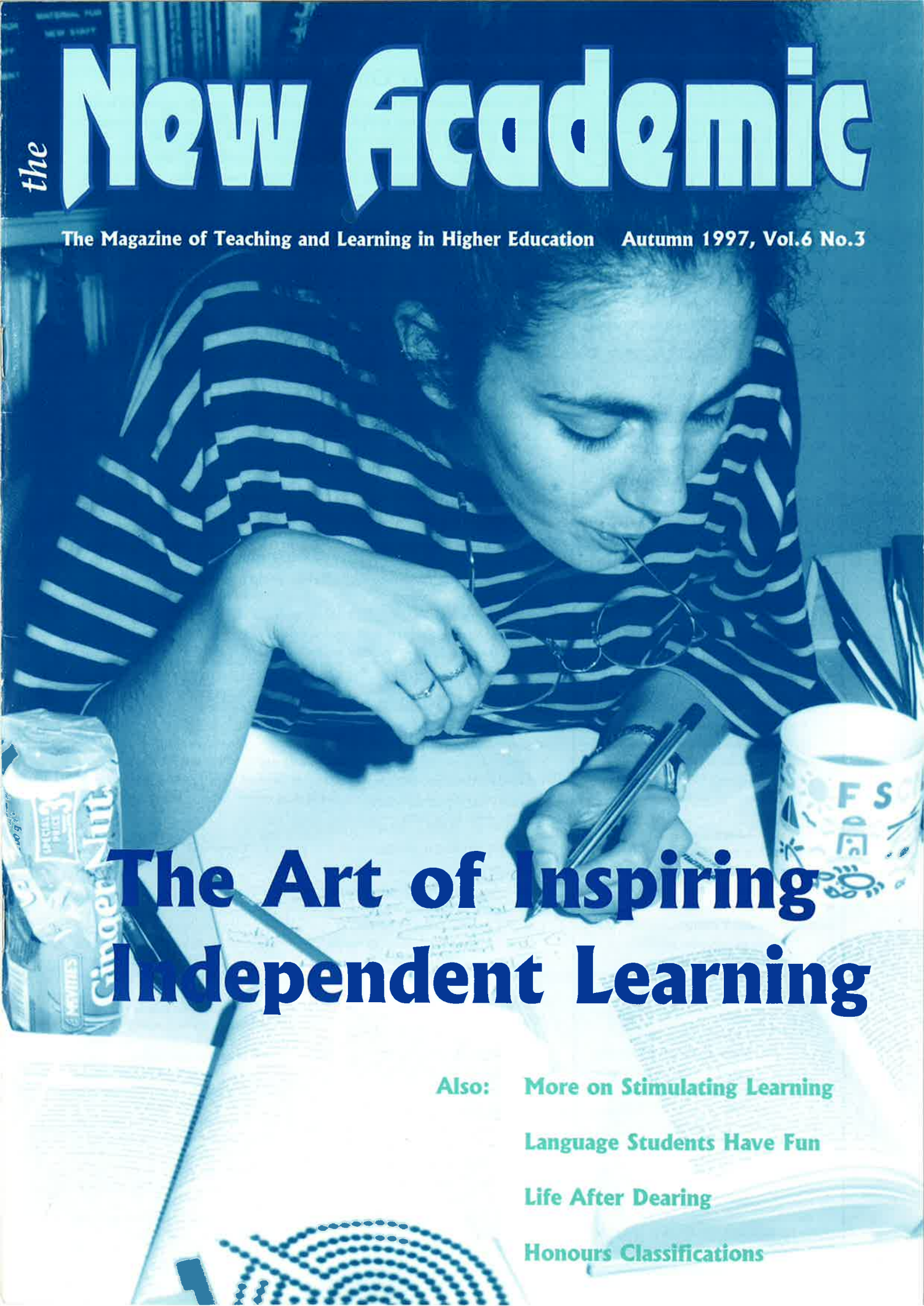


the

New Academic

The Magazine of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Autumn 1997, Vol.6 No.3



The Art of Inspiring Independent Learning

Also: More on Stimulating Learning

Language Students Have Fun

Life After Dearing

Honours Classifications

SEDA

The Staff and Educational Development
Association

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HE	Higher Education
HEFC	Higher Education Funding Council
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
HND	Higher National Diploma
IT	Information Technology
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
SEEC	South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
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Andrew Tweedie (p.9)

THE ART OF INSPIRING INDEPENDENT LEARNING 1

In the first of two articles, *Carole Baume* and *David Baume* explain why we should spend time helping our students become independent learners. And once they have convinced you that the effort is worth while - if you were not a firm believer already - they go on to provide practical suggestions which can help students change the ways they learn.

WHY INDEPENDENT LEARNING?

Why should we spend time helping students to develop the art of independent learning? There are several reasons, including:

- ◆ Our students will need to go on learning long after they leave us - in fact, throughout their lives. And there won't always be someone around to teach them! So they need to leave HE as good independent learners.
- ◆ Becoming a good independent learner doesn't just happen - like most other skills and attitudes, it needs time and practice and discussion and feedback.
- ◆ Our student body is becoming more varied, in age, motivation, educational background and learning style. It is probably now impossible to find one teaching regime which will work well for all students.
- ◆ Employers want staff who can - indeed, who want to - continue to learn.

"Fine", you may say, "but how do I do this?" That is the question which these two articles on the Art of Inspiring

Independent Learning are designed to answer.

WHAT ARE INDEPENDENT LEARNERS LIKE?

Let's start at the end. How will we know that our attempts to help students to become independent learners have worked? What are independent learners like? What do they do, and how do they do it?

- ◆ They enjoy learning, and seek out opportunities to learn.
- ◆ They know how they learn best, and seek out these ways of learning
- ◆ They ask perceptive questions.
- ◆ They bring their own enthusiasms and ideas into their course.
- ◆ They can identify what is impeding their learning, and take steps to overcome these obstacles.
- ◆ They know what they already know, and know what it is that they still have to learn.
- ◆ They know that they need to learn; they can identify their learning needs.

It is worth remembering that independent learners are not necessarily solitary learners - they can often work very effectively in groups

with others, and often prefer this method of learning. Nor are they necessarily mavericks - when they have embraced the goals of the course, they will work hard and effectively to achieve them.

SKILLS AND ATTITUDES OF INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

There's a danger here that we may be making independent learners sound like problem learners, with dangerous peculiarities to be 'coped with'. We don't see it this way, so below we list some of the learning outcomes we would expect to find following a course designed to develop independent learning.

But first, let's go into a bit more detail on this.

We are suggesting that, alongside the course learning outcomes to do with content and personal and professional skills, there should also be outcomes related to independent learning skills. Attainment of all these various learning outcomes will be achieved in a holistic way - for example students will develop and demonstrate their skills by learning content and personal and professional

skills independently. As this last point suggests, the need to develop and demonstrate independent learning skills will affect the shape of the teaching, learning and assessment methods employed.

Taking responsibility

Independent learners don't simply say "OK, teach me." They are more likely to be concerned with questions like

- "What are the goals of this course?"
- "How do these goals relate to my own personal and professional goals?"
- "If necessary, how can I adapt my work on this course to make it even more relevant to my goals?"
- "How can I use the resources available - the classes, the library, staff, other students, other learning resources within and beyond the University - to help me achieve my goals?"

As independent learners they will mostly answer these questions for themselves, although they may check with you where they feel it helpful.

Making connections

They continually seek and make connections - between theory and theory, between theory and practice, between theory and practice and opinion and value.

Strategic learning.

Wherever possible, they take a deep approach to learning, really seeking to make their own sense of what they are learning.

However, most are, above all, strategic learners. If they sense that surface learning, the simple memorising and repetition of content, will gain marks or grades sufficient for their purposes, then this is how they may choose to learn. But this will be a conscious choice.

Planning

They plan how best to use their time and apply their effort. They will be

interested in deadlines, and they will be good managers of their own time.

Monitoring progress and adjusting activity or plans

They will be interested in the feedback they receive from you on their work, but they will probably also talk to other people, including other students, about their work. They will also evaluate their own work. And they will decide what use to make of all this feedback!

Questioning

As you will gather by now, independent learners are good at asking useful and appropriate questions!

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

In this article we're going to explore giving students more independence inside, and then outside, classes. In the second article we'll look more widely at assessment and at units, modules, pathways and courses.

The larger the chunk of students' experience we consider, the greater the scope for helping them to develop as independent learners. But there are some principles which underlie any move towards independence. We hope that, with these principles and examples, you can develop new ways which are appropriate for your students, courses and, institution (Earlier articles in *The New Academic* on the arts of lecturing and teaching small groups also contain ideas which develop independent learning within a class: see Habeshaw, 1995 a,b; Brown, 1996, 1997.)

Principle 1: Systematically relinquish control

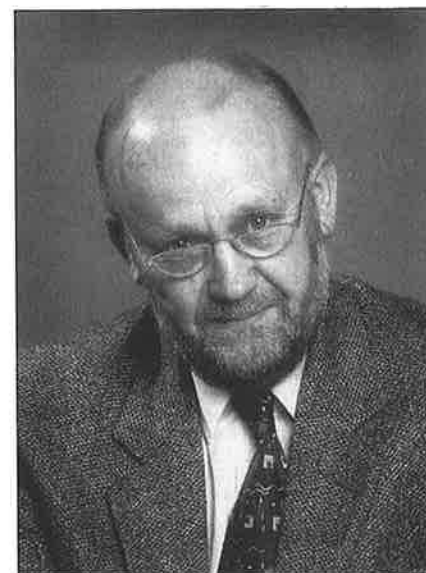
Control over what? Relinquish how?

Step 1 - Find out where control lies at the moment over major aspects of the course or class. Who controls:

- Aims?
- Outcomes?



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David Baume is a former Chair of SEDA and Co-Director of the Centre for Higher Education Practice.

- Content?
- Timing, sequence and mode of study?
- Teaching methods?
- Learning activities?
- Feedback?
- Assessment?
- Learning resources?
- Evaluation?

Control may lie at any point along a continuum from: the course document; the course leader; the teacher; the teacher and the students in negotiation;

to the students, who may choose alternatives from a list or perhaps develop their own learning outcomes or learning activity.

Step 2 - Work out where you can move control or responsibility in the direction of the student.

You will probably be able right from the start to give the students more control over their learning activities outside class; over what kinds of feedback they get, and from whom (you, each other, expert practitioners); and over the range of learning resources inside and outside the university which they use. Over a longer time scale you will be able to give them a great say in and then a greater control over, for example, learning outcomes, teaching methods and even assessment.

Step 3 - Tell the students what you're doing, and why.

You are trying to change the way they learn. Change can make students nervous. If they are nervous, they'll be even more reluctant to change the way they learn. This problem can be cured, in part, through providing information; about the learning outcomes of the course, why they matter, and how you will help students attain them.

Step 4 - Do it

Step 5 - Check with the students that they feel more in control of their learning.

Principle 2: Help students to develop self-evaluation skills

Step 1 - Establish success criteria

Suggest to the students, or help them work out, success criteria for particular pieces of their work. For example, what would make this essay excellent? Perhaps clear and appropriate structure;

informative and accurate summary; marshalling of well chosen and referenced evidence; elegant and persuasive argument? Once they know, they can work towards these criteria.

Step 2 - Evaluate against criteria

With every piece of work they produce, the students should provide a critical evaluation of the work against these criteria. This self assessment could be accompanied by evaluation of the work by their peers.

Step 3 - Review and revise success criteria

As students become more practised at evaluating their work they can develop and use more sophisticated evaluation criteria, thus becoming better at evaluating their own work.

Principle 3: Change your role from deliverer of content to supporter of learning.

This principle brings to life the mantra about lifelong learning. Students who have only been taught throughout their courses are ill prepared for the informal and self-directed learning which they will need to undertake throughout the rest of their lives.

Step 1 - Be explicit about your intentions and methods

Tell students that you intend to change your role in this direction over the duration of the module or course, and explain how you will do this. Stress that you will, initially at least, do it slowly.

Step 2 - Start small

First, require students to locate and use small, well-defined pieces of information. During the module or course, steadily increase the scale of

their information collection, and the extent to which they use the information collected.

Step 3 - Help students to develop the skills of finding and using the information they require

In class, talk about learning the subject and finding and using the information as well as about the subject itself.

Step 4 - Help students to broaden their view of possible sources

Help them discover new sources of content, expertise and knowledge. Move them from a dependence on you, your lecture notes and a standard textbook to using the library more widely (using indexes, searching for information in books), and using sources such as journals, magazines, professional reports, data-sheets, newspapers, CD-ROM, the web and other on-line services, TV and radio and so on.

Step 5 - Encourage students to develop networks and peer support groups.

Remember that independent learning doesn't mean isolated learning. Students used to competition may need more than just encouragement to co-operate. You may need to help them to form groups and networks and to develop ground rules for running the groups and networks.

Principle 4: Look after yourself

All this involves you in changing your own practice as a teacher. Don't assume that this change will always be stress-free and unproblematic for you. Prepare for the changes. Read further about approaches to independent learning - some sources are suggested in the bibliography. Plan the first moves in considerable detail. Talk to colleagues who have moved their teaching in this direction. Talk to your staff or educational developer. Evaluate your progress.

Note: We are not suggesting that students should have total control over every aspect of their learning. They have chosen a particular course of study, and you have responsibility to provide that course. We are simply suggesting that giving them progressively more control over, more responsibility for, their learning, helps them develop additional and very valuable skills.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING IN CLASS

So how can we use the principles suggested above to change the practice in our classes? Here are a few examples:

A seminar

- ◆ Preparing a seminar presentation, alone or in a group, can be a small-scale piece of independent learning.
- ◆ Give students a steadily increasing say in the topics for the seminar presentations they give.
- ◆ Give them a steadily increasing say in the ways in which the seminars are conducted.
- ◆ Ask one or two of them each time to produce a record of the seminar for distribution to other students.
- ◆ Encourage students to give each other feedback on their presentations.
- ◆ Give marks for the quality of the feedback given by peers or self.

Lectures

This is harder, but a few things can be done:

- ◆ Provide one or two sessions in each lecture where students can reflect on what they've learned and relate it to their reading or the seminar.
- ◆ Similarly give them time and encouragement to undertake a short individual task within the lectures, such as generating a question or predicting what's coming next.
- ◆ Encourage students to see the big picture, within the lecture and across the lecture series.
- ◆ Break up the lecture into two or three mini-lectures.
- ◆ Punctuate the mini-lectures with group activities, for which the students perhaps need to prepare before the lecture.

Labs and practical work

As with seminars and tutorials, you may be able to give students some responsibility for:

- ◆ What experiments or practicals they choose.
- ◆ In what sequence they do them.
- ◆ How they do them.
- ◆ Giving and receiving feedback on their reports, and how they write them up and present them.

More radically, you could ask them to plan how they will use the resources of the laboratory or practical space to solve a problem. (It would be wise to check and agree their plans before they start the practical work.)

Overall

- ◆ Tell students why you're going to help and encourage them to develop the skills and attitudes of independent learning.
- ◆ Reassure them that you're not going to abandon them.
- ◆ Give students repeated opportunities to take increased responsibility for their own activities and their own learning within a class.
- ◆ Regularly spend time talking with them about the skills and the challenges of independent learning, in relation to the independent learning

they are undertaking in the class.

- ◆ Ask students these questions, or ask yourself these questions about your students. Then, encourage your students to answer and to act on the answers!
- What do the students already know about this topic?
- Do they know that they know it?
- Do they know what it is the course wants them to learn?
- Do they really want to learn this? Do they know how they'll be able to tell when they've learnt it?

INDEPENDENT LEARNING OUTSIDE CLASS

This gets much easier!

Assignments, projects and dissertations

Students can be given choice over assignments, with the framework of the course. This choice can extend to:

- ◆ Topic
- ◆ Approach (descriptive, analytic /critical, comparative)
- ◆ Sources used
- ◆ Method of presentation (for example paper, lecture, seminar, audio-visual presentation, video, web-site)
- ◆ Number of people involved.
- ◆ Making links with appropriate people or organisations elsewhere in the University and outside, to act as clients or collaborators or resources or providers of feedback.
- ◆ Perhaps size and time-scale

Learning agreements

As students become more independent learners, we and they may start to feel uncertain. How do we know that all the disparate things they are doing are appropriate? How do they know that the work they are doing will be acceptable to us? One good method is to use learning agreements.

A learning agreement can describe,

Headings for a learning agreement for a complete course

1. **Personal and academic history** (Where have I been?)
2. **Current capabilities** and gaps therein (Where am I now?)
3. **Long-term personal and career goals** (Where am I going?)
4. **Learning outcomes** for the end of the course (What will I need to get there?)
5. **Programme of work** to meet these learning outcomes (How will I get there?)
6. **Assessment** (How will I show that I've got there?)

among other things:

- ◆ What the student will do;
- ◆ What resources the course will provide to enable the student to do this work;
- ◆ The assessment criteria for a piece of work;
- ◆ Overall, the rights and obligations of students and tutor.

A learning agreement can:

- ◆ Describe the complete course, or one piece of work on a course;
- ◆ Be individually negotiated, or prescribed by the university;
- ◆ Be formal or informal;
- ◆ Once agreed, its implementation can be monitored and revised.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING OVERALL

Students' independent learning abilities should be developed as far as possible in an integrated way, with class-teaching methods and work outside class all contributing this development. Students need repeated opportunities to reflect on and talk about learning, and their approach to learning, as well as about the content of the course. They also need help in monitoring their progress towards greater independence in learning. We need to encourage them to reflect on how their approach to study has changed. In most pieces of work they do, in class and between classes, they should explicitly address, however briefly, the development of their independent learning skills.

So far we've offered some reasons why students should develop the art of independent learning; some principles behind the development of independent learning; and some ways you can help lead and support them to develop these skills and approaches.

Headings for a learning agreement for a student project

with notes on how each section would be completed:

Course, Tutor name, Student name(s)

Project title (*agreed between student and tutor*)

Length and format of report (*negotiated between student and tutor within course guidelines*)

Project schedule (*overall timetable prescribed in course document, details proposed by student and agreed by tutor*)

Reporting and feedback - *what (if any) interim report(s) will the student make to the tutor? When will feedback come, and perhaps what will the feedback address?*

Success / assessment criteria for project (*negotiated between student and tutor within course guidelines*)

Schedule of meetings between tutor and student (*the course allows for two such meetings during the project; student and tutor agree when they would be most useful for this project*).

Resources - *what financial and physical resources will be available to students for the project (over and above generally available library, IT, etc.)*

Revisions - *What is the process for making and agreeing changes to the agreement, as new opportunities arise or insuperable problems are met?*

In the second article, we shall offer more ways to develop independent learning, through the relation between work inside and outside class, assessment, and module and pathway and course design. We shall also look (briefly) at encouraging independent learning through such processes as course approval and review, and educational support services and systems.

Carole and David taught in the School for Independent Study at the (now) University of East London during the 1980's, helping several hundred students each year to plan from scratch and then carry out their own programme of study in a vast range of subjects. Many of the ideas and methods and approaches described in this article were developed and tested there. In later work in other Universities, teaching colleagues have helped Carole and David to extend their understanding and practice in independent learning.

Selected further reading

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STIMULATING LEARNING

***Sue Jackson* explains how she overcomes the difficulties of large classes in order to meet the needs of ever-increasing numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds now venturing into our universities**

TAKING THE GIANT LEAP INTO HE

For many people, especially those from disadvantaged groups, a university education is something they would not have considered a possibility until recently. At the new universities in particular, many students - including mature students - are the first generation in their family to attend university. They enter into this new stage with excitement, trepidation and enthusiasm.

First year, mainly mature and mainly women students gave a variety of reasons for taking the giant leap into HE. Some focussed on job prospects, believing that a degree would be a passport to a new, improved, or first-time career. Others focussed on a quest for an education they had missed out on when young. Many women said that, having been in the home for some years, it was now time to do something for themselves. Some thought that they could become better role models for their children. Some wanted to prove that "they could do it", to themselves and/or to others. Almost all spoke about self-fulfillment and personal satisfaction.

For many students though, the initial experiences of university come as something of a shock. Modularisation, semesterisation and the ever growing numbers of students on each unit mean

that the university experience can be fragmented and alienating. They find that most of the teaching occurs in large groups, that library resources are scarce, that there are tight deadlines for work, and that there is little formal tutorial support.

Paradoxically, although mature students who come via Access courses are in many ways very well equipped for university study, they have also come to rely very heavily on a supportive environment, and find university a stark contrast to their previous learning.

Students also enter HE with a range of responsibilities outside the classroom. Today, more and more are trying to cope with paid employment, study and family responsibilities. They often arrive tired, have little time outside formal attendance for study, and all too often are coming to see the academy as a consumer-led marketplace, which they use to pick up the required amount of credits for a degree. Despite the wish for personal self-fulfillment, there is a growing expectation by students for lecturers to meet their demands, imparting knowledge which they as students will then consume. This is problematic for academics who do not consider themselves owners of knowledge, but as facilitators and enablers.



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How, then, can students be empowered to take control of their own learning, make sense of the fragments, and turn their experience of university into a more powerful whole? What can already over-stretched and over-worked lecturers do to help? How can we make learning meaningful and fulfilling, and personal to the individual student?

INTRODUCING VARIED PERSPECTIVES

Most of my own teaching, at a new university, is in groups of about sixty students, sometimes in large classrooms, sometimes in small lecture theatres. Much of the teaching inevitably has to be lecturer-led. Through the semester that I am with the students, on units with about three hours a week contact, I will get to know some of the students personally - either because they make themselves known to me, or they join in discussion, or they have some sort of problem - but the majority will remain a name, or nameless, or a student number on an essay.

And yet, for effective learning teaching needs to take account of

individuals and their needs. How, with ever increasing numbers and pressures, can this be achieved? One way the variety of identities in the group can be considered is to introduce a wide range of work and ideas - work which considers working-class, Black, gay, disabled, and women's perspectives, for instance. Lively sessions normally follow, with students who may previously not have seen themselves as 'academic' feeling empowered and stimulated, often asking me for additional readings.

The learner needs to be an active participant, trying out new responses, rather than just listening. New learning needs to take account of the learner's present knowledge and attitude, and it needs to be internalised, with students making the learning their own, claiming ownership of knowledge for themselves. In groups such as mine, of sixty or more, how can this be done?

HANDOUTS

Firstly, any handouts that I give - in addition to outlining the main points, giving sources and references etc. - always ask questions. I pause in my lecture as I ask students to respond, in writing and/or orally, to questions such as:

- ◆ What do you think?
- ◆ Do you agree or disagree? why?
- ◆ Does this build on your present knowledge? how?
- ◆ How does this relate to other learning?
- ◆ What similarities or differences have you noticed?

I might ask students initially to jot down some thoughts on their own, and then to move on to compare in pairs. I might ask them to move into small discussion groups of four or five, to share ideas. This is not always easy, depending on the physical size and

layout of the room and its furniture, and can be very noisy. However, it does allow students to participate more actively. Pair and group work also help all students, even the more reluctant ones, to try out ideas for themselves in a 'safer' environment than making points to the whole class.

USING THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE

Adults come to HE with a range of experience and knowledge and areas of expertise. Group work allows them to have this expertise acknowledged and valued, by sharing ideas with others, and to recognise themselves and each other as valuable resources. However, even if the class is too large for pair or group work, it is still invaluable for students to get into the habit of individual reflection. Students should also be encouraged to form study groups outside the formal sessions.

By asking them to think about how the theories or issues relate to their own experience, the ideas become more relevant and meaningful; and by trying to encourage the students to relate the work to their previous knowledge, and to other units currently being studied, the fragments can start to take on shape. By trying to work through an idea individually, or explain it to someone else, more effective learning occurs.

I also often end my handout with specific questions that will either broaden or deepen the issues. These may turn into group discussion points, or remain as issues I ask students to think about after the session.

ACTIVE NOTE-TAKING

I encourage students to engage in active note-making, both in the lecture and when reading outside the lecture. This is a process that involves active engagement with the text: asking

questions, considering personal responses, making links and connections to other work and to personal experience. Structured handouts can help with this initially, with key points and/or questions set out, but with room for students to add their own comments. I try to get the students to engage in critical responses to their own work and to the work of others, including my own.

QUESTIONING MYSELF

As well as asking students questions I also ask them of myself. It can be all too easy to see lecture slots as free-standing, as a chance to impart knowledge. I ask myself the following questions:

- ◆ Why am I giving this particular lecture?
- ◆ How does this lecture relate to the rest of the unit?
- ◆ How will I enable students to make the links?
- ◆ What sort of learning do I want to facilitate?
- ◆ How will I facilitate it?
- ◆ What do I want the students to know?
- ◆ What do I want the students to consider?
- ◆ How will I know that I have achieved this?
- ◆ How can I encourage learning to continue outside of this session?

Perhaps, for students to be stimulated into becoming active learners, this last question is the central one. One of the ways in which students can be encouraged (forced?) to continue learning outside of the sessions, is through the production of written work.

As the personal contact I have with students is so limited, I see marking coursework as a positive way in which to engage personally with students. I consider marking coursework as a way to engage in dialogue with students (albeit a rather one sided dialogue, as

they rarely have an opportunity to reply to the questions I raise).

However, I do encourage them to think about and respond to the questions themselves, and to come and see me if they want to discuss their coursework. I allocate specific times after hand-back of coursework when I will be available for students to see me, both to set boundaries for myself, and for students to feel more confident about my availability.

Students can also be encouraged to reflect on coursework through completing their own evaluations of their work. The evaluation form might include questions like:

- ◆ What have I done well in this piece of work?
- ◆ What could be done to improve it?
- ◆ How will I achieve this?
- ◆ How have my study skills developed?
- ◆ How will they continue to develop?
- ◆ What have I learned by completing this coursework?

EVALUATING THE LEARNING PROCESS

However, it is not just via evaluation of formal coursework that student learning can be stimulated. Students can be encouraged to evaluate lecture or seminar sessions in similar ways. By doing this, students can start to build an ongoing profile of themselves and their learning. This enables students to take responsibility for, and feel a personal commitment to, their own learning.

Lecturers can help facilitate this by encouraging students to set out a list of goals for themselves:

- ◆ Where am I now?
- ◆ Where do I want to be? (at the end of the semester/year/university etc)
- ◆ What do I need to do to get there?
- ◆ How will I know when I have arrived?

PREPARING A SKILLS STATEMENT

Students can also prepare a **skills statement** when they enter university, considering the range of skills they have already developed; how these skills will help them at university; what skills they would still like to develop, and how they will go about this. This can be regularly updated as each semester comes to an end. This will also be an invaluable document for them to take out into the workplace, with a clear articulation of those very skills which employers constantly demand.

One of the most difficult jobs is in convincing students who already feel pressured that this extra and time-consuming work is **w o r t h w h i l e**. Knowing that it may help in the market place, or that it may improve their grades and therefore their class of degree, is a persuasive initial argument. It is a problematic line to follow, however, when what you really want to say is how stimulating and exciting learning is for its own sake, and that this will add to the self-satisfaction and fulfillment students seek. With the groups I have worked with, both arguments have worked in persuading some students, and neither have worked in persuading others. Although most of the students agree in theory that it is a good idea to take personal responsibility, in practice they say that they do not have the time.

Whilst almost all students will engage in reflection in lectures, and many will become more active in their note-taking, the essay self-evaluation has varied. If it is compulsory to the coursework, it does of course get completed; if it is an optional extra, only a proportion will complete it. If skills statements and goal setting are done in class time, everyone participates to varying degrees, but if it is given as a suggestion outside classroom, the take-up rate is much lower.



Perhaps there is, after all, only a limit to what we, as lecturers, can do to stimulate learning. We can stand and give our 'show' in the lecture room, and hope that some students will be stimulated enough to want to take the ideas further. We can facilitate a range of ways in which students can take responsibility for their own learning processes. In the end, we can try to create a learning environment, to encourage students to reflect, criticise and engage with ideas, but stimulating learning has to be a two-way process in which students too have to participate. □

HONOURS CLASSIFICATIONS

THE NEED FOR TRANSPARENCY

Harvey Woolf and *David Turner* got together with colleagues from other institutions to examine the vexed issue of Honours Classifications. They asked: might a student who achieves a particular set of results be given an Upper Second in one institution but a Lower Second in another?

WHY COMPARE?

In the world of league tables and performance indicators, data like the distribution of honours classifications are seized upon as measures of how well a programme or institution is achieving in comparison with others.

The importance of comparative analysis has been emphasised in a number of recent reports, including HEQC's **Learning from Audit** series. This paper seeks to take the discussion further by examining the extent to which the specific institutional rules which determine the classification of honours degrees actually affect the class of degree awarded to a student. In other words, is it the case that a student achieving a set of results in one institution would be given an Upper Second, while a student achieving the same results in another institution would be awarded a Lower Second? (For a discussion of similar issues from the perspective of the External Examiner, see Partington, 1995).

This formulation of the question about comparability of classifications

has become of particular interest with the growth of modular programmes, which normally entail regulations owned by the institution as a whole rather than by the individual discrete subject award boards. This in turn has generated the need for institutions to develop clear and explicit rules for classification.

The Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) is an informal group of staff from seven institutions with modular programmes who share an interest in assessment issues. The Group began its studies of comparability by investigating subject-related differences in module results and the possible effects of these differences on honours classification. We have now collected a considerable amount of comparative data on module grades, grading schemes and the mechanics of degree classification used in the SACWG institutions. (Details of this work were presented at a national workshop on Comparability in Classification held at Liverpool John Moores University, November 1995.)



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CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

It has become obvious from our investigations that, although each of our institutions operates a modular scheme, they do not share a single model by which students are classified.

The first distinction to be made is between methods which use an average of the individual module marks and those which profile the module grades. An institution's regulations then specify the precise requirements for each class of degree in terms of the average or profile achieved. Some institutions employ a combination of the two approaches.

Another, perhaps more important, feature which may be added to either of these methods of classifying is to allow students to discard some of the grades that they have achieved. This discard may arise because the individual model does not use all of the second and third

year results or any of the second year results or because students are allowed to take more than the minimum number of modules required for an honours degree.

The specific comparisons we set out to make were based on the question **would students given one class of degree at one institution be given a different class of degree if their results had been achieved at another institution?** The process by which this comparison was carried out involved translating the module results obtained in the home institution into the marking and grading conventions of the other SACWG institutions. The translated results were then processed through the classification algorithms of the other universities.

We had assumed that when a student from an institution which did not allow discards (that is, operated the "everything counts" model) was re-classified according to a model used by a university that did allow discards (that is, the "best of" model), the class of degree might improve, especially if a student were close to a borderline.

When we compared the "constructed classification" for each student according to each university's rules with the actual result in the home university, we found that overall about 85% of the results shared a modal value. Thus, in 15% of the cases the student might have been given a different class of degree if his/her results had been obtained elsewhere.

Although this figure may seem high, our findings show remarkable agreement when we consider that the algorithms used include examples of all four types of classification system. Furthermore, a significant number of the differences derived from just two institutions. Further work will be necessary to determine whether the

SACWG

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variations in the results from these institutions are artefacts produced by grade translation or whether they derive from distinctive features of the classification processes used at those institutions. For the remainder of the 15%, the students concerned had been adjudged to be on a borderline by one or more university.

Consequently it was recognised that the criteria used for resolving borderlines were likely to be a key factor in determining the differences in the allocation of a class by different universities. As these criteria may be specific to a particular award board rather than applicable across an institution, it might be possible for two students in the same institution who achieved essentially equivalent results, to be given different classes either by different boards or by the same board meeting on different occasions. Borderline criteria are often not specified in detail in regulatory frameworks and are likely to be encapsulated in the gnomonic phrase "at

the Board's discretion".

Given the variations in borderline conventions, it would hardly be surprising if two students with closely similar performances but in different universities were awarded different classes of degree by each of the universities. As a further complication, some institutions do not recognise borderlines at all - students are awarded the formulaic class determined solely by the rules and the award board has no discretion.

Our methodology does, of course, assume that the marks or grades obtained on individual modules are awarded on a comparable basis in different institutions. Also, we have had to make various assumptions in fitting a set of marks/grades into the regulatory frameworks of each institution. This has been discussed in an earlier paper (Yorke et al, 1996) and is at the heart of the whole of the quality assurance process of external examining and subject comparability. So far as we know, comparisons based upon the considerations we are describing are not routinely carried out by examination boards.

STANDARDS

The work we have undertaken so far has re-emphasised the importance for the standards debate of the following issues.

First, within institutions much work is being done on standards at module and subject level, including evaluations of the assessment criteria used to arrive at module grades. Yet there appears to be little work on award level performance criteria or examples of institutions attempting to define their classification algorithms to ensure that they relate to generic outcomes for each class of their degrees. Even the extensive work of HEQC on graduate

threshold standards and SEEC on level descriptors does not take matters this far.

All our algorithms assume that the grading criteria used within a module are the same criteria as those used for classification and thus a class can be arrived at by simply summing module results in some way. However, if we were to specify the competences expected for different grades of performance in each module and for each class of degree, we could then determine whether candidates have met the criteria for a particular class. Transparency of standards could thus be asserted by the act of publishing these lists (see e.g. Lyons & Bement, 1996).

Second, it is not at all clear how institutions use the module data they already collect. Even when these types of statistical data could be relevant to decision-making, none of our institutions reports using its knowledge of the variability of module means or standard deviations at award examination boards when considering borderline candidates.

Third, and a recurring theme of our work, is the extent to which there are differences in the way in which institutions treat borderline candidates. Borderlines exist because of the variation in performance between candidates in different assessment tasks and on different occasions and because of the problems entailed in making "category cuts" in a distribution of any kind. But when resolving borderlines we must also bear in mind the fact that the reproducibility of marking (by different persons or on different occasions) cannot be guaranteed. We must therefore seek to ensure that anyone who is a little below the arbitrarily designated border is not the victim of inconsistencies at module level. Thus we look to ways of being fair(er) to candidates in the border zones.

Given these difficulties, perhaps borderline candidates should not be placed in one class or another but left as a borderline class. This approach, moreover, would obviate the perennial preoccupation with recognising the differences between borderline 2i/2ii candidates. Assessors, by and large, seem to be able to identify first or third class work relatively easily. Those Cambridge subjects which retain undivided Seconds may be saving themselves from lengthy and largely unhelpful debate.

ISSUES

Even if, for whatever reason, only 15% of students are potentially able to argue that they might have been awarded a different class of degree at another institution, that represents around 30,000 of the 1995 honours graduates in the United Kingdom.

While a single model of classification at all institutions may appear to offer a solution, we need to recognise that there are many other factors that need to be addressed before advocating such an approach. For example, how are borderlines recognised, defined, and resolved? Is compensation or condonement allowed within the regulations? If so, how much and at what level? How does this relate to concepts of credit accumulation? How are mitigating circumstances treated? We are not sure that these factors are always fully defined within an institution and applied systematically across the institution.

There are many other factors which are central to any model of classification. These include the use (or not) of core or compulsory modules in classification, the limits on resits, the size of modules, the possibility of APEL, and the use of exchange credits and grades. Other issues are related

more closely to a specific model: for example, the maximum number of modules that can be taken or the proportion of modules which are used to determine classification in "best of" models.

CONCLUSION

This work inevitably contributes to the debate on the future of the honours classification (see Winter, 1993; Richard, 1997). Whatever the merits or otherwise of the arguments on either side, change is unlikely in the immediate future. Therefore, it is important that the similarities and differences between our systems of classification should be made transparent by publishing our rules, regulations and practices. We believe such transparency can lead to greater inter-institutional comparability and could help raise the reliability of our classification of students from our estimate of 85%. Improving reliability should surely be one of the key aims of those who control assessment in a HE system that wishes to classify its graduates.

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TOWARDS AN ACCREDITED FUTURE

The long-awaited Dearing Report recommends the professionalisation of teaching in HE, a proposal that SEDA - and *The New Academic* - have been advocating for some years. *Kate Exley* now examines the relevant Dearing recommendations, describes how her university has been constructing a programme of continuing professional development (CPD) for lecturers, and gives some personal views on how training might evolve in future.



Dr Kate Exley is Training & Staff Development Officer at the University of Nottingham

AFTER DEARING

National debate since publication of the Dearing Report has shown that universities support the principle of teacher training for their staff, but institutions are at very different stages in developing appropriate training provision. Here I refer to relevant Dearing recommendations and use the past and present experiences at University of Nottingham to illustrate a possible response.

Nottingham has had a mandatory course for New Lecturers, run by the Training and Staff Development Unit (TSDU), since 1992: completion of the course is a requirement of probation. More recently we introduced an additional (and optional) programme for New Lecturers, Level 2. Both New Lecturers' programmes were externally accredited through SEDA in 1996.

During the past two years, the Unit

has been working with the Department of Continuing Education to look at how our current staff development courses could acquire credit under the University's modular scheme. Currently my colleagues and I are developing a ladder of academic qualifications that will provide a CPD framework for all staff who teach. The Dearing Report has increased the profile of this work and given the process a real boost.

THE DEARING CONTEXT

As we all know, the National Committee of Inquiry into HE was formed in May 1996, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing and given the task of making recommendations about how HE should develop over the next 20 years. The year-long process of consultation, investigation and analysis resulted in the recent publication of a

very full and extensive core Report that includes 88 individual recommendations and 14 subsidiary Reports on specific associated themes. Newspaper headlines were grabbed by the Report's suggestion that students should pay 25% of their fees through an income-contingent loan mechanism.

Here though I would like to focus on the support that the Dearing Report has given to the professionalisation of teaching in HE. It discusses initial teacher training for new academics, proposes the establishment of a National Institute of Learning and Teaching and states:

"To achieve world class HE teaching, it should become the norm for all permanent staff with teaching responsibilities to be trained on accredited programmes."

Summary Report (1997)

The Report recommends the creation of a framework to record data about lifelong learning and specifically discusses the importance of CPD for teachers:

“CPD should be regarded as important as Initial Teacher Training in the training and development of teachers.”

Report 10, (1997) Teacher education and training : a study

The initial response in universities may well be focused on the accreditation of training for new academics. However, the influence of the Report is likely, in time, to extend to the professional development opportunities available for experienced staff and the provision of an appropriate CPD framework for all academics.

TRAINING: MODELS

The Dearing Report could have recommended one of three models of accreditation for initial academic training:

- 1 A national compulsory training programme run and controlled by central government agencies.
- 2 A national accreditation scheme which accredits individual training programmes developed by a university or a group of universities.
- 3 Universities develop their own training programmes and use existing teaching quality assurance mechanisms to monitor and control for standards.

I believe that two factors have strongly influenced the decision of the Dearing Report to recommend model 2. The first is that the sector is extremely diverse and Dearing supports the maintenance of that diversity. The different HE contexts make the appropriateness of a national training programme very unlikely. Secondly, there is a need for portability. A

qualification gained in one institution needs to be acknowledged and valued in all universities so there is an argument for some kind of national approach.

“We favour the recognition of institutional programmes leading to the accreditation of staff who have successfully completed a recognised programme, along the lines of the SEDA scheme.”

Dearing Main Report 1997

The Report also recommends that the proposed Institute of Learning and Teaching should be responsible for the process of accrediting university teacher training provision. It remains to be seen, but I sincerely hope that the Institute is able to operate an open and flexible accreditation mechanism. I feel that it is very important that universities are able to be proactive in this area and able to develop innovative staff development schemes that best suit their local requirements. Indeed, I would like to see the adoption of an outcomes-based model of accreditation that does not seek to prescribe content and process but is more interested in the learning outcomes of staff development programmes.

INITIAL TRAINING

A case study

Teaching and Learning at The University of Nottingham : A course for new lecturers is a programme of development activities, completion of which is a condition of probation for new academics with limited teaching experience. The course includes elements on teaching, research and the pastoral role of academics. It involves attendance at a choice of workshops, peer observation of classroom teaching and is supported by a departmental mentor scheme. It can be completed in

one academic year (*Level 1*).

In 1996 we sought external accreditation for an extended New Lecturers' course through SEDA: 20 new lecturers opted to pilot the accredited Level 2 course. They have worked in base groups, produced portfolios which demonstrate the SEDA objectives and values and gained support from a Teaching Advisor in their discipline area.

GETTING A COURSE ACCREDITED -

The SEDA model

Obtaining SEDA accreditation involved a thorough peer review and recognition process. Two 'Recognisers', i.e. colleagues from other universities with experience of running initial training programmes, helped us develop our proposal, and I believe the course they accredited was better than the one we initially submitted to them.

The accreditation scheme enables institutions to develop a programme of academic training which suits their context and requirements. It requires common outcomes but does not determine the methods. In essence the scheme focuses on the learning achieved and not the teaching delivered.

A Qualification Ladder

A wide range of people teach in universities, including post-graduate students, researchers and academic staff of all levels. Providing a coherent structure for CPD which can be used by all staff is a challenge. One way of approaching this is to think of a ladder of qualifications which individuals can join and leave at levels appropriate to their experience and requirements. In time I hope that this will be clearly linked to career progression and promotion.

The ladder we are developing at Nottingham can be represented as

shown in the diagram.

I believe that a fair and appropriate "qualification ladder" should provide a clear mechanism for teaching staff to gain credit for their experience and their previous involvement in learning and development activities. It is, therefore, important to be able to accredit a wide range of prior experience and learning. These activities could include, for example, involvement in mentoring, peer observation of teaching, work shadowing, coaching etc. The Dearing Report seems to support this view :

"While initial professional development will be the basis for establishing the professionalism of teaching, we consider it essential that staff should be encouraged to enhance and update their skills. [...] We see advantage in establishing an organisation [the Institute of Learning and Teaching in H.E.] that can accredit training and practice."

Dearing Main Report 1997

At Nottingham we have established a working group of experienced lecturers to oversee and pilot the development of the "qualification ladder".

PROFESSIONAL BODIES

CPD as a requirement or as an opportunity has become the norm in a wide range of professions, e.g. in Law, Engineering, Accountancy and Medicine. Many academic staff are members of the professional body associated with their discipline and have responsibility to meet the CPD requirements of their association. It makes sense for the developing CPD frameworks in universities to work in harmony with these bodies so that staff can obtain appropriate credit under university and professional schemes. For example, at Nottingham the TSDU has just registered as an employer with the Institute of Electrical Engineers (IEE) so that university staff

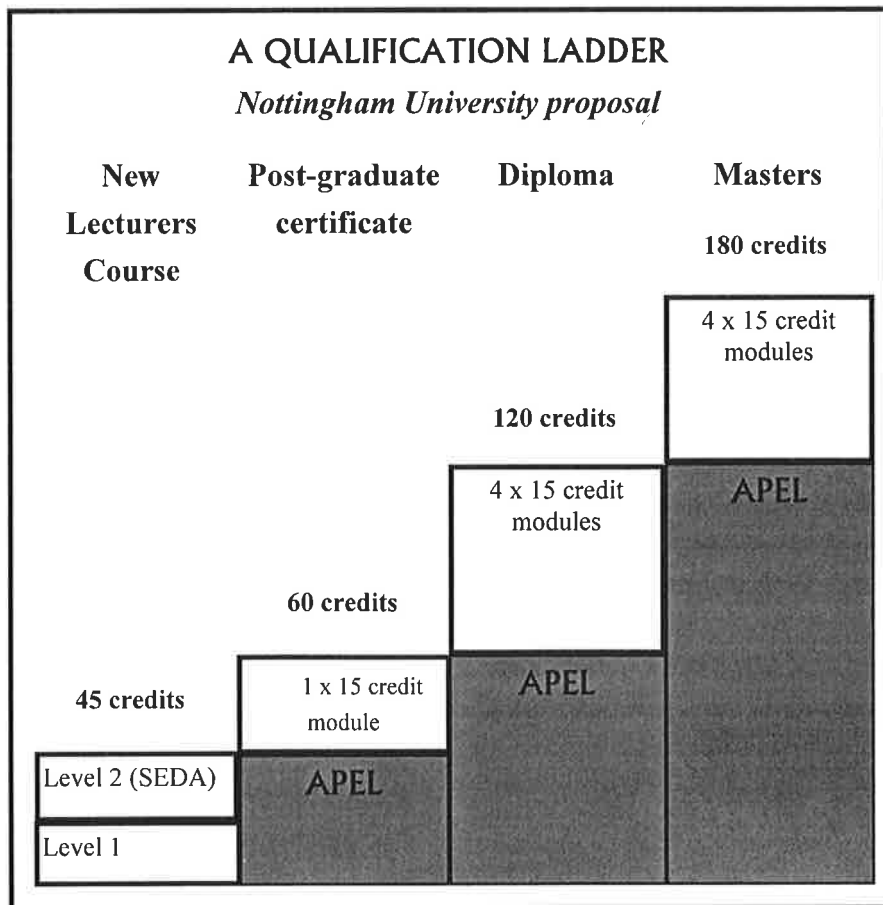
development events can be accredited with Institute and staff members gain official IEE "professional development units" if they choose to attend.

COMPUTING THE FUTURE

The Report provides interesting information about the ways in which teaching methods have changed over the last five years, and the massive increase in use of videos, multi-media and interactive course-ware. It talks of every student having a portable PC in a fully networked university. The information technology age has arrived. Much of Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) development to date has been computer packages produced by the few, used to enhance traditional forms of teaching. The future calls for more widespread use of computers by the many, to replace some traditional teaching. These are huge cultural changes and staff development must lie at the heart of any strategy to ensure that developments are informed by research in teaching and learning.

At Nottingham, one of the 15 credits towards a Certificate or Diploma will be a module called "Effective teaching and learning in a technology rich environment". It is being developed by a cross-disciplinary team which includes experienced academics, educational technologist and computer specialists.

We live in exciting times and I very much look forward to working with the proposed Institute of Learning and Teaching in order to develop our thinking and respond to the recommendations laid out in the Dearing Report. We must continue to share ideas and information and use the Dearing Report to encourage and support, rather than bully, our academic colleagues towards an accredited future. □



'SPAß' IS GERMAN FOR 'FUN'

Steven W. Lawrie describes an experiment designed to motivate his German language students. All language tutors will appreciate these students' need to find the German word for "fun".

But the principle of actively involving students in using their newly acquired knowledge is one which most teachers can adapt to their own subject area. Here is inspiration for all.

MOTIVATING STUDENTS

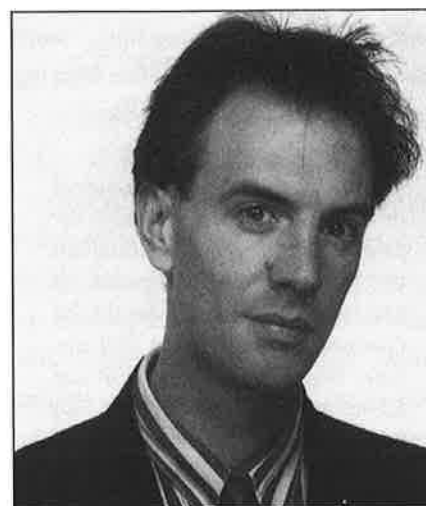
In a recent experiment in language teaching, we introduced student presentations. Working in groups, students were required to 'sell' something to their peers using the German language. The choice was left to the group members themselves as to whether they wished to 'sell' a product or a service or even an idea.

This assignment is a move towards student-centred language learning, and is designed to increase student motivation. Traditional language teaching methods and forms of assessment (such as translations and grammar exercises) have not been thrown overboard completely. But variety being the spice of life, the inclusion of presentations helps maintain students' interest and enthusiasm throughout the course. Presentations also allow the primary course objective, the acquisition and production of the German language, to

be combined with the development of the kind of transferable skills required by employers, as identified in the EHE programme.

The initial experiment was conducted with Level 1 language learners and the presentations were included as a formal part of continuous assessment. Although students in their first semester may still be overawed by the unfamiliar university environment, and feel more intimidated by the prospect of speaking in front of their peers at this early stage, tutors felt that it was of overriding importance to avoid a passive attitude to learning from the very outset of university study.

The task also facilitates deep learning as opposed to a mere regurgitation of the material covered in class, for the simple reason that it demands creativity: course participants are required to generate their own material, and by taking an active role in producing it in a foreign language,



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develop a greater interest in the language problems they encounter. Working in teams, they can combine their language skills with whatever inventiveness, imagination and creativity they possess.

This kind of task also makes students aware of the need to take greater responsibility for their learning beyond the contact hours of the course. Of crucial importance, and as a contrast to what the majority have experienced in school, is both the guided and independent work of the language learner between the regular meetings of the class. Consequently, and to make this concept more familiar, preparation for the presentations is restricted exclusively to non-teaching hours (which many new students view as free time!).

PREPARATION

A major issue at the preparatory stage was integration into the overall formal continuous assessment. Inclusion of presentations might place undue pressure on the course participants in what was already an unfamiliar and potentially intimidating situation. The idea of being introduced for the first time, was experimental and the outcome could not be anticipated. If students could not co-operate effectively or were overwhelmed by the task, the outcome might be disastrous, with correspondingly disastrous marks.

On the other hand, given the time and effort invested by students in the preparation and delivery of their presentations, it would have been inappropriate not to have acknowledged this hard work by fully integrating the assignment within the course (8%). Thus, presentations receive sufficient status to warrant a conscientious response without taking on wholly daunting proportions.

Guidelines given to the students as handouts are carefully formulated. They allay student anxiety by providing clear directions in German about the nature of the task and the form of assessment.

Tutors also agreed there was a need for documentary evidence beyond the initial subjective impression of each tutor during delivery of the presentations. Therefore the groups each produce a folder, which both provides an insight into group activities and ensures consistency in the tutors' marking by permitting meaningful comparisons.

In class, a brief explanation in English is given and the groups are arranged, depending on student wishes, either by the students themselves or by the tutor. Generally, students prefer to form groups themselves and the role of the tutor consists of ensuring a parity in

group size (around 5 students) and, as unobtrusively as possible, a spread of ability within each group. Students are reminded of each tutor's office hours should problems arise. Time is reserved for a further discussion two weeks prior to the presentations, but by this stage students generally have things well in hand and there are very few questions.

NATURE OF THE TASK

The provision of a detailed two-page handout is essential in ensuring from the outset that the groups work in parallel and in a clearly defined manner towards a clearly defined goal. The guidelines are written in a challenging German idiom, so that working through the German guidelines is itself a part of the task and serves as a useful concrete starting point for group work: finding out just what is required.

The task is set a full six weeks in advance to allow adequate time to plan and develop an idea. As mentioned above, the object of the exercise is to 'sell' something to the other members of the class; exactly what that something is, is left to each group to decide. The distribution of functions amongst the individual group members is also left to the discretion of each group.

- ◆ Who will arrange meetings?
- ◆ Who will take minutes?
- ◆ Who (if anyone) will lead the group?
- ◆ Who will produce what materials?
- ◆ Who will produce which texts?
- ◆ Who will perform what function during the actual presentation?

Preparing their presentations wholly outside normal teaching hours, the groups themselves must decide when, with what frequency and where they are to meet. (There was evidence in some cases that the venue for meetings was the local pub, although in the light of the results, the environment appears to have been conducive to

fruitful co-operation!)

Like the presentations themselves, all written submissions must be in the German language. The requirements for the contents of the folders (submitted four days after the presentation) are as follows:

- ◆ a self-evaluation by each member concerning his or her activities within the group;
- ◆ a report on the meetings of the group, the problems encountered and the solutions arrived at;
- ◆ a plan for the structure of the presentation;
- ◆ the texts used during the presentation and any other material such as OHP acetates, pictures and handouts;
- ◆ a brief evaluation by the students of the degree of success of the presentation.

ASSESSMENT

The marking system was devised especially for this assignment. By means of self-assessment, it aims to reflect the overall co-operative approach demanded by the task.

The final mark for each group consists of an assessment, based on agreed criteria, of the actual delivery of the presentation. This is combined with an assessment of the folder submitted by each group. Using the University's Common Assessment Scale ('CAS', 0-20), one mark is awarded by the tutor to each group. This mark is then multiplied by the number of members in the group to give a certain number of points. It is then left to each group to decide how these points will be distributed among its members as a reflection of the input of each student. These points then correspond directly to a CAS mark.

HOW DID IT WORK?

Feedback on the assignment comes via the students' comments in their

folders and also in the Course Evaluation Forms (filled in at the end of each module).

The themes chosen were indicative of the enthusiasm which developed for the assignment. Presentations ranged from discussions of the more immediately obvious 'Grant Cuts' and 'Student Accommodation' to the more exotic marketing of 'Jet Shoes' and 'selling off' of various members of the Royal Family. One group, organised as a 'company', with a director, a secretary, business cards etc., offered the modern working woman a solution to loneliness and housework with 'Rent-a-Man'. Presentations were frequently highly entertaining and contained scope for hilarity which was fully exploited.

In the majority of cases material was produced using a word-processor. Frequently the students had prepared OHP acetates, pictures and handouts to illustrate and enhance their arguments.

The folders contained much evidence of peer support, in particular with regard to the production of texts in German. Some groups, in particular those which formed 'companies', had looked beyond the realm of a mere assignment and considered how their product might sell in the real world. The effort invested by the course participants was, in the overwhelming majority of cases, quite startling and this was reflected in the marks, whose average was approximately 3 CAS marks higher than normal. In some instances, student input in terms of time vastly outweighed the actual weighting of the exercise within the overall continuous assessment, unavoidable where the work is left to the discretion of the individual groups.

Generally no problems arose in connection with the distribution of marks within each group. Students showed a remarkable degree of

solidarity in awarding each member the same mark - a genuine reflection, it might be hoped, of the spirit of co-operation engendered. In only one case has there been disagreement within a group which had to be resolved by the intervention and arbitration of the tutor.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Student involvement in the distribution of marks aims above all to encourage critical reflection by each group member rather than to guarantee 100% fairness. In any case, students will experience the same collective responsibility for team work in their later Honours courses and in their future careers.

Fluctuations in group numbers due to student withdrawals from the course can make group work impossible. Such an eventuality may be prevented by ensuring a minimum number of five members when groups are first constituted, so that the group will still function even in the unlikely event of the withdrawal of two members. Late additions to the class have, unfortunately, to be excluded and are given alternative tasks.

A perennial problem is that of time. Students must be made to keep to the time limit (10 minutes), lest the presentation class spill over into the following week.

WHAT THE TUTORS SAW

From the tutors' point of view the experiment was deemed to have been a success and has now been in use for three successive years. Although course textbooks, course content and tutors have changed in the meantime, the presentation has been retained in the form outlined above.

The initial time input in the development and preparation of presentations was great. On the other

hand, in subsequent years tutors' time commitment is bound to be less. In any case, the very positive results make the initial effort by tutors altogether worthwhile.

The primary aim was achieved: the development of written and oral/ aural German language skills. At the same time transferable skills were fostered: learning to work in a team, generating practical ideas, problem solving, time management and communication skills. The students also arrived at an appreciation of their own abilities and limitations.

Beyond that, the project helped develop a co-operative and pleasant working atmosphere amongst the students which in turn led to a more profitable learning environment in tutorials throughout the academic year.

Motivation, which of course cannot be measured but can be felt, is greatly aided by such an exercise. The feedback received to date on the presentations has been very positive and the frequency of one piece of German vocabulary in the folders illustrates the success of the experiment in inspiring students' interest:

'Spaß' is German for 'fun'. □

FORUM

- * Do *you* think teachers should be accredited in HE?
- * How do *you* inspire your students?
- * Is managing academics really like herding cats?



Send your own comments to Editor in Chief, Ivan Moore, at University of Ulster. **Forum** this time is on p.24.

LOST IN SPACE

Teaching and Learning Materials and the Internet

Ian Forsyth

Kogan Page (1996)

£18.99 ISBN 0-7494-205596

Let this book fall open at any page and you will be treated to at least one unsupported, unexplained or incomprehensible passage. A typical example is:

'The world is becoming choked by a new set of highways and infrastructures. Most of them are electronic. However, as with physical highways, these electronic highways have an ironic example such as the paperless office.' (p 25)

If you pick the book up to learn something about teaching, learning, materials, the Internet or any combination of those things you are likely to be disappointed. An experienced Internet user will find Forsyth's treatment unhelpfully minimalist. Newcomers will find no clear exposition of anything. The glossary at the end of the book is unsystematic, incomplete and uninformative. His treatment of teaching and learning is trite to the point of being embarrassing. He mentions Rogers, Gagné, Bruner and Freire but derives no more from them than the truisms that teaching is more than just telling and that learners' needs are more important than teachers' course notes.

The chapter headings indicate a structure that would have made some sense, but the text does not follow the plan. Ideas crop up unannounced in unlikely chapters, and sudden changes of direction take the reader from one precarious line of argument or level of analysis to another without warning or

BOOKS

reason, frequently within a single paragraph. There are problems with the construction of logical sentences and the consistent use of vocabulary.

Forsyth attempts to analyse learning (or is it teaching?) by identifying four modes: the didactic; the illustrative; the vicarious; and the experiential. These modes are not applied systematically to any of his later suggestions or typologies, and are not described with sufficient argument to enable readers to apply them for themselves.

The author presents some schematic diagrams in a chapter on 'Specific Considerations' which deals almost entirely with high level generalisations. My reading of this chapter left me with a new perspective on the Internet as a means to propagate and read databases.

His chapter on cost considerations, economic benefits and budgets reminds us that lighting needs to be paid for and that budgets need to be drawn up. Further insights of the same type are there to be found, but I could find no guidance that would be of real use.

This book has no practical value and its homespun philosophising offers nothing sharp enough to compensate.

Sam Saunders

University of Leeds

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STILL ON COURSE?

Leading Academic Programmes and Courses: Developments in Roles, Practices and In-house Training

Edited by Gina Wisker

SEDA paper 97 (1996)

£12.00 ISBN 0 946815 39 9

The introduction of modularisation and the rapid expansion of HE provision mean that relatively few academics are without some form of curriculum management responsibility. This has led to a great deal of learning on the hoof for new programme and course leaders, so this volume is a welcome contribution to the staff development literature. Current literature in this area appears to concern either institutional management or generic management skills which are difficult for the new course leader to contextualise. As a consequence, this paper has the potential to be an important resource for the fledgling course leader, for experienced course leaders who wish to examine their own management and leadership practice and for staff developers designing and developing training programmes in this area.

The paper is divided almost equally into two sections; part one focuses upon the context for leading programmes and courses whilst part two seeks to address staff training and development issues.

Part one sets the scene by looking at the changing role of the course leader. The process of converting traditional course leaders to what Ian McNay describes as an activity manager in a market and resource-driven enterprise is charted in a chapter which is both thought-provoking and insightful. Further chapters in this section address adult education and gender issues

associated with programme management and leadership.

Part two begins with ideas for the training and development of academic leaders, and is followed by two chapters which seek to model good practice in identifying roles for leaders. Resources to support course leaders are dealt with through an examination of the training provision for course leadership in one institution, followed by a discussion of the successful use of a peer-support network in another institution. The final chapter of the paper will be of particular interest to academics in HE in that it provides a reflective outsider perspective, in this case from an educational consultant, on the experience of working with course teams.

The structure of the paper could be more coherent to the reader. In particular, the chapters which seek to identify the role of the course leader contain a degree of overlap and might have usefully been conflated into a single chapter, whilst a synoptic chapter to summarise the findings and issues would have helped the reader. Nevertheless, the paper is valuable in that it accurately targets a largely unexamined area in the literature on academic management.

Nick Sutcliffe

Leeds Metropolitan University

WHY DID THE PLANE CRASH?

Group Communication

Peter Hartley

Routledge (1997) £10.99

ISBN 0 415 11160 9 (paperback)

Group Communication opens with the recording of a flight crew's conversation minutes before all on board were killed, apparently simply because this group of three people could

not communicate well enough. Peter Hartley's 'main aim in this book', in his own words, 'is to provide an interesting and accessible introduction to the analysis and practical implications of small group dynamics.'

Most books dealing with a specific topic of an academic discipline might not expect to have a wide readership outside that discipline - who but a physicist or mathematician will read '*Differential Equations*', sitting on my shelf as I write this?

Peter Hartley's book is different for at least two reasons. We all communicate in groups, and '*Group Communication*' has something which will appeal to surely everyone. Not only that, it is clear, and fun to read, comprehensive and authoritative (at least to my non-specialist eye) in its coverage of established theory and research.

The paperback copy is a pocketbook size, with 226 pages. There is a useful 7 page index. Each of the 12 chapters has a thorough set of notes with references, pointers and suggestions (even the Introduction points us to '*The Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing*', which I must seek out for myself). There is excellent use of straightforward sentences, short paragraphs, and clear, logical sub-headings.

The book is in three major sections. In the author's words again, 'Part I provides some of the justifications and background for the study of group dynamics. Part II examines group processes in more detail. Part III looks at specific areas where we can apply the theories and techniques described in Part II'.

However, I'm missing the main feature of Peter Hartley's achievement. His writing is direct and immediate, and yet considered and balanced at the

same time. His excellent first person style involves the reader in the facts and ideas he presents. It is a most reader-friendly text book. His coverage of his material appears to be admirably wide-ranging, and he uses material from a vast array of sources, presents it clearly and succinctly, points out its good and bad aspects, and compares it with that from other sources.

If you want a thorough introduction to the theories and practical applications of small group dynamics, I can't imagine that you could find a better one.

Robert M Edwards

University of Glamorgan

PEER POWER

Effective Peer Tutoring in Further and Higher Education

K. Topping

SEDA paper 95 (1996)

£12 ISBN 0 946815 29 1

Promoting Peer Assisted Learning Amongst Students in Higher and Further Education

A. J. M. Donaldson, K. J. Topping et al

SEDA paper 96 (1996)

£12 ISBN 0 946815 34 8

Peer tutoring (PT) involves 'people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching', specifically with one person assuming the role of tutor and the other/s of tutee/s. Peer assisted learning (PAL) covers a wider range of activities involving people helping others within their own peer group to enhance their learning. PT is only one example of PAL: others include peer monitoring and peer assessment, collaborative writing and peer mentoring.

The rationale for offering these two

volumes is primarily a pedagogical one, though there is also a claim that PT and PAL are more cost-effective than other learning and teaching methods. The pedagogical benefits claimed for PAL include better learning, more enjoyment, improved social interaction and the development of transferable skills.

Together the two guides do an effective job of explaining and promoting the learning/teaching methods they address. The first gives the background to PT, explaining it and arguing for its effectiveness by using an impressive array of research evidence. It shows how PT can be organised and provides OHP materials useful for anyone wishing to implement PT and PAL in their institution. The second volume gives more practical guidance to the individual lecturer on putting different types of PAL into practice, though it is also designed to be given directly to the students involved in PAL.

The two volumes will prove invaluable to anyone keen to apply and promote these approaches. The combination of a well-grounded theoretical rationale and clear guidelines for application is admirable: too often in other texts the theoretical and pedagogical projects are either divorced or are qualitatively or quantitatively asymmetrical. The provision of materials for dissemination to colleagues and to students is an added bonus.

One is left with the question, however, of why PAL approaches are not more widely used if they are so beneficial. The answer lies partly in the preconceptions that students and lecturers bring to the post-compulsory context: the idea that 'experts' should teach, that learning is essentially a passive activity and that student-student interaction is less valuable than contact with lecturers. Topping touches on

these issues, but offers little in the way of advice on how to deal with them. Nor does he suggest how hard-pressed lecturers, departments and institutions might cope with the various and high initial costs of PAL, though again he touches on the issue. Case studies of PAL elsewhere suggest that without continued (expensive) institutional support there is a tendency for such innovations to atrophy.

Topping and Donaldson are proselytisers for a useful set of implements in the pedagogical toolkit, but their enthusiasm makes them inattentive to crucial implementation issues. Unfortunately achieving successful widespread use involves more than providing a rationale and materials for using the techniques. Sadly there exists a rich paper trail of similar exciting educational innovations about which nothing is heard today.

Paul Trowler
University of Central Lancashire

UNTANGLING THE INTERNET
The Student's Guide to the Internet

Ian Winship and Alison McNab
Library Association Publishing (1996)
£6.99 ISBN 1 85604 207 3

The Internet is fast becoming an invaluable source of information for all those in academia. The very anarchic nature that has allowed the Internet to grow so quickly is, however, one of the biggest hindrances to Internet novices, hence the proliferation of guidebooks. So is there any need for another one? As the authors explain, there is a need for one that is British (and is not simply a repackaged North American title) and one written for students and others in higher and further education.

This clearly written and concise guide covers the usual territory whilst giving the material a useful slant, with tips on finding jobs, obtaining information for course work and how to cite electronic sources. Much of the technical information found in other guides is missing, but as most of those in academia do not have to set up their own systems, nor use modems, it is not really required.

There are a number of typographical errors which would normally not warrant a mention, but when they appear in Internet addresses they are likely to frustrate new users. Despite this, the vast majority of addresses listed are still active and for this the authors should be congratulated on their judicious selection.

The index is a little on the light side, making it difficult to use as a reference book, and the contents page lacks a number of headings. Although there are four pages devoted to Internet jargon, more detailed explanations and a more comprehensive list would have been useful, as jargon can be very offputting to the uninitiated. The layout of the book is generally clear, though it is difficult to distinguish between main headings and subheadings.

This guide is meant as an introduction to the Internet and as this I recommend it not only to students but to all those involved in education - don't be put off by the title!

Michael J. Dolan
University of Dundee

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FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT

Reading, Writing and Reasoning A Guide for Students

Gavin J Fairbairn
& Christopher Winch

Open University Press (1996) 2nd ed
£10.99 ISBN 0 335 19740 X

As interest in learning to learn and transferable study skills has accelerated, there is a growing number of publications - specifically aimed at the university student - about how to become a more effective learner. If, as research evidence suggests, the most important factor is the ability of the student to become a self-aware learner who seeks to develop an individual approach, then the greater the variety of books with ideas about this the better. Fairbairn and Winch's book will appeal to those who long for sustained prose as a respite from advice given in bullet points.

The book is written in three parts. The first introduces the idea of reading for different purposes, but the main theme, a major one for the authors, is the difference between writing and talking. I found the discussion useful: it convinced me that it is a neglected one which could be helpful to students. The second part, 'Writing as a student', deals with the mechanics of writing. This is the least successful part; there are some excellent bits (for example, the few pages on referencing and the notion of 'commitment in writing'), but much is familiar advice (redraft your essay, ask another person to read it) which has, perhaps, been better dealt with elsewhere - the authors do refer to other publications. There is, also, a slightly hectoring tone which the intended audience might find distracting.

However, in part three, 'Developing coherent trains of thought', the book comes into its own. It is a thought-provoking discussion about forms of persuasion in writing, and about using, analysing and evaluating different kinds of arguments. This section does distinguish it from many other study skills books.

This is not a bland book; there are strong themes and, at times, opinions. Whether this is refreshing or irritating will depend on the reader. The problem with learning from 'teach yourself' books is that, for most of us, it is the hardest way. Although the book is intended for students, I think they would have to be highly motivated or selective to make the advice applicable to their university work - it goes much further than writing essays in a university setting. Most of the examples are not from university essays and it is a dense book. I do think though that, as one of a collection of books, it offers interesting and useful ideas to those lecturers, educational developers or learning support/study skills tutors who want explicitly to help students improve their ability to recognise and write a cogent argument.

Monica McLean
Keele University

MATURE LEARNING

Adult Learning: A Reader

Edited by Peter Sutherland
Kogan Page, 1997, hbk £35.00
ISBN 0 7494 1971 7

While I am not sure that this is 'essential reading for all adult educators', as the dust jacket proclaims, there is certainly much of interest in this volume. Entitled a 'reader' but without any specific programme orientation, it will be useful to students

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on MA courses in which adult learning is a component and may also be of interest to students of psychology who have an interest in education.

It is divided into six sections, which move from being psychologically based (and, at times, difficult for non-specialists) towards more sociological and policy perspectives, with a final summary chapter by the editor setting forth some implications for teaching. It balances basic and higher education well (although there is nothing significant concerning the further education sector) and attempts, with some degree of success, to present perspectives from Australia, Britain, Scandinavia and the United States, albeit with little comparative consideration. The latter point simply serves to show the under-theorised and under-researched nature of the education of adults, at whatever level.

The chapters are inevitably of mixed

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length, complexity and quality (one in particular demonstrates no reason for its inclusion). As a whole, the book appears to have been strongly edited by Sutherland, although there are a few textual problems. These do not detract, however, from the useful summaries of behaviourism, experiential learning and learning in small groups and also the questioning of the notion of the 'mature' or the 'adult' student, as if students over 21 (or 22 or 25) do not have differing

characteristics, at least some of which may have something to do with age.

In policy terms, the book is valuable for demonstrating the importance of the perspectives of Habermas and Mezirow (the latter a contributor to the volume): a pedagogy/andragogy based on a continuum and parity of esteem between the technical/instrumental (vocational), the communicative (social) and the emancipatory (self development) is surely one that is

necessary now and will be for the next century.

It is to be hoped that those who control the purse strings will have the sense to realise this. Perhaps such thoughts were not the prime concern of the book but they are an interesting by-product of it.

Malcolm Barry
*Goldsmiths College,
University of London*

HERDING CATS

Managing or leading academics it is said, is like herding cats. A particularly apt analogy I feel. Intelligent/independent/curious/contrairy/charming/churlish/skittish/supercilious/mischievous and mean - I love them all.

I am, as you may guess, a cat herder. A one time academic staff developer reinvented as educational development manager, with my team I try to pick a route forward and encourage our academic colleagues that it's in everyone's interest to "Well sort of move in this direction ... or somewhere generally within 90° either way of that Please?"

They look at me askance:

"That way?"

"Up this tree is inherently much more meaningful."

"Push off, can't you see I'm busy studying this ant?"

"Who needs you? We've been managing perfectly well for centuries."

Delicately licking a paw, they twitch dismissively and stalk off in the opposite direction.

The parallels may be engaging, but are they helpful? While it is the independence that makes pursuit of our goals tricky, it is these very characteristics that must be preserved in the process of handing over the baton of HE to the next generation. It is the scepticism, the challenges and checks of the academic and graduate that will see society through testing times. So the stick (that other herders may use) is of no help - they'd only sharpen their claws on it. But change we must, and it will not work unless we can take the people with us. In Tony Blair's words, "we must give them the hope of change without the fear of change."

If not the stick, a carrot? Cats are fairly indifferent to carrots. A nice piece

FORUM

of fish perhaps? Perhaps. Where that fish is in the form of incentive funding it has been shown to be quite effective. The EHE scheme demonstrated that dramatically. A wonderful feline independence was also evident of the way that HE took the money and ran off, with great elegance in a different direction from that intended by the fishmongers. Fortunately everyone was too polite to draw attention to this, besides the direction was not entirely off track. The significance was that it showed that new directions are possible and at least one method of achieving them.

Can the academic really change its spots? One of the most highly evolved cats we know, who cannot, has become an endangered species. From my position, this is the crux of the matter. For HE our environment has changed every bit as much. There are few remaining protected niches where leopards can be leopards and the refined form of dons can be dons. The irony for HE is that it is the success of their progeny which has so changed life as they know it. Perhaps if they'd stuck to the classics? But changed academic life has, and change faster it will.

Can we learn to adapt fast enough? My own managers, I'm pleased to say, learn fast and since EHE, they have put money in to oil the process. Firstly 'change agents programmes' where five staff from each faculty undertook short but intensive development in an area and then disseminated and encouraged change in their own departments. There were four such programmes: Assessment, Improving Student Learning, Flexible Learning, and

Maintaining Contact with students in light of increased numbers. They are generally regarded as having worked well although it is hard to claim all the changes that ensued. It set up dialogue.

The academics crawled out of their lairs, discussed and addressed the issues. Those who came were those who already saw the need to but, beleaguered by all the ongoing changes, would not normally have put themselves in line for more pain. So what induced them? Money. Not for them personally but for something that would help them in their teaching. Many used it to get a laptop. Some bought books, course ware etc. The money was however more than a mere trade off. It was a recognition that change is hard, it requires time, commitment and additional effort.

The lesson was reinforced and money was then used to fund innovations. Enthusiasts were fostered and given general direction through a competitive bidding process. Their natural independence and energies could be harnessed. Excellent, wonderful and stimulating ideas and good practice have emerged, flourished and are ready to act as exemplars for others.

But now the pace of change is faster. The need to adapt or perish is more intense. The diverse demands on staff are greater, the money tighter. Clearly articulated guidelines on what are acceptable as proposals are the order of the day. Hackles are rising and claws unsheath. No longer can we go with the good will of the enthusiast, now things have to be clearly aligned to and embedded in clear strategies.

"Strategies!?" I hear them miaow. That sounds suspiciously like directions and the crack of the whip.

Hazel Fullerton,
Academic Services,
University of Plymouth

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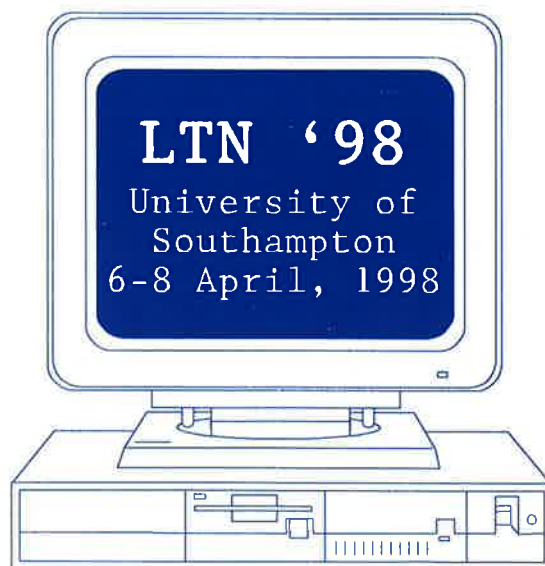


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