



the **New Academic**

The Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Spring 1998, Vol. 7 No. 1

Part 4

The Art of Inspiring Independent Learning

Also: Supervising the UK PhD

Student Focus Groups

Can you use Computers to
Teach Counselling?

SEDA

The Staff and Educational Development
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Audience is drawn from educators in all fields and disciplines. You should therefore not assume specialised knowledge, but write clear, straightforward accounts in plain English. When describing projects, please give concrete detail. Papers accepted for publication may be subject to editing.

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Thatcher, M. (1992). How I turned back the tide, *Journal of Marine Studies*, **14**, 123-45.

Thatcher, M. (1992). *Lessons for Canute*. Westminster: Celebrity Press.

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CAL	Computer Assisted Learning
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
EHE	Enterprise in Higher Education
FSEDA	Fellow of SEDA
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
SRHE	Society for Research in Higher Education
THES	Times Higher Education Supplement
UFC	Universities Funding Council

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the New Academic

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Photographers: Bob Pomfret (cover, p.9
Coventry University (p.13))



NOTES FROM THE EDITORS

We have a short list of titles this time, but these articles are crammed with quality hints for the professional HE teacher. All four papers are longer than usual, and each offers useful and practical information which should ensure that our students benefit from being under our guidance: the students of these writers will be inspired in their learning, discover that their tutors listen to their comments and adapt their courses, and find that even computer-phobia may be overcome with carefully designed programmes, while those who go on to do a doctorate will have supportive and knowledgeable supervisors. For the incorrigible, though, we provide a special page this time. for those who *wish* to fail.

You will see that Forum has once again been pushed out. Next time we will make room! If you would like to contribute, send letters to Ivan Moore.

Good reading.

Ivan Moore and Elizabeth Mapstone

THE ART OF INSPIRING INDEPENDENT LEARNING 2

In their second article, *Carole Baume* and *David Baume* propose more ways to develop independent learning through: appropriate relationships between learning and student work inside and outside class; assessment; and design of study programmes. They also look at formal processes like course design and support systems like the library. Here is lots to inspire the inspirational teacher.

JUST TO RECAP

In Part 1 (*New Academic*, Autumn 1997), we suggested that, without explicit attention to acquiring the skills of independent learning, all enthusiasm for life-long learning was likely to remain mere rhetoric. We talked about what independent learners are like - they are enthusiasts for learning, and they are also reflective practitioners of their own learning, continuing to develop their learning skills.

We reviewed some of these independent learning skills - taking responsibility for learning, making connections, being strategic about learning, planning, monitoring learning progress and adjusting activity or plans, and continued questioning both about what one is learning and about the effectiveness of one's approach to learning.

We explored independent learning in various classroom settings - lecture, seminar, laboratory and practical work.

We also offered some suggestions on developing independent learning outside class through assignments and learning agreements.

WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN CLASS - AND OUT?

If students are learning more independently, what should be happening in class? What should be the relationships between independent learning undertaken outside class and the work done in class? Courses are normally planned around classes. Courses are often specified in terms of contact hours. Little reference is usually made to what students do between classes.

The increased use of independent learning turns this view of courses on its head. If we are concerned with student learning, with students' planning and undertaking learning activities with some degree of independence, we should plan courses around these activities, around this learning.

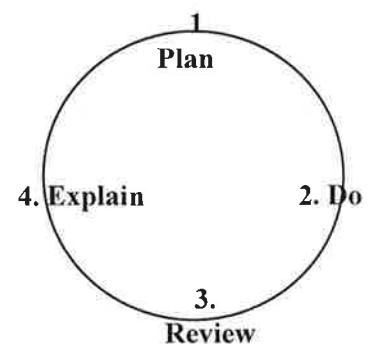
It is useful to see an independent learning course as a series of learning cycles, as described for example by Kolb (1984). The activities might include:

- (1) Planning a piece of work.
- (2) Undertaking the work.

(3) Reviewing the success or effectiveness of the work done.

(4) Seeking or making explanations or theoretical explanations for the success or otherwise of the work, leading to guidelines on how to make the next piece of work in some sense better.

Then (1) Planning the next piece of work, as in this simple diagram.



What could be the roles of the class in this cycle?

(1) The class is a good location for planning, at least in outline, the next piece of work, and for ensuring it is fully informed by all that has been learned in the previous work cycle. The lecturer can describe the parameters for the work; perhaps the aims, assessment

criteria, as appropriate. The students can work together in groups to outline work plans, critique each other's plans, and explore how they will collaborate

(2) Their work is less likely to be undertaken in the class. However, the class can provide a useful setting where students can meet and work together. Lectures can provide some of the necessary input. Students who are using the lecture to obtain information and ideas to support their independent work are usually a very focussed audience, and ask good questions!

(3) Independently undertaken work can very usefully be shared and reviewed in class. Students can present their work, as in a seminar. The discussions will be enriched by being concerned with the process of independent working as well as the content. Students will see how they might learn from and contribute to the work of others. The lecturer can raise more general points about the way in which the assignments are proceeding.

(4) Towards the end of a cycle of work, students can step back from the details in class and seek to explain or theorize from the work.

This suggests students' undertaking more than one piece of independent work during a course. However, even if the course embraces only one piece of work, a similar approach can be adopted. Intermediate classes can be concerned with plans, with first drafts, with subsequent sections of the work, with referencing and completion.

BE EXPLICIT ABOUT SKILLS

As you help students to undertake such independent work, be explicit about the skills required. These include time management, searching the literature and weighing up what they find, data analysis and presentation, and the varied and subtle skills of working

with others.

You could try to teach them these skills beforehand; better, you could help them identify their current capabilities in these areas; better still you could also help them, first to identify the skills they need in order to undertake such independent work, and then to monitor their development of these skills: cycles within cycles.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment is the point at which students often feel the most dependent on their teachers - for the definition of the assessment task, for the criteria (often implicit) against which they will be judged, for the judgement itself. They need not be so dependent. Let us explore how, without teachers' sacrificing their proper role in setting and maintaining standards, students might have some say over:

- the kinds of tasks they undertake;
- the timing;
- who plays what role in assessment;
- the assessment criteria used.

The tasks

Assuming that learning outcomes are specified for the course, students can be given some control over how they show they have achieved them.

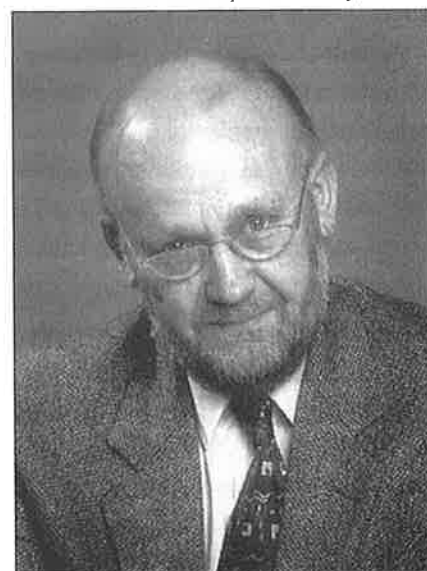
For example, the learning outcome may be that they should be able to compare and contrast the views of two or three authors on a particular topic or range of topics. Students might be allowed to choose whether to demonstrate this in an academic essay, a magazine article, an audio programme, a multimedia presentation, a lecture, a discussion. In this same example, they might also be allowed to choose (from within the overall syllabus) which authors and which topics to work on.

Timing

There can be advantages for both



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

lecturer and student in allowing some freedom over the timing of a pieces of coursework assessment.

There is a natural tendency for students to want to delay such assessment as long as possible. However, if a course falls into say four well-defined sections, and resources only allow students to receive feedback on two pieces of course-work during the term, then students might be allowed to

decide - near the start of the course - on which two sections they will submit course work for assessment.

Students have some choice over assessment, and the assessment load for the lecturer can be spread.

Who plays what role

Students can derive great benefit from assessing their own or their fellow students' work against standards they understand. Their first attempts at self or peer assessment may require support, until they become familiar with the process of making judgements against criteria. However, once assessment criteria are fully understood, the quality of work increases dramatically, as the criteria become the standard of performance as well as assessment.

For work-based learning, placements and real-world projects, students can be encouraged to nominate an assessor from the setting in which the assessed work was carried out.

Assessment criteria

The course or the lecturer may specify some of the assessment criteria to be applied to a particular piece of work. Students can be encouraged to add to this list, to reflect their own priorities or to reflect the assessment of particular skills or knowledge that have proved problematic for them in the past.

The setting and use of assessment criteria has to be learnt. One way is to ask students to assess work from a previous year. They could assign a mark or grade and then work out what criteria they had implicitly applied; or they could mark against given criteria.

Either way a discussion is needed on how to write and use criteria. Students rapidly become adept at these activities.

DESIGN OF STUDY PROGRAMMES

A module, pathway or course (hereafter, for simplicity, a course)

typically consists of a series of teaching and learning sessions - depending on the subject, these may be some combination of lectures, seminars, tutorials and practical or laboratory classes. There will usually be a syllabus, and assessments, probably some aims and learning outcomes or objectives, and often a reading list. These documents typically indicate what the lecturer will do (give lectures, run seminars, etc.) and suggest what the student should do (attend lectured, take part in seminars, read at least some of the set texts).

If we intend to design a course which will also help our students become more independent learners, what implications will this have for our planning?

Above all we need to decide how much independence or control we want the students to have. At one extreme we might offer them a blank canvas (with or without a frame!) on which they can design their entire course. At the other, we can provide a highly specified template in which their freedom is tightly constrained - painting by numbers, if you will.

Over what aspects of their course might students have control? We suggested in Part 1 that they might have control over:

- 1 Aims
- 2 Learning outcomes or objectives
- 3 Content
- 4 Timing, sequence, mode of study
- 5 Teaching methods
- 6 Learning activities
- 7 Feedback
- 8 Assessment
- 9 Learning resources
- 10 Evaluation

Faced with this list of areas in which you might relinquish some control to your students, you may feel that, at this

moment, you have an uncomfortable independence as a course designer! Here are some useful questions.

* Over which of these have you or have you not some control?

For example, in most courses the overall timing, the number of weeks available, is fixed, although you may have some freedom over how you use them. In a professional course, the aims, learning outcomes, content and assessment may also be fixed, leaving you (and therefore potentially your students) some freedom over teaching methods, learning activities and feedback. It's worth taking a couple of minutes to reflect where you have and do not have some freedom over the design and operation of your course.

* Where does control lie, and where might it lie, for each of the aspects of a course?

It is not as simple as "Either the lecturer or the student has control." As suggested immediately above, some things may be outside the your control. It's worth noting what they are.

Where something is mostly under your control - perhaps teaching methods - you may still feel that your freedom is somewhat constrained, perhaps by local norms or by student expectations or by the classroom you are allocated. It's useful to clarify how much freedom you feel you have, and hence how much you might offer to your students.

For example, you might feel that, in your Department, you have freedom to vary course-work assessment but not the final assessment, which must be by unseen examination.

A good intermediate position between your control and student control is negotiation, or student choice within a defined frame. It's useful to clarify the parameters of such

negotiation, to know the range and the boundaries of their possible freedom over the design and operation of the course. Continuing the example of course-work assessment, you might ask your students if they would rather undertake three small pieces of course work or one large one.

*** In the areas where you have some control, how much of this might you relinquish to the students?**

For example, do you really have to specify the whole syllabus, or the sequencing of content? Are there areas where the students could validly have some say in what they learn, or in what order they learn it?

More radically, must they all be working to the same learning outcomes? Within the overall course aim, there may well be more than one appropriate learning outcome. Could students choose, or negotiate with you, which outcomes they will work towards? (This will immediately have implications for assessment - students would also need some say in the assessment task.)

Caution: Becoming an independent learner takes time, support, and indeed a little courage. Don't inflict total independence on your students at a stroke! As we said in Part One, "Give students repeated opportunities to take increased responsibility for their own activities and their own learning" within the course.

*** How do you find or make time for students to plan their course?**

The first couple of weeks of a course will normally need to be planned in some detail, to give students time and space and support to design the rest of their course. Alternatively, make 'planning the course' part of a previous or prerequisite course, as is sometimes

done for student projects.

*** Isn't there a loss of community if students are all doing different things?**

We sometimes exaggerate how much community there is among a group of students doing the same course, especially if the course environment is perceived as competitive. But, where students are planning and undertaking their own course, each student faces much the same challenges; planning a course, finding resources, developing standards, monitoring their progress. These activities provide great scope for community, common topics around which students can gather and work together - perhaps without you?

*** If the students design the course, how can 'the course' be properly approved and validated and reviewed?**

We deal with this below under 'Course approval and review'.

DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT LEARNING THROUGH INTEGRATION

You may have responsibility for a unit or module within a course. Most units or modules add content. You might consider developing or redeveloping your unit to achieve two other goals as well - developing independent learning and helping students to pull together what they are learning throughout their course. Here's a possible process for such a unit.

1 Ask students which other units or modules they have taken and are taking.

2 Ask them to work in groups to identify overarching questions, concerns or interests, reaching beyond individual units or modules, that are of

particular interest to them.

3 With or instead of 2 above, ask them to identify academic or career goals which, again, go beyond and make use of individual units or modules.

4 Tell them, or agree with them, parameters for a programme of integrating work. These parameters might for example address academic level, expected number of study hours, collaboration, participation in classes, size and form of the output of the work, success criteria for the work.

5 Ask them each to develop a programme of work that pulls together work from past and current units, which addresses questions or concerns or goals that are important to them. They could develop the programmes in small groups or individually; the programmes themselves could be solo or collaborative ventures or some combination of the two.

6 Collect their plans, give feedback, and identify common themes and issues that can form the basis of classes during the unit.

COURSE APPROVAL AND REVIEW

If students can play a role in designing the course, this account of independent learning may have raised for you questions such as "What is a course?" or "What kind of a validated course can leave a course design role for students?"

We listed earlier, under "Design of study programmes", ten elements of a course, elements which might be described in a course document. Your institution might require some or all of these, or perhaps some other items not listed there, to be specified before a course can be approved. But you will have some freedom.

First, you presumably have freedom to allow students some say over any

elements of the course which do not have to be described in a course document. No problems so far - if it's not banned, it's allowed; if it's not prescribed, it's up to you!

Second, you can simply build some freedom or discretion into the course description: "Indicative syllabus" or "Content will be selected from this list" or "Teaching and learning methods will include " are useful phrases.

Third, you could describe the process whereby, for example, assessment tasks could be defined and agreed, or some of the content could be negotiated, within the course. This approach may or may not be familiar and comfortable within your institution. If it is not, then you will need to undertake some negotiation with those responsible for course approval. As for students, so for institutions; small innovations are less alarming than large ones, and a pilot or trial may provide informed reassurance before an innovation is adopted fully.

LEARNING RESOURCE SUPPORT

Independent learners need ready access to good learning resources. Effective independent learners can clarify what they need to know; locate likely sources; obtain the information; make a judgement on the value and validity and relevance of what they have found; and follow up valuable links to other sources. Increasingly in the age of the World Wide Web they also need to know how far to follow these links, and when to stop.

They may need some help to develop such skills, for the particular sources used within the discipline. Mainly, however, they need the resources with which to practise these skills. A decent and well-catalogued library or learning resource centre, with good access to the

Internet, will provide most of what they need. They should also be encouraged to use other sources, such as individuals, companies and organisations.

The increased use of independent learning has varied effects on library provision. It reduces the scramble by all three hundred students on a course to get hold of the set book or the paper held on counter reference. It increases the range of sources which students will want to access. It increases the variety of interesting questions which students will ask of the library!

CONCLUSION

As you support students to become more independent learners, your role and your relationship with those students is likely to change. Your focus as a teacher will shift from the content in its own right to the process of learning the content. Your role will shift from provider of content to enabler of student access to content. You will become a partner in your students' learning. You will help them to develop their own standards of judgement, building the standards that you initially offer to them. You will from time to time be pleasantly surprised as students use their growing independence as learners to follow new routes to discovery and invention; new, not just to them, but to you.

You will know your students better. And they will remember you, not just

for the content you taught them, but also for the ways you helped them to learn, ways which they will use and on which they will build throughout their lives. □

Selected further reading

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Carole and David Baume 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, colleagues have helped Carole and David to extend their understanding and practice in independent learning.

COMING IN OUR NEXT ISSUE....

Work-based Projects: Supporting Students

by Jenny Rowley

More on Innovations in Medical Teaching

by Reg Dennick and Kate Exley

Daring and Learning How to Learn

by Graham Walton and Catherine Edwards

"Tell me How to Get a First"

... looking beyond academic success to the meaning of scholarly education

SUPERVISING THE UK PH.D

***Claire E.A. Seaman* takes a close look at what it means to be a supervisor of a doctoral student. What does the supervisor need to do, and what does she or he need to know? Once again communication turns out to be a major factor in ensuring a successful outcome in what is inevitably a complex process.**

A MAJOR ISSUE

Supervision is a major factor in the successful completion of a PhD and is a major issue for many academics. Supervision is considered by some to be one of the most important factors influencing the progress of a PhD studentship, but training courses for new supervisors are rare and expectations vary. Defining effective supervision is difficult because the nature of supervision changes as the research student becomes more competent and confident, both in the specialist subject area and in the more general processes of academic research.

Here I review the literature which tries to define effective supervision. Training courses for new research supervisors, learning contracts and institutional processes all play a role in ensuring that students, supervisors and the institution obtain maximum benefit from the PhD process, but communication between supervisor[s] and student is likely to remain a critical factor which will determine the success of many PhD projects.

In 1992, the UFC considered, for the first time, research assessment exercise

submissions from HE Institutions alongside those from Universities. The findings in 1992 and 1996 have encouraged many universities and HE Institutions to raise their research profile (McQueeney, 1996). Pressure to increase the volume and quality of research will continue for the foreseeable future and, as part of this drive, PhD studentships are likely to increase. Raising the research profile of an institution may be beneficial in the long term, but in the short term the policies, procedures and structures in many educational institutions may be found to be inadequate to support quality research supervision (Moses, 1994).

Research for a PhD is one way in which original academic research is carried out in Universities and, increasingly, in HE institutions. A doctorate involves a substantial research project which makes an original contribution to knowledge in a specific area (Phillips & Pugh, 1996). The PhD student is usually supervised by two or more individuals who are often academics and who will play a considerable role in the successful



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completion of the project. As more HE Institutions become involved in the supervision of research degrees, the nature and quality of the supervision and the effects of supervision on PhD completion rates are therefore vital elements of the successful research culture which many institutions are currently trying to develop.

PHD COMPLETION RATES

Differences in PhD completion rates in different subject areas were examined in a major study which studied the completion and withdrawal rates for 484 students who graduated from a British University after 1980 and subsequently registered for a PhD (Booth & Satchell, 1996). When ability and funding were controlled, the successful completion of a PhD was more likely where the student

was registered in a science department, as opposed to a department providing courses in the social sciences, arts or literature. Where academic ability, as indicated by the quality of the student's first degree, and employment status were studied, however, these affected the chances of a successful PhD completion.

Amongst women, funding and personal factors, such as having had a child before starting the PhD, did not appear to affect the student's chances of completing the degree. Very few women, in practice, register for research degrees without funding or with young children, and in practice those who do are probably extremely determined.

No attempt was made, in this study, to assess the supervision offered to individual students or to assess the likely impact of supervisory help on completion rates but they provide background information within which the importance of supervision can be considered.

THE NATURE OF PHD SUPERVISION

The critical importance of effective supervision during a PhD has been emphasised by a number of authors (Bond, 1991; McQueeney, 1996; Phillips & Pugh, 1996; Sheehan, 1983). Although there is general agreement among these authors that effective supervision is vital to the successful completion of a research degree, defining effective supervision is difficult. Qualities which should *ideally be present* in the supervisor and the host institution have been described by McQueeney and are listed in the box.

Descriptions of the nature of PhD supervision have concluded that, while supervisors and their research students may have very different expectations of each other, the match between supervisor and research student was one

of the major factors in ensuring the successful completion of the thesis (Phillips & Pugh, 1996). The picture is complicated, however, by the changes in the working relationship between supervisor and research student which are expected to take place as the research student 'settles in' to academic life and becomes more independent and confident in their knowledge and judgement within the chosen research area.

Other models of supervision have been developed (Welsh, 1980). The first approach described is highly directive, where the student is given a great deal of highly specific and structured advice early in the project but far less help when they are writing up. The second approach involves a highly directive approach to supervision at the beginning and at the end of the project, with a non-directive period in the middle. Finally, a third approach is described, where close, directive supervision is a feature throughout the duration of the project.

The method of supervision where little help was available to the student was not described and, while this clearly should not happen, it is fully described by Phillips and Pugh and appears to be quite common.

The main problem with this type of classification, however, is the implication that the professional relationship between the supervisor and the research student is in some way predetermined at the start of the project, or that any one supervisor will supervise all research students in roughly the same way. This assumption is probably false.

Communication between supervisor and student has been emphasised by McQueeney, indicating that guidance is important, but the guidance and feedback required will vary among individual students.

NEGOTIATION MODELS

A number of authors have suggested a partnership model of supervision (Armitage & Rees, 1988; D'A Slevin & Lavery, 1991; Elton, 1994; Whittle, 1994). The common theme described by these authors is a system of negotiation, where at the very beginning of the research project, ground rules for the supervision process are negotiated and defined. A number of areas are suggested where negotiation should take place, including a minimum number of supervision hours, ethical demands, time management and the availability of resources, and contract setting is suggested as a worthwhile strategy which helps to clarify the breakdown of responsibilities between supervisor and student (McQueeney, 1996; Ryan, 1994). This is certainly a useful idea, although it is clear that negotiations at the start of any research project may be

EFFECTIVE PH.D SUPERVISION

An effective Supervisor should:

Demonstrate an interest in the student

Be enthusiastic

Communicate effectively

Be well organised yet flexible

Be credible and knowledgeable

The Institution should provide:

Clear co-ordinating goals

Research emphasis

Distinctive culture

Positive group climate

Assertive participative governance

Decentralised organisation

Frequent communication

Accessible resources

Diverse research personnel

Appropriate rewards

Appropriate recruitment and selection

Expert skilful leadership

After McQueeney, 1996



subject to alterations if the details of the project change. But there may also be problems if the new student is either not sufficiently aware of the processes of research to know how much advice they are likely to feel comfortable with once the project is developed, or not sufficiently confident within their new role to negotiate effectively with their supervisor.

One scenario described by Phillips and Pugh is the process whereby a schoolpupil moves to HE, which requires more independence of thought and some ability to discuss issues critically with academic staff, and finally on to a research studentship where the student should very quickly be discussing issues critically with professionals who will often have considerably more experience of the topic. Clearly, this model will be affected by many things, not least the academic abilities of individual students and their personal maturity. But negotiations with a supervisor at the

beginning of the research studentship should be treated as the starting point for an ongoing, two-way sharing of ideas and negotiations, which should allow the channels of communication between student and supervisor to remain open.

Such problems may be less likely to occur where the potential research student is involved in the writing of the original research proposal, and hence will know the project in great detail before the studentship begins, but specific problems may also occur where there is a large supervisory team.

STAFF PROBLEMS

As developing research becomes an increasing priority for HE institutions, two problems are developing which affect the supervision of research students. In some academic departments, developing research proposals which are suitable for research studentships is a priority, but there may be only a small number of

staff with experience of supervising a PhD project. Those staff who do have supervision experience may therefore find themselves being asked to take on more and more students, while less experienced supervisors in practice carry out more 'routine', day-to-day supervision than would be ideal. While time will gradually solve this problem, the importance of training for new supervisors - and indeed for those who have some supervision experience - cannot be overemphasised.

In addition, to ensure that as many members of staff as possible become experienced supervisors, there may be pressure to increase the number of supervisors for each individual student. In practice this may work very well and the student may benefit from the diversity of expertise available to them, but if the channels of communication between the different supervisors are not good, catastrophic problems may develop where the students find themselves receiving different and

contradictory advice from different members of the supervision team.

The answer to this is relatively simple. If all the members of the supervision team can make time to meet occasionally for formal meetings, this would allow the supervisory team to discuss the project and to decide on a coherent approach. Where students see supervisors independently, there is likely to be a main supervisor who will obviously have a greater say, but it remains important that students and staff are aware of the potential for communication problems and try to keep the channels of communication open to allow any difficulties of this type to be resolved. Phillips and Pugh highlight the possibility that students may attempt to play supervisors off against each other and supervisors should clearly be aware of this possibility.

TRAINING

The training new supervisors receive when they start to supervise research students is a complex area.

Whittle (1994) has put forward detailed recommendations which would form a useful starting point for any institution planning a supervisors training course:

1. A proper time allowance should be available to members of staff who become supervisors, to take account of both the supervisory tasks and any training which will be required if they are to be carried out successfully.

2. All supervisors - new or with some experience - should receive adequate training in the specific skills of research supervision and research management.

3. Both formal training programmes and discussions with colleagues in the same and different institutions should be used both to provide initial research supervision training and to share and

profit from each other's experiences.

4. All research supervisors should initially supervise with an experienced supervisor before they attempt to supervise on their own.

5. An agreed Code of Practice for research studentships and for research projects in general should be available for each institution.

6. All institutions should give serious consideration to the issue of research supervision and the management issues which arise.

Effective use of the funds devoted to research studentships requires good supervision, allied to a matching of the supervisor's research experience with the work to be carried out. It should also be emphasised that effective supervision will be difficult if the supervisors have limited recent research experience themselves, which may be common where HE institutions are gradually entering a research culture.

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SUMMARY

Effective research supervision is a complex process which depends primarily on realistic expectations and good communication from both student and supervisors.

Systems where students are matched to supervisors without consideration for personal preference are less likely to promote effective supervision, and effective supervision seems to be partly dependent on effective, credible role models functioning in research conducive environments where the emphasis is on the process of research rather than purely on the end-product. To achieve a quality research output which meets the demands of staff, students, assessors, sponsors and employers is vital and is becoming more and more important in HE. Staff development, both in terms of training for supervisors and as resources for individual members of staff to develop their own research experience, are important if these goals are to be achieved. □

FOCUS ON QUALITY

Most of us have heard of focus groups in market research into consumer preferences, or opinion polling in elections. But focus groups are both versatile and extraordinarily useful. *Karen Harrison* and *Lynn Clouder* explain how they applied this methodology to evaluation of courses in physiotherapy with great success: this method could be applied to most subject areas.

RESEARCHING ATTITUDES

The focus group as a research technique was first described in 1956 when researchers used group interviews to explore the social effects of films and television (Merton, Fiske and Kendall, 1956). For the past forty years, focus group methodology has been used extensively as a tool for market research. More recently the technique has reappeared in academic literature, where it has gained recognition as a qualitative option in the social sciences.

We have seen a burgeoning of evaluative processes in HE characterised by a strong movement away from informal assessment towards a greater reliance on traditional quantitative research methods, such as standardised surveys. Data acquired through such methods make accessible profiles of such things as entry qualifications, examination pass and fail rates, degree classification, employability of graduates and student satisfaction in relation to elements of their course. But though such quantitative methodologies have their place, they do not - and cannot - tell the whole story (Ory, 1991).

The focus group has been defined as a form of group interview that capitalises on communications between research participants in order to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995). The group 'focus'

on a specific issue and since attitudes and opinions are both socially formed and socially articulated, the discussion which ensues provides the dynamic for developing, challenging and refining ideas. We therefore believed that focus groups might have the potential to contribute to the quinquennial review of our modular undergraduate honours degree course in physiotherapy.

BREADTH AND DEPTH

The complex nature of the professional course under review demands both breadth and depth of critical appraisal. Depth of understanding was gained by eliciting the views and attitudes of two major consumer groups associated with the course, namely the students and the employers of physiotherapy graduates. The support of an Enterprise in HE Research Grant enabled us to explore the views and attitudes of both groups using focus group methodology. Here we will consider the input to the evaluation process provided by the students.

Discussions in routine meetings between staff and students tend to concentrate on operational issues. Staff with 'ownership' of elements of the course may react defensively to criticism and will often attempt to reassure students by justification of the



Karen Harrison is Head of Physiotherapy Subject Group



Lynn Clouder is Senior Lecturer in Physiotherapy

existing situation, thus maintaining the status quo. Such meetings can feel confrontational for both staff and students, and the latter may feel inhibited about expressing their views in such a forum. Focussed group discussion, in contrast, concentrates on strategic and policy issues and provides

a dynamic for change in existing practice. In the absence of a need for justification on the establishment side, the group can discuss issues in a relatively open and unimpeded manner. Power relations are neutralised or even favour students, particularly when the focus group is moderated by persons who have no vested interest in influencing the discussion, further freeing it from constraint.

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

Three separate group discussions to ascertain student views were held with undergraduate physiotherapy students taken from years one, two and three. The groups convened near the end of the year, so that students could reflect on the year as a whole. Each group consisted of five or six students who were self-selecting, and included some who had represented the interests of their peers in the past.

A standard proforma issued to the

KEY AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

identified on the proforma

1. *Strengths of the current course*
2. *Weaknesses of the current course*
3. *Preparation for clinical work*
4. *Suggestions for change*

students provided a framework of headings for the formulation of ideas, in preparation for the discussion. The four headings are shown in the small box..

Key phases in the running of the focus group discussions were as follows:

Choice of location - an informal quiet location was selected to be free from distraction.

Explanation of process - students assembled, were welcomed and thanked for their participation and the format of the focus group discussion was explained.

Personal reflection - Students were given the proforma and asked to consider individually and make brief notes on the key areas for discussion within 10 minutes. This allowed individual formulation of thoughts.

Group discussion was initiated and facilitated by the moderator in a non-directive and impartial manner. Participants were encouraged to speak to one another rather than directing comments to the moderator. The discussions lasted up to one hour and were recorded in manual note form by the moderator and co-researcher.

Prioritisation of key points - At the completion of the discussion, notes were read back to the group for verification, amendment and prioritisation of key points. This gave students the opportunity not only to identify clearly the most important items discussed but also to comment on the accuracy with which opinions were reported, enhancing the rigour of the standard focus group process.

1ST YEAR STUDENTS : FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS

Strengths of Course

- Lecturers are very good and very helpful
- Reasonable hours worked
- Facilities and equipment are good
- Tutors make links between modules
- Interesting material
- Good range of modules
- Observation of clinical practice very helpful - would like more
- Healthy group of integrated students
- Able to cope with eight modules

Weaknesses of Course

- *Physiology: needs integrating, more relevance to and emphasis upon physiotherapy*
- More assessment needed in term 1, less in terms 2 and 3
- *Assessment regulations; very tough regulations for progression*
- *Would like option of early retake of failed element; clouds rest of course, spoils break in the Summer, feeling that however hard they work they are weighted down by the failure*

- Not enough books
- Not enough hours anatomy, kinesiology and biomechanics and basic therapeutic skills
- *Basic therapeutic skills - no 'big picture' need to know why they are learning techniques*
- Needs to be linked more to patients
- Pathology needs to be better paced
- *Very heavy work overload, a lot of material and fast paced, no comparison with other degrees*

Preparation for Clinical

- A lot of people worried and unsure what to expect
- *Fear of unknown - need more insight*
- *Feedback from second years could be helpful*
- Techniques reiterated on patients helpful
- Rehearsal and integration of materials across modules helpful

Suggestions for Change

- ◆ *More time*
- ◆ *Change Physiology*

- ◆ *Spread dates for work*
- ◆ *Statistics - divide into*

- beginners, intermediate and advanced.
- ◆ *Bring patients to classes*

- ◆ *More patient contact before starting clinical*

HANDLING THE DATA

There are a number of ways in which focus group data may be recorded and analysed.

For some types of research, for example exploration within a particularly delicate or sensitive area, the discussion would be tape-recorded, and a word-for-word transcript produced. (In the educational field, this might occur where the feelings and experiences of failing students are being explored. In such a situation, the actual words which students use might need to be recorded. Also, it could be insensitive if the moderators were to take notes whilst participants are disclosing details of an experience which is in some way traumatic or painful.)

However, when using focus groups for curriculum evaluation, the aim is to identify specific issues of concern, and to take appropriate action within a relatively short time. Consequently, we chose to collect data through the use of parallel reporters' notes, made by the moderator and co-researcher, and verified by the participants (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992).

Notes were subsequently compared, cross-referenced, coded and analysed. Frequently, analyses erroneously equate length of discussion of a particular point with perceived level of importance of that item. Other items may receive little attention because they are non-contentious but often command tacit agreement and are high on the list of prioritised points when a group is asked specifically to highlight priorities. Analysis involved the identification of significant ideas and concepts for each year group.

TAKING ACTION

The data generated from each group discussion were tabulated, with



prioritised items identified in italic print. 1st Year data are presented in the large box on the previous page.

The final phase of the interactive evaluation process was that of taking action. As Coles and Grant (1985) observed, there is no point in identifying weaknesses in the curriculum unless positive steps are to be taken to remedy those weaknesses. In the absence of relevant action, evaluation becomes a destructive process whereby areas of deficit are brought to public attention only to be seen to be ignored, demotivating all of those involved in the process.

An action plan was drawn up to specify how each of the issues identified by the students as being problematic was to be addressed in the new curriculum. The action plan devised in response to 1st Year issues is shown in the box on this page.

Some matters required simple operational intervention, for instance, bringing patients into classes with increased frequency. Other items demanded change of a more strategic nature, for example, the actions taken to overcome the theory-practice divide identified. This involved re-shaping the

curriculum according to a holistic and thematic model to avoid compartmentalisation of knowledge.

1ST YEAR STUDENTS RECOMMENDATIONS ACTION PLAN

- Emphasise relevance of theory to clinical practice, eg. physiology
- More hours for anatomy, kinesiology, biomechanics and BTS
- Integration of theory and practice in core modules
- Spread out assessments
- Assessments spread through 1st year
- Improve preparation for clinical placements
- Feedback from 2nd years
- More observation of clinical practice observe patients in class
- Continue with 1 week clinical observation at end of 1st year
- Observation of patients in class
- Shadowing of 3rd year students on placement
- Improve access to library books (Continual problem, continually addressed: new books ordered)
- Access to Hospital libraries arranged
- Progression regulations warrant review (Currently under review by Registration/Professional Body)

HOW WE FELT

For us, the power of the technique in eliciting evaluative student opinion proved to be considerable. Specific issues relating to the undergraduate curriculum had been identified by academic staff, but these and more were highlighted by the students. The quality of debate generated in the group discussions did not support common negative assumptions about students' inability to make worthwhile, balanced judgements about course matters (Bensen and Lewis, 1994). All students were encouraged to speak about the course as a whole and not just their current year of study. Many comments, particularly from second and third year students, closely reinforced comments of students from previous cohorts, offering a degree of corroboration of the research findings. Consequently, student insight had a profound influence on the re-design of the curriculum, the core structure and philosophy of the new course.

ASSETS AND LIMITATIONS

The focus group situation is particularly useful for exploring novel areas, or topics of which we have limited understanding. The interactive nature of the technique can empower participants, who typically feel stimulated and enlivened. Participants enjoy the experience, and feel that they have a valuable part to play. This may in turn make them feel favourably disposed towards the authority or organisation responsible for soliciting their opinion in this way.

Unfortunately this powerful participant element is frequently open to abuse. The focus group is not designed to be used as a sales opportunity (whether for a product or a managerial idea), a support group or a group with decision-making powers. Misuse of the

technique in these ways not only invalidates any findings from the research, but also brings the technique as a whole into disrepute. The primary function of the focus group must remain the exploration of informed opinion through a group interview situation.

Insight gained from focus group data is low in external validity due to the nature of the sample, which is fairly small and is often self-selecting. Data is very context-specific and the technique cannot be exactly replicated. However, where researchers seek to explore and gain an understanding of a topic generalisability will be of less importance.

The skills required of moderators should not be underestimated and are crucial to the quality of the data generated. The moderators' approach should be facilitative but 'low key'. The aim is to open up debate so as to avoid false consensus, and at the same time to manage group dynamics so that, for example, no one person is allowed to dominate the discussion.

WOULD FOCUS GROUPS BE USEFUL FOR YOU?

The use of a focus group technique as an adjunct to support and complement traditional quantitative methods proved to be a valuable asset in informing the change process implicit in curricular review and evaluation. The technique offered depth of insight and explanation of course deficits, the complexity of which may otherwise have remained unexplored, therefore unresolved. Students contributed to the process not as passive respondents, ticking boxes on a standard modular or course survey form, but as empowered participants actively involved in formulating opinions and setting the agenda. In this case the focus group approach gave

power to the student voice and freed the course evaluation process from the constraints of pre-judgement and rationale imposed by the educational researcher. Maintaining an awareness of strengths and limitations, the technique has potential to both generate ideas prior to further research and to be valuable when used in conjunction with other techniques in any evaluative process. □

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A PLEA FROM THE EDITOR

An inordinate amount of editorial time is spent on sorting out references. Could authors please examine current issues of *The New Academic* to see how we present them, and then make sure their references conform.

No need to bother about italics or bold face, but please - commas, full stops, spaces as accurately as you possibly can.

Thank you!

CAN YOU USE COMPUTERS TO TEACH COUNSELLING?

Robert Shaw explores the difficulties and benefits of applying Computer-Assisted Learning to counselling education. His findings are important for all subject areas where experiential learning is central.

PRESSURES TO USE CAL

The issue of computer-aided technologies within counselling education arose during the Certificate in Professional Practice in HE (CPP) programme, designed to help newly appointed academic staff at the University of Derby become critically self-reflexive over their teaching practice. It is clear that within HE resources are being directed towards ever more complex computer-centred learning. The issue for counselling education is whether such methods are appropriate and, if so, what is the best mode of delivery.

Since counselling education relies heavily on experiential learning and is thus social constructivist in nature (Atkins et al, 1993; Lebow, 1995), there would appear to be a conflict with the use of computer-assisted learning (CAL) as it tends towards individual-based learning. My purpose, therefore, is to explore this apparent tension and to look at appropriate uses of CAL within counselling education. Although this paper primarily relates to counselling, there are clearly wider implications for other disciplines which rely on experiential learning, and whose

students are predominantly mature and studying for vocational qualifications.

In assessing the appropriate use of CAL, we hoped to identify its potential uses and develop a framework of good practice in CAL within both counselling and related vocational subjects where shared group experience is a significant aspect of the learning process.

CURRENT DEBATES

My intention here is to highlight some of the current debates relating to CAL and constructivist learning. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive review of CAL here as the subject is, quite frankly, too vast for the scope of this paper. I will also briefly discuss open and distance learning (ODL) as this has a part to play in CAL.

One of the main points to emerge from the literature is that CAL can improve the speed with which people learn. This has been noted by Mottram (1995) who made a link with HE's problem of increase in teaching load combined with a decreasing resource base: CAL is viewed as a mechanism for alleviating the teaching load for



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hard-pressed academics. Maul and Spotts (1993) also observed that, although CAL methods may not necessarily show any difference in learning compared to more traditional teaching, there is a significant decrease in the time taken to teach material using CAL. Teaching in these contexts is seen as knowledge transfer and is not perceived as an interactive process.

However, it is interesting that there are connections being made to constructivist learning. Silverman (1995) suggests that students prefer to use CAL in a constructivist environment; this implies a more collaborative approach to computer

learning.

This use of CAL seems to be one way of emphasising the social constructivist approach to learning and would seem appropriate to the counselling setting and other disciplines which encourage experiential learning. There are other authors who suggest collaborative work can be achieved via electronic networks (Magidson, 1992; Levin, 1994) and thereby enhance constructivist learning.

There is also a growing interest in interactive CAL. An example of this would be virtual reality (VR). Situations can be simulated and the student allowed to react (Wood & Authers, 1995; Dennen & Branch, 1995), which has the advantage of not causing harm if the student makes a mistake. Examples of current VR in education include flight simulators and some medical procedures. These are very expensive to set up (Wood & Authers, 1995), but it may be possible to use this technology for counselling with difficult clients and for looking out for signs of suicide risk or psychopathology.

There seems to be a consensus that CAL can help achieve deep learning whereby knowledge is not simply learnt by rote, but is assimilated in a fashion that enables the student to use the knowledge in a meaningful way. This does require that the student be well motivated - which also applies to traditional learning environments. Use of video, compact disc and audio equipment does allow for more than one sense to access information simultaneously which may partly account for the success of CAL in achieving deep-learning. However, in order to create such interactive programs, considerable work and time is required (Neesham, 1992). One might argue that this does not actually differ very much from traditional teaching.

NON-DIDACTIC SYSTEMS

Although much teaching is still based on the didactic approach, which probably led to CAL's initially being seen in the same mould, it is interesting to see increasing variety. An example is the so-called intelligent tutoring systems (ITS), which guide students and encourage investigation and learning (Soloway, 1991; Lai, 1995). The claim is that such systems strengthen and improve the learning process, as they are not just based on factual knowledge, but require creative engagement with a knowledge base. The TOTAL (Macromedia, 1987-1993) system currently used at the University of Derby could be employed in this approach.

Another example of the impact of CAL is in its use of the Internet and conferencing. The Internet has great potential for education (Mulligan, 1995): from the constructivist perspective there is the opportunity to join mailing groups and share ideas. This can also be done via CAL and teleconferencing (Davis & Smith, 1994).

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

One of the current trends within HE is that of student-centred learning. The basic tenet of this method of teaching is to allow the students to govern their own pace of learning. The added advantage of ODL is that the student is able to choose the location for learning. In this country since the launch of the Open University in 1971, high standards of ODL have been achieved (Schofield, 1995). Many institutions are now taking ODL seriously and beginning to offer advanced learning via this medium (Valley, 1995). However, there is a lack of social interaction which would seem to limit

ODL from the constructivist position. This was highlighted by Ismail (1992) who noted the importance of face-to-face contact as a significant factor when using ODL. The introduction of such contact improved the effectiveness of the ODL programme.

Some form of social contact is required to obtain the best results from using ODL. This could also be said of CAL. Perhaps a method of improving the effectiveness of ODL would be the use of conferencing via video link or less expensively via the Internet. The use of the Internet for discussion groups is becoming ever more popular. It would seem a relatively simple matter to set up e-mail groups and link them to specialised ODL groups. This type of conferencing could also be employed as a supervisory activity within counselling. In this case students from multiple locations could present case material to a group which included a tutor/supervisor. This would allow for the exchange of views and opinions on material and thereby introduce an element of constructivist philosophy into the learning process. The most obvious drawback to this would be the necessity for the students to have access to the Internet. This type of contact would be seen as an adjunct to and not a replacement for social contact via workshops or summer school.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The discussion so far has been centred around the potential uses of CAL from the perspectives of social constructivism and implications for experiential based learning. Undoubtedly there are many uses for CAL, the main ones being communications, information and teaching. Communication would include e-mail, discussion lists and bulletin boards, and conferencing with implications for distance learning as



already mentioned.

Information can be obtained from either discrete or networked databases. Teaching can be seen as either an open or divergent system which allows for interaction and an evolution of the teaching process, or a closed or convergent system. The predominant mode of teaching in these cases is based on computer-based tutorials.

SETTING UP CAL

There are several issues which need to be addressed.

Since students cannot ask questions while engaged in CAL, an assessment of prior knowledge is required. Clear objectives need to be set out which could be related to learning outcomes for a particular module. Assessment of what other resources students needed is also essential. This is an important issue for counselling students. Many post-graduate counselling students have been away from full-time education for some time. Many are suspicious of computers, and are technophobic, lacking self-confidence when faced with a technological situation of which they have little understanding. Careful and sensitive induction into the use of computer equipment would seem imperative if CAL is to have any success with this group.

Finally, an analysis of feasibility and time costs is needed. Although in the long term, such technology may decrease contact time, setting up CAL is labour intensive.

Careful thought to the type of CAL to be employed is a crucial stage in the development of a system that will be of help and, more importantly, used by the students. From the perspective of counselling education and constructivist learning, the environment would seem important. The usual arrangement is

one seat placed in front of one monitor, in either the library or computer lab. Possibility for more than one person to look at the screen and interact with the material is limited, especially with only one "mouse". It would, therefore, make sense to allow more space around the monitor for small groups of three to four to interact with the material. It may even be possible to have multiple "mouse" connections which would enhance the social interactivity. The positioning of computers could be improved by putting them in areas where such social interaction would not disturb others.

For CAL to be relevant to this group of students a more interactive forum is required. This could include the use of video footage of counselling sessions integrated into discussions on theory. Since there is often much debate as to whether a particular intervention should be employed, several response options should be available. Thus a more divergent system could be set up with the student or students following a particular branch of inquiry. Such systems would obviously require a lot of time and effort to construct. However, the potential for such interactive systems is that they will promote an integration of theory and practice. Also, it would be hoped that deep learning and an integration of knowledge and understanding would be achieved.

It would also seem important to integrate CAL into the course rather than simply add it on. This would require considerable thought, but if achievable would help to enhance the students' learning experience.

A progression of CAL approaches would seem apposite. Within counselling education, CAL could be initially introduced to test the knowledge base. Although counselling education is at a post-graduate level,

many students have been out of full-time education for some time, and so it cannot be assumed they have enough relevant knowledge of contemporary counselling theory. Short 10 to 15-minute tutorials with simple true/false multiple choice type questions could be employed to help enhance their acquiring a sufficient knowledge of basic counselling theory.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

If CAL is to become a popular mode for the delivery of teaching material, then the traditional role of the lecturer is likely to change. Within counselling it could be argued that the traditional role of the lecturer has already changed. Social constructivist philosophies and a highly motivated post-graduate group of students suggest that a facilitatory role is more appropriate than a formal lecture. Although lectures are given, much use is made of group work and discussion sessions. However, it could be envisaged that with learning material primarily in CAL or ODL form, lecturing per se will become outdated. The sequelae of this situation might be a reduction in lecturing staff. This would be an ironic position since CAL has been seen as a means of alleviating teaching loads (Mottram, 1995). The result of decrease of teaching load may well be redundancy!

On a more positive note more time could be made available for research. Once CAL systems are set up, updating material may be achieved fairly easily. Therefore, time-consuming lecture preparation time can be saved and may be used for research purposes.

There are certain requirements for students who will be using CAL. They need access to a personal computer, which may be problematic for post-graduate students, who are also part-time and therefore do not have ready access to university facilities. The cost

of buying equipment may be prohibitive, especially in conjunction with course fees. Finally, as already mentioned, students on counselling courses tend to be wary of computer technology. Indeed, one of the reasons they are drawn towards counselling is to explore the human relationship, not the relationship between human and machine

If the slogan 'where learning is for life', which has become a rallying cry of the University of Derby for adult learners, is to mean anything for counselling students, then the introduction of CAL and ODL packages needs to be handled sensitively and with an awareness of the concerns of such students. If this is not addressed, then the likelihood is that students will go elsewhere. Indeed, the general feeling amongst this group of students is that they would avoid courses which contained CAL as a teaching medium. The quality of contact with teacher and fellow students is perceived as one of the strengths of vocational courses like counselling. In any subject where there is an exploration of personal material, personal support is seen as an essential aspect of the course. Students, therefore, perceive the loss of human contact via the use of CAL as very negative.

It is vital in any development of such systems that students are consulted and CAL programmes are piloted on existing students prior to implementation on a new cohort. This process is likely to be very time consuming and staff will also be required to attend training in the sensitive and appropriate use of CAL. The institutional pressures to design and implement such systems need to be carefully balanced with student needs. This is without doubt a difficult task. However, if this balance is not achieved then CAL systems will not be used, and

students on courses which up to now have incorporated experiential based learning may well feel alienated and not register for courses which include CAL.

CONCLUSION

CAL and ODL are likely to develop into ever more sophisticated systems, so that those available today will be unrecognisable from those developed within the next few years. However, this paper has highlighted the need to incorporate a social constructivist methodology into the use of CAL and ODL. In addition, before incorporating these systems a considerable amount of effort needs to be spent on addressing the potential fears of the students; if the students are not going to use these new technologies, then there is little point in having them.

The potential for enhancing the learning experience of these students by CAL and ODL should not, though, be understated. Computer literacy is likely to be a necessity for the next century. There is within counselling education and related vocational disciplines a great opportunity to use CAL as a means to underline and amplify one of our main goals, namely the integration of personal skills, theory and practice. □

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BOOKS

**Beyond Fragments: Adults,
Motivation and Higher
Education - a biographical
analysis**

Linden West

Taylor & Francis, 1997, pbk £13.95
ISBN 0 7484 0486 4

This is really two books in one, although none the worse for this given the honesty with which West treats the inter-connectedness. First, there are the stories of some 30 students on Access and Foundation programmes provided by the University of Kent in the Medway towns and in Thanet, as gathered by Funding Council-supported research undertaken by the author and his associates. Second, despite the second clause of the sub-title, rather than a biographical analysis, there is an autobiography: as the description of the author on the back cover states, he 'is training to be a psychotherapist': significant, indeed!

The first element attempts to elicit information about students' motivation for beginning and staying on their courses and their subsequent progression. It relies heavily on their accounts, as evinced through interview and questionnaire. I am not a great fan of this type of testimony, so beloved of some writers on adult education, not least because of the partiality of such accounts and the potential for manipulation and the patronising of the students on the part of 'the professionals' who write in such vein. West, however, makes a case for his studies and their wider application and he has clearly been scrupulous with the ethical issues involved.

Colleagues involved with mature students seeking to enter HE and admissions tutors in general might find

many things to ponder on as these students describe their experience of study, its pitfalls and its opportunities. Indeed, the burgeoning and necessary industry of student support might profitably take this as one of its set texts. In addition, as West himself points out, there is applicability here to other areas of public service, not least the Health Service: the issues of change, of managing change, of relationships, both personal and professional, and of boundaries apply both to education and to medicine. For this reason alone, the book is worth perusal.

The link between the first and second element of the book is the notion of testimony. West finds it necessary to describe, in fairly measured terms, components of his life history and his difficulties with the exercise on which he was engaged - one wonders whether the UFC/HEFCE knew what they would get for their support! Again, such therapy is not to my taste, but it is elegantly handled, albeit that the claim for a novel cultural psychology of learning having been developed might be thought to be open to question.

One wonders how much of West's account reflects the perturbations of his

institution. Perhaps one reason for his seeking to become a psychotherapist is the treatment that has been accorded to Continuing Education at the University of Kent, providing a stimulus for the book. It would have been helpful if West had told us, given his autobiographical orientation, but this is one piece of context that is missing: as with much work in the field of therapy, perhaps, there is too much concentration on the individual(s) and not enough on the social and political.

Nonetheless, this is an interesting book(s) which colleagues involved in continuing education, life changes and contiguous concerns will find resonates with them and their work.

Malcolm Barry

*Goldsmiths College,
University of London*

TOP TIPS

**500 Tips for Quality
Enhancement in Colleges and
Universities**

Sally Brown, Phil Race & Brenda Smith

Kogan Page, 1997 £15.99

ISBN 07494 22233 8

A few months ago there was a heated debate on one of the US electronic discussion lists about the value of books of 'Tips'. (Well, how would you feel, on being wheeled into the operating theatre, groggy from the pre-med, to find the surgeon reading '500 Tips on Open-Heart Surgery'?) So, why are three of Britain's top education developers producing such a document? The answer comes in the ways in which they see the book being used: for personal reflection; as agenda for course teams; as a checklist for preparing for quality assessment visits; as a framework for formulating quality plans.

NOTICE TO PUBLISHERS

Books for Review should be sent to

Lesley MacDonald,

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Personally I found it a bit confusing to work through numbered tips in numbered sections in numbered chapters (though I didn't check that the sum of all these came to 500!). And these vary from a chapter of 11 sections (130 tips) on Enhancing Learning through Teaching and Assessment to a section of 17 tips on Car Parking.

In some ways, the one chapter that jarred was that on Preparing for Quality Assessment. Whilst the rest of the book is concerned with making real impact on the quality of what we do, this chapter seemed to be more about the smoke and mirrors of getting a good rating. If quality assessment is going to have any impact on quality enhancement then we have to face up to the reality of our deficiencies and do something about it. To that end, I was also disappointed not to find a section about self-development.

But that is carping. This book is full of practical, common sense; tips that seem obvious but we might wonder why we haven't thought of them ourselves!

Bland Tomkinson

UMIST

ALL WORK AND LOW PAY?

Working in Higher Education

Edited by Rob Cuthbert

SRHE & Open University Press (1996)

£16.99 ISBN 0 335 19721 3

Rising student:staff ratios; total quality assessment; research assessment exercises; temporary and fixed term contracts; efficiency gains; managerialism; and consumerism have all become common features of HE throughout the 1980s and '90s. During this period workers in HE have also experienced increasing pressures and workloads while their salaries have

failed to keep abreast of their private sector counterparts. These are just some of the issues discussed and explored in *Working in HE*.

Rob Cuthbert brings together contributions by authors from a variety of backgrounds including management consultancy, librarianship and information science, as well as those more traditionally associated with the HE environment.

Divided into three parts, The Workers, The Work, and The Work Context, the book claims to be 'for anyone who wants to reflect on their experience of working in HE, for all who study HE, and for anyone who works with HE and wants to understand it better'. The excellent coverage of public sector management, the role of support staff such as librarians and information scientists, gender issues, and the analysis of psychological and economic contracts, also make this a text which may appeal to many others outside the intended readership.

Although the writing styles vary, overall the chapters are extremely readable, well laid out, interesting and, in some cases, humorous (at least a wry smile should be raised by anyone who has been involved in a committee when reading Ian McNay's chapter on committees), and this encourages both 'dipping in' and reading from cover to cover with ease.

Unfortunately there is a limited amount of information about non-academic staff which, Cuthbert explains in his introduction, is due to the fact that available data is 'patchy and in some cases non-existent'. He does, however, suggest that this may be a 'fruitful field for further research'. Perhaps he will oblige with *Working in HE 2*.

Moira Foster

University of Dundee

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RON BARNETT

Higher Education: A Critical Business

Ron Barnett

SRHE & OU Press (1997) £16.99

ISBN 0 335 19703 5

Repositioning Higher Education

Editors Frank Coffield & Bill

Williamson

SRHE & OU Press (1997) £18.99

ISBN 0 335 19716 7

Ron Barnett writes faster than most people can read and yet every one of his books is first class and different from every other. How does he do it?

In his new book, Barnett challenges the assumption that the hallmark of academia and of good graduates is the ability to reason critically. He claims that 'a curriculum intended to develop critical persons ... has to find some way of developing critical thought, critical self-reflection and critical action' (p. 114), and he illustrates this dictum with the famous picture of the student in Tiananmen Square facing a row of advancing tanks. This student, he says, is a critical being, who demonstrates all three of the critical activities listed.

It would be impossible in a brief review to summarise Barnett's intricate argument, which is divided into three parts: the rejection of the old view that critical thinking is enough; the characterisation of the new view of a critical being who combines the three aspects of criticality; and the influence which critical beings ought to have on the corporate world, on the professions and in the creation of a learning society. In true Barnett tradition, there is a final coda, which raises an issue unresolved in the book - what in this world can we

be sure of? Will the resolution of this problem form the substance of his next book?

Last month, and before I had read the book, I gave a talk at the University of Kent and defined the true graduate as one who could think dispassionately, feel compassionately and act passionately, and who could balance all three. The first and third of these are demonstrably similar to two of Barnett's critical activities, the third would appear not. Did I forget about self-reflection and/or Barnett about feelings?

The second book is a collection of chapters by different authors, one of whom is Barnett, which reposition higher education in the corporate world of today. The book is designed to provoke debate and it assuredly will, but the debate will be one that throws more light than heat on the problems in question, because the book is written with sensitivity to the susceptibilities of traditional academics as well as of captains of industry. The authors are all expert in their fields and they write well.

While both academia and the corporate world come out well, the same cannot be said about the state. As the editors say in the final chapter (p. 117): 'In the United Kingdom there is an unresolvable contradiction between a market model of educational planning and one based on the plan'. One day those who govern us and those in the Civil Service who serve them may realise that neither the politics of greed nor Soviet style planning are appropriate ways of running a public service. But the day has not come yet.

The book was completed before the Dearing Report came out, but it covers many of the same issues, although it wisely confines the issue of funding to a single sentence (p. 20): 'the transformations of higher education for which we argue will not succeed without

major financial support from the state'. Gordon Brown, are you listening?

The two books complement each other well. The first is highly theoretical, while the second is very practical. But they both deal with the future of higher education and as Kurt Lewin once said: 'There is nothing quite so practical as a good theory'.

Lewis Elton

University College London

HE - WOMEN'S VIEW

Women as Leaders and Managers in Higher Education

Edited by Heather Egging

SRHE & Open University Press (1997)

ISBN 0-335 19879-1 pb £16.99

ISBN 0-335-19880-5 hb £45.00

The publication of this extremely well edited, highly informative and accessible book was very timely, appearing just as publication of the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into HE was imminent. In the light of the grandiose statements of democracy, equality and respect for the individual which were expressed in the Dearing Review, this book raises uncomfortable questions regarding the commitment of universities to recognising the value and the contribution made by women and minority groups to the enhancement of our HE sector.

The dominance of white, middle class, male values within the organisational culture of the University can only change if men and women are prepared to listen, to consult and to learn from each other. This book can and hopefully will make a positive contribution to that process.

There are three main sections to the book, the first setting the context of women in HE. Robin Middlehurst presents a historical perspective on concepts of leadership which have traditionally excluded women; Jennifer Bone examines ethical issues associated with leadership in HE and the dilemmas posed for women with a genuine desire to pursue a feminist agenda in HE. The final chapter in this section, by Yvonne Sarch, gives a perspective on the changing job market and its influence on the nature and purpose of HE.

The second section of the book presents a series of case studies of women's experience of leadership or striving for leadership and managerial positions in HE. This section will appeal to many women readers - but if men choose to read this book (and hopefully they will see it as relevant to them) one cannot help but wonder if they will actually understand and acknowledge the extent to which they exclude, marginalise, demoralise and undermine women and minority groupings in academia. That is not to say that all men set out deliberately to indulge in such behaviour; rather they behave in accordance with the cultural norms of the academy. The HE agenda is set by white, middle-class, heterosexual men so what else can we expect? What the case studies present so clearly is how this behaviour affects women and why many women and minority groups will be lost to academia.

So much then for the rhetoric of recognising and valuing cultural diversity in the academy. Until senior managers in academia develop an understanding of the meaning of 'cultural diversity' the prognosis for the progress of women and minority groups in academia will remain rather poor.

The final section of the book, *Implementing Change*, does focus very

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much on implementation of equal opportunities policies in academia, models of working in HE in other countries and practical measures women can take to gain support from their peers through networking. While such measures are clearly important, there is a sense that what is being said is that women must learn to speak the language of the dominant culture, rather than the dominant culture taking any responsibility for learning more about the richness of the contribution which cultural diversity can bring to management.

This book will, though, make an excellent contribution to future discussions on improving the position of women aspiring to leadership/management positions in HE. It is to be hoped however that these discussions will not be narrowly focused and based on the assumption that all women in academia are white, middle class and heterosexual. Women too must recognise that cultural diversity means more than gender issues alone.

Lorraine Stefani

University of Strathclyde.



FROM THE EDITORS

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HOW TO FAIL YOUR EXAMS

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

Prepared by *C. Hywel Williams* at the University of Glamorgan

BEWARE before you read this guide. Failing may sound easy, but in reality may take far more time and effort than passing with honours. So make sure you're ready for the commitment before you read this!

To fail properly you will need to know that you are writing things that are incorrect. It's no good putting things down in your exam paper that you thought were wrong, only to discover afterwards that you (due to your complete lack of knowledge of the subject) had been writing grade A stuff! An appeal afterwards to the exam board disclosing your true intent will not wash. Any appeals on matters of this nature have to be made before the exam board sits. This means turning up to ALL lectures and tutorials. Not turning up at all is not considered "de rigueur", common even. Even if you fail by chance writing rubbish - these are the amateurs. True professional failures look down on students like these!

So if you are serious about failing properly...Read on....

1 Don't answer all the questions in the exam. This is based on the secret lecturers keep to themselves and now revealed here in print for the first time....it's much easier to get the marks at the beginning of a question or part of a question than at the end. So if you can avoid answering the beginning of a question at all, then look how many easy

marks you can avoid even attempting to get!

2 Spend more time on part of a question than is allocated to it - same principle as 1 - see also 11 below.

3 Don't answer any of the written parts as it is normally easier to get marks here and if you get the easy marks it will be much harder to fail.

4 Answer the questions in number order rather than in order of preference as you don't want to answer the questions that you're remotely good at as that would be a sure way to pass.

5 Make sure that you go on and on and on and on about one point or aspect of your answer. Make it least a page on one point as then you'll have wasted a great deal of time getting only one or two marks rather than making a lot of points, each briefly, and getting 5 - 10 marks.

6 Don't illustrate your answer with examples - this should cut your marks by a 1/2 or a 1/3, a good ploy.

7 A goody this one - make sure you **don't read the question** and end up answering a different one.

8 Don't relate the answer to the question (this applies even more to assignments). If it's about a farm then write about a factory. Or even better, just "write all you know about" a subject and ignore any context entirely.

9 This one is related to 8 above. **Don't read through a scenario for clues** to hang your answer on. It is very important that you avoid doing this or

you could end up passing despite all your efforts. This way you could happily ignore the fact that a business is in trouble, for example, and give advice based on prosperity. If you read the question for clues then you may find it very difficult to go ahead and ignore what you've read.

10 Ignore the format demanded. This is important and applies to assignments as well. If asked for a report, give a letter, or better still, write an essay. There will probably be easy marks that you avoid getting here for very little effort.

11 An easy one this - you'll find yourself doing this one naturally. If **preparing a calculation** (budgets or balance sheet are the easiest formats to practise this on) then you **WON'T** balance at the end, as even the lecturer won't, first time. So go back and check, find out why, **spend as long as you like**, in fact ask for extra time to enable you to do so after the end of the exam. This enables you to waste time and be guilt-free as well. You are only looking for 1 or 2 marks' worth and can avoid the chance to get lots of marks elsewhere. In fact you could, if you pick this question first, ignore all the other ruses above and still fail, if you're lucky.

12. Related to 11 above - but can be applied to other calculation questions as well - e.g. tax computations, net present value calculations. If you discover an error when you're part way down a question, then go back and alter all your

figures from the beginning. It will only be worth a mark and you can waste time like mad. DON'T make a note to the examiner about the error and carry on, as this would be a lot shorter and have the same effect. You don't want to miss this opportunity to reduce your mark.

13 Make sure you write in a long-winded way, **don't be succinct.**

14 If you are running out of time then don't adopt a listing of the main points.

15 Make sure you also set out all the intricate details of your calculations, as this also wastes time.

16 A brother method to 15. Don't set out ANY of your calculations at all. If you must write down anything, make sure you throw the workings away. All your effort to get the answer wrong will be wasted if you get 1/2 marks or more for method!

17 **Don't plan your answer.** You want it to be long and rambling and not make any sense, don't you? Easy to do

this as the temptation not to waste any time at the beginning and just get on with it is hard to resist. So give in to temptation, you can easily avoid getting any marks for format or layout or....

18 **It is important you DON'T WRITE THE OBVIOUS** down. Don't copy any of the points down that are given in the question or the ones that any one would know, the ones that you think that the examiner must know already. These are the easy marks. You want to avoid these at all costs.

BEWARE, the examiner wants you all to pass, don't fall into his/her trap - ignore these easiest of all marks.

Well, I hope you fail. If you try all these and still pass, there is a *money back guarantee on the price of this Guide.*

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