

# *the* **New Academic**

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## **Developing Autonomy in Students**

*Also*

**Deconstructing Familiar Things  
GNVQ Time Bomb and NVQ Depth Charge**

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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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Photographers:

Otmar Dresel (cover),

Bob Pomfret (pp 5, 9, 21)

Are there any photographers out there who would like to contribute to *The New Academic*? Our usual contributors are excellent, but we need more!

Cover pictures are always needed, and we pay a small fee for every one used. Please contact the Editor for further information.

# EDITORIAL

## DEVELOPING AUTONOMY IN STUDENTS

The overall theme of this issue is the need for students to take responsibility for their learning. To a graduate of a traditional university like me, this seems so obvious as to not need saying! However, all is apparently not quite so simple as might at first appear.

As a linguist and Member of the Institute of Linguists before I switched to psychology in 1980, I was particularly intrigued by **Stella Hurd's** paper which takes language learning as model when examining the issues involved in helping students develop autonomy. Surely learning a language is a bit like giving up smoking. Just as you can only give up smoking if you really want to, so you can only learn a language if you choose to make the effort.

However, "autonomy" is rather a complicated concept, I discover, and many believe that HE's preoccupation with aims and objectives and learning outcomes is incompatible with any reasonable notion of student learning autonomy. **Hurd** recommends that we refuse to get bogged down in fine distinctions of meaning, but rather embrace the notion that students be encouraged to take responsibility, and find ways of breaking out of what appears to have become a circular argument into new areas of theory and practice.

She describes a number of projects, in her own and in other universities, where different ways of approaching the concept of *autonomy* have been put into practice. It becomes clear that any fears that developing autonomy in students

will lead to redundancies in the teaching profession are very ill-founded. On the contrary, such an approach seems to make *more* demands on a tutor's time, not less. This must apply to all subject areas, not just language.

## PROFILING

The more students who enter HE and the more diverse their origins and experiences, the more difficult the task of the teacher becomes. **Mary Karpel, Sue Jackson, Lea Myers, Andrew Ruffhead** and **Olive Stubbs** also address the question of student responsibility for learning, but from a different angle. Here they describe a project in which students were required to keep their own records of what they were learning, what they had achieved, and how they plan to achieve more.

## HIDDEN DANGER

**Penny Wolff** and **Nick Sutcliffe** warn that as ever increasing numbers of students enter universities via non-traditional pathways, like GNVQ and NVQ, they pose a hidden and growing problem. Teachers need to be aware that few of these students will have had any experience of such things as academic essay-writing, or the long 2-3 hour unseen examination. If the needs of such students are not addressed, they predict an explosion of discontent and dropping out.

## WHICH QUESTION?

How do you know if your students are happy with their course? Lots of tutors give questionnaires. So **Paul Sander** and **Keith Stevenson** decided

to find out whether getting students to circle numbers on a rating scale really tells the tutor what s/he wants to know. Does it? Ah, depends what her/his purpose is! Read the article to find out.

## DECONSTRUCTING FAMILIAR THINGS

An unusual but very exciting article is provided by **Stuart Hannabuss**, who describes how his course in Postmodernism stimulates students into thinking for themselves, and even getting to grips with some of the most difficult writers of the twentieth century. Sometimes one might conclude, from the papers we publish on teachers' problems and dilemmas, that *A teacher's lot is not a happy one!* **Hannabuss'** article demonstrates that that old pedagogical technique of making students' everyday experience relevant to the classroom really can have some far-reaching consequences.

This article is definitely worth reading, even if you have never thought that postmodernism is your thing!

A really good issue. Enjoy!

*Elizabeth Mapstone*

### Missing Author

In our past two issues, we flagged a forthcoming article by John McGrath of the Open University in Wales, entitled *Engineering Quality Tutorials*, in which he explains how an engineering approach to tutorials can enhance teaching. But where is it?

Alas, Dr McGrath has gone missing, and absurd as this may sound, we have not been able to catch up with him. So if anyone knows the whereabouts of this missing author, please tell us how to find him! Thanks.

# DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:

## LESSONS FROM AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

**Autonomy in learning looms large in everyday discussions as academics debate the future of HE.**

**What subject could be more illustrative of the need for the student to take responsibility for learning than language? Taking language learning as a model, *Stella Hurd* examines the key issues that need to be addressed if students are to be equipped for the 21st century.**



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In the current debate about graduate standards, teaching and learning methodologies and assessment measures, increasing attention is being paid to the role of autonomy in learning. Not only is it a fitting goal in its own right for students in HE as preparation for lifelong learning, but it is also increasingly seen as closely bound up with the qualities and skills needed for the workplace: self-reliance and resourcefulness, flexibility and good time-management, persistence, tolerance and patience. Using modern languages as a model, this article attempts to identify and bring together some of the key issues that need to be addressed if autonomy is to become more firmly embedded in university curricula across the board.

### THE NEED FOR A CONSENSUS

Although there are many examples of successful implementation of autonomous approaches across the university sector, there appears to date to be no consensus on exactly what autonomy means and the extent of its realistic application to the learning of languages in different contexts. If the word '*autonomy*' is used at all to refer to language learning activities over which students have some control, it is often qualified by '*semi*' or '*partial*'. '*Independent learning*' is often the preferred descriptor, as it appears to allow more freedom of interpretation.

Learning described as *self-access*, *self-managed*, *self-directed*, *open*, *flexible* or *resource-based* always

involves some autonomy but is not synonymous with it.

The root problem is that HE operates within fixed goals tied to stated aims and objectives and learning outcomes, a system which appears to many to be incompatible with autonomy.

There is a choice: either we confine ourselves to purist interpretations and therefore block productive discussion; or we embrace the notion, refuse to get bogged down with fine distinctions and push ahead in whatever way seems appropriate. In other words, we attempt to get into the circle in which theory and practice feed each other and create new branches and new circles.

Those who have made the latter

choice, and set up projects with language learners, have enriched the quality of learning for their students, helped to define limits and possibilities and opened up new areas for debate and research. Some of these projects are briefly outlined in a later section.

Work is in progress, through the Funding for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) Language Projects, which may well come up with workable versions of autonomy that can be understood and applied more systematically. Or it may be that we have to learn to live with complexity, and accept it as an underlying feature of autonomy within a university setting.

There does appear to be general agreement, however, on several important matters: the critical role of the teacher in autonomous learning, the need for tutor and learning training and the fact that autonomous learning does not lead to savings in staff time.

## AUTONOMY AND STUDENT DIVERSITY

Given the diversity of students' aspirations, needs and abilities, the variety of learning styles and the range of personal expectations, a degree of autonomy would certainly seem to be desirable. Different characteristics mean different cognitive styles. Esch (1976) warns us that *'if you impose on learners the strategy which does not correspond to their 'type', they do not learn properly and do not retain what they have learnt'*. Autonomy can help in allowing a degree of freedom over learning style.

However, it is important to gauge the degree of autonomy that is appropriate in a given context and avoid rushing in without a clear focus. Students do not automatically have the ability to be autonomous in their learning and need to be shown how to develop the

*'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action'* (Little, 1991). Some of them may find this very hard to attain, particularly those who have difficulty making decisions in other areas of their lives or who find unacceptable the whole notion of taking responsibility for learning. This raises serious questions for the wholesale implementation of autonomous approaches into language programmes, and highlights the need to beware of a *'contradiction in educational terms'* (Holec, 1985) if such approaches are introduced without proper preparation and support mechanisms.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The demands autonomous language learning makes on the language teacher should not be underestimated. These involve first a good knowledge of the theoretical and practical possibilities of autonomy, and its limits. In addition, teachers need to be aware of the skills and strategies that are required for learners to become autonomous. Syllabus content and design, teaching and learning methods and assessment also must be addressed. Then there is the need for teachers to adapt to a more flexible role, that of facilitator, counsellor, supporter, adviser, as well as source and imparter of knowledge. Finally, they must be skilled at managing and organising time and resources.

From a review of the research undertaken in this area and, in particular, projects carried out over the last five years in language departments on a variety of aspects of autonomy, there is no evidence that teachers will have a lesser role in the learning of languages, though this role is certainly

changing as many seek to achieve a different balance between learner, teacher and resources. Examples of some of these projects are grouped below under key aspects of autonomy.

## SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

'Open learning for languages', an accredited project (level 2 student-initiated credits) at the University of Central Lancashire was set up with funding from EHE (Hurd, 1994), and ran throughout the academic year 1993-4. The final product was an induction programme for students new to autonomous language learning. It contained advice and guidance on study skills and strategies for open language learning, use of audio-visual and computerised material and a range of materials written by the students themselves for use in the University's Language Learning Centre. Students met in semester 1 with me as Project Leader and two colleagues for weekly seminars on aspects of autonomous language learning, and in semester 2 worked increasingly on their own, in pairs or threes, with staff support as required to produce the induction programme.

In their final assessed presentations students commented very positively on the project, both in terms of their satisfaction with the final product and of the transferable skills they felt they had acquired in the process. Staff too reported favourably on the personal benefits of being involved in the project, in particular the dedication and commitment to high standards shown by students and the more equal relationship that had become established between teacher and learner.

Last year, a project on 'Integrating skills in an active learning environment' (Damamme-Gilbert & Tyler, 1998) which involved the design and creation

of a departmental news sheet was set up at Birmingham University for 2nd-year students of French. The project aimed to demonstrate the range of skills that can be acquired and integrated '*within a creative active and autonomous learning environment*'. For one semester students worked in groups to create an 800-word written text or set of texts covering a range of topics, from reports, reviews and interviews to items on fashion and even an agony aunt column.

Outcomes were very positive in terms of both enjoyment and the opportunities to demonstrate a range of skills, some of these specific to the type of project (such as editing, redrafting and proof-reading of each other's scripts), others more generally transferable (such as report-writing, questionnaire design, team-working and keeping to deadlines). Students also showed great improvement in IT skills.

In terms of staff input, the findings again bore out the fact that projects involving learner autonomy do not save staff time. In this particular case, there was considerably less face-to-face teaching, but it was more than made up for by the hours spent managing the project, checking drafts, and giving general support and guidance.

Other projects and developments involving peer-teaching at Brighton University (Carpenter, 1996) and tandem learning at Sheffield University (Lewis, Woodin & St John, 1996) have also proved to be very effective in fostering autonomy through actively involving students in their own learning.

## ASSESSMENT

With regard to assessment and autonomy, some interesting developments have taken place at the University of Central Lancashire (Roberts & Shaw, 1998) in which part of the final grade awarded to students on

the Institution-wide Language Programme (IWLP) comes from an assessed portfolio of work submitted by each individual student. A survey carried out in 1998 revealed that students were largely in favour of portfolio assessment, not only in terms of their language development but also for the acquisition of transferable skills such as communication, organisational, interpersonal and IT, and for qualities such as increased self-confidence and self-discipline. For the year 1998-9 it is anticipated that a third of the mark generated for portfolios will come from self-assessment by each student. Sharing some responsibility for assessment is also on the agenda at Newcastle University (Fernandez-Toro, 1998), where proposals for integrating self-awarded marks into summative as opposed to formative assessment of IWLP modules are under discussion.

## INCORPORATING IT

Since 1994 face-to-face tandem learning has been available to students of modern languages at Sheffield University's Modern Language Teaching Centre. Pairs are formed

between native-speakers of different languages to give each other practice in the foreign language. In 1995 the idea of tandem learning was extended to email and a project was set up to evaluate its effectiveness (Lewis, Woodin & St John, 1996). The students taking part were briefed on the principles of tandem learning, including agreeing with their partner how to go about correcting each other's language errors, and negotiating the frequency and language of communication. Participants also attended two 30-minute sessions on using email.

Findings from the project, which ran for five months, revealed increased confidence together with greater cultural awareness. Students also appreciated the opportunities for instant correction and access to authentic language. Despite problems to do with inadequate IT skills and lack of proper planning, students were largely positive about the experience. In terms of autonomy, the researchers concluded that while '*email is an ideal tool for the autonomous learner, [...] the ability to exploit what it has to offer depends critically on the possession of sophisticated personal, social and IT*



skills'. Further proof of the need for high levels of preparation and support entailing large investments of tutor time if autonomous approaches are to be successfully implemented.

A later project (Marsh, 1997) used email and computer-mediated conferencing to reduce learner isolation and encourage peer support and was very successful in this respect. Research findings indicated that 'students tended to be more open and aware of the processes they were going through to learn the language', and 'appreciated the immediate feedback on their thoughts and fears on their language learning experience.'

Pilot projects at the Open University's Centre for Modern Languages (Goodfellow and Lamy, 1998), involving student-to-student and student-to-teacher exchanges via the internet are also clearly demonstrating the potential of the internet to promote autonomy and reduce isolation.

Developments on programmes for non-specialist learners of languages which have a non-romanised writing system such as Japanese (Gilligan, 1998) are favouring use of the internet to enable students to learn complex written characters, a memorising task that can just as effectively be achieved outside class time. This use of IT can give students more autonomy in their learning, and at the same time free up the teacher to concentrate in class on the sometimes neglected but equally important socio-cultural aspects of language learning.

## ETHNICITY

As our student body increases to welcome more and more students from different ethnic backgrounds, it is essential that issues raised by this increasing diversity are sensitively addressed. A study of ethnicity and the

autonomous language learner carried out at Westminster University (Press, 1996) indicated significant differences among learners, particularly in the affective domain. With regard to autonomy Press concluded that '*increasing evidence of different cultural expectations requires a more sensitive interpretation of the concept*' and that '*some students could be demotivated if expected to work without firm instructions or formal assessment coming from the teacher.*'

This study provides further evidence of the need for careful preparation of learners and teachers before any degree of autonomous learning can be successfully implemented.

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNER TRAINING

The need for '*extensive staff and student preparation*' was sharply highlighted in an evaluation of a self-study system at the University of the West of England (Beeching, 1996). This underlined the findings of an earlier study of independent language learning at the University of Central Lancashire (Hurd, 1994) which indicated the need for staff development in specific areas: '*not only in materials development, but also in areas such as learner support, use and management of resources, responding appropriately to a variety of language needs, assessing progress, using and authoring computer-based activities, and many more.*'

## GOOD ORAL SKILLS

One frequently cited drawback of autonomous language learning concerns the acquisition of oral skills. While writing does not require the presence of others, speaking does,

unless we refer to activities such as oral presentations and ansaphone messages. Missing from those solo activities are the two crucial features of communication: unpredictability and surprise.

It is true that autonomous learning can provide ideal opportunities for learners to work on the techniques of oral production, such as pronunciation, intonation, pausing and stress, in their own time and at their own pace. Nevertheless, even if this involves using examples on audio as models for imitation, it is very hard for a student working alone to be able adequately to assess his or her progress. Some are better than others at imitating what they hear, and learning from a comparison of their version with the model. Developing good oral techniques, even out of any meaningful context, can play an important role in boosting confidence, but it cannot help learners transfer from real as opposed to imagined spoken contexts.

These limitations only apply, of course, to those working alone. But some of the projects outlined above have demonstrated that autonomous learning does not always have to entail working in isolation. Autonomy can be fostered through activities such as tandem learning and self-help language groups, which increase the number of opportunities for authentic oral interaction, while at the same time encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. Autonomy and social interaction are not as mutually exclusive as some might claim.

## QUALITY OF AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

If autonomous learning methods do not preclude social interaction,



arguments about decreased enjoyment through lack of social interaction begin to lose their force. While opportunities for face-to-face interaction are likely to be limited for those learning at a distance, learners on campus-based universities can exercise their autonomy through seeking out every opportunity to work with others. Some researchers quite rightly stress the importance of the 'human element' in learning a language, suggesting that '*perhaps it is this human factor that distinguishes foreign language learning from other knowledge*' (Warriner-Burke, (1990). But as we have seen, autonomous methods do not automatically rule this out. There is simply a shift in the balance of responsibility for seeking out good learning opportunities, with the onus as much on learner as on teacher.

It is important to address the needs of teachers too, in particular the ways in which a move to incorporate autonomy can affect the quality of their experience in and out of the classroom. The changed role to adviser or manager of learning, the lack of spontaneous interaction, the need for specific skills

not required to the same degree in face-to-face teaching, isolation and the potential for considerable work overload are just some factors that need to be taken in to account. While some are finding ways of overcoming this, particularly through the use of technology, many still express serious reservations.

## AUTONOMOUS LEARNING EQUALS EFFECTIVE LEARNING

Many of the skills which come under the general heading of autonomy, such as the ability to work independently, set your own targets and manage your time, are transferable to other contexts and therefore desirable in their own right. In the late 1990s with a workforce that is approximately 30% graduate, employers are seeking the kinds of transferable skills autonomous learning requires students to demonstrate. In encouraging an autonomous approach, we are also providing the grounds for students to develop other crucial skills, not just for the market-place but

possibly for life in general as independent, self-motivated individuals.

On the pedagogical side, there is increasing evidence to support the argument that autonomous learning can lead to better learning outcomes. Certainly for languages, those students who seek out opportunities to develop and practise their language skills in a variety of different contexts are likely to attain higher levels of language proficiency than those who do not.

The above issues are just some of those that need to be examined by those working on the implementation of autonomous approaches into their programmes. While it is clear that some issues are relevant across the board, others are specific only to certain disciplines. It is for each subject area to identify and clarify what these are, the specific problems they raise and how these can be addressed.

In helping undergraduates become more autonomous, we equip them with many of the skills, competences and qualities they need for life post-university. □

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# (SELF-) STUDENT / PROFILING



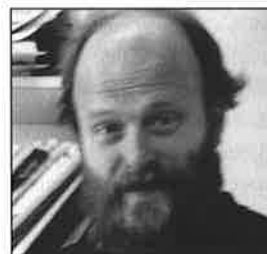
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*Mary Karpel, Sue Jackson, Lea Myers, Andrew Ruffhead and Olive Stubbs describe a practical approach to the introduction and development of student profiling designed to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.*

In September 1996, the University of East London began a one year research project to develop student profiling on courses in the two Faculties of Design, Engineering and the Built Environment; and Social Sciences. The aim of the project was to extend both the knowledge and the practice of student profiling in a variety of subject areas.

*Profiling* in this context is a formative process of personal reflection aimed at encouraging students to recognise their achievements, review experience, plan and manage future learning and develop the necessary skills important for their future. Much emphasis is placed on self-assessment and evaluation and the content of the portfolio is decided upon by the student.

Students were encouraged to:

- ◆ keep a learning journal
- ◆ create a file to store evidence of achievement (portfolio)
- ◆ produce a personal statement
- ◆ prepare an action plan
- ◆ attend guidance tutorials
- ◆ review progress at regular intervals

The process was supported by documentation which was available upon request by staff and included the

following:

- detailed handout on profiling
- handout/exercise connecting skills and career development
- learning styles questionnaire
- skills audit
- guide to producing a personal statement
- action plan
- review of achievements
- evaluation questionnaire

However, a challenge facing any implementation of profiling within an institution is compatibility and adaptability across Schools. It is unlikely that a rigid design could accommodate the various demands of different subject areas. Therefore one of the major tasks in the project was to discover if a model could be designed that would adapt to a diverse range of students studying a variety of subjects.

## THE CASE STUDIES:

(1) *Faculty of Design, Engineering and the Built Environment*

### School of Art and Design

First Year Degree course - 3 terms, in Printed Textiles and Surface Decoration, 14 first year students

Profiling was introduced into course teaching and supported by the Course Tutor.

(2) *Faculty of Social Sciences*

**Department of Education and Community Studies**

First Year Unit (module) Semester A, Learning to Learn, 50 first year students

Profiling was introduced into the unit teaching and supported by the Unit Tutors.

(3) *Faculty of Social Sciences*

**Department of Education and Community Studies**

First Year Unit (module) Semester B, Personal and Professional Skills Development, 40 first year students

Profiling was introduced specifically to promote and encourage transferable skills development, and supported by Unit Tutor.

(4) *Faculty of Social Sciences*

**Triple Subjects Area**

First, second and third year, and part-time Triple Subject Students, Semester A and B, 110 students

Profiling was introduced into the Personal Tutoring system and supported by Home Base Personal Tutor.

## INTEGRATED DEGREE

The degree course in Printed Textile and Surface Decoration (Case Study 1) attracts students from a diverse range of backgrounds: foundation; BTEC; HND; and Access. It operates in full and part-time mode. All of the students entering the course have different expectations, agendas and ambitions. Their understanding of textile designs and how this integrates into the 'global context' of their degree programme is an area that we felt needed exploring. It was also clear that there was a need to identify the key skills required in terms of becoming a design practitioner.

Students liked the concept of profiling as it enabled them to understand and evaluate what is required from them at the outset of the course. It also allowed them to plan and

develop key skills, identify weaknesses and set objectives.

A Central Skills questionnaire was excellent in helping students identify and prioritise general and more subject specific area skills; this enabled them to understand the need to monitor and be responsible for their own progression, and be able to reflect on their own personal development.

Staff often make assumptions about students' abilities both in terms of key and subject specific skills, and the initial steps of profiling have helped them understand student perceptions of both of these.

Although this is the first year that profiling has operated, both staff and students feel it has been a valuable and beneficial exercise, due to the decision to integrate and embed profiling into the creative design element of the course. The course itself has strong links with professional organisations such as the Chartered Society of Designers and, with the introduction of profiling, we feel the concept of professional development can be realised at a much earlier stage of the course. Profiling provides students with the facility to maximise their potential, both within their degree and also their future careers within the design industry.

Profiling, then, clearly appears to be helpful to students on an integrated degree course.

However, growing numbers of students are embarking on degrees which are increasingly modularised, and from which they can 'pick and mix' from a wide range of possible areas of study. In the Faculty of Social Sciences, profiling was introduced into two skills based units within the Department of Education and Community Studies. (Case Studies 2 & 3) The students who participated included a high percentage of 'non-



traditional' learners, as well as those entering university straight from school.

## SKILLS-BASED

Case Study 2 introduced profiling into a skills based unit, whose aim is to enable students to develop effective learning strategies. Students were encouraged through their coursework to consider profiling for their personal development, for their work at university, and for their future prospects. Each of the four pieces of coursework that the students produced involved them thinking about their skills development. This included understanding the rich variety of skills they brought with them to university; a consideration of how those skills would benefit their study; and submission of a personal non-assessed evaluation of their development with each piece of coursework.

Additional profiling within the unit was incorporated into classroom work. This included analyses of learning strategies, group and presentation skills. Although some of the students were initially concerned that profiling would take up too much time in already very

full schedules, the vast majority thought that the skills developed would be beneficial to them both at university and in future employment.

## TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

The unit in Case Study 3 promotes the development of personal and professional skills. The profiling co-ordinator worked with students during the early part of the course to encourage them to consider which personal transferable skills are necessary for success in HE. They were then required to complete a personal skills audit, enabling them to assess the relative importance of a range of skills, and their own competence in them. Students were asked to select two or three of the skills to improve and develop during the course of the unit, and to keep a written log charting their progress. Carrying out a regular skills audit and keeping an ongoing personal development log was part of the profiling process, which students were encouraged to recognise as integral to lifelong learning and employability.

Although some students admitted that they had not initially been honest when they first completed their skills audit, they had subsequently completed a more candid self-analysis. Students also became more aware of the need to collect evidence so that achievements can be demonstrated to potential employers and others. The majority of students reported a sense of achievement and a resulting boost to their self-confidence as a result of successfully completing the course.

The initial piloting of profiling, then, appears to have been successful both in an integrated degree programme and as

part of skills units in modularised degrees.

## PERSONAL TUTORING

The final case study (4), considers the use of profiling in extending the effectiveness of personal tutoring for students on triple subject pathways. The emphasis here was on developing students' awareness of their own skill level, and encouraging their involvement with the content and outcomes of their studies in relation to life skills. In particular, it was hoped to enable students in the often silent middle-ability range to know themselves better by encouraging them to record their needs and aspirations each semester for discussion in personal tutorials. There was also long-term interest in increasing student satisfaction, so helping to minimise dropout.

Student reaction was very positive. A box ticking questionnaire in the first semester eased them into the project, although many students (particularly, it must be noted, mature female students) initially found it easier to admit weaknesses rather than claim strengths. Both full and part-time students were stimulated into action by multiple examples of the use by employers of a skills acquisition analysis approach.

The questionnaire was followed in the second semester by an open-ended form, focusing on the acquisition and the forward planning of skills development. This required more time and effort on the students' part and, to be effective, individual feedback tutorials are essential. Ways are still being considered to reinforce this in 1997/8. Nevertheless, student profiling has the potential - given sufficient resources - to expand the role of personal tutor in identifying and developing students' benefits from their

studies, and their preparedness for the employment market.

## CONCLUSION

The student profiling undertaken during the project was successful. Students and staff evaluations were positive. Although only involving a small sample size from which generalisations are difficult to draw, the findings do indicate an evolving process.

There appears to be no definitive model. In each instance, the context dictated a variant of what was on offer and as it was introduced, further alterations and modifications were identified, some early in the process, and others only recognised at the end of the project. Having all documentation on disk and a profiling co-ordinator on hand to discuss any problems made modification a relatively simple task. The staff involved in the project also valued the opportunities to discuss their experiences with each other at various times during the project.

For anyone considering the introduction of profiling, this research suggests a number of recommendations.

First a basic simple format or model needs to be agreed upon which is amenable to change, and the model chosen needs only to serve as a guide. This can be in a 'pick and mix' style. Second, it is beneficial to have a central person co-ordinating and involved in the introduction. Third, the opportunity to work alongside others means that good practice can be exchanged and problems discussed. Finally, the documentation needs to be on disk so that amendments can be effected promptly and easily.

Although the project ended in September 1977, student profiling is being continued in all groups and is being continuously modified and improved. □

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# DECONSTRUCTING FAMILIAR THINGS

*Dr Stuart Hannabuss discusses how a course on postmodernism helps students see everyday images in a new light.*

**Starting with a local restaurant, popular TV series like *Friends* or *Brookside*, and media stars like Madonna, Dr Hannabuss shows how getting to grips with postmodernist thinkers can make the familiar unfamiliar, and vice-versa, and lead to a fuller understanding of Western culture.**

**This is a long article, but don't let that stop you reading it. It is exciting and full of fascinating ideas.**



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I can remember studying sociology and feeling excited that I knew the proper names of all the social and political processes I had seen and heard on the news. I can also recall how, on reflection, I realised I had learned the names of things I had known all along, like gender and class, conformity and kinship.

I think a lot of teaching and learning is like this. You think you know, you probably see through a glass darkly, then you're told things and you both think you know a lot more and a lot less, and then, on reflection, you realise that you have known it all along. However (and it is a big however), you're only able to reflect in this knowledgeable way because you've gone through the learning curve and can now look back. You know that you know, you know

what you didn't know before, you know something of what remains to be known if you only have the time.

In recent years I have been teaching a course on postmodernism. It is delivered to students in their fourth (ie Honours) year of one of the four-year BA degree courses run in Scotland and offered in my own University. It is not an easy course - it covers many subject fields, many of the writers are not easy to read and understand, and it is never easy to define terms. At the same time, it looks at the here and now, is firmly situated in the cultural setting of young people, and examples abound in the media and life around us. In other words, we are faced with that paradox I experienced with my sociology course, that of knowing and not knowing, of understanding and not understanding.

## GETTING A PERSONAL HOLD ON THE IDEAS

The critical world of postmodernism is challenging and not a quick study. It is a reaction against modernism and incorporates post-structuralism and post-industrialism. All these have to be defined, and, rather like those infuriating definitions we sometimes meet in dictionaries, tend to define each other in relation to other terms we don't really know. So the whole process of learning becomes a laborious intellectual journey through a maze of new concepts and movements, getting remoter and remoter by the day.

Postmodernism, also, is a mixture of things - a reaction against previous ideas going back to the Enlightenment, a global phenomenon revealed in consumer behaviour and global media

and heritage experience. It is exciting in bringing lots of different styles together (as in architecture) and in generating products which exist and also remind you of their own existence (like meta-fiction, novels which keep advertising their novelistic impact on you). It is knowing in its use of irony (see how Madonna mocks the icon she has herself become) and its use of bricolage (things juxtaposed in an apparently random way as in collage art). It is big business, taking global and corporate forms like the media industry, theme-parks, and advertising. For some, postmodernism is living on the edge of a volcano of relativity, while for others it captures and defines the true excitement of living in a heterogeneous, pluralistic, and millennial society.



*Madonna, sans armoured bra, whose mockery of the icon she has become is analysed in Dr Hannabuss' course*

For a student to get a hold on these ideas, a fair amount of committed time and energy is needed. Many of the writers are not easy to read : they are often highly educated, multilingual, multicultural, uniquely informed, tantalisingly bigoted, prescient of things to come, and usually engaged in a

complex debate with other thinkers (who also have to be read and understood). Barthes and Foucault are two good examples of this. Many of their works were written in languages other than English and some exist only in dry translations. Many wrote on a lot of other things than postmodernism (Adorno, for instance, was a wide-ranging music critic, and much of Lyotard's work is not on postmodern information paradigms). Books are expensive for the library, lecturer and student. There's a lot working against us.

Students need and want to get a personal hold of postmodern ideas. This is where the paradox mentioned before comes into play. Some way down the track on the course, light begins to break through the treeline and two things start to happen. First, students get hold of examples. Second, they begin to use the critical terminology independently. In this way what seems to be remote and hieratic and canonical turns magically into something they can convert to their own use, make their own. It doesn't come quickly or easily, particularly in mixed-ability and mixed-interest teaching. But it usually comes and it's exciting when it does. It suggests that students can get hold of postmodernism and, better than that, it suggests that courses on postmodernism uniquely address some of the intellectual questions and existential uncertainties that students have.

### HERE'S AN EXAMPLE I PREPARED EARLIER

Given the complexity of postmodernism, particularly to students just starting a course, it's no surprise that examples have to be provided early on.

I've got three examples for my own

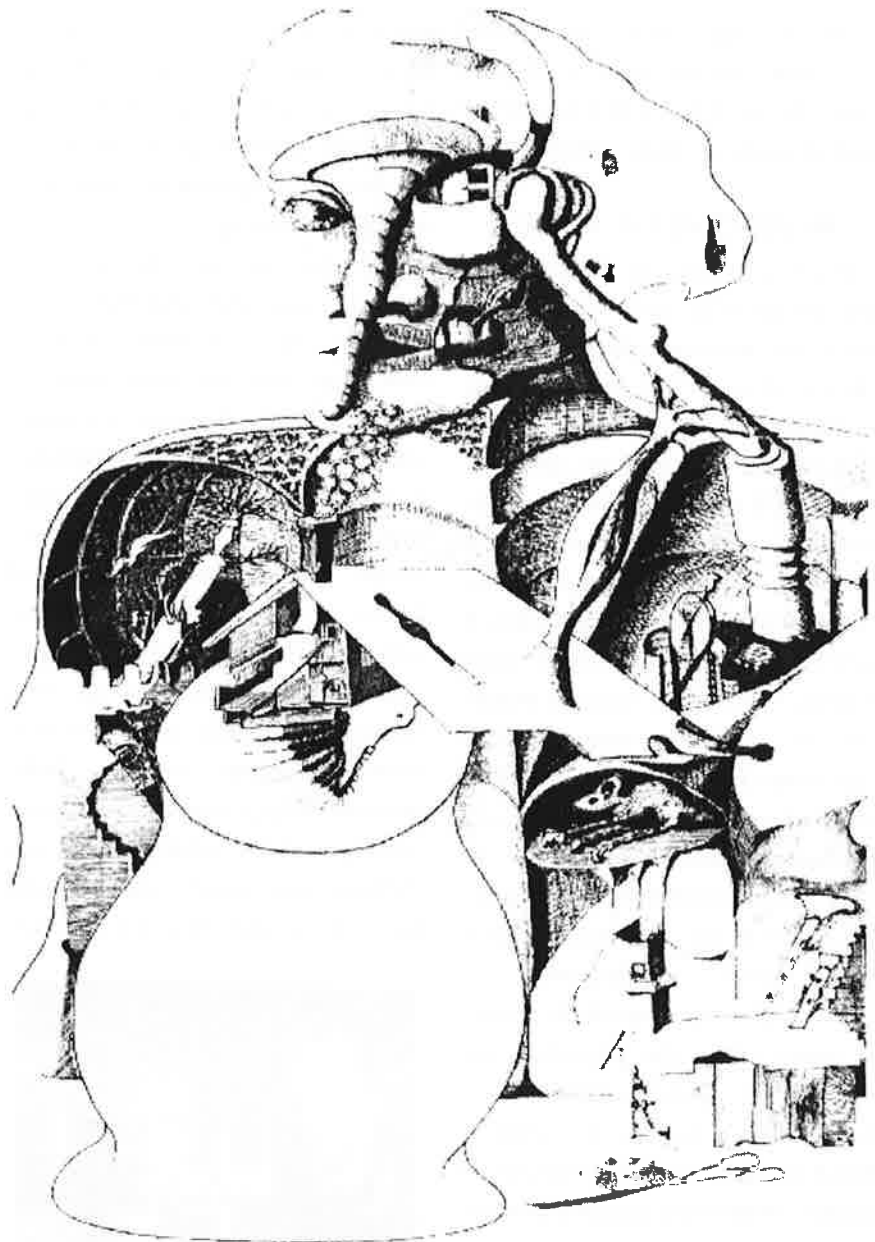
students which appear to work. The first is a local restaurant. It's full of bric-a-brac from earlier days: e.g. an old red telephone box in the corner, metal Oxo ads we used to see on pre-Beeching stations, an old adding machine. It is the bricolage of the past, it is history filtered through the thinginess of things with heady overtones of nostalgia. Because they are relics from the past, they can be examined and observed, and they can be mocked and held up as weird creatures from the past. Irony is alive and well, over a cup of coffee. It is partly a stage-set, with props, with wide windows and a large passing pavement traffic, looking in, being looked at, the metropolitan experience of the *flâneur* described so vividly by Walter Benjamin.

The second example is the television series *Friends*. Everyone watches it and identifies with the knowing worldly and vulnerable characters in it. Joey's endearing ignorance, Chandler's ill-luck with women, Jennifer Aniston's double existence as character and actress. They live, they live watched lives, their lives are spectacles and imitations of real lives, they mimic themselves (e.g. falling in love, making faux pas, dealing with parents, being themselves). Lisa Kudrow's songs are un-songs which become strangely enjoyable for being formless and tuneless, talent pretending to be untalent. They are innocent like children and worldly like adults. Joey and Chandler watch television like Beavis and Butt-head, commenting on what they watch while being watched, so there is a hall of mirrors irony as we watch them being watched discussing what it is like to be watched. Occasional guest stars from other series (e.g. George Clooney and Noah Wyle from ER) appear, as the parts they play in the other programmes, but also as themselves, providing a double take for both characters and audience. In other

accessible and situated in the cultural frame of the students. Also (since sneaky teaching is part of the process) an ideal launch pad for work on Baudrillard.

The third example is Scott Ridley's film *Blade Runner*. This futuristic film of a hero's war with robots, set in a decayed urban cityscape where opportunism and consumption have been taken to violent limits, opens up a number of important postmodern themes. The replicants themselves are humanoid but in the final analysis they are simulacra, creatures fit for the world of hyperreality created (or at least described) by Baudrillard. The replicant the hero goes off with at the end 'proves' her identity as a human with a photo of her mother, using one reproduction to prove the authenticity of another. It is a world in which what Jameson called late capitalism has had its ultimate effect on civilisation: there is no culture, corporate power rules, people have become instrumentalised (reified, commodified) and inhabit a world where the real and simulated are indistinguishable. Urban and domestic decor and fashion are examples of pluralistic fragmented consciousness. It is a world where anything goes, aesthetically, morally, economically, ideologically.

These examples get across a lot of complex ideas. In learning we're often faced with the difficult choice of setting out the principles and then providing the examples and evidence; or, the other way round, providing examples and evidence and then starting to tease out and infer the principles. The differences between deductive and inductive approaches in learning and research are widely discussed in the literature. Here, I took a mixture of approaches, laying out some of the basic features of postmodernism, suggesting three



*Questioning the essential differences between human and robot is part of the deconstruction of certain films, like **Blade Runner**.*

*Here the late artist Rene Halkett pursues his own theme of the painful mechanicalness of human life.*

examples, and getting discussion going. It's not the place to be directive or intrusive : students want to get a handle on the stuff, they want to own the examples and do new things of their own to them. For instance, they have always had a lot to say about *Friends*.

There is a diplomatic dimension too: this is 'own culture' stuff. Suddenly, as it were, a member of the lecturing classes moves into cultural

worlds associated with outside, out there, real life, street knowledge. It's quite a jolt when you've been drinking a coffee in a restaurant and then come into a class where you learn that, maybe and perhaps, you might also have been having a postmodern experience. Worse still, you might have gone there for it, and have been such an experience for others looking at you. It's a lot to take in on a personal level. So the paradox

entends to being a student being made aware that you are being a student, being a person in the metropolis and the grove of academe, being a flaneur.

### HEAR ONE OF MINE

If courses like this are going to work, they are likely to move on from the writers and ideas and concepts to their active evaluation. For instance, what Baudrillard has to say about signs and simulacra and spectacles, all absolutely crucial for a full understanding of the process of media response in a postmodern world, comes to life when students provide their own examples. It might be in a discussion of the coverage of media news or the response people have to television soaps. Travel programmes provide the experience of going there, natural history and environment programmes make us aware and responsible. Our absorption in the lives of the characters in *ER* or *Murder One* or *Brookside* is complicated by the meta-talk we read in the papers about the characters and actors, by the experience of visiting the studio set on a holiday, by going to Herriot Country or walking that part of Hadrian's Wall which appeared in *Robin Hood*, *Prince of Thieves*.

The notion of the spectacle is important too : not just events like Tiananmen Square and the Gulf War, police videos of bad driving and TV courtroom and psychotherapy dramas, in themselves, but as examples of what we watch becoming part of the way we watch other things, of ways in which the act of being watched changes what is originally put into programmes, and of ways in which, in real life, we feel we are involved in unreal encounters. This is what led the critic Debord to refer to the society of the spectacle, a society mediated by images of itself, reflecting (as he argued) the economic and

political order of those groups in society most in charge of the production and dissemination of the news. This rapidly leads to a discussion of truth and legitimation, and other examples swarm in.

Students are eager to contribute their own examples and experiences and this increases their sense of ownership over the ideas and the course itself. Madonna is a popular topic: controversial, outrageous, beautiful, a gender-bender, musically talented, raucous and iconoclastic, sexual with her Gaultier-corsetted breasts, asexual in dressing in clothes associated with private intimacy on a stage where millions can see her, engaged in sexually suggestive acts while professing religious faith, surrounded by a penumbra of news coverage about relationships and children and acting achievements, playing Evita and being and not being



Actors Anthony Edwards and George Clooney as "medics" in the soap *ER*: viewers' response is complicated by meta-talk about both actors and the characters they play.

an Eva Peron character in fact and fiction. It draws on gender, media, music, art, sexuality, religion, politics, and money. It's got everything. It's irresistible. Everyone's heard about it, everyone's got something to say, it

belong to us all. It's not esoterically academic, and - for a moment - it's not the exclusive territory of a course on post-modernism!

Leisure and the consumption of heritage are other fertile and contemporary themes. Since the me-too me-first 1980s, and probably since the 1960s and 1970s where postmodernism has its roots, there has been a reevaluation of leisure. Veblen argues for the conspicuous consumption of leisure by a class which, as the result of capitalism, became able to demonstrate the economic base and cultural competence to own art, go to concerts, and become 'cultural'. Late capitalism is often characterised by the growth of consumerism and the leisure industry in all its forms, from the growth in shopping malls as major centres of human activity to the consumption of heritage and theme-parks. Some argue that whole regions (e.g. the Lake District, Scotland) have been turned into theme-parks. Theme-parks as such, like Disney World and the mythical countries of Asterix and the Murfs, are good examples of hard-nosed commercialism AND they are also good examples of postmodernism. They gather together things from all sorts of places, decontextualise and recontextualise them (e.g. you can get food from any one of 30 countries in a theme-park). They create imaginary kingdoms where Peter Pan and the crew of *Star Trek* live and walk about, and, like the film *Westworld*, convert images into simulated realities by dressing up staff as characters, designing Main Streets and hotels where you can eat an ice-cream, and where you can have the genuine and authentic experience of living life on a Wild West ranch for \$1000.

This could be a course on tourism, sociology, economics, social



philosophy. It probably is a bit of all these. Tourism is a powerful sociological field, with strong economic factors at work, commodifying the consumer experience for careful targeted and researched market segments, using media for PR and advertising and playing on our knowledge of the media where many of the original wishes and expectations start, and providing us with many challenges about what is real and true and right. Whatever else it is, though, it provides an ideal opportunity for students to take part. They too are consumers, travellers, shoppers, media addicts and analysts.

So they want to talk about their own experiences and offer their own examples. They've been to Disney World and Alton Towers, seen the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the landscape of Montana Man, the Pompidou Centre and the Little Mermaid. It is part of both the real (ie actual) experience of the young, moneyed, mobile, global traveller AND the mediated experience we get through television and film. Through film we all know the streets of San Francisco: there's no need to go there, but, if you do, know you what the experience is, your experience adds to your prior experience, you are both tourist and traveller, able to look and examine and susceptible to the knowledge that that is what the experience has turned into. History too has become very accessible in the theme-park and living museum, so you walk down streets helped by staff dressed like nineteenth century squires and yeoman farmers, buy olde worlde marmalade and herbal teas in shops so carefull preserved that you could look round and find Jane Austen in the queue. Wildlife centres spread the message about seals and otters and hedgerow birdlife, and everyone has been to them.

This means that the familiar gets discussed and examined in the new and unexpected setting of a formal academic course. This has interesting results. One, perhaps negative, is that some confusion arises between what is suitable for coursework and examination assessment : students always worry whether their own experience (e.g.to a theme-park, of a pop group) will be 'relevant'. The other, definitely positive, is the way in which students take to the diversity of courses on postmodernism once they know that their own examples and experiences are entirely relevant.

In fact, it is stressed that, unless they are able to internalise the ideas and concepts and critical approaches, provide their own examples to apply them to, and discuss them with friends (in fact, anyone in the world out there), the course will remain an artificial hand-me-down, and they will never be able to use the learning outcomes in their lives. For the thing about studying postmodernism is that, whatever else happens, if it works you end up understanding yourself, now, better.

### I THOUGHT I KNEW THAT

The course has a strong formal centre: it introduces a lot of ideas. Writers like Adorno and the followers of the Marxist tradition are important: what they had to say about the alienating and the mechanising effects of technology are important to any age. Much was directed at America, above all when Adorno and Horkheimer went there and criticised the way late capitalism was going. Typical excesses cited in such a position refer to Las Vegas. It's interesting to ask ourselves what happens to the unique identity of a work of art when it becomes available to everyone, like a photograph of the Mona Lisa, and to ponder on what

people actually 'get' when they take a postcard away from an art gallery or take a photo of a famous beauty spot.

The debate over the years has taken some interesting turns. Benjamin suggested that the process of reproduction (e.g.film, photography, mass media) did not necessarily take away the uniqueness or aura of a work of art, and, indeed, could create something new, and something unique in its own turn, particularly when shared by lots of people. He saw that we live in a world of collective experience, of corporately generated culture, where many can simultaneously experience what was originally reserved only for the few.

It's only one step further to wonder how and why the system runs as it does, who runs it, whether it is a powerful group, and whether they have a political or financial agenda: this takes us into media concentration, conglomeration and globalisation, with important implications for what it is to live in a world where culture and leisure are commodified and homogenised; or if they are, since postmodernists always speak of the diversity and bricolage and knowing irony of the modern world. Out from there we go on to ideologies and value-systems, knowledge paradigms and epistemologies, rather abstract territory perhaps, inhabited by thinkers like Foucault, Lyotard and Habermas. Even here, however, if we go back to concrete and accessible examples, the stuff stays real.

One student complained to me once about the commodification of Scottish culture ('hoots mon' haggis and pipes and Highland 'cooes') and the marginalisation of national (e.g.Scottish, Welsh, Breton, Catalan, Maori) culture in the news media. Another began to question conventional historical interpretations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries after

Foucault of the way meaning and power and legitimation are interconnected. A third wrapped her mind about a Lyotardian meta-narrative (a scheme by which we explain other schemes, like Marxism or Christianity) and began to work out why New Age ideas are so popular nowadays.

### I KNOW THAT AND I BELIEVE I KNOW MORE

Two important outcomes can be noticed. The first is how courses like this one can defamiliarise the familiar, encouraging new looks and interpretations. The second is how often a rather passive interpretation of personal experience, that of the entirely relativistic 'anything goes', 'if it doesn't hurt anyone else, then it's OK', gets subtly changed the more students think about what might lie beyond post-modernism.

Defamiliarising the familiar is probably one of the most interesting results of such courses. It's happened to me through preparing and delivering the courses. It certainly appears to happen to the students who take them. Nothing is more familiar than television. It's even more familiar because many students have already done media studies. The effects, structure, language, meanings of television are familiar. Nonetheless, a trip through Baudrillard (and the many subsequent writers about his work) is likely to irritate, encourage, stimulate, and initially bamboozle the reader, all essential stages through to a deconstructing of prior cognitive structures (ways of thinking about media before change) to a reconstruction of them later. Signs, simulacra, spectacles, post-structuralism, hyperreality and virtual reality, commodification and reification of the contemporary consumer: they might be rarefied nonsense, but the

more you work at them the more you realise they're there and that you need the critical apparatus to discuss them, just as you need the language of film studies properly to discuss film noir or MGM musicals.

Shopping, tourism and heritage consumption is another field for defamiliarisation. No one can be quite the same after reading about Baudelaire's *flâneur*, mediated through the reflections of Simmel on the metropolitan experience. Consuming and being beguiled into doing little else, watching and being watched, being surrounded by infinite opportunities and blandishments and yet being dimly aware of existential inadequacies: these are the reflections that come through one of the most familiar and commonplace experiences of every student. They get recognition and channelling through courses like this. These are outcomes of value for preparing human beings for life, and preparing reflective practitioners for their various professional activities.

Postmodernism has often been criticised for being an 'anything goes' type of movement. There is said to be a sign near the Pompidou Centre in Paris reading '*Tout est Art*'. This suggests a world where we have no reliable cultural and artistic and moral values, where the integrity of the work of art is multiplied and commodified by widespread cynical economic processes, and where beliefs and values are regarded one as good as another and so there is no moral and religious framework left. Certainly, some of the most influential characteristics of postmodernism imply diversity, novelty for its own sake, experimentation of pointless kind - we think of the ambivalence of Michael Jackson, the surreal transience of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, the

selling power of Disney and Hollywood reality, the knowing but sterile world of Beavis and Butt-head.

Traditionalists bring in the decline of religion and the growth of New Age, the blurring of boundaries between genders, the effect of virtual reality on human consciousness, and hybrid forms like samplers in music and meta-fiction in literature, and argue that anything goes means reliable values and meaning have gone. My experience has been very different: the very process of thoughtfully investigating and reexamining a range of political and aesthetic, cultural and consumer issues and products has taken students through from unknowing to knowing, knowing to unknowing to reknowing, as much based on examples from their own experience as any provided by the course. Values, preferences, prejudices, knowledge of knowledge are all brought along with these examples. The courses suggest new approaches and frameworks for understanding contemporary experience, and students have met them more than halfway. Educationally - and existentially - I am more than satisfied. Sincerely (not "sincerely").

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# GNVQ TIME BOMB & NVQ DEPTH CHARGE

***Penny Wolff and Nick Sutcliffe warn that ever increasing numbers of students entering HE via GNVQ and NVQ routes have little experience of the usual methods of assessment and lack important skills previously taken for granted with A-level students. If these problems are not taken seriously, universities will rapidly find students failing and dropping out.***

One of the major recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into HE (1997) is that mechanisms should be put in place to widen participation in HE still further. This fits comfortably with the widespread support for the notion of lifelong learning. The CVCP, in a strategy paper on vocational HE stated that

*'the assumption that universities are primarily for the education of an elite of school-leavers is gradually losing ground to a recognition of the value of mass HE and the need for lifelong learning' (CVCP, 1995-17).*

In line with this, the government's most recent target figures for expansion of both further and HE sectors indicate that an additional 500,000 places will need to be found by the year 2002 (DfEE, 1998-25).

Whilst the expansion of the sector and an increase in the diversity of its student intake is to be broadly welcomed, there are major problems, one being that further resources to support the transition of an increasingly diverse population of students to academic learning are unlikely to be forthcoming.

## 'INEXPERIENCED' STUDENTS

The thrust of the concerns in this article centre on those students who will increasingly access HE by the GNVQ<sup>1</sup> or by the NVQ route alone. Such students have not yet reached 'critical mass' to warrant a clear and extensive evaluation of the problems they may encounter. However, the establishment of a Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 1997, with a brief to develop a National Qualifications Framework in the UK, is likely to increase the number of students adopting more unconventional routes to HE. Many (though by no means all) of these students will have had little or no previous experience of 'traditional' approaches to teaching learning and assessment. The long academic essay, the use of academic referencing and the 2 - 3 hour unseen examination, in particular, will not form part of their background experiences in the same way as for an 'A' level or Access Course student.

1. In 1997, 26,125 students opted to use advanced GNVQs to apply to HE: 94% received offers. (Advanced GNVQ acceptances through UCAS: HE programmes for '97 entry, UCAS leaflet)



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The first GNVQ students have now graduated from HE, and a recent report, (UCAS, 1997) provides an insight into student perceptions of their difficulties. The report found that according to students, their GNVQ Courses

*'lacked sufficient depth for HE'. In addition, 'essay-writing skills had been neglected and students were ill-prepared for 'the form of assessment often used within HE'.*

This situation may be compounded as the first recruits from Modern Apprenticeship, National Traineeship

schemes and others with NVQs at level 3 begin to apply for HE courses from 1997/98 onwards.

### COMPARING A-LEVEL

Relatively few studies have made direct comparisons between 'A' level and GNVQ qualifications in the same area and at comparative levels. Of those carried out, one comparison of Advanced GNVQ Science with 'A' level Chemistry (Barry, 1997) suggests that whilst the GNVQ approach fosters a deeper approach to student learning, this is at the expense of the breadth of content coverage in the 'A' level course.

If this pattern is repeated across other disciplines, it has implications for entry to courses where the assumption has been that students will already be familiar with particular areas of knowledge.

### ASSESSMENT

An important difference between vocational and academic systems is the approach to assessment. For NVQs as for GNVQs, this is evidential assessment, via a learning portfolio.

In the case of NVQs, the evidence of learning will derive predominantly from the workplace and not from any formal course. Induction/orientation for students entering HE with NVQ level 3 will therefore need to address the transition from workbased learning and assessment to some of the more conventional methods currently used on HE programmes.

If 'starting at the point learners have already reached' is accepted as one of the first principles of facilitating learning, it follows that academic staff will need to be familiar with portfolio methods of supporting and assessing learning. This will have strong implications for the professional development of academic staff in HE,

many of whom will be unfamiliar with evidential methods of assessment.

A learning portfolio has been identified as an appropriate means of assessment at higher levels (Jasper, 1995; Brown and Knight, 1994 and Davies, Firth & Noble, 1996). It can with value be combined with more traditional methods of assessment within both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, as action research undertaken during the DfEE-funded Competence-based Degrees Project (Wolff & Lee, 1996) has shown.

### EFFECTIVE SUPPORT

Fundamentally, students accessing HE via vocational qualifications will need effective systems of support to enable them to make the transition to academic learning.

A variety of strategies already exist in many HE institutions. Examples of good practice include learning to learn and study skills courses, as well as IT/multi-media support via the internet. However all these different strategies will need incorporating into mainstream course delivery for students throughout their time in HE, not simply for an initial period of the first year of a course (Billing, 1997).

The cost implications of the above are enormous and the staff development implications far-reaching.

There is also little time available to us.

The implications of failure are, in our view, clear. If the challenge of the 'GNVQ time bomb' and the 'NVQ depth charge' is not met proactively through the development of viable and appropriate strategies, the current problems of how to increase student recruitment will rapidly become those of how to address problems of student wastage and how to promote retention.

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*\*An earlier short version of this article was printed in the National Newsletter for Academic Maths Support (No 7) Autumn 1997.*

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# DO NUMBERS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS?

**Paul Sander and Keith Stevenson describe their investigation into the comparative value of two styles of student feedback: the quantitative and the qualitative.**

Increased use of quality assurance programmes has helped to formalise student feedback on a range of university issues, including teaching and learning. With this formalisation has come a trend to collect feedback through numerical rating scales or in other convenient, quantitative ways. However, it may be that qualitative feedback would be more informative to teachers seeking to improve the learning experience of their students.

We suggest that the way in which student's opinions are collected should be determined, at least in part, by *why* their opinions are being sought.

Numerical responses from students to a range of questions may be relatively quick to collect and can readily be summarised with suitable descriptive statistics. However, it is less clear what baseline these statistics should be judged against and exactly how the statistics should be used to improve teaching. If the intention of collecting feedback from students is to improve the students' learning experiences, then qualitative feedback, which gives "a holistic, in depth understanding ...from the perspective of those involved" (Pancer 1997, p.64) may be preferable.

Our experience as Open University tutors had suggested that qualitative feedback elicited from just three open-

ended questions, did provide insights that were useful in the development of the tutorial programme. Could this also be true in traditional university groups?

## THE INVESTIGATION

A group of 27 first year degree students in a post-1992 university was asked to evaluate a traditionally delivered social psychology module using both qualitative and quantitative strategies which were sequentially counterbalanced between students. The students were encouraged to be polite and helpful but honest in their evaluations. Anonymity was assured.



*Paul Sander is with the School of Human and Environmental Sciences, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff*



*Keith Stevenson is at the Eli Lilly National Clinical Audit Centre, Department of General Practice, Leicester General Hospital*

### Box 1

#### Quantitative student feedback

using a Likert-type rating scale

How challenging did you find this module?

Very 5 4 3 2 1 Not at all

How effective did you find the teaching strategies on this module?

Very 5 4 3 2 1 Not at all

How helpful did you find the teaching staff on this module?

Very 5 4 3 2 1 Not at all

How interesting did you find this module?

Very 5 4 3 2 1 Not at all

How satisfied are you with what you have learned from this module?

Very 5 4 3 2 1 Not at all

**Box 2 Examples of qualitative responses to open questions**

**Q1: What was particularly useful about the lecture sequence?**

- ◆ The application of psychology to Podiatry. *Why?* To help in understanding the cross section of people we meet in a clinical situation.
- ◆ The thing that I found useful about this lecture sequence is the way I think it helped me explore certain topics (e.g. stress) that will help us throughout the course. *Why?* Because the topics we covered will not only help us on our course but also our future careers.
- ◆ That it increased our knowledge of patients behaviour that we come across in clinic and everyday life. *Why?* We covered a lot of topics in not too much detail so it was useful amounts of information.
- ◆ The coffee breaks. *Why?* It was a good time to unwind and ponder over what had gone on in the lecture.
- ◆ Having to submit a journal. *Why?* You had to attend and understand the lectures to write an entry.

**Q2: What was there about the lecture sequence that you felt didn't work for you?**

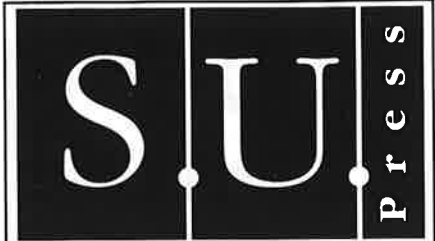
- ◆ Altruism. *Why?* The example which was given didn't really relate to podiatry and it was difficult to see how the subject did at all.
- ◆ More group discussion *Why?* Large class, large subject area and little time could not validate group discussion.
- ◆ The only gripe I could put forward was that I was never able to understand the marking criteria,

and therefore did not improve on a 'B' grade.

- ◆ Having the overheads given out in a handout as it meant you switched off as you didn't need to listen. *Why?* The exact same info was on the OHP & handout and not much more info was said or added to in the lecture.
- ◆ The structure of the lecture. *Why?* Having previously studied psychology and the subjects covered I don't think that it was a clear way of approaching it in a short course.

**Q3: What do you feel could have been usefully included in the lecture sequence?**

- ◆ More about prejudice and how you show it. *Why?* It is possible to be prejudiced and to show it via body language even if you are trying not to and this is an important point to really stress.
- ◆ Not using a lecture theatre. *Why?* Did not encourage group discussion.
- ◆ Videos of some of the experiments. *Why?* Some of the experiments you explained would have been better explained visually.
- ◆ Exercises whereby we left the lecture room. *Why?* To put into action ideas that had been taught, like the 2nd years did last year.
- ◆ More specific info on the topics with less emphasis on snippets of psychological research which was only touched on. I think it would have been more beneficial to give an understanding of the basic topic area, not always achieved.



**The New Higher Education: Issues and Directions for the Post-Dearing University**

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RESULTS

The outcome of the exercise was most revealing. The students' quantitative ratings (see Box 1, page 19, for the questions) indicated that they were moderately satisfied, with their ratings of the five given questions summarised with means of between 2.96 and 4.12, and standard deviations of between 0.72 and 1.33. These data suggest that the teaching was satisfactory but not startling.

The teacher had thought that the course had gone well so why were the students only moderately satisfied? The quantitative evaluation did not answer this question.

The qualitative data was far more helpful to the practitioner. In Box 2 opposite, we list the questions and give examples of the responses collected.

Over one third of the students said that they liked all the links that were made. Against that, three people wanted to see more relevance to the material and one person felt that some of the topics were a little obvious.

About half of the students stated that they would have liked more discussion although another two students qualified this by saying that it would have been difficult given the size of the group and the lecture hall setting. There were, though, three students who clearly stated that they liked the discussions that had occurred.

One person was pleased that there was no large final assessment and five people said that they liked the style of assessment that was used. There were mixed feelings, expressed by only a very small minority of the students, about which were liked and disliked topics.

With this information the teacher had a clearer idea of how to increase student satisfaction, either through changing, or by providing a better explanation or justification of the



students' learning experience.

Ideally, any action taken on this qualitative student feedback should be with the students who provided the feedback. However, careful consideration may suggest that there are actions that could be generalised to other student groups.

CONCLUSION

The qualitative data helped identify the students' feelings and some reasons for those feelings. In many cases the views were similar, but there were instances of contradictory opinions. These were dealt with by explaining to the students that meeting all their expectations all of the time is simply not possible, but wherever possible efforts would be made.

Generally, we suggest that qualitative student feedback can increase awareness and provide a clearer sense of direction for teachers in their pursuit of improved learning environments for students, enabling them to reflect on their teaching strategy and consider whether there are elements that could or should be changed.

Also, qualitative student feedback could promote an informed sensitivity

when teachers introduce issues that had been the subject of explicit comment.

The quantitative data on its own did nothing to promote informed changes in the students' teaching and learning experience as it required the qualitative data to be interpreted. It might, though have told managers that the teaching was satisfactory, which leads back to the opinion that the way in which student feedback is collected should be determined, in part by the reason for which it is being collected.

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Research supervision has recently been opened up to institutional scrutiny in many Universities and will soon be subject to external scrutiny via the QAA's planned Code of Practice. In consequence, professionalism in supervision has become a major concern, and there have been a number of publications setting out good practice for supervisors, most notably the excellent '**Supervising the PhD**' volume by Sara Delamont, Paul Atkinson and Odette Parry (SRHE and OUP, 1997).

But while this is, and will be for some time to come, the best general text on research supervision, it leaves niches still to be explored, two of which form the subjects of the first two of these pamphlets.

One extremely important niche is that of the supervision of international research students. In this pamphlet Eunice Okorochoa, herself a former international student, outlines concisely and elegantly the problems likely to be experienced by international research

# **BOOKS**

students, how they can impact upon the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and what supervisors can do to overcome them. It is extremely useful to have these points in print, and the pamphlet offers an excellent basis upon which to develop discussions and training sessions about improving the supervision of international students.

The second pamphlet focuses upon the dilemmas likely to be faced by supervisors. Written by Pat Cryer and based upon extensive interviews with supervisors, it focuses upon common dilemmas in the process of research supervision which are independent of the subject matter. The three most common ones identified are 'originality vs conformity', 'control vs autonomy', and 'copy editor vs guardian of standards' and, in addition, there are ten others. Each is outlined clearly and options are discussed in a balanced way. This is a 'must' for those new to research supervision to indicate what lies in store and how they might go about dealing with what can be very difficult problems, and it has much to offer to established ones in enabling them to problematise their experience and build upon it.

The final pamphlet, which is edited by Pat Cryer, deals with another wider

issue which again has come to the fore in recent years, namely the development of key skills among postgraduates. Dr Cryer's own chapter touches on the role of the supervisor in this context as well as outlining the roles of others in raising awareness of the skills developed in the course of undertaking research. Further chapters present interesting case studies of different ways of devising and delivering programmes and assessing skills, while the two concluding chapters are devoted to institutional provision. The last chapter in particular, written by the Leeds staff development team, offers both a revealing case study and an invaluable template for reviewing training and support for the development of key skills across an institution.

The first two pamphlets should, with Delamont et al, be an essential part of the library of the research supervisor, while the third deserves a wide reading among staff at all levels involved in postgraduate education.

*Stan Taylor*

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

## **GOING GLOBAL?**

### **Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media; Technology Strategies for Higher Education**

*John S Daniel*

Kogan Page: London (1998), £19.99

ISBN 0 7494 2634 9

If, like me, you are struggling to conceptualise global universities, this book is a must - it will inform you about 'Mega-Universities' defined as 'a distance teaching institution with over 100,000 active students in degree level courses'. Included are profiles of eleven

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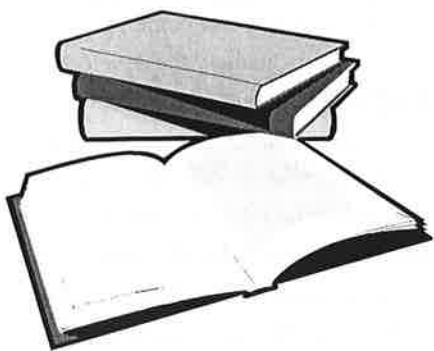
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successful mega-universities from across the world, including the Open University in the United Kingdom. The 'Knowledge Media' in the title is the World Wide Web; referred to as the third generation of distance education technology.

Porter's value chain is used to explain in part the quick success of some of these universities. Many began with the explicit purpose of breaking the link between quality education and exclusivity of access. The book is a curious combination of hard-nosed business approaches with altruism, reflecting a necessary condition for survival as a mega-university.

In an interesting introduction, the author lays bare three personal beliefs before whetting the reader's appetite by summarising chapter topics. The parts about creating and implementing technology strategies are really vital reading. An analysis of likely pitfalls in achieving competitive advantage is useful to all universities, not just those aspiring to become global providers. It is an essential read for all university managers, while some individual chapters could provide useful explanation or examples of technological change for staff or students.

I feel that all chapters are well written in an interesting style. Each contains carefully structured arguments presenting a range of viewpoints.

Early chapters include the assertion that 'the latest manifestations of

*technology ... alter the relationship between people and knowledge*'. This may be true, but there are other effects on the relationship such as constructivist beliefs or the awareness of alternatives to positivism. These may actually be stronger influences than technology.

I also have difficulty with claims of interactivity in video-conferenced classrooms containing a hundred students with a remote tutor!

Usefully included is the development of distance education, although there are important omissions: the difficulties in making e-mail communications to students as sensitive as speech (due to the loss of voice tone); the potential problems for tutors giving phone tutorials without using careful recording systems.

Despite these omissions I am passing on a copy to some colleagues of mine straight away!

Mary Hayes

Nottingham Trent University

## **FINDING OUT ABOUT FINDING OUT**

### **A Practical Guide to Academic Research**

Graham Birley and Neil Moreland

Kogan Page (1998) £16.99

ISBN 0 7479 2277 7

At one point in this very useful book the authors suggest that an active reading strategy should begin by speculating on the content and likely use of a publication by careful consideration of its title. If we apply this to **A Practical Guide to Academic Research** then we might expect a book which contains direct suggestions and clear advice, accessible to a variety of

readers, and which is a comprehensive coverage of the stated topic. I think most readers will not be disappointed. Whatever their research experience there should be something of interest in this handy review of the researcher's task.

The book is aimed at those who engage in research as part of their academic role as well as those embarking on a project as part of a study programme. The way readers will use this book will depend very much on their previous research experience. For the novice, Birley and Moreland give a very useful Cook's tour of available research methods, with welcome advice on their usability and with reference to weightier tomes on specific methodology. For those with some experience they offer a useful way to audit what you already know and, if you are like me, a reminder of why you avoid certain methods!

Chapters deal very effectively with the important methods of investigation and they liberally provide tasks which enable the reader to engage with the ideas described. Each chapter is clear and to the point, although I did feel that the one on research and organisations seemed to get more involved in explaining theoretical perspectives than in how they might be investigated. Nevertheless, the book is clearly the distillation of considerable research experience and expertise.

I can see myself dipping into it in the future when I want some suggestions for different methods or pointers to authoritative works. Unfortunately it will not tell me how to create more time to do the research, although it may well make my efforts more efficient and productive.

Graham A. Martin

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