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Closing the loop on educational research: using findings to improve the student experience

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Too much educational research remains still-borne. That is not to say that it isn't finished, and published or presented. But it is still in a state of suspended animation, as an unfulfilled ambition - for unless its findings are applied to the students' experience and the results monitored, it has not fulfilled its purpose. The problem is that there are lots of incentives to motivate staff to reach the publication/presentation stage but nothing to encourage progress further - plus the knowledge that this second phase is one of the most difficult and frustrating activities in which to engage. Course organisers need to be persuaded, staff need to be motivated, findings need translating into detailed reforms, logistical obstacles need overcoming, statistics extracted from central services. Finally, there is the fear that the whole enterprise may fail and your reputation suffer: far easier to leave the research as an academic exercise with just enough ambiguity to allow face saving re-interpretations.

Despite all this, the right conditions to close the loop do occur and the opportunity is often too interesting to miss. One such opportunity arose from the appointment of a new course organiser for HND in Business Management who was an old colleague in a previous college (it also helped that we both came from Manchester and supported United!). He was interested in some research I had done on a franchised degree course on widening participation and factors causing students to succeed or fail (Hall, May and Shaw, 2000). He asked if he could use it as a basis for discussion in the course teams meeting and the research was issued to each member of staff. What followed was a good example of using research findings to improve the student experience.

The research was based on answering a straightforward question - who was the 'non-traditional' student and what factors caused them to succeed or fail? We used work already conducted in this area (Cox and Light, 2000; Entwistle 1992; Bhachu, 1991; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) to build a rich picture the non-traditional student. Jarvis (1998), for example, warns of the sheer complexity and paradoxes involved. Barnett (1994) uses Habermas' term 'life world' to emphasise the need to consider 'the total world experience of human beings which higher education must address'. This is in direct contrast to our traditional approach of limiting our practise to either the 'academic competence' of the discipline world, or the 'practical operational competence' of the world of work.

The problem then arises of translating this rich complex picture into a form which can be applied to make a real difference to the student experience. We therefore simplified this complex picture into a diagnosis that student failure was *mainly* because of:

- low self esteem (re their academic ability);
- fear and lack of understanding of the academic process;
- isolation from other students.

Although finance as a factor was a strong influence, it failed to explain why some students coped with the same amount of financial pressure while others did not - and we couldn't, as staff, significantly reduce this pressure. Students needed reassurance as early as possible that they could succeed, that other students felt the same way as they did and that the staff were there to help. They interpreted initial emphasis on study skills as further evidence that they were 'remedial'. They were bewildered by the amount of information presented at the induction but needed much more information about things we consider obvious - what an assignment, essay or case study was, when and where to ask questions, how to find your tutor, what terms such as 'balanced argument ' and 'depth of theory' meant. No sooner had they started the module then it seemed to finish and everything changed again. Sending them for study skills support re-inforced their low self-esteem.

What we did, first of all, was to involve the course team - too often the approach to applying research is elitist and patronising 'We know best, this is how you do it'. Just as staff often blame the 'wrong sort of students' for retention problems, staff developers are prone to blame the 'wrong sort of staff' for reforms that don't succeed. We organised an awayday to exchange ideas and plan. What we came up with was, to begin at the beginning, a simplified induction where instead of a briefing on study skills support we put in a session on the transition from school to higher education, our expectations of them, and the learning and teaching strategy to achieve this. Equally important, we re-visited these same themes half way through the term, which continued the induction under the heading 'And now do you believe us?'.

Staff were encouraged to be as approachable as possible for the students. This was about staff recognising that a worried student at their office door is a potential drop-out not just a potential headache and that a few kind words can be significant in averting that problem. Also staff were encouraged to make the learning and teaching strategy more transparent - for example why particular types of assessments such as team presentations were used and their value. Learning objectives and assessment criteria were laid out fully in course and unit handbooks. Early feedback on performance was provided both in face-to-face contact in tutorials and on a re-designed assessment front sheet where comments had to be provided under the headings 'Strengths' and 'Weaknesses'. Students were also given the opportunity to re-take first semester modules early in the second semester instead of waiting for August. Summer schools were provided for those who had to take re-sits in the second semester.

Perhaps the major change was the decision to do away with the traditional end of semester exam thus giving staff and students a full 15 week semester in which to explore the subject (instead of the usual 11 weeks teaching plus a reading week model). Finally students were encouraged to work together via group work in tutorials and group presentations in assignments. Attendance was actively promoted - evidence shows that regularly taking registers and enquiring about absence or lateness encourages students to feel a necessary part of the community.

How do we monitor this? We still have problems with statistics from central services. We also have to disentangle students dropping out from those on temporary leave or transferring to other courses. We still need to discuss what is an adequate definition of success. Traditional feedback methods provide some information but the most useful feedback came from re-designing the final assignment of the 'Managing Activities' module where we asked them to look at the course as an operations management process and analyse its strengths and weaknesses. Freed from the ritual of filling in another feedback form the students provided fresh insights into the course. The crude statistic of retention rate did improve.

What next? It needs emphasising that this did not happen all at once but resulted from an ongoing 'reflection-action' cycle, where mistakes were as important to development as successes. The HND course was an ideal area for experimentation. Not only did the course organiser and learning and teaching facilitator have a good relationship but also the staff worked as a team and were receptive to the concepts of transparency, feedback, personal tutorials and non-traditional students. The real challenge is spreading these ideas to traditional academic practise in degrees, especially if HND is to be replaced by foundation degrees.

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Biographical note

John Shaw is currently Principal Lecturer in Learning and Teaching Development for the Department of Business and Service Sector Management. He has been teaching in higher education since 1972 in a variety of settings, from access courses to postgraduate, Croatia to Trinidad. He has a variety of papers published, including two articles in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. He was nominated by London Guildhall University for the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme.
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