The Vanishing Final Year Students - Independent Learners or Lost Sheep?

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Introduction

This case study explores the response to a cluster of problems that arose in a double-unit research project (one year). Firstly, final-year students were disappearing for the year and then reappearing with work that was often well below their potential, plagiarised or failing to meet the deadlines. Allied to this was a problem, highlighted by one external examiner, of lack of agreement on marking standards and the treatment of plagiarism. In addition, staff were reporting that students were poorly prepared for research, having little knowledge or expertise in the skills of the area.

The pedagogic literature suggests that research methodology teaching is a difficult area. Apart from the shortage of studies (Court and Molesworth 2003), there are the problems of lack of student engagement (Booth and Harrington 2003) and difficulties in agreeing standards and teaching methods, made worse by the 'massification' of higher education (HE). Although there is no agreement about the right approach, there are some repeated themes in recent studies. Brems (1994), Froeses *et al.* (1998) and Chapdelaine and Chapman (1999) recommend that students who can be classified as independent learners should undertake their own research, based on a topic that they find interesting. Court and Molesworth (2003) propose that it is unrealistic to attempt to match teaching to learning style, but one can at least try to prevent consistent mismatch by developing a variety of teaching approaches. Their simplification of Grasha's 6 learning styles into three - 'Dependent, Independent and Collaborative' - provided a useful lens through which to look at the student experience and from this to fashion relevant teaching approaches. Benson and Blackman (2003) emphasise the importance of encouraging reflection and the consequent need to make the learning process as transparent as possible, with learning outcomes 'pertinent and focussed' with staff fully signed up to them. Booth and Harrington (2003) suggest that student engagement is best provided by 'meaningful projects' using case studies and action research rather than

a 'cookbook' approach. They also point out that the debate over standards and approaches in research methodology is only a symptom of the wider debate about the 'massification' of HE and its implications. Thus behind staff disagreements over standards may lurk a real debate about liberal *versus* vocational education, rigour *versus* relevance, content and delivery *versus* skills development.

These issues were echoed in discussions at a departmental workshop to review marking criteria for final-level dissertations. On this score, Webster *et al.* (2000) point out that there is usually considerable ambiguity in the meaning of assessment criteria, and Saunders and Davis (1998) suggest that criteria need to be debated periodically. Staff tended to polarise into two groups: one that that might be labelled 'keepers of the golden standard', and a second that might be labelled the 'measure the exit velocity' group. The former saw their main function as protecting standards, the latter argued that while the new entrants may start from a lower level they can be accelerated through the course to become excellent lifelong learners. A resolution of this fundamental dispute was, of course, not reached on that occasion but greater understanding of the many issues involved was reached. On the technical matters of the assessment criteria, the use of SEEC level descriptors, HEFQ Qualification Descriptors and Business and Management undergraduate benchmarks provided a wealth of 'prompts' to help staff get a feel for what was required.

Alternative approach

The other main element in our eventual solution was the decision to use the first of the double modules as an introduction to research methodology which the students would have to pass before being they would be allowed to continue with research around their chosen project in the second module. This offered a solution at a number of levels. It ensured all students started in the second semester on a level playing field - with the basic knowledge and skills for conducting research. The learning outcomes and assessment criteria developed would inform the marking of the final project. The development of research topic, the literature search and methodology under close formal supervision would reduce the temptation and opportunity for plagiarism. In addition, we divided the assessment into sections and spread the hand-in dates evenly throughout the semester. This was done to help with student time management and also to help with our objective of 'taking the fear out of research' (Brems 1994). Thus the title and abstract would be submitted in the second week, the literature search in the sixth week, methodology evaluation in the tenth week and the final viva voce examinations would take place from the 13th to the 15th week.

The learning and teaching strategy was based on the provision of support and security to students through the sectionalised task plus the provision of clear guidance on learning outcomes and assessment criteria throughout. Both

transparency and reflective practice was emphasised through the provision of marks and full feedback - both written and oral - at regular intervals throughout the course. Lectures provided an overview of the process and the tutorials were a mixture of collaborative learning (with small groups using case studies for problem solving) and individual guidance by tutors. Students were encouraged to share their problems with each other and it was hoped that the security and support provided at the start would lead to increasing independence of the students at the end of the course. We were assuming a largely instrumental approach would be used by our students and thus used marked assessment tasks to motivate them to work independently. Following the approach of Horner *et al.* (1998), by providing direction and structure we also aimed to empower students so they could feel confident enough to produce a piece of competent individual research. Court and Molesworth (2003) suggest that this, in and of itself, is an effective way of encouraging independent learning.

As in most promising educational initiatives, the main blockage was bureaucracy because we had to steer these changes through the quality system. Two of the degrees managed to meet deadline for implementation but two of them did not. This originally seemed a problem but when we considered how we might evaluate the initiative, the research group realised it was actually an opportunity - we had two degrees using the new research methodology unit and two degrees still using the old system of individual supervision over two modules - an ideal situation for a comparative study.

Evaluation

The old module (see Table 1, Scenario 1) we classified as following the *independent approach* (see Court and Molesworth, 2003): a course structure that caters for students who are independent learners (i.e. individuals who prefer to be assigned tasks which they get on with in their own time and at their own pace). The newly devised module (see Scenario 2) we classified as being closer to the *dependent approach* and the *collaborative approach* (Court and Molesworth, 2003). A dependence approach involves a highly structured approach to teaching and the pace is slow to allow the absorption of material (Markham, 1991). Collaborative learning (when students work in groups) can maximise students' learning (Johnson and Johnson 1987), reduce anxiety and contributes to higher achievement.

One of the key objectives of this evaluation was to establish whether the new module on Research Methodology was more suited to third-year undergraduates' learning styles. It also aimed to find out the expectations students had of the course and how these were met, whether this research methods unit contributed or enhanced students' motivations, and its impact on learning.

A questionnaire was handed out to all students who attended tutorial sessions in week 10. Out of 45 students formally enrolled on the course, all 26 students who

attended class that week filled in the questionnaire. At this stage of the course, students had received 10 lectures on the aims and objectives of the Research Methods unit, on what makes a good dissertation, various lectures on secondary and primary data collection, sampling, data handling and analysis. They had also handed in a number of pieces of work that had been marked and commented upon. Since students were requested to hand in the Methodology chapter of their dissertations (apart of the continuous assessment) in week 10, a higher than average student attendance was anticipated.

Main findings

Learning styles
The questionnaire began by asking students how they would prefer to be taught Research Methods. Specifically, students had to choose one of 2 scenarios representing the established Research Methods module and the newly devised unit.

Table 1.

Scenario 1 Have 12 weeks of lectures on Research Methods in the first semester, but no tutorials. Have a supervisor that you can consult with one-to-one throughout the whole year (2 semesters). Although recommended, attendance and contact with the supervisor are not compulsory. Students only receive a final grade for their dissertation.	23%

Scenario 2 Have a formal unit on Research Methods for 12 weeks with tutorials and **formal** continuous assessment and grading. Get a supervisor (one-to-one) that you can contact on a weekly basis for the second semester only.	69%

Overwhelmingly, the newly devised structure for teaching Research Methods was preferred by the students taking the course. The main reasons given by students as to why this was the case are summarised in the quotations in Table 2 (below).

Table 2.

P1[i]: "*Makes life easier in terms of feedback on ideas.* P4*: "Helps us get a better grade finally.*" P5*: "You can boost up your grades by continuous improvement.*" J1: "*This process will enable us to climb the stairs bit by bit and we will know where we are standing.*"

J4: "*Because it is formal; you do some actual work because you are graded and it is therefore important to get started as soon as possible.*"

J5: "*I think grading is a good impetus to put in more effort*".

J7: "*Because I get graded, I make sure that I do my work. It also gives the most help available.*"

J8: "*Can have constant feedback and guidance throughout the whole year and we can see where we need to improve, and can clearly see our time scale as deadlines will be set.*"

R1: "*You can learn more from tutorials than from lectures through discussions about how other students are tackling problems, problems that may not have crossed your mind. Also, formal marking is important so as to challenge slackers like me!*"

R3: "*Because this way you get feedback and you know how to get a better grade by using the tutors' suggestions. Also, keeps students up-to-date as if there were no deadlines we wouldn't do any work.*"

Student participants who chose Scenario 2 as the preferred method of teaching/learning were clearly very reliant on help and advice from academics and were not naturally independent learners. They were mainly extrinsically motivated in their studies. The sample of quotations reflects the likelihood that these students welcomed the structuring of the learning process by teaching staff because the students (a) lacked time-management skills, (b) lacked discipline and (c) did not have the self-confidence to judge their own work. Although in terms of learning styles, a large majority of the students (69%) appear to be dependent learners, 20% of students also demonstrated collaborative learning styles.

Students who would have preferred to be taught Research Methods in the manner outlined in Scenario 1 possessed different traits (see Table 3 below for some of the responses given by these individuals).

Table 3.

J2: "*It gives more personal time to study on the unit as we have to do very hard units in parallel with this unit such as BN325* (Business Processes), *QB304* (Policies and Issues in IT) *and SO312* (Personnel Management)".

J6: "*I think every student should read a book like Saunders* [recommended textbook] *on their own because one cannot remember everything covered in the lectures. I strongly prefer having constant contact to a supervisor who gives advice to my specific situation only.*"

R9: "*I would choose the first scenario as the time spent in tutorials can be used to gather information and whenever we are experiencing problems we can consult our supervisors.*"

Most of these students could be characterised as independent learners who would rather manage their own time and spend the tutorial time reading and getting on with their individual university work at their own pace. If this analysis is tenable, less than a quarter of all respondents sampled could be characterised as independent learners, a worrying phenomenon in the third year of an undergraduate degree course.

The remaining 2 students in the sample reported that, given a choice, they would not choose either, but instead devised their own scenarios. They commented:

Student P3: "*Ideal would be tutorials (and no lectures) run with informal assessment and a chance to meet a supervisor throughout the 2 semesters. The lectures are not productive. The tutorials allow the discussion on research methods to flow and make the aim of the unit clearer. It is important to meet supervisors at the beginning of the year.*"

Student R5: "*Have 12 weeks of lectures on research methods in the first semester and a supervisor (one-to-one) for 2 semesters (similar to scenario 1). However, also have continuous assessment/grading throughout the year. I feel that the scenario I'm recommending would provide me with a complete education using various tutors, lecturers, supervisors and also have the one-to-one attention from the supervisor which I believe to be crucial for everyone. The formal assessment is vital because it will evaluate progress and provide a benchmark with provisional grading.*"

These two students are seemingly different in the way they learn. Student P3 obviously valued active rather than passive learning situations, and would like to experience learning mainly in this way; student R5, however, did not feel comfortable with the idea of completely independent learning. Students were also asked to comment on whether or not they liked to be formally and continuously assessed. Table 4 reports some of these responses:

Table 4.

P1: "*Sometimes it helps, but this can have positive and negative effects. It can cause more stress and panic. For brilliance to shine you need to do things in your own time. Pupils who are capable should have a choice.*"
P2. "*Yes, because it makes you think about your research more or less all the time. On a negative note tough, it can hamper the chances of success in other units.*" (A number of individuals had similar comments.)
J6: "*I don't like it. I think other students need this kind of assessment in order to manage their time correctly, but I don't need it.*"
J9: "*Yes, because it forces us to work.*" (This was a common response.)
P5: "*Yes, made me more optimistic. Got one bad mark then one much better one, which was good for my self-esteem.*"

An overwhelming majority of the students reported that they found the tutorials to be the most useful aspect of the course. In these classes, they claimed, they not only received clarification on aspects of the lecture that were not clear or misunderstood, but received good feedback and guidance about their ongoing work and discovered how other students were going about their research (often learning from their experiences and mistakes). Eighty-five percent of students reported that the structure of the course helped them manage their time.

Student expectations
A number of authors have pointed to the difficulties of teaching research methods, as very often students display a limited knowledge of research techniques when they join a degree programme (Dana and Dana, 1994; Lorenz and Bruton, 1996; Tetley and Glover, 1999). The findings of this study indicated that this phenomenon was present at the commencement of this third-year undergraduate course. For example, in response to the question, "Overall, what were you expecting from this Research Methods course?", one student replied: "*Anything, because I didn't know anything about research before I started the course*". Certainly, approximately 20% of students admitted to ignorance when it came to research techniques. The aims from the unit handbook descriptors most commonly cited by the student respondents were "to introduce you to research techniques" and "to introduce you to sources of data and how to handle them". It was evident also from teaching on the course that a number of students could not even differentiate between the notions of qualitative and quantitative research in the first few weeks of starting the programme.

Although only one-third of the students expected the Research Methodology course to be difficult, half of them reported that they found it difficult or more difficult than initially anticipated. The expectation of all that writing a dissertation would be difficult did not change over the course of the 10 weeks

The majority of the students stated that they expected to pick up or improve research skills from the unit and obtain a guiding hand in starting a dissertation. However, when asked whether the course had met their expectations so far, the results were mixed. Overall, the main criticisms were that:

(a) the lectures were confusing. This was not necessarily the *fault* of the lecturer, as the following two statements demonstrate:

"*Mainly uses simple language during lecture and with lecture materials; by simplification this unit could be improved a lot.*" "*The course was interesting, but please try to make it a bit easy and user-friendly for students as students are not the same as lecturers.*"

There is an indication here that some students' vocabulary is limited. Other students, however, found the lectures too simple.

(b) the tutors themselves had different ideas about what was expected of the student. As one student explained:

"*The actual lecture information given on areas tends to contrast with what is expected* [by] *individual tutors; it would be better to give an outline of what is expected of them* [students] *in the lecture and even the tutors should be made aware of this.*"

(c) some students found the course repetitive, particularly the more able. (On the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate whether their marks so far were worse, about the same or better than average on the course - 31% of students reported that they had better grades.)

This investigation also tried to uncover students' perceptions of plagiarism. In particular, students were asked whether they thought other students would plagiarise their dissertations. Nearly half of respondents said "yes" and 15% reported that "some might" plagiarise. A variety of reasons were given as to why students might plagiarise their dissertation (see Table 5).

Table 5.

Reasons for plagiarising:	Percentage (%) - the percentage of all individuals who indicated
Lack of time	58%
Perceived difficulty of writing a dissertation	58%
The sophistication of dissertation material already available and easily accessible on the Internet and other libraries	46%
Laziness	12%
It's an easy way out	4%
Personal difficulties	4%

A key factor was that students were "pressed" for time. Whether this was due simply to bad time management or was a serious issue (competing university assignments, work and family commitments) is not known. Furthermore, it is worrying that nearly 3 out of 5 students believed that plagiarism may occur because of the perceived difficulty of writing a dissertation.

Part of the problem may stem from students' lack of clarity about the nature of the dissertation, even though it had been defined in the unit handbook and referred to during the course on many occasions. Only a handful could give sound definitions, for example:

"A dissertation is the research into a particular topic to prove or disprove a particular thesis/idea, through analysing secondary, primary and tertiary data. It is a topic that has not been previously investigated."

"In my opinion, a dissertation is a proof that a student is able to think and write about a certain topic in an academic way and that he/she is able to do primary - or at least - secondary research."

Many students offered vague definitions that spoke of the dissertation in terms of "level of detail", "employment prospect", "investigation of a topic of interest" and demonstration of "acquired knowledge/skills" – rather than as a substantive synthesis of research data. They appeared to believe that a dissertation was their *ticket to employment,* implying in their statements that a good quality dissertation was a piece of work that demonstrated the *quality* of the individual to prospective employers.

When asked about the aim of the Research Methodology unit, most students (approximately two-thirds of respondents) asserted that it was, in general, to give guidance and support to students in writing their dissertations. Their perceptions may indicate that students were more reliant on the staff than would be expected from a third year undergraduate (dependence learning). This becomes more apparent when one analyses other aims of the course highlighted by the students. A quarter of participants believed that it aimed to help with their time-management skills and a fifth thought the unit was set up to give feedback to students on a continuous basis to help them improve their work.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings demonstrate both the possibilities for and the limitations to improving the students' experience by interventions that change just one module. The mixture of continuous assessment, collaborative learning and individual guidance offered in the new approach (scenario 2) discussed here promised real improvements and was favoured by most students. However, we are not going to convert students from an instrumental and dependent learning style to deeper, more independent learning by 'fine-tuning' one element of the degree course. One clear recommendation is that producing an independent piece of research has to be backed up by a 'spine' of research 'elements' starting in the first year and continuing through to the final year. Secondly, we need to use more differentiated teaching strategies to provide security for the fearful and challenge for the confident. Thirdly, staff need to develop a shared understanding of what sort of student experience we are trying to develop and how we are going to facilitate it. Finally, we need to gear our learning strategies towards producing 'empowered independence' rather than bewildered absence!

Endnote: In Tables 2, 3 and 4, P(number), J(number) and R(number) refer to individual students who were assigned to different tutors, namely Paul (P), John (J)and Rita (R).

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