

Orienting Students to Higher Education: a Business example

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Background

Business Skills (BX101) is a core module for all undergraduate students studying Business at the North campus of London Metropolitan University. It seen as a key element in assisting new students to settle into, and prepare for, academic life. One of the learning outcomes is 'to help you [ie the student] integrate into University life and assist you to develop a range of academic and discipline-based skills and capacities that will enhance your academic and professional achievement'. The course was re-designed for autumn 2002, with the twin objectives of student integration and retention. A core team of staff who had been involved in a research project on the module the previous year (see www.criticallearning.co.uk) redesigned the course. The aim was to give the students a more explicit focus on engagement with study and being a student, one aspect of which was to include the use of Learning Styles Inventories [LSI]. At the same time, the team is continuing and developing our research which has now extended from a limited perspective on the value of learning styles as a vehicle for involving students in discussion about learning, to a consideration of wider issues about engagement and adjustment to being a student in higher education.

Research looking at people from working class areas locally indicates that many potential students are reluctant to enter higher education [HE], because HE institutions are viewed as 'full of middle-class white tutors, and have no relevance to us' (www.unl.ac.uk/hers). A study, therefore, of what makes a student, from their own and their families perceptions, is timely, given the Government commitment to widening participation to 50% of 18-30 year olds (Hodge, 2002).

A pilot project to identify key themes was carried out in 2001/2 (Andrew et al, 2002). This study attempted to identify whether using learning styles questionnaires with year-one students would facilitate discussions around their learning. Many students had been identified as 'unengaged with the learning

process', 'unmotivated' and 'not interested in their study' (interviews with staff during 2001/02). The research project demonstrated the usefulness of a learning styles focus, whether paper-based or online, for influencing students' behaviour: 70% of respondents said they had learned something about themselves, 68% had found the exercise useful, and 42% said they had changed their study habits as a result of the learning styles intervention. The research also identified areas for further study. A central challenge is: what can be done to engage students earlier in their learning process, before they make the decision that higher education is not for them and leave?

Redesign of the programme

The programme was reorganised so as to give students more time together in small groups. Students had the opportunity of attending one of four identical weekly lectures and were timetabled into their seminar groups according to their main subject of study. Subject specialists facilitated these seminars, and students on joint programmes had a choice of assessment task related to their preferred subject. Both staff and students had access to full online support via the BX101 website (<http://learning.unl.ac.uk/bx101>). Other changes included senior staff commitment: Brian Roper, the Chief Executive, and Bob Morgan, Head of Department of Business and Service Sector Management, each gave talks about the changing experience of HE in the main lecture slot. The teaching team was resourced to team-teach the lectures, and the administrative office spent much time and effort in getting the student seminar groups to work.

Much of the work in the seminars remained the same as previous years, addressing academic writing, exam revision, presentation skills etc. The lecture programme was new, and while it supported that work on academic skill development, it also provided a forum in which approaches to study, study and career aims, and the role of HE in society were discussed.

Drawing from our work the previous year, the use of a LSI was integrated as a key component by which students would be encouraged to reflect on their learning - an approach informed by practice elsewhere (see Dunn (1993), Dunn & Griggs (2000), Reynolds (1997) and Sadler-Smith (2001)). Dedicated lectures introduced the aims of the learning styles project to the students, and seminars were booked in the IT studios to assist with the completion of an online version of the 'Building Excellence' LSI devised by Dunn and Dunn (for more details see Rundle & Dunn (2000) and www.building-excellence.com). Staff and students all received briefing sheets, and nearly 500 students took part in the online exercise. The Dunn and Dunn LSI is a commercial model and its quality reflects that background. We have an arrangement with the suppliers to use it at reduced cost on the basis of collaborative research (see Dunn et al, 2001). Students receive a 20-sheet printout of helpful, supportive strategies to aid their learning - and they really enjoyed using it!

The module assessment now includes a learning log for recording a set of activities on a week by week basis, as well as a group presentation and an individual written assignment.

Review of the programme

Module evaluation by students was carried out in seminar groups, and the feedback was discussed in a team meeting of staff at the end of the module. Given the size of the module there are considerable co-ordination problems. The students' response to the new module was generally favourable and they continue to find the learning styles focus useful. The lecture given by the senior managers was seen to be significant. The main evidence for the success of the module, however, is the significant improvement in attendance in most of the seminar groups.

Questionnaires were used both for the on-going research and to provide data about the module. The questionnaires asked students about their engagement with University life, about their attitudes to study and their previous learning experiences. About 400 questionnaires were returned in week two, and 126 in week ten. The figures below are from the week 10 raw data; however, these do provide an indication of what students find helpful with their learning:

Which of the following were helpful in your learning?

Learning Centre [Library]	88%
BX101 Business Skills	81%
Academic Tutor	81%
Other lecturers	69%
University administration	39%
University websites	73%
Other students	83%
Family	54%
Friends	80%
Kolb Learning Styles	63%
Online 'Building Excellence' LSI	70%

Through further analysis of the statistics we will be able to relate the results presented above to other factors, such as social class, educational background and success in the first semester. The conclusions will be used to inform the development of institutional strategies to encourage effective orientation to HE. In the meanwhile, the initial data appears to endorse BX101 as a possible model for this, in terms of its approach of trying to integrate opportunities for raising students' self-awareness of learning in HE within a coherent programme of fundamental skills development that combines scheduled sessions with academic tutors, online resources and specialised services.

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www.criticallearning.co.uk (for information on critical learning issues)

www.unl.ac.uk/hers (Higher Education Research Seminar series)

Biographical note

The authors comprise the 'Critical Learning Group' of staff who are teaching in the Business Departments in North Campus of London Metropolitan University - see entry under section below on University-based educational research.