

Factors Affecting Student Engagement with Learning: a pilot study in an Accounting department

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Introduction

The policy of expanding higher education in the UK has led to higher education institutions (HEIs) widening participation to students from non-traditional backgrounds (Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE, 2003) at the same time as student fees are being introduced (Curtis, 2004). Many HEIs, which have a high proportion of non-traditional students, have poor retention rates. This might be due to factors such as lack of preparedness for higher education, changing personal circumstances, and dissatisfaction with the course or institution as suggested by the National Audit Office (NAO - 2002). However it is contended that here are other factors which impact upon learning, such as commitments outside the HEI and the student's relationship with the institution. Non-traditional students are difficult to define, but tend to be those in employment for more than 12 hours a week, over 21, or with non-traditional qualifications. The institution where the study took place recruits a high proportion of students from non-traditional backgrounds. In order to support themselves, many students work in paid employment (Leathwood and Dalgety, 2002) for more than the 12 hours a week recognised by the Department of Education and Employment Committee (as cited in NAO, 2001) to have an adverse effect on learning.

Literature Review

To meet the needs of students and the demands of the profession and government, lecturers need to understand of how students engage in the subject to ensure that curricula and ways of learning are designed which enable all students to learn, despite the other commitments they might have. This is supported by Lucas (2002), who notes, with reference to his particular subject area, "the teaching of introductory accounting is revealed as a world where much is taken for granted and where contradictions and uncertainties remain unquestioned" (p. 201). Nixon *et al.* (2001) recognise that this is a time of changing roles for university lecturers: they state "The changing student identity has placed an emphasis on the need for pedagogical and curriculum change and, consequently on the professional identity of

the university teacher” (p. 232). Thus, the emphasis of this study is on the changed student profile, their relationship with the institution and consequent engagement in learning.

Several recent studies explore the effects of students working during degree courses (e.g. Curtis, 2004; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Watts, 2002). Paid employment has some benefits if it is in an area related to the student’s studies (Curtis and Shani, 2002) but there are also adverse effects. Curtis (2004) reports that working is now routine for students, with over 80% at a typical metropolitan HEI working more than ten hours a week and conclude that this results in students missing formal learning opportunities due to work commitments, and having less time outside university to study. Leathwood and Dalgety (2003) report that in a survey of 1600 students that two-thirds have difficulty in combining work, personal life and studying and conclude that such factors affect the quality of the student experience, and the willingness of students to continue their studies.

The students’ relationship with the HEI where they study may also impact upon learning. Reay, David and Ball (2001) consider Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* when they discuss the student relationship with HEIs. Habitus is the complex internalised core of an organisation or social institution from which the everyday experiences of those associated with it emanate. It is the source of day to day practices and as Reay *et al.* (2001) comment “it produces action, but because it confines possibilities to those feasible for the social groups the individual belongs to, much of the time those actions tend to be reproductive rather than transformative” (para 1.2). In the case of higher education, the implication is that some institutions might perpetuate the way they teach, despite the changing student population. Bourdieu (as cited in Swartz, 1997) contends that one of the main functions of education is to socialise students into a particular social cultural tradition, and by doing this it reinforces, but does not redistribute social capital. This leads to what Swartz (1997) terms a “regimented intellectual habitus” (p. 206), which encourages frequent examination and assessment. Whilst educationally this is useful for some it does not encourage an interest in research or intellectual development of the majority, merely the adoption of a strategy to pass the exams. It could be argued that this is what occurs in accounting in UK higher education, as the profession demands high standards in order for students to achieve exemptions from professional examinations. Therefore robust, well-designed qualitative studies are needed to explore the learning experience to enable universities to better meet the learning needs of those entering higher education from non-traditional backgrounds.

Higher education research has to satisfy two potentially conflicting groups of taskmasters: target-driven management, who need to know what achieves high pass rates and increases retention; and teaching practitioners, who need to better understand the learning process in order to empathise with the students and to improve the learning experience. Paradoxically, it is possible that increased

understanding of the learning experience will increase retention and thus satisfy the objectives of both management and practitioners.

The Study

The study commenced with an informal focus group with first-year students studying for the accounting and finance degree and identified issues which might impact upon learning. At a later date, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with seven student volunteers. These explored the learning experience and what engages students in learning. The interviews commenced with questions concerning age and qualifications; this acted as an ice-breaker. The interviews then developed using appropriate prompts to explore what encourages students to engage in learning and what disengaged them. The questions asked in the interviews were based on the broader education research literature concerning factors which might have an impact on learning. Factors discussed by students in the focus group, such as commitments away from the HEI, were also considered. The purpose of the interviews was to explore any other factors apart from learning styles and opportunities, (Coffield *et al.*, 2004) which might affect learning. The themes which emerged are summarised into factors which engage students in learning and those which disengage.

How do students engage in learning?

There are a host of variables which may engage students in learning. Many of these, such as location or numbers in the class, are out of the control of the teacher. However, the way in which learning opportunities are designed and implemented may be influenced. The study identified several ways of effectively engaging students in learning such as independent study, group learning, hand outs, tutorial questions and worked examples. Whilst the methods of engagement in learning are well documented, the interviews enabled exploration of why they worked, especially for students from non-traditional backgrounds who perhaps have other commitments to think about. Students realise that if they miss something due to other commitments, they have to catch up. Ways of doing this include group work with friends, using the Internet and practice questions using methods learnt in lectures or tutorials. Interviewees value the opportunity to discuss and to ask questions about the topics they learn. This emphasises self-engagement and knowledge of various sources of learning. The frequent practice of handing out notes, in many forms, such as Power-point slides or worked examples, is popular with all students as it enables them to concentrate on what the lecturer was saying, and to catch up if they miss a class.

Students perceived tutorials as one of the best learning opportunities. As one student commented: “Any questions you maybe had from one lecture, maybe something you did not understand, you had a chance to express it there and then

and develop your skills". Worked examples are also a popular way of learning. Students become more engaged in a topic when provided with material. It is important that in tutorials students are encouraged to do group work as they support each other. Tutorials at the Institute where the study was undertaken include up to 30 students, so they need to be well managed. For some it is a new way of learning: one participant comments, "I think I like the idea of tutors allowing us to get information from others, especially with the computer-based learning, because I never did that before, it was completely new to me". This highlights the need for lecturers to realise that the students have lives outside the Institution and that they have to empathise with them, and to encourage them to use each other as a resource.

The popularity of study away from formal learning opportunities suggests that students engage with each other and this also implies a willingness to learn. Whilst these methods are established from the more traditional students, it is encouraging that they also engage students from non-traditional backgrounds. However, it is even more important to consider what does not engage them, as this can lead to non-attendance and subsequent dropping out of the course, which rules out any learning.

How do students detach from learning?

The department where the study was conducted has a traditional lecture-tutorial model of teaching, with class sizes reaching 140 in lecture and 30 in tutorials, the interviews identified several factors which disengage students from learning such as detachment, boredom, non attendance, inflexibility of the institution and paid employment. There is an underlying theme of detachment in lectures, one student commenting, "Lectures are pretty good if they are not too long or boring". Another, when asked why they did not attend some lectures replied "you kind of get fed up of listening." However, giving students notes to refer to helps to engage, as "if I wasn't given any notes I may just leave because I don't understand anything". If the learning opportunities are perceived as boring, some students do not attend. For example, one student "missed the tutorials because I just didn't learn anything". This supports the desirability for professional development of teaching staff and the need to include the need to raise awareness of student's commitments outside the university.

On a broader note, the inflexibility of the institution and the semester system does little to aid engagement; comments included "after Easter, when you get back, you only have two weeks left and most of the students really don't feel like putting the effort in". The lack of weekend opening at some sites does not assist non-traditional students to engage with the institution. One participant suggested that "they could open the library on Sundays, so as to enable the students, who have to, I mean, cope with their studies". The most severe form of detachment occurs when students cannot attend classes due to other commitments, such as family or work. The main commitment outside university was employment: five of the students interviewed

had part-time jobs and yet they try to fit other commitments around study. The type of work is also an issue. Work which relates to the students' degree course is considered to be more beneficial (NAO, 2002). However, only one of the interviewees (accounting students) was employed in the financial sector; all the others were in retail or catering. The two students with young families seem to accept the need to manage other commitments. They have both returned to education and put thought into their responsibilities, one stating "well, going back to studies was quite something, and leaving work and being home with a child and then going back to studies!"; the other explained, "I am married and I have got to take care of my kids, my folks, my church is very important as well." This emphasises the importance of taking into account the commitments students have outside the Institution. The interviews identified several factors which lead to student detachment from learning, some of which, such as delivery of content, lecturers can address; other issues need to be addressed at an institutional level.

Discussion

The sample interviewed represent those from non-traditional backgrounds who have entered higher education since its expansion, and prior to current policy might have been excluded. However, during the study, it emerged that it was questionable if the institution, and those who work there have been given the opportunity to meet the more flexible learning needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds. For example, whilst the learning opportunities such as lectures engaged some students, they clearly did not engage all. This, and the strict semester-based system, led to disengagement in learning of some students. This could be said to be an example of Bourdieu's "regimented intellectual habitus" identified by Swartz (1997, p. 205). As the degree course is designed to ensure maximum exemption from professional accountancy examinations, students are forced to learn to pass examinations. Bourdieu (as cited in Swartz, 1997, p. 205) observed that this does "little to foster an interest in more probing intellectual exploration that is important for training teachers and researchers".

However, it is not just the institution and those teaching in it which have an impact on learning. Students' expectations and the level of outside commitments also influence engagement. Thomas (2002) identifies this as a problem for retention as, if HEIs only provide traditional learning opportunities students may not attend. The influence of paid employment on students also emerges as a key theme. The interviews here support the study of Leathwood and Dalgety (2003), who report that students have difficulty in combining work, personal life and the course they are studying. The interviews identify factors which concern potential problems with the institution's slowly changing habitus, and the difficulty students have in meeting expectations. Both these areas are of interest for further research, to develop a clearer sense of the engagement of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Previous research, this study, government policy and underlying theory all indicate

that there is a need for more research in the area. The concept of institutional habitus is relevant, as the policy of widening participation in higher education seeks to improve the expectations of those from non-traditional backgrounds. As Reay et al. (2004) put it: "habitus can be transformed through a process that raises or lowers an individual's expectations. Implicit in the concept is the possibility of a social trajectory that enables conditions of living that are very different from initial ones" (p. 435). Further studies are needed to explore the impact of the growing centralisation of some institutions on students' learning. Furthermore, the impact of other commitments on students need to be considered to ensure a more egalitarian system of higher education which enables all to learn, no matter what their background or commitments.

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Biographical note

Jon Lyons has been teaching at London Metropolitan University (and the former London Guildhall University) for fifteen years. He is the Learning and Teaching Facilitator in the Department of Accounting, Banking and Financial Services. With an interest in enabling students from non-traditional backgrounds to succeed in their studies, Jon has given several papers at national conference. This piece is extracted from a paper given at The British Accounting Association conference (Special Interest Group: Education) in 2005, which won the award for best emerging paper. Jon is currently studying for a Doctorate in Education at Kings College, which he expects to complete in the next 2 to 3 years.