

## Read to Succeed

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### Introduction

This paper outlines the interim results of a continuing collaboration between a module leader and an academic liaison librarian. They identified an opportunity to collaborate on a project aimed at the reconfiguration of an undergraduate module on a professional, Early Years teaching degree, to embed support for academic literacies.

### Context and Rationale

The sample for the study was a first year cohort of 25 students on a B.Ed Early Years Teaching undergraduate degree at London Metropolitan University, a large, urban institution with a linguistically and culturally diverse body of students. The authors developed an intervention programme and, in line with Gilman and Kunkel (2010) study about changing roles of university librarians, they believed that 'an essential first step ... was to establish common goals, understanding and vocabulary'. (p.24) between all participants. Focussing on one module, "Aspects of Early Years Play and Learning", they sought to reshape their positions and develop their (the authors') capacity for innovation and change. (*Ibid.* p.31)

#### *A Blended Learning approach*

The authors used a shared VLE to support students' learning. This was used mainly to facilitate opportunities for students to receive individual feedback on weekly formative tasks that consisted of engaging in asynchronous discussions and revisiting session materials. Leese (2005) found that 'students are more likely to engage with technology if [they believe] it will enhance their performance.' (p.73). Similarly, MacDonald and Evans (2008, p.88) noted that undergraduate learners responded favourably to being linked, through blended learning, to workplace learners, stressing that such approaches offer students an 'increased opportunity to relate

theoretical content to the real world.’ Again, Lopez-Estrada (2008) found that such blended learning approaches made it possible for student teachers on placement to gain support from their university tutors and peers more easily. Therefore, in this project, technology became the main vehicle for communication with students during their time at university, on placement and at home. Simultaneously, the VLE was used to support students in their development of independent working styles, to participate in discussions and receive individual, descriptive feedback.

### *The Issues*

It was noted that a significant number of written assignments submitted by first year students on the B.Ed Early Years Teaching programme suggested they had issues with their reading. More specifically, while students were, in general, able to refer to some key texts, their assignments demonstrated they were facing greater challenges. Firstly, challenges in making coherent links between their reading and their practice on placements; secondly, challenges in accessing a wider range of appropriate reading material and, thirdly, challenges in developing their own critical stance in relation to their reading.

The project was conceived at a time when London Metropolitan University was beginning to seek new ways to embed support for academic literacies within the core academic offer, rather than sending students out for satellite, off-course, catch-up interventions. This was in line with recommendations that embedding academic support within a course is more effective than signposting students to adjoining, disembedded support (Warren, 2006; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007) It also matched Goen-Salter’s (2008) notion of providing a support model as ‘an explicit scaffold for learning’ (p.87) emphasising ‘the important bridge between academic learning and students’ lived experiences in the world beyond...’ (Ibid.).

For Geon-Salter, the experience of reading involves not only the skills of de-coding, comprehension and interpretation of textual material but also an ability to make appropriate reference to one’s own ‘social and cultural location’ (Ibid.). Students involved in this project were supported in the process of making links with their own experiences of learning, including their learning on professional placements in Children’s Centres.

### **Project Objectives**

The aim of this project was to explore effective ways for academic liaison librarians to work with academic tutors in offering scaffolded support to first year undergraduate students who need to acquire the academic discourses needed for them to show they have made the transition to university-level study. This collaborative project sought to give the academic liaison librarian ‘increased visibility’ (Gilman & Kunkel, 2010, p.31) in both the university and the online learning spaces.

York et al (2010) also note that involving librarians in academic encounters with students enabled the librarians 'to become active participants, not just suppliers of text and technologies.' (p.196) and to this end, the librarian and tutor collaborated in an effort to develop information-literate students – an attribute considered to be essential for both 'lifelong learning' and 'employability' (Webber, 2000 cited by Big Blue Project final report, 2002, p. 6; SCONUL, 1999, 2007).

More specifically, they supported the students in making links between their reading of policy documents and theoretical works, and a connection to their emerging professional practice in London-wide centres. These are particularly challenging requirements for first year undergraduate students in a large, urban university, the majority of whom are the first in their families to progress to Higher Education.

The librarian and tutor offered students opportunities to experience 'success' in frequently-offered 'bite-sized chunks' (Marriott, 2009, p.251) - short, formative assessments, in the hope that students would have more chance of succeeding in the module summative assessments. The project also supported the transition towards students engaging in more independent study patterns, helping them to build self-confidence and autonomy as new academics and aspiring teachers. Throughout the intervention, students were supported by the academic liaison librarian in selecting and accessing a wide variety of online and hard-copy reading, evaluating its quality and making links between that reading and their experience at Children's Centres.

## **Methodology**

The researchers adopted a qualitative, action research approach, positioning themselves within an interpretive paradigm and they also sought students' own narrative accounts of their learning. This was considered to be an effective way for students to reveal their emerging learning positions. Further, all students taking part in the module contributed brief, evaluative accounts of how their reading had impacted, or might impact, on their practical experience on professional placements and their understanding and syntheses of academic theory. At the end of each face-to-face session, students' accounts were sought in relation to how they had applied their reading to their professional and academic roles. Some students also volunteered to share their learning more extensively by offering accounts of their learning journeys since beginning the module in question.

The researcher/project leaders also shared their own learning stories with each other as they evaluated each session and planned the next. At each stage of the project they met in a physical space to evaluate and reflect on the sessions, analyse student responses and plan the next steps. Through this phase of the project the librarian acquired student feedback using the 'One minute paper' classroom assessment technique developed by Angelo and Cross (1998). This enabled a response at the very point of students' learning. The project leaders not only

analysed and acted on these responses, but also shared their joy and satisfaction at students' positive responses, articulation of their learning and actual take-up of the support offered.

### *Discussion of the innovation*

The librarian was present for a proportion of each session over six weeks, offering incremental steps in learning and relating the learning content to the module formative and summative assessment tasks. The module tutor planned the face to face and virtual learning activities as opportunities for students to represent or realise their reading in a range of modes, including drawing, acting, making, discussing, writing, blogging and posting online comments.

Students were supported to 'become actively engaged in their learning and the learning and teaching process, rather than be passive recipients of knowledge and information.' (Groves & O'Donoghue, 2009, p.147) This was in order to include all learning styles and acknowledge that learning can be realised multi-modally. As one student clearly articulated during a structured interview, "Ideas come to me when I do things", and another student said: "I've always learned better from being practical." The librarian and tutor consciously adopted this approach of offering students a range of modes through which to realise their reading comprehension. Just as on placements students are required to translate their university reading **about** learning and teaching into **actual** learning and teaching, so in each session students were required to translate their reading for each session into concrete experiences or outputs.

The project leaders adopted a social constructivist approach, striving to support new students to read widely, negotiate meanings with their peers, assimilate new learning and begin to make links between their reading and practical experience on placements. To this end, students were invited to post their reflections on children's play experiences on their own learning blogs. This online activity was linked to the final presentation assessment at which students were asked to refer to their blogs. Although this approach was targeted primarily at students who needed to be 'extrinsically motivated' (Ibid.) in order to engage in their learning, it ensured full participation in this online reflective writing activity. As emphasised by Groves and O'Donoghue, 'the technology does not have to be complex or leading edge. It does, however, need to be constructively aligned with the curriculum objectives and learning outcomes.' (Ibid., p.148)

### *Project Impact*

The impact of the project was gauged through an analysis of the end-of-semester assessment outcomes, student participation in the VLE and students' ongoing and end-of-semester evaluations. The first cohort of students who participated in the

project, achieved high levels of success both in the module and their Professional Placement. Some students commented that they were able to see particular theories of play and learning in action at their placement settings. Other students were able to make links between their observations of children at play and their reading.

Students were invited to carry out very quick reflections at the end of each face-to-face session at university under the following prompts: 'What did you learn through your reading and by participating in the session activities?', 'How will this affect your approach on professional placement experience?' and 'What do you want to read more about?' Some responses referred to emotions, with one student making reference to what she experienced as "the joy of learning", and another student expressing that she was "moved" by a certain aspect of history she had read about, associated with an educational approach. Many of the responses revealed a deep level of learning and contained evidence that, as in a study by Lopez-Estrada with a similarly diverse group of students at the similarly large, urban Texas Pan American University, these first year students at London Metropolitan University were 'bridging theory to practice, and deepening their critical thinking skills.' (Lopez-Estrada, 2008, p.89) In the first year, 97% of students who submitted their module assessments passed at the first attempt.

Student evaluations of their learning were gathered by means of module-specific online questionnaire embedded on the VLE. Students commented on the level of support they received by the tutor and librarian, the increased confidence they felt about approaching the summative assignments and their newly-acquired skills, especially in relation to referencing their work.

### *Conclusions*

A positive outcome of the project was that student who found using the library resources threatening or envisaged impenetrable barriers to library services acquired the skills to locate, evaluate and critique a range of appropriate reading. Furthermore, they re-positioned the library services as accessible. Some students reported increased confidence in being able to "get a good grade" and "to do well in their assignments". In these ways, they progressed from having relatively little understanding about the library to a realisation that it is part of their learning landscape, the "real world" service (with helpful people, comfortable spaces and a wealth of resources) in and with which to develop academically.

Students had access to their librarian at their point of need and were supported to acquire increased independence as researchers. They were motivated to seek and evaluate appropriate reading material for themselves and apply these skills to other modules in the programme.

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## **Biographical notes**

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