"To embed or not to embed, that is the question …"

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The issue

For the last three years the School of Art and Design (SAD) has run a large, core, school-wide level 1 model with an academic literacies approach to developing research and writing skills assessed by ePortfolio. This module was designed and delivered by a team of subject and study skills specialists. As the module has matured ownership has moved from central specialist tutors, increasingly towards subject areas. There is clear evidence of better student achievement when subject staff have engaged with and supported the module. However, subject staff and students must see a value and benefit in giving and receiving academic writing 'skills'.

The question now is whether to fully embed this work in subject curriculum or keep a discreet contextualised strand across all courses that would start with a study skills type module at level 1, what might students gain or lose?

The Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL): Critical Interventions for Enhanced Learning (CIEL) context

Our CETL: CIEL is based on the first-year student experience and is multi-disciplinary. It identifies excellent practice in four areas: Art & Design; Applied Sciences; Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences and Education. These practices comprise critical interventions for the enhancement of achievement, progression and retention.

Critical Interventions for Enhanced Learning (CIEL) identifies pedagogies, support systems, activities and initiatives that in a variety of ways offer critical interventions that help a student along his/her journey towards successfully achieving their goals.

At the start of their studies in the School of Art and Design (SAD) students use individual learning profiles (ILP), (self-evaluation questionnaires that allow you to audit your current knowledge, skills and abilities) to identify their own learning needs. The Centre for Learner Development (CLD) in SAD follows up on what students have identified in these ILP's with group and individual support. The CLD was set up with funding from CIEL as a one-stop-shop for student support with specialist contextualised academic support for study skills and dyslexia. Since the academic year 2006/7 at level 1, these activities and support are delivered via a semester 1, core, school-wide module, AD1007 'Introduction to Research and study skills'. The assessment for this module is via an ePortfolio where students can reflect on their experiences, undertaken formative assessments, gain both peer and tutor feedback, evidence achievement and stitch together and present their journey for summative assessment. The module adopted an academic literacies approach that draws on the work of Mary Lea (2004). The development of the module brought together a team of people from the academic school and the CETL. Lea, comments, "Supporting the relationship between writing and learning is not generally regarded as the remit of course designers. As subject specialists they are usually primarily concerned with course content and, therefore, often overlook the ways in which writing and textual practices more generally are central to the process of learning".

Having run this module for three years and seen a significant move towards subject 'ownership' of the learning. We are now asking whether to fully embed this learning and support in subject modules or not to embed, keeping a discreet school-wide contextual strand to all courses starting with a learning skills module at level 1. This could be facilitated by specialist contextualised academic study support tutors.

What we found meaningful from an academic literacies approach

Looking at the literature relating to academic literacies and academic socialisation, by running module design seminars and by debate and discussion, CIEL and subject staff felt that an academic literacies approach would give a framework and ethos for the delivery of research and study skills that would be meaningful and positive. What we particular liked were the following:

Understanding different settings, gaining a repertoire of practice, and how to apply this knowledge. All our courses are modular this means that students have to be aware that they need to gain a repertoire of skills to produce work to different expectations from different subjects, modules or even lecturers.

Moving away from a deficit study skills model towards reading and writing in a particular discipline. With an academic literacies approach we might reasonably be sure that students are unaware of academic writing conventions in a given subject in higher education, but that this does not mean that they can't read and write.

Understanding staff expectations. Members of staff may not always clearly articulate their expectations of academic writing in their discipline to their students. To do this staff need to identify clearly what those expectations are and the reasons for them.

Formative feedback. We need to make sure that students are developing their academic writing skills. The use of formative feedback needs to be used to help them gain these skills.

Active writing – little and often We found that it was important to get students writing and then to give feedback to develop their repertoire of skills. Writing a little and often also reinforced the expectation that students in the modular scheme needed to work over the whole period of the semester.

The elements of an academic literacies approach together with the use of an ePortfolio system to support PDP processes can be found within the level 1 taught curriculum via the use of scaffolded web folio templates an unexpected outcome of this approach being the early identification of risk.

Case study: The School of Art and Design(SAD)

The School is one of four lead academic areas in CIEL based on their work on the design and development of an Individual Learning Profile (ILP) (Salter and Peacock 2001, 2002 and 2003). The ILP was originally a paper-based self-assessment document that asked a student to rate their own confidence in their skills for learning. The ILP led to the development of the Profile tool in the PebblePad software. The 'learning profile' as the ILP became, could be used as a stand alone entity or as something that could be used and linked to other applications such as action plans or web folios. In SAD they linked the ILP to a web folio and set it as an early task for students to complete and publish to their tutors. Prior to the academic year 2006/7 the use of the ILP sat outside the taught curriculum being introduced to students in Welcome Week and followed up by Personal Academic Tutors (PAT's) who were, is possible, staff within the subject(s) that students were studying.

An outcome of embedding this task in a module as the first piece of formative self-assessment was an increase in students asking for support. In 2006, before the use of a scaffolded web folio template with formative activities, 44 students came forward for additional support. In 2007 (the introduction of the web folio) 198 students came forward, rising in 2008 to 253 asking for help. Of the students being helped by the CLD in 2008, 94% progressed successfully on their course. This is a higher percentage than the school average. Of particular note is a culture shift in both staff and students that now sees asking for help not as a stigma or a sign of inadequacy but as a sensible thing to do in order to understand the expectations of studying in HE and as a way of improving your own learning.

By using short formative activities, as well as the CLD, subject teaching staff and personal tutors were able to make contact with their students to enable the identification of support needs and any non-academic issues that might be affecting student learning. Issues highlighted included such things as IT facilities had been stopped through non-payment of

fees, non-attendance to the taught sessions, some misunderstanding of the instructions given and basic ITC skills which were hampering student engagement with the e-learning opportunities offered by the University. All issues raised were able to be addressed before it was too late for the student to complete their work.

The use of the scaffolded template has knitted together the student activities, academic literacies and subject content and created a space for meaningful dialogue and early identification of risk with appropriate action being taken. Like many schools of art and design ours has a disproportionly large number of students with dyslexia compared to other subject areas. The module team has now developed podcasts (Dyson and Rhodes 2008) to support the student activities in response to the needs of this group of students.

An unexpected outcome of the use of the ePortfolio is that there has been an increase in the submission of work. This school-wide core level 1 module has an average of 440 students. It is taught in four iterations by subject and specialist study skills tutors.

- Week 1: students down load and personalise a scaffolded ePortfolio template provided by their tutors this included elements that a student must personalise and formative tasks that when completed will form the summative assessment.
- Week 3: Students were expected to personalise and use the ILP in their ePortfolio submitting it to their tutor.
- Week 3: 210 ePortfolios were submitted.
- Week 4: students are reminded that ePortfolios needed to be submitted for formative feedback
- Week 5: 330 students had submitted at this point. The 140 students who had not submitted were contacted by their tutor or a member of support department staff (electronically initially)
- Week 6: 110 students identified potentially 'at risk' as after repeated reminders they still had not submitted any work.
- Week 12: All but 20 ePortfolios were received for assessment

The approach the team took was to develop the students' activities and what they would learn both within the class contact time and student directed learning activities, putting the student experience at the heart of the module. The students' own personal development planning was at the core of this. They would be given student directed learning tasks that would be used for peer and formative assessment. The summative assessment would require certain minimum pieces of evidence including: an individual action plan with targets, an essay project plan and a short essay based on the plan that had already been submitted

In the academic year 2006/7 the learning was led and directed by the CLD supported by CIEL with some subject input. A three hour teaching session was broken down into the first hour being delivered by the CLD concentrating on introducing the why and how of academic writing, followed up by two hours looking at subject specific issues and practical application. These taught sessions were reinforced by student directed learning in the ePortfolio. In the academic year 2008/9 this has now shifted with the subject specific staff being supported by the CLD staff to deliver the module learning outcomes.

Issues raised

1. Understanding staff expectations. Members of staff may not always clearly articulate their expectations of academic writing in their discipline to their students. To do this staff needed to identify clearly what those expectations are and the reasons for them. The learning and teaching culture within art and design disciplines can mean that this is perceived as the territory of theoretical areas that has nothing to do with practical application or skills which can be seen as more legitimate and desirable by both staff and students. This can be exacerbated by the use of visiting lecturers and fractional posts.

2. Delivery and assessment via ePortfolio. The central, specialist teaching team provided one to one and group support to try to engage students early on and build confidence with using

the software. The second time this module was taught, seminars were also held each week where students could complete activities within an IT lab environment. Subject staff were encouraged to join these sessions. This helped to develop confidence and highlight issues students and staff may be having with accessing and using the software.

In the finding of a recent evaluation of the impact of PDP and the use of an ePortfolio (Lawton and Purnell 2009), ePDP activities can be onerous for staff (particularly with large group sizes) as often can be perceived as 'add on' to discipline content. Students can sometimes see it as onerous too, unless they can see the value and benefit and how it fits with the bigger picture of their learning in HE and their chosen career path.

3. *Not perceived as a subject module.* Despite trying to avoiding a 'generic' study skills approach, some students felt that the module was not adequately subject-specific. Familiarity with more traditional, practice based teaching meant that some students found it difficult to relate the research and study skills to the rest of their course. There is clear evidence in student grades between subject areas where staff have engaged with this module and in those where this has not happened. Students who have been encouraged to engage with this module and made to see the relevance to their other modules by subject staff on average have grade points higher than those who have not.

 4.How do you give meaning and relevance? Students perceived that this module has a far greater workload than others. However, this module reflects the amount of hours that students should be studying (150 hours of both directed and self directed learning for a 15 credit module). Ironically reflection and personal development planning when identified as a written activity was sometimes seen as tiresome and worthless. However, sketching and working up ideas, critiques and show cases linked to creative and practical activities was not seen in the same way. It can be argued that creative activities develop the same critical thinking skills though not the academic writing skills.

Question
So, should the learning in this module be fully embedded in subject curriculum or stay part of a central but contextualised strand, what might students gain or lose?

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