CETL Briefing Papers: Embedding Learning Skills into the Curriculum.

Karen Clarke and Debra Cureton

Project Lead Karen Clarke, School of Education

Aims of the Initiative

The transnational widening of participation in higher education and the concomitant emphasis on promoting successful progression and high retention are focusing attention on how best to create supportive learning environments in HE. Using a phenomenographic approach, this briefing describes variance in how first year undergraduate students experience the learning of generic, subject-related and metacognitive skills within a study skills module integrated into education programs. Responses ranging from a lack of engagement in the module to evidence of increased confidence, criticality, self-reflection and change as a learner were found. It is concluded that alternative ways of promoting the learning of study skills, which, whilst potentially including all learners, brings significant ramifications for the professional development of university lecturers.

Description of the Initiative

This initiative was a research program that examined the embedding of learning skills into the Curriculum for first year undergraduates. This research took the form of a case study which was influenced by a phenomenographic perspective (Marton, 1981; Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth 1997; Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984) of students' perceptions of their experience on the Learning for Success module. Phenomenography explores how concepts, principles and phenomena are perceived, experienced and understood in specific contexts and is thus concerned with the direct exploration of experiences (Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984). It is an approach which is used to tackle "questions of relevance to learning and understanding in an educational setting" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.111) and to describe "the limited number of qualitatively different ways in ways in which we experience phenomena and present this variation in terms of logically related categories of description" (Martin, Trigwell, Prosser, & Ramsden, 2003, p. 249). In this study this means identifying the qualitative *variation* in the experience of learning study skills by first year undergraduate students and describing this variation in terms of categories. This is a second order perspective in which the world is described by individual learners through reflective accounts of their learning on the module.

In total, 205 students studied this module in the academic year 2005-06. All students were asked if they wished to take part in the study; this was a self-selection method whereby students were asked to sign a statement agreeing to participate. There were no penalties for non-participation and 73 students initially agreed to take part. Of this group 62 students submitted reflective logs, 18 of which were also respondents in one of three focus groups.

The principle data collection instruments were: (a) a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of the students in terms of the skills developed in the module; (b) a written reflective account of students' personal development throughout the 26 weeks of the module based on the original SWOT analysis; and (c) the end of module written student evaluations. In order to provide some direction to students, tutors modelled a section of how a reflective account might be written and also provided examples of completed reflective accounts from previous student cohorts.

The reflective accounts provided an appraisal of students' perceptions of their achievement of the learning outcomes of the module. In addition, students also considered how the skills acquired on the module enabled them to continue with their studies in a more effective way. In the reflective account, students were invited to discuss in a constructive and analytical manner, any areas that they felt were not beneficial to their learning. This research study also used focus groups to bring together participants who shared the same experience, but not necessarily the same interpretation and perspective, to provide a source of data to validate the finding from the reflective accounts. Three focus group interviews were conducted; two comprised mature students on a part-time foundation degree and the third comprised 5 first year undergraduate students on specialist degree programs. The group facilitator for all three groups was an academic who did not teach on the module but who was familiar with first year HE work.

The authors of the article and the research assistant arrived at the categories of responses to the experience of the module independently. Initially the principle researcher and the research assistant analyzed the data independently and identified variation in the categories relating to the learning of each type of skill. The two researchers and the assistant then shared their analyses and consensus was reached. Verbatim quotations were then selected to describe the essence of the variation in each category rather than a rich description of students' experience. Respondents cited from the reflective accounts are identified by their initials and those from the focus groups alphabetically from A-X.

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

A strong theme in the different experiences of learning presented here is variance in engagement in learning. The technique of using a SWOT analysis at the start of the module, together with a range of blended activities to promote frequent self-assessment of learning throughout the 26 weeks, were deemed by respondents to be appropriate. Learning in relation to generic and subject related skills and metacognition was lecturer, peer and self-directed and took was in line with both Biggs' (2003) and Peters' (2000) criteria relating to location, mode and the originators of learning. Given that a similar blend of approaches was also used in relation to the teaching of each of the skills; it appears that the method of teaching and learning is not here a decisive factor in explaining inconsistencies between the level of respondents' engagement.

However, the spread in the level of engagement described in this article begs the question as to whether integrating a skills module into a program study offers the most effective way to create a supportive learning environment. Given that the module constitutes 25% of the year one undergraduate program, any variance in engagement threatens to compromise the achievement of high retention and progression rate for all students. Although the learning of generic and subject skills in an integrated program can be achieved by many students, the findings of this research suggest that the quest to offer and include all students means rethinking the teaching of both generic and subject-related study skills.

The findings in relation to the teaching of subject-related skills in this research suggest that there is insufficient emphasis on skills in the module. In order for all students to achieve a high level of competency there needs to be more opportunities for the development of these skills. The dislocation between the development of these skills and the context in which they are applied appears to preclude their effective development; suggesting that the embedding of these skills within subject modules over a three year program might be efficacious.

Conclusions relating to the learning of generic and metacognitive skills are more equivocal. While the findings suggest that a module devoted to generic study skills should not be core for all students, there is ample evidence to suggest that a shorter option module carrying fewer credits might offer a valuable learning experience for some students. The results suggest that the embedding of these skills within subject modules, although possible, might not allow the flexibility of access based on previous experiences, which is required.

In relation to metacognitive skills, notwithstanding evidence suggesting that promoting the learning of these skills in a module integrated into a program is effective, the learning of these skills might be equally, effective were they embedded into subject teaching. Given that this research is advocating embedding the teaching of subject-related skills, the development of metacognition within subject modules would offer a supportive context spanning the three years of a degree program.

One caveat remains: the development of sophisticated learning environments at modular level inevitably demands significant commitment from all university lecturers, some of whom may hitherto have regarded their role rather more narrowly as subject lecturer. Inevitably this will require the provision and use of staff development opportunities.

In summary, this research has investigated the range of perceptions of first year students in relation to the acquisition of generic, subject-related and metacognitive study skills. A range of perceptions was found which suggest that the integration of a module within a program of study is not the most effective way to promote these skills for all students. This raises the possibility that if a more inclusive environment, which engages all learners, is to be created, then the teaching of subject-related and metacognitive skills needs to be embedded in subject teaching and learning. Further research is needed to posit models of acquiring generic study skills and to establish if the embedding of skills into subject modules poses an appropriate solution.

Policy Implications
HE Sector & Stakeholders
- Embedding what has been learned above into a common module that is core for all students is crucial. This module should utilise relevant materials and task, ensuring that tasks are frequent and increase in complexity. Utilising informal, peer and formative assessment methods are also useful.
- Staff Development is important in the delivery of this work. Teaching staff no only need to be skilled in academic writing but also skilled in the development and deliver of modules that enhance these skills within the student body.
- Personal Tutoring: The continuation of academic writing skills in sessions with Personal Tutors enhances the development of students' academic writing skills. It is crucial to generate the opportunity for at least two focused meetings between student and Personal Tutoring which look at the feedback students have received from their assignments. The reorganisation of Personal Tutoring hours to allow for more hours of Personal Tutoring with first years is crucial.

Business Case
Opportunity
- Ensuring students have good academic writing skills is demanded by the Education sector. By enhancing the academic writing skills of the students,

this initiative is enhancing the employability of the University of Wolverhampton Education Graduate.

- The generic module is transferable to other discipline and other academic levels.
- Staff Development needs to be considered especially in relation to how to teach academic writing skills to students. Staff also need to be up-skilled so that academic writing skills delivery can be transferred to ITC format

Risk analysis of not continuing the programme
- Teaching team members need to take responsibility for module so that sustainability can be achieved.
- The up-skilling staff, as mentioned above, will not as readily available. This will have implications for student performance and employability
- Not continuing the programme will also affect the retention and progression of Education Undergraduates. This programme has positively impacted on student performance and thus the number of student who progress from year one to year two (There has been a reduction in the percentage of E grades received by first year undergraduates. In the first year of this CETL initiative 35% of students received and E grade, in the second year this reduced to 19% and this further reduced in the third year to 10%)

Resource implications of the programme.
- This model can be implemented with large groups.
- The increased diversity as a result of widening participation and lower entry levels which has lead to students having ranging support need. Investment in focused academic writing support is crucial.

Expert Contacts and Links
Karen Clarke, University of Wolverhampton k.clarke@wlv.ac.uk
Amanda French, University of Wolverhampton a.french@wlv.ac.uk