Good Practice Guide in Learning and Teaching

Volume 3

Quality Unit
Aston Business School
February 2006

Part funded by an Aston University Excellence in Teaching Award

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

HELEN HIGSON

Once again this publication is produced to celebrate and promote good teaching and learning support and to offer encouragement to those imaginative and innovative staff who continue to wish to challenge students to learn to maximum effect. It is hoped that others will pick up some good ideas from the articles contained in this volume.

We had changed our editorial approach in drawing together the articles for this 2005/6 edition (our third) of the ABS Good Practice Guide. Firstly we have expanded our contributors beyond ABS academics. This year's articles have also been written by staff from other areas of the University, a PhD student, a post-doctoral researcher and staff working in learning support. We see this as an acknowledgement that the learning environment involves a range of people in the process of student support. We have also expanded the maximum length of the articles from two to five pages, in order to allow greater reflection on the issues.

The themes of the papers cluster around issues relating to diversity (widening participation and internationalisation of the student body), imaginative use of new technology (electronic reading on Blackboard™) and reflective practitioners, (reflection on rigour and relevance; on how best to train students in research ethics, relevance in the curriculum and the creativity of the teaching process) Discussion of efforts to train the HE teachers of the future looks forward to the next academic year when the Higher Education Academy's professional standards will be introduced across the sector.

In the last volume we mentioned the launch of the School's Research Centre in Higher Education Learning and Management (HELM). Since then HELM has stimulated a lot of activity across the School (and University) particularly linking research and teaching. A list of the HELM seminars is listed as an appendix to this publication. Further details can be obtained from Catherine Foster (c.s.foster@aston.ac.uk) who coordinates the HELM seminars. HELM has also won its first independent grant from the EU Leonardo programme to look at the effect of business education on employment. In its annual report to the ABS Research Committee HELM listed for 2004 and 2005, 11 refereed journal articles, 4 book chapters, 3 published conference papers, 18 conference papers, one official reports and £72,500 of grant money produced in this research area across the School. I hope that this shows that reflection on learning is live and well in ABS.

May I thank the contributors for taking time out of their busy schedules to write the articles and to Julie Green, the Quality Manager, for putting our diverse approaches into a coherent and publishable form.

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INTERCULTURAL TRAINING FOR INTERNATIONAL PLACEMENT STUDENTS

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Introduction

More and more students decide to do their placement year abroad. International Business and Modern Languages (IBML) students are required to do their placement in countries like Germany and France, but others find it increasingly attractive to use their placement year for improving language skills and getting international work experience.

These students, though keen on the adventure that an international placement provides, face a major life change. They have to manage the transition from study to work and also have to adapt to a new environment and new language. They need to form completely new social and professional relationships and adjust to new systems of social interaction. The cultural differences in this transition can be a big challenge. In order to help students to adjust more easily to another culture, perform better on their placement, and make the placement year a generally more satisfying experience, a voluntary training called ITIP (**I**ntercultural **T**raining for **I**nternational **P**lacements) is offered to all students who are willing to go on international placements. This training is open to all 2nd year students who are interested and is not connected to any course requirements. In the last academic year, over 60 students who are now on their placements all over the world have taken the training as a preparation for the cultural experience they encounter.

The ITIP training

ITIP is designed for the needs of Aston placement students. It is based on cultural differences between the UK and the cultures most placement students go to: France, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Its theoretical foundation lies in differences in cultural dimensions as they have been described recently in the GLOBE study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Didactic foundations are derived from intercultural training literature (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Young, 1986; Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004). ITIP is targeted towards a deep learning: students should understand why an answer is appropriate or not, and why a certain behavioural strategy might work out or not. Its aim is to facilitate the development of behavioural competencies for coping with cultural differences during the placement year. ITIP tries to provide students with an overarching cognitive framework to make sense of other cultures.

The structure of ITIP is in two parts: The first part is an individual online training which comprises three sessions of 90 minutes. The training can be accessed worldwide from any PC with Internet connection. Participants have one week to complete each session, so they get a continuous training for three consecutive weeks. In this part, participants work on little scenarios of cross-cultural encounters between British and French, German, Austrian, or Swiss people. All of these scenarios contain some sort of problem, for example, something goes wrong in communication, e.g. the other party (French, German etc.) is offended without obvious reason, or the protagonist (British) is faced with a difficult social situation and has to come up with appropriate solutions. Participants are asked to identify what exactly went wrong – not only on a superficial level, but what differences in fundamental values might have caused the misunderstanding. They might also be asked to come up with their own ideas how they would handle difficult situations if they were in the protagonist's place.

Example Scenario: The smoking flatmates

Gemma is a British exchange student at the University of Cologne. She shares a flat with three other German students: Irene, Klaus, and Markus. They get on very well with each other and often have great flat dinners. However, Gemma is increasingly annoyed by the fact that Irene and Markus are smokers, and that they smoke at home, too. Especially Irene smokes a lot at home and often leaves the full ashtray on the kitchen table. Gemma has the impression that Germans in general seem less concerned about the health risks arising from smoking, and she tries to put up with it as good as possible. However, in the weeks before her exams Gemma becomes quite irritated by the smoke in the flat. She really wants to do something but is afraid to come across like a milksop when she complains. But being rude is not in her interest, either.

What would you do in Gemma's situation? (here students have space to come up with their own answer)

Which of the following actions do you think is best?

- *I would put up a big "non-smoking" sign on my door and hope Irene and Markus respect that.*
- *I would complain at dinner that I've been suffering from headache and little appetite for the last week. So I give them the chance to offer to change their smoking habits.*
- *I would ask Klaus what he thinks I can do. He should know best.*
- *I would directly ask Irene and Markus the next time I see them to reduce their cigarettes at home because it makes me sick.*

After coming up with their own answers, students evaluate various suggestions for explanations or behavioural strategies. They receive extensive feedback about cultural differences underlying each scenario. Explanations are given for the reasons why a specific answer might be most appropriate or a behavioural strategy might be most effective. After each session, students work on a revision page which connects the scenarios they worked on, and provides a meaningful system for understanding the cultural differences displayed in the scenarios. Students also evaluate their understanding of these cultural differences and their ability to cope with them.

The second part of the training is a 2 hour workshop (2-5 participants) with host nationals ("cultural experts") from Germany and France. The workshop is designed to complement the online sessions and allow students to try out behavioural strategies in a psychologically "safe" setting. Students discuss with their trainer, the cultural experts, and each other what they learnt in the training and which aspects of cultural differences they found most difficult. They are encouraged to talk about their fears and expectations regarding the placement and exchange experiences. The heart of the workshop is a one-to-one role play by each student with the cultural expert from Germany and France. In this role play (done in English, French, or German) the students are put into the following situation: They are on their placement abroad and have a meeting with their supervisor about permission to take a language course. Their goal is to get permission for the course although it coincides with their working hours. In this role play students apply their cultural knowledge, exercise their language skills and get a feeling of negotiating difficult problems in a foreign language. The workshop is concluded with feedback from the cultural experts about how the students are doing in the role play and recommendations on culturally appropriate negotiation strategies. Students also receive a training certificate and a summary of the contents addressed in the training.

Advantages

Preparing students for their international placement was received very well, students felt it took away some of their anxiety about the whole cultural experience and equipped them with an idea of what they could expect on their placements. In ITIP they also gained some confidence in their own skills of handling difficult situations abroad. As one student put it: *"I think I know now that it won't be easy. But I also know I'll manage somehow"*.

There are three features of ITIP which, in my opinion, are most advantageous to student learning:

1. ITIP is designed for students. They can connect with the scenarios, identify with protagonists, and remember these scenarios easily. The cognitive involvement of students seemed to be quite high, despite working mostly on a computer screen.
2. Delivering most of ITIP in individual online sessions enabled many students to fit ITIP into their already tight schedules. As ITIP participants come from various courses (IBML, MAS, IBE, BAM, Combined Honours, and others), their diaries are so diverse that it would be almost impossible to find a time for all student to attend an additional training like ITIP. In this sense, the online format facilitated participation.
3. ITIP is voluntary. It is not related to any course requirements. No one involved in ITIP (trainer, culture experts) was in a lecturer position to any of the students. I feel the informal, pressure-free environment of ITIP contributed greatly to students' openness. They talked very freely in the workshops about their hopes and fears, problems and successes with their placement. This in turn improved their learning and self-confidence.

Disadvantages

Despite the positive reaction from the students who completed ITIP, some disadvantages of the training format should be mentioned.

Firstly, ITIP relies heavily on the functioning and availability of technology (stable server, survey software, internet access from participants) especially during the individual online sessions. The process leading up to ITIP going live is quite time consuming. Once the training is live, changes are difficult. Initially I encountered difficulties with software and server stability which also frustrated students – e.g. when they couldn't access the training. Delivering the first training part online also means little contact between students and trainer prior to the workshop. Reliance on emails does not always work. A central point of contact, therefore, became necessary and I am grateful to all the people in the Aston Business School's Placement Office who have helped in this process.

Further, ITIP relies completely on students' intrinsic motivation. There are no incentives connected with training participation or completion other than personal development. It seems many students are interested in the training, but cannot manage to complete their online sessions in time, mostly because they felt their time tables were too full to incur in any activities that were not absolutely essential for course completion.

In this sense, the voluntary nature of ITIP fosters a self-selection bias. Those students with a good time management can easily make time to participate, while those students who are struggling with their studies anyway find it hard to take up extra commitments. Maybe exactly those students who struggle most with their studies would actually need the training most – they are likely to be the ones most stressed out and most anxious about the culture shock when going abroad. They might also be the ones who incur many personal and academic problems during their placement year.

A follow up questionnaire that aims to shed light on this question is being sent to all international placement students during their year abroad.

Conclusion

International experience and intercultural skills are more important for students than ever before. International placements are a unique opportunity to obtain both. ITIP is a small initiative to support students who are willing to immerse themselves into the experience of international placements and can help them to get a better understanding of what might expect them in another country. It is not and cannot be a recipe for faultless cultural adjustment and extraordinary performance. But it offers a framework of cultural differences that allows students to understand a culture's underlying values and enables them to develop coping strategies for difficult situations. In this sense, ITIP can help students to adjust more easily to their new placement environment, enjoy their year abroad and improve their placement performance. Participating in ITIP means a substantial amount of time spent on personal development, which sometimes can be hard to manage. However, those students who have completed the training have already found it very helpful. They have gained confidence and have a more positive attitude towards their year abroad than before.

I personally want to thank all the people who have helped me develop and run ITIP in the last two years, most notably the Aston Business School Placement Office, AMIRS and many course coordinators and tutors who allowed me to use their lectures to inform students about ITIP. Without their generous support ITIP would not have been possible.

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Example used with 2nd year students from various
courses willing to go on international placements.

ACCESSING ELECTRONIC READINGS THROUGH THE BLACKBOARD™ VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

JACKIE BROCKLEBANK

A Pilot Project carried out by Library and Information Services (LIS) on behalf of Aston Business School

Introduction

Reading lists take the form of books, chapters within books, journal articles, conference proceedings and so on. It is more and more difficult to satisfy demand in the form of physical resources given the increasing numbers of students at Aston University. Demand can be met by buying multiple copies of texts or by putting printed copies of articles into the Short Loan Collection but access depends on the item being physically available to one person at a time.

Web based electronic journal provision has made access easier but still requires the student to find the article by interrogating a database or e-journal provider.

Environmental factors

Students are demanding easier ways of finding material and appear to have led the way in demanding resources for their modules to be mounted on a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as Blackboard™. Students can log in and see everything that they need for a module from timetables to lecture notes, from bulletin boards to performing interactive tasks such as tests.

The VLE could also be the natural home for targeted electronic readings. Professor Jim Love from Aston Business School had asked LIS if it were possible to do this for a final year module in 'Economics of Multinational Enterprise' . Resources recommended included book chapters, journal articles and other types of literature. Although this may sound easy, digitising material and mounting on a server involves seeking permission from the copyright owner (and possibly payment) as well as the digitisation service. Unfortunately this process can be long and drawn out with copyright sometimes difficult to establish and publishers unwilling to grant permissions. This can result in a lot of time being spent with little progress and no guaranteed outcomes. Not surprisingly a commercial service called HERON (Higher Education Resources Online) exists to do this work. HERON offers a complete service eg, copyright clearance and digitisation. Over 80 University libraries use this service. It is a subscription based service with an annual charge of £750, with payment for clearance and digitisation charged separately. It was almost impossible to budget for an average cost since publishers' charges are different (ranging from 5p to 25p per page per student). I decided I would like to try using Heron to see if it was economically viable and to test student reaction, usage and learning. In order to do this I received some financial support from the Subject Group Convenor in charge of the module, Professor Jim Love, who agreed to pay for the pilot project readings to support his course. The project started in August 2004.

Aims of the Pilot Project

There were several reasons for trying the HERON service:

- To simplify the copyright clearance procedure
- To obtain digitised documents
- To encourage good practice by setting up a process which would provide a legal system for mounting digital copies
- To help students find targeted resources
- To help academics ensure that students were pointed to specific readings

Advantages of this approach

- Streamlined procedure for copyright clearance and digitisation
- All copies obtained and mounted are legal (HEIs in general are finding it difficult to police VLEs for infringing copies)
- One stop shop for academics in LIS for all digital clearance
- Technically easy to manage

Disadvantages of this approach

- It was costly to retrieve the readings (although there are some controls) Overall almost twice as much as was thought
- It was impossible to obtain reliable usage figures (even though the initial indications were good, Blackboard™ cannot supply reliable usage statistics)
- As LIS does not have a VLE it relied on having an excellent relationship with the Blackboard™ coordinator to mount, remove and monitor readings
- It relied on pump priming to start up the system and will rely on continued funding through a portion of the Library & Information Resources budget in a similar way to Inter-library loan expenditure

New developments

Since the pilot project there has been a major development. There is now a trial blanket digitisation licence for Higher Education which allows HEIs to digitise resources which they ‘own’. Aston University has signed this licence and paid the extra licence fee. The implications of this are far reaching. The conditions of the licence mean that Aston needs to keep records of all material which is digitised including bibliographic details, how many students will be accessing the material, which course the material is for and when the period of study ends. This information needs to be fed back to Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) and they in turn will be reporting to publishers. Publishers are naturally worried that their market will be affected. Fortunately the licence negotiators have been able to include all UK publishers in this trial scheme but we wait to see if any will exclude themselves as a result of this new way of working.

The licence has similar restrictions to the photocopying licence which means that only one article from a journal or one chapter from a book can be digitised for a particular course.

From Aston’s point of view it means that the academics need to be aware that the licence exists and what the procedures are for obtaining digital copies. Unfortunately this is far from clear at the moment. One stumbling block is that we would still need to outsource digitisation which means that there is a cost which must be borne somewhere. The good news is that the digitisation costs are likely to be much more manageable – around £20 an item. At the moment the true cost of digitisation is probably hidden as the activity cannot be centrally monitored.

The advantages are that students and staff should have more opportunities to access material regardless of time and place as long as they have access to a personal computer. If and when increased digital copies become available some degree of usage measure must be introduced to measure cost effectiveness and learning outcomes. I am recommending that LIS manage this new procedure with digital copies kept on a separate server with special software to track usage. Server management issues need to be discussed with the new ISA department once it is fully operational. I hope that this initiative will be funded under the E-learning strategy strand of the Teaching and Learning Strategy as access to digital resources is key to student learning.

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Example used with final year undergraduate students
BS3332 Economics of Multinational Enterprise

GROUP VIVA WITH JEREMY PAXMAN

DUNCAN SHAW

Introduction

Meetings can often be challenging, hostile and quite unpleasant causing individuals to only want to escape unscathed and with their proposals intact. This article reports on the use of group vivas to simulate such an experience for second year under-graduate students before they go on placement where they might experience such events for real.

Background

In Systems Analysis Project (BN2229) students spend 10 weeks in Term 2 working on a project in groups of 5-6 'consultants'. Their remit is to advise the top management team of their chosen organisation on the definition, selection, implementation and evaluation of a suite of new management information systems which will significantly improve operational performance.

Part of the module's assessment is the group viva where the management team of the client organization quiz the consultants on what they have done, why they have done it that way, and what they intend to do in the near future.

Arranging the viva

All vivas are conducted in the week before the Easter break. This is to give the students maximum time to progress their project but still benefit from the viva as a formative experience which will influence their analysis after Easter as well as their writing of the final management report.

The organisation of the viva is that three groups attend each viva:

- Group 1 provides a 10-15 minute presentation to introduce Groups 2 and 3 to the nature of the work they have done and interim findings.
- Group 2 spends the next ~25 minutes asking questions about the project which are responded to by Group 1 i.e. Group 2 viva Group 1.
- Group 3 watches the presentation and the viva.

To remove the ease of groups forming pre-viva alliances Group 3 will viva Group 2, and Group 1 will viva Group 3. Thus, each session of vivas take about 2 hours (3x40 mins).

Usually 30% of the module's marks are allocated to the viva. These marks are evenly distributed across: the presentation; asking questions during the viva; answering questions during the viva.

Pre-viva briefing

A few weeks before the viva, students are given the following brief:

- The group who are asking the questions represents the top management team of that organisation. It is their job to grill the consultants group to ensure that their company gets its money's worth from the consultancy.
- This is the organisation's last opportunity to refocus the consulting group and correct any misunderstandings they have.
- The management team lead, and responsible for all aspects of leading, the viva.
- In previous years the management team have often entered the viva with prepared questions and have slavishly read these from a piece of paper. This is poor practice which shows little imagination and lack of effective preparation.
- Any swapping of documents between the groups is to be negotiated without tutor support. Although the documents can be useful preparation, this only works if all groups share documents simultaneously. Negotiation skills are required to ensure that you are not worse off during the viva.

During the briefing the students are also given details of what issues are being assessed in the asking portion of the viva. These include:

- Clarity of the questions
- Suitability of the phraseology of questions
- Probing nature of the questions
- Range of questions
- Working as a team in asking the questions
- Whether the management team accept a bluffing answer or whether they probe for a better answer
- Releasing the consultants off particular questions when it is clear that they cannot answer.

Also, the briefing includes details for marking the answering portion of the viva. These include:

- The extent to which the group rely on a limited set of key people to answer questions
- Organisation when answering the questions
- How convincingly the answers are in defending the work.

The importance of hard (but fair) questioning and crisp, pointed answers is reinforced at every opportunity in the weeks before the viva.

Reflection

The viva is meant to be fun and provide a new experience for students before they go out to their placement organization where they may need to defend their ideas. Students seem to embrace this opportunity and many have demonstrated excellent analytical and lawyer-like questioning skills.

However, sometimes the management team appear unable to challenge the consultants group adequately. This brings the difficulty that the consultants are not able to demonstrate their knowledge and thus could score poorly on their answering of the questions. If this is the case then to avoid this I always put the consultants under as much pressure as I think they can cope with using Jeremy Paxman style questioning. This way I am able to get a feel for how competent the group are – and so allocate a mark that is not dependent on the competence of the asking done by management team.

The use of a viva gives a different form of assessment to a module which is entirely project based. Instead of students relying on writing skills or presentation abilities they are required to think on their feet without the usual safety nets. They are put on the spot by questions that they could not have expected, asked to respond to very awkward people who are challenging their professionalism, and questioning whether their last 10 weeks work has been at all useful. It is hoped that the students do not experience such confrontation during their placement year, but they might be a little better prepared for it if they do.

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Example used with second year undergraduate students
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TRAINING THE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS OF THE FUTURE: ABS POSTGRADUATE TRAINEE ACADEMICS PROGRAMME

HELEN HIGSON

Introduction

In autumn 2004 the first cohort of ABS doctoral students began work on the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching (accredited by the Higher Education Academy). This was part of an initiative to invest in our PhD students to produce graduates who could undertake all aspects expected of academics in UK HE institutions. In the background was the HE Academy's work on producing a code of professional standards for those working in HE. Additionally, the incentive was the knowledge that from October 2006 all new staff being employed in UK HE institutions would need to hold some teaching and learning qualification. Following the full programme allows candidates to become a 'Registered Practitioner' or an 'Associate Practitioner' for the Associate Programme.

There was also a short term objective of improving the quality of teaching support within the School. Many PhD students assist in running modules, both on the Postgraduate and Undergraduate Programmes. Some students had undertaken the course previously, but this had only been on an individual basis, here was an opportunity to introduce an initiative which was as example of good practice which other institutions might consider taking up.

Description

The Postgraduate Certificate is open to any member of staff or doctoral student who has teaching responsibilities. The focus of the accredited programme is participant's own work experiences, informed by theory, research and reflection on your practice. Participants are assessed against a range of activities that support students' learning and develop individual academic practice. Final submission for the award is by 'portfolio'. This is an edited record of the participant's module-based work and shows the specific skills and underpinning professional values expected by the HEA.

Enrolment is part-time. The Postgraduate Certificate consists of 60 credits and, therefore, requires 600 study hours. The registration for this is normally two years. The Aston Certificate award consists of a 20 credit double-module and takes 200 study hours. Registration for this is normally one year. Normally, those taking the Postgraduate Certificate will also complete this 20 credit double-module within their first year of registration.

The taught elements within the programme are usually completed during an academic year. Participants are expected to attend an agreed list of these, according to your experience and needs, and participate actively in tutorials and online learning. Experienced teachers and those who have already attended appropriate courses can seek exemption from the taught elements.

All students on the ABS Doctoral Programme were invited to a meeting where they could gain information on what was involved in the University's Postgraduate Certificate. David Anderson, from the University's Centre for Staff Development attended the meeting to outline what would be expected.

As a result twelve students signed up for the first stage of the Postgraduate Certificate – the Associate Programme. (This is more than 10% of students enrolled at the time on the ABS Doctoral Programme). This consists of the first 20 credits of the Postgraduate Certificate Introduction to Teaching and Assessing in Higher Education. In the meantime five members of academic staff from ABS were recruited (voluntarily) to contribute to the programme, to ensure that an appropriate discipline-specific perspective was included in the general programme. The students met once a week for five weeks and the programme included sessions on optimising students learning via learning outcomes and session planning, teaching methods in small group work, use of technology in presentations and assessment methods. The formal sessions ended with an opportunity to undertake a microteach to the rest of the class.

Assessment

Assessment consists of a work-based portfolio of evidence, accompanied by reflection on the students experiences. As well as documents evidencing the candidates' learning and teaching activities there is a requirement to link key theories with practice. The portfolio was marked by one of the Centre for Staff Development's Professional Advisors and then moderated by a member of ABS staff. Another important part of the assessment is teaching observation. This involved arranging for an experienced member of staff to observe the participant running a teaching session, reflecting on learning points and discussing feedback with the observer. Finally, on submission of the portfolio each student is subject to a short viva, to clear up any issues which the marker or moderator may have found in the portfolio, or to ask students to expand on points made. The recommendations of the examiners are then passed on to the examination board for approval. The Examination Board consists of academic staff and members of Staff Development as well as an external examiner from another institution.

Completion

Two students completed the whole Associate Programme in the original time allowed, a further student submitted and was referred. One student needed more time and has rejoined the next cohort. A further five will need to complete within the new extended deadline of one year. The student feedback showed that this extension of time was appreciated.

Feedback

This completion date is taken from quantitative data on progression, collected via examination board minutes. This feedback analysis is based on questionnaires filled in by students as part of the Staff Development quality assurance process at a progress meeting held in September 2005 and one to one interviews with participants.

Eleven questionnaires were issued to students and five were completed. From the replies it appears that most students had found out about the Postgraduate via supervisors or colleagues. Most decided to undertake the course to gain a qualification and improve their teaching. Two students had been recommended to take the course. All but one felt that the taught sessions were useful. Suggestions for improvement included more interactive exchange and less theory. In general, however, all students found the support during the course very good. All respondents said that undertaking the course was a positive experience. They liked the reflective approach and gained more confidence in teaching methods. They all agreed that they were pleased to have undertaken the course and would do it again.

Three students finished the programme within the original time and most of the rest are continuing in order to complete within a year. Of these four (one third of the original cohort) have expressed an interest in going on to complete the whole Postgraduate Certificate. The feedback from staff who took part was also positive. They enjoyed acting as expert facilitators in the teaching sessions. In addition, the teaching observations were encouraging. We all felt we were giving something back.

The future

It is very pleasing to note that the overall feedback is very positive, even if the completion rates are not as yet as good as first contemplated. This is partly due to the unrealistic expectations of those running the programme that students would complete within a shorter timescale than normal. It was particularly unrealistic to expect students to finish their teaching observation within the time scale, especially if they were spending time away from the University completing the fieldwork for their PhD. (Many of the students were from overseas).

In future students will be given the normal one year to complete the Associate Certificate. Despite this, at least four students have registered an intention to continue with the remaining modules of the full Postgraduate Certificate this year. Without exception they are all more involved than ever with teaching in the School.

A second cohort of eight participants was recruited (subsequently ending up as five). They started in October 2005. In addition a second group of ABS staff will contribute to the programme in terms of contact sessions and in moderating portfolios. We are grateful to these staff who carry out this work mainly for free (there is a small fee for moderating portfolios). Acknowledgement should also go to David Anderson and Chris Ford from Staff Development for their encouragement and investment in this project.

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INVOLVING THE FAMILY
WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN ASTON BUSINESS SCHOOL

CATHERINE FOSTER & HELEN HIGSON

Background

During the last 20 years, participation in HE has increased dramatically. From 590,000 in 1985/6, to over one million students in 1998. The government target of encouraging 50% of 18 – 30 year olds to participate in HE may see these figures rise even further. This growth has not, however, been evenly spread across all sections of society. Participation from the middle classes remains high, with 73% of young people from professional backgrounds participating in Higher Education (Lewis, 2002, p.1) compared to only 13% of young people from unskilled and manual backgrounds. Focus has been required, therefore, on the under-represented groups to help achieve this government target. Low socio-economic groups and minority ethnic groups are two of the main focuses of widening participation activity.

There are many factors which influence a student's decision to undertake a course of HE study. Connor et al (1999, p.1 & 2004, p.xvi) found that key influencers on students' decisions to attend HE included expected school attainment, school experiences, access to careers advice, expectations from school and home and concerns about student finance. Conner et al (1999, p.2) also found that those students already definite about going to study at University are more likely to consult subject specific teachers whereas students who are either unsure or who have decided against University study are more likely to consult careers/guidance staff or their parents. Baxter-Smallwood (2002, p.3) found that a University prospectus was perceived to be for people who were already sure about going to University.

The family is acknowledged to be an important factor in the decision making process of potential students throughout their educational career. Many students see their families as the most important source of motivation and advice right through from school age children (Warren & Gillborn, 2003, p.viii) to students making decisions about HE. UCAS (2002, p.10) found that the parents/family influence can be both positive and negative and is also linked to social class. Connor et al (2003, p.40) state that parents and family of minority ethnic students have a stronger influence on decisions about going to University than the parents and family of white students. Minority ethnic families were perceived to encourage their children more to go to University than their white counterparts, as education is a route to improve their employment prospects. Pathak (2000, p.7) also highlights that cultural values and parents' attitudes may strongly influence Asian students, particularly young women.

Here at Aston University, research undertaken from enrolment surveys highlights students' perception of the main influences on their decision to attend HE. 84% of respondents discussed their choice with their parents and 47% rated their parents as the most influential people source (Wood, 2003, p.13-4).

Involving the Family Project

Involving the Family is the second phase of a Widening Participation project being run by Aston Business School and funded via Aston University's Widening Participation funding. Phase I "Research and design of Programmes that attract and fulfil the needs of Britain's ethnic groups" focused on the experiences and participation of Minority Ethnic students compared to White British students amongst 1st year undergraduate students at Aston Business School. In the findings, it emerged that family and academic support played a significant role in enhancing students' academic achievement and consequently success. Family influences and perceptions were recorded as a significant factor throughout the educational experiences of ethnic minority students.

While groups traditionally well represented in HE consult careers/school advisers before coming to university, those from low participating groups seek advice from their parents and families. It was found that parents of students from minority ethnic groups are less likely to have been to university or have clear ideas of what to expect. There is a need, therefore. to inform parents and provide access to information regarding Higher Education if they have no personal experience to draw on.

In response, Phase II was developed to involve and inform the parents and families of students from under-represented groups in order to raise their awareness and understanding of Higher Education. It was agreed that any activity designed to meet the needs of community members should be developed in consultation with those communities. Parents from within the West Midlands were interviewed and surveyed to investigate their beliefs, concerns and understanding of Higher Education.

The findings provided excellent results in terms of the opinions and beliefs held by parents on Higher Education. It is clear parents have mixed views about education and its opportunities. There is a need for information to be given directly to parents throughout a child's educational career not just about Higher Education but the whole process, from nursery/pre-school to HE. Parents felt that they do not receive enough or appropriate information to enable them to make informed decisions about their child's future.

Key findings from this research include:

- Parents responded that an event at school followed by a daytime visit to the University and a booklet sent to them were there preferred modes of information source – these are the three main delivery methods used in this project
- The top three concerns for parents about their children and Higher Education were safety, debt and accommodation
- The majority of parents stated they would like their children to go to University, however, the majority of parents did not agree that they could afford for them to go
- Differences exist between minority ethnic groups when asked if they would be happy for their child to move away to attend University
- More than half of the parents stated they would expect their child to take up or continue with part time work whilst studying in Higher Education
- Caribbean parents were less likely than other minority ethnic groups to agree that everyone has an equal chance to go to University although most parents (irrespective of ethnicity) thought University was for everyone
- Parents expressed a need to have further information about specific aspects of university, in particular information about courses and course structure, accommodation and support available for their child whilst at University

These findings are not only relevant to Aston Business School but to the wider Higher Education audience. As the level of involvement of parents increases as is being seen by colleagues, HEI's will need to address concerns and questions parents have over their child's education to ensure that all parents are fully prepared and able to support their child as required. This is particularly important for those working within the Widening Participation field to ensure students from under-represented groups, and their families, are fully prepared for their transition into Higher Education.

Project Activity

Project activity is based around the findings of the research and is able to be responsive to individual group needs. Activity offered includes attendance at events within the community or at school to raise awareness of Higher Education and to develop a relationship with parents within their own environment. One of the most important aspects of the project is to provide an opportunity for parents to visit the University campus. This is structured to include a campus tours, including viewing student accommodation and a question and answers session with myself and current final year students, which is proving to be a valued aspect of the visit. The campus tour covers all the key areas that parents highlighted were a concern about their child attending University, accommodation, safety, pastoral care etc. This enables parents to become familiar with the facilities on campus for students as well as giving parents and/or family members a taste of University life.

Parents are invited to take part in the project by the project officer utilising contacts within the community and also by contacting both schools and community organisations within the West Midlands region. The nature of parental involvement is changing and it would be inappropriate for a project such as this to not continually review that it meets the needs of its audience. Involving the Family also works closely with colleagues in Schools and Colleges Liaison to ensure there is no overlap of activity.

As an additional outcome from this project, a "Family Guide to Higher Education" has been developed (in conjunction with Schools and Colleges Liaison for use by the extended Aston University community) to support the programmes of activity for local parents/families and also parents/families of overseas students. The focus of the guide is based upon the findings from this research, the key topics parents raised as concerns and areas in which they would like further information. The guide provides information about University life, the facilities and pastoral care available to students on campus as well as broader University issues. The guide is available online http://www.aston.ac.uk/parents and will be in printed form for participants of the Involving the Family project.

The Higher Education environment is changing. This can be seen by the change in both the needs and expectations of students as well as the increased involvement of parents, due primarily to the perceived increased financial commitment (tuition fees and variable top up fees from 2006) and with an increasing number of students choosing to live at home rather than on campus. Holdsworth (2002) found that students from a Widening Participation background were disproportionately represented in her findings for students choosing to live within the family home. Research undertaken at Aston University investigating the achievement and retention of students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPNs) also found that students who were from LPNs were more likely to be living at home (Fowler & Brookes 2002). It is important to fully understand the influence and effects this has on the student body in order to enable students to fulfil their potential and as an academic institution, empower students to achieve academically.

Widening Participation as policy often fails to meet the requirements of students from non-traditional backgrounds with many learners being offered an opportunity which fails them. This failure further reinforces, to the student and their community, that some groups within society are simply not learners (Thomas 2001). Ensuring that both students and family have a clear understanding of what University does and does not provide, and preparation for the transition to University from school for both parties (students and their families), must surely be a vital part of any Widening Participation activity. Engaging with parents in this way also provides universities with an opportunity to ensure parents and their families are aware of the role parents play when their children become students, and consequentially adults (i.e. access to results, attendance records etc).

If young people have their aspirations, aims and awareness raised by activities at University and within their school, it is vital these activities are also provided for parents, as without their support, young people may still not achieve their goals.

Future Plans

The project continues to develop relationships both from the compulsory education sector and also the community sector. Attendance at events external to the University are a key activity to the promotion of the project. Parents and family members recruited to the project from such events are invited to attend a session at the University. Continual monitoring of the appropriateness of the project activity is essential to ensure that it meets the need of the target groups. It is envisaged that this project will continue and develop further contacts, whilst ensuring the existing ones are built upon. All activity is offered in addition to that offered by Schools and Colleges Liaison and complements their activities.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROJECTS/DISSERTATIONS

CAROLE PARKES

Background

The ABS Research Ethical Guidelines were drawn up in response to the requirements of the new University regulations, and to the broader funding community, to have working ethical procedures in place within the School and in response to the need for research to be undertaken in accordance with commonly agreed standards of good practice, such as those laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki. The guidelines provide a framework for the continuing training of academics and researchers in research ethics and they enable regular audits of research studies aimed at creating an effective way of encouraging research with high ethical standards at ABS building an 'ethics culture' within in ABS.

The aim of this paper is to consider the operational issues of extending the guidelines for students undertaking research as part of their masters and undergraduate studies.

In the autumn term of 2005, the implementation of Ethical Approval procedures for Masters Projects/Dissertations was discussed at the Postgraduate Teaching Committee and a number of concerns were raised concerning the style of form to be used and the purpose of the student and supervisor's signatures. As a result, members of the committee were encouraged to put forward proposals for consideration at the next meeting. In the Work and Organisational Psychology Group a meeting was convened of interested individuals and the following draft proposal was put forward for consideration at the next Postgraduate Teaching Committee;

Draft Ethical Approval for Postgraduate Projects/Dissertations

1. The aim of any such procedures must be to educate students undertaking research in the importance and necessity of appropriate consideration of ethical issues. Therefore, the procedures must be meaningful to the students, workable in the context of the requirements for the dissertation and the large numbers involved, and place responsibility where it lies i.e. with the individual undertaking the research.

2. Any forms or documents developed must include a statement of the four basic principles that underpin ethics in research. The ABS Research Ethical Guidelines provide an excellent foundation for the procedures and the Guiding Principles (section 2.0) could be used as the basis for the form for students to sign. The principles contained in section 2.0 may be broadly categorised into four themes: Beneficence; Non malfeasance; Informed consent; and Confidentiality (see Research Ethical Guidelines for Postgraduate Students in Appendix 1.).

3. It is, therefore, proposed that section 2.0 of the ABS guidelines be printed with the following declaration included at the bottom for the student to sign at the time when they commence work on their dissertations with their supervisors

   "I confirm that I have read and understood the above ABS research ethics guiding principles and agree to abide by them in conducting my research project."

4. There was debate at the earlier Teaching Committee meeting about the requirement for academic supervisors to counter-sign the form. If this is required, as it is not feasible for academic staff to

vouch for the actions of a student in advance of the conduct of the research, a suggested form of words could read as follows;

> *"I confirm that I have made the student aware of the importance of the ABS research ethics guiding principles and of the necessity to adhere to them"*

5. The ABS Research Ethical Guidelines must be included in the 'project guidelines' documents received by students and form part of their respective research methods module.

6. Consideration should also be given as to how apparent breaches of the ethical principles are incorporated into the assessment criteria.

These proposals were discussed at the next Postgraduate Teaching Committee and agreed subject to clarification on purpose of the student and supervisor's signatures.

As a result, a Project/Dissertation Agreement and Ethical Approval Form was developed by the Postgraduate programme with the following wording;

Student agreement and acknowledgement of ethical procedures:

I, the undersigned, agree to the following:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the ABS Research Ethical Guidelines for Postgraduate Students and agree to abide by them in conducting my research project / dissertation.
2. I confirm that my academic supervisor has explained the importance of adhering to the Ethical Guidelines for Postgraduate students and I am aware of the penalties for breaching the ethical conduct of my Project / Dissertation.
3. I agree to notify my academic supervisor if there is a change to the circumstances relating to the ethical conduct of my Project or Dissertation.
4. I agree to adhere to the conditions of the project period and to submit my project by the date entered below.

Academic supervisor

I confirm that I have made the student aware of the importance of the ABS Research Ethics Guiding Principles and of the necessity to adhere to them.

Finally, in order to focus efforts on reviewing research that raises 'real' ethical issues and keep review of the rest to a minimum, it was agreed that supervisors would also sign to confirm whether the Project/ Dissertation requires referral to the ABS Research Committee's Ethical Group as follows;
I confirm that, on the basis of what the student has told me, the above Project / Dissertation **DOES* / DOES NOT*** need to be referred to the Business School Ethical Procedures Committee for approval **(* delete as appropriate).**

The final Research Ethical Guidelines for Postgraduate Students is in ***Appendix 1***.

These proposals are also being used as a basis for the development of procedures for students undertaking research as part of their undergraduate studies.

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Prof Margaret Harris and Dr Helen Shipton
Work and Organisational Psychology Group
Example used with postgraduate students

Appendix 1: RESEARCH ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Guiding Principles:

Research should be undertaken in accordance with commonly agreed standards of good practice such as those laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki. Codes of practice and further guidelines are available at http://www.abs.aston.ac.uk/newweb/research/ethics/.

These fundamental and widely accepted principles may broadly be categorised as:

- Beneficence ('do positive good')
- Non-Malfeasance ('do no harm')
- Informed consent
- Confidentiality/Anonymity

Beneficence & Non-Malfeasance:

Terms such as risk, harm and hazards include emotional and mental distress, and possible damage to financial and social standing, as well as physical harm.

- The research should be scientifically sound and the purpose should be to contribute to knowledge.
- The research should be undertaken and supervised by those who are appropriately qualified and experienced.
- The importance of the objective should be in proportion to the inherent risk to the subject. Concern for the interests of the subject must always prevail over the interests of science and society.
- The research should be preceded by careful assessment of predictable risks in comparison with foreseeable benefits to the subject or to others.
- Research should not be undertaken where the hazards involved are not believed to be predictable.
- Adequate facilities and procedures should be in place to deal with any potential hazards.

Informed Consent:

- Each potential participant must be adequately informed about the aims, methods, anticipated benefits and potential hazards of the research and any discomfort it may entail
- Any documentation given to potential participants should be comprehensible and there should be an opportunity for them to raise any issues of concern.
- Consent should be required in writing and records of consent maintained.
- Potential participants must be informed that they are free to withdraw consent to participation at any time.
- There should be a procedure for making complaints and participants should be made aware of this.

- All participants should be volunteers. Considerable care should be taken where consent is sought from those in a dependent position and it should be made clear that refusal to participate will not lead to any adverse consequences. For example, students must be assured that any decision not to participate will not prejudice in any way their academic progress.
- Any inducement offered to participants should be declared and should be in accordance with appropriate guidelines.
- Consent must be obtained from a legal guardian in the case of minors or any others who do not have the legal competence to give informed consent.
- Where participants are deceived, as is the case in some psychology research, there should be clear and justified reasons for the deceit. And there should be full and transparent explanation to participants as soon as possible after the research is completed of the aims, methods and outcomes of the research.

Confidentiality/Anonymity:

- All research should conform with legislation relating to data protection.
- Details that would allow individuals to be identified should not be published, or made available, to anybody not involved in the research unless explicit consent is given by the individuals concerned, or such information is already in the public domain.
- All reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that confidential details are secure.
- Great care must be taken where there is an intention to use data collected for one study, for another study. It is important that relevant guidelines are followed.
- Questionnaires that contain identifying information should not be stored in spaces where those other than the researchers would have access to them.

Penalties for Breaching Ethical Procedures:

Students who breach Ethical Procedures when undertaking research will be penalised in the marking of their Project / Dissertation or coursework assignment. The maximum penalty will be the award of 0% for the submission concerned.

E-NTERING

JO SMEDLEY

Introduction

Recent UK ~~Government~~ Widening Participation initiatives and ~~UK~~ Curriculum 2000 changes have resulted in an increased number of students with a wider variety of learning experiences, abilities and study skills ~~. Today's students include many non-traditional types of learners~~ who often need additional support and encouragement in ~~certain~~ study-related areas to achieve their potential and to maximize retention ~~opportunities~~. ~~With the promotion of Foundation Degrees as a way of linking theoretical and practical experience in Higher Education, it is more important than ever that account is taken of skills not previously assessed; those lifelong learning skills that ultimately affect the employability of students.~~ On May 23rd 2003, the UK Times Higher Education Supplement supported this view stating: "If a student is to be encouraged and equipped to progress to higher education, a good deal of support must help them hone the necessary study skills". With the promotion of Foundation Degrees as a method of enabling more work-based students to access Higher Education through linking theoretical and practical experience, it is more important than ever that account is taken of skills not previously assessed; those lifelong learning skills that ultimately affect the employability of students. The purpose of this project was to provide support to students on various pedagogical approaches that they could encounter with suggested strategies for success prior to their arrival at Aston University. The resulting ~~online~~ blended learning course acts as a supportive mentoring and marketing tool while also encouraging and enthusing capable ~~but otherwise cautious~~ students to enter Aston University successfully.

Literature Review

There is a numerous amount of scholarly ~~knowledge management~~ work available reflecting the wide ranging approaches on the subject of how knowledge is managed in organisations ~~-~~(Senge (1990), Davenport (1997)). ~~This study draws on the socialisation process and the incorporation of this into the knowledge management acquisition and analysis, thereby providing a heightened customer relationship experience and knowledge. Nonaka(1998) acknowledges the importance of building spaces for knowledge interactions to take place, enabling the rich source of data from normally unconventional approaches to be realised. The introduction of technology provides a facility to remove the traditional physical boundaries, providing a powerful tool to enhance customer relationships, thereby providing competitive advantage in the market.~~

Customers invariably know more about a business than a business knows about its customers and "customer intimacy" is one of the business strategies that organisations adopt for competitive advantage (Butler (2000). ~~, that that are seeking to learning more from this data but also that they are not cross-referencing this data to provide even further meaning.~~

There are several sources of knowledge relating to customers with some being gathered from transactions, i.e. tasks being undertaken while others are gathered through customer interaction (Garcia-Murilllo et al 2002). Developing and maintaining an appropriate business-customer relationship is vitally important in building a productive customer base in order to improve customer satisfaction, maintain loyalty and determine current and predict future needs and overall improving the strategic positioning within the market. Learning about customers and how they can best be supported and valued is an important factor within this framework. The quality of the relationship between a business and its customers has a profound effect in attracting, maintaining and retaining the customer base (Neville 2005).

Offering products or services alone is no longer enough: organisations must also provide their customers with satisfactory experiences (Berry et al (2002)). In particular, addressing clues that speak to emotions is especially important. Emotional bonds between companies and customers are difficult for competitors to sever easily. Creating an internalised meaning and value creates a deep-seated preference for a particular experience and therefore for one company's product or service over another. Businesses depend on their customers and, therefore, placing the customer at the heart of the business endeavours to build a close link with the customer, encouraging brand loyalty and seeking new opportunities for communication and dialogue. Increased knowledge about customers skills and needs enables businesses to anticipate opportunities to enhance the customer experience and provide customers with a better service. Consequently, the customers become the focus of the business and customer satisfaction is assured.

Understanding how consumers adapt their behaviour to the demands of an increasingly information-intensive environment has been a focus for companies that have achieved success in smart markets (Glazer, (1999)). In most markets, the advantage on staying closely connected to customers depends on three factors (Day, (2003)) namely making customer retention a priority, organising on the basis of customer groups, and gathering and using information on customers that is in-depth, relevant and available throughout IT systems in the company. Offering great products, technologies or services is merely the entry stake into the competitive arena (Vandenbosch, et al (2002)). Most organisations aim to maintain an edge in the way that their interact with their customers, as they recognise that customers value the interaction process as much as the product that they purchase. The main drivers of customer choice are often cost-oriented factors such as convenience, ease of doing business, product support and risk-oriented factors such as trust, confidence and strength of relationships. Strategies built around reducing customer interaction costs and risk offer a systematic way of tapping into new sources of customer value rather than purely following the often well-trodden path of competing on product innovation. Such policies are often difficult to devise or implement as they require creativity, imagination, hard work and willingness to take risks.

Nonaka (1998) acknowledges the importance of building spaces for knowledge interactions to take place, enabling the rich source of data from normally unconventional approaches to be realised. The introduction of technology offers a facility to remove the traditional physical boundaries, giving a powerful tool to enhance customer relationships, thereby providing competitive advantage in the market.

The generic "e-ntering" system

Heightened competition among UK universities has raised a need for a more customer-focused strategy of customer care and quality of service. Initial market research supported the view that there was a strong need for such a system in order to support students during various transition phases during their post-16 education. This study draws on the socialisation process and how this knowledge is incorporated to provide a heightened customer relationship experience and knowledge. It study ~~discusses~~ recognises the problems associated with the entry of new learners at various points in higher education, ~~,~~ demonstrates how~~how~~ technology can ease this transition and ~~examines~~ shows how customer relationship marketing can be used to build a closer and more informal relationship with students prior to their physical arrival at University, as, at this stage, the students have yet to register and confirm their place.

The main objective of the system is to guide the user while still giving a sense of control to the student. It focuses on~~n the use of an interactive information system to~~ attracting, maintaining and retaining students ~~to an education organisation through~~ while also yielding a substantial amount of pre-arrival (post-entry) information concerning the study skills profile of each student. This information informs curriculum areas of the prospective students study skills capabilities and thereby encourages and maximizes opportunities for retention. The ~~course~~ modules adopt~~s~~ an informal yet rigorous academic approach, encouraging student interaction with quizzes providing instant feedback on responses. ~~Initial market research supported the view that there was a strong need for such a system in order to support students during various transition phases during their post-16 education.~~

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"e-ntering Level 3"

The bridging course forms a transition between Foundation Degrees and progression into the Level 3 curriculum, providing an opportunity to prepare students for the learning challenges of the following Level 3 undergraduate curriculum. It consists of two elements, one focusing on learning skills comprising of such as quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods, analytical writing, time management, relating theory to practice, presentation, critical analysis with the other focusing on subject content appropriate to the nature of the ongoing Level 3 course~~. As part of the~~. The bridging course incorporates the generic "e-ntering" system as ~~at Aston, "e-ntering Level 3"~~ one of the methods to ~~is an online information system,~~ deliver~~ing~~ the bridging course material. ~~Originally designed to mentor Level 1 student entry , this system has subsequently been developed further to facilitate students entering at any level of study.~~ It provides information through a variety of means, e.g. online, DVD, face-to-face, paper-based with facilities to download material for use with mobile technologies and link for online communication. In addition, it allows~~. It enables~~ the uploading of information in modules covering various areas, each comprising content, self-assessed questions and feedback. An online diary is included at the end of each module, to encourage students to reflect on their recent learning on a step-by-step basis, providing preparation for students in developing their Personal Development Profile during their studies at Aston. "e-ntering Level 3" is a very flexible and user-friendly system, enabling staff to edit certain parts of the existing modules, to focus on particular modules or include their own material in various formats, e.g. sound, video, text, graphics.

As students progress through the system, staff are able to view student profiles through a collective report for the whole group, for a particular module of for each student, providing a valuable insight into the students learning, skills and management, in addition to their assessed knowledge, prior to the commencement of studies. This offers the possibility of adapting tutorial groupings to reflect students' stronger and weaker skill areas or altering the balance of time that is spent on a particular area of a module. With particular focus on tutoring and supporting students progressing from the new Foundation Degree in Business Administration, it yields a valuable additional mentoring tool in the transition from vocational to traditional academic curriculum.

"e-ntering Level 3" is accessed over the internet and is available to students from the time of their acceptance until the commencement of their University studies. Typically, the course runs over a four week continuous period. ~~The system was designed specifically with the user in mind, using the ideas of Customer Relationship Management. The main objective of the system is to guide the user through almost in parental manner by controlling what they can do (using the idea "hold the user by the hand and guiding him/her through), while still giving a sense of control to the student (by allowing him/her to control how much they do at a time).~~

In addition to providing skills information to students, the system could:-

- Provide students with an idea of the workload that he/she can expect
- Decrease students study load at the beginning of their course
- Make the tradition to Level 3 a little bit easier.
- Allow tutors to have a more informed idea of the students ability and therefore be able to direct help where it is needed most.

"e-ntering Level 3" also has benefits for staff as it:-

- Provides a collective report on the students responses over the whole group, for individual students or for a particular module.
- Gives the possibility to change the time that is spent on a particular content area of a module if there seems to be a general problem with students.
- Enables focus on particular areas that students need help with in relation to modules to be studied in the curriculum.

There are several interfaces within the system:-

a) The introductory student brochure interface

This welcomes students, explains the system and outlines user expectations and forms the first interface that the student will experience prior to working with the online interface. It uses the same informal, chatty style of the online version but aims to provide the student with a feeling of 'safety' which quite a number of learners associate with paper. It explains the "e-ntering Level 3" system and the benefits of participation followed with an explanation of how the system works and the features within it, highlighting usability, functionality and layout. There is also information to enable students to obtain further information or answer any queries that they may have.

b) The online login interface

The interface design of the login page was considered carefully as it was important that it was not too detailed but still needed to contain all the necessary information. A unique login ID and Password are required for successful entry~~. The system has~~ with an automated email system to enable users to change password as necessary. ~~for students who forget their password. This generates a new random password and sends it to their email address after a comparison has been made between the student's email address.~~ The student can change their password at any time. In addition to the username and password information, a link to the help facility is provided as backup support.

c) The online content page interface

The interface of the online content pages ~~were~~ was designed to be easy on the eye, user friendly, have a 'clean' look and concentrate the focus of the user on the material on the page. The layout of the pages was designed with functionality in mind. The content itself is designed to take the user along a controlled path while allowing certain freedoms, such as login out or even change subject. Although the content of each section is designed to be progressive, the user will not be allowed to change the order in which he/she proceeds. Although the user will be able to go back to check information, he/she will not be able to jump to a further stage within a study skill.

d) The quiz page interface

A quiz comes at the end of each section and tests the student knowledge of the whole study skill. It involves multiple choice questions which can be right or wrong, allowing for a more precise feedback. One of the features of the quiz is the integrated validation to the questions. The system generates an error message and students will not be allowed to proceed to the quiz unless they have finished all the questions.

e) Features of the feedback pages

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The quiz is linked to the feedback, to ensure that the feedback is relevant to the student's answers. The feedback itself is displayed in a friendly and informal style. Each answer is displayed in colour coded (green – right; red/pink – wrong) box which includes the right answer and wrong answers, and then a specific feedback depending on what the student has answered. All of this is done instantly following submission of the answers. All input is ~~The answers are also~~ recorded and can then be viewed by the e-tutors, providing opportunities for additional feedback to the student, for example, through the provision of a reading list or additional exercises if a student has a demonstrable problem with a certain area.

f) Features of the online diary

An online diary is included at the end of each study skills section, to encourage students to reflect on their recent learning on a step-by-step basis through the course. This is intended to be a precursor to students developing their Personal Development Profile during their studies at Aston. Focusing on just four questions, the aim is to provide structure and guide student responses and encourage reflection.

Outcomes

The result of research to date supports the view that this system provides a positive introductory experience to learning at a higher level, focussing particularly on the preparatory needs of the student in terms of learning skills. While acknowledging that learning management systems including virtual learning environments provide~~ing~~ additional support through technological means, this system goes further in linking with existing technologies to establish~~ing~~ a proactive customer care philosophy and marketing product concept to support the learning needs of students, staff and administrators.

Located at http://www.e-ntering.com, the generic "e-ntering" system has been presented at various conferences in the UK and Europe during 2004-5 resulting in considerable interest and ideas for further development. Areas for use are considerable as the system offers an opportunity to engage with learners at any level of undergraduate, postgraduate or pre-employment to gain an insight into learning and knowledge skills, enabling more efficient and effective management practice to be employed. Implemented in Combined Honours at Aston in 2005, piloted at another UK University in early 2006, and increasingly being sought for use throughout Aston for 2006 entry, further development is planned to include wider use of business applications and mobile technologies.

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LECTURE CONTENT AND CONTEXT: PURELY ACADEMIC OR THEORETICALLY RELEVANT AND USEFUL? THE IMPORTANCE OF COURSE EVALUATION TO THE MANAGEMENT OF EDUCATION:

JANE ANDREWS & MARGARET HARRIS

Background

BPM757 'Management of Organisational Change' was an elective module offered as part of the MBA/MSc Public Service Management. It was taught between 1999 and 2005 by Margaret Harris and Helen Cameron at two different locations, Aston Business School and in Hereford for staff of the local authority. All of the students enrolled on the module were public or voluntary sector managers. Themes addressed included: conceptual frameworks for understanding organisational change; the context of organisational change in the public and voluntary sectors; changing organisational structure; changing organisational governance; monitoring the organisational environment; inter-agency relationships; action research as a tool for organisational change; and planned versus emergent change. Understanding of the taught parts of the module was assessed by a written assignment in which course members were required to write an essay describing, analysing and explaining an episode of organisational change that they had either observed or taken part in. The module Learning Outcomes required that, as part of the coursework, the students should be able to describe the success or failure of the particular episode of organisational change they were discussing; explain what strategies and theories underpinned that episode; and suggest one or more alternative strategies that could have been utilised to manage the episode.

BPM757 was last offered as an elective in 2004/5. Following its 'closure', and in light of government policies promoting frequent organisational change within public service organisations, it was decided to evaluate to what degree the module participants had been able to apply the issues raised and theoretical content taught in the module to their 'real-life' working situation both during the time they were enrolled at Aston and since.

At the moment the fieldwork involved in this study is ongoing; thus the results of the evaluation will be published at a later date. Our focus here is the methodological issues and difficulties raised by this kind of evaluation of a taught postgraduate module.

Matters of Methodology

It was agreed that in order to avoid 'researcher bias' and hence address matters of validity, a third person, who had not been involved with the preparation or delivery of the module, should be employed to undertake the empirical investigation. Jane Andrews was employed and the three interested parties together formulated a research plan for a qualitative study using semi-structured tape-recorded telephone interviews.

The first practical difficulty related to identifying and locating ex-course members. In total, over the six years the course was offered, a total of seventy-seven students took part in the module. However, difficulties were encountered in attaining the current personal details of those individuals; updates to the University's computer system meant that the Postgraduate Office only had the personal records of students enrolled since 2001/2. Previous records are kept on an 'archived' system which took considerable time and effort to access and search. Once all the relevant demographic details were collated it was evident that there were major ‘gaps’ in the University records system. Few telephone numbers were recorded and the only e-mail addresses recorded were the University addresses allocated to students whilst enrolled. A search of the alumni records proved equally frustrating; membership of the alumni is entirely voluntary and personal details are kept only of those individuals who wish to be contacted. Hence, out of seventy-seven names, less than a handful could be verified using University records. In order to widen the sample, a search was then made of the available public data-bases including the national electoral register, telephone directories and internet address lists. This resulted in positively identifying the current contact details of a third of the ex-course members.

Although current address details were only verified for twenty-seven ex-course members, it was decided to approach all previous BPM757 students using their last known address.

Letters were despatched to each potential participant asking if they would be willing to take part in the study. It is possible that some of the study participants may not fully remember all of the module content or may confuse the content of BPM757 with other modules studied whilst at Aston. This issue has been addressed by sending all of the participants a course outline for BPM757 module. A pilot study has been conducted and it is anticipated that the research interviews will take place during the last week in January and first week in February.

The small number of potential respondents makes a high response rate a vital part of the evaluation. Furthermore, in order to produce a valid piece of research it is important that the methodology used is flexible enough to allow the participants to fully express their perspectives and experiences, whilst being rigorous enough to provide a true reflection of the value of the module lecture content and context. Thus the interview questions focus on three main themes: the usefulness of the contextual and conceptual approaches taught on the course; an assessment of whether the approaches to organisational change taught on the course have had an impact in the participants’ places of work; and an evaluation of whether change within organisations is shifting from defined episodic events towards a more continuous almost ‘evolutionary’ change culture.

Conclusion:

The most unexpected difficulty encountered thus far has been locating ex-students of the University. This is despite the fact that many of those eligible to take part in the study are recent graduates. Despite such difficulties it is anticipated that the study will be of particular academic interest to scholars interested in the nature of organisational change. In addition to this the study will provide valuable feedback in respect of the value and relevance of BPM757 to the ‘real-life’ working environment. It will also provide data about students’ perceptions of the teaching of MBA and MSc courses within Aston Business School. Such data will not only be of future benefit to those involved with this particular study, but may also prove interesting and beneficial to colleagues.

Evaluation of teaching practice and the relevance of course context and content to the ‘real-life’ situations is becoming an increasingly important part in the management of education. It is hoped that by adopting an innovative and retrospective approach to student evaluation of lecture content and context the evaluation of BPM757 will provide an accurate and ‘considered’ appraisal of teaching methods whilst giving some indication of the relevance and applicability of theoretical knowledge taught at Master’s level within the Business School. Thus, the lessons learned from this study should be of benefit in both the planning and delivery of future MBA and MSc Modules.

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THINKING CREATIVELY ABOUT LEARNING – THE REFLECTIVE MINDSET

MICHAEL J. R. BUTLER

"I am gone into the fields
To take what this sweet hour yields; -
Reflection, you may come to-morrow"

Shelley (1792-1822): To Jane – The Invitation (Cohen and Cohen, 1977, 363)

Introduction

In a previous mini-paper, I explored my attempts to bring learning outcomes to life (Butler, 2004). I did this because lecturing does not necessarily cause learning to happen effectively (Abd-Elsalam, 2003; Mumford, 1993). In this mini-paper, I focus on learning itself. I do this in order to improve how I teach by challenging the assumptions that underpin my approach. I focus on learning by exploring recent literature about how to improve Executive Education, but instead of applying the ideas to teachers and processes of Management Development, they are applied to myself. This is achieved in three ways: by raising conceptual issues about learning, by relating them to wider social science scholarship and by describing how the issues are being put into practice. Two conceptual issues are raised, the need to think creatively about learning and the reflective mindset. Two links to wider social science research are made, the place of self and reflexivity in scholarship and current policy debates. Finally, the issues and links are then set in the context of a visit to Harvard Business School. It is too early to identify early implications of the visit – this is not an empirical paper, but a method paper about reflexivity.

Learning about the learning process – reflexivity

Professor Howard Thomas, Dean of Warwick Business School, argues that there is the myth of standardised business education:

> 'Business schools worldwide are beginning to realise that educational models are no longer static, isolated structures.' (Thomas, 2006, 8).

He argues this despite the 1999 Bologna Declaration, which aims to turn the heterogeneous systems of higher education in European countries into a European Higher Education Area, where higher education degrees are comparable, mobile and widely recognised.

The first issue of the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* journal (2002) contains two papers which seem to support Thomas' argument. The first paper raises the issue of the need to think creatively about learning. The second paper suggests a process for thinking creatively and introduces the notion of the reflective mindset.

The first paper is an interview with Russell L. Ackoff, who is one of the founders of operations research and systems thinking, because of the links he made between science and business. In the interview, he argues:

> 'The fact is that teaching is the major obstruction of learning.' (Detrick, 2002, 58).

To elaborate, the problem arises from 'the implicit assumption in most educational institutions that learning is the converse of teaching, that an ounce of teaching produces and ounce of learning.' (Detrick, 2002, 56). The problem for Ackoff is threefold:

> 'The first was to equip students with a vocabulary that enables them to talk about subjects they do not understand. The second was to give students principles that would demonstrate their ability to withstand any amount of disconfirming evidence. The third was to give students a ticket of admission to a job where they could learn something about management.' (Detrick, 2002, 56).

The solution lies in the observation that 'People learn from others by following their curiosity' (Detrick, 2002, 58). More practically, the solution lies in thinking 'creatively about learning, every single aspect of the educational process ought to be questioned and systematically denied and the consequences explored.' (Detrick, 2002, 63). Ackoff tackles a range of issues, but emphasises the role of incentive systems to get staff to effectively take into consideration the needs of students, not just what faculty think they would like to do. This includes teaching students to learn how to learn.

In the second paper, Mintzberg and Gosling (2002, 64) are more explicit about how to question the educational process. In reviewing the International Masters Program in Practicing Management (IMPM) (www.ipm.org), which operates in five different business schools (the Indian Institute of management, INSEAD, Lancaster University School of Management, McGill and a collaboration of faculty from Japan and Korea), they argue that:

> 'Borders of different kinds get in the way of management education.' (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002, 64).

Four borders are directly relevant to the current argument, all of which are related to a particular learning philosophy – the reflective mindset. The first border asserts that educating managers goes beyond globalisation. By this it is meant: 'To broaden people beyond geographic borders means not only to teach about globalization, but also to provide a truly balanced international experience.' (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002, 67). This is part of the reason why the IMPM operates in five different business schools. The second border asserts that educating managers goes beyond teaching: 'Learning occurs where concepts meet experiences through reflection.' (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002, 66). This is a blended strategy in which formalised knowledge is linked to personal experience by confronting old beliefs with new ideas, a process enhanced by collaboration. The third border asserts that educating managers goes beyond functions. By this it is meant that: 'The nature of managerial work, not the functions worked on, is the natural way to organize management education.' (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002, 68). Management education should not be function-oriented and move away from studying in isolation marketing, finance, human resources and strategy.

The underlying assumption is that everything that effective managers do is sandwiched between reflection and action – managers work where thoughtful thinking meets practical doing. Here, I focus on thoughtful thinking, which lies at the core of the reflective mindset. The core of the reflective mindset concerns meeting yourself by deliberately getting out of the daily routine and doing something unusual.

The fourth border asserts that educating managers goes beyond classrooms: 'Management education has to extend into the organization, by using work and making impacts.' (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002, 70). Each of the five business schools delivers a Module and the participating managers are expected to write a reflection paper a month or two after the managers have returned to their jobs. They revisit the material of each Module and link what seems to be relevant to their organisation.

Taking the two papers together, they suggest an action plan in order to engage with the learning process:

- every single aspect of the educational process ought to be questioned and systematically denied and the consequences explored
- there should be an international dimension to the questioning and exploration
- questioning and exploration, that-is-to-say reflection, links concepts and experiences
- the reflective mindset concerns meeting yourself by deliberately getting out of the daily routine and doing something unusual
- in the end, reflection has to return to the origins of the reflection, back to the organization, in this case, the educational process

The two papers argue that managers from the United Kingdom (UK) are particularly good at reflection. Ackoff states:

> 'I think the British system is better than ours. Their managers are broadly educated people and ours are not. Most American managers are not well rounded. So I think an undergraduate program should be broadening; specialization should come at the graduate level.' (Detrick, 2002, 62).

This could explain why Mintzberg and Gosling (2002, 69) believe that there is a 'British predisposition to reflection'.

Reflexivity as an important social process

It is tempting to focus narrowly on reflexivity in business school teaching and view it as new, but this would isolate it from wider social science research. Two processes from social science research will be highlighted here: the place of self and reflexivity in scholarship and current policy debates in higher education.

Harris (2001) notes that the place of self and reflexivity are widely debated by those working within the disciplinary frameworks of sociology and anthropology and those who are concerned with the development of social theory (for example, Giddens, 1984; 1990). Harris (2001) extends the application of self and reflexivity to third sector scholarship and locates its application within existing social science scholarship. The place of self challenges positivist perspectives by, at its extreme, legitimising the researchers' own personal experiences as acceptable data. Denzin (1997) terms this "auto-ethnography". Harris (2001, 757) explores the

> 'factors in my personal and family history that may have affected my choice of research projects, the way in which I have conducted and analyzed my findings, and the manner in which I have disseminated them.'

She claims this as appropriate because 'by acknowledging the role of our experiences and the role that we have played in research situations, we enable those who read our research findings, if they so wish, to evaluate them fully and to place them into context.' (Harris, 2001, 758).

The place of reflexivity has two strands. First, a researcher "constructs" the research setting that is, in turn, part of the researcher's own social world (Beck, 1992). Second, the knowledge generated by research become a means through which the social world is constructed – not just for the researcher but also for research funders and the wider public (Deacon and Mann, 1999). Harris (2001, 757) reflects on the way she conducts and analyses her research findings by acknowledging

> 'my undergraduate education has been a very strong influence on my approach to research to date. In the early 1960s, the positivist social science paradigm was presented to us as truth, and we were urged to strive to be "value free".'

She finds this energising because it 'acknowledges explicitly what it is we are doing and how it affects our research … Taking those hitherto hidden ingredients out of the closet and examining them give us new perspectives on our research endeavors for the future.' (Harris, 2001, 758).

Self and reflexivity are terms now occurring in current policy debates in higher education. Jenkins and Healey (2005) suggest an analytical framework to guide institutional strategies to link teaching and research. The framework 'represents a key component' of the Higher Education Academy's engagement with understanding the relationship between teaching and research (Prosser, 2005, 3). Prosser (2005, 3) also indicates that this 'is one of international concern'.

The framework identifies four types of teaching-research links. The most developed link is described in a variety of ways. Griffiths (2004) suggests that teaching can be research-informed in the sense that it draws consciously on systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning process itself. Healey (2005) substitutes research-informed with research-tutored. Bradford (in Jenkins and Healey, 2005) substitutes both with pedagogic research – enquiring and reflecting on learning.

By thinking creatively about learning and adopting the reflexive mindset, this mini-paper is adopting a research-informed strategy to link learning and teaching and acknowledging the place of self and reflexivity in scholarship. Jenkins and Healey (2005, 40) note that this type of research is under-developed both nationally and internationally:

> 'it does indicate that at present the specific strategies to ensure the links are largely from the 'teaching' side. It also suggests that the negative impacts of research selectivity on teaching are probably not being addressed through institutional research strategies.'

Engaging with reflexivity – a personal history case study: Harvard Business School

This Section will not discuss any research findings – these are not available yet. Instead, it will discuss research methods – how the ideas about reflexivity, presented in the previous Sections, were operationalised. This is only one response to the literature presented. The research strategy followed the action plan suggested by Ackoff (Detrick, 2002) and Mintzberg and Gosling (2002). The strategy will be outlined by linking different aspects of the plan together.

I am questioning and exploring how I teach and the systems I participate in by identifying an international example of good practice in learning and teaching, by observing that practice and then by reflecting what the implications might be for my experience of learning and teaching. The international example of good practice I have selected to observe and reflect on is the teaching of Professor Max Bazerman who is based at Harvard Business School.

Professor Max Bazerman was selected because he is an expert in one of the fields I teach – decision-making and he has been institutionally recognised as a good teacher. He has won three teaching awards, two of which are from leading American Business Schools (http://dor.hbs.edu/fi_redirect.jhtml?facInfo=bio&facEmId=mbazerman&loc=extn). In 2002 and 2004, Max was named one of the top forty authors, speakers and teachers of management by Executive Excellence. In 2003, he received the Everett Mendelsohn Excellence in Mentoring Award from Harvard University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. While at Kellogg, Max was named 'Teacher of the Year' by the Executive Masters Program of the Kellogg School.

The observation of Professor Max Bazerman's teaching links concepts and experiences of learning and teaching by participating in an Harvard Business School Executive Education Programme, 'Changing the Game: Negotiation and Competitive Decision Making', run between 23-28 October 2005. Following the participation, Max was interviewed about his teaching philosophy, specifically drawing on the Programme as evidence of his philosophy. By doing this, I am deliberately getting out of the daily routine in order to focus and reflect on a different way of teaching. I am also going beyond Race's (1999) tips for improving lecturers by observing others. Although extremely useful, observation by itself is limited, despite the exchange of feedback, because it can focus on technique, for example, how well were the intended learning outcomes of the session communicated. The linking of participation and interview, of experience and concept, reveals both the teaching technique and the underpinning teaching philosophy. The Team responsible for the Quality Assurance of the Executive Programme were also interviewed in order to understand the relationship between the content and the administration of the Programme. In addition, informal discussions were held with other participants in order to discover their reflections on the Programme. The data was triangulated between the teacher, the student and the administrator.

The research question becomes – what can I and Aston University learn from Professor Max Bazerman and Harvard Business School? The research question is divided into research objectives which are grouped into three themes:

1. Learning from Professor Max Bazerman:

- to observe Max in action delivering his decision-making material
- to be a participant observer in the use of the Harvard Case Study Method
- to interview Max about his teaching philosophy by discussing the why and how of what he does

2. Learning from Harvard Business School:

- to reflect on Harvard's customer care by taking part as a fee-paying participant would
- to interview the Administrators responsible for the Quality Assurance of the Executive Programme
- to discuss with other participants their reflections on the Executive Programme

3. Informing current practice:

- to disseminate good practice in Aston through HELM
- to disseminate good practice more widely by publishing research findings
- to engage with current policy debates in higher education

There are limitations with this approach. Only one case study has been investigated, which makes the data particular to one context and difficult to generalise from. Harvard Business School will only grant visitors limited access because it is a private university relying on payments from all its students, which in turn limits the amount of data that can be collected. It has been noted that this type of research is under-developed, adopting a research-informed strategy to link learning and teaching and acknowledging the place of self and reflexivity in scholarship, which means that the research method is novel. It is hoped that the limitations have been overcome by arguing the case for reflexivity, my personal history of choices can be a case study, and by practically maximising the access I had, pre-arranging a schedule of activities.

Conclusion

The reflective mindset supports one objective of UK national policy which is to maximise the potential benefits of the relationship between staff research and scholarship and student learning. The relationship matters from a staff point-of-view: 'it is strongly arguable that unless there are benefits to teaching (and to other activities like community service and knowledge transfer) there is no case for doing research in universities at all.' (Brown, 2005, 2). More importantly, the relationship matters from a student point-of-view: 'It is becoming clearer that those students who are not learning in an HE environment that is informed by research, and in which it is not possible to access research-related resources, are at a disadvantage compared to those who are'. (Research Forum Report, 2004).

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Good Practice Guide in
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ISBN: 1 85449 401 5