



Edge Hill University

TEACHING & LEARNING
DEVELOPMENT

To what extent can the application of 'Spring Board: enhancing academic study skills' (Spring Board), an online study tool, enhance the inclusion of part-time students within Higher Education (HE)?

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Abstract

This report will explore the learning experiences of a group of health practitioners studying part-time on a masters level module. The main area for investigation is whether the use of an online vehicle for study skills and academic writing support can provide additional reinforcement for part-time students and enhance their experience of learning in Higher Education. The study includes the perspectives of tutors, students and Learning Services professionals and concludes that additional forms of support for students on such programmes can exacerbate time constraints for students and staff. The report will discuss the tensions that can exist for tutors, Learning Services staff and students when trying to provide flexible learning and opportunities for lifelong learning through specific vocationally related modules. In conclusion the report will argue that a move towards an embedded approach for such learners would seem to be the most effective move forwards.

Introduction

There has been a substantial increase in the number of students entering Higher Education at postgraduate level and there is an increasing awareness of the need to provide flexible learning opportunities to meet the diverse needs of these learners (Hoad, 2001). In addition to this, there is an increasing responsibility placed on employers and employees in terms of a lifelong commitment to learning and a continued move to provide academic accreditation for those studying in vocational contexts. The National Health Service (NHS) is amongst many employers responding to the government's lifelong learning initiatives (NHS, 2001) and has recognised the need to provide employees with a supportive learning environment and the structures necessary to promote the notion of a lifelong learning trajectory. Health based students on a masters level programme are provided with the opportunity to learn via 'stand-alone' modules that relate to specific aspects of their vocational context. Responding to the need for flexible forms of delivery and a commitment to relevant and accessible learning opportunities can however provide demands for those supporting learning for students, and tensions for students who are also in full-time employment and have other life commitments. This report will explore the experiences of students on a part-time stand alone module with a particular focus on the introduction of an online learning facility, Spring Board, to support their learning experience and enhance their engagement with academic writing.

The Context

Lifelong learning can provide the development of opportunities for employers and employees and provide a response to the need for a work force that is responsive to change and adaptive to recent developments. This commitment within the Higher Education sector is illustrated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commitment to Lifelong Learning Networks and forms a key element of their strategy. The commitment to lifelong learning for the NHS provides opportunities for staff to maintain and extend their skills and there is a focus on realising individual potential (NHS, 2001). The emphasis in the strategy documents is to develop a learning culture by providing the facility for updating and extending knowledge and this is central to the development of professional practice. This commitment has emerged as one of the key elements of health care reform (Fryer, 2006).

The move towards flexible provision in Higher Education however can emphasise some of the difficulties that can be faced particularly by mature students who are more likely to have childcare or family related issues and also be in full time employment (Gorard et al, 2006). There is a recognition that there is a need to maintain student support services to meet the needs of postgraduate students who may not fit the typical student profile and subsequent moves to explore the form that such support should take. An exploration of online learning facilities has been acknowledged as one such form of provision. This report will focus upon a small scale research project which aimed to explore student support for a group of such students via an online learning facility.

Spring Board

The use of e-learning has the potential to contribute to the notion of institutional transformation and development as a means of accommodating the range and diversity of learners in Higher Education. Study skills advisers, learning technologists and information literacy professionals have had considerable success in developing these facilities within programmes of study but had only tentatively begun to explore how the three skill sets could be brought together for the benefit of learners under the umbrella of, 'academic literacies' [or] 'adapting to new ways of knowing; new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge' (Lea & Street, 2000:32).

The Summer Enrichment Programme at this university requested that Learning Services create a module that would enhance undergraduates' academic and vocational skills, strengthen their achievement and their employability, and that it could be delivered to students using the institution's virtual learning environment, WebCT. This would allow them to learn at a distance and at their own pace. The multi-professional team approach, ensured the module was developed with an understanding of the technological, accessibility and pedagogical issues, together with the study and information skills content. Spring Board was developed using a constructivist approach to learning, aiming to build on what students already

know and focusing on the process of learning as well as the content. Module content consisted of the following ten units:

1. Identifying strengths and weaknesses
2. Understanding what information is needed
3. Looking in the right place for information
4. Using electronic resources to find relevant information
5. Retrieving information you have located
6. Thinking critically
7. Note making
8. Reading and research
9. Assignment writing
10. Referencing and information ethics, including: conventions of academic writing, academic malpractice (plagiarism) and the use and acknowledgement of sources (referencing).

As the module was delivered wholly online, the learning environment was designed with the aim of making the 'virtual' appear 'real' to the learner. This is especially important for novice e-learners. The module provided opportunities for asynchronous discussion with tutors and other participants in groups or individually, using the discussion and email facilities. The role of the tutor was vital in supporting learners by modelling the human element, essential in effective online discourse, and in offering advice and guidance related to individual requests from students.

The 15 credit, eight week, level 4 module ran successfully from June to August, 2006 to a cohort of 90 undergraduates, ranging from first to third year students. Current tracking of the 2006 cohort has revealed that students are still accessing the resource. Spring Board is currently running for eight weeks, during the 2007 spring term and is proving initially to be equally as popular.

The potential for the use of this facility to enhance students on a broad range of programmes was realised and this project emerged from a recognition that students on part-time programmes may benefit from an adapted use.

The Research

The main focus for this project was around the students writing for assessment and the types of challenges this may present, the types of support Spring Board may provide and any subsequent impact that this might have on their learning.

The following questions were considered in relation to their experiences of studying at masters level via short term modular provision:

- What types of specific learning challenges are experienced by part-time students who are health practitioners enrolled on a work-based programme for a short-term module of 16 weeks?
- What are their experiences of their re-introduction to learning in HE?
- To what extent can Spring Board, an online learning vehicle, facilitate and support this cohort of students?
- To what extent does this experience contribute to their wish to continue in HE?
- How could the experience be enhanced?

A qualitative approach to exploring student, tutor and learning support practitioners' experiences was employed in order to investigate two phenomenon: students returning to learning in HE for a specific group of students and their engagement with an academic support vehicle, Spring Board. Responses from the three relevant parties were sought in order to support the validity of the project by offering opportunities for the triangulation of data and the potential for identification of tensions or accord. Key themes were grounded from this data and key features identified.

The initial research stage aimed to identify previous experiences of this cohort of students in order to identify levels of learner confidence but also to ascertain a specific level of confidence in relation to producing academic writing for the 4,000 word written assignment. In addition to this two course tutors were interviewed via email in order to establish any areas worthy of comment or concern regarding the learners' potential to study and complete the written assessment. The tutor leading delivery of this module had not had previous experience and it was useful to gain another perspective from a tutor with some background of this style of masters level delivery. Learning Services representatives were also interviewed in order to establish the rationale for the development of Spring Board and expectations for the use of and potential value of the resource to enhance students learning.

The second stage of the work included telephone interviews with students to gain an understanding of their learning experience, challenges to their learning and their approach to writing for assessment and attitudes towards

Spring Board. The tutor was interviewed at the end of the module to gain some insight into any particular areas of relevance in relation to this specific cohort, support provided and reactions to Spring Board. The member of Learning Services was also interviewed in order to gain a third perspective on the experience.

Stage 1:

The Learners' Experience

The cohort could be described as typical of a student group studying at this level who are participating in stand alone modules in that they are practitioners, some senior, in a specific area of health care and that most are graduates and would have a diploma level qualification. Some work at a strategic level and others are operational. A majority of this particular cohort was female representing a broad age range.

Students approached their learning on this module with a clear recognition of their previous experience of formal education and all were able to identify some notion of continued professional development at a postgraduate level. Some students did indicate that although this was the case they were not necessarily confident learners. Although, it may be appropriate to identify that this group were engaged with on-going learning there may be no guarantee of learner confidence when new contexts are introduced. A majority of the students acknowledged that there would be challenges to their learning and for some these included a concern over the level of study required in respect of knowing specifically what was meant by masters level.

Students described themselves as average to good in their ability to produce academic writing. None considered themselves to be either particularly proficient or particularly poor although the two tutors interviewed suggested that their main concern for similar cohorts related to their ability to produce a piece of academic writing. Given a list of statements related to the types of activity related to writing for assessment there does not appear to be any clear indication about the types of activity related to writing that students would find most difficult. Some students identified aspects as most difficult and a similar number identified the same aspects as something that would present the least difficulty. This does not provide any additional insight but suggests that there is a variation in the types of writing related activity that students may find more or less difficult and that this may be highly personalised.

The Tutors' Perspective

The tutor had not delivered a masters level module prior to this but a tutor with significant experience was also interviewed. Their combined perspective revealed an assumption that the students studying would need support with academic writing in view of the fact that they may not have studied for some time. The students however suggested that they were regularly involved in professional development and that they were used to writing reports and documents within their work roles. This could highlight a tension between the students' perception of writing requirements for assessment and the academic demands for writing of which tutors potentially had a greater awareness. The tutor perspective was informed by work with a range of similar cohorts and an

on-going concern for providing appropriate support with aspects of academic writing which have appeared problematic such as the development of argument, critical thinking and a critical engagement with literature.

The tutor identified a range of study support available for students on this programme including the module co-ordinator, an academic writing session, assignment guideline sessions, 1-1 appointments with the tutor and the suggestion that students could gain 1-1 peer support via Learning Services. The tutor suggested that support for students would traditionally be provided via 1-1 support in class.

The tutor suggested that the introduction of an online facility may be useful for students due to the geographically diverse nature of the group and described it as a good 'additional' support for those who may have to travel long distances. This may be significant in that Spring Board was seen as additional and supplementary to the other forms of support for students and corresponds with the additional nature of the resource and the subsequent time constraints indicated by students.

Learning Services' Perspective

The Learning Services representative indicated that there has been an increasing demand placed on the centralised support services from subject areas for 'academic writing' sessions. These have often been designed and delivered by Learning Services. This poses staffing issues, as demand outweighs what can feasibly be supplied, moreover, it raises the issue of

responsibility for where this type of support should lie. Whilst an academic session had been offered for the tutor to deliver, the Skills Development Co-ordinator felt that Spring Board has the potential, if contextualised and fully embedded into the curriculum, to not only offer support with other pre-requisite skills for academic writing (such as literature searching and critical reading - that can never be addressed in one 'bolt on' session) and also to add a flexible learning opportunity via a resource that could be accessed at a distance and at any time for these busy, practitioner students.

The health module was delivered in traditional face-to-face mode, with the use of visiting professional speakers. Students were made aware of individual tutorials and there was a session delivered by a member of Learning Services, aimed at a consideration of the generic issues related to academic writing. Spring Board was accessible for students via their own PCs at home or at work but was not used directly with the students in the sessions.

The online facility was introduced to the students as an additional and optional study skills resource and there were some issues that hindered the Learning Services facilitator during delivery of the session. There was no opportunity for hands on experience for the students (as had been planned) and technological faults delayed the session.

Stage 2:

The second stage of the research aimed to identify the students' experiences of learning during the module and the types of use students may have made of Spring Board, but mainly the reasons for their lack of engagement with this facility. The Learning Services representative was aware of the students' lack of engagement due to the monitoring facility available. This had revealed that two students had accessed the resource but only one of them had made substantial use of it. The tutor had not accessed it at all.

Telephone interviews were conducted with 6 students to elicit the reasons why Spring Board had not provided a suitable vehicle for their academic study support. This also provided an opportunity to identify what students hoped to gain from studying the subject based module, their learner histories and any further information regarding levels of confidence in approaching academic study at this level. Students were asked to identify how they might learn best and any specific challenges that they might face. They were also asked about how they had approached the written component of their assessment.

What did the students have to say about their experience?

At the point of interview the students were in the process of producing their written assignment and were finding this appropriately demanding. There was no change in their perceptions of confidence as learners although some naturally felt more confident with the academic writing process than others. All students indicated that writing would be used regularly as part of their work role and saw a direct connection with the report writing and work place writing

that they did regularly and the academic writing that they were being asked to produce for assessment. Out of the 6 students interviewed only one had accessed Spring Board and all students indicated time as the most significant constraint in making use of the resource although their initial impressions were very positive. One student indicated that engagement could have been improved if it had been introduced to students prior to the module offering the thought that if students were familiar pre- module they might be more likely to use it. No students indicated anxiety about the online dimension of the facility but the majority had not attempted to access it independently.

What did the tutor say?

The tutor felt that Spring Board was potentially very helpful and comprehensive but was disappointed by the lack of use. She identified other support available for the group indicating that she had delivered a session on academic writing at 'M level' (using resources developed by Learning Services) with them at the start of the module. The group had also had a session delivered by a member of Learning Services which she described as well received by students and indicated that the group had been provided with the facility for individual tutorials with her or another member of staff but had indicated that not all students had made use of this facility. The tutor thought that Spring Board could have offered examples of masters level writing, support around referencing and general advice around essay structuring and considered all of these aspects to be of benefit to students. The tutor indicated that she would make use of Spring Board in the future but would

introduce it at the beginning of the module and incorporate a session mid-module to promote students engagement with the resource.

The tutor indicated that of the 12 scripts submitted some were 'better than others' and that they had found specific aspects of the subject challenging in their writing. Interestingly, the tutor discussed the challenges with assignment writing in relation to subject specific challenges rather than generic issues with academic writing which had created the original request for support. She felt that students could have made improvements to their work by accessing her for one to one tutorials but few had taken this opportunity. In addition to this the tutor indicated that the responses made via the end of module evaluation indicated that students preferred face-to-face support and had also benefited from face-to-face session delivered by a Learning Services facilitator.

Learning Services

The Skills Development Co-ordinator suggested that whilst an online resource such as Spring Board would appear to be an ideal flexible support mechanism for cohorts such as this, their lack of engagement and reasons for this must be taken into consideration before promoting its further usage on this module.

She further suggested that the contents of Spring Board can be contextualised, tailored to masters level and delivered either in face-to-face sessions or online. This, however, requires planned development time and needs the full commitment of the academic tutor and all relevant Learning Services staff. She also advocated that the resource should be seen by

students as a natural part of their learning process on the course, thus delivered by the tutor. The Skills Development Co-ordinator noted that in a current pilot on a similar Health Continuing Professional Development (CPD) module, tutors have designed a 'blog', in which the discussion is very active. This discussion is tutor facilitated and involves both subject matter and learning and teaching issues.

Discussion

This small-scale study has provided an opportunity to engage with some key issues in relation to the experiences of part-time students studying via single modules at Masters level:

- Time constraints for mature part-time students
- Notions of embedded approaches to learning support
- Tensions between online facility and a face to face preference
- Academic assessment of vocational subject

Students on this part-time masters level programme did not make use of the facility and the main reason for this appears to be the time constraint. The students indicated that first impressions were very positive and they were reluctant to suggest improvements to the resource yet this did not provide a sufficient reason for them to engage. Time constraints were a significant factor in the learning experience of these students some of whom did not make use of optional tutorials prior to submission. Students were allocated study time to attend the taught sessions for this module but were not necessarily given time for developing their writing for assessment and at least

one had taken two weeks' annual leave in order to produce the final assignment. Spring Board is designed to promote learning via participation with activities and a social dynamic via a discussion board and therefore requires a significant investment of time from students. As a result working with Spring Board requires a time commitment from students that those following this mode of study may find difficult to honour. The challenge of studying whilst working and living do not easily accommodate a means of support that creates additional time demands for students.

The concept of inclusion for students into the academic community may be problematic in view of the fact that they are allocated time to attend sessions but not necessarily time for study. Traditional concepts of student learning in Higher Education exist around the model of tutorial, lecture attendance and time for personal, independent study but this may not be reflected in the commitment to learning from employers. The notion that an additional resource requiring additional study could in some way provide support seems to exacerbate this issue. Although students could take half a day to attend the taught sessions, any additional work needs to be done in their own time and for many this means juggling work, life and learning. Time constraints and the implication for mature students on retention is acknowledged in the Widening Participation literature review by Gorard et al (2006).

The emphasis on this time demand for students reinforces the need for study skills or academic support to be integrated or embedded within subject delivery. It is not only the time constraint that is significant here. A discipline

based approach to writing and study support is a model favoured by many seeking to enhance the student learning experience. Research at Queen Mary University concludes that students benefit most where writing is taught within the academic disciplines. Mitchell and Evison (cited in Ganobscik-Williams, 2006: 72) highlight this. They argue that, 'teaching writing should not be a remedial or add-on activity' but should be, 'part of the responsibility of disciplinary academics and should occur within the discipline's curriculum.'

Embedded approaches are not always an easy concept for tutors who may feel the tension between the subject content of a module and the need to ensure all learners have an understanding of the appropriate range of academic literacies necessary for assessment of their learning. Tensions can exist for Learning Services and academic staff regarding the locus of responsibility for learning in relation to study skills. Cottrell suggests 'skills development needs to be subject specific' and that 'this necessarily requires the involvement and support of subject specialists' (Cottrell, 2001:6). Evidence of delivering study skills support sessions to a wide range of students in this university indicates that students value the sessions more when their tutors are involved in the design and delivery of the sessions and where sessions are fully relevant to course structure, content and assignments.

Teaching study skills as an integral dimension of a subject module may be more meaningful for students in that it is developed within a context. Approaches to embedding may also be a move towards a truly inclusive approach to learning for students who can access support as part of their learning entitlement rather than having to seek additional support which can at times foster notions of remediation for learning for those who consider aspects of their learning to be problematic.

There may be tensions between the nature of specific subject based modules designed to provide specialist knowledge in one particular area, notions of academic development and the potential for lifelong learning. The course tutor and students agreed that the main driver for enrolling on this module was related to specific subject knowledge of an aspect of medical health. Students were very clear that this was the central reason for them studying and that this learning experience was related to an often very strategic understanding of the types of professional development that would be useful in terms of career enhancement. Students did not give any indication of broader concepts of learning development in relation to studying this module and the priority was largely content driven and suggestive of a transmission based concept of learning. The indication was that there was a body of knowledge that they needed to learn in relation to a specific area of healthcare. This tension between academic and vocation was also emphasised in relation to the different concepts of writing held by tutors and students and the views held about students' writing confidence.

Concepts of lifelong learning and the increasingly diverse student population can present challenges for institutions modelled on the established concepts of student, tutor and learning services roles. Traditional notions of university teaching and learning based on principles of longer term study for full time students do not fit easily with the single module delivery. It is possible that on-line learning facilities can enhance the potential for flexibility but it is essential that such facilities do not create a sense of virtual learning time for students. It is also essential that the locus for academic skills development sits within a meaningful context and is relevant to the particular cohort. Krause (2001:161) suggests that 'serious' consideration should be given to students who, 'prefer face-to-face contact with their learning communities'. In addition to this it should be noted that not all students studying at masters level are autonomous or independent learners. It is important that the learning opportunities we provide are flexible enough to meet this aspect of diversity.

This project had a particular focus on the use of Spring Board to enhance the student learning experience but has left us with further questions regarding the learning experiences for students on similar programmes. We are currently working with another cohort to develop this project further, enabling us to gain a deeper understanding of the learning experiences of part-time students studying via a single module and the potential tensions between vocational subject emphasis and the need for academic enhancement.

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