

Developing Skills for Independent Learning for Access to Higher Education Students

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Abstract

An investigation was carried out into how Access to Higher Education teachers at an inner London further education college interpreted the teaching and learning of skills for independent learning and developing learner autonomy, including the use of information technology and critical thinking in their teaching practices. The research indicated that the teachers have developed a learning and teaching model that clearly delivers many skills for independent learning but is amended to take account of individual learners' educational needs and external circumstances. The teaching team use a hybrid teaching and learning model drawn from adult and general education traditions. This model has been found to deliver several skills for independent learning but needs adaptation to include more explicitly the use of new information and communication technologies and the more overt integration and assessment of skills in the subject units and core skills modules.

Introduction

Access to HE programmes developed in the late 1970s as an alternative route to University level study for mature (+21) students. They were developed by

partnerships between Universities or Polytechnics and neighbouring Further Education Colleges (FEC), sometimes with Local Education Authority (LEA) involvement, offering clear progression routes to named awards at the receiving Higher Education Institute (HEI). From their inception they were predicated on the assumption that the traditional qualification route into University level education – A levels – used teaching and learning practices and models, which were perhaps inappropriate for mature learners (Parry 1986).

Researchers in the 1980s (Woodrow 1988, Parry 1986) argued that Access courses are characterised by their student orientation and focus on the process of learning and skills development rather than being subject or institution based. 'Unlike the banking of knowledge under an A level regime the Access intention is to develop content both as a vehicle for improving study and communication skills and as a necessary foundation for further study' (Parry 1986:46).

However, although there are possibly agreed *purposes for Access* courses – targeting under-represented groups, providing progression pathways, fostering FE/HE collaboration, developing alternative models of teaching and learning – local management and delivery means it is difficult to capture what models and practices of teaching and learning are actually adopted by FEC based Access to HE teaching teams; 'there is considerable diversity among Access courses in their aims, curricula and client groups' (Hayes et al 1997:27).

Moreover, in comparison for example to BTEC courses that have a strong assessment-led teaching and learning philosophy, clearly written with back-up training available, there is comparatively limited structured *advice* on teaching skills for independent learning (SIL) provided to local Access to HE teaching teams. In their general introduction about Access courses Open College Network – London Region (2008) (OCNLR) describes study on the programmes as being, 'Learning to develop ideas, write essays and make notes are all important parts of Access programmes. In addition, you are introduced to subjects that will be covered more fully in the degree and diploma programmes'. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) provide similar advice

(QAA 2006). Additionally, in the OCNLR course specification documentation that local providers are required to complete there is no requirement that local teams report on the course's underlying teaching and learning strategies in relation to SIL.

Unfortunately, although there have been many studies of Access students' perceptions of their experience of access courses - including teaching and learning (examples include: Betts 1999, Gibson and Waters 2002, Waller 2004, Burke 2004) - there has been relatively little research into the teaching and learning practices of general education and access teachers in FEC (Lucas 2004).

The vast majority of Access teachers come from the 'general education' tradition in FEC (Lucas 2004), graduate educated, with a clear subject specialism. In the case of this study four of the six teachers interviewed came from an A level teaching background, experienced in teaching students with a narrow range of abilities. Evidence from studies of 'subject specialist' secondary and University teachers indicate that those with a strong subject orientation tend to emphasise the importance of knowledge transmission over different forms of pedagogy in their teaching practices (Lucas 2004); teacher-centred and curriculum driven (Biggs 2003).

However, as indicated Access courses stress the importance of skills development; particularly SIL, critical thinking and developing the capacity for autonomous learning – all 'attributes' seen as vital for success in a mass higher education system (HEFCE 2003, QAA 2001).

This project examined key course documents – course specification, lesson plans, schemes of work, tutorial programmes - and learning resource centre (LRC) input to ascertain teachers' approaches and practices. These documents indicate that SIL such as note taking, essay writing, research skills and critical thinking are taught in the communication module and are progressively developed in the subject units, but only formally assessed in the former. Internet research skills and effective use of the college's virtual learning environment (VLE) is delivered by the LRC and in the IT core skills module.

Near the end of the programme learners complete an oral presentation assessment and a simulated exam to develop and test exam technique. SIL then are developed in both subject and core skills units (CSU), formally assessed in the CSU, with several skills assessed during an oral presentation towards the end of the programme.

The interrogation of these secondary documents was followed by individual interviews to explore the interpretation of these documents in practice.

Accordingly, this research has focussed on what teaching and learning practices and strategies are deployed by Access teachers in teaching concepts such as SIL and critical thinking. A small group of ex-Access students completing their first year of HE study was also convened to ascertain an understanding of their preparedness for applying SIL and critical thinking, in preparation for further research.

Methodology

The project deployed a case study approach exploring the access course delivery of one inner city London College. The rationale behind this research approach is that it enables the investigation of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin 1989:23) and strengthens the validity of the findings through triangulation (Yin 1989, Singleton and Straights 1999), as previous research in this subject has been scarce.

The design was based on a mixed-method approach, deploying one to one semi structured interviews with teachers, a focus group with former Access to HE students and documentary analysis of schemes of work, assessment plans and course validation documents as its principal methods of investigation. The design of the interview schedule was based on the Delphi approach (Brown 1968), in which Access to HE experts were consulted in developing the questions.

The project started in February 2008 and data were collected and analysed between April and May. All research participants were fully briefed about the purpose of the research project before their participation and informed consent was sought in all instances. In addition, research participants were not subjected to any form of physical or psychological harm and anonymity and confidentiality has been kept throughout the research.

Finally, the analysis of the interviews and documents was based on a combination of analytic and diagrammed coding (Lofland and Lofland 1995), which enabled a focused analysis on skills development. All data were analysed with NVivo 2 (Gibbs 2002).

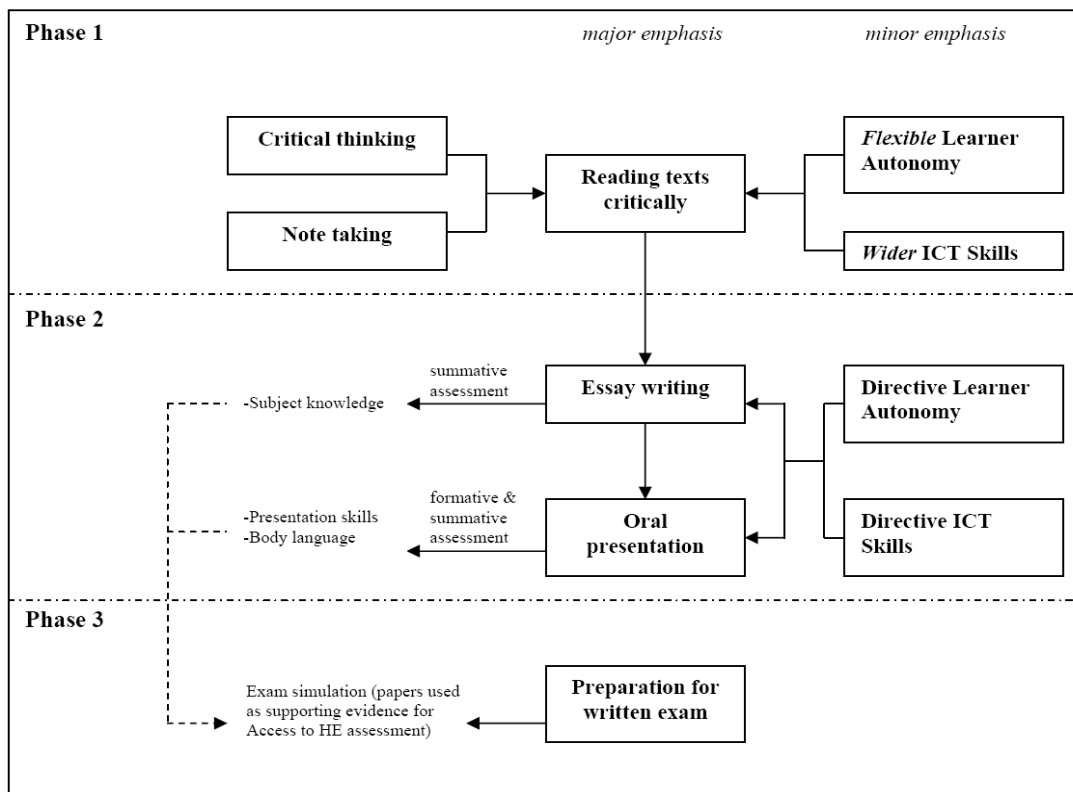
Findings

The development of SIL and critical thinking is to a large extent driven by an interpretation of unit learning outcomes and formal assessment methods reported in the course specification. Thus, the development of SIL such as note taking, critical thinking and reading texts critically, and use of information and communication technology (ICT) skills are developed and assessed in subject specific and core skills modules by students critically engaging with textual information in which they are encouraged to experiment with different learning modes. Although a variety of learning skills are assessed, it is primarily essay writing, oral presentation skills and exam rehearsal that are most prominently emphasised and assessed.

In particular, skills development is divided into three phases: the first phase places an emphasis on initial skills development focussed on future assessment; the second phase, preparation for level three assessment. Learners' success in these two phases determines their readiness for the third phase, which is preparation for HE study. Within this model, a major emphasis is placed on teachers supervising learners to read texts critically using critical thinking and note taking as the major teaching and learning methods as the essential prerequisites for the development of essay writing skills; a minor emphasis is

placed at this stage on learner autonomy and the use of ICT skills within the subject modules. The figure below depicts the relationship between teaching and learning, SIL, critical thinking and ICT skills.

Figure 1: The relationship between skills development and learning outcomes



There was a consensus amongst Access to HE teachers interviewed in emphasising note-taking and critical thinking in the first few weeks of the programme and then to encourage learners to engage with textual information available on the web or in printed sources. Critical reading in turn is taught as a developmental process, initially, an emphasis being placed on comprehension followed by analytical engagement with textual information in style, length and format. The purpose of these practices is to develop the skills that facilitate directive reading, necessary for essay writing. The aim is to allow students to

develop a directive approach to note taking, which is also practiced through different forms, such as note-taking during lectures, video or from printed sources. In addition, the development of critical thinking skills is being encouraged through the examination of positive or negative aspects of an issue filtered through the theoretical perspectives of a subject-specific issue.

At the same time, objectivity, as one element of learner autonomy, is developed using ICT skills for retrieving and filtering subject-specific information. The intention is to create a learning culture in which learners are encouraged to develop objectivity through the application of their views and experiences on subject-specific content and through the exchange of ideas and experiences within small groups for the production of individual work. Peer learning support networks are not formally developed although small group work is encouraged that can lead to their development. Basic ICT skills are taught in the IT core skills sessions. Subject sessions support IT skills development by encouraging the use of the Learning Resource Centre for research purposes and secondly, treating the Internet as a resource. However, teachers do not emphasise on teaching learners how to identify sources of information and tend to see this as a role for the staff of the Learning Resource Centre. Thus, the teacher's role is related to teaching learners how to assess and filter such information for subject-specific purposes. In a teacher's words:

'The Virtual Learning Environment is when I can see that they can go to sites where they can learn and be taught things without the presence of a teacher. [...] Some of the things we do [...] is more competently shifting information and making sense of the vast array of information, where there is too much information'. [Interview with A, 21.04.08]

Moving on to the second stage of skills development, essay writing per se is again taught through a 'model' based on building blocks of combined knowledge, in which the quality of the textual body is gradually improved. Learners' work is primarily assessed on subject knowledge, although there is an advice section on the assessment feedback form indicating quality of written English and ability to source. All teachers reported emphasising academic

writing style rather than on discursive writing and on the use of bibliographical notation systems, the avoidance of plagiarism and the critical processing of information acquired from the Internet. Again, an emphasis is placed on the development of strategies of how to develop argumentative text where learners are encouraged to list their opinions backed up by evidence, rather than descriptive text. As one teacher put it:

‘Looking at the evidence, students are inclined to have opinions, so it [essay writing] is about learning the value of opinions’. [Interview with E, 30.04.08]

In turn, the knowledge produced in a subject-specific essay is further assessed in oral presentations. The assessment aim of oral presentations is not focused on the content of the presentation itself, but on presentation and communication skills. As an assessment method it also provides students with the opportunity to open up their work for debate within their peer network.

Within this stage, ICT skills and learner autonomy is highly directive. Blackboard, the college’s VLE is increasingly being used as a learning tool by some teachers, in which documents are deposited and learners are also encouraged to use the Internet. In addition, teachers expect all work submitted to be word-processed, skills the learners have learnt in the IT core skills sessions. Whilst in the previous phase learners were encouraged to work independently and develop their objectivity, in this phase time-management skills are important as the work schedule and deadlines frame the work to be produced. In addition, feedback is more directed in the assessment feedback forms and Individual Learning Plans in which teacher and learner negotiate the latter’s achievement and identify areas for improvement. If learners contest their teachers’ final decision on the quality of the work submitted there is an appeals procedure in place. In this respect, learner autonomy is partly encouraged through the learner’s active involvement in his/her learning and assessment plan and partly through their defence of their submitted work in oral presentations in front of their peers. Even though learners’ conceptions of the purpose of oral presentations vary, one teacher referred to it as ‘*the ultimate sign of learner autonomy*’.

Although teachers' views on the development of SIL were similar, there were some differences in the consistency of the agreed practices. For instance, whilst one teacher built flexibility into the work schedule to account for issues that many adult students face, such as childcare needs and employment, another teacher viewed this practice as a weakness of the programme. While the former teacher justified his views as enabling learners to achieve the course, the latter questioned the effectiveness of the teachers' team-working efforts.

'It is important that they [the learners] gain what is required by the end of the course, but it is not necessary that they do every single assignment at the specific time'. [Interview F, 2.04.08]

'So, in a way, within the team, we can be our own worse enemy – giving mixed messages [to students]'. [Interview A, 21.04.08]

Finally, the third phase of skills development of Access to HE course includes preparation for written examinations. The examination does not always contribute to the formal assessment but aims to prepare students for examination conditions experienced at HE level. Thus, there is an emphasis on the development of SIL such as revision, planning and time management in order to increase students' confidence as prospective HE students. As a teacher explained:

'Students are often overwhelmed by exams because [they] may come in with fear of exam; it might have been something that they have brought from their early schooling. So I think we have to be very careful about how we do it.' [Interview with E, 30.04.08]

Instead, the exam papers are used as supporting evidence to the formal assessment criteria of the programme; they are an opportunity for students to experience not only formal exam conditions, but also to rehearse the exam preparation process within their informal peer networks.

In this respect, this third phase can be regarded as the one in which all sets of skills developed and knowledge acquired through their development during the

academic year are being brought together through this informal/formal assessment. Finally it is during this phase in which the learner starts to develop an understanding of the demands, as well as the strategies required for successful study at HE level.

Discussion

Overall, teachers' interpretations of their documented practice indicate that they are aware of the model they are applying, although not surprisingly there are differences of emphasis and nuance. Moreover, they are attempting to develop skills and a concept – learner autonomy – that is oft used but not clearly defined as 'A major consequence of the failure to define independent learning adequately in the context of higher education is that there has often been an inability to discriminate between independent study as a learning activity and as a capacity to be developed. As a result the process by which a student becomes self-capable of self-directed study is left to serendipity' (Knight 1996:35). Thus, there are variations in the interpretation of learner autonomy and its subsequent application in practice.

These variations are evident in this course's documentation and reported teaching and learning practices related to some of the skills related to 'higher education learner autonomy'. For example, ICT is not always clearly integrated into the delivery of the subject units and time management is only 'taught' through the assessment deadline rules. The development of peer networks is not clearly formalised and all teachers do not regularly use the VLE. There is also limited evidence that skills developed in the CSU and LRC inputs into the programme – Internet research and the use of subject specific gateways and academic journals – are reinforced in formal subject unit assessments.

However, there is clear evidence that the teachers are aware of the need to develop SIL and critical thinking and have put into place structures that develop these skills throughout the programme. Moreover, in several cases – essay

writing skills, critical reading and note taking – practice mirrors structure; and there is a clear phased development of skills.

Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on an oral presentation that is meant to bring together and assess many of the SIL developed previously. The exam simulation also provides an opportunity to rehearse exam technique skills and prepare for a popular University assessment mode. All these skills are seen to determine a successful University readiness learning experience.

Consequently, there is a tendency for the development of SIL and learner autonomy to evolve around the individuality of the adult learner and his/her needs, rather than on an agreed pedagogic model or practice:

‘We do encourage students to think about how they organise their own lives and their work around their college life, because often with Access students there is a problem with the demands from home life and demands of study’. [Interview with E, 30.04.08]

So, although the teaching team has a model that most sign up to, in practice there are variations based both on individual teachers’ assumptions of adult learner needs and preferred teaching and learning styles.

There is also an issue relating to the role of skills development within the subject units; is it the case that teachers teach skills necessary for the understanding of the subject or the corollary; that the delivery of the subject drives skills development? The latter approach is usually associated with ‘general education’ pedagogic traditions; the former more linked with adult and community education (Lucas 2004). This report indicates that the teaching team probably deliver a hybrid model drawing from both traditions. This could be the strength of the programme, although it could lead to confusion for the learners if different teachers use significantly different models of teaching and learning.

However, the evidence indicates that although the majority of the team come from a general education background and traditions they have adapted their

teaching to meet the needs of the client group. Their teaching and learning practices emphasise skills development as much as transmission of knowledge; student orientation over teacher-centred-ness; a constructivist rather than a student deficit model. Indeed, many of their practices chime with the philosophy of the early 'access movement'.

Overall then, the report indicates a group of staff that are delivering a hybrid teaching and learning model based on skills development/knowledge transmission within an access course tradition informed by relatively limited outside structural advice. SIL and critical thinking are clearly identified as important skills to be developed, although there is evidence of some difference between the teaching team in terms of how these skills could be interpreted and taught.

Conclusions and recommendations

This short report has explored Access teachers' structures and perceptions of delivering SIL within the context of an inner London FE college. It is clear that with the ever increasing 'vocationalism' of the adult FE sector and withdrawal of support for adult general education that Access to HE courses are under threat. This report indicates that this course team have responded to the needs of its client group and are in general delivering the skills needed for HE study. It is also clear that this area of FE is under researched, in particular the long tradition of general education courses and its associated discourses and practices.

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