

USING A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' LEARNING: A model of learning support for both traditional and non-traditional learners

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Introduction

It could be argued that it is necessary to provide additional support for 'non-traditional' learners. An alternative view is that provision of such support should be for all learners, thus ensuring that the potential of all students is acknowledged and developed. This paper presents a developmental approach to supporting students' learning, which can be applied to students studying in any subject area, level or mode of study. It also recognises that students learn in different ways and develop at different paces.

We write from the perspective of a central staff working with both students and academic staff in faculties at De Montfort University, a large post '92 higher education institution in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom. The University's main focus is on professional, creative and vocational provision, underpinned by a strong research profile. As well as students studying full-time and part-time, an increasing number study by distance learning, both within the UK and internationally.

A developmental approach to learning support

A deficit approach to supporting learning, that is reactive, remedial and specialist, is costly, and limited in its impact (Cottrell, 2001; Wolfendale, 1996; Peelo and Wareham, 2002; Tinto, 1997). If this is simply aimed at students who are perceived as more in need of additional support, such as those identified as 'non-traditional' learners, many students who would benefit from support for their learning will not take up opportunities to enhance their achievement. Such students would include those who do not actually fail and those who do not recognize that they need help until late in their studies. Typically, if these students survive on their course, they do so by resorting to safe surface approaches to learning and consequently never reach their fullest potential. Finally, it will not benefit those 'high fliers' who do not quite make the grade, but could have done so with appropriate encouragement and support.

Our developmental approach to learning support enables us to address the needs of a wider range of students, acknowledging that it is not helpful to categorise students as 'vulnerable', 'at risk' or 'failing'. Rather it recognises that students, indeed maybe all students, need support for their learning at some point during their studies. As a result, we can create an environment which encourages students to be proactive and make decisions about their own study strategies prior to embarking on assignment work, rather than simply making reactive responses to grades and assignment feedback. However, our experience is that many students are unsure about the appropriateness of help-seeking. Later in this paper we demonstrate that this is the case through the analysis of a survey conducted with students on two first year modules and follow up focus groups with students from a wide range of subjects. The analysis revealed that in fact it is not only the low achieving students who are reluctant to seek help, but also those who are achieving good grades.

The key elements of our approach are threefold. Firstly, the opportunity for students to undertake a self-assessment of their confidence, at the point of entry to the University, in the skills needed for studying in higher education. Secondly, the provision of practical

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learning materials, which are accessible and relevant to all students, studying at all levels and in a variety of modes. Thirdly, a range of 'gateways' to support providing students with alternative routes, which both suit their own ways of learning and enable them to feel that seeking help is a natural element of a higher education learning experience. A crucial aspect of this final element is collaboration with faculty staff to provide support to students in a timely and contextualised way within a course setting. We have evidence that this has enabled us to reach a much wider group of students than the few who might naturally seek out support.

While each of the key elements has its own intrinsic value, there are significant benefits in overtly acknowledging their inter-relationship, by positioning them within the taught curriculum in a timely and relevant manner.

Help-seeking in a higher education context

Students in higher education have access to a range of face-to-face learning support opportunities, provided by lecturers, tutors, and study skills specialists. They also have access to an equally wide range of materials; in their modules, in the library and on the web. Many students use all of these opportunities and resources and benefit from them, but some students do not. In order to maximise the impact of these various forms of learning support and ensure that all students can benefit, it is important to identify what barriers exist to accessing help.

There is considerable research related to effective help-seeking. Karabenick and Knapp (1991) found that confident and successful students tend not to feel threatened by needing to seek help; rather they accept help seeking as part of a developmental learning process. On the other hand, they found that less confident or less successful learners are more likely to regard their need for help as a sign of failure or an indication of their lack of ability. Karabenick and Knapp described two types of help-seeking. Firstly, 'executive help-seeking', in which the student is looking to relinquish responsibility for the task and find someone else to either solve the problem or provide the answer. Executive help-seekers may seek help before they have attempted the task. In other words help-seeking is not necessarily always a good thing. Their second type is 'instrumental help-seeking', in which the student is actively taking responsibility for the task, and looking for just enough help to allow them to complete the task independently. Instrumental help seekers would say that they will only look for help when they have done everything they can to help themselves.

In order to understand students' experiences and perceptions of the help-seeking process, we made use of the '3P' (Presage, Process, Product) model of student learning, proposed by John Biggs (1994) and further developed by Prosser et al (2001) in Rust (2001). This model acknowledges students' characteristics, their previous learning experiences, preferences and attitudes (presage); their perceptions of the teaching context and how they approach learning experiences (process); and the resulting learning outcomes (product). In Table 1 we have applied the '3P' approach to students' experiences of help-seeking.

PRESAGE	PROCESS	PRODUCT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students' characteristics. ▪ Their prior knowledge and experience of needing and seeking help. ▪ Their beliefs about help-seeking. ▪ Their level of learning confidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students' learned approaches to help-seeking. ▪ Their perceptions of how appropriate help-seeking is (or not) in higher education. ▪ The impact of information, advice and learning activities. ▪ Access to additional support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 'Instrumental' or 'executive' approach to help-seeking. ▪ A level of engagement with learning in HE (deep or surface; independent or dependent).

Table 1: Students' experiences of help-seeking in higher education

Help-seeking survey and focus groups

We knew from our experience that many students who should take up opportunities for support do not in fact do so, but we wanted to understand why. We therefore carried out a survey with students studying on two first year modules as a first step to understanding the beliefs, attitudes and expectations of help-seeking that students bring with them as they make the transition into higher education. The aim was to understand why students might or might not seek support. The survey was followed by work with focus groups involving self selected students from across a wide range of subjects.

The survey sample included both 'high' and 'low' achievers, as we wanted to understand whether this was a significant factor¹. In fact, contrary to Karabenick and Knapp (1991) we found that there was no clear link between students' levels of success and their confidence about seeking help.

Students were asked how they would feel if they needed help with an assignment. Some students felt confident about acknowledging a need for help:

'If the particular area or subject is not understood fully then help should be sought'. (High achiever)

On the other hand many student responses confirmed the emotional nature of help-seeking:

'I would feel embarrassed asking for help, especially from someone I barely knew...don't get to know lecturers enough to confide in'. (High achiever)

'Afraid to ask. Didn't know where to go for advice. Ashamed to ask lecturers/tutors as I didn't feel confident to do so'. (Low achiever)

¹ 'High achievers' were those students who had achieved over 70% and 'low achievers' were those students who had achieved under 50%, in two module assignments

Students may see their need for help as an admission of failure, or as a sign that they have not worked hard enough. These students may need to pluck up the courage to approach staff for help:

'In a way I would be disappointed because I would feel that I haven't learnt all the material required'. (High achiever)

Analysis of the range of comments we received demonstrates that they fall largely into five categories (Table 2).

ISSUE	TYPICAL STUDENT COMMENT
Pride	<i>'I don't want people to think I can't cope'.</i>
Lack of Information	<i>'If only I'd known about this (study support) before'.</i>
Anxiety	<i>'Maybe I shouldn't be at university'.</i>
Complacency	<i>'I've written essays before - what else is there to know?'</i>
Embarrassment	<i>'What if I'm the only one who doesn't understand?'</i>

Table 2: Categories of students' reasons for not seeking help.

However as we have already noted, help-seeking behaviour in itself is not necessarily 'a good thing'. Further analysis revealed that students can have unrealistic expectations about the type and amount of help that is appropriate in higher education.

If students are looking for prescriptive answers they may not recognise the value of advice and guidance from tutors, and may feel disappointed or rebuffed. This high achieving student felt inclined to give up after sending an email to a tutor.

'I emailed my tutor a sample of my bibliography and said could you just check that this is correct, like I don't want to lose any marks and he goes to me "Well I'm sorry but no there's plenty of guide leaflets out there for you to check how its done" and I just looked at him and thought you know you're there to help me, you're not doing it. It made me feel really crap to be honest, because it was just like "I don't want to do this".'

Too much help, or too little, provided too soon, or too late, can encourage dependence or a fear of failure.

'For my dissertation, I just wanted to make sure that everything was right so even stupid things I was in there with my tutor - 'Is this right?' (Student in focus group)

Student comments also confirmed the results of Karabenick and Knapp's work (1991), that feelings of inadequacy or anxiety about seeking help may be resolved by students lowering their goals:

'So with issues like that (clarifying understanding) you're too embarrassed to go forward because you just think you're being stupid so in the end you think "Well, at least it passed"'. (Student in focus group)

How did the survey inform our practice

In exploring students' attitudes to and experiences of needing help, we identified five key factors which encourage students to make appropriate decisions about their learning needs and then take action to address those needs. These were:

- The adoption of a reflective approach to learning.
- Feeling safe to ask for help.
- Knowing when and how to seek help.
- Being aware of the availability of support at the point of need.
- Having access to a range of support provision and a variety of routes to it.

In view of students' expressed concerns about the appropriateness of seeking help, we recognised the need to take a proactive approach with students in their first year of undergraduate study. We already had a number of years experience of delivering a self-assessment exercise to new undergraduates, as their first step towards taking a reflective approach to learning. This had informed our development of learning and teaching resources. We also had experience of offering central study skills workshops and one-to-one study support tutorials, but were aware that, as in many other universities, take-up of these can be low. We felt that the key to maximising students' engagement with the various forms of support that are available, was to work with them, within their course and provide a relevant, timely and contextualised experience. We felt that this would reassure students that needing and seeking help is a normal part of effective learning and as a consequence they would then be more likely to take up other opportunities, both within their course and centrally. The following sections of this paper consider the interrelated aspects of our approach in more detail.

Self-assessment exercise

The De Montfort University Self-assessment Exercise (SAE) has been completed by over 20,000 new undergraduates between 1999 and 2006. In its evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Higher Education: Student Retention (House of Commons, 2001), the Quality Assurance Agency cited the exercise:

The QAA argued that students who are not fully confident in key skill areas should be provided with assistance to develop these skills at the very start of their higher education. The QAA drew the attention of the Sub-committee to the DfEE² funded 'Improving Your Learning'³ produced by De Montfort University to support the development of key skills, including self-assessment and action planning by students'.

The SAE provides students with an opportunity to reflect on their skills and experience and make a judgement about their levels of confidence at the point of transition to higher

² Department for Education and Employment.

³ Earlier versions of the self-assessment workbook were entitled 'Improving Your Learning'. The title was changed to 'Focus on Your Skills and Experience' in 2005.

education. In summary it is a reflective, developmental and planning tool, which is delivered in a supportive environment and which provides signposts to further support.

Students complete activities in a workbook (Bloy and Pillai, 2005), which has been revised and updated each year, in response to feedback from students and staff. The activities are designed to help students reflect upon and make a judgement about their level of confidence and/or experience in Information Technology, Information Skills, Verbal Communication, Academic Writing, Reading and Employability. Students transfer their self-assessment to anonymous feedback forms which are analysed to produce course, faculty and university-wide reports.

Information Technology, Information Skills and Employability are self-assessed by students against three categories: not confident, quite confident and confident. Verbal Communication, Academic Writing, Reading and Numeracy are set against the national key skills levels 1-4. As a rough guide, level 2 equates to GCSE, level 3 to A-level and level 4 is the measure of applied competence that a student might be expected to achieve on completing a first degree. Clearly the importance of each skill varies between courses. For example, there are some subjects where numeracy may not be particularly relevant. However, the exercise includes all areas for all students in order to provide a level of consistency and comparability across the University.

Although the exercise can highlight areas of weakness, it also provides students with the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate their strengths. In fact, the overall purpose is developmental and therefore it is of relevance to all students. Written feedback from students demonstrates that they do value the activity, for example:

'Still worried about being out of my depth, but know that most of us feel the same and that there is plenty of help out there'.

'I was expecting this to be a waste of time, but have now realised that I remember a lot of the maths I thought I had forgotten. I'm also feeling more confident about my reading – as a dyslexic I always worry about comprehension'.

'I found this workbook easy to understand and work through. It also gave useful information that I am sure will be invaluable to me in the future'.

The SAE has become an established element of induction for all faculties. While most sessions are delivered to large groups, other modes of delivery, such as in small group tutorials, have also been used. In a few instances, students have been given the workbook to take away to complete in their own time, with a view to discussion at a personal tutorial. However, regardless of the form of delivery used, the important point is to ensure that it is appropriate and timely.

Perhaps the best indication of the value of the exercise is the students' own reflections on completing the self-assessment activities. In the current academic year, 70% of students indicated that, having completed the activities, they were 'very much' or 'quite a lot' more confident about studying in higher education and 90% indicated that they now knew the areas they needed to improve.

A further development has been the translation of the approach taken in the SAE for use in the Training Needs Analysis, which was introduced as a requirement for all newly enrolled Research Students, from October 2005.

Learning resources and materials

The learning resources and materials which we have developed are designed to be accessible and practical. They are applicable to a wide range of students, and indeed in some instances are used from undergraduate through to postgraduate and research level.

As a result of feedback from students completing the SAE, the *Focus On* series was developed (De Montfort University, 2000). These are available electronically on the University's website. The series covers topics such as presentation skills; essay writing; note making; reading strategies; time management; and, group work. While the materials have been widely used, both by faculty and central support staff, students did not always know where or how to find them, when they actually needed them. Increased use of BlackBoard as a learning resource to support modules provided the opportunity to signpost the materials at timely and relevant points. However, while students were positive about the series, feedback indicated that they needed more guidance on how to use them. This was particularly the case for students studying part-time and by distance learning. As a consequence we have developed further materials which are currently being piloted with groups of distance learning students, with a view to making them more widely available across the university in the next academic year (see Case Study 1).

Case Study 1: Development of the '*Getting Started*'⁴ materials

Context: Students studying part-time and by distance learning were referred to the *Focus On* materials by faculty staff, but were unsure how to use them. They needed practical material which would support them in making a start with academic work.

Our response: Existing materials were extended to include a '*Getting Started*' level. The resources encourage students to apply their knowledge to a framework that can be adapted to their own situation. A key element is translating academic language, so that students can begin to unpick assignment briefs and actually get down to the task in hand.

Outcomes: In partnership with course teams, materials were signposted at timely and relevant points in the delivery of the curriculum. For example, a hyperlink to '*Getting started with assignment writing*' was placed with the assignment title.

Early responses from students suggest that the new materials are meeting their needs.

⁴ As the '*Getting Started*' materials are still at a pilot stage, they are currently not more generally available.

Central study skills workshops and one-to-one study support tutorials

While central study skills workshops and one-to-one study support tutorials have been available for several years, attendance has been poor. However, in the current academic year, we have seen a significant increase in attendance at workshops and one-to-one tutorials.

Case Study 2: Maximising the use of central study skills support

Context: Attendance at weekly drop-in study skill workshops was consistently low. The students who attended were largely mature and confident, or in great difficulty. This did not represent the number or profile of students who had developmental needs as identified by the SAE. Advertising the workshops using posters and other means made little difference to attendance.

Our response: We were increasingly being invited to work with course teams to support their students. We built on this as it provided us with:

- Insight into students' attitudes to learning support.
- An understanding of students' confusion about academic language.
- Opportunities to model the nature of appropriate learning support.
- Opportunities to publicise the central workshops in a timely and relevant way.

Outcomes

- A decision to reduce the number of topics covered in the workshop programme to focus on a small number of key topics.
- A switch to less 'academic' terminology.
- 50% increase in central workshop attendance.

Attendance lists at these central workshops suggest that the increased use reflects the impact of proactive collaboration with particular courses, as there was a clear correlation between students who attended the workshops and course teams with whom we had worked. They are used by a wide range of students including postgraduate students and students looking to achieve the highest grades. These workshops provide a safe and relatively anonymous first step into the support network for many students. In fact many students go on to arrange study support tutorials.

One-to-one and small group study support tutorials are available throughout the year. These are only thirty minutes long for individual tutorials or up to an hour for small groups of students. Consequently it is crucial that this valuable time is not wasted on getting to grips with the support that the student is seeking. We have adopted a booking system, rather than running drop in sessions and students are asked to prepare for the tutorial by completing a simple proforma, prioritising what they wish to cover. This simple reflective activity ensures that the student is clear about what he or she wants to achieve, rather than arriving expecting the tutor to make the decision for them about which issues should be addressed. Thus encouraging students to articulate their own learning needs and discouraging them from seeking only directive help. Again, the increased use of one-to-one study tutorials this year seems to reflect the impact of collaboration with course teams.

Course-based, subject-specific workshops

In order to reach the widest number of students in year one, in a timely and relevant manner, we have worked closely with course teams to provide bespoke workshops. In many cases this collaboration started with the SAE, which will have provided the course with a 'snapshot' of their students' levels of confidence in a range of academic skills. This feedback can help staff to anticipate barriers to students' levels of engagement with assignments and provide a practical focus for integrated support. Working alongside course teams ensures that ownership of the 'intervention' remains with the course, while allowing us to work at the heart of the curriculum. The workshops are designed as active, practical sessions which encourage discussion between students, facilitate their engagement with assignment tasks, and use activities and resources that ensure all students can benefit. Reflective activities and action planning encourage students to seek help early, while the student-to-student interaction in this context acts as a reassurance that needing help is a normal part of effective learning,

Course-based workshops ensure that students who are uncertain about asking for help can be supported in a relevant and timely way, without being specifically targeted or identified. There are clear indications that, having had this positive experience, these students then go on to use other learning support provision with more confidence. This integrated approach also provides opportunities to address and resolve issues of student engagement with course teams, so that in some cases elements of the 'additional' support can be embedded in the delivery of the curriculum. Although we had experience of working at course level in a number of faculties, we had had little involvement with one faculty. Case Study 3, illustrates how we developed a truly collaborative working relationship with staff in that faculty.

Case Study 3: Supporting students at the heart of the curriculum

Context: Students taking a first year module were having difficulty with the assessment tasks. The course team contacted us to find out what resources were available and where students could be sent for help.

Our response: We attended a full team meeting and were able to hear staff concerns. We then worked with the module leaders, so that we were clear about the requirements of the assignment that students had to complete. We then delivered a workshop, which was attended by a broad mix of students, ranging from those who were already achieving high grades to weaker students who were more in need of support. The workshop enabled students to:

- Analyse the requirements of the assignment.
- Acknowledge individually that what they were able to undertake without guidance, and where they might need help.
- Work together to produce individual action plans.
- Learn about other central support that was available.

Outcomes

- Students who attended the workshop achieved on average 10% higher grades than students who did not attend.
- Student feedback from the workshop relating to their perceptions of the assignment was fed back to the course team.
- Increased numbers of students from the course used central support.
- The assignment structure was reviewed and the following year it was presented in stages, allowing formative feedback to be provided. Success rates improved again.

Conclusions

Our approach to learning support is developmental in several ways. It is developmental in itself, as the approach has evolved and will continue to do so to meet the needs of a more diverse student body and changes in the higher education environment. It is developmental for students, as it encourages them to take a proactive approach to their own learning. They feel safe to seek help in an appropriate way; learn from their successes and failures and apply these to new challenges. Finally, it is developmental for faculty staff. By working in collaboration with them, we are able to have a better understanding of the demands of particular courses and provide bespoke support for their students. This collaboration can, as illustrated in Case Study 3, also result in changes in teaching and assessment practice, as staff gain a better understanding of the learning needs of their students.

Sellers and van der Velden (see University of York, 2006, page 75) cite what they term 'targeted learning support', be it within the discipline, skill based or through pastoral support, as key to retention. In addition, they refer to the importance of collaboration between central and faculty staff in order for support to be placed appropriately in the curriculum. Our own observation is that course-based integrated support, particularly during the first year of undergraduate study, lays the foundations for students' more confident use of support in year one and in ensuing years. Our evidence indicates that contextualised course-based support is an effective way of reaching a wide range of students, who might otherwise not seek support. These very students are likely to be those who are likely not reach their fullest potential or at worst fail.

Feedback from students and staff who have been involved in our course-based approach to learning support has been consistently positive. Staff have noted that students who have had access to contextualised support have engaged with assignments with increased confidence. Staff have also commented that they themselves felt supported in dealing with learning support issues, which were outside their subject expertise. We have also noted that having had a positive experience of our support within the curriculum, students were more likely to take up central provision. In addition, it appears that students were more inclined to seek help early in their studies, including having the confidence to seek advice or clarification from their tutors, rather than waiting to react to assignment marks.

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