

Ways to Engage Widening Participation Students.

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1. Introduction

Widening Participation (WP) covers so-called “non-traditional” students from diverse backgrounds who are being encouraged to consider further and higher education. This paper seeks to show that by identifying the learning issues of two different groups of WP students it is possible to find better ways of responding to their needs. Without this understanding we are relying on 'what the teacher does' rather than 'what the student does' within the learning environment and thus failing to engage the student fully (Biggs 1999).

In the absence of engagement, information skills work cannot be embedded or integrated, and is thus perceived to be unconnected with study, work or professional practice. It is seen as a means to an end only; i.e. encouraging a surface learning approach (Marton and Saljo 1984). It can also be counter-productive as students who are not engaged can display negative behaviour, be disruptive and spoil the group dynamic. At a surface level there can be little real engagement for the student, no matter how well sessions are planned or how good the content.

Students' prior and present learning experiences affect their perceptions and expectations and can be associated with the three barriers to learning as identified by Cross (1981) and cited by Merrill et al. (2000). Within new situations these perceptions and barriers can have a significant influence on learning approaches and styles (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). WP students from FE or a professional background, are likely to have more varied learning experiences than traditional students. To understand this relationship and determine how students perceive their situation is a further step towards developing appropriate learning and teaching contexts for successful engagement and deeper learning.

2. Profiles of the two student groups

- **Post Qualifying Social Work**

The full PQSW award (6 parts in total) is a professional social work qualification, linked to the requirements of higher education carrying 120 academic (H level) credits. PQ1 is met through a portfolio of evidence, and PQ2-6 through a variety of taught and portfolio routes. It is an award for all qualified social workers who wish to have their post qualifying experience and learning recognised, evaluated and extended, although it will eventually be a professional requirement in many situations.

- **FD Sc Equine Studies**

A Foundation Degree validated by Bournemouth University (BU). It is run by a partner institution, Kingston Maurward College (KMC), an agricultural college about 25 miles from Bournemouth. The students come from a wide rural area, are mostly working in equine related occupations and have studied to Diploma level.

3. Student Perspectives – PQSW and Foundation Degree

There is a wide diversity in the skills base of both sets of students, related to their Continuing Professional Development experiences, but the underlying level is usually diploma or lower. All of these students are adult learners with specific needs for experiential and active learning (Knowles 1990). Adults returning to academic study are likely to lack confidence in themselves as learners and to underestimate their own powers. They tend to be over-anxious and avoid the risk of making mistakes, exaggerating any stress and anxiety lingering from early schooling experiences (Daines, 1992 cited Michie et al., 2001; Knox, 1977; Cross, 1981). Many also find the complexity of being both a worker and a learner, along with the increased responsibility within a learner-centred process, a struggle, as evidenced by Boud and Soloman (2001).

For some students there can be problems identifying with HE and their role within it. There is understandable loyalty by some students to their local FE College that has served them well to this point in their learning. For Social Workers there can be perceptions of themselves as practitioners rather than students, too busy to read or undertake research of any kind (McCrystal, 2000; Ennis and Baldwin, 2000).

4. Barriers : dependency and anxiety - PQSW and Foundation Degree

Merrill refers to three barriers to learning, identified by Cross (1981) as 'situational' (learners life and circumstances) 'institutional' (associated with aspects of institutional provision) and 'dispositional' (linked to learners self-perception and attitude).

These barriers are interesting because they describe the issues outside the learning experience but which relate directly to that experience. For example, information literacy and the evaluation of resources are a challenge to many students because they require transferable skills and critical thinking. These can be particularly difficult concepts for HE students within the FE context as they adapt to becoming self directed learners.

Social work practitioners experience feelings of pressure, anxiety and lack of confidence regarding the necessity for the award, their academic ability and use of electronic information. Their expectations showed a general mistrust of the University environment, often perceived as elitist and totally unrelated to the 'real world' of practice. These findings appear in various studies (CEBSS, 1998; McCrystal, 2000; Everitt, 2002). The wide range of evidence and research relevant to social work practitioners in

non-bibliographic areas like practice guidance, policy, and professional information, is also an issue (Watson et al., 2002).

5. Responses - PQSW and Foundation Degree

To help students overcome these barriers and acquire the skills to engage with information research demands a re-evaluation of the way that students' perception is taken into account when delivering information skills sessions within the FE and professional environment. However as WP gains momentum some of the methods and interventions described next may be increasingly applicable within the whole HE sector.

6. The Mexican Hat – Foundation Degree

The term Mexican Hat (**Fig. 1**) as used by Robinson and Udal (2001) describes a series of interventions at different stages of learning. It resembles the hierarchy of levels of reflection that Brockbank and McGill (1998) use to describe the difficulty experienced by learners to 'reflect-on-action' (Schön, 1987). In this paper it is used to show levels of student engagement, and interventions to enable them to move to deeper learning.

Fig 1

Figure 1 not available

Zone 3

At the outer rim of the hat the students are not engaged. They are taking a surface approach to learning and are at best listening and waiting for answers to be fed to them. Ramsden (1992) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999) describe the characteristics of deep and surface learning. The students are passive and almost resentful, reluctant to take any responsibility for their own learning and they exhibit all the signs of surface learning. To overcome these complex barriers between the students and active learning the following interventions were put in place.

- A workbook was written to take them through the stages of information handling. The style of this workbook was deliberately relaxed and referred to resources at both KMC and BU to help establish

and reinforce the identities and complementary roles of the two institutions. The reaction to this workbook was positive and provided a focal point for a subsequent session.

- Time was spent ensuring that all members of the group had a personal Athens account to enable them to access resources remotely. Most of the group had forgotten their account IDs by the next session, indicating that they had not been used in the intervening period and that the importance of these accounts had not been fully understood.

Zone 2

In the middle zone of the hat the students are beginning to participate in the learning process. This engagement was achieved by

- The distribution of full text articles. These articles were all available from the online resources available to the students, and when they were handed out at the start of the session the level of engagement rose noticeably. When the group realised that articles just like these were attainable they began to be much more participative, and understood why the Athens personal accounts were so important.
- The students were then reminded how to search for articles, and referred back to the workbook that explained searching skills.
- They were asked to track down the article in front of them from a database with full text content, (EBSCO Academic Search Elite), writing down the steps needed to find it and noting any problems they encountered. This enabled individuals to discuss problems as they arose and for the group to work together to solve them.
- They were then asked to find other articles on the same topic and note down the steps that they took.
- Finally they began to look for articles on other topics relevant to their needs. They were not told *when* to do this but all did so as their confidence grew, and the more confident members helped the others.

By this process they began to move away from the notion that to complete an assignment they need to have all the resources to hand in their college library. At this stage they are still not fully independent learners because, for example, some found it difficult to ask questions about finding resources. One student whose online search failed to find a full text article on the welfare of horses in transport just looked out of the window. When she was asked why did she think she was having a problem her response was “there’s nothing there, there never is”. It was possible to work with this student to look at her search strategy and the databases she was using and prevent her moving back to Zone 3, whilst others in the group were moving towards Zone 1. The growing confidence of the group was evidenced as students chose to change databases to find more references and then successfully transferred their search terms to fit the new interface.

The interventions in Zone 2 were underpinned by

- The introduction of a specially designed web page linking the full text and bibliographic resources available, as well as providing links to e-journals, newspapers and useful websites.
- The workbook from the first session was made available in pdf from the web page.

Zone 1

In the centre of the hat are the fully-fledged reflective learners. Interventions at this stage are minimal, as contact with BU is restricted to email. Evaluation is necessary to establish how many of the group reached the middle of the hat, and for how long they stayed there. It would be useful to establish how much movement exists between Zones 1 and 2. Movement between these Zones is probably inevitable, given the profile and location of the group. Realistically some may retreat to Zone 3. Staff at KMC Library with support from BU will guide the progress of this group.

7. Implications – the Mexican Hat

So what next? As the preceding description shows, this work has not been evaluated at the time of writing. Until the cohort has completed their studies and hopefully transferred to BU for their final year it will not be possible to judge how effective this technique is in the long term. However this work is being continued. To enhance the student experience of HE within the FE environment and respond to the needs of WP students studying in partner colleges, Bournemouth University is managing DSW¹, a HEFCE funded project. Part of the funding for this project has been directed at a post of peripatetic training support librarian, working with several of BU's partner colleges including KMC. Any library or information skills developments with the FD Sc Equine Studies will be undertaken by this person in conjunction with the course team and library staff at KMC. As a secondee from BU library, the peripatetic librarian has been involved with the delivery of services to partner colleges and prior to appointment was aware of the methods that were being used with the group.

The developmental work is already being used in other ways. A workbook to support a BSc programme at another college has been developed from the KMC model and used with a small group of students to help them acquire independent research skills. Finally, the experience of using the interventions will inform a review of the undergraduate information skills teaching for the School of Conservation Sciences at BU during 2003-4.

8. A Bespoke Service - PQSW

Candidates on the Bournemouth PQSW programme are provided with an holistic package under the title of 'information skills' and have a dedicated Student Support Lecturer. The remit of this post is to engage fully with the candidates and the requirements of the programme, and develop appropriate responses. A taught information skills workshop is offered by the lecturer with supporting handouts and help sheets; a dedicated web portal has been designed; online texts made accessible; and opportunities for contact time with the lecturer are available.

One of the primary aims when dealing with PQSW students' perceptions and anxieties has been to treat them with respect whilst limiting any form of intimidation. A reduction of threat and anxiety were found by Marton and Saljo (1984) to be associated with increased motivation to learn. Belbin and Belbin (1972) illustrate how important it is for adults to have built a sense of confidence first before they can acquire specific skills. The PQSW information skills workshop is therefore relaxed and informal, developing a sense of trust, and encouraging active participation.

More specifically, one of the first activities is designed to respect and utilise students' practice experiences and knowledge. Rogers (2002, 32) states that the more learners are involved and offer their own experience, 'the more they are likely to learn at speed'. Their experiences of finding and using information at home or work are shared and explored with the whole group. By relating to everyday situations and problems where information is used, students begin to feel less unfamiliar with the idea of 'research' and therefore less anxious about it. As Bigge and Shermis (1999, 248) state, 'understanding is seeing the relation between particulars and generalisations'. They also begin to realise they are not alone with their fears, worries or their perceived lack of knowledge and skills. Students are encouraged to critically evaluate academic knowledge and research against their practice knowledge as well as other literature. This addresses many misconceptions regarding academic elitism.

The dedicated PQSW web portal has also been designed to provide a fully tailored service. Specific Information Skills web pages within the portal allow non-bibliographic and practice-based information to be made available on an equal footing alongside more academic resources, and reiterate the commitment to an understanding of students' needs.

Portfolio case study exemplars are used as a basis for the taught information skills procedure. Relevant information areas - theory, research, policy and law, listed as marking criteria for the portfolio - are used as starting points in this procedure rather than information type or format. This is important as it allows the workshop to integrate completely into the PQ unit, and shows relevance to the students' information needs, whilst also reflecting the requirements of evidence-based practice. As Grafstein (2002) explains, emphasis should be placed on the process of locating and retrieving information procedures because these are the skills that students need and will facilitate their ability to acquire new information as the need arises, i.e. they are transferable.

Active teaching methods (discussion, questioning, use of flip charts, post-its) are employed when sharing this procedure with the group to allow participation, questioning and interaction. In this way students are not just 'told' how to do it; they can become involved with understanding a case study and its various areas of evidence, identify specific information needs and begin to form their own ideas for relevant sources using the procedure as a framework.

The web pages also reflect the information skills procedure explored within the workshop, using similar structures and language. These pages are used to access the electronic sources during the practical part of the workshop. Candidates work at their own pace to develop confidence and skills with plenty of positive reinforcement and encouragement. The workshop therefore provides an holistic approach, able to base its structure, content and resources entirely on the needs and perspectives of the students, unrestricted by the frameworks of more traditional information services. A unique level of bespoke information skills provision and engagement has been enabled by the appointment of a dedicated Student Support Lecturer within the academic team. Although this position is fairly unique it reinforces the need for, and the ultimate success of, embedding information skills teaching within the curriculum (Dee 2001; JISC 2002).

9. Implications – The Bespoke Service

The way we have identified and responded to the needs of PQSW students gives an added-value experience to pave the way for more positive and effective interactions with information for evidence-based practice, reflective practice, and lifelong learning requirements. There has been a positive response to a survey of candidates attending the workshops. Of the 90 completed forms during March to July 2003, 85% said they will use the information resources they had learned about, and 91% said they found the web pages useful.

This approach can now be followed for further responses to specifically identified learning needs. At present a workbook to support the writing of academic reflective assignments is being produced, adding a further element to the provision for post-qualifying social work education at BU.

10. Conclusion - PQSW and Foundation Degree

In this paper we have described techniques and interventions that in themselves are neither new nor different. What we think is innovative is the way that both the Mexican Hat and the Bespoke Service identify and recognise the relationships between experiences, perceptions and students' learning experiences and use this understanding to develop appropriate methods to engage the students' process of learning information-handling skills.

The perceptions of these groups of WP students in many ways typify the perceptions of the increasingly diverse student body within both FE and HE. We hope that some of our experiences and conclusions will provide food for thought for colleagues in FE and HE who are reinventing their services in response to WP.

¹ Dorset, South Somerset and South Wiltshire Higher Education Partnership

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Web Sites

Equine Studies

http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/library/subjects/equine_studies.html

Post Qualifying Social Work

<http://ihcs4u.bournemouth.ac.uk/pqsw/pqsw.asp>

Guest password required for access - please contact Lynne Rutter: lrutter@bournemouth.ac.uk