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3 Is Learning Development ‘Part of the Problem’?

Ann Barlow, John Acroyd and Alyssa Phillips

The writers also wish to acknowledge Combined Studies students at the University of Manchester for their contribution to the authorship of the chapter.

Summary

As learning developers seek to respond to a variety of needs within the current culture of higher education, it can be difficult to maintain a balance between work which aims to develop skills for independent learning and work which meets some of the quality-driven demands of the institution. We argue that engaging in reflective practice can develop our confidence to achieve this balance.

Given that many students have a complex view of the university’s role in their personal and professional development, we need to question the nature of our responsibilities and functions as learning developers. This chapter explores some of the philosophical, historical and institutional approaches which have influenced the development of ‘the university’. These ideas may form tacit frames which influence ideas and practice. Bringing these factors into conscious awareness will help us in our work to promote self-directed learning within the perceived constraints of requirements such as criterion-referenced assessment.

Introduction

How much individual responsibility should university staff require students to take for their own learning?

We have been exploring this question at the University of Manchester for the past five years, looking at resources and frameworks to support self-directed/independent learning for undergraduate and
postgraduate students. We are engaged in research with practitioners (tutors, lecturers, programme directors and learning developers) and students, centred on the identification of resources and practices which enable the development of self-directed learning within the university environment. Through our research and our own practices, we often emphasise the necessity for students to be self-directed learners, and at the same time provide extensive learning development resources to support students in achieving such a state. As practitioners, we often find ourselves performing an uneasy balancing act of providing support for students to meet the requirements of the university’s assessment mechanisms, while at the same time encouraging them to be self-directed in their own learning.

Achieving balance in our working practices is becoming more problematic in today’s fee- and results-driven universities. Fee-paying parents expect a return for their money in terms of a sound qualification, senior management at universities desire excellent results from the National Student Survey, while employers wish to be satisfied that new graduate recruits are appropriately skilled for meeting the demands of the twenty-first-century workplace. In this environment, there is a risk of learning development being seen as primarily result driven with a focus on ensuring that students acquire a high-classified degree, and that institutions will be ranked high in student satisfaction and employment tables.

Learning development provides an important service to students and institutions. In addition, learning development can provide an important vehicle for focusing attention on the purposes and practices of student learning. In this chapter, we encourage staff working in learning development to reflect on their role in fostering particular approaches to student learning in their own institutions. Central to this discussion is the consideration of what ‘kind’ of student learning should be fostered by learning developers: how does this fit with the purposes and realities of the modern university?

One particular challenge facing staff working in learning development is the current prevalence of what is known as ‘criterion-referenced assessment’, whereby students are increasingly being required to demonstrate that they have met a lengthy series of assessment criteria. This form of assessment raises questions about the kind of learning encouraged. Without a clear understanding of our approaches to learning, there are dangers that learning development will be seen as simply remedial within institutions – a way to ensure students meet criteria,
rather than an opportunity for them to develop and foster self-directed approaches to learning.

This chapter also aims to encourage staff working in learning development to reflect on their own practices and, in particular, their own philosophical, historical and institutional reference points for their understandings of approaches to student learning. We have found that, to meet the challenges of criterion-referenced assessment, we need continually to focus our attention on recognising how we frame our own experiences and assumptions of student learning.

▶ Self-directed learning and the reflective practitioner

Self-directed learning places learner autonomy at the centre of the learning experience, and requires staff and students to foster a lifelong approach to learning where students take responsibility for their own learning outcomes. This chapter assumes that staff in learning development should encourage an environment of self-directed student learning. For example, the Learning Guide at the University of Manchester emphasises three aspects of self-directed learning: that independent learners are motivated to learn ... are capable of managing the learning processes effectively ... [and] are able to monitor and reflect critically on how and what they learn. (Wyburd, 2006)

Self-directed learning is not a new concept but lacks an accepted definition (Broad, 2006, p. 119). Various terms describe the process of learners taking responsibility for their own learning, including ‘autonomous learning’, ‘self-directed learning’ and ‘independent study’ (Broad, 2006, p. 119; Wyburd, 2006; and Boud, 1988, p. 17). Self-directed learning is an important aspect of the university experience, with most institutional teaching and learning strategies recognising this approach to student learning. The Dearing Report (1997) also recognised the need for planning more effective support for students, given that they are spending increasing time in independent study (Section 8.13).

Our own practices encourage students to engage with reflective practice (Boud, 1988). For example, in developing frameworks to support first-year students in community placements, we were influenced by
David Kolb’s (1984, p. 38) concept of ‘experiential learning’ and the four-stages cycle of concrete experience. Yet, how reflective are we about our own assumptions towards learning?

Donald Schön advocates reflective practices in order to understand approaches to particular situations. By reflecting upon his or her reaction to a situation, the practitioner engages in continuing professional development. One particular aspect of reflective practice identified by Schön is that of frame analysis. To resolve a problem, the practitioner needs to frame that problem using recognised professional expertise.

To do this, the practitioner needs to become aware of the tacit frames in use. Schön (1983, p. 310) notes that ‘when a professional becomes aware of his [sic] frame, he also becomes aware of the possibility of alternative ways of framing his practice’.

The difficulty in framing experience, for learning development, is its hybrid nature – it can draw on the practices of several different occupations such as teaching and learning, counselling and librarianship.

Our own backgrounds are varied: a philosopher, an historian, and an educator, all engaged in learning development activities. That said, we found common frames of reference for understanding student learning. This became a reference point for our frame analysis: taking us on a journey into the philosophical, historical and institutional assumptions we make about student learning that influence our own practices in encouraging self-directed learning. These philosophical, historical and institutional frames, in particular the rational and the empiricistductive approaches to learning, provide us with deeper understandings of our practices, and thus a stronger foundation from which to face the challenges present in the modern university.

By adopting a reflective analysis for the learning development profession, practitioners have a theoretical basis from which to encourage a deeper approach to learning, and hopefully avoid the problem of supporting institutions and students purely to ‘pass the exam’.

The purposes of a University

Determining this is not an easy task. For example, Matthew Reisz (2008) identifies considerable diversity in what may be expected from university education across the higher education sector in Britain, arguing that this diversity: ‘reflects varied histories and public policies that pull in several directions’. Our university mission statements, and visions of their purpose, inform our role in fostering particular
approaches to student learning. A number of university mission statements focus on one or all of the following: regional development, encouraging widening participation, engagement of business and employers, and excellence in teaching and learning.

Students are at the centre of the service provided by learning developers. They have provided us with further insights. A group of 100 first-year Combined Studies students were set an online task: *Discuss the origins, purpose and value of a university.*

Three prominent themes emerged. Firstly, there was overwhelming agreement among these students about the financial and employment rewards of a good degree. The majority of postings talked of improving employment prospects:

> For me the primary purpose of coming to university is to gain a degree and ultimately obtain a better job than I could have acquired without further education. I appreciate that there are many other benefits of university, such as gaining independence and furthering your knowledge of a subject you are interested in, but for me these would fall under the ‘values’ of university category, as these alone would not be enough to tempt most students today to come to university. (Student 1, 2009)

These comments might suggest that students are ‘results-driven’. Yet a significant number also emphasised the primary importance of advancing their knowledge of their subjects. One student expressed this as valuing:

> … an environment where ideas and theories can be shared and cultivated. Both with respects to the discipline the student follows and on a wider socio/political scale. It [the university] does this by introducing the socio/political world to many new, fresh minds in a setting where pro-active behaviour is encouraged. (Student 2, 2009)

Interestingly, both perspectives make some reference to independence and pro-active behaviour, recognising a need for autonomy in study.

The third theme directly links to this notion of learner autonomy. Students discussed the importance of their personal development at university:

> I also believe that university enables students to unlock their full poten-
tial, therefore I agree with ... and ... not only does University provide education but it also enables people to enhance inter-personal skills, such as independence, organisation, and to quote ... 'confidence' (Student 3, 2009)

We also found significant agreement amongst the students as to their perceptions of the purposes and origins of a university. The majority made some reference to the importance of the historical and philosophical foundations. For example, students referred to the medieval universities that emerged out of schools funded by the church, and also the universities of the nineteenth century set up to educate professionals in the new industries created during the industrial revolution.

Of most interest for this discussion is the value that this group of students placed on historical foundations:

I really like the idea of being in a university that has had a lot of students throughout so many years, because even though they were here in the 19th or in the 20th century, they came for the same reason as me: to study and develop their potential, in a place that offered them all they needed to do it. Everything changes with time, but I love the fact that I am sharing something with people who were here a long time ago. (Student 4, 2009)

This group not only knew about the foundations of university education; some also viewed these philosophical and historical foundations as in some way shaping their own approaches to their degree. This is similar to the way our own approaches to learning are framed.

Fundamental approaches to learning in the history of the university

In Britain, the earlier universities of Oxford (recognised in 1167) and Cambridge (1209), together with some Scottish universities established in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were monastic in origin, essentially establishments which promoted learning through discourse, debate and discussion, much along the lines of the ancient Greek philosophers. These universities tended to emphasise the pursuit of knowledge, learning and research for its own sake (Reize, 2008). Critical thinking, along the lines of that of the ancient Greek philosophers, was often the established approach to learning.
Though the process of ‘critical thinking’ is notoriously resistant to precise definition, it is not in question that this kind of intellectual activity should be embedded in all approaches to student learning. Most learning developers are familiar with the confused look of the undergraduate student who has been told by their lecturer that they needed to be ‘more critical’ in their essay. If we trace the origins of this intellectual tradition we find ourselves in ancient Athens, considering the ideas originated by Socrates, and perpetuated and developed in recorded form by his student Plato.

For Socrates, truth was elusive, and any proposition claiming the status of it must be subjected to rigorous and relentless questioning to reveal the falsity of that claim; hence his admission that he was ignorant, that he had nothing to teach. This was critical thinking and learning at its most epistemologically barren, its most courageous.

Plato’s chief concern was morality or ethics – that we could know ethical truths as certainly as we knew mathematical truths. For Plato, the means of arriving at such truths, at all truth, was ‘dialectic’, or critical thinking in the form of an interrogative dialogue, with oneself or another. Both Socrates and Plato conceived of knowledge or truth as internal, abstract, the object of purely intellectual inquiry. Indeed, the road to truth was that which led away from the world of sensory perception, into the intelligible realm of the mind (Cornford, 1962, p. 74). Learning was, for them, a looking within. The emphasis here was on the close relationship between the teacher and the student, the critical dialogue they engaged with and the intellectual knowledge that could be revealed from within the student through questioning. There is a degree of autonomy for the learner here in searching for the truths within.

Plato’s student Aristotle, the third of the great ancient Greek philosophers, believed that the chief object of philosophical inquiry was not the inner world, but instead the empirical world of concrete facts, reality as seen, heard and felt. Although he observed the contents of the natural world systematically, his prime means of arriving at conclusions remained rational analysis through questioning and inquiry.

This reliance on intellectual contemplation was rejected by later figures such as the sixteenth century British philosopher Francis Bacon (Bacon, 2000). He argued that reason must be placed after, not before, the facts, and proceed by inductive inference from them. The proper exercise of reason in scientific inquiry involved extrapolation from accumulated empirical data to generalised conclusions, rather than the spinning of metaphysical webs into which the facts must be fitted.
Rationalists, like spiders, spin webs from themselves; Bacon, 2000, p. 79. At around the same time, the need for practical experimentation over theoretical speculation was also emphasised by the Italian astronomer and physicist Galileo (Becker, 1959, pp. 20–1).

So, and very broadly speaking, the Western intellectual tradition has bequeathed to us two conceptions of knowledge or truth, and two methods of attaining it – the purely rational, and the empiricinductive.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century had a profound influence on British universities, with empiricist assumptions, influencing the learning encouraged, alongside the older rationalist tradition.

Learning in British universities became more formalised. This was reflected in the introduction of lectures, although there was a continued emphasis on the relationship between the student and teacher (Perkins, 1972). Even if students were bent on taking up places in elite professions outside of the university, subject matter still included the teaching of logic and rhetoric, ensuring the survival of the older rationalist tradition. This rationalist approach to learning was emphasised by Isaac Watts (1798, ‘The Improvement of Mind, or a Supplement to the Art of Logic’). This text bears a remarkable resemblance to current study skills manuals in terms of its anticipated audience. Watts noted in his introduction: ‘I have endeavoured to eschew the mistakes we are exposed to in our conception, judgement and reasoning … I have also laid down many general and particular rules how to escape error and attain truth.’ He also asserts that, ‘if the … scholar and the gentleman would but transcribe such rules into their understanding; and practice them upon all occasions, there would be much more truth and knowledge to be found among men …’ (Watts, 1798, p. 3).

During this period, there was also increasing emphasis on the university as a place of teaching, as opposed to being purely a protector/defender of knowledge: ‘a University … is a place of teaching universal knowledge’ (Newman, 1982).

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw real change in the definition of the purpose of the university, as well as the expansion of university education. The development of a national system of education led to increased demand for higher education opportunities, particularly in industrial areas of the country. But longstanding universities were not prepared to engage with the potential for research that was emerging through the industrial revolution (McNay, 2005).

It was becoming clear that, in England, the four universities of
Oxford, Cambridge, London and Durham were too conservative or hidebound by restrictive statutes to respond readily to modern circumstances. (Robertson and Lees, 2007, p. 10)

As the goal of educating members of the professions became more prevalent, universities became the vehicles for delivering elite professional knowledge while at the same time establishing that the individual was well-versed in the required knowledge. The latter, of course, is achieved by means of rigorous assessment, and this increasingly came to involve formal frameworks such as criterion-referenced assessment. However, universities continued to embed the philosophical approaches to critical thinking and learning discussed earlier.

The changing role of the university in Britain was illustrated in the ‘Two Cultures’ exchange (1959–62) between F. R. Leavis and C. P. Snow (Strohl, 2006, p. 134). Snow argued that an urgent problem in higher education was the breakdown of meaningful communication between the cultures of the humanities and the sciences. This breakdown in communication was preventing progressive change as neither group alone was able to respond adequately to world problems such as poverty. Leavis (1962) responded with a particular view of the modern university – his ‘liberal humanist’ notion of higher education that:

> at its most basic level is a belief in the value of knowledge without immediate application; in other words it is a faith in the intrinsic value of a university education to produce reflective, responsible citizens free from political, military, bureaucratic or market demands in a modern industrial society. (Strohl, 2006, p. 134)

These arguments about the role of the university are still debated by students today. In recent years, we have seen the mass expansion of higher education, underpinned by the UK government’s emphasis on the importance of higher education to provide skills for the ‘knowledge economy’ (BIS, 2009). Specialism of knowledge has replaced Newman’s unifying ideal of education. Specific frameworks for criterion-referenced assessment, including ‘key skills’, are in common use, with the aim of ensuring that graduates are equipped for the challenges of the modern economy.
The challenge of criterion-referenced assessment for learning developers

There are clear potential benefits to teacher and student of approaches emphasising learning outcomes and criterion-referenced assessment. The formulation of pre-specified learning outcomes encourages clarity of pedagogic purpose, and provides a general framework for the coherent delivery of a course. Criterion-referencing indicates to the student precisely what he or she is required to do, and tends to produce a high level of what is known as ‘validity’ in assessment – that is, it provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate, clearly and specifically, that they have learnt what they can reasonably be expected to have learnt during a course; and provides teachers with the opportunity to assess students’ knowledge and understanding of the curriculum as delivered (Brown and Knight, 1994, p. 17).

Perhaps more important is that, as higher education becomes less the preserve of the few and more a process for equipping increasing numbers of the population for vocational roles in a society, criterion-referenced assessment seems an effective means of ensuring that the highly specific knowledge, understanding and skills required by sophisticated workforces are being developed, as well as the equally vital generic or transferable skills called for by Dearing (1996, 1997).

According to the former Secretary of State for the Department of niversities, Innovations and Skills, John Denham (2008), universities have an important role in developing one in particular of these key skills: the ability to think critically. However, there is the potential for conflict between criticality and forms of assessment where too much prescription may discourage a questioning approach. Our concern is to avoid assessment becoming an overly formulaic exercise in meeting a series of rigidly defined expectations.

Similarly, as we have argued above, there is a potential danger for learning developers in supporting students to meet such assessment requirements. Without the breadth of perspective afforded by a reflective and philosophical framework, learning developers, and learning development provision, may adopt a purely instrumental role. If the goal is simply to ensure that students meet pre-specified learning outcomes and pass the exam, a key dimension of learning development may be overlooked: that of preparing students for independence and the achievement of their full potential through lifelong learning.
Conclusion

There is an onus on universities to create new knowledge and, as Deaging (1997) expressed it, to ‘sustain a culture which demands disciplined thinking, encourages curiosity, challenges existing ideas and generates new ones’. If learning developers are to subscribe to the latter approach, there has to be careful management of the response to the student whose main concern is ‘passing the exam’. Both staff and student may be tempted to identify the means of meeting the necessary criteria and to lose sight of the wider and more abstract goal of university education and self-directed learning.

By developing an understanding of the philosophical and historical foundations of higher education, together with a critical engagement with the current institutional structures within which we work as learning developers, we are more able to recognise the tacit frames which underpin our responses to student learning. In consequence, we will enhance our capacity to be reflective practitioners and become more able to rise to the challenges facing learning developers in the rapidly changing higher education culture of the twenty-first century.

Further Sources

Further information about our research and implementation of frameworks for self-directed learning can be accessed at:
www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/independentlearning/home.htm

A resource pack detailing the frameworks used for community placements can be found at:
www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/independentlearning/resourcepage.htm

University of Manchester strategic documents referred to can be viewed at:
www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/facts/vision
and www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/tandl/resources/strategydocs/

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