

Learning about learners: understanding the student experience

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Introduction

This paper explains the background to an exploratory research project which is on-going but which will have been completed by the time of the FACE Conference in July. The project is focused on understanding how students learn and how they evaluate the various resources provided for them within the learning environment. The project is focused on undergraduate students in one Faculty within the University of Stirling but it is intended to extend the project, if it is successful, to other places of higher education and to other types of students. The paper is structured as follows. As a formal literature review has not yet been completed a general context will be presented which explains what stimulated the author's interest in this subject before providing some details on the learning-teaching context at Stirling. The project methodology is then outlined before presenting some initial findings. A conclusion then follows.

General Context

One of the key issues facing learners and those responsible for teaching them is that of how to manage time. Gone are the halcyon days when learning was the sole activity of the student. Few undergraduate learners can afford to participate in higher education without recourse to a part-time job in order to support their studies. This, of course, can help to solve financial problems but can create stress, for example, due to the reduction of the time available for studying or the timing of shift-work which may affect attendance at classes. The latter can become particularly problematic if the classes are designated as compulsory within programmes. While it is generally acknowledged that time for social activities is an important factor in helping to create the rounded person, it can be difficult for today's learners to find such time in an average week. Thus, the competing demands of study, paid work and social activities can make it increasingly difficult for learners to achieve a study-work balance.

As a result of these pressures many learners have adopted a strategic approach to their studies (Entwistle, 1992; Kneale, 1997). Strategic students are those who approach learning purely on the basis of satisfying the assessment requirements of the course and seek to get the best return for the lowest possible effort. With such learners it is difficult to see how concepts will be understood in any great depth or how you can encourage participation in course activities other than those which are assessed.

Some authors (Ottewill and Macfarlane 2001) have suggested that adopting opportunistic strategies might be a way forward by attempting to fuse the working experience and the learning experience by getting students to reflect on their experience and relate it to a concept, model or theory of relevance to their course. Students could be asked to keep a learning log in which they reflect on the link between their workplace and/or other learning experiences and their academic study. This approach can assist in achieving synergy between the student's lived experience. It has also been suggested that a student can contribute to the

learning of others. Opportunities for doing so can relate to the substance of learning as well as to the process. These can include mentoring, coaching, demonstrating, supervising and buddying. While these may be admirable skills to encourage in learners it does not seem to entirely remove the study-work conflict.

Wider discussion of these issues has taken place within the Business Education Support Team (BEST) which was established by the higher education funding bodies in the UK in 2000 as part of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) for UK higher education. In a survey conducted for BEST by the Open University (2002) no fewer than 278 *big issues* were identified in the field of teaching and learning. The dominant category within these responses with 28% market share was 'Change in curriculum teaching and assessment'.

In the area of teaching, resource constraints are increasing class sizes and contact time for staff. From the students' perspective work commitments mean that more flexible attendance and delivery modes are sought. The survey also revealed the increasing cultural diversity and wider ability range of the student population require more developed systems of learning support.

The solution to many of these problems is seen to be in the increasing use of information and communications technology within the teaching, learning and assessment process. This usually is encapsulated in the form of on-line learning (e learning). However, the development of such systems is resource intensive especially in the set up stages and the survey reported difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified teaching and support staff.

It is one of the *big questions* for all educators as to how business education will evolve in the future. The BEST report made some interesting contrasts between the tradition or classic approach to learning and teaching and the emergent model which seems to be replacing it. For example in terms of assessment there is a shift from individual coursework and exams to group project, portfolios and placement projects while in pedagogy there is a greater concern for being learner-centred.

This then is the general context which stimulated the author's interest in undertaking a study of students' learning habits. However, a more formal literature review is yet to be completed in order to place the study in its proper context. Since this is an exploratory study the initial work will focus on the experience of students within the specific context of the Faculty of Management, University of Stirling. It is recognised that this may be too specific for some readers but as an exploratory study it will serve to develop a questionnaire which can be extended in future work to other Faculties in the University and eventually to other places of higher education. It is believed that the experiences of students at Stirling will resonate with other students elsewhere in the UK. More will be said about the Stirling context in the following section.

The Stirling Context

For some of the issues raised in the BEST report it could well be argued that the future has already arrived at Stirling as a least some of these activities are up and running. Stirling has also recently formalised its learning and teaching policies into a Learning, Teaching and Quality Enhancement Strategy (University of Stirling, 2002). Within this strategy a stated aim is to 'provoke and foster strategic debate at University, Faculty and Department level about the enhancement of Stirling's learning and teaching infrastructure, and in particular the

kinds of students, programmes and modes of delivery that will characterise the institution in the future'.

Part of this debate has, in a sense, been prejudged as within the action plan the document states that by 2005 the University will provide a learning environment that 'through continued investment in the use of C & IT has promoted new learning opportunities, with many more course available in mixed modes of delivery'.

While the level and extent of the changes which might take place can be debated and presented to fit easily with an action plan aim it is clear both from the limited national survey data, University documents and informal discussions that we are at turning point within the development of higher education. As such it is imperative that we understand the needs and wants of our current and future students in order to deliver a service to them that is accessible, appropriate and ultimately makes them employable.

For all the development of a learning, teaching and quality enhancement strategy it is, for the most part, a document based on a top-down approach with no systematic attempt to evaluate the student body at Stirling or those who might come here in the future. One can see the gradual emergence of a concern for the learning experience of the students but as yet there is little evidence of any attempt to engage with the students in order to gather information which would help shape University policy in learning, teaching and assessment.

Project Methodology

The research project has as its central aim to evaluate patterns of student learning and to understand how methods of delivery are received and how they could evolve.

The focus of the current study was undergraduates however, if successful, it is intended to extend the approach to other groups of learners. While a University wide survey would be useful in this first instance the focus was on the student experience within programmes delivered by the Faculty of Management. In terms of the timing and to provide a range of experiences respondents were drawn from those in second, fourth, sixth and eighth semesters. Data was collected by means of focus groups and a self-completed questionnaire survey.

Three focus groups were arranged with students from fourth, sixth and eighth semesters with six, four and six students participating respectively. These provided contextual evidence for the student experience and allowed the topics for the survey questionnaire to be selected and fine tuned.

The key questions which were included in the questionnaire were structured around the themes of basic background information (sex, semester, lecture and seminar attendance, time spent studying or on paid work); teaching and learning methods (including face to face contact and assessment); computer and library facilities (use and satisfaction); and finally some questions about how the students evaluate their own progress.

More specific questions derived from the themes are listed below.

How do students manage their time? (study, work, social activities)

What are their patterns of attendance at lectures, seminars/tutorials?

What are the levels of participation within staff-student meetings?

How do they value face to face contact?

How do they use the learning resources provided to support face to face contact? (texts, web based material on site or provided by publishers)
How do they rate any e-resources provided?
What skills do they see themselves as gaining during their degree?
Attitudes towards and experience of various assessment methods?
How do they evaluate their own progress?
What means would they use to encourage engagement with units amongst their peers?
How do students want to learn?

The questionnaire survey took place 14-17 April 2003 with classes of second, fourth and sixth semester students targeted. The total number of questionnaires distributed was 527 with 397 successfully completed and returned which represents a response useable response rate of 75.3%. One problem with data collection was that a key sixth semester class was cancelled and so sixth semester students are underrepresented in the survey. Of the 397 respondents 207 (52.1%) were male and 190 (47.9%) female.

Initial Findings

Due to the timing of the submission of this paper these will be very superficial at this stage and will do little more than provide some descriptive statistics and a random quotation from a learner referred to as the learner's voice. However, a fuller analysis will be available for the FACE Conference presentation.

Lecture, seminar attendance

There was more variation in lecture than seminar attendance. Respondents had on average 6.84 hours of lectures and attended 5.65 of them. The comparable figures for seminars were 3.19 and 3.12.

The learner's voice: I did not miss many at all, but we had one on Monday morning at 9 o'clock where I only got the slides. It is no use getting up that early and go to class just to fall asleep again.

Allocation of time

On average the students spent 49.9% of their week on social activities, 35.9% on study and 14.2% undertaking paid work. Females tended to study more than males who spent more time on social activities. Participation in paid work was similar for both genders.

The learner's voice: I have a part-time job. I work most weekends and sometimes during the week. I don't really have a social life, which is quite tragic. I do dancing and yoga which will do as socialising. About 50% of my time goes on university work. For me it is ok to work part-time. It does not really affect my studies.

Teaching and Learning Methods

Lectures were seen as being important (4.47 on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being most important) but satisfaction level with lectures was only 3.67. Likewise seminars were ranked at 4.29 in terms of importance but only 3.81 in terms of satisfaction.

The learner's voice: I think the staff student thing works best in smaller groups because they get to know you and you are more willing to contact them.

Assessment

Within this group of questions a similar pattern emerged of the importance of a factor being more highly rated than satisfaction. Thus, individual coursework scored 4.25 on importance but only 3.69 on satisfaction. For group work the figures were 3.61 and 3.07 respectively and 3.59 and 3.24 for presentations.

The learner's voice: The tutor knows what he is looking for in the back of his mind, and if you don't have that bang on then you are not going to do well.

Support Materials/Facilities

The students find the slides provided by the Department on the web to be really useful with 85% stating satisfaction. They are however more neutral about discussion boards and suggestions for further reading. In general the websites provided by the departments are ranked at 4.18 in terms of importance and 3.81 in terms of satisfaction. Interestingly the satisfaction gap for websites provided by publishers is narrower at 3.80 and 3.54 respectively. Perhaps it is a problem which will never be solved by availability of computers was a major concern with a ranking of 4.61 for importance and only 2.82 satisfaction.

The learner's voice: If you open the books I think you can tell which books are useful because if the last time it was taken out was in 1902 you know....

Skills gained during the degree

These fell broadly into four groups with communication and presentation skills being top followed by teamwork and organising skills then creativity and self-reliance while negotiation, risk-taking, networking and leadership skills made up the fourth group.

The learner's voice: Your getting presentation skills. My tutor has this thing if we give a presentation it should be like as if you were actually in the business. You know, you have to put yourself in there, which is really, really difficult. But it does actually get your presentation skills up because you feel as though you have to convince your classmates of your arguments even though they don't agree with you.

Conclusion

Little can be concluded at this stage because of the timing of the research. However, it can be said that the data set is rich and should yield some interesting insights as to how our students learn. This project addresses an under-researched area within the University. The information which will be gained from the study has the potential to inform and shape University policy in a core area of University activity, namely, learning and teaching. It is crucial that in order to make best use of resources within teaching and learning informed decisions are made based on the needs of students now and in the future. This exploratory project will shed light on the needs of current students as a starting point and should pave the way for further substantial research. If successful this project could be extended to other Faculties within the University as well as to other places of higher education. As part of this extension the intention is to target marketing students in throughout the UK. Ultimately, the findings will be relevant to all students and academics involved in facilitating learning.

References

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