

Developing Learner Autonomy in International and UK Students at SHU

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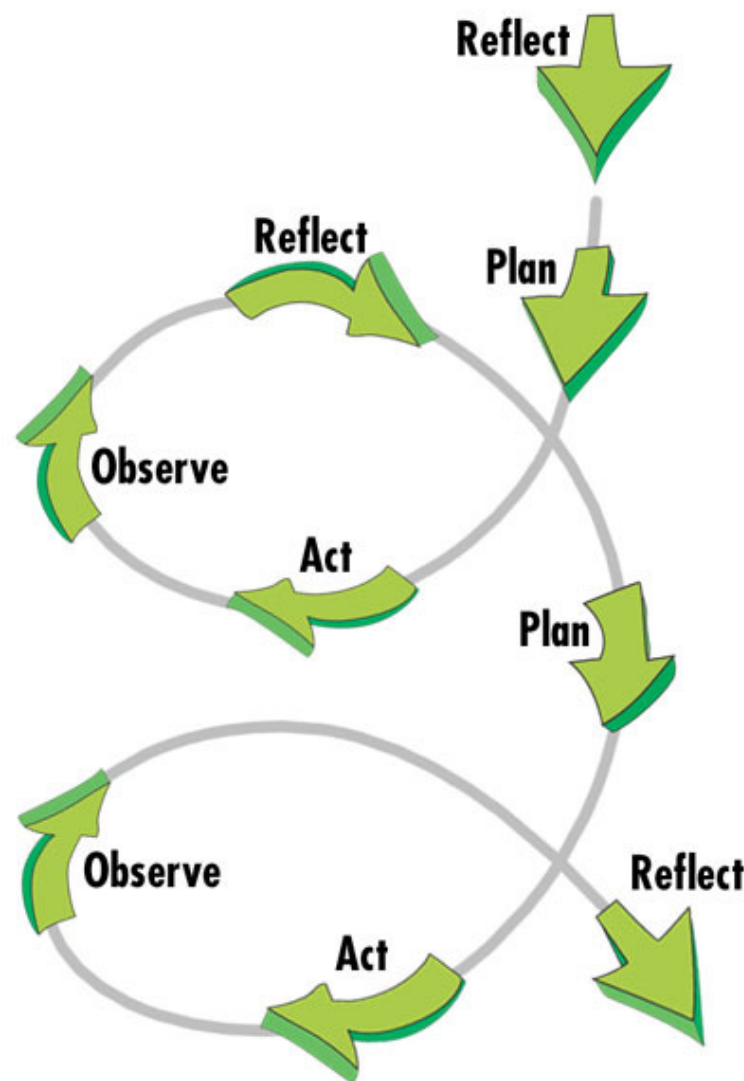
Background:

Experience of staff working with international students reveals that a proportion of these students do not engage effectively with the learning opportunities on their courses, showing weaker language skills, lower levels of participation in seminar activities and lack of meaningful contact with UK students. The same is true of UK students going abroad to study or work. Successful academic and social integration enhance academic success but engagement by and with learners from other cultures does not happen automatically.

Rationale:

Building on previous experience and published research in the areas of peer-supported and TANDEM learning, the project aimed to identify effective peer-support mechanisms to enable international and UK students to develop their levels of autonomy by working together. The individual goals included:

1. identifying student and tutor views
2. designing peer-support interactions
3. evaluating the interactions
4. embedding of interactions in existing modules
5. assessing the viability of a university-wide TANDEM module



Method:

REFLECTION

The project was undertaken in stages and started with a review of what UK and Chinese students felt they could learn from each other.

PLANNING AND ACTING

Based on the outcomes of this survey and existing literature, the team then planned and organised a series of interactive student events, which took place between 26 November 2008 and 1 April 2009.

OBSERVATION, FEEDBACK AND REFLECTION

Staff observed each event, asked students for feedback, and after their own reflections fed changes into the following events.

Evaluation:

The final evaluation took place on 23 and 24 April and included the use of student focus groups and three student questionnaires, as well as a review by the project team of the overall project. Goals 1—4 have been achieved. Some of the TANDEM activities that have been developed will be embedded in assessed student portfolios (UK students) or aligned to other assessed work for which the TANDEM activities provide a practice environment (Chinese Graduate Diploma students); goal 5 is still in progress

Future developments based on evaluation:

- peer network with UK/Chinese contact but also Chinese to Chinese links (Graduate Diploma to Masters cohorts) and UK to UK student contact between years 1, 2 and 3;
- UK/Chinese club; name to be decided by students
- club supported by the Chinese language assistant and students from the Faculty of Development and Society, who will use this activity as the basis of their work-based learning project

STUDENT VOICES

"Through the communication and the games with local students we can understand a lot about British culture." (Chinese student)

"Speaking to people who were from China was very useful." (UK students)

"I helped my partner on the communication level, by practising English with them and by introducing several aspects of the western culture. For me being able to put what I learned in the class in real life situations was the most important." (UK student)

"Some of us met and went ice-skating, this was helpful. We also met and helped each other with our work." (UK student)



"My partner helped me most. The follow-up event let me know more about British culture". (Chinese student)

"I helped her with a presentation. She was very grateful. She corrects my Chinese when I pronounce it wrong." (UK student)

"While listening to the person I keep eye contact to build up confidence." (Chinese student)

"The whole event is very relaxed and a happy environment." (Chinese student)

"The process of the events has helped me to understand UK Higher Education better." (Chinese student)

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