**CPLA Case Study: Disseminating Good Practice through Learner Autonomy and Enquiry Based Learning on a History Programme.**

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**Abstract**

This case study examines the dissemination of Learner Autonomy (LA) and Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) across an undergraduate History programme. The 'seed' module, the Level 5 Historians & Research (H&R), was used as the model to extend LA/EBL both to incoming level 4 students and final year learners. Approximately 75 students take the H&R module, and the process is now rolled out to some 80 to 90 first year students and in the region (it will vary from year to year because of option choice) of 50-60 final year students.

**Introduction**

The undergraduate experience of LA requires 'careful scaffolding' if students are to become producers of meaning rather than passive consumers of knowledge (see Walkington, 2008). The decision to embed LA/EBL across a programme of study therefore required a systematic approach which addressed the following issues:

1. LA is not reducible to independent study and is more securely located in the sphere of active learning where autonomy can progress and evolve in a stimulating environment (Savin-Baden, 2007).
2. Careful consideration must be given to the design of assessment systems (see Section 6) so they are aligned to the students development as an autonomous learner (Booth & Hyland, 2000; Timmins, Vernon, Kinealy, 2005).
3. The timing of implementation is a critical factor, and detailed discussion of LTA initiatives take place during key phases of the re-validation cycle and provide the opportunity and space to review and explore 'good practice'.
4. To encourage the participation of younger members of staff/new lecturers in curriculum design which has specific LA/EBL focus. In short, investing in the future and therefore **addressing the issue of sustainability.**

**Background**

The History programme has an intake of about 110 students a year (80 single honours stream) and in aggregate there are approximately 280-300 students registered on the whole programme. The 'seed' module H&R which was introduced in 2000 (and was included in the original CETL bid) is taken by all level 2 single honours students. Subsequent curriculum developments in LA/EBL have followed both vertical and horizontal paths across the programme. For example, the level 4 compulsory module Making History 2 (85-90 students), at level 5 in addition to H& R the Imperial Economy (24), and at level 6, Britain and the Great War (40-65), Inventing British Democracy (25), and Northern Soul (27).

**Rationale**

The initial challenge was twofold:

1. To encourage students to take greater control over their own learning (Benson & Voller, 1997) in a core module focused on research and project work; and
2. To use the module as a 'seeding device' to enable the dissemination of LA/EBL more extensively across the History programme.

The intended benefits of the core module are associated with an approach to learning which invites learners to choose and develop their own research project, and to set their own aims, objectives and research questions. In other words, the learners themselves are asked to define the challenges/constraints and to set goals (Walliman, 2005). The rationale for the module is that research is not taught, but rather it is the learner who reflects on, and who searchers for the solutions to the challenges that confront any research project. The skills and capabilities are embedded through learning-by-doing, so that the learners acquire the capacity to l to act autonomously. Yet crucially important within this learning environment is also the recognition that it is collaborative both between learner and tutor, and between learners themselves. It is important to foster a partnership approach to learning. The rationale for the dissemination process was to capitalise on the 'good practice' of the core module in the context of a re-validation event and the appointment of two new members of staff.

**The Approach**

**The Core Module**

A key driver of the module is that students must choose and design their own research project; it is made clear at the outset that tutors do not provide one for them. Consequently, in the early weeks of the module it is essential to cultivate student confidence. Tutors were aware in the design stage of H & R that it would take students outside the comfort zone of more conventional modules. (One student reflected in her final report: *'although the project provided a great opportunity to under take self-supported work, it was difficult to know where to start'*.) The design and delivery called for robust 'scaffolding': how was this done and how successful has it been?

The mode of delivery was divided into two sections. In the first four weeks the focus is on collaborative learning, where students share responsibility in small groups (up to no more than four per group) and prepare for the transition to individual activity (Barker, Mclean & Roseman, 2000; Allen & Lloyd-Jones, 1999). At the end of week four students make their case for selecting their individual project, justify their choice and are allocated a tutor as mentor. Over the remaining eight weeks of the semester drop-in-sessions are available and feedback tutorials are provided on their first and second assignments (see section 6). In the critical first period (weeks 1 to 4) student groups foster collaborative learning, discussing between themselves and with tutors the feasibility of their chosen project, and sharing ideas and testing out potential research projects. In addition, there are practical exercises set and there is a group assessment element (see section 6). After week four students develop their own individual project focusing on design, challenge and reflection, which is, on the process of 'doing' a project rather than on producing a finished product. Students can use the opportunity of the drop-in-sessions to seek advice and support from tutors who are always available for consultation at set times. The four parameters which support the 'scaffolding' for the module are:

**Confidence:** the cultivation of a learning environment that enables students to take greater control of their learning

**Collaboration**: using group activity to foster the sharing of responsibility and to prepare for the transition to individual work

**Innovation**: the student makes the case for a research project and justifies their choice

**Autonomy**: students are weaned away from conventional sessions, are responsible for developing and reflecting on their project, but operate in a framework of support offered by tutors. It is important to stress that students are not required to attend drop-in-sessions; it is up to the student to decide whether to take-up the opportunity to use them.

Student responses to the module have been positive.

**Student Comments**

*'Above all being more responsible and more accountable for my own work and level of commitment'*

*'When first starting this module I thought thinking about research ideas and having to do an individual case study a daunting prospect, but…taking on this project has made me much more confident and positive about this kind of research'.*

*'Working to be more involved in group activities will help me to contribute in group work in level 6'.*

*'The nature of the module is independent learning and it has helped me in introducing my own questions and aims'.*

*'To formulate objectives and research questions new skills were developed as I never previously had to take a topic, break it down to set my own objectives and form questions I intended to answer'*

The student responses suggest a twofold outcome: a growing student awareness and confidence in their responsibilities as learners; and a growing acceptance' by tutors in the student's capabilities as autonomous learners. Both processes are mutually re-enforcing and provide another example of how the scaffolding enables the development of learning as a partnership between learner and tutor. The opportunity for students to frame their own questions and be prepared to answer them is the development of a practice where they do take greater charge of their own learning.

**Disseminating Good Practice**

H&R acted as a 'seed' module enabling the dissemination of an EBL approach to LA to be embedded at other levels of the History programme. Some of the modules adopting this approach are briefly described below:

**Making History 2:** This is a core module for all level 4 single honours students in semester 2 (total numbers for 2008/9 academic year - 85 students). The aim of the module is to develop autonomous learning skills through students working on a group project related to an aspect of public history in the Sheffield region. The module handbook states: *'The tutors will be there to facilitate your work, not to tell you what to do, when and how to do it'.* Lectures are provided in the first four weeks (following a similar template to the H&R module) and are then supplemented by a series of fortnightly seminars. The purpose of the latter is to ensure that project groups are working smoothly and that all group members are aware of the demands of team work. The module ran for the first time in the 2007/8 session and feedback from students have been positive.

**Britain and the Great War:** This level 6 module is in its third year of delivery and is modelled on an EBL approach where students are engaged in exercises in informal groups. For example, groups are invited to prepare short reports and briefing papers on various aspects of the economic, political and military dimensions of the war. As a student commented in his seminar log: The main task was for the group to act as *'a small sub-committee advising the War Cabinet. The purpose of the exercise was to view the decisions undertaken by the war time cabinet from their (students) perspective to reach an understanding as to why decisions are made…*' This is an example of an EBL approach enhancing the development of deep learning and students gain understanding by meaningfully taking charge of their own learning (see Wenden, 1998). Student response to the module has been very favourable, comments on module questionnaires include: *'The layout of the seminars - structures and activities have been fantastic as they allow you to engage in the topics being* discussed'. *'Seminars were much better than other modules - encouraged participation'. 'The quiz was a great introduction to the seminar and was carried out well by the group work and we had good discussions at the end'. 'Enjoyed the discussions because you find different views and perspectives on topics that differ to the ones you think of'.* The external examiner in his 2007/8 report observed that the module required the *'students to reflect on their seminar work and structure what they had learnt'*.

**Inventing British Democracy and Northern Soul:** These two modules were designed by two new young members of staff who were mentored by Roger Lloyd-Jones, and who also worked with Sally Bradley from the LTI using their approach to LA/EBL in curriculum design to apply for membership of the HEA. One tutor has already gained membership and the other was awarded a small project grant from the CPLA and has recently taken up the role of History group LTA co-ordinator. Both modules will start in semester 2 of 2008/9 and have attracted 24 and 27 students as their first intake.

**Assessment**

Critical to the successful design and implementation of modules adopting LA/EBL is that the approach must be aligned to the mode of assessment. As Boud has argued student decisions about what and how well they learn is informed by assessment (Boud, 2002; Booth, 2000) and one might add that asymmetrical alignment leads to a significant fall in student confidence.

**Assessment and the H & R Module**

In the H & R module a three tier assessment package is used: the first exercise is group based and students complete a number of tasks using on-line search engines from the module blackboard site. The exercise is designed to enhance learning by the group using its own initiative (Nicholson & Ellis, 2000) to search for historical sources and to produce a short report. The exercise is submitted in week 5 and tutors guarantee return and feedback by week 7. The second exercise is an individual research proposal which is designed to prepare students for planning and writing the final report - this is submitted in week 7 and students are asked to return proposals and provide feedback in week 9. Exercise 3 is the final report which invites students to comment on their learning experience, what they consider to be their positive achievements (see 5.2) and what they consider to be their less successful outcomes (these frequently refer to time management issues). Students are also asked to comment on what ways the project has changed since the proposal in week 7 and to explain why changes have been made.

The assessment package is not simply a 'test' of what the students have achieved but an opportunity for learners to demonstrate their ability to reflect on their own learning and plan ahead for their final year. As one student put it in the final report: *This module has taught me how a dissertation is different from an essay, because it involves more independent study and unlike an essay is not based on a subject learnt about in lecture or seminar work. The kind of study is dependent upon the student setting out the objectives of research'.* The external examiner observed *'The assessment criteria were very appropriate' and 'provide 'a stimulating intellectual environment,* and *'part of that is the support and feedback system'*

**New Modules**

Assessment portfolios in the new modules using an EBL approach tend either to use a group presentation and an individual self-reflective report evaluating the learners contribution to the presentation (MH2 & Northern Soul) or seminar logs (Great War; Inventing British Democracy). Seminar logs introduce an element of choice into the assessment system, in both the Great War and Inventing Democracy modules. Students are able to select any 3 of the 5 thematic seminars to write up their log. The logs focus on what has been learnt in the seminar, how the activities have contributed to the learning process and how students have arrived at their conclusions or judgements. They also provide a different approach to assessment compared to the more traditional essay/examination format. In terms of evaluating student assessments, consideration is given more to reflection. For example, what is achieved in the seminar, how was the topic approached, how valuable were the group activities and discussions in facilitating learning; rather than focusing on content and narrative. In his 2008 report on the Great War module the external examiner reported: '*May I start by saying what an excellent form of assessment I think this is - it requires the students not only to attend seminars but engage in them actively, and reflect on learning. Exemplary test for graduate level skills'.*

**Summary and Conclusion**

To successfully embed LA in programme curriculum it is essential to see the LTA approach as a partnership between tutor and student. Rather than independent learning LA, is more to do with interdependent learning where students can learn from each other. Equally important, and why this approach can be recommended, is that tutors gain the confidence to wean students away from over-directed teaching and assessment, which tends to turn students into passive recipients of knowledge. The outcome for the History programme at SHU over the last few years has been to disseminate good practice in the form of LA/EBL at all levels of the curriculum and there has been a progressive embedding of these initiatives. The core level 5 module H & R was used as an exemplar and the opportunity of the re-validation cycle and the appointment of new lecturers were capitalised to disseminate good practice across the programme. Tutors are encouraged by greater participation and activity in seminars (student responses), a significantly more varied assessment portfolio and this is reflected in student work and performance (external examiners). These initiatives have also been enhanced by significant investment in Blackboard (an LTA history group action plan for 2007/8) and this formed part of the 'scaffolding' so crucial for supporting the partnership between students and tutors. For tutors and students this has been an important journey, the embedding of LA/EBL has been challenging, thought-provoking, and risky, and like all interesting journeys the means are as significant as the end.

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