Practice and Evidence of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Vol. 11, No. 1
Enhancing Student Learning through Innovative Scholarship Conference, July 2015, Durham, UK
Special Issue June 2016, pp. 57-65

Does one size fit all?
Using scholarship to enhance the student learning experience

Grace Clifton
Faculty of Education and Language Studies
The Open University, UK
grace.clifton@open.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper describes a recent scholarship project focusing on different student experiences of large courses used across several qualification pathways within the Childhood, Youth and Education Programme at the Open University. Using qualitative methods, the project sought to understand more about students' (n = 20) experiences of learning, drawing on the richness of the 'hybrid' learning experience (Helyer, Lee & Evans, 2011) where learning is seen to take place both within a higher education institution and the work place. By locating the project within the broader Faculty framework for scholarship, this paper sets out the Faculty strategy and explains how changes are made to curriculum to enhance student learning as a direct result of scholarship.

Keywords: work-based learning; scholarship; student learning; quality enhancement

Introduction

With a growing trend towards work-based learning (Leitch, 2006), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have faced challenges in meeting the needs of their 'traditional' knowledge-based students at the same time as meeting those of the work-based student. It has been acknowledged that work-based learning programmes of study generally require a different set of principles and practices to knowledge-based programmes of study with a need to provide the work-based student with recognition for their previous learning, the use of practitioner research and valid forms of assessment which are mapped against the relevant academic levels (Lester & Costley, 2010:564).

These different requirements are generally perceived to be challenging to HEI's systems, processes and infrastructure (Marr, Walsh & Lomas, 2011) in terms of developing curricula suitable for students in the work-place, with HEIs' own cultural practices generally being seen to favour more academic courses than vocational. In addition, the ability to make and maintain useful working relationships with employers in order to create vocationally meaningful curriculum is also cited as being problematic (Boud & Solomon, 2003; Lambert, 2003). Helyer et al. (2011:24) outline the possibilities presented by a 'hybrid HE' where higher level learning is seen to take place at a combination of the traditional HEI and within the work place. In this sense, the learner takes:

> *responsibility for their own continuous learning and development. It is when they engage with an HEI to perhaps formalise and/or progress what they are already learning at work, or what they anticipate they will require for a future role, that skills, abilities, expertise and knowledge can be captured and articulated, even in some cases validated.*

In many ways this can be seen as the precursor to more recent moves to embed, promote and measure broader employability skills within all aspects of HE provision (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton, 2012; Times Higher Education, 2015).

Context

The Open University's (OU) pedagogical approach is somewhat different to face to face institutions. Associate Lecturers are employed by the OU on a part time basis to deliver and teach at a distance the materials written by central academic teams for students. We take a modular approach to study and describe this teaching method as 'blended learning' (Bonk & Graham, 2006) in that it takes place in a face to face environment (through regular tutorials) but also at a distance (through on-line tutorials, forums and one to one telephone calls). There are increased expectations for central academics to play extended roles within the modules (courses) they have created – for example, delivering podcasts, moderating student on-line conferences and monitoring Associate Lecturer marking and feedback. Although we have a physical headquarters in Milton Keynes, the reality is that our students and Associate Lecturers can be located anywhere in the world.

The OU does not differentiate between research and research about our teaching, and as such "the scholarship of learning and teaching is as valued as the scholarship of discovery (research)" (Open University, 2009). The notion of research about our teaching is particularly important within the Faculty of Education and Language Studies, within which the module on which this project was based is located, because so many of the academic staff have come from professional backgrounds in schools and therefore have been 'trained' to teach and, indeed, continue to teach about pedagogy. At a Faculty level, a small working group comprising the Associate Dean for Scholarship and Research and the two Programme Directors (Language Studies and Childhood, Youth and Education) who lead the two teaching programmes which make up the majority of the Faculty's curriculum, meet on an annual basis to discuss the University's broad scholarship priorities in relation to four key areas: the Faculty's business plan, curriculum plan, learning and teaching plan and our own Programme priorities. Out of this discussion, we translate these different (and sometimes conflicting) priorities into the Faculty's scholarship priorities for the coming year. When we have agreed these, we disseminate these to all Faculty staff and ask for feedback on the main points before confirming these principles.

Table 1 Scholarship priorities

Faculty of Education and Language Studies scholarship priorities (2013-14)
● Understanding the study experience ● Practice-informed teaching and learning ● Intercultural learning and global identities ● Learning and teaching with new technologies ● Innovative development within an area of (the Faculty) curriculum

Helyer et al.'s (2011) concept of a 'hybrid' learning experience, as outlined above, is indicative of the student-learning experience on several large modules (courses) within the Childhood, Youth and Education programme, where students can be drawn from several qualifications pathways (including Early Years, Primary Teaching and Learning, Childhood and Youth Studies, Youth Work and the University's Open Degree in which students can take any combination of modules to make up their 360 credits of

undergraduate study). Given the variety of different study and work experiences of students in the programme, a scholarship project was devised to find out more about the different student experiences on two modules, E212 'Childhood' and EK310 'Research with Children and Young People', both large multi-purpose knowledge-based modules available to work-based students, with a view to supporting the module teams to develop a better approach to differentiation, student engagement and progression. Aspects of the scholarship project, therefore, were reflected in two of the Faculty scholarship priorities: understand the study experience and practice-informed teaching and learning.

E212 'Childhood', is one of the biggest modules within the Childhood, Youth and Education Programme at the OU, with 975 students. It offers 60 credits of knowledge-based study (of approximately 600 hours of learning over eight months of study) mapped against FHEQ level 5 and positioned as the first module that students take at level 5 across all constituent qualification pathways. The majority of E212 students fall within the 30-49 years age range and 54% of students stated that their motivation for studying the module was for both employment and personal development reasons. EK310 'Research with Children and Young People' another large module, with 582, is no longer available to students. Like E212, it offered 60 credits of knowledge-based study mapped against FHEQ level 6 and was positioned as the last module that students took as part of their degree level study. Like E212, the majority of EK310 fall within the 30-49 years age range and 60% of students stated that their motivation for study was both for employment and personal development reasons. As a result of their positioning across several qualifications pathways both of these modules have always attracted a wide range of students from different work and study backgrounds.

Method

Module teams review student data relevant to their module and reflect on the impact of their teaching on student performance and experience as part of the Faculty's annual review cycle. What made this project different to this process and similar, therefore, to the action research cycle described by Robson (2002) is that this project involved the systematic collection of, and reflection on, additional data. In order to complement the

existing routinely collected quantitative data, therefore, a qualitative approach was developed in order to enable an exploration of the students' understandings and experiences (Punch, 2005).

An in-depth interview framework was formulated comprising eleven closed and open-ended questions designed to find out more about students' experiences of, and motivation towards, studying E212 and EK310, and the challenges they faced during the year. A purposeful approach to sampling was used (Patton, 2002) in that two tutor groups, comprising eighteen students in each group, were identified for consideration in this study. The E212 tutor group was located in England and the EK310 tutor group was located in Northern Ireland, allowing for a range of student opinions and experiences to be explored. Students in both groups were approached by their Associate Lecturer and given information about the project. In total ten students from E212 and ten students from EK310 opted to take part in the study. This paper will focus on the responses from the E212 survey only as the module continues to be available to students so aspects of continuous quality enhancement are more pertinent. The results relevant to EK310 were made available to, and used by, the academic team involved in the production of its successor module in order to inform module design.

Interviews were carried out by the students' own Associate Lecturer as this was felt to be less intrusive and more normalised than contact from an academic who the students would not have spoken to before. For E212, eight students chose a telephone interview and two preferred to return their responses via email. A detailed thematic analysis (Silverman, 1993) of all qualitative responses was carried out, identifying the different qualification pathway each respondent had registered for. The analysis identified commonalities across some of the key themes or concepts in each of the students' responses.

The project proposal was submitted to and approved by the University's Human Research and Ethics Committee and the University's Student Research Project Panel. Students were fully briefed about the aims and purpose of the project and it was made clear to them that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

Results

Of the ten E212 students involved in the survey:

- Three of the students interviewed were registered on a work-based learning qualification, three were registered on a knowledge-based qualification, and four were registered on our 'Open' qualification.
- Seven of the students commented on the complexity of the module texts and the need for more 'concrete' examples which linked to their prior and/or current experiences of working with and/or interactions with children.
- Two of the three work-based students commented that the module felt more suited to study at level 6 FHEQ and that the module's expectations were too high.
- Three of the knowledge-based students found the essay writing challenging on the module and the guidance and support materials did not seem to acknowledge and/or challenge these presumptions.
- Seven of the students said that they found their previous experiences of study at the OU useful when studying for E212. Two students, however, both registered on a work-based degree, stated categorically that their previous study was not helpful to them.
- In spite of the concerns raised above in relation to the work-based students, the majority of students indicated that their previous experience of the world of work was useful for them when studying the module.

Key themes emerged including: the need to acknowledge prior study and the need to acknowledge students' work experiences with children and young people. These suggest that knowledge and understanding of the students' different pathways and qualifications should be an important consideration for the E212 academic team – in terms of module design (content and assessment) but also in their teaching and student support.

Moving forwards

The results from this investigation coincided with the completion of an extended review of the first time the module was made available to students, a significant part of our quality assurance processes when the academic team analyse and reflect on student and Associate Lecturer feedback in order to inform the on-going development of the module. Drawing together all available evidence and the findings from this scholarship project, an action plan was devised which focused on making enhancements to the student learning experience (detailed below). In order to broaden the appeal of the module to students from a work-based background, existing materials and assignment guidance were adapted in order to acknowledge prior study experiences and to enable students to make use of examples of prior and/or current experiences of working with and/or interactions with children. In addition, preparatory materials for students were developed in relation to their different experiences of prior study. For example, in order to support the transition from level four to level five study, an interview with students was recorded about their own experiences of moving from level four to level five. As the E212 end of module assessment involved an examination, a similar resource was recorded focusing on preparing for examinations. This was beneficial to all students as none of the constituent qualification pathways had made use of examinations up to that point, favouring the use of extended projects instead.

The need to offer consistency in provision of study skills was also a key priority. Students who had come from work-based qualifications were used to writing a Professional Development Plan as part of their portfolio of evidence of work. However, students from knowledge-based qualifications had not had to write or develop an equivalent Personal Development Plan (PDP) up to that point. Working with senior academics from all contributing qualifications, a suitable version of PDP was developed which was embedded within the study materials at suitable points in the academic year. For example, the first task asked students to rate their own study skills according to the University's level 5 framework and, from this, identify and prioritise what areas they needed to work on. Finally, in order to continue to monitor and reflect on the different experiences of all students taking the module, key performance indicators for the module were identified which could be regularly reviewed in order to monitor the student experience across all of the related study pathways. These indicators were shared with the module's linked student support staff so that suitable interventions and messages to

students could be developed for implementation at key points across the eight months of the student journey on E212.

The impact of changes made as a result of this project can be seen in the small increase in overall pass rate on E212, but, in particular, in the large increase in pass rate for students on work-based qualification pathways. For example, the student pass rate on the Foundation Degree in the Early Years increased from 84.4% to 89.2% after changes were implemented. The changes also brought about higher levels of student satisfaction in subsequent annual end of module surveys. Two questions in the end of module survey relate specifically to issues connected to the cross-qualification use of the module. Of the 192 students who responded to the survey after the stated changes were made, 90.5% stated that the module contributed to the achievement of their wider qualification aim and 81.8% stated that the knowledge and skills developed on the module were relevant to their work or career. With further enhancement work still planned for the module, it is hoped that the 'work and career relevance' indicator will increase further.

Conclusion

This scholarship report highlights the importance of engaging directly with students to find out more about their different experiences and then using this evidence to enhance the student learning experience more generally. It has led to a more nuanced way of working for the academic team through the development of different resources appropriate to the different study pathways and through an on-going commitment to monitor and track the progress of students on their different pathways. In addition, it has led to an increased collaboration between academic teams working across different qualifications in order to improve the student experience on core modules.

References

Bonk, C. and Graham, C. (eds) (2006), *The handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs,* San Francisco, Wiley

Boud D. and Soloman N. (2003) *Work-based learning, a new education*, SRHE/Open University Press

Helyer, R. Lee, D. and Evans, A. (2011) Hybrid HE: Knowledge, skills and innovation, in *Work-based Learning e-Journal*, Vol 1, No 2, pp 18-35

Lambert, R. (2003) *The Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration*, London, HM Treasury

Leitch, S. (2006) *Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*, London, HM Treasury

Lester, S. and Costley, C. (2010) Work-based learning at Higher Education level: Value, practice and critique, in *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol 35, No 5, pp 561-575

Marr, L. Walsh, C. and Lomas, M. (2011) Advance: challenging the structure of higher education to meet the needs of adult work-based learners, in *Work-based Learning e-Journal*, Vol 1, No 2, pp 138-159

Open University (2009) *Learning and Teaching Strategy 2009-2012*, retrieved 19 Oct 2015 from http://intranet.open.ac.uk/oulife-home/landing.aspx?type=policies

Patton, M.Q, (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, (3rd ed) London, Sage

Pegg, A. Waldock, J. Hendy-Isaac, S. and Lawton, R. (2012) *Pedagogy for Employability*, York, HEA

Punch, K. (2005) *Introduction to Social Research – Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, (2nd ed), London, Sage

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research*, (2nd ed) Oxford, Blackwell

Silverman, D. (1993) *Interpreting qualitative data – methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*, London, Sage

Times Higher Education (2015) *Global Employability University Rankings,* retrieved 19 Oct 2015 from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/carousels/global-employability-university-ranking-2015-results