

The role and efficacy of generic learning and study support: what is the experience and perspective of academic teaching staff?

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Abstract

The importance of student learning and study support is now widely recognised in higher education but empirical research into this aspect of teaching and learning is limited in scope. In particular the experience, perceptions and understandings of academic staff constitutes a perspective which seems under-explored. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study in this area undertaken in one institutional context. Data are presented which illustrate academic staff attitudes to, and beliefs about, learning and study support and the effects of institutional practices and priorities on how this type of provision is addressed in the curriculum. The findings have implications for the challenge of learning development in higher education.

Key words: student learning; teachers' attitudes and beliefs; teaching and learning in the curriculum; institutional practices.

Introduction

Hilsdon (2008) points out definitions of learning development (LD) in higher education are open to debate as the field is recently-emerged, broad church and continually reassessing its boundaries. There is, nonetheless, a general consensus among practitioners (LDers) that developing learning involves working with teaching staff as well as students, and that the responsibility for supporting learning rests ultimately with teachers in the disciplines. Intrinsic is a critique position of student 'support' as predicated on a deficiency in individual

students (Haggis, 2006; Blythman and Orr, 2002; Lillis, 2001; Lea and Street, 1998) and the 'outmoded' (Wingate, 2007) view that students' learning needs can be 'fixed' (Wingate, 2006) separately through provision which is predominantly extra-curricular or 'bolt-on' as opposed to embedded or 'built-in' (Bennett, et al, 2000).

The beliefs and attitudes of teaching staff are central concerns. Blythman and Orr (2002: 53), for example, state that study support must be 'firmly linked to the curriculum' and that 'strategies' of student support should take into account the 'culture of academic staff' allowing them a key role in determining and implementing initiatives. Orr and Blythman (2003:181) call for closer 'partnerships' across the curriculum between academic staff and study support specialists where overlaps can be negotiated, but lament that this frequently results in support specialists dealing with aspects of the curriculum which are squeezed out due to lack of time – '...what we do in the study support service is dictated by what the lecturer does not do in class'. Evidence of embedded and cooperative ventures are rare and involve, for example, compromises such as using student mentors rather than direct participation of academic staff (e.g. Durkin and Main, 2002). Others point to a perceived reluctance on the part of academic staff to concern themselves with 'student learning' outside the direct teaching of disciplinary content knowledge (Haggis, 2006; Wingate, 2006; Yorke, 2005).

But how far is this portrayal of reluctance or indifference representative? What other aspects of the higher education experience in the contemporary context impact on academic staff attitudes, beliefs and practices in this regard? How can LDers get more insight into that experience and what can it tell us? The present research attempted, in some small measure, to address this ostensibly neglected line of inquiry.

The research approach

The research reported here was part of a part-time doctoral study during which data collection spanned two years. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of academic teaching staff as part of a broader institutional case-study research strategy, realised through a critical ethnographic style inquiry. Ethnography aims to explore reality as others perceive it. Researchers attempt, as far as possible, to obtain a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of social and cultural phenomena by examining not only

the processes but also the circumstances and intentions integral to how something is experienced in given contexts. A researcher ideally occupies a dual position, that of both 'insider' and 'outsider'. Being a member of staff at the institution under study gave me the status of an insider – a member of the cultural group being studied. In so far as I was based in a discipline area other than those represented in the research, I had something of the status of an outsider which enabled me to look critically at what is familiar, routine or taken-for-granted to insiders in other contexts.

Respondents came from traditional humanities; applied and 'hybrid' disciplines in social and applied sciences; and emergent or 'practice-based' disciplines. My insider status facilitated extensive contact with teaching staff and enabled me to expand the sample of interviewees as the research progressed. In total 48 academic staff were interviewed in the course of the study providing scope and depth to the data.

The data presented and commented on here were in response to two questions which were part of a larger interview guide and were as follows:

- What is the role and purpose of learning and study support?
- What is your experience with this provision?

The purpose of the questions was to explore academic staff perceptions, understandings and beliefs about generic support, but especially in relation to its role in the curriculum and teaching and learning in the discipline(s). Secondly, and consistent with an ethnographic approach to research, to investigate the lived reality of teaching staff in the current context of higher education in this regard. The findings emerged from the data as the research progressed. Once similar data were identified as occurring regularly in responses, findings were established and interviewing ceased. The analysis and discussion presented here are, therefore, grounded (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in the views and experiences of teaching staff.

The data are presented as illustrative excerpts from the interviews. There are two overarching themes around which the data are organised: the understandings, experience and beliefs of teaching staff with regard to generic study and learning support, and the extent to which institutional agendas and the way provision is framed and implemented influence lecturers' practices and perceptions. In addition, a range of contextual factors

consistently surfaced in teaching staff accounts and are commented on here as having subtle influences on their attitudes as well as revealing their underlying concerns.

The disciplinary backgrounds of respondents are provided in brackets at the end of each excerpt. Brackets are also used for elliptical references within the data excerpts.

Presentation of the data with analysis and commentary

A frequent finding was that teachers often have ostensibly limited notions of what constitutes 'generic support'. This is exemplified in the excerpt that follows. A teacher in a humanities discipline seems to associate generic support with 'computer literacy' and IT knowledge, and locates this provision outside the curriculum:

There are a number of areas where generic study support is extremely useful. When supplied by the library for example, in terms of IT, which we couldn't do as well ourselves so we want the students to take advantage of that.

Later he uses the term 'study skills' and appears to refer to various kinds of support across curriculum areas within the humanities. There is a discernable note of personal disaffection in what followed:

On the other hand we want some more subjective material because the generic material we are supplying even across the humanities is a) not exciting to students, b) not engaging them, c) not helping students. Either they think they know it already, which might be the case, or they are bored or can't see the point. We recognise that developing study skills materials is absolutely essential; it's got to be done in the modules but it has also got to be done separately (Humanities).

A number of inferences can be drawn from this particular example. Firstly, his words imply a conceptualisation of 'generic study support' as something extraneous to the curriculum. Secondly, he appears conflicted about what should be 'done in the modules' and 'done separately'. Thirdly, an institutional agenda regarding the provision of generic 'study support' can militate against teaching staff not only being able to make changes that would be more embedded, but even being able to coherently conceive of alternatives.

The next excerpt, from a lecturer in a separate humanities discipline, seems to support this interpretation. He is referring to a module which was taught in the first semester of the first year of undergraduate study (it is no longer current in the form described here but is still a bolt-on):

Students do a study skills module in the first year. It is based on the assumption you can teach people things in one go. It is a poor premise. It hasn't been changed or up-dated since it was produced over ten years ago. It was originally taught by visiting lecturers.

Two points can be inferred from this particular example. Firstly, the teacher is fully aware that a 'one-size fits all', disembodied, study skills approach is a 'poor premise' for learning in the discipline(s). Secondly, this work was originally outsourced to a non-disciplinary 'support' specialist and not regarded as within the remit of academic staff. This highlights a real issue and one that came to the surface on a number of occasions. Academic staff may not feel they have, individually, the expertise to deal with study skills provision in the curriculum. Furthermore, the notion of 'study skills' is equated with deficiencies in basic skills, as is clear in what the same respondent said next:

Learning support should be done by lecturers. The really useful thing I can do as a lecturer is mark students work as efficiently as I know how. We are in higher education; teaching reading and writing is not what we do (Humanities).

This ambivalence appeared regularly in teachers' accounts, a frequent acknowledgement that learning support should be embedded, but reluctance concerning perceived remedial needs, as is evident in the following:

[Students] sometimes don't understand what constitutes a paragraph. They are not well prepared before they come here. I think the solution has to be bolt-on generic skills input (Social Sciences).

On the other hand, a colleague in the same department was explicit:

Study skills is patronising to students. It abstracts out an organic process and disconnects it from the real context.

The same respondent added:

We would like people to come in and talk to students about the epistemologies and genres in Sociology but there isn't time... Learning is becoming part of a community. Bolt-on, non-integrated support is not good enough (Social Sciences).

This is evidence of what teaching staff value in terms of embedded support (Blythman and Orr, 2002) and an indication of a persistent concern that emerged regularly – time and resource constraints. Another respondent elaborated:

Most of higher education is going the way of getting students through degrees with fewer resources. One-to-one tutorials are the best way to support student writers. To develop their writing [learning] in the department, well, it has to come from the department. But workloads and lack of resources constrain being able to do things the way you want to do them (Applied Sciences).

Teachers have experienced a change in their pedagogical relationships with students. The last two excerpts indicate that teaching staff continue to subscribe tacitly to what Lillis (2001) has referred to as 'a model of learning as implicit induction'. However, the conditions under which this model flourished – smaller classes, regular tutorial contact between students and their teachers, continuity in teaching relationships – are to a much lesser extent a feature of the university experience. In their place a standardised approach to teaching and learning systems comprising virtual learning environments, distributed learning systems, and an extensive range of printed and automated institution-wide and department-specific textual sources for students and teaching staff has become widespread, necessitated, and driven, by economy of scale considerations. Concomitant values emphasise student/learner independence, self-sufficiency and self-direction. Taken together these may reinforce certain beliefs and attitudes among staff, as appears to be the case in the following:

We would be much happier if these issues about study skills and the ways in which students write were taken care of by others (Humanities).

The attitude here seems to correspond what Orr and Blythman (2003) called the 'leftovers' approach. The support team is regarded as there to take care of what is squeezed out and not done in the curriculum by the lecturer. In the next excerpt a lecturer in an area with a very high intake, and in which there is extensive student diversity across programmes, espoused a more hard-line view:

Students who want support have to seek the supporter rather than the other way round. There are major problems with some students in just understanding what we mean by adult education (Nursing).

The term 'adult education' is used as if it were indivisible. Students should not expect to be given additional contact time with academic staff; they should strive to be the independent learners that the university and current education policy hold up as an ideal. Students can access other sources of support and guidance if they need to. However, when teaching staff were probed on the efficaciousness of those resources there was overt scepticism:

We don't think Blackboard is really effective but it suits senior management. Stuffing so much contact time onto ICT doesn't really work...we pay lip-service to it (Business School).

Another respondent stated:

When students seem to have persistent problems we use the study skills service. We expect them to put things right. But they are not always good at that. They have failed to pick up on dyslexia in some of our students... I've had students who can't write using paragraphs. These are some of the difficulties we need them [study skills] to sort out (Nursing).

The teacher here was a programme leader in a curriculum area which is on the front line of widening access. The excerpt is palpable evidence of some of the challenges teachers in these areas experience. It also indicates that the curriculum is not addressing the issues which concern her. Her expectations of the study skills service as a source of all-serving, unlimited remedial help reflects a wide-spread (mis)conception about the nature and

capabilities of such support. Another respondent, also from an area of the university with a large and diverse student intake, sums up the problem as follows:

We don't explicitly recognise different types of student... It is more difficult to spot if students are having difficulties until it is too late. We need to identify more clearly the issues students face when they embark on the programmes (Business School).

There is an identification here of 'when' diagnostic support should be effected. But a social practices perspective on student learning in higher education maintains that learning is situated and contextualised. As such it needs to be supported throughout a student's university experience. Teachers are aware that students need help beyond the first year. A lecturer in a traditional discipline area who recently returned from a sabbatical year, comments:

It came as quite a shock to remind myself of what some second year students are not capable of. It does seem to be quite clear that they confuse 'assertion' and 'evidence' for example, and they don't understand what a consistent argument is and that they don't really understand structure (Humanities).

Words like 'argument', 'structure', and 'evidence' have different connotations and even specific meanings depending on field of study and even the expectations of individual teachers (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Students engaged in learning and assessment will need to be in a position to manage that learning. However, the further the student progresses with undergraduate study the fewer opportunities there are, as the data here reveal, for tutorial contact with teachers.

A recurrent theme in the interview data was a concern which went beyond the obvious and familiar issues regarding time and resources – the way in which the curriculum is managed at the institutional level:

We can't get rid of the skills thing, or replace it. We think it should be done here [in the department] but the decision was taken to concede to the better provision made by the university. We are squeezed in terms of resources.

The 'skills thing' referred to here is university-wide provision mostly in the form of printed and automated materials focusing on generic study skills which is incorporated into taught programmes in the social sciences. Generic support in, and across, the university where this research was conducted is conceptualised and construed as flexible, accessible and reactive for a number of reasons. The first is the requirements of the university's infrastructure. The university is a large central campus with a number of satellite sites inside and outside the city area. It is divided into schools which differ in size and complexity. Secondly, the organisational structure of the university is periodically in flux. This is in part a response to the need to respond dynamically to change and to internal agendas related to adjusting and reviewing provision. University policy (entitled 'Guidance and Learner Support' and available to all teaching staff) also stresses fairness and equality; all students should have, in principle, the same opportunities for, and access to, support.

These factors underpin the university's commitment to generic support in a shifting and responsive organisational environment. New structures have developed in HEIs such as teaching and learning committees based within broad divisions in which 'strategies' for enhancing teaching and learning are mostly centrally directed and determined and overseen by academic management. Academic staff involvement may be partial or token in many cases; the real nature of these committees is to implement top-down policy agenda. Programme leaders are a layer of operational management and their autonomy in managing the curriculum is restricted. The data also revealed that the curriculum does not accommodate learning needs beyond the first year of study; space is taken up with other things:

Employability has been a big concern. The more generic skills we include the more subject specific skills we lose. We are trying to get them to do both but it is hard to get the space on the curriculum (Applied Sciences).

In principle all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (but in particular the post-92 universities) are expected to demonstrate a commitment to the values of life-long learning and the knowledge economy and make explicit employability in graduate education. A discourse in which skills (key, transferable) and outcomes are emphasised permeates from the top down and takes priority in the curriculum beyond the first year of study in the form, for example, of student progress files and a range of employability and graduate

skills modules. These are currently core mandatory components at all levels of undergraduate study and integral to other modules. In addition, academic staff are required to comply by including references to key or transferable skills in the rubric of documents such as templates for module descriptors, course guides and proformas for assessment feedback, all of which are subject to standardisation and approval by teaching and learning committees. The teacher's words above indicate that this is diverting time and energy which teaching staff may well prefer to focus on 'subject specific skills'. The effect on the ground is that teachers feel they have little control over what they can realistically do in the curriculum to help students (Yorke, 2005) as is evident in the next excerpt. A teacher describes the function of student guides and handbooks produced in the department:

Common [to all modules] material is separated off. There are course specific handbooks but they are focused on the programme structure. They don't say anything about what I would call 'the learning process'. They are mainly information... The main thrust is talking about learning objectives (Business School).

The production of these materials is mandatory; a university requirement and a quality assurance recommendation (in accordance with the Quality Assurance Agency). The institutional priority is to ensure that students are provided, equally, with specified information related to their course(s) and modules. Given that higher education has moved extensively towards modularity in degree structures to facilitate and accommodate flexible patterns of participation, students will receive a wide range of these documents, sometimes all at once. In practice these sources may consist of little more than a diet of information on course outlines or synopses, assessment details and criteria, suggested reading, outcomes (objectives) and injunctions regarding academic misconduct (especially plagiarism). Teachers have little or no time to address their concerns for students, what this teacher calls 'the learning process'.

The situation is further complicated by what teaching staff can assume is done in other curriculum areas. Central to the 'academic literacies' thesis (Lea and Street, 1998) is that students throughout their time at university have to manage and negotiate the demands of 'course switching'. It is at the level of epistemology that students experience difficulty but this may not be obvious to teaching staff who assume students may be deficient in basic

skills. The suggestion is there should be more explicitness about the (frequently tacit) expectations of academic teaching staff as students produce writing and assessments for different teachers across various fields of study. However, teaching staff have concerns as is evident in the following response:

We have many joint degrees with other departments. Do Film Studies or History do a 'skills for sociologists' module? I don't know. We want to cut the extraneous stuff and make the module as embedded as possible but there is a problem with joints and the assumptions you can make... in an interdisciplinary degree structure we are measuring different things. They [students] need to understand why we ask them to write [for assessment] in certain ways and we need to show more understanding of the difficulties they face. We need to do this to retain students. Those [students] on joints are particularly vulnerable (Social Sciences).

The reference here to a 'skills' module is part of the key/transferable skills agenda. It is possible to discern in the excerpt above how a discourse of skills and outcomes influences the teacher's perception of what should be prioritised. It seems that this agenda marginalises what are traditionally referred to as 'study skills' (Wingate, 2006). The teacher's mention of 'extraneous stuff' is a reference to generic support which is provided in the curriculum within a department which offers numerous options for degree study including a variety of 'joints'. The teacher acknowledges that a more embedded form of support linked directly to the requirements of study in the discipline is in the best interests of students. However, a centrally provided generic form of support has replaced it, while in the curriculum an emphasis on components linked to skills and employability predominates. This teacher, like many whose words have been included in this paper, experiences certain conflicts which are not helped or resolved by the way the institution frames student learning and study support provision or how it exercises control over the curriculum.

What are the salient findings?

The evidence indicates that teaching staff are aware of the learning needs of students and the importance of addressing these directly and in an embedded way at various stages in degree study. In fact the very premise on which generic study support is based is

perceived as false. They lack the confidence and, to some extent, the know-how, but not the will, to support student learning outside the teaching of content knowledge (Blythman and Orr, 2002). However, they are conflicted over the nature of that support and what they are willing to do (Haggis, 2006). Resources are a perennial issue, especially staff shortages set against rising numbers of students. This situation plays on other issues lecturers may have and compounds a sense of reluctance to voice concerns and take initiatives. Institutional agendas over-ride departmental and individual preferences and restrict what teachers can do on the ground (Yorke, 2005). In turn, this can subtly reinforce certain attitudes and assumptions about student learning at university. On the other hand, there is evidence among teaching staff of wide-spread ambivalence, and in some cases outright scepticism, about practices.

A core finding is that the curriculum is overloaded and taken up with agenda such as key skills and 'employability' components constricting space for on-going, embedded support. Teaching staff are distracted by these requirements, sometimes confusing or conflating purposes. The problem is also contextual. Too many hybrid courses and joint degree structures engendering complications around the sorts of assumptions teachers can make (Lea and Street, 1998). Academic teaching staff experience uncertainty. They maybe circumspect about institutional requirements, or openly dissatisfied, but they have to comply, consuming time and effort that is at a premium. The situation seems to compound the separation of learning support from the curriculum (Wingate, 2006). This separation state of affairs is, arguably, the most significant challenge of learning development.

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