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Integrating content and academic skills: working in tandem to meet learning outcomes and assist the transition of international students

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Abstract

The majority of international students, particularly on final year top-up degrees, tend to require considerable support in terms of English language, academic transferable skills and cultural awareness to assist their transition from their home institution to Higher Education in the UK. Traditionally, such support has been delivered via stand-alone English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Study Skills modules but research shows that they have had limited success and supports a move towards discipline-specific or embedded models (Durkin and Maine, 2002; Wingate, 2006). There have also been calls for such support to be offered to all students, particularly in the post 1992 universities (Elander, 2003; Wingate, 2006). In line with current thinking, the Contextualisation, Embedding and Mapping or CEM model (Sloan and Porter, 2008) is currently being used to implement ASk International – Academic Skills for International Students across Northumbria University. The current project gives one example of how this model is being implemented, and emphasises the need for close collaboration between the subject specialist and the ASk lecturer, who in this case are working in tandem to achieve the learning outcomes. This paper will offer a rationale for the collaboration and discuss its impact on the delivery of both modules. An attempt is currently underway to evaluate its effectiveness by the administration of a questionnaire to students, and by correlating ASk attendance with the final grade on this module. This part of the work is ongoing, and no firm conclusions have yet been reached.

The rationale behind the ASk / subject specialist collaboration

Previously, across Northumbria University, the in-sessional support for international students, known as ELISS, taught generic English for Academic Purposes to multidisciplinary classes at all levels. As studies of similar programmes have found (see for example Durkin and Maine, 2002) attendance was low, as was student satisfaction. In line with current research into the area (Sloan and Porter, 2008), Northumbria University has now moved towards an embedded approach. As the acronym implies, ASk International is more than English for academic purposes; it also places great emphasis on transferable academic skills, and in particular on the skills required in the student's discipline.

Staff from Northumbria University have developed the Contextualisation, Embedding and Mapping (CEM) model which is used to implement this approach (Sloan and Porter, 2008). This basically means that the language and skills are taught in context, and are presented as part of the academic programme rather than as an add-on, and at the time when they are

needed. Yet, the degree to which the CEM model has been embraced, and the way in which it is implemented varies across the university. This collaborative project attempts to show how the CEM model is working in practice to support final year direct entrant students on a top-up degree within Newcastle Business School (NBS).Where, ASk International is contextualised in a core module entitled the Professional Development Project (PDP) which accounts for 25% of the final degree classification.

For embedded models of academic skills support to succeed, there is a need for close cooperation between the subject and skills specialists. This is supported by Durkin and Maine, (2002, p.27) who state:

> *"A study skills programme tailored to the specific requirements of a degree course can only be achieved through substantial liaison with the teaching staff."*

It is echoed by Sloan and Porter (2008) who call for a collegiate approach between both tutors, whilst, at the same time, acknowledging that this does not always happen.

Both the ASk and the subject specialist felt that their collaboration would bring about numerous advantages for their own professional development, for the delivery of their modules and to their students' experience. These are now outlined, along with some background about each module and what the student cohort will be offered.

In NBS undergraduate, ASk support in each year is contextualised around a core module which involves literacy and transferable academic skills. Since many students are motivated by summative assessment, the ASk Teaching and Learning Plan aims to meet the needs of the assessment, which are assignments that are frequently used within the subject area, such as essays, reports, oral presentations and reflective statements, and so in theory, skills developed can be transferred to other modules and enhance overall performance. The benefit of having the support closely linked to one specific module is that students feel that it is more relevant to their immediate needs. It also allows the ASk lecturer the opportunity to work closely with the module team, in other words, the subject specialist. Another advantage is that it provides a context in which skills can be developed, since learning without such is neither desirable, if indeed possible. A review of the academic literature would strongly support that discipline based skills support is more effective than a stand-alone module (Elander, 2003). Whilst ASk is technically a non credit bearing stand alone module, it is closely related or contextualised within a credit bearing module and presented to students as compulsory.

As ASk is non-credit bearing in Newcastle Business School (NBS), the Teaching and Learning Plan (TLP) can be adapted to meet the needs of the students as the semester progresses. Student needs are assessed by eliciting information from both the students and the module team. In reality, the ASk lecturer is often proactive in seeking out this information, and this can be a time-consuming and sometimes fruitless task. Therefore, from the ASk lecturer's perspective, the principal aim of the collaboration was to observe some of the module's workshops on a weekly basis, working closely with the module tutor to gain insight into the needs of the international students, and thus inform her TLP and improve the student experience.

Another concern is that modules such as ASk risk being seen in terms of a "deficit model" (Biggs 2003 p.136): something which is only for the weaker students, when in fact there is evidence that many students may benefit, particularly in a modern university where many students come from non-traditional backgrounds (Smailes et al, 2005). The ASk tutor also felt that the nature of the student population on the module in question i.e.–direct entrants - was such that ASk would be relevant to all of them. Thus, a secondary aim of the observation was to assess the needs of the students who were not enrolled on ASk.

In the 2007/08 academic year the Professional Development Project (PDP) was piloted across three programme areas involving 125 students, the vast majority of whom came from overseas. It was trialled as an alternative to the final year dissertation for students on a one year top-up degree. The rationale was that these students were at a disadvantage in terms of academic knowledge and skills when compared to other final year students who had previous experience of studying at NBS. The degree classifications of the top-up awards reflected this notion, as they were in general of a lower standard when compared against the conventional three year and four year (with placement) awards. This problem is recognised by Sowden (2003), and is commented on by an Observatory report (2005, cited by Sulkowski and Deakin, 2005, p.154) : "*overall, foreign students were less likely than UK domiciled students to achieve the high grades necessary for coveted first class or upper second class honours degrees.*"

Unlike the standard dissertation, the PDP comprises of two sections: the first involves an exploration of how students learn and the implications of career choice on the individual (3-4 thousand words); the second is similar to a scaled down dissertation, but with no requirement for any primary research (5-6 thousand words). A further important difference in the delivery of the PDP is the regular week by week contact throughout semester one and for the first five weeks of semester two, unlike the relative hands-off approach of the dissertation. It was considered that by working within a more structured framework, this would work to the benefit of the majority of the direct entry students.

During the delivery of the PDP it became apparent that there had been at times a breakdown in communications, in the sense that what may be considered common academic expressions were not being interpreted as expected in the classroom setting. To give an example, this occurred with the use of the word 'theory'. In discussing part of the assessment task work, it was suggested that the class could analyse the 'theory' alongside the practice (real life examples) and that this could be developed further in the synthesis and conclusion of the work. It was quite a surprise when it was discovered, that in the earlier discussion, the use of the word 'theory' had not been recognised in the manner expected by the lecturer.

Another example of a breakdown in communications has been the lack of active participation in workshops, and the reluctance of students to ask questions in the class. It is recognised that such practices may be due to cultural differences. Ward (2001 cited in Sulkowski and Deakin, 2005, p.155) states

> "*that lecturers might interpret the reluctance of international students to contribute to classroom discussions as a lack of confidence, competence or lack of interest,*

> *while in actual fact students are replicating the behaviours they have acquired as the norms of conduct in a different educational and cultural system".*

Thus, the subject specialist felt that an understanding of the entry level and the previous educational experience of the students would help communication in the classroom and enhance the student learning. This is recommended by Barron and D'Anunzio-Green (2009, p.8) who claim that

> *"a better understanding of direct entrant students' needs and expectations will potentially have an impact on the completion rates of this group of students and may ultimately provide a more valuable learning experience."*

Valiente (2008, p.74) highlights

> *"the need for change in teaching and assessment approaches that could help students to become high-quality learners within a cross-cultural vision of learning."*

Warwick (2006, p.3) also makes the recommendation of the need of cultural awareness and states
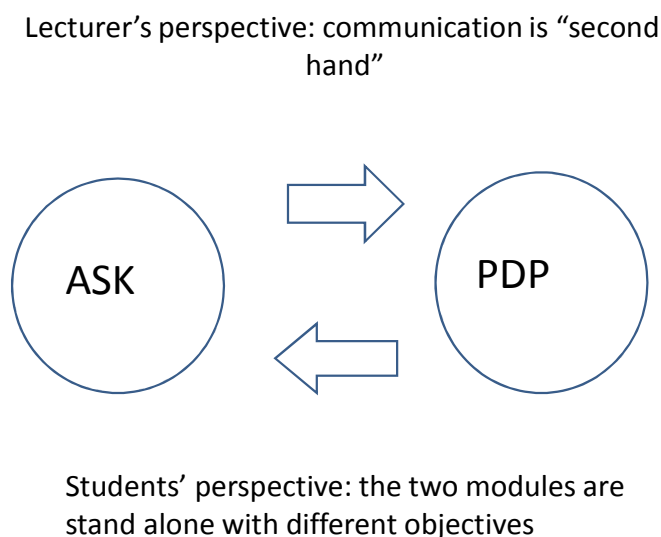
> *"Good teaching involves developing a clear understanding of the profile of the students being taught."*

It was felt that working more closely with the ASk lecturer would help to achieve this.

The nature of the collaboration and its impact on the delivery of ASk / PDP modules

The ASk lecturer and the subject specialist assessed the learning outcomes of the module in question at the beginning of the semester, and discussed the ASk support together. Furthermore, the ASk lecturer observed one of the subject specialist's weekly workshops throughout semester one. Following the workshop, both members of staff met to discuss their perceptions of the students' needs and how these could be addressed in the immediate ASk sessions. The lecturer's perspectives can be seen in the two figures below.

Figure 1: Lecturer and students perspectives without collaboration

Lecturer's perspective: communication is "second hand"

Students' perspective: the two modules are stand alone with different objectives

Figure 2: Lecturer and students' perspectives with collaboration

With collaboration from the lecturer's perspective

Regular first hand communication

Students' perspective: the modules work in tandem towards common goals and "successful student status"
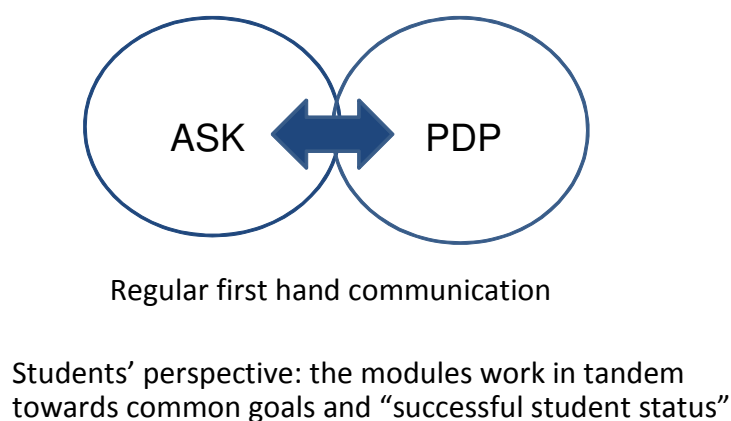
Some of the student difficulties identified over the semester, and the support offered are outlined below:

1. As outlined earlier, common academic expressions used by the subject specialist were not being interpreted as expected. For example, students were not clear about the meaning of 'theory' in the given context, with the subject specialist's help ASk lessons clarified this, by offering relevant and current examples.

2. Students had difficulty in seeing the links between different strands of the assessment. Individual /small group tutorials with the ASk tutor complemented those offered by the subject specialist.

3. There was a lack of active participation and peer support in the workshops. It is recognised that clearly there are various cultural factors at play that have an impact on the students' behaviour as individuals and within a group setting. The work of Valiente is important here: she writes about creating "safe environments" so that international students may be more participative, and to be given the opportunity of interacting without "losing face". She also discusses the "acculturation" process, which she defines as *"the integrative process of awareness towards one's own culture and others' cultures"* (Valiente, 2008, p.82) Both module tutors are considering how to improve this for the next academic year.

Evaluation of the ASk / PDP collaboration

At the end of semester one, it was decided that the collaborative approach should be evaluated in order to take into account students' views on it, and to measure its impact on learning outcomes of the PDP module. In recognition that progress goes beyond the attainment of formal measurements of academic success, this raises a number of questions: How do we define learning? How do we measure progress? These concerns have led us to try to identify the skills required for success, and to analyse what we mean by a 'successful student' in our context, in order to determine whether students have made progress, and in what way our collaboration has influenced that. Waters and Waters (1992), Andersson (2003) and Barrington (2004) suggest a range of factors which include skills, behaviours and values which lead to successful student status. We have incorporated some of these ideas into the questionnaire, discussed below, and further details of this work can be found in appendix one.

A semi-structured questionnaire administered to students is to be coded and analysed via SPSS to establish:

1. The entry level of the students in terms of their language proficiency, transferable academic skills and previous learning experiences.

2. The students' progression over the semester towards the skills of the "successful student" (Waters and Waters,1995, cited by Sowden, 2003,p.2)

3. The students' perceptions of the support offered

4. Whether there is a demand for ASk from students currently not enrolled.

In addition, an attempt will be made to correlate the PDP grades with ASk attendance to establish if there is a link between the support offered and the submission of a successful assignment.

Conclusion

Initial findings suggest the ASk / PDP collaboration has allowed difficulties to be identified and dealt with in a timely manner, has enhanced both programmes and increased student satisfaction. It is anticipated that the effectiveness will be confirmed when the questionnaire responses have been fully analysed.

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Appendix One

The notion of a "successful student" has been explored by Anderson (2003) and described by Waters and Waters (1992, p.265 cited in Sowden 2003) and cited below.

"They [successful students] typically:

- Have a high degree of self awareness
- Are good at critical questioning
- Tend to have an "adult" approach to relations with their teachers
- Think clearly and logically
- Are self confident
- Impose their own framework on study data
- Have a positive attitude to their studies
- Are willing and able to teach themselves
- Are intelligent"

Waters and Waters (1992, p.265 cited in Sowden 2003)

Anderson's study features some 24 criteria that may be identified with successful students, these have been classified into cognitive and non-cognitive groupings, and summarised here.

Cognitive
- Creativity and originality
- Awareness of different perspectives
- Ability for abstract thinking
- Logical ability
- Verbal communication skills
- Critical analysis/reflection
- Ability to learn new concepts
- Analytical skills
- Written communication skills
- Ability to apply theories

Cognitive skills development and intellectual Growth (10)

Non-cognitive:
- Ethical values
- Personal growth and maturity
- Developed sense of responsibility
- Developed sense of autonomy

Personal and adaptability development (4)

- Social skills
- Leadership Skills
- Ability to work with others
- Participation in organisation

Social Development (4)

- Ambition and goal achievement
- Time allocation to studies

Motivational and aspirational development (2)

Appendix One continued….

Cognitive and Non Cognitive	Developed clear career paths	
	Worked/working in chosen career whilst training	Vocational Development (4)
	Having the potential to qualify in chosen career field	
	Having potential to become a skilful researcher	

Adapted from Anderson's Table 1 (2003, p.546)

Barrington (2004) also suggests the use of Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory (MIT) would be beneficial for teaching and learning in higher education. Gardner's eight intelligences are as follows:

- Verbal, linguistic ability
- Logical, mathematical ability
- Musical, non-verbal sound recognition ability
- Visual spatial ability
- Bodily, kinaesthetic, hand –eye coordination
- Interpersonal skills
- Intrapersonal, self motivated, own consciousness
- Naturalistic, understand and relate to the natural world

(Adapted from Barrington 2004, p.422)