Usage guidelines

Becoming a psychology undergraduate:
Integrating study skills and integrating students

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Three years of action research into a study skills and transition programme for psychology undergraduates are reported. The programme began as a 'bolt-on' response to perceptions of student deficit and developed to focus on transition to university. Data from three cohorts and over 600 students show attendance to be associated with higher academic grades and progression rates. The programme has also helped to establish relationships with peers and staff, prepare students for assessments, set expectations about study, and provided an opportunity to ask questions, to work collaboratively and to learn about referencing and plagiarism. Concerns with study skills highlighted by Wingate (2006) and others are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

At a pre-1992 UK university, in response to long running concern about poor standards of first-year undergraduate literacy (referencing, expression, grammar, punctuation, plagiarism and collusion), combined with data from student exit interviews and a slow decline in student retention rates, it was decided in 2002 to offer a first-term study skills intervention for psychology students for the first time. This now permanent feature was researched and reviewed for the first three years of its implementation.

Following initial development without reference to research, the second and subsequent interventions drew on research suggesting that successful transition to university integrates students into their course and is a key factor in progression and achievement (Tinto, 1975). Evans and Peel (1999) found the first six weeks to be important in forming relationships and embedding students into their course, and Cartney and Rouse (2006) highlight the impact of the first year on continuation. Early experience may have a lasting impact on motivation, continuation, approach to study and achievement.

Interest in the process of transition to university is not new. Beard and Hartley (1984) summarised Wankowski's suggestions (1973, cited in Beard & Hartley, 1984) that courses for new students should include interaction with the teacher, work in small groups, teacher-student contact outside lectures, and far more feedback. Wankowski also suggested that courses designed only to assist with study skills may not meet students' needs. Beard and Hartley found that students considered a good transition course to include getting to know staff and students; information about course aims; assistance with study skills; identification of gaps in knowledge, and prompt remedial treatment.

In the second and subsequent interventions, the provision of transitional and emotional support, and the opportunity to form relationships, were given greater prominence relative to study skills. Rogers and Freiberg (1994) suggest that the student has in abundance all that is required for learning, so that what needs to be provided to facilitate learning is opportunity, space and encouragement. Cranton (2001) and Brockbank and McGill (2007) suggest that a supportive classroom atmosphere in which students can feel safe to ask

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questions, make relationships, and be open to learning is important. Kift and Nelson (2005) argue that creating environments for active learning helps students to manage transition.

Maslow's (1970) work on motivation suggests that more basic safety, security and belongingness needs must be satisfied before higher level needs. It follows that engaging in learning and reflection requires that students first feel safe, relaxed, and involved, and Cartney and Rouse (2006) showed that awareness and understanding of emotional aspects of learning helped to create an environment where students could achieve their potential. The intervention reported here developed into something of a higher education 'reception' class, similar in scale and participation to A-level classes familiar to many students from their previous stage of learning. This scaffolding of support was intended to give students a secure base from which to develop and to allow interest and engagement to flourish.

Intervention 1 lasted for the first 6 weeks of term, and was optional and extracurricular. Intervention 2 was integrated into the undergraduate programme as part of the Perspectives in Psychology module and attendance was compulsory and credit bearing. Activity based workshops developed by the Assessment Plus (A+) project[2] on assessment criteria were used in Intervention 2, with the aim of engaging students in discussion and problem solving. Tasks were presented to students as preparation for their first essays. Short homework tasks were also set, and quick, informal feedback was given. High levels of activity and interaction during the classes provided opportunities for students to develop relationships with staff and peers, and early feedback set expectations about performance and effort required, and permitted students to engage in social comparison.

METHOD

After Intervention 1 a brief questionnaire was developed to ask students about the value of the intervention in preparing them for study and assessment, in enabling them to get to know other psychology students, and in supporting them in transition. A version of the questionnaire was also used online with students at the start of their second year.

After Intervention 2 and 3, six focus groups were also run with similar aims to the questionnaire, and transcripts analysed thematically. For high and low attending groups (students attending five or more seminars were classed as high attenders, and those attending four or less as low attenders), the following data were collected: grades for the first and second essays in Year 1, for the first year overall, and for the first essay in Year 2; and failure and progression rates for Year 1. In addition, progression data for combined honours students taking psychology as one of their two subjects was compared with those not taking psychology and therefore, not receiving the intervention.

Data were collected in accordance with current university ethics procedures, and supported by a research participation scheme in which first-year students were required to achieve credits by choosing from a selection of studies in which to take part.

RESULTS

After each of the three interventions questionnaires were received from 51%, 64% and 81% of first-year students respectively, and from 16% and 31% of second-year students 12 months after the first and second interventions. All five questionnaires produced broadly similar outcomes.

Students reported that the intervention had been of value in helping them to form relationships with peers and staff and to prepare for assessments. They also thought that the intervention had clarified expectations about study, and valued the opportunities it provided to ask questions and work collaboratively. Enduring friendships made during the programme were reported by half of respondents 12 months on, and learning about referencing and avoiding plagiarism was strongly valued, with between 85% and 98% of respondents judging these topics to be useful or very useful.

Three main themes emerged from focus group discussions. Firstly, students valued the opportunity to form a relationship with a member of staff:

The seminars gave me the opportunity to interact properly with a tutor.

Just getting to know a member of staff well… I would rather see my seminar tutor rather than my personal tutor if I had a problem as she actually knows who I am.

The second theme concerned group interaction:

The group felt like a base where we could talk about problems we were all experiencing – reassuring.

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[2] http://www.writenow.ac.uk/assessmentplus/

I thought working in groups was good as we got to share our ideas and listen to one another. I felt I learnt more… this way.

The seminars helped with meeting fellow students, whom I now feel I can ask for help if I am struggling but don't want to or can't speak to lecturers. Working together is helpful to get different perspectives on things.

Thirdly, students said that the seminars helped them to prepare for the first assignments:

The plagiarism and referencing exercises and handouts also proved to be very useful, this advice I will continue to use on future assignments.

I found that I used the seminar material for my first essay. It helped me plan, structure and organise the content of it and helped me keep focused on what needed to be [in] and what I should have left out.

However, some students reported that Intervention 2 could be dry and dull, and advice was sought on writing laboratory reports. These issues were addressed in Intervention 3 with a renewed emphasis on student activities.

Progression and academic grades were related to seminar attendance for the second and third intervention. Intervention 2 high attenders obtained significantly better grades than low attenders for Essay 1 in the first year (single honours students: $t(99) = 40.26$, $p < .001$; combined honours students: $t(46) = 19.60$, $p < .001$) and for their first essay in the second year (single honours students: $t(136) = 11.66$, $p < .001$; combined honours students: $t(30) = 6.28$, $p < .001$). In the year before the intervention, the first-year mean grade was 54.8%, not significantly different to the mean grade for low attenders in Intervention 2 (53.1%), and significantly worse than the mean grade for high attenders (59.5%; $t(132) = -6.80$, $p < .001$).

Progression data from annual monitoring returns for single honours students, for the preprogramme year and the three subsequent years, show that withdrawal for nonacademic reasons declined from 11.6% before the intervention to 7.8% after intervention 1, 6.9% after Intervention 2 and 5.8% after Intervention 3.

For Intervention 3, combined honours students taking psychology and therefore attending the intervention (50 students) were also more likely to proceed to Year 2 and less likely to fail compared with those not taking psychology and thus not attending the intervention (220 students).

DISCUSSION

This intervention was created and introduced quickly in response to a perceived crisis. Staff did not begin with a thorough review of the literature in order to design an evidence-based intervention, and therefore did not respond as the scholarly researchers they are within their discipline. Rather, they responded as experienced teaching practitioners. Consequently, the first intervention was poorly based in evidence and was not informed by the extensive research published in this area. This failure highlights the importance of the scholarship of teaching and learning and the importance of bringing together teaching and research and valuing teaching as a form of applied scholarship.

Norton and Crowley (1995) and McCune and Entwistle (2000) found stand-alone study skills programmes to have limited success, and Johnston and Webber (2003) found students to be unwilling to attend noncredit bearing classes. These studies influenced the authors' review of Intervention 1 and contributed to the conclusion that a 'bolt-on' programme (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 2000) had been created which separated academic skills from their disciplinary context and derived from a remedial, deficit model. Skills were seen as surface features of writing, and students were not positioned as interested and keen to learn.

Wingate (2006) notes that a bolt-on remedial study skills programme undermines a deep approach to study. A skills approach implies that a deep approach is unnecessary because the student simply needs to acquire the right techniques to succeed (Nisbet & Shucksmith, 1986). Wingate (2006) concludes that it is time to do away with study skills altogether. She suggests that they fail to engage students in the epistemology and discourse of their discipline, and instead peddle a quick-fix technical approach to academic life that is at odds with a deep approach to study. A focus on study skills implies that the 'problem' of academic work is essentially a short-term one of doing what is needed for students to pass at university, can be easily fixed, and has little application or relevance to employment or adult professional life (Wingate, 2006).

This intervention began life as a study skills programme but has migrated to become group work embedded in the Perspective in Psychology module. Its focus is primarily on developing relationships and transitional support. Focus group data show that it offers students social and emotional as well as academic support, and opportunities to form relationships with peers and staff. Data on essay and end of year grades and progression show an association with seminar attendance. However, seminar attendance may very well be confounded with

aspects of motivation, thus improved outcomes cannot be causally linked. Further research utilising control conditions may be appropriate. On the other hand, an holistic approach drawing on literature across a range of interventions, such as that reported by Cohen, Chang, Pooley, and Pike (2008) at Edith Cowan University, may lead to change more quickly.

In developing this work further, it is intended to offer students support with academic writing to help them construct arguments and use evidence in a rhetorical structure, within the conventions of psychology as a discipline. This is a deeper aim than the concern with the surface features of writing that were initially problematised: the focus has moved from the surface features of academic writing, exemplified by concerns about plagiarism and use of the apostrophe, towards writing as a central element in learning and meaning making.

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