

# Absorbing the shock of the early undergraduate experience

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The SHOCK ABSORBER Project is a collaborative venture involving five contrasting undergraduate programmes: Law, Biomedical Sciences and Photography at Manchester Metropolitan University, Archaeology at the University of Liverpool, and Social Work at Stockport College. The five programmes differ in subject/discipline area and vary in size of cohort (between 30 and 280). The project is in its second year of operation and will be complete by summer 2010. The overall aim is to produce a 'toolkit' for interconnected learning, teaching and assessment strategies for first-year undergraduates. The toolkit will be flexible and adaptable for implementation in a variety of subject/discipline areas and institutional contexts.

## Background and rationale

Early 'drop-out', failure or dissatisfaction in the first year in HE appear to have multiple and complex causes (Yorke, 1999; Yorke and Longden, 2007; Tinto, 1994). While financial and personal reasons are commonly given for poor student engagement and early drop-out, the First Term Student Experience Survey carried out by the SHOCK ABSORBER Project found that the following issues are also significant:

- wrong choice of course/lack of pre-course information
- feeling isolated – the need to establish peer and friendship networks
- lack of timely support for disability and dyslexia requirements
- being overwhelmed by induction processes
- remoteness of staff, especially when much of the early experience occurs in large lectures
- uncertainty regarding workload, assessment criteria and level
- lack of timely and meaningful feedback on assignments.

In response to the above, the SHOCK ABSORBER

project is developing innovative activities to engage students and increase their confidence, knowledge and scholarship skills in order to alleviate the 'shock' or anxiety often associated with early experiences in HE. Taking the topic of the first assignment as a common thread, a 'holistic' approach to pre-entry, induction and the first term experience is being taken. Early opportunities for collaborative group work, peer learning, enquiry-based learning and formative assessment and diagnostic feedback are designed to enable students to engage with each other, with teaching staff and with curriculum content. The project team believes that these interventions can make a significant contribution to student success in year 1 and can have a profound impact on the development of independent learning, autonomy and growth in self-esteem and confidence. The strategy adopted is designed to meet the new and changing demands of an expanded HE sector and contribute to an inclusive learning experience for an increasingly diverse student body. It is not intended as a 'spoon feeding' mechanism or a remedial approach, nor is it based on a deficit model of our students. The goal is to enable all students to become autonomous learners, reach their potential and succeed.

The cyclical development of the project and the evaluation of its impact on the student experience are inextricably interwoven within the action research methodology (Rossi et al, 2004).

Participatory research methods encapsulate 'the student voice' to influence, shape and evaluate the toolkit (Rowland, 2002). The project is in its second phase of operation, so quantitative and qualitative data gathered through detailed surveys of pre-entry, induction and the first term experience inform the development of the toolkit. A final comparative analysis will examine the influence of SHOCK ABSORBER strategies on achievement and progression. SHOCK ABSORBER interventions are illustrated in the table below. A case study provides detail of developments in Archaeology at the University of Liverpool.

Table 1: Common reasons for poor engagement in the first term in HE					
Lack of pre-course information	Isolation – need for peer and friendship networks	Remoteness of staff	Lack of timely support for disability and dyslexia requirements	Uncertainty regarding workload, assessment criteria and level	Lack of timely and meaningful feedback on assignments
Choosing the wrong course	Being overwhelmed by induction				
<b>S h o c k                      A b s o r b e r</b> Activities linked by focus on first assignment					
Pre-course activities to increase knowledge of course content, assessment topics and criteria	Early opportunities to work with peers, collaborative group work	Early tutorials /Personal Development Plans (PDPs) Tutor availability – ‘drop-ins’	Early involvement of services for disabled and dyslexic students	Initial tasks for the construction of PDPs	Peer, formative and diagnostic assessment Speedy constructive feedback to support the production of first formal assignment

### Crossing the threshold into Archaeology: a case study

Activities presented here are an example of an intervention from the SHOCK ABSORBER ‘toolkit’ and were piloted at the University of Liverpool in September–October 2008. Initial feedback from students has been favourable.

One commonly cited reason for students leaving university early is ‘having chosen the wrong course’ (Yorke and Longden, 2007). This may be partly due to lack of pre-course information on curriculum content or it may be that students have already formed a false impression of their chosen subject. This scenario is compounded in disciplines where popular media images boost recruitment, but adversely affect retention when students realise that the subject’s reality does not equate with its image. A few weeks into the course students are confronted with dissonance between their personal construct of the subject and the reality of the discipline as taught at university, causing them to disengage, drop out or change course.

Children are first introduced to Archaeology as part of Key Stage 2 History, where the Greeks and Romans are popular curriculum elements. Although Archaeology GCSE and A2 qualifications exist, few schools offer these and they are not a requirement for university entry. The likelihood is that young

people with an interest in the ancient world construct a personal concept of Archaeology as a form of professional practice based on information from local museums, sites and societies, as well as books, TV shows, films and the internet. Although there are many excellent materials out there, the portrayal of Archaeology as a discipline in some of the latter media mentioned can be dubious. Narratives about the past can be colourful, engaging and often surprisingly well-informed by archaeological research but lack detailed explanations of scientific methods or theoretical approaches. It is precisely these methods and theories that students confront head-on when they arrive at university to study Archaeology.

Standard university induction procedures often explain to students how, where and when they will be studying, but not what. Practising academics are often immersed in the culture of their own discipline and may appear dismissive of students’ personal concepts of the subject. It therefore behoves us to induct students both into the practical aspects of life on campus and also into the intellectual culture of the discipline. We need to share with them as future practitioners the disciplinary understanding of what it is we do and make explicit the implicit principles by which we operate.

An illustration of an early intervention that addresses this issue is provided in the box.

## From the Shock Absorber toolkit: Crossing the threshold into Archaeology

### *Pre-entry:*

All registered students are sent a complimentary copy of *Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction* (Bahn, 2000) with their welcome pack. A slip inserted into the book indicates that this will be useful for their first tutorials and assignment. Students are also guided to a Facebook site for newcomers to meet each other and discuss the book.

### *Weeks 1 and 2:*

Students attend 'Learning Cafés' to follow up their reading of the short book and guide them towards their first assessed essay: 'What is it that archaeologists do? What principles guide their work?'

Learning Cafés provide a social setting for small discussion groups. The student Common Room is arranged 'cabaret style' and discussion takes place in groups of c.5 over coffee and muffins. After ten minutes each table presents its ideas on a given question to the room. Participants

circulate to mix up the table groups and the new groups form to discuss the next question. At the end of the session everyone in the room has worked with everyone else to formulate collective essay-plan style answers to the questions posed.

The topics for the sessions are:

- Week 1:  
What is Archaeology, its ethics and practice?
- Week 2:  
Discussion of first assignment and essay-writing tips

### *Week 3:*

Students have their first formal academic tutorial in small groups. The topic for discussion again includes the nature of Archaeology.

### *Week 4:*

Students submit their first essay. Prompt feedback is provided by their tutor. This first essay and its feedback is formative towards the next, bigger assignment.

The discussions introduce students to a number of important threshold concepts that are central and unique to the study of Archaeology. The first, "Archaeology as the study of the material remains of human societies", reveals that Archaeology is *not* History – it is concerned with the analysis of artefacts, not texts. Archaeology requires students to engage with scientific, analytical methods, and this revelation may make some students feel unprepared for the course ahead. This threshold concept may also challenge their construct of Archaeology as being the cultural history of ancient societies, a popular view that is compounded by media sources.

Another threshold concept is "Archaeology as destruction". Within the archaeological community of practice it has long been recognised that excavation destroys what it uncovers (Wheeler, 1959). Practising archaeologists therefore have a duty to preserve the past by using non-invasive

methods of investigation, such as geophysics, using digging only as a last resort. Again, this requires students to engage with science. It can also cause them unease as they begin to realise that their subject involves destroying finite cultural resources, and is not purely a 'creative' act of discovery.

Threshold concepts are 'bounded' and it is appropriate to introduce them to students at the start of their studies as they delimit the discipline itself, for example defining Archaeology as being distinct from History. However, threshold concepts are also 'troublesome' (Meyer and Land, 2003) and can present students with difficult truths, e.g. that Archaeology is destructive. By addressing such concepts explicitly and openly in informal groups at the outset of their programme of studies, students can work through these 'troublesome' concepts as a peer group. With peer support they are less likely to experience feelings of isolation, inadequacy and confusion.

## Conclusions

Archaeology is not the only subject taught in HE but not in schools where there is a popular image at odds with the reality of the academic discipline. Others include Forensic Science, Geology and Engineering. Pre-enrolment literature should address the issues raised above but choice of course may still be based on misconceptions of the discipline. The intervention outlined may prove useful to induct students from pre-arrival and through the critical first few weeks into the academic culture of their adoptive discipline, and support them as they experience dissonance between their personal construct of that discipline and academic realities. Crucially, by making explicit those 'troublesome' threshold concepts and discussing them in informal social environments, students can be helped to work through this dissonance with the support of their peers.

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