

Title: ***“Your students have excellent knowledge and skills,
but they don’t think about them . . .” A Reflective
Learning Project***

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"Your students have excellent knowledge and skills, but they don't think about them . . ."

ABSTRACT

This paper describes two phases of a project set up to encourage students to be more reflective about their studies and their career goals. It takes as its starting point a discussion with employers about the lack of reflection that they observed in otherwise highly skilled management graduates. The project examined a number of processes, including mentoring, logbooks and learning style questionnaires to gauge which was the most effective in inspiring students to be reflective. Having identified the best methods the project entered a second phase which involved rolling out the findings to large numbers of students. The challenges of doing this are analysed in the paper.

KEYWORDS: Reflective Learning, Mentoring, Logbooks, Learning Styles

A Reflective Learning Project

This paper describes a recent journey we have been taking at Aston Business School to help our students to be more reflective about their learning. We do not set ourselves up as experts in the field, but we want to share with you our experiences in order to gain feedback on what we are doing.

Feedback from Alumni and Employers

Our journey started with a meeting of our Advisory Panel. This group of employers and graduates meets regularly to help us develop our curriculum at Aston Business School. In one of their regular comments on the graduates that we were producing they made the point that is the title of this paper and which began our search for reflective learning: "Your students have excellent knowledge and skills, but they do not think about them . . ." With the Advisory Panel's views in mind we developed a small pilot project which looked at different ways in which we could encourage our students to develop a more reflective attitude to their studies. We were lucky enough to gain a small HEFCE grant for this.

We had already been trying to encourage our students to be more reflective, particularly when preparing for their placement year and in the log book that all students complete while they are on placement. We had, however, often been disappointed with the results, and had decided that

our students needed to be helped to develop a reflective approach earlier in their studies. It was not sufficient to expect them to develop such a way of thinking by themselves in the middle of their degree programme. We also thought that such an initiative would help address another learning issue – that of managing group work. Group work had become a major part of the curriculum, both due to the growing student numbers, but also because group work prepared students well for their placements. It was, however, one task which students often found difficult to handle effectively.

Towards a definition of Reflective Learning

The aims of our pilot project were to enable our students to improve their skills for lifelong learning through reflecting on their performance and by setting goals for improvement. The objectives were to find a suitable working definition of reflective learning consistent with feedback from the Advisory Panel, external examiners and Business School academics. We wished to map out the extent to which students were currently enabled to develop this approach in the curriculum by examining learning material and gathering feedback from both staff and students. This overview of current good practice would be used to identify the best ways to enhance the reflective approach to the curriculum. Finally, we would trial suitable methods and materials to find the best ways to improve opportunities for reflective learning in our curriculum.

After feedback from our Advisory Panel members, staff and a review of the literature, we decided on the following working definition of reflective learning to inform our project.

“Learning which encourages students to look beyond the short term acquisition of key skills and knowledge and of immediate career goals. It involves a learning process which encourages students to think about what they are learning, to make connections between different areas of their studies, to analyse where their strengths and weaknesses are and to set objectives for future development.”

Pilot Project: Students

Our project started by recruiting a group of student volunteers who would participate in the pilot. These were all second year students who were seeking placements, so much of their concern during the period of the project was with applications and interviews for jobs. The pilot group were given an exercise to complete on approaches to studying and invited to an initial focus group meeting. At this they were introduced to the concept of reflective learning via our working definition and asked to consider what opportunities they had had to reflect on their own performance in their first year studies. They were prompted to comment on different methods of assessment, teaching and personal tutoring.

The feedback that we got from the focus groups indicated that students had little understanding of the concept of reflective learning and they struggled

to find examples of when reflection was encouraged in the curriculum. They had found the transition between sixth form to University difficult in terms of different teaching and learning styles. In addition, they did not know how to select the relevant information from the reading sources given or what information to highlight in lecture notes. Students said that they enjoyed lectures where interaction was encouraged. They felt that the use of case studies and group work helped their understanding of theories, but felt that they needed more guidance on how to approach these kinds of assignments. It was interesting to note that they found it difficult to know how they were getting on during their studies and were not using the personal tutor system effectively to help monitor their progress or work on areas of weakness.

Pilot Project: Staff

At the same time short interviews were held with academic staff to find out what they were already doing to encourage students to adopt a more reflective approach to their studies. The findings matched what we have found with the students. Lecturers believed that a reflective approach relied on appropriately timed feedback to students. This feedback could be oral or written, but it must be carried out as soon as possible after the assessment. Aston's normal six-week written feedback turnaround does not give time for this. Staff thought that group work could be a very productive way of encouraging reflection if it was well managed and where students could see that their participation in the process of group work was an important experience rather than end in itself (for example, in peer

review of group presentations). Too often competition within and between groups stifled reflection. For this reason all assessments should have reflection embedded in them. Assessment that encourages reflection, our interviewers believed, should not always count towards an overall module result as this encourages students to be instrumental. It allows students to assess themselves, to experiment, practise and develop an idea.

Other staff told us that a reflective approach to teaching relied on the opportunity for students to undertake guided discussion and debate. Students needed to be helped through the highs and lows of this approach. This was easier where there were small numbers of students. As students are not used to operating like this, and come to it from different directions, they needed individual attention and the opportunity not to be a “free-loader”. Furthermore, increasing numbers of students enrolled on the programmes left less time for staff to reflect themselves on their own work and to develop ways to present difficult or technical material to students in a reflective way. All agreed, however, that it was worth persisting. They cited examples of graduates who had told them later that modules with a reflective approach were proving of far more long term use in their careers and this matched what our original employers had said.

Pilot Project: Logbooks, Learning Styles and Mentoring

After researching the literature and talking to staff and students we decided to test three methods of encouraging reflective learning amongst our pilot

group of students. These methods were the use of learning style exercises and questionnaires, mentoring and the keeping of a reflective logbook.

Mentors were selected from staff across the institution. They were all people who did not have direct teaching contact with our students, for example, the Directors of Widening Participation, of the Business Partnership Unit, of Staff Development and the Business School Management Development Programme. Mentors were given a resource pack of information about the mentoring process. They were also given the CV of their mentees. Students were given a similar briefing before they met their mentor. They were instructed to meet once a month with their mentor over the next three months and to spend some time each week filling in the logbook that they had been given.

The logbooks contained the definition of reflective learning and information on the aims of the project. They also consisted of a learning styles questionnaire, exercises on assessing key skills and identifying strengths and weaknesses and a weekly diary. The diary asked students to record what they had learnt, found difficult or easy and what learning styles worked best for them each week. Each week they were encouraged via the diary to set themselves a goal for the following week.

Pilot Project: Feedback from Mentors

At the end of three months both mentors and students were asked to give written and oral feedback on their experiences.

The mentors reported that different parts of the process had worked for different students and that they had had to adapt the process accordingly. Some students were more focussed on finding a job and, therefore, wanted to concentrate on the development of their CV. Others were more interested in their learning styles and exploring different approaches to their studies. Group work came up again, quite independently, as an issue. Mentors reported that the students were very motivated and interested in the project as they had volunteered for it thinking that it would enhance their performance and their chances of gaining a placement. Concerns were expressed as to how the methods would transfer to a larger group of students for whom the process might be compulsory and not all of whom would be so enthusiastic. The mentors reported that although the mentoring had been rewarding for them and their own self development, it had also been time consuming and again this raised concerns about how it would be possible to mentor larger numbers of students.

Pilot Project: Feedback from Students

Feedback from students was similarly enthusiastic. Although they were not surprised at the results of the learning questionnaire, they were in general pleased at being given the opportunity to stop and think about how and why they approached their work as they did. They reported that it had helped them identify areas of weakness and to focus on these in an effort to improve. It had also helped them to think about their approach to tasks

such as undertaking group work. Reflecting on this had specifically helped with preparing to answer interview questions.

Students were even more positive about their experience of mentoring and completing the logbook. Mentors had helped them enormously with the development of their CVs and their interview preparation. They were very appreciative of the fact that a busy member of staff was interested in them and their development. They felt more confident in themselves by the end of the process, although they had sometimes had to have been helped through difficult and challenging reflection on the weaknesses before reaching this point. The logbook helped them to manage their time better and the mentor meetings gave them a focus for making changes. Mentors helped identify areas of weakness and ways of improving. The overall project gave them a better understanding of themselves and their learning styles. Encouragingly for us it also brought a broader view of their studies.

Pilot Project: Conclusions

At the end of our pilot we concluded that the experiment had been a success. It had been an exciting and worthwhile project that had produced some optimistic results. We were, however, aware that it had been a very small pilot, conducted using only twenty students. Our concern was with how to take things forward, given that we had up to 400 students a year who could benefit. The pilot had been very time-consuming and dependent on the good will of volunteer mentors. We were concerned to find a way in

which we could manage, sustain and embed our findings into the curriculum.

Phase Two

Despite our misgivings we decided to proceed to a larger scale development of some of the activities that we had identified as being important. Once again we put together a project plan and once again we managed to gain some HEFCE funding. Our main objective this time was to find a way to encourage reflective learning amongst a large group of students.

Learning Styles

Our first activity was to address the issue of introducing reflective learning to students right from the beginning of their time at the University. We began in Freshers Week with a session called "How to Make the Most of your Studies". This has been in existence for a couple of years, but we now introduced new material, which could be picked up later in the first year curriculum. Right from the start we wanted students to think about the links between the subjects that they were studying.

Our main initiative in the first year was to introduce learning styles questionnaires into the curriculum. We chose a module called Foundations of Management in which students were expected to start to take an analytical, challenging approach to business and to lose some of their initial

idealistic conceptions. We introduced a lecture on learning styles and reflection. This included both an introduction to theoretical issues and an examination of the relevance that reflection could have on studies and work experience. The lecture ended with input from an employer, a member of the Advisory Panel, giving students some indication of how important reflection was regarded by employers and what they were, therefore, looking for in graduates.

The lecture was supplemented by a series of interactive tutorials. This allowed us to introduce students to a learning styles questionnaire. They enjoyed this participative approach in which they could find out their strengths and weaknesses and discuss this with their colleagues. The session ended by asking them to consider the impact of their findings on the group work that they were in the process of undertaking. At the end of the year we will be able to assess the success of the sessions.

Mentoring

Our second initiative was with second years applying for placements. We wanted to provide them all with mentoring opportunities. The first activity was, therefore, to identify as many mentors as possible. If we were to find mentors for up to 400 students we would have to recruit from all the areas identified at the end of phase one. These included final year students who had just returned from placement, and these were a particularly enthusiastic group who volunteered eagerly for the task. They believed that they would have benefited from such mentoring themselves in the second

year. Although the mentoring is still underway we have already been able to identify informally that these final years are making excellent mentors and their relationship with their second year mentees is being cemented by the closeness of their shared experiences.

The second group of mentors that we have targeted were also identified in our first phase feedback. These were postgraduate students, also studying at our University. By using these students we thought that we could not only expand the numbers of mentors, but also we could provide a benefit for the postgraduate students themselves. Students on the MSc degrees in Personnel Management and Business Administration and the MSc in Work Psychology and Business have been targeted. As part of these programmes students undertake modules that include mentoring, counselling and interpersonal skills. The mentoring scheme is providing an opportunity for all MSc students to have 'real life' experience of these areas and provides an excellent record of achievement to enhance individual's CVs and future career opportunities. The students are also required to compile a reflective learning journal in working towards their membership of CIPD. This scheme, therefore, provides evidence of continuous professional development for professional body membership.

Finally, we went back to our Advisory Panel and asked them whether they would participate and mentor a student. We were grateful for their enthusiasm. Some of them sent us information on their in-house mentoring schemes and the majority of them agreed to be mentors. As, in many cases, they were not located within easy access of the University we had to

find different ways of facilitating contact between mentor and student.

Some students would be able to meet their employer face to face, others would communicate by email or telephone.

All mentors and mentees were given introductory briefing sessions and simple documentation to help their sessions. We had learnt from our pilot phase that our documentation and briefing had been too complex. This time, therefore, each party was given a very simple two page aid memoir. This incorporated the aims of the activity, guidelines on when and how to make contact and questions to guide the meetings. Mentors were given guidance on how to mentor, but the instructions were not prescriptive. We had learnt from phase one that the scheme needed to be focussed but flexible.

We based our instruction to both mentors and mentees on two issues: what is expected of you? and what are the benefits to you? Mentees were told that they must initiate meetings with their mentor, using email, telephone depending on the most appropriate medium. They were given their aid-memoir which gave suggested topics and activities for each of three meetings. At the first mentees would be helped to get to know their mentor. At the second they would discuss CV and interview techniques, and at the final one an action plan for the future would be produced, depending on whether the student had been placed or not. The aid-memoir features some general issues which might help them through the mentoring process, including ethical and confidentiality implications. We hoped that the benefits that we had identified would encourage students to volunteer to be mentored. These included help with the all-important placement search,

networking, encouragement of a more reflective approach and a broader view of their studies.

The mentors had similar instructions. These were presented to them via briefing meetings. The effectiveness of the instructions given was affected by the lack of time it was possible to give to the briefing in busy schedules. Final year students were enthusiastic, they turned up to hour long briefing sessions. The mentors could not visit the University for a briefing, but this disadvantage was overcome by individual telephone briefings, by a useful Advisory Panel meeting where we could check on progress, and by the general professionalism and experience of the employers. The most problematic group were the masters students. Briefings had to be fitted in at the end of lectures and these mentors had the least in contact with the background of the students they mentored. Some felt so lacking in confidence that they asked to mentor in pairs.

Once again the expectations and benefits of the mentoring were explained. Here was an opportunity for some real life experience of mentoring which not all mentors had had. In addition to the satisfaction of helping our undergraduate students, masters students could use the experience for their own reflecting learning journals as part of continuing professional development.

Conclusions

Our project is long term and evolving. We are still undertaking the second phase feedback so how it will evolve next is still under consideration, as is the effectiveness of the recent mentoring activity. It is, however, possible to start drawing some conclusions. These revolve mainly around balancing the amount of work it has taken recruiting and briefing large numbers of mentors and mentees with the added value which both parties have gained. The biggest challenge has been the large numbers involved. For this reason the first year activity has been the most cost effective. We have found a way in which we can introduce students to reflective learning approaches from the beginning of their studies. It is a way which involves employer input and student participation and it comes early enough in their studies to sow the seeds of a reflective approach which can be referred to elsewhere in the curriculum. The mentoring is more problematic. As a concept it is exciting and inviting. As a practical process it is hard to sustain. This year we have 70 mentors and 70 mentees. They continued to be volunteers. We still have not found a way to recruit enough mentors to be able to make the mentoring process compulsory to all 400 students. In fact, it has been hard to find enough mentees for our mentors. On balance, we think it is worth trying next year and this will form the focus of our next project.

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