# Developing students as learners – varied phenomena, varied contexts and a developmental trajectory for the whole endeavour.

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## *Abstract*

This paper is offered as a conceptual map to help 'learning development' to distinguish its various activities and to locate these activities and approaches in relation to pedagogic theory and empirical evidence. It highlights variations in context that have profound implications for what 'learning development' might realistically focus on. The paper also examines parallel developments in 'educational development' over the past 30 years to see if that offers pointers to how 'learning development' might evolve.

**Keywords**: Educational development; Learning development

## *Varied contexts*

When I started working on 'study skills' over 30 years ago the students that I worked with were often adults returning to education with no experience of higher education (at the Open University) or school leavers of limited educational attainment who found themselves, somewhat unexpectedly, in higher education (in Polytechnics and Colleges). Neither could make much sense of what they were asked to do and neither had even basic skills. They could not easily put sentences together to form coherent arguments or even explanations. They did not understand what the subject was that they had signed up to study and had almost no subject matter knowledge that could help them to get going. It was not easy to know where to begin as they were practically starting from scratch, but it was relatively easy to be helpful as almost anything was better than nothing. When I moved to Oxford Polytechnic I

undertook 'study counselling'. When the counsellors based in Student Services decided that a student's problem was not primarily emotional but technical the students were packed off to see me and I had a case load of the confused and the failing to see every week, one to one. These students sat in lectures bemused about what they should be doing, got nothing out of their reading, and rapidly lost heart.

This year I have been applying for a grant to undertake a project to develop students at the University of Oxford and Kings College London as learners. Both institutions have students with strong educational backgrounds and high levels of motivation and academic aptitude. Most are intimidatingly clever and knowledgeable. They do not suffer from significant problems of drop-out or failure. Nevertheless in both institutions it has become clear, through QAA Audit and through internal reviews and feedback from students, that there is scope for providing more support to develop students' ability to cope with the challenging intellectual and academic demands they face, and to develop their sophistication as learners within their academic disciplines. Both institutions have funded extensive internal reviews in recent years (Oxford University Students' Union, 2005; Gibbs, 2005; Yudkin, 2008;  Kings College, 2008) that have identified the problems students experience, have collated examples of existing 'study skills' practices, and have identified this area as a priority for quality enhancement. Oxford has already funded a full time post for a year to undertake a detailed review of current practice and Kings currently has a working group focussing on this topic, feeding in to its 'Kings Graduate' project which will become Kings' Learning and Teaching Strategy.

## *Varied phenomena*

To understand what is going on in these entirely different contexts, and what problems and gaps in provision consist of, it has proved necessary to distinguish different sub-categories of 'study skills', each of which involve different phenomena that require different interventions. Table 1 below is based on a policy paper to the Educational Policy and Standards Committee at Oxford, and illustrates the difference between the focus of learning development efforts in different contexts. Oxford is

currently interested primarily in 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 where my early study skills work focussed on 1, 2, 4 and 8.

## Table 1 Domains of learning and associated processes designed to impact on these domains

|   | Distinct domains of learning to be an effective learner in higher education | Appropriate pedagogical process to develop students |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Basic and generic skills, e.g. written and oral use of English, numeracy, how to organise one's time and organise complex tasks, information and library skills. For some sub-groups of students: use of English as a second language, overcoming dyslexia. | Making rules, procedures and 'tactics' explicit and students practicing these with detailed and immediate feedback. |
| 2 | Meeting conventions and requirements in relation to intellectual property, referencing and plagiarism. | Making conventions explicit, providing exemplars of good (and bad) practice, discussion of practices. |
| 3 | Acquiring subject matter competence that is a pre-requisite for advanced study (e.g. mathematics for Bioscience, statistics for Epidemiology) | Teaching of subject matter, assignments and feedback on the assignments, within the subject area. |
| 4 | Learning to negotiate assessment systems (Snyder, 1971; Miller & Parlett, 1974) e.g. revision tactics, examination tactics. | Discussion of the 'hidden curriculum' in relation to examination questions and criteria; discussion with more experienced students. |
| 5 | Developing a more sophisticated understanding of what learning consists of, and adopting a deep approach to learning (Saljo, 1979; Gibbs, 1983, 1984; Lindblom-Ylanne, 2004) | The assessment system making deep level demands and refusing to reward a surface approach and reproduction. Discussion of exemplars of the learning outcomes of a surface and deep approach. |

| 6 | Developing a more sophisticated understanding of what knowledge consists of and adopting a relativistic epistemological stance (Perry, 1970) | Confronting students with subject matter where there is no one right answer, repeatedly, even when this is confusing, and providing safety and support amidst the disorientation that inevitably follows. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 7 | Becoming a member of a disciplinary community of practice, and able to use the discourse of that community and its forms of argumentation (Northedge, 2003) | Close contact with members of the community – academics, research students, senior undergraduates - and their scholarly products, and seeing how they think, argue, speak and write. Practicing use of the discourse with feedback from members of the community. |
| 8 | Being able to recognise task requirements and respond flexibly to different demands (Gibbs, 1981); internalising standards and criteria (Price et al, 2001); supervising oneself in relation to these standards (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006); self-awareness as a learner and 'meta-learning' (Biggs, 1995; Jackson, 2004). | Reflection on varied learning experiences, highlighting differences between tasks and between students, experimenting with alternative tactics and developing a repertoire. A general focus on process components of learning. |

## *The importance of disciplinary context*

Meta-analysis of educational interventions of all kinds has identified that it is in the domain of changing learners that there is most scope for increasing learning outcomes (Hattie, 1992). But meta-analysis of 'study skills' interventions (Hattie et al, 1996) highlights that these interventions need to be well embedded in the learning contexts that learners are currently facing, as there is little evidence that skills can transfer across contexts, even from a study skills course focussing on learning

process to a parallel course in the same subject focussing on subject content. It is also clear that a focus on technical components can leave the vital underlying approach of students unchanged (Ramsden et al, 1996) whilst interventions embedded in disciplinary contexts and their features do have the capability of changing students' approaches (Norton & Crowley, 1995). Most of what Oxford is currently interested in has to be conducted within disciplines and most of it is undertaken by members of disciplinary communities, ideally students' own tutors. Oxford have completely rejected the idea of a centralised learning development service, and rightly so. I funded students from the Students' Union at Oxford to visit Harvard to look at their Bureau of Study Council, and Princeton, to look at their Writing Centre, and they came back convinced that such generic approaches could not help at Oxford where the place with most scope for development is the tutorial. Princeton have since moved away from generic approaches to writing and instead have training programmes for Teaching Assistants to change the kind of feedback they write on students' assignments so that this changes students' writing. Similarly Kings College have articulated strong arguments for embedding 'study skills' efforts within disciplines, undertaken by disciplinary experts (Wingate, 2006; Wingate, 2007).

So the first message here is that what 'learning development' encompasses a very wide range of activities and objectives and what it might sensibly consist of is extraordinarily context-dependent. It makes little sense to generalise too widely about what learning development *should* consist of.

### The relationship of teaching development to learning development

The list in Table 2 was developed at an international meeting organised by the University of Lund, in 2008, to discuss the question 'How do you change a whole university's teaching and learning?' Lund invited a range of people – some like me had been involved in institutional efforts for many years, some were members of senior management with responsibility for teaching from prestigious universities, some were individuals with specific responsibilities for development of one kind or another, such as learning development for international students, within a particular

university, some were involved with national or international efforts to develop teaching. What came out of this event, for me, was an awareness that most educational development staff tend to focus on just one or two of all the possible levers for change and are not involved at all in most of the others. I suspect this is why many educational development units come and go, gaining and losing political support, funding and staff, and being recombined repeatedly with various other functions or even entirely disbanded. They tend to develop rather narrow preoccupations to the exclusion of all others, and see themselves as the centre of the universe where in fact they are one of many planets circling the phenomena they are dealing with. This egocentrism and narrow preoccupation is often their undoing. You will see in this list that 'developing learning skills' is just one component of one item on the list. Institutions cannot afford to have a separate Centre or Unit, each with its own staff, for every item on the list.


## Table 2 How to develop a university's teaching and learning

1. develop **individual teachers' practice** (training, with a focus on *competence*).
2. develop **teacher thinking**, HoD thinking, PVC thinking, about teaching and learning (education with a focus on *understanding*)
3. develop **teacher motivation** for teaching (appointment criteria, career structures, reward and recognition, engineering more engaging teaching experiences, with a focus on *values and orientations*)
4. develop (local) **communities of practice** (creating facilitative environments for teachers with a focus on the *social context*).
5. develop 1-4 in locally varied, disciple- context- and organisational culture-relevant ways, oriented to **addressing local issues and problems**
6. identify successful **emergent change** and **spread best practice** across the university
7. develop **learning environments** (at the level of programmes) focussing on curricula, in the widest sense, assessment environments, co-ordination between courses, progression, the affective and social environment of learning etc.
8. develop **learning resources** (libraries, e-learning, learning spaces, access to digital resources, laboratories, studios)

9.  develop **students** (attracting better students, developing learning skills, enhancing student engagement, developing clearer career or educational orientations)

10. develop **quality assurance** (course approval, course review, appraisal of teachers, review of support services) so as to have positive influences on teaching development, with a focus on *accountability*)

11. undertake **evaluation** and obtain and interpret evidence, including benchmarking, scholarship of teaching and educational and institutional research, in order to recognise institutional progress and steer future development

12. develop **leadership of teaching** (for course directors, directors of undergraduate study, PVCs teaching)

13. **identify and remove (infrastructure) obstacles** to development and change (such as unhelpful or unnecessarily constraining resource allocation methods, workload allocation methods, promotion criteria, library policy, assessment policy, room allocation systems, quality assurance rules etc)

14. integrate and align several of the above in a co-ordinated **institutional strategy**, and link this to parallel strategies (Estates, Research, Student Support etc) with a focus on *strategic planning* and orient all these towards a **common goal**, with a focus on *corporatism*.

15. **influence the external environment** (e.g. national quality assurance a funding policies) that frame what is possible and institutional priorities, with a focus on *politics*.


### *The evolving nature of educational development – and learning development*

In my career in educational development I have spent time on every single one of these domains of activity, but my preoccupations have changed over time, and in particular from a micro focus on individual teachers and their practice to an increasingly macro focus on programme design, institutional strategy and national policy. The world of 'educational development' that I entered over 30 years ago has been transformed beyond recognition. There were then perhaps 30 people in the UK that had the development of teaching as at least a part of their role and there were no

national or institutional funding mechanisms, or organisations. Today there are literally thousands of people hired full time to work on this issue. Every institution has a funded and staffed centre and everybody trains teachers to national professional standards. There are 24 disciplinary 'Subject Centres', and there is about £100m a year in national funding through one route or another. Institutions that paid no attention to teaching development whatsoever now have comprehensive learning and teaching strategies that affect every department, every degree programme and every teacher. Networks, journals and conferences have proliferated and the 'scholarship of teaching' has increased enormously (though not always the level of knowledge of what is already known). While all this change was going on, educational development transformed itself, gradually going about its business in quite different ways with different preoccupations. Table 3 lists some shifts over time in what educational development has focussed on. These trends appear to be evident in very different higher educations systems in different countries. Each country, institution, and even department, might be at a quite different stage but whatever the local variations, the direction of change seems to be somewhat predictable.

## Table 3 Trends over time in efforts to develop teaching and learning

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Focus on teaching | ➡ | Focus on learning |
| Focus on the classroom | ➡ | Focus on learning environment especially assessment and social characteristics |
| Focus on individual teachers | ➡ | Focus on leadership, teams, programmes, departments, whole institution |
| Small, simple, single component | ➡ | Large, complex, multiple interlinked components operating at multiple levels |
| Separate, isolated efforts | ➡ | Integrated, aligned efforts |
| Change tactics | ➡ | Change strategies |
| Quality assurance | ➡ | Quality enhancement |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Atheoretical | ➜ | Conceptualised, theorised |
| Experiential | ➜ | Empirical/evidence based |
| Psychological underpinnings | ➜ | Social and cultural underpinnings |
| Unscholarly | ➜ | Scholarly |
| Amateur | ➜ | Professional |
| Organisationally peripheral and implementing others' initiatives | ➜ | Part of central team and involved in planning of change |
| Quality focus, improving practice | ➜ | Oriented in new directions involving new practices |
| Context neutral/blind | ➜ | Context sensitive/dependent |

## *Learning development and educational development*

The issue for 'learning development' here is whether there are, already, clear signs of what might shift over time in terms of foci of attention and approaches to the whole endeavour. My guess is that, over time, efforts will have to change from working with individual students to working with teachers, courses, degree programmes and the whole institution, in ways that are aligned with other institutional efforts, as part of a broad strategy, and that these efforts will need to be well conceptualised and backed up with convincing empirical evidence of impact.

For me the big question is whether it would be best for learning development to 'piggy-back' on the existing much larger and more well-embedded 'educational development' enterprise, and piggy-back on its decades of development and institutional integration, or try to carve itself out a separate niche. The former risks losing its distinct identities, preoccupations, and contributions. The latter risks the howling gales of political whim and expediency.

Good luck to you!

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