

Enhancing Study Skills: Developing Self-Help Materials for Distance Learners

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the study skills needs of students studying through distance learning, whether by traditional paper-based courses or via online learning. It identifies the skills that need to be developed and argues for the need for institutions to offer study skills materials in addition to and separate from course materials. It uses, as a case study, the UK Open University's Student Toolkit project which provides both paper-based and web-based study skills resources to support an extremely large and diverse student body. It goes on to outline an extension of this project whereby web-based resources have been built in such a way as to make them both reusable and able to be contextualised for different faculty/departments. It suggests the need for a dual medium, pick and mix approach to the provision of study skills materials which could be replicated by other institutions.

Introduction

Students studying at a distance, whether through traditional paper based courses or via online learning, need to develop study skills in order to be effective learners. This chapter identifies some of those study skills and goes on to explore some of the reasons why institutions should assist them by providing study skills materials independent from course material. It looks in detail at how one distance learning institution, The UK Open University (OU UK), has supported its large and diverse student population by providing both paper and web based self-help resources through its Student Toolkit project.

The Study Skills Needs of Students

Simpson (2002) defines student support within open and distance learning as having two main strands: academic and non academic. Study skills support seems to me to straddle the two. One could argue that cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy are clearly part of the academic, whereas aspects like time management and organisational skills and the skills needed to find ones way around a complex structure are the other end of the spectrum and would fit what Tait (2000) terms as 'affective' qualities that a student needs to develop. So, here, I am defining study skills in its broadest way which amounts to all the generic non-course specific skills that a student needs to develop in order to be an effective independent distance learner.

Students will need to develop different skills at different times in their career; they will also wish to use different methods according to their particular need and learning style. For these reasons, any attempt to help students develop skills must be presented in a highly student centred way.

Many students who are attracted to enrol on a distance learning course will not be traditional young undergraduate or postgraduate students. They may be mature students

(as in the case of the OU UK) or students who, because of geography, mobility or financial constraints, are unable to travel to or attend a campus university. Some of these are likely to have skills gaps. This may be because they are unused to study per se, or that they have little past educational experience, or because the mode of distance learning may be new to them. Whatever the reason, distance learning is less tutor-centred, relying on the student to be more active and take a greater responsibility for organising their own studies. In distance and on line learning where the traditional lecture and seminar is missing, there is a reliance on the written word: the course material is delivered via books or online texts and there is often an emphasis on written assessment as other forms are not available. All these factors lead to an increased need for the development of study skills.

It is easy to demonstrate why competent study skills are essential for the student, but institutions too should have an interest as clearly the success of their students is important to them. Many institutions are trying to draw in more untraditional students through their widening participation strategies. The UK Open University's Strategic Plan, Plans for Change 2002-2012 (2002) includes the following objective: "To increase the successful participation of adults with low previous educational qualifications, those from lower socio-economic groups, and from Black and Asian communities, and those with disabilities" (p. 12).

Once students are in, the institution has a duty to provide an inclusive learning environment which involves the development of the necessary study skills for success. This would be in keeping with Access and Equal Opportunities policies. The institution also needs to retain these students for economic and reputational reasons. Institutions (in the UK certainly) are funded according to numbers of successful students and the 'revolving door' helps neither the student nor the reputation of the institution.

What then are the study skills that students need to develop, apart from those taught within the course? They can be divided into three stages: preparation for study, on course skills and end of course skills.

Before the course starts, students need to develop good time management skills: distance learning courses tend to have a looser structure and many students are studying alongside a job or family commitments. Working out when you can study and how to make best use of precious study time is essential if the student is going to succeed. Good organisational skills are also essential to deal with course materials and administrative matters. Knowing how to get advice, including when and from whom, are skills worth developing as distance learners often have to be their own advocates and need to develop the resourcefulness to do this.

Students may also need to brush up on the more academic skills of effective reading and note taking so as to make the most of the study materials when the course starts. Furthermore, many courses also require data analysis and other numerical skills. Information technology skills of all kinds are needed if the course is online or has online components as increasingly they do today. Such skills as accessing and storing information, communicating with tutors and other students and taking part in online discussions and virtual tutorial groups are required. There are also a range of course specific skills that course authors have defined in their prerequisites for the course. It is important to offer students different methods and techniques so that they can select the

ones that are right for them. It is also advisable for students to address their basic skills needs before the course starts as, once it is underway, the likelihood is that new knowledge and new skills will become the priority.

Once on course, the initial major hurdle can be the first assignment and students may need to develop essay or report writing skills, analytical skills and critical thinking skills to tackle this. Development of these may well be built into the course alongside course specific skills but it is useful to have additional resources to which the struggling student can turn or to which the tutor might refer students. Students often need to be highly motivated at this point so advice on how to keep going through tough times can be useful too.

At the end of the course there may be an extended assignment or project to complete that requires different skills. Alternatively, there might be an exam in which case students will need revision and exam techniques and help in coping with exam stress.

The Student Toolkit Project

To address these issues, the UK Open University (OU UK) has developed a strategy of producing self help student study skills materials both in paper and online through its Student Toolkit project.

The OU UK is a very large open entry distance institution offering its courses via supported open learning. Courses have traditionally been paper based but they increasingly have an online component and many new courses are being developed solely as online courses. The original charter, awarded in 1967, states its aim as to offer higher education to all those who seek it, regardless of educational, social or cultural background. This still stands, although it has moved from the initial undergraduate institution to one which now also embraces access, vocational and postgraduate courses (and therefore has some educational entrance restrictions on some courses). In 2001, the OU UK had 201,786 students taking 224 different undergraduate and 185 post-graduate courses. Students can, on an undergraduate programme choose their own entry point. This means that both course choice advice and adequate skills development are vital. Some students inevitably find themselves on courses for which they do not have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.

The notion of learner support has always been fundamental to the OU UK and this support has been delivered in a variety of ways which have developed over the years: via written materials, web based resources, access to help and advice via telephone, letter and electronic communication and some limited opportunity to attend face-to-face workshops and meetings. All students are allocated to a tutor (a part time member of faculty) who is their first and most important point of contact with the university. The tutor marks students' assignments, offering correspondence tuition as well as assessment; offers help and advice on both the academic content of the course and study related matters by telephone, correspondence both written and electronic; and offers either face-to-face or electronic group tutorials. Behind the tutor there is a whole raft of staff both at the central campus in Milton Keynes or in one of the 13 regional centres scattered across the UK who offer academic and personal support backed up by strong administrative systems.

It is against this background that the Student Toolkit Project was set up in response to the perceived need for generic study skills materials that could be available free of charge on request to the whole range of students. Excellent study skills materials had

been produced by individual tutors, members of support staff and faculty/departments but these were ad hoc and had been produced, often on a shoe string, according to individual enthusiasm and expertise. The intention of the Student Toolkit project was to develop a suite of professionally produced printed materials with an agreed content, overseen by a small steering group drawn from practitioners across the university who could provide a wide range of academic perspectives.

Each Toolkit focuses on a particular study skills area and is designed to complement the work undertaken by regional learning support staff as well as the approaches being taken to study skills by faculty course teams. They are aimed at meeting the needs of students who have a particular gap in their study skills. Each booklet is between 24-40 pages long, begins with a reflective activity for students to assess their current skills, is designed for active learning and contains both tips and practice exercises. Each Toolkit aims to be a starting point not a 'magic wand' and gives suggestions for further reading and study. The titles produced to date are as follows:

- Effective Use of English (1)
- Revision and Examinations (2)
- Working with Charts (3)
- Graphs and Tables; Reading and Note Taking (4)
- Essay and Report Writing Skills (5)
- More Charts, Graphs and Tables (6)
- Maths for Science and Technology (7)
- Learning How to Learn (8)
- Extending and Developing Your Thinking Skills (9)
- Using a Computer for Study (10)

The first four Toolkits were evaluated in a number of ways: by postal questionnaire to a sample of students who had requested one or more of them; a telephone survey of a subset of these; an analysis of the student database to identify the profile of students who had used them; and a survey of how regional support staff had distributed them and integrated them in their study skills strategy.

Feedback from the postal survey (Allen & Woodley, 2000) was largely positive although naturally there were differences in response between the different Toolkits. Overall, 71% of respondents found them quite or very helpful with only 3% finding them unhelpful and only 5% saying that they would be unlikely to recommend them to other students.

In the report based on the telephone interviews, the researcher concludes as follows:

The interviews conveyed how important and valuable the toolkits were to individual students. They appreciated the value and aims of the toolkits. They have found them a confidence boost and students are reassured by the toolkits. ... Students commented that the toolkits let them know that they were on 'the right lines' and felt that the style of writing was simple and easy to understand, although at times took too long to get to the point (Jelfs, 2000, p. 10).

Regional student support staff were also very enthusiastic about the Toolkits as an enabling resource:

Help such as this is long overdue and should definitely be continued.

The Toolkits are very good at instilling confidence in the students.

The Toolkits were useful for filling in the gaps in knowledge and skills for those changing direction within their degrees (Johnson & Barrett, 2003, p. 47).

Web Developments

The original aim had been to produce web-based versions of all the Toolkits alongside the written booklets. However, this did not happen, largely due to the length of time it took to develop interactive websites in comparison with the paper booklets. At the time the project began (1998) there was no recognised procedure for the production of such web-based resources. However, the first two Toolkits were produced in web-based interactive versions and the remaining ones were put on the web as pdf files to be looked at on the web or downloaded and printed. The two interactive sites have since been improved and updated and now sit on the main learning support web-site of the OU UK – *Learning with the OU* (OU, 2002 [secure website]). One of the advantages of the web-based sites is that they contain more interactive practice exercises with immediate feedback. In the usability testing of the Effective Use of English site (Doye & Johnson, 2002) one of the participating students remarked of such activities: “if I had a difficulty I wonder if I am going to know why” (p.12) and all participants felt that they would prefer to get more feedback on what they got wrong.

An extension of the project has now been made possible by the author being awarded a UK National Teaching Fellowship which brought with it funding to undertake a major project. This was to create a model for adapting generic study skills sites to make them specific to particular academic areas. Working with the School of Health and Social Welfare on their level one course, *K100, Understanding Health and Social Care* which attracts large numbers (59% in 2003) of students with low or lowish educational qualifications (defined as having one ‘A’ level or less which is less than the standard minimum requirement for entry into HE) the Effective Use of English site has been adapted by inserting Health and Social Care specific course material and examples into a generic template. In this way the site becomes much more relevant to students on the course. When undertaking the usability testing, students were asked if they would be more likely to use the site if it was more closely related to their particular course. Three out of the four participants felt that the examples of text would be better if related to the course (Doye & Johnson, 2002)

The methodology used for building the web site is that of Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs). These consist of autonomous ‘chunks’ or modules that can be used separately from each other. They are therefore portable and can be used in any number of different learning environments. Each module was ‘tagged’ with metadata which allows the nature and content of each module to be easily identified. This metadata is invisible to the learner. Therefore, for instance, a member of the Science faculty could ‘lift out’ a section on paragraphs from the Effective Use of English site and insert it into an online workshop on report writing, thus moving it to a new learning environment. As well as having this portability, the site has been ‘contextualised’, in this case for Health and Social Care. This process allows different faculties to insert their own text into the ‘chunked’ and meta-tagged learning objects to make it specific for their courses. This site is therefore both a model and a resource that can be used any number of times by

any number of course teams. It is an approach that could be used for adapting other sites and for other academic areas.

Hopefully, the OU UK will develop this idea and instead of each academic area spending time and money on developing their own skills sites they will adapt existing ones using this advanced technology. This will also ensure a standard quality across the university. Certainly, the reaction from the School of Health and Social Welfare has been very positive both from the course team and from tutors. At a recent staff development event for tutors, a regional academic from the School of Health and Social Welfare said: "Having looked at the site I think it is just brilliant – a great resource for both tutors and students alike".

A Possible Way Forward

It would seem that the way forward for a university that is going increasingly electronic is to create study skills materials in dual mode. There will always be a need for paper resources as this suits some students better: it can be more convenient as it is easy to carry around and can be used in a variety of contexts. The web is also not the best medium for reading large amounts of text but it is good for providing shorter chunks of study skills materials and for interactive practice with immediate feedback. Reeves (1997) says that the web "should only be used for the delivery of a learning environment when its unique affordances are appropriate to the needs that have been identified for faculty and students" (p. 3).

A student centred approach would be to build a website which offered students bite-sized chunks of study skills materials so that they could pick and mix according to need and so create a package that is right for them. One possible model would be to have a series of diagnostic tests, followed by 'hints and tips' but with the opportunity to access deeper learning study skills materials as needed. There still needs to be the mix of generic and course specific study skills on offer. Course Teams should develop their own versions of sites such as 'Effective Use of English' and 'Essay Writing' as in these areas it is better to develop skills within the discourse of the subject. However at the more 'affective' end of the study skills spectrum with aspects such as time management and organisational skills it would be better to produce generic materials so that all students of the university have access to the same advice and there is not unnecessary overlap. If we offer students a 'pick and mix' approach, however, then this needs to be backed up by good sources of advice and, ideally, a link to a real person to answer individual concerns

It is also vitally important that we work with the tutors as they are the students' interface with the institution. They need to be made aware of the student materials and also be provided with complementary tutor manuals. These should provide advice in order to help them develop their students' study skills using the materials available. These two sets of resources should be developed alongside each other. The OU UK is at present redesigning both its student and tutor study skills materials to this end. Wherever possible, tutors should be able to take part in staff development sessions, whether face-to-face or virtual, in order to help them use the resources effectively. Good practice in this area should also be shared and disseminated.

Conclusion

Once the full structure is in place, the future is one where the autonomous student uses these resources according to their need and their preference in a way that suits them. By these means, the UK OU can be seen to genuinely support students' study skills development and enhance their learning by offering a dual medium range of materials from which students can pick and mix to create their own self help 'package'. In an increasingly competitive environment, such support can only be beneficial for both the student and the institution. It is hopefully a model that could be replicated by other institutions.

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Appendix

Student Toolkit titles and authors:

Student Toolkit 1: *The Effective Use of English* (Johnson, M. & Goodwin, V.)

Student Toolkit 2: *Revision and Examinations*. (Goodwin, V. & Bishop, J.)

Student Toolkit 3: *Working with Charts, Graphs, and Tables* (Gilmartin, K. & Rex, K.)

Student Toolkit 4: *Reading and Note Taking* (Bates, D.)

Student Toolkit 5: *Essay and Report Writing Skills*. (Manning, E. & Houston, M.)

Student Toolkit 6: *More Charts, Graphs and Tables*. (Gilmartin, K. & Rex, K.)

Student Toolkit 7: *Maths for Science and Technology*. (Gilmartin, K., Laird, H., & Rex, K.)

Student Toolkit 8: *Learning How to Learn* (Coats, M.)

Student Toolkit 9: *Extending and Developing Your Critical Thinking Skills*. (Talley, J.)

Student Toolkit 10: *Using a Computer for Study*. (Macdonald, J. with Gilmartin, K., Clark, W., & Rowney, I.)