

# What are we learning about 'Developing Learning' modules?

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## Abstract

...it is clear that planning how to assess innovation in teaching is as important as developing the innovation itself ... (English & Ihnatko, 1998)

This paper reports on an evaluation of the "Developing Learning" modules which form part of the level one undergraduate curriculum at Nottingham Business School. These modules, which were launched three years ago, broadly support the development of study skills, interpersonal attributes, independent learning, and the transition into higher education and back out into the world of work. This paper does not attempt to discuss whether modules of this kind belong in a business school programme but rather examines what we have learnt about conditions for their successful delivery. Our action research approach encompasses the views of Business School staff, module leaders and students using a combination of interviews, nominal group sessions and discussion.

The main findings are developed into a set of recommendations that stress the importance of links to the rest of the degree programme that can largely be achieved by whole course team endorsement of the module. Ensuring understanding and commitment to the programme from staff teaching on the module and departmental heads was found to be of equal importance. It is also worth noting that our research emphasised the value of these modules in developing a relationship between staff and students. It is important that in these times of increased numbers and lack of personal contact this additional role is not forgotten.

Key Words: Learning-to-learn, undergraduate learning, generic skills, undergraduate innovation.

## Introduction

Most UK higher education institutions offer students some form of support to help them develop as learners. This may be in the form of stand-alone study guides, drop in centres, time-tabled classes or informal advice. National bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for H.E. are increasingly stressing the importance of the need to develop generic skills within degree programmes. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency Benchmark Statement for General Business Management states: "...lifelong learning skills' should be said to include the development and enhancement of a range of general transferable intellectual and study skills..." (QAA for H.E., 2000, 2). The national funding of projects such as the FDTL<sup>1</sup>

*Effective Transferral of Good Practice in Student Support and Guidance for the Development of Transferable Skills* based at the University of Surrey, gives further evidence of the priority currently given to developing learning-to-learn support for H.E. students.

This support can be linked to a specific degree route or offered as a generic resource to all students within a university. Within the first year of study at Nottingham Business School (NBS), the former approach has been taken via the introduction of a 'Developing Learning' (DL) module into each of our undergraduate courses. Developing a module which was often more about process than content proved a more complex undertaking than first anticipated. When the programme was

launched, it was understood that this was the prototype and that following a *thinking, planning, experiencing & reflecting* Learning Cycle would be as important to the teaching team as to the students who were being introduced to these ideas.

The aim of this paper is to report, evaluate and learn about the impact of our own innovation in relation to the introduction of 'Developing Learning' modules at Nottingham Business School (NBS). The design adopted within NBS will be discussed to establish the context. As the authors were closely involved with the modules, an action research approach has been adopted which is explained in detail later in the paper. A wide-ranging review of the perceived effectiveness of the DL modules, from the perspective of both staff and students, will be presented. These experiences will be discussed and conclusions drawn. Finally, recommendations will be made to assist the future development of DL modules.

The wide range of learning-to-learn materials offered on university web sites does not seem to be matched by a similar number of papers reflecting on the success or otherwise of learning-to-learn programmes. Therefore, it seems appropriate to share our findings both internally to staff in our Business School and externally to other similar faculties. In their paper reflecting on an in-context learning support programme, De la Harpe et al (1998, 476) conclude that, "...putting energy into assisting first-year students to develop their learning strategies, while not always easy, is a worth-while investment". The authors of this paper share this view and hope we have learned more about how we can best invest both our staff and student time.

### **Background to the research - Developing Learning modules<sup>2</sup>**

As this study is concerned with what we are calling 'Developing Learning' (DL) modules, it will assist the reader if we clarify what we mean by this term at the outset. Our definition, for the purposes of this study, is:

first year undergraduate level modules designed to develop students' skills and attributes as independent learners and critical thinkers.

Within NBS, such modules have a variety of aims which fall broadly into four main categories.

1. The development of the student as an independent learner and critical thinker.
2. The enhancement of individual study skills such as writing essays and making the most of class sessions and lectures.
3. The development of inter-personal attributes including working with others, presenting and communicating ideas and arguments, and active listening.
4. The provision of support for students during their transition into higher education and back out into the world of work.

This paper does not attempt to track the various elements of the 'Developing Learning' (DL) movement in higher education. We merely note that many H.E. institutions appear to have taken a more structured and robust approach towards the development of the student as an independent learner through the 1990s<sup>3</sup>.

For the academic year 1997/8, Nottingham Business School introduced a module delivered to all first year undergraduates titled 'Developing Learning for Business' (DLB), as a vehicle for developing independent learners. NBS chose to implement the DL idea through what Cuthbert (1998) describes as 'concentrated' modules, in that the 'developing-learning' aspects were focused into a dedicated module rather than the 'distributed' model where such skills and attributes are addressed within *all* modules. This paper does not set out to argue the case for either model and readers unfamiliar with the debate should see Cuthbert (1998) and Drummond et al (1999). However, the differences between these two approaches appear to influence the success of the developing learning initiatives. After a period of debate and reflection within the Business School, it was concluded that the distributed model would not provide sufficient weight within the curriculum for the independent learning attributes that were sought. In addition, it was felt that the distributed model was more difficult to operate in a complex and mass system of higher education, such as that found within the Business School.

Degree Programme Title	Year DL module introduced	Title of DL module	Approximate number of students enrolled on degree programme in 1999/2000
BA Business Studies	1997/98	Developing Learning for Business	340
BA Financial Services	1997/98	Developing Learning for Business	60
BA Quantitative Methods	1997/98	Developing Learning for Business	80
BA European Business Studies	1997/98	Developing Learning for Business (variant since 1998/99)	55
BA Business Information Systems	1997/98	Developing Learning for Business (variant since 1999/00)	80
BA Accounting and Finance	1998/99	Developing Learning in Accounting & Finance (DLAF)	140
BA Business Management	1998/99	Developing Learning for Business & Management (DLBM)	23

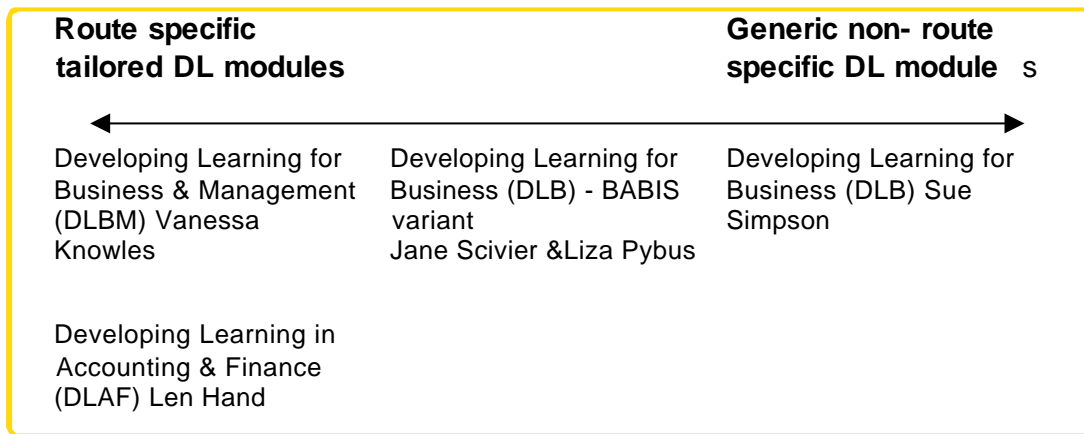
**Table 1 – Summary of Developing Learning Modules**

By 1999/2000 the following DL modules were running across the various honours degree programmes within the Business School. The above table shows that since the development of the original DLB module at NBS, the module has spawned two variants and two degree-specific versions. By the spring of 2000, the Business School had gained several years' experience of designing and delivering DL-type modules — the DLB module, for example, was into a third cohort. Thus, it was an opportune time to evaluate the experiences to date and to consider possible refinements and changes.

Conversations and other anecdotal evidence suggested that there was no consensus about the value of the DL modules. While some students and staff appeared to hold negative views and to have had difficult and/or unhelpful experiences, others remained convinced that the values and ideals espoused within the DL experience were central to the success of the undergraduate programme. Given this

background of changes and the need for evaluation, five of the DL module staff came together to form a working party with the remit of evaluating experiences to date.

As has already been reported in Table 1, the original DLB module had spawned two degree-specific versions, DLBM and DLAF and two degree-specific variants. The degree specific versions were developed both as a result of a new degree programme being validated (DLBM) and from the re-validation of a programme (DLAF); both programmes felt that the generic DLB materials required refinements to meet the specific structural and learning needs of their programmes. All DL modules shared the same learning outcomes but the three validated versions met these objectives in slightly different ways, both in terms of delivery and assessment. The working party spanned the range of DL staff experience within the Business School. It consisted of the module leaders of the three validated versions of DL and two module



**Figure1: Working Party Experience: the DL modules leaders involved**

tutors responsible for the delivery of DL on one of the degree-specific variants.

*Developments elsewhere, and the literature on DL*

As we began to establish our research focus, we were informed by other experiences within the H.E. sector. We asked (via the ISL electronic mailbase<sup>4</sup>) for other experiences of evaluation. We received five responses from UK universities and it was encouraging to learn from this, admittedly limited, search that practitioners in such diverse disciplines as business studies, medicine and geography were interested in the same questions which engaged us. A provisional literature review along with the mailbase search identified some recurrent themes that appeared relevant to our study as follows:

- the need for (successful) Developing Learning modules to be *integrated* into the curriculum (see for example Cuthbert, 1998);
- the need for DL modules to be set within an appropriate *context* which relates to the study area of the course (see for example Ingleton and Wake, 1997, and Barrett, 1999);
- the (false) assumption of *transferability* and the need for reinforcement if transferability of skills is to be achieved and embedded (e.g. Shepherd, 2000);
- the lack of evidence regarding the efficacy of learning interventions (e.g. Norton et al, 1999).

*Our research questions*

Following the literature search and considerable debate within the group, the following research questions emerged as important.

1. What is the awareness, understanding of and commitment to, Developing Learning modules amongst staff who teach on the courses but are not directly involved with the Developing Learning modules?
2. What is our current understanding of the perceived strengths and limitations of the Developing Learning modules in NBS among staff and students?
3. What are the implications of these findings for the future of DL modules within the school?

**Research methodology**

The research followed the tradition of action research, in that practitioners (the module leaders) were seeking improvement to their practice through a process of - *questioning, gathering evidence, reflection, and suggesting change*. We would suggest that good quality action research:

- **has a pedagogic aim**, which embodies an educational ideal; the practitioner uses research into her/his own practice to realise these ideals. In our case, our ideals were about the improvement of students as individual learners;
- **is about change**. This is not research merely for understanding but for improvement through changing practice.

Elliott, for example, claims that: "...the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice..." (1991, 49). In this research we wanted to improve the effectiveness of DL practices within the faculty;

- **brings together teaching and research** into one activity. As Zuber-Skerritt explains (1992,): "Action and practical experience may be the foundations of educational research, and research may inform practice and lead to action". We, as module leaders were acting as researchers on our own practice;
- **gathers evidence about teaching and learning** from different points of view — this is sometimes referred to as 'triangulation. Action research recognises the significance of the viewpoints of all participants in the educational process. Staff, students, and module leaders were the participants who provided evidence for this study;
- **is often claimed to be** (1) collaborative (involving all participants in the educational process), and (2) democratic (allowing the focus of research to emerge from the agenda of the key players rather than being imposed by external parties). For example, Carr & Kemmis (1986) argue that: "...schools and other similar institutions should be run as participatory democracies, with teachers collaboratively reflecting upon, criticising, and improving upon their own practices ...". This study, we felt, fulfilled this ideal in that we were collaborating with colleagues and students and were being democratic, in that the study allowed various participants to draw up their own agenda regarding the value of DL modules. We will also disseminate the findings of the study amongst both staff and students.

Reflecting on this study, our pedagogic aim was about the evaluation of an innovation with a view to further changes and improvements concerned with developing the student as an independent learner. The action research imperative for *change* was, therefore, inherent

within our agenda. The research also represented an example of the ways in which, through action research, the roles of teacher and researcher can be brought together.

### *Evidence and research instruments*

The different points of view and triangulation came by gathering evidence from:

- 15 staff members, who were teaching first year students but *were not* directly involved with any of the DL modules, who were interviewed on a one-to-one basis;
- a focus group of 10 staff responsible for the delivery of the DLB module;
- the views of 14 groups of students who experienced the DL modules during 1999/2000;
- the experiences and views of the working party itself.

We believe the use of such a wide range of viewpoints allows us to claim a level of collaboration within the study. Although the initial brief for the working party was set by an external body within the Business School, we were able to democratise the process by allowing for a changing and emerging agenda as the study progressed.

### *Evidence from staff interviews*

The work of Cuthbert (1998) reports on both research and current thinking which suggest that 'learning-to-learn' and study skills-type intervention have a greater impact on students if they actively link into the rest of the curriculum. This given, the working party conducted interviews with staff responsible for designing and delivering Level 1 curriculum. The aim of the interviews was to capture a range of tutors' awareness of the DL modules, their perception of the impact or otherwise of the said modules on students' performance at the end of Level 1 and the links between what they are teaching at Level 1 and the materials covered in DL. The interviews were conducted with fifteen members of staff, all teaching on Level 1 but *not* responsible for delivering any of the DL modules. The staff members were selected to represent a good mix of subject areas, to include part-time staff

as well as full-time and those with an association with each of the degree awards. With the exception of the newest member of staff, all of those questioned were aware of the existence of the module. They also had some idea of the content, although most were unaware of the career development aspect of the module. In general, there was little perception that the module had had any measurable impact on the development of student skills: only three members of the group were willing to claim some positive improvement since the introduction of this programme. One member of staff commented that the module:

Delivered the majority of its objectives to a minority of its students

and that it:

Needs to 'hit' the majority of both students and STAFF with its values

However, despite no strong feelings that the module has helped students improve, twelve out of the group of fifteen interviewees felt a module of this kind was needed at Level 1 of the programme. One person commented that:

Ideally the DLB skills should be integrated into the other modules but this has the problem of a 'lack of ownership'

There was clear evidence that the range of study skills currently included in the DL programme are required to complete other modules at Level 1 successfully, particularly those of note-taking, presentation, research, referencing and critical analysis. Some interesting suggestions of additional issues that the DL modules might address were also offered:

- motivation for working in groups;
- moving students from spoon fed to independent learners;
- encouragement to cross boundaries; to see that module content crosses over between modules;
- research skills including understanding the nature of evidence;
- the need to teach students about the culture of Higher Education including our values and our norms.

As a further measure of possible impact of the DL programme, tutors were also asked what they saw as the strengths and weaknesses of

student skills at the end of Level 1. A significant number mentioned good presentation skills, which is a key focus of the DL modules but few other skills were positively identified. A considerable number of our sample perceived the skill of referencing as weak despite the inclusion and emphasis of this skill in all DL modules. General weakness in the areas of numeracy and literacy also received significant attention. These issues were signalled as important in the course of many interviews, although it was accepted that there was little one module could do to address these fundamental problems.

So what messages can we draw from our interviews with staff? It seems that most staff accept that there is a place for modules of this nature, although in an ideal world one may like to see the content distributed throughout the degree programme. There is clearly work to do in terms of ensuring that all Level 1 staff have a comprehensive understanding of the underpinning philosophy and content taught on DL modules. If the non-DL tutors are armed with this knowledge, they can then support the development of DL skills. This can be achieved by tutors creating opportunities, within their own modules, for students to practice, rehearse and receive feedback on the full range of DL skills. For example, the skill of referencing is one that only develops through constant practice and cannot be adequately absorbed as a one-off activity.

A general issue on which many staff commented was the perception that a significant number of the student population was of a lower standard today than five years ago. This weakness exhibited itself most noticeably in relation to low levels of literacy and numeracy. Such fundamental issues as these cannot be addressed by DL modules. However, DL modules may have a diagnostic role to play, in helping students to identify their weaknesses and supporting their use of additional resources to develop in these areas. For example, students could be directed to CBL packages and central learning support by DL tutors.

The learning-to-learn role of the module seems to be of importance to many staff in terms of helping the transition from school to university and there seems to be scope for developing

this area further. At least one member of staff saw these modules as a “Key mechanism for developing ‘relationships’ between staff & students”.

It is important in these times of increased numbers and reduced personal contact, that this role is not forgotten.

### *Evidence from Developing Learning tutors*

Two of the researchers met with ten tutors who were teaching on the Developing Learning for Business module (both generic and variant versions). During a two-hour focus group session, in addition to detailed discussion of operational issues, the following messages emerged:

This module was valued by students who attended and participated. Such students usually demonstrated maturity in their approach and a commitment to engage with the spirit of the module.

The structure of the module gives room for much formative feedback to be given to students. Staff reported evidence of students listening and responding to this guidance; examples included: “reworking material in light of comments”; “developing their ability to present to the group “ and “moving to a better understanding of the requirements of an academic essay”.

Paradoxically, but not unexpectedly, those most needing further development of transferable skills were often the least likely to attend regularly.

A number of staff reported problems with attendance, particularly during an inter-semester period where this was the only module scheduled. Most staff identified that a number of the weaker students were missing on a regular basis. The staff who had a more proactive policy of chasing up absences seemed more likely to have full attendance.

I don't have any problem with attendance, but from the start I emailed any student who was missing saying “I noticed you were absent from our session today, is everything alright?”

Those courses having a dedicated DL team, thus providing a clear course focus, provided a more convincing delivery of DL values. In addition, having colleagues with whom to share experiences helped with staff development within the module.

As this module aims to support students through their learning across the degree programme, staff need a high level of understanding of the content and structure of each course to help this happen. After a few years of operating within a modular system, most staff admitted to *having gaps in their knowledge* and, therefore, being less able to make relevant links to each module. Staff working within a small DL team were able both to pool this type of knowledge and discuss the approach they planned for each session.

### *Evidence gathered from students*

Evidence from students was captured via a series of seminar group sessions based upon the ‘nominal group technique’ (NGT). In brief, the essence of NGT is that the participants (here the students) set the agenda and raise matters that appear to be important to them, *not* working to a pre-set agenda. This is initially as individuals and then views are collated and voted upon. This technique is well discussed by O’Neil (1983), where he describes its helpfulness in drawing out all members of a group to solve a problem or at least identify key issues. Although qualitative responses initially emerge from the participants, the NGT structure and voting system bring an element of quantification to the methodology.

The feedback sessions were held within the normal time-tabled DL seminar group slots – i.e. those that met naturally rather than being specially arranged evaluation meetings.

The brief for the groups was very open, and the tutor/facilitator acted merely as a recorder of data generated by the group. Although there was some variability in the conduct of the sessions, in general each followed the following pattern:

Following a brief introduction from the tutor explaining the need for staff to gather evidence and to reflect on the DL module, students were asked to identify any positive and negative aspects of the module that they could bring to mind – this was a private exercise. In some cases, a subset of the exercise, students were asked to reflect on their whole-year experience, with the DL module. A group list was then compiled and clarification and merging of topics allowed.

This approach was carried out across four of the DL modules with a total of 14 groups (6 BAAF, 3 BABIS, 4 BABS, 1 BABM). Two researchers (for BAAF and BABM) took a course-wide view where the students were left to raise DL issues if they were important within their course experience. The other three researchers (BABIS and BABS) asked the students for feedback on the DLB module only. More time was available for these groups to raise issues concerning the content and delivery of DLB. What we do not know is whether DLB would have been identified as a significant part of their course experience had we asked them to take a wider view. The findings are summarised in Table 2.

### **Comments on students' feedback from group sessions**

Table 2 summarises both the research methods that were applied and indicates the sample size. It also offers an overview of the students' experience, the most valued aspects of the modules and areas that require development.

The findings reported in Table 2 signal a number of important issues. DLBM (the smallest cohort) received very positive feedback, whilst the generic form of DLB (the largest cohort) gained generally poorer acceptance from the students. However, the other degree-specific module, DLAF was not as well received as DLBM, with many of the Accounting students appearing relatively indifferent. The BABIS students taking the 'slightly' amended generic DLB module offered a mixed response. Overall, the most positive response was reported by the BABM students. This group raised and praised the DL module within their overall course experience; this could not be said for any

other programmes. The findings raise several questions: what factors are influencing the students reported experience? Is it a function of size and complexity of the teaching team delivering the module and/or degree programme? Does it relate to level of integration between the DL module and other Level 1 modules? Are responses influenced by the student's perceived and actual immediate need to apply what is taught on DL? Do students studying different degree programmes within the Business School, arrive pre-conditioned to respond differently to modules that focus on process over content?

At a more detailed level, the students' responses did signal reservations about the DL modules. In particular, the lecture programmes in DL were not very popular, except where they were interactive. This issue needs addressing across all the DL modules. Here we merely note a contradiction: didactic delivery does not naturally encourage independent learning. However, it is important to note that many aspects were valued. These included: the encouragement to be independent, work-preparation and work-related activities, induction, development of group and team work skills, presentation skills and regular contact with a member of the course team.

### *Evidence gathered from the module leaders*

The five tutors who authored this paper also provided important evidence about the DL modules. Each tutor had been deeply involved in the design and delivery of one of the versions of the DL modules operating within the faculty. The evidence of our own experiences was, we believed, significant for the study.

This evidence was captured through a series of working group meetings at which we discussed our experiences. As module leaders we felt uniquely able to identify ingredients within our DL modules that either helped or hindered the success of the module. The overwhelming view was that the most successful module falling within the DL cohort was that taught on the BA in Business Management and the least successful was the generic module taught across a range of

	DLB (generic)	DLB(BABIS Variant)	DLAF	DLBM
Perspective taken by the researcher	Module- specific	Module-specific	Course-wide	Course-wide
Number of Students surveyed for purpose of research	45 in 4 groups	35 in 3 groups	57 in 6 groups	18 in 1 group
Number of Degree Programmes taking module	3 (BABS, BABQ, BAFS)	1 (BABIS)	1 (BAAF)	1 (BABM)
Number of Students enrolled/Seminar Groups taking module	480 in 24 groups	80 in 4 groups	140 in 8 groups	22 in 1 group
General View of DL Module	Committed students appeared to see the value. A large minority did not see the link into the rest of the degree programme, nor why they should do it.	Most saw the value, but some thought there was time wasted	Little criticism, but little outstanding praise either! Many students engaged fully, but too many did not!	Very positive view - a clear understanding of the value and purpose of the module.
Top Requested Changes	No lecture programme - more individual contact - less group assessment	More relevant lecture programme - less role play - better synchronisation between module timings	Not much agreement, but separate IT module and fewer DL lectures mentioned	None
Most Valued Aspects of DL	Placement preparation Group work	Placement preparation - team work - skills - presentation skills - contact with BABIS tutor	Encouragement to be independent - world of work special week - induction week	Most aspects!

**Table 2: Student Feedback Process and Outcomes**

degree programmes. In our meeting, we attempted to capture our individual perceptions of our own modules across a range of issues in order to establish the major contrasts between the modules. They are summarised in Table 3 which suggests that there is significant variability in some structural areas pertaining to the delivery of the modules. In particular, it is believed that the issues of numbers, tailoring and ownership of the module are influencing factors. These issues are elaborated in the points below.

- Commitment from course team, course leader and head of department in espousing the ideals of learning-to-

learn. Unless the DL module has a high level of acceptance throughout the department and course, it is unlikely to succeed. The values of DL require reinforcement throughout students' experiences within other modules and at other levels, not merely as an add-on in DL at Level 1.

- Where a DL module was seen by ALL staff as central to the curriculum and was referred to and used by other modules within the same degree programme, it was likely to have a better chance of success. Other modules must create

the opportunity for students to practice, rehearse and receive feedback on their ongoing skills development.

- Allocation of the 'right' staff to the module and keeping the key delivery team relatively small, at least initially. Not all tutors feel comfortable facilitating learning-to-learn work and the skills required are not shared by all staff. However, there was evidence that the DL modules were sometimes used as 'make-weights', in that staff were allocated only because they had spare time, not because they necessarily were suited to this form of teaching and learning.
- Where the DL module had been tailored to the specific needs of the degree programme, the experiences were generally better than for DL modules that were generic.
- Where students understood and could see a relatively immediate relationship between the content and process of the DL module and their other studies and placement/work experience, there was a better chance of success. Those students on the DLBM module would only complete the Level 1 experience before they entered the work environment.

	DLB	DLB(BABIS Variant)	DLAF	DLBM
Tailored to specific degree programme/Generic	Generic	Semi-Tailored	Tailored	Tailored
Module meets its intended learning outcomes	Limited Success	Partial Success	Partial Success	Meets Objectives in Full
Number of degree programmes delivered to	3	1	1	1
Number of Students	480	80	140	22
Perceived centrality of module to the degree(s) it serves by other members of staff	Low	Medium	Medium	High
DL module delivery staff's familiarity with degree Programme	Low	High	High	High
Number of staff involved with the delivery of all level 1 modules for degree programme(s)	100	30	24	12
'Non DL staff's' understanding/ownership of DL module core values	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
How surprised might an average student be to see a DL module?	Not Very	Not Very	Quite	Not at All

**Table 3: Module Leaders Self Reported View of their DL module across a range of issues**

- Ensuring that teaching materials were of the highest calibre and delivered at the appropriate time. It was felt that using high quality and **timely** materials had a positive impact on both the delivery staff and students' perception and the value that they placed on this type module.
- That when the materials were appropriately delivered, the time spent engaged with the content offered a useful vehicle for establishing and developing meaningful relationships between staff and students. This factor helped foster the understanding of shared values and norms within the H.E. framework.

### Discussion and reflections

The most successful DL model within NBS appears to be DLBM but this involves far more contact hours than DLB. It is very tightly linked to the needs of the rest of the programme, taught by someone who is very close to the degree programme and involves a small well-knit group of students. In addition, the module leader admits to investing far more time in the delivery of the module than the hours that are allocated to her timetable. This type of personal subsidy is possible in the context of one group of students but some staff teaching on DL modules are responsible for a number of groups. In the context of our more usual, larger scale degree programmes, is it possible to draw from the time-intensive best practice of the BABM model? We would argue that there are some characteristics which can provide learning points for our larger courses: the strong links with the wider course, the commitment of staff and the well-structured programme.

It seems fair to say that the BABIS, BAEB and BAAF courses have already acted on these points: each of these degree programmes has taken the generic version of the DL module and have started to shape the content to suit the needs of their course. In each of these versions, the staff teaching on the module have a strong sense of course identity and are, therefore, able to reinforce the links to the rest of the degree. These staff also have a fairly strong belief in the value of the module and, therefore, signal the benefits to students.

A number of difficult staff issues occur within the generic DLB module. Management of the module has always been very difficult and we question whether this model of one module leader for such a large, complex module is appropriate. Currently, any economies of scale are detrimental to the development of the relevance of the module to specific degree routes.

### Conclusions

Our research set out to explore the awareness and understanding of and commitment to Developing Learning modules among staff and the perceived strengths and limitations of the Developing Learning modules in NBS among staff and students. We have discovered that there is work to do (1) in increasing staff awareness of the content of the modules and (2) in the reinforcement of the DL skills within the context of their own modules. Most NBS staff accept that there is a need for modules of this nature, although most admit that integration with each degree course is important.

It seems that the timing and linking of modules such as DLBM to the world of work is crucial in helping students to realise the importance of personal development *per se*. At the same time, implementation is critical; whatever the design of DL modules, if they are not backed up by rigorous processes they can fail. We need to ensure that the course aims/ideals we espouse are actively pursued — in other words we should not just pay lip service to the values of DL. The staff who teach on the modules need to be enthusiastic about the philosophy, aims, objectives and learning outcomes of the module — this will then flow into the delivery.

Course team ownership appears to be important, including management support by the allocation of the 'right' staff and support of some staff training and development. There is sometimes an assumption that anybody can teach this type of module, which is not the case. Best practice seems to develop from a dedicated team of staff, who are willing to pool their skills and ideas.

Student feedback shows us that when well implemented these modules do provide valuable developmental support; the paradox

is that the very students who most need the support will not always embrace the opportunity and may find it hard to see the value of these modules. It seems that the importance of regular personal contact with a member of staff who is interested in a student's progression on the course should not be underrated. However, we cannot assume that after delivery of these modules at Level 1, students will automatically have identified with the notions of continuing professional development and lifelong learning to the extent that it carries through for the following three years. There is a clear need for improvement in the way we re-emphasise the development of skills throughout the curriculum at Levels 2 and 3.

What then are the implications of these findings for the future of DL modules within the sector? We now offer our recommendations at three levels (1) course and module, (2) Faculty and (3) in relations to the development of future research.

### *1. Recommendations – for course and module leaders*

In terms of redevelopment of the DL modules the following operational measures would clearly help both the credibility of such a module and/or the student experience:

- setting high standards and being demanding of students' performance, informing students of the culture of Higher Education including our values and norms;
- building in some interaction of tutor and student *on an individual basis*;
- reassessment of the lecture programme and its objectives;
- development of student understanding of the nature and requirements of work in groups;
- providing a course-wide view to encourage students to cross boundaries and see that module content overlaps;
- considering using DL in a diagnostic way to address individual student weaknesses for example literacy and numeracy.

### *2. Recommendations – for Faculty*

- Delivery of the module must be assigned to core staff who are committed to the DL concept. They must feel at ease with delivering modules that are as much about process as content. They must also 'own and understand' the norms and values of the specific degree programme for which they deliver the module. This will enable them better to represent the degree programme and help make the connections between modules for students.
- Heads of Department must demonstrate that they value the DL ideal by active support through: the allocation of appropriate staff with adequate time allowances; support for module leaders and the provision of staff development. This will send positive signals regarding the values placed on Developing Learning and help to ensure competent delivery of high quality teaching materials, which exceed the expectations of both staff and students. Delivering (for staff) and taking (for students) this type of module must be perceived to be a privilege.
- Wider integration of the DL objective is necessary into the rest of the undergraduate programme. Those responsible for the design and delivery of all undergraduate modules must be aware of the objectives underpinning DL and explicitly incorporate them into their modules. This would ensure better integration of the DL aims across a degree programme and encourage the iterative practice and feedback for specific techniques.

### *3. Recommendations – development of future research*

This piece of work developed from the working parties' genuine desire to improve its practice. Many of the above recommendations have been actioned since the paper was first reported in July 2000 (Hand et al, 2000) but this is an ongoing process and the working party is preparing to evaluate those changes that have been made for this current academic year 2000/2001. Some areas relating to this study seem worthy of further investigation.

- **Mapping of skills throughout a degree programme.** This study has focused on the first year of an undergraduate programme; the exploration of generic skills development over the three/four years of a degree route would be useful. This relates well to a number of current QAA initiatives.
- **Small scale case studies of individual student experience.** This paper focused on the group-based student view. It would be interesting to explore the impact of DL module intervention on particular students' approaches to study during both the first and subsequent years.
- **Staff-student relationships.** Informal conversations suggest that relationships developed between staff and students within these modules improved the teaching and learning environment. It would be useful to take a closer look at the interpersonal and social role of DL modules.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> FDTL: Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning. For more information on this initiative see [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1998/98\\_34.htm](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1998/98_34.htm).

<sup>2</sup> In the UK, at the time of writing, the term 'module' referred to a subject being studied within one academic half-year or year. Within this business school, students can take a mixture of whole year-long modules running between September and May, worth 20 credit points and half-year long, 10 credit point modules. Undergraduates would typically take between six and twelve such modules, each valued at either 10 or 20 credit points to provide the 120 credit points for one year's study. The specific programme of study would be dictated by the degree programme on which the student had registered.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of the way in which particular institutions have approached the issue of developing students as independent learners, see, English (1998), Cuthbert (1998) and Ingleton & Wake (1997)

<sup>4</sup> The ISL mailbase (Improving Student Learning) is an international electronic

mailbase shared between practising academics and staff developers within Higher Education.

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