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PRACTICE PAPER

Reflecting upon Curriculum Change in Sports Studies: Developing a Research Methodologies Unit

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Abstract

The following paper is a reflective analysis of the development of a new Research Methodologies unit on an undergraduate Sports Studies programme at an Institute of Higher Education in the South of England. Drawing upon an action research approach it critically reflects upon the first year of teaching this module. It highlights some of the problems faced in developing independent learning strategies amongst students and considers some of the barriers to undertaking research.

Keywords: research methods, independent learning, curriculum

Introduction

The following paper focuses on the introduction of a new Research Methodologies (RM) unit on an undergraduate Sports Studies programme. It is an interpretive, reflective analysis that utilises qualitative data collection methods as a means of 'telling the tale' (Van Maanen, 1988), adopting an Action Research (AR) approach to the subject, and reflecting upon the process of curriculum change. AR is inquiry or research in the context of focused efforts to improve the quality of an organisation and its performance. It can generate genuine and sustained improvements in education as it offers new opportunities to reflect upon and assess teaching and curriculum content. It also provides the means to explore and test new ideas, methods, and materials, and to assess how effective the new approaches are (Calhoun, 1994). When AR is used it has the potential to increase the amount learnt from the research experience. The AR cycle can also be regarded as a learning cycle (see Kolb, 1984). Within this, it is important to reflect upon our experiences for, as Schön (1983, 1987) suggests, systematic reflection is an effective way for practitioners to learn.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 17), the prime goal of research is the production of knowledge. Like Dey (1993: 15), the author's preference is to view data as something that is

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'produced' rather than 'collected', as this acknowledges the role of the researcher within the process. Research can be viewed as an enabling process that effectively watches and monitors the obtaining of new knowledge.

Research is an emergent, developmental process, about which there has been much debate. The interest in this debate stems largely from Thomas Kuhn's (1970) work, which provides an historical appraisal of scientific development. The central tenet of Kuhn's thinking is that generations of researchers adopt a particular paradigm, and engage in their scientific work, until enough conflicting data force a 'paradigm shift'. The term 'perspective' as opposed to 'paradigm' is used here as this is a less well-developed system than the latter, and can be more easily moved between (see also, Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Background to the project

Research Methodologies had previously been taught as a ten credit (half) unit over the course of one semester. Feedback from students in Year 2 undertaking the module, and from students in Year 3 who had completed their research projects, together with the opinions of staff within the School, were solicited to consider increasing the weighting of the RM unit to a 20 credit unit. Alongside this development, and using a similar rationale, the final year research project was increased from 20 to 40 credits (with a later hand-in date).

With the numerous changes taking place in Higher Education (HE), and the move from an elite system to one of mass HE, it has been suggested that the whole HE experience of many students today is markedly different from that of previous generations (Gordon, 1995). As well as the many lifestyle changes that have been influenced by factors such as the introduction of tuition fees and the like (Harris and Ide, 2000), the whole process of learning has also altered a great deal in many areas. In response to this change in the learning process, researchers have looked at conceptualisations of learning and highlighted a number of the tensions within contemporary HE (e.g. Bourner, 1997; Biggs, 1999; Entwistle, 2001; Parker, 1997).

Degree courses in sport and leisure witnessed exponential growth during the 1990s to the extent that there were stated fears of an over supply of sport and leisure graduates (SPRITO, 1995). Students who embarked upon the degree course discussed here come from a number of different backgrounds, although many have not achieved particularly good A-level grades, and a number come from vocational courses such as General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) programmes. Sometimes these students may need more assistance in understanding referencing and essay writing skills, given that they could have been more used to report based work and writing in a different style. Many students are also quite instrumental in their learning, and are not interested in the learning process, but just in the end results (Biggs, 1999).

Conceptualising research

Research is a much-misunderstood concept. Sessions undertaken at the start of the Research Methodologies (RM) module highlighted a collective fear amongst the cohort of having to go out and research an area. This reflects the findings of Lane, Devenport and Horrell (2004) who discovered similar results in their study. Concerns ranged from the pressure of 'having to do it yourself' (Joe) to 'not being told whether I'm doing the right thing' (Jane). These comments support the work of I'Anson and Smith (2004: 29) who note that 'many students find the choice of research topic not only intellectually challenging but also an isolating experience'. It seemed from initial discussions that many of the students did not consider themselves able to competently undertake a Research Project in Year 3 of their course.

Early sessions attempted to break down some of the barriers that students had with regard to the whole research process. Research was put forward as an enabling process and the chance for the individual to spend time working on something that most interested them. Students were introduced to the idea that research is 'produced' rather than 'collected', which acknowledges the role of the

researcher within the research process. One of the first major obstacles was trying to get students to understand the importance of having to read in order to undertake research. In the early seminar sessions many claimed that they had rarely been to the library. Whilst some of these comments may have been a means of 'showing off' or trying to gain recognition in the group, the struggles faced by many students in using academic journals demonstrated that perhaps they were genuinely telling the truth. Early sessions highlighted an apparent reluctance, or possibly fear, of taking some responsibility for individual learning.

Barnett (1994) envisaged a key feature of HE as being the development of reflective students able to form and substantiate independent thought and action in a coherent fashion. In this sense, concern is with higher cognitive development and providing experiences for students that encourage systematic reflection, development of a questioning outlook, and a continuous reappraisal of their own learning. Early seminar sessions in this module focused upon trying to reframe notions of research methodologies and attempting to open up the many possibilities that the subject presented. Much attention was also given to the fact that RM was not a stand-alone module, but the basis for work to be undertaken for the final year project.

Attempting to hold the students' attention early in the unit also proved to be a challenging task. In consultation with the other member of the unit teaching team, as many 'hands-on' practical exercises as possible were included early on in the module. Following the lecture on Interviewing, for example, students were put into pairs and asked to undertake certain tasks in accordance with Whyte's (1982) hierarchy. Feedback at the end of the module, through unit questionnaires, highlighted that the students found the practical learning most enjoyable and beneficial. Within these questionnaires, suggestions from students as to how to improve the unit included use of more practical exercises.

Bourner (1997) suggests that the learning aims of HE should encompass aspects such as: the dissemination of up-to-date knowledge; developing the student's ability to generate ideas and evidence; and developing the capacity of students to plan and manage their own learning. The prime focus within this is to encourage students to be responsible for, and in control of, their own learning (see also Zuber-Skerrit, 1992). The aim of the RM unit is best understood as developing a particular 'approach to learning' (Marton and Saljo, 1976). The very nature of a final year undergraduate project requires developing a deeper approach to learning, which entails active engagement with the subject of study, leading to extensive elaboration of the learning material, whilst seeking personal understanding. Such an approach also purports to encourage the concept of independent learning; an integral feature of the institution's teaching and learning strategy.

Problems and the lessons learned

Reflecting, and analysing, the development of this module highlighted some promising results. Attendance at both lectures and seminars was excellent throughout the first part of the course and most students seemed to actively engage with the subject. Small group discussions undertaken during the year highlighted a general satisfaction with the unit, and this was supported in end of unit questionnaires. However, attendance at lectures and seminars declined just before the main assignment deadline. This was attributed to the fact that the students had a number of assignments due for submission over a three-week period. Of far greater concern was the number of students who booked appointments with tutors less than three days before their assignment was due in, clearly struggling to decide on a topic for their proposal. Despite positive feedback, plenty of pestering from the course team, excellent attendance and good seminar contributions, few students had actually started their work. Many wanted and (perhaps more worryingly) expected answers 'on a plate'. Had they not grasped the notion of 'independent learning'? Or was it the case that they had not been prepared sufficiently? Having read more around teaching and learning strategies (e.g. Badley, 1999; Crumbley et al., 2001; Entwistle, 2001), the author became much more aware of notions such as 'selective learning' and 'learning to assessment'. Within this context independent learning must have been more of a shock to many students than first envisaged.

Overall grades for the written research project proposal were low. Towards the end of the course, small group (3 – 4 people) discussions were undertaken with a number of students to discuss their performance and the lessons learned from RM. A large proportion of the students highlighted that having a number of assignments due for submission close together had clearly influenced the time and effort that they had put into the RM assignment. This was despite the fact that all assignment questions were handed out at the start of the year, more than four months ahead of the main assignment submission. The majority of students had viewed the experience as a sharp learning curve with comments such as, 'I now know I really do have to start my dis on time' (Mark) and 'I didn't think it would be that hard' (Steve).

The discussions with small groups of students towards the end of the year highlighted both a selective learning to assessment (across modules), and a conscious time commitment to time afforded by students to each individual course module. Many positive aspects were also uncovered. For example, a number of students pointed to the fact that they did not know just how much information was available in the library and the type of information that could be found: 'I found loads of stuff on football in things I didn't even know we had' (Sam); 'I think that I will be able to do a really good project now that I know a bit more about what university should really be' (Dave).

Some of the student feedback referred to here may have been merely a case of the students saying what they thought was wanted. However, External Examiner reports from the following year singled out the research projects as being an area that was much improved. External recognition was certainly a pleasing aspect and was confirmation that moves made were in the right direction. Informal discussions with some of the students, who had progressed through the first RM course and onto the research project, also provided much positive feedback.

Some reflections

Reflecting upon the development and delivery of the unit has been an enlightening experience. The various pressures placed upon lecturers' today means that time for reflection and contemplation are few and far between (see Davis, 2003; Kuit, Reay and Freeman, 2001). Ironically this lack of reflective time is sometimes cited as a reason for the changes in learning strategies amongst students in contemporary HE. Despite many pointers that we were progressing in the right direction, perhaps the biggest mistake made was not fully grasping the differences in learning approaches by students. Having to actively engage in independent learning was a massive step for many students particularly when measured against their high school experiences and some of the more vocational units on their degree programme. As I'Anson and Smith (2004: 30) note:

“The project or dissertation is an accepted and well-regarded assessment tool, however, given the pressures on students, staff and universities from the external HE context, attention must be focused on how best to support and develop this crucial introduction to the research experience and major component of the final degree classification.”

Focusing on developing these skills and fostering an understanding of research early on in any degree programme would seem to be an important part in preparing students for this task. Yet, as our experiences have shown, it is also crucial that some aspect of independent learning is incorporated into this. As Barr and Tagg (1995) noted, there is also a need for educators to themselves acknowledge and move beyond a purely instructional paradigm towards a learning paradigm that encourages students to construct knowledge for themselves.

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