

Linking Teaching and Research

This paper reports the focus group discussion convened prior to the LTSN22 steering group meeting on Wednesday 22nd January 2003. The purpose of the session was to establish an outline view of the issues relating to engaging students within LTSN22 subjects in research within their programmes of study. Research undertaken by John Tribe as part of his pedagogic research project (http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/events/200902_report.html#50) identified lack of student reading as a current concern of tourism staff.

There is extensive national and international debate about the links between research and teaching. Concern for individual staff and course teams focuses on managing the process of the link within programmes of study. Strong linkages are already made within subject courses, although the multi-disciplinary nature of hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism subjects creates a complex arena in view of the different modes of enquiry adopted within the different disciplines often involved in subject courses. The issues identified in discussion were:

Accessible and Credible Resources

There is an immense amount of information available to students via the Internet. As a result, students are increasingly using the Internet as a key resource for their research. For example, search engines, such as Google, provide instant access to extensive resources. This raises an issue regarding the credibility of the sources that students are using, and so the need for students to become discerning and evaluative of the sources that they find. For example, if the resource is free, is it likely to give unbiased and credible information?

The use of the internet for research by students may also be influencing student language in essays and assignments where there is possibly a trend towards using 'web-speak,' rather than a more conventional academic style of writing.

There is some reluctance amongst publishers currently to publish Phd theses. In order to support the availability of research there are opportunities to increase the publication of research by focusing on clear links within publications between policy, research and context.

On-line databases have undoubtedly opened up access to research articles and moves are being made within hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism subject areas to increase the availability of resources and support for research. See for example, the Round 2 pedagogic research project to develop a research gateway being undertaken by Drs Kay and Robinson at <http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/projects/ltsnfunded.html>, and the subject specialist guide of Paul Brunt at <http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/projects/specialists/brunt.html>. Although within there is often still a lack of on-line resources for use by students.

Assessment

Assessment is often the key driver of student study effort. Thus it is necessary that the tasks set reflect the desired learning outcomes to be achieved by students. These are likely to include the identification and critical evaluation of sources within essays and assignments. The learning outcomes and assessment criteria can be used within assignments to draw attention to the need for research by students in undertaking their assignments. In order to encourage understanding of what is expected from students, first year tasks may benefit from being prescriptive and provide detailed information on what is expected, in terms of the type of resource which is suitable and also the way in which critical evaluation of these is undertaken. In submitting proposals for dissertations students could be encouraged to ensure that they are aware of and report on the key authors within their chosen topic area. This requirement ensures that students demonstrate a grasp of current thought within their chosen subject area prior to undertaking further work for their dissertation.

Inquiry based learning

The Boyer Commission report, (<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/>) which outlines a proposed approach of delivering an effective nexus between teaching and research in American research led universities, promotes the adoption of inquiry (or problem) based learning. This creates two dilemmas in first year education within the mass higher education system in which we operate. Firstly, in order to achieve an inquiry based approach in the first year with a large number of students, it may be necessary to provide detailed guidance to students regarding the tasks to be undertaken, perhaps in the form of a workbook, and this may in essence demand a more prescriptive approach and thus counter the objectives of an inquiry based learning. Secondly, the move to an inquiry approach may not be feasible with first year student cohorts due to the diversity of starting points of the students, and the need to ensure a common knowledge base in core theories and concepts within course.

Further information relating to examples of institutions adopting problem based learning can be found at the University of Maastricht, Netherlands on the philosophy <http://www.unimaas.nl/algemeen.asp?id=7AVPDB2H54R7D6660BA5> or the Queen's Univerisy, Canada for further sites and links <http://meds.queensu.ca/medicine/pbl/pblhom10.htm>

Approaches to Learning

Two accepted models of learning are the behaviourist and cognitive approaches to learning, these recognise that different individuals may learn in different ways, and may adapt their approach according to the given situation. Cognitive learning is often associated with the interpretation of information in the light of prior information or knowledge. Whereas the behaviourist model recognises that learning takes place in the light of experience and responses to stimuli. In academic study students are required to interpret information and form an opinion or argument using critical evaluative skills. In supporting them to do so, we need to lead them through this process from Level 1 studies onwards in order that they are able to both learn from experience and develop their analytical and evaluative skills.

The learning styles (as portrayed for example in the Kolb model) of activist, reflector, pragmatist and theorist are an alternative classification of learning preferences. Individual students, and perhaps those selecting particular degree subjects for example, arts or science, are also likely to have an impact on their preferred approaches to research and academic study. Research into learning styles of hospitality students has shown that these students do not naturally include preferences for theorist or reflective styles. Thus for hospitality students it might be likely that specific attention may need to focus on development of these learning styles within the curriculum (Lashley, 1999). Furthermore, a survey of Confucian students undertaking degree study in hospitality and tourism in western universities has suggested that whilst Confucian students are often more likely to adopt reflective learning styles, a shift towards more activist approaches has been detected when these students study in western institutions (<http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste/vol1no2/academic/0025.html>). Given current drivers emphasising reflective learning practices, this is perhaps of concern.

Research skills and key skills

The appreciation and development of research skills by students is one of the key skills which need to be developed by students during their study. Too often the lack of student research skills may only become apparent when they embark upon work for their dissertation. Support thus needs to start at induction and then be phased within modules to give students the opportunity to develop their research and critical evaluation skills. In order to achieve a good level of research skills student support needs to focus on two complimentary skill sets, the methods and techniques to enable literature searching and critical evaluation, and the ability to effectively communicate the results of their analysis using written or oral communication methods. Without this balance, particularly in the light of current widening participation initiatives, students capable of identifying and evaluating relevant literature may find their work limited by the inability to express themselves in an effective manner. The application of e-learning offers new possibilities in terms of support offered to students in the development of both research methods and techniques and also communication skills.

Awareness of research undertaken by academics

In order that an awareness is created within departments and student cohorts of staff research activities a planned effort needs to be made to promote staff and student research to students. See project LINK for guidelines and discussion, <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/planning/LTRC/guidelines/index.htm>. For example, this can be achieved by feeding staff research into courses and modules, running research seminars and events presented by research students and staff, or by training research students in teaching to enable them to run student seminars. A further step in engaging students in departmental or staff research could also be through participation by students in staff projects.

Student lifestyle and structure of the academic year

The MacDonaldisation of society has amongst other factors impacted on the expectation of speed of delivery for products and services, and hence the need for speed and

convenience for students in locating research information. It is also accepted that many students are now also working whilst studying at university, reducing their time available to study. For an overview of student lifestyle and opinions, see <http://www.unite-students.co.uk/slf.asp?action=main&langid=1>

In the national student experience survey conducted by LTSN Hospitality Leisure Sport and Tourism students expressed concern about the concentration of their study workload during terms/semesters <http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste/vol1no1/research/0010.html>. The pressure to complete assignments within semester deadlines is unlikely to be conducive in encouraging students to read around the topics which they are studying. In reality, how feasible is it for students to develop reflective learning practices when their period of study is concentrated into twelve weeks, and when during this time, their attention will be drawn towards assessments?

A move away from semesters has been made by Huddersfield University, which has returned this year to the traditional year-long courses, and the University of Glamorgan and Plymouth University are also in the throws of returning to three terms following concerns that over assessment was damaging student performance (Utley, 2002 p5). Further research regarding student study patterns and perceived limitations and enablers to academic study and research is required to investigate the implications to changes in course structures and assessment patterns.

Conclusions

Students need to be encouraged to develop their research and critical thinking skills throughout their programmes of study. This needs to be a cohesive element of their course which starts in their first year of study and supports the progression of these skills largely through guidance provided by staff in course materials, activities and assessment tasks. Conscious evaluation and planning regarding course design to consider the current links between research and teaching in terms of student use of research and personal development of research skills is required in order to ensure that opportunities to make the link are fully capitalised upon within programmes.

References

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