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High velocity—a capacity building approach to learning

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Abstract

Many teaching and learning strategies are based on a deficit / gap analysis approach to student needs. Our capacity-building approach is a modest attempt to focus on what students already know and can do, and concentrates on building on that knowledge and skill in order to accelerate learning that becomes, deep, meaningful and enjoyable. Student comments bore out the importance of paying attention not merely to prior knowledge, but particularly context, emotions and strengths. By concentrating on areas where students had some knowledge and skills, not only did students progress very quickly to a higher level, but they found that this also gave them confidence to tackle other areas of work where there was less initial certainty and knowledge.

Introduction

The following discussion is based on a poster presentation that was prepared for St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria, Learning and Teaching Fest on 26th and 27th June 2006.

Many teaching and learning strategies are based on a deficit approach to student needs. Our capacity building approach is a modest attempt within an undergraduate first year Business and Management module to focus on what students already know and can do. This year, we have been concentrating on building on their existing knowledge, skills and most critically, confidence, in order to accelerate learning.

Theoretical background

This 'strengths-based' approach is not new and is relevant to many areas of teaching and learning. However, convergence towards a strengths-based approach came through consideration of four other factors. The first, fundamental factor we considered was that of **prior knowledge**. Ausubel et al. (1978) maintained, 'If I have to reduce... to just one principle... the most important single factor influencing learning, it is what the learner already knows.' (p 163) More recently, researchers have suggested that this may not be the most dominant factor in student learning, and this led us towards consideration of our second factor, that of **context**. Prosser and Trigwell argue, 'Given a changed learning and teaching situation, those previous understandings may not be evoked.' (1999:31) Student knowledge and understanding may only be temporary and conditional. How they deal with and build on existing knowledge may also depend on a third factor, their **emotional intelligence**. Beard and Wilson suggest that emotional intelligence can underpin learning, whilst a lack can be destructive, 'In order for any experience to be interpreted in a constructive manner it is essential that learners possess abilities such as confidence in their own abilities, ...and ...self esteem in order to recognise the validity of their own ideas and those of others...' (2005:11).

Paying attention to confidence and self esteem proved to be most important when designing and running the module this year, but there was a fourth factor that we also considered, that of **motivation or intention** of the student, prior to and during the module. We had already surmised that students would have different experiences and emotions that they would bring to their course at St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria, and the following comments on motivation underlined this assumption, 'In contrast to the view that students are either a blank sheet to be written on... or that students who have a deficit in particular

study skills need some remedial programme ...our view is that the intention or motivation students have when undertaking subjects is as or more important than the particular skill that they have.' Prosser and Trigwell (1999:27).

Tobias (1994) explicitly states his findings on the relationship between interest and understanding, 'Interest and understanding are inextricably linked and cannot be separated.' (p 37). For us, the journey from prior knowledge, through context, emotions and motivation seemed to culminate in the beliefs espoused by Huntingdon 'Education should be **strengths-based** (focuses and builds on what students already know/can do) and cumulative.' (2005:27). This final quote defined our philosophy for the module and gave us the final impetus to begin to measure the student experience through paying attention to these five important factors.

Research methods

Students completed an initial self-assessment of study skills, which was part of the existing personal development folder at St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria, in September 2005. The results were discussed and shared within cohort groups during sessions throughout the academic year. For the first time, we also asked a group of 20 students to identify areas that they had existing or limited confidence in (rather than no skills at all) and encouraged students to build on these. Students were then invited to write down their thoughts on progress in class and through one to one sessions with the tutor at the end of the academic year. The results of these writings and discussions are summarised in the next section and have been coded to link back to the five factors underpinning the intervention.

Results

Student comments have been reproduced below, and their relevance to the five factors have been coded as follows—**prior knowledge (PK), context (C), emotional intelligence (EI), motivation (M) and strengths (S)**.

I started knowing a little bit about using short loan and library usage at A level; various introductory sessions at the library helped confirm this and build my confidence about it
(Lesley - **PK, C, IE,S**)

I wasn't sure whether note-taking from school would be the same as note taking here but I now find that it's not all that different. It's quite easy to underline from handouts and refer back too.
(Kim - **PK,S**)

I had some knowledge but wasn't aware of the exact format and details (of referencing) that had to be included. Now that I have practised it a few times, I feel more confident
(Amy - **PK,IE,S**)

Have had some experience of working in teams. Feel this has helped in my approach to the team assessments. They have facilitated my learning in working in groups
(Lorna - **PK, C, S**)

If you don't know anything (about a subject) you need to learn a lot in one go. (If you know a bit) it's more about building and refining.. Though it can be more difficult sometimes. Kind of need to train or learn again. (This re-doing) in the long term is probably more effective
(Chris - **PK, C, S**)

If you've done a bit (presentation skills) before it can help - it's basically then about confidence
(Daley - **PK, IE, S**)

Having done very few presentations before starting this course, I have found them challenging and rewarding
(Rosemarie - **PK, IE, S**)

I wasn't very confident about using the computer but I feel I've developed my skills sufficiently and can now manage proficiently
(Amanda - **PK, S**)

I had a minimal idea as to how to reference when I first started, but didn't know how to do it correctly. Thanks to booklets, lecturers and practice I now feel more confident in referencing
(Gary - **PK, IE, S**)

Started off hating group work.. however after doing the group presentation I now enjoy it
(Lyndsay - **IE, C**)

Learning to take notes more effectively .. trying not to write down everything
(Kirsty - **PK, S**)

I had not worked in a group very often so I was not too confident.. now we have done lots of group work .. so I am confident about the subject
(Cara - **PK, IE, S**)

At the start of the course I had some confidence about working in assessment groups; my confidence has grown in this largely due to extended periods working in a group ...other people are relying on me... so I work earlier on rather than leaving it to the last minute
(Stephen - **PK, C,IE, S**)

Conclusions

Student comments bear out the importance of paying attention not merely to prior knowledge, but particularly context, emotions and strengths. By concentrating on areas where students had some knowledge and skills, not only did students progress very quickly to a higher level, but they found that this also gave them confidence to tackle other areas of work where there was less initial certainty and knowledge.

This modest attempt to start to chart how students can build on existing strengths will be expanded over the next year. We also hope to elicit more information on **student interest and motivation** prior to commencing module MST101 as this is one factor that we did not fully explore. Students will be asked to rate specific topic areas, both before and after the teaching and learning experience. If there is a significant difference over time, we will explore why this is so, with individual students, and through focus groups.

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