



The Enhancing Series Case Studies: Student Centred Learning

PDP - Inspiring Capability

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We believe that the process through which we engage students in PDP should itself be an example of the attitude and behaviours we want them to develop! This case study demonstrates the approaches that have been taken to enable this to happen.

The starting point for this process is noticing where you are and how you come to be here. We believe staff should lead the way, engaging in self-reflection, honing observation and feedback skills and deliberately creating the conditions they need to work and learn at their best. We aim to embed this philosophy in the whole curriculum until it becomes “the way we do things round here.”

Introduction

We begin with the context for our project and what we wanted to happen. Then we outline some of the philosophy underpinning our approach and introduce key features including the notion of autogenic metaphors for learning, clean (metaphor-free) questions, clean set-up and clean feedback. We continue with how we went about engaging staff and students, some challenges, learning and the impact so far, and then end with a summary of how we will do things differently this year, knowing what we know now.

Key words: Learning Metaphors, Agency and Structure, Whole System Change

Background and Context for PDP Development

Professional Development Planning (PDP) has been an area of interest within the Sport Development (SD) programme at Liverpool John Moores University since the course

started in 1999. There is an annual Level 1 intake of 90 students and average student retention of 96%. The university requirements are for just two PDP tutorials per year, but SD views PDP as central to student development and far exceeds this recommendation.

At Level 1, Sport Development PDP is part of a year-long module. The teaching is structured around whole group lectures one week, and then small group sessions with personal tutors in the alternate weeks. Each member of staff has around 9 tutees and we believe that by sharing their goals, setbacks and successes students learn more and can become more supportive of each other. They complete an assessed reflective essay on their personal goals, their learning styles and their aspirations, plus four 5-minute verbal presentations during the year on different areas of their development.

Through working with external facilitators we have formed, challenged and re-formed our thinking and our process, borrowing tools and techniques from Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Symbolic and Systemic Modelling. The wider university is presently taking an employability approach to its curriculum design encouraging students to develop themselves as employable graduates. The PDP process we have developed strongly supports these aims.

What did we want to happen?

Aim 1 - Inspire capability in our students by building from where they are and incorporating who they have been into their learning

We know that our students come from a broad variety of backgrounds and many are the first in their families to attend university. We want our PDP to help them to notice the skills, decision-making strategies, learning styles and motivation they already possess. Once they know more about what they can already do, and how they do it, we want them to use these skills to adapt and grow within their life long education.

Aim 2 – Students can make cross-module connections

We want our students to be able to make cross-module connections and to integrate these into their learning. To support this, we want lecturers to make cross-module connections and to have a clear model for how the whole course fits together. Lecturers often have limited understanding of one another's modules and the students are asked to make links that aren't modelled by those teaching them.

Aim 3 – Build links to the world of work

As well as connecting with their past experiences and making connections across modules, we want our students to be linking what they are learning with the careers they want to develop for themselves. By enabling them to articulate their skills and experience, students improve their employability skills.

Aim 4 - Develop a balance between agency and structure

Our aim is to enable staff and students to be able to maintain a sense of self and to relate effectively to external structures. We want our students to respond to their time at university as though they are the agent of their lives and not simply at the mercy of the structure within which they find themselves. At the same time we want them to develop an accurate awareness of others around them and to work collaboratively with staff and the wider University. This balance between agency and structure, or agency and communion as Wilbur (2000) calls it, exists whether we like it or not. When students come up against difficulties: in lectures, with tutors, with peers, at work or at home we want them to be able to affect this positively. This could be done either by their having the capacity to alter their own behaviour or learning style in order to get more from the situation, or by giving high quality feedback to affect the way they are being taught, managed or interacted with.

Our desire is to create a whole system change in the department, so that this balance, and the attitudes that come with it, are welcomed and demonstrated by staff in lectures, in meetings, staff appraisals, student assessment and feedback. We want the processes of becoming more self-aware, articulate, observant and flexible to become “the way we do things around here.”

Key Features of the Approaches

Eliciting Auto-genic Metaphors

Following the work of Grove (1989), Lakoff and Johnson (1980:2000) and more recently, Lawley and Tompkins (2000) on auto-genic metaphors, we are interested in the idiosyncratic unconscious models that govern how we go about learning. Our PDP aims to bring these to conscious awareness so that students can employ the useful ones, update outdated ones and increase their capacity to learn things outside of their current perception.

If a student, when learning at their best, resembles a “*magpie, liking to gather everything and take it back to my nest, sift through it and throw out the tat,*” this can inform both the student and their tutor how they may go about learning. If they are like a “*snail, slow and steady, but leave a glistening trail that shows exactly where I’ve come from,*” they will be a very different student from the first one, with different needs and who will have different results. However with self-awareness and a flexible tutor both students can excel on the same course.

‘Clean Questions’

The art of asking non-leading questions in order to facilitate students and staff to reflect on their own idiosyncratic thinking and internal metaphors is called ‘Clean Questioning’. It was vital to our project that students and staff became aware of their own metaphors rather than fitting themselves into those of the facilitators. To do this we employed the Clean Questions, developed by Grove and published in *Metaphors in Mind* by Lawley and Tompkins (2003).

For example, students could explore the snail metaphor: and when that snail leaves a glistening trail, what happens next? Or with the magpie: and when you throw out the tat, what happens just before you throw out the tat? What kind of tat is it? After you throw out the tat, what happens next?

Agency and Structure – the clean set-up

As people articulate their outcomes, identify individual responsibility for their state and ask for the support they need, there is an opportunity for the group to collaborate to ensure that the event is as useful for each individual as possible. These three questions, designed by Training Attention Ltd, can be asked at the start of any interaction, meeting, lecture, or project. The exact words can be changed to suit the context.

- 1 For this lecture to be really useful for you it will be like what?
- 2 For it to be like that, and you to be learning well, you'll need to be like what?
- 3 What support do you need to be like 2 and achieve 1?

The questions are designed to be answered and shared in small groups of up to 15.

Clean Feedback - Walker & Doyle (2005)

Following the notion that everyone learns and thinks differently, it is important that students and staff remember that the feedback people give is often in relation to their own needs rather than the needs of the recipient. To capture this we use a 'clean' feedback model (Table 1) to separate out what has been observed and the effect it has had.

Table 1 Giving and Receiving Clean Feedback – an example from a lecturer to a student following a presentation

<p>Something you did which worked well for me was...(something you saw or heard) <i>Setting the activities clearly out on the board</i></p> <p>I interpret this as meaning <i>That you're well organised and committed to your work</i></p> <p>Something you did which didn't work so well for me was...(something you saw or heard) <i>You were writing on the flip chart and talking with your back to the group,</i></p> <p>I interpret this as meaning <i>You weren't aware of the group's need to hear you</i></p> <p>Something that would have worked better for me is..... (what you would have preferred to have seen or heard) <i>Asking someone else to write for you or writing and then turning around to make a point.</i></p> <p>I'd interpret this as meaning <i>The stuff you were saying was relevant to us and you were making sure we could hear you.</i></p>
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How did we go about bringing the PDP to the whole system?

Aim 1 - Inspire capability in our students by building from where they are and incorporating who they've been into their learning

In order to congruently build a PDP process that works from where students are, we needed to develop the themes for the PDP from within the current student body and their learning needs. Rather than us deciding on what was important to students, we interviewed 4 groups of Level 3, 2 and 1 students to find out what had enabled them to get the most out of their time at University so far, what they had been attending to and what they wished they'd attended to. We used non-leading 'clean' questions in order to minimally influence their answers. We were surprised by the topics raised by the first group of students and even more surprised when these were confirmed with later groups. The interviews were analysed and 8 key themes were identified as shown in Table 2. From these themes we designed a series of self-reflexive exercises with no wrong or right answers; students investigate their metaphors for learning, their sources of inspiration etc; they compare and contrast them with peers and with interviewees shown on a DVD and then they decide how to use this information to increase the effectiveness of their learning during their forthcoming degree.

Table 2: PDP themes and resulting exercises

Theme	Focus group interest	Exercises
When you're learning at your best, you're like what?	They wished they'd known more about their learning styles earlier and how to help themselves learn better	Eliciting and developing a metaphor model for learning at their best, exploring the environment/behaviours/beliefs/values you have around learning and your identity as a student.
Time	They wanted to learn about organising and managing time better	Exploring individual maps of time, how you place the past and future in space and how you plan.
Inspiration and motivation	They felt that knowing what inspired and motivated them and their lecturers was important	What and who inspires or motivates you to do your best? How can you deliberately motivate yourself?
Setting and achieving goals	They wanted or had benefited from setting realistic goals and being supported to achieve them	Using the information so far, setting a goal you're motivated to achieve in a timeframe that makes sense to you.
Overcoming set-backs and challenges	Identifying set-backs and how to overcome them so that	Reflecting on times you've over-come set-backs, listening to one another's stories and devising plans to overcome any unforeseen

	unexpected problems didn't disrupt their time at University	obstacles that may arise.
Making key decisions	They wished they'd thought more before making key decisions. They wanted to think about past decisions and to make better ones in the future	Thinking about how you've made key decisions so far, modelling when you've made them well. Adjusting your own strategies, borrowing other peoples or deliberately creating the conditions to make good decisions.
Paying attention to the right things	Many 2 nd and 3 rd years wished they'd attended to different aspects of University life. They'd have liked some guidance with this; noticing where their attention was and where it needed to be to get them their goals	Exploring what you pay attention to and how to attend to the things that will get you what you want
What can they do now that they didn't think they could do	3 rd years thought it would have been useful to reflect on things they'd learnt in the past so they didn't become overwhelmed by the learning they were about to do.	Reflecting on things you used to think you wouldn't be able to do but now do easily, exploring the conditions that allowed this change to take place and then thinking about what you may be able to achieve in the future.

Students reported that after the information was delivered to them, they were thinking about: goal setting and aiming high; self belief; realisations of how they learn in different ways; how to learn in lectures; and ways to learn in small groups. However, getting the students to see the relevance of the PDP within a system that values assessments and gaining marks, was still a challenge; to some it seemed a waste of time and effort. We needed to increase staff understanding of the PDP themes and their links to the subject and the field so that they can respond positively to students' concerns and questions as they arise.

Aim 2 – Students can make cross-module connections

As part of staff development, the staff team were asked about their mental model for the degree programme as a whole and how their modules related to it. By getting individual staff members to ask one another questions about how they view their subject and how it interrelates to other subjects they created a network of intellectual connections which in turn we wanted the students to emulate.

We changed the way students start university by having a five week induction during which they were introduced to the degree as a whole, had mini-lectures by all staff members and were introduced to the PDP themes. They then came into contact with each of their subject modules in a relatively short space of time and were encouraged to observe how the modules fitted together and supported one another.

One member of staff stated that *“they have an understanding of the topic themes and how they relate to one another and they’re trying to link things together better than they have done in the past”*. Another commented that *“it was fascinating to see how we all viewed the programme and how different we all are. It really made me think about the messages we must be giving out to the students.”* One of the challenges faced by the team was accepting how differently others viewed the subject or the modules and this caused some disharmony for a time. For the future it is thought that the core PDP themes can be more strongly embedded into other modules across the level, for example, ‘goal setting’ and ‘inspiration’ could be incorporated into coaching and leadership modules, ‘modelling time’ and ‘overcoming set-backs’ could be included in business modules. This helps to make connections between the PDP and subject modules as well as using PDP themes to link subject modules.

Aim 3 – Build links to the world of work

Students are often limited by whom or what they already know when it comes to planning their careers. We wanted the students to hear the stories of people who they and we considered to be successful in their field of interest, people they might not get to talk to ordinarily. We asked students during the initial interviews that led to the PDP theme development, to identify those they would consider to be role models or whom they’d be interested in hearing about. We interviewed a number of these individuals, asked them to reflect on the themes identified in Table 2 and incorporated this information into a DVD called ‘Success Journeys. The DVD contains a set of exercises that allows viewers to self-reflect on the same themes. Students can compare their answers to those of their peers in the seminar sessions or the ‘successes’. This DVD has become an integral part of the PDP process.

The DVD stimulated a great deal of discussion in the seminars and offered opportunities for the students to develop different patterns of thinking. One second year student commented; *“I hated the PDP stuff, but after being on work based learning, I now realise it was one of the most valuable things we have done.”*

The DVD served to reduce dependence on the tutors running the small group PDP sessions. Some students didn’t engage with the DVD as a resource; they wanted different exemplars or could see little point in the use of this type of information and linked it only to the one module. This resource will be linked to the other modules and the wider world of work next year.

Aim 4 - Develop a balance between agency and structure

To encourage students to create the conditions they need to learn well, we asked them to think about learning at their best, how they differed from other students and what they needed in order to learn well. Because they did this in a small group we encouraged

them to notice that staff can't satisfy all students at all times and to decide what they can do personally to stay in a good learning state.

We ran a similar process with a small number of the staff team via a peer coaching project. They explored what they needed in order to learn and teach well. We legitimised the idea that there is great diversity in learning and teaching and that for maximal learning to take place both students and lecturers can do some adjusting of their behaviours. We introduced the 'Clean Set-up' to staff meetings in order to encourage staff to articulate their own needs and to be more adept at accommodating those of others. We aimed overall to tie the DVD material, staff and student PDP experiences together.

Some staff reported that students are using them more effectively this year by asking them for the help they need. *"Last year, I didn't get my personal tutor group and others booking tutorials, this time there's been more students planning tutorial support,"* (staff feedback). In relation to the team *"We've got to know much more about one another, that's been really interesting,"* (staff feedback). However some staff seemed to be unhappy about the increase in demands made on them by students. On reflection we have tried to introduce a number of complex changes at the same time as asking staff to deliver the PDP to students. Instead we would like to introduce the simple processes and embed them first in the staff team, allowing the staff to develop their observation skills and self-awareness before they take the process to the students.

What we will do differently as a result of what we have learned

A number of staff development sessions are now organised to allow the staff time to digest and work with the processes themselves and with each other before the next run through with the students.

We will arrange for staff to get observation and feedback as they deliver the PDP modules so that they can share good ideas and ask for any support they need. We can then compare approaches with feedback we collect from students.

For the students we will design a developmental activity such as a presentation or mini-essay in relation to the themes to be fed back to the tutor. This way their skills and understanding can be assessed.

We will work with tutors to embed the themes in their modules so that they are also embedded in the curriculum.

We will design posters displaying relevant processes for the walls of meeting rooms and lecture halls, so bringing them to everyone's attention.

We are still in the process of testing, forming and reforming our PDP. At the moment we have qualitative, anecdotal evidence only. We are embarking on a formal longitudinal

study tracking the progress of students through their 3 year journey beginning in July 2008.

Biographies

Sarah Nixon is a principal lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University and the leader of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) for the Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure. Her main teaching areas are sports management, the business of sport and PDP. Her research interests are within the area of teaching and learning, with a particular focus on PDP and the student experience.

Caitlin Walker is a business and educational consultant and a certified Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Trainer with 20 years experience in designing learning to learn programmes in the public and private sector. Using ideas from systems thinking and Clean Questions from the work of David Grove, she has developed practical processes for creating learning organisations.

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