Teaching of Study Skills for Supportive Learning Environments in Higher Education

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Abstract:-
To create supportive learning environments in Higher Education (HE) use of study skills in teaching is most focusing attention. Using a phenomenographic approach, we explore variance in how first year undergraduate students experience the learning of generic, subject-related and metacognitive skills within a study skills module integrated into education programs. The findings results increase in confidence, criticality, self-reflection and change as a learner. The conclusion posits alternative ways of promoting the learning of study skills, which, brings significant ramifications in all learners for the professional development of university teachers. The findings in relation to the teaching of subject related skills in this research suggest that there is insufficient emphasis on skills in the module. In order for all students to achieve a high level of competency there needs to be more opportunities for the development of these skills.

Keywords:-
learning environment, teaching skills, generic skill, metacognitive skill.

I. INTRODUCTION

An important facet of the emerging notions of excellence in promoting learning is the reopening of the issue of how best to provide appropriate support, especially for non-traditional entrants, such as mature learners and those with vocational rather than traditional academic qualifications[1, 2]. Cotterell (2001) [3] argues that, "changes in the student body go hand in hand with the need for different kinds of teaching and with increased emphasis on skills development." Over the last 30 years a substantial literature has been developing related to skill acquisition. In the1980s and 90s the emphasis was on specifying the nature and range of skills which were variously labeled study skills, transferable skills, key skills and personal skills, and on debating the assumption that strategies, though developed independent of context, are transferable across tasks [4-7]. The Dearing report (1997) [8], by advocating that all graduates should 'learn how to learn', shifted the research emphasis in the UK back to the importance of developing strategies to learn effectively, otherwise known as metacognitive skill. Far from being novel, the importance of metacognition had been promulgated widely in the 1980s, [9-11]. The core assumption underlying the resurgence of learning to learn is that an ability to take responsibility for directing and improving one's own learning, to becoming an independent learner, is a requisite for success in HE, and, by implication, for future employment. This represents the antithesis of a narrow emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge by learners and on subject coverage by lecturers which research [12, 13] has shown unequivocally pushes students towards a surface approach to learning. In the rapidly changing environment of the 21st century, where subject knowledge risks becoming defunct, it makes sense to promote the learning of reflective strategies to give students the confidence to become independent and life-long learners. Crucially this new drive to support student learning seeks to create a developmental and student-centered approach associated with promoting a deep approach to learning [14]. Creating Supporting Learning Environments Issues relating to the nature of the learning environments that are most conducive to effective support of learning, center on three facets:

- the type of skill-oriented outcomes which students are expected to learn;
- the kind of learning activities which are most likely to result in these desired outcomes being achieved, including who students learn with, and where students best learn; and the curriculum design structures at a program or modular level which offer the most effective environments.

Biggs (2003) posits three levels of skills that are required for students to become independent learners: generic study skills, study skills related to specific content, and metacognitive learning skills[15]. This article reports on research designed to explore the efficacy of teaching study skills to students in a modern university which boasts a strong widening participation ethos.

II. METHOD

This case study was undertaken from a phenomenographic perspective [16-18] of students' perceptions of their experience on the Learning for Success module. Phenomenography explores how concepts, principles and phenomena are perceived, experienced and understood in specific contexts and is thus concerned with the direct exploration of experiences [18]. It is an approach which is used

to tackle "questions of relevance to learning and understanding in an educational setting" and to describe "the limited number of qualitatively different ways in ways in which we experience phenomena and present this variation in terms of logically related categories of description" [19]. In this study this means identifying the qualitative *variation* in the experience of learning study skills by first year undergraduate students and describing this variation in terms of categories. This is a second order perspective in which the world is described by individual learners through reflective accounts of their learning on the module.

In total, 205 students studied this module in the academic year 2005–2006. All students were asked if they wished to take part in the study; this was a self selection method whereby students were asked to sign a statement agreeing to participate. There were no penalties for non-participation and 73 students initially agreed to take part. Of this group 62 students submitted reflective logs, 18 of which were also respondents in one of three focus groups. The principle data collection instruments were: (a) a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of the students in terms of the skills to developed in the module; (b) a written reflective account of students' personal development throughout the 26 weeks of the module based on the original SWOT analysis; and (c) end of module written student evaluations. In addition, students also considered how the skills acquired on the module enabled them to continue with their studies in a more effective way. In the reflective account, students were invited to discuss in a constructive and analytical manner, any areas that they felt were not beneficial to their earning. This research study also used focus groups to bring together participants who shared the same experience, but not necessarily the same interpretation and perspective, to provide a source of data to validate the findings from the reflective accounts**.** Three focus group interviews were conducted; two comprised mature students on a part-time foundation degree and the third comprised five first year undergraduate students on specialist degree programs. The group facilitator for all three groups was an academic who did not teach on the module but who was familiar with first year HE work. The authors of the article and the research assistant arrived at the categories of responses to the experience of the module independently. Initially the principle researcher and the research assistant analyzed the data independently and identified variation in the categories relating to the learning of each type of skill. The two researchers and the assistant then shared their analyses and consensus was reached. Verbatim quotations were then selected to describe the essence of the variation in each category rather than a rich description of students' experience. Respondents cited from the reflective accounts are identified by their initials and those from the focus groups alphabetically from A-X.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are organized into qualitatively distinct categories which describe students' responses to the learning of generic, subject related and metacognitive skills through the experience of the module. The categories are first described, and then verbatim quotations from the focus groups and the reflective accounts which illustrate key aspects of each category are presented. The intention is to provide an account of the essence of each category. Thus no single quotation is intended to describe fully the category, rather quotations which typify a category have been chosen and grouped together. In this way the distinctive differences between categories emerge.

Generic Study Skills (see Appendix A)

Three categories of variation in response inrelation to the learning of generic study skills (see Appendix A) were identified, (a) students becomingmore *confident* in their ability to perform the skills, (b) students gaining more *expertise* in the range and scope of skills they can readily perform, and (c) students *not engaging* with the learning of generic study skills. The first two categories are interrelated, but the third category is independent.

Subject-Related Skills

Analysis of the module program indicates that the proportion of the module time devoted to the development of subject-related skills (see Appendix A) was less than that for the generic study and metacognitive skills. This is reflected in the responses from students in each of the three focus groups where there was consensus in relation to the need for more contact time devoted to the development of both reading for meaning skills and research skills. Conversely, students expressed a high degree of satisfaction in relation to the use of mind-maps. Three categories of variation in response in relation to the learning of subject-related skills were identified, (a) students not engaging with the learning to promote subject-related skills; (b) students believing that their ability to be critical had improved through the acquisition of these skills; and (c) students applying the skills to other modules in the program. The second two categories were interrelated, but the first and third categories were independent. Those who lacked engagement with learning in relation to these skills, failed to comment on their applicability to their subject study. This is not surprising given that those students in this category failed to achieve the module outcomes and in consequence were not in a position to apply these skills to their subject learning.

Metacognitive Skills

Two categories have been identified that describe the variation in how the learning of the metacognitive skills detailed in Appendix A were experienced by students on the module, specifically: (a) students believing that their self-reflective capability had improved; and (b) students believing they had changed as a learner. The SWOT analysis at the beginning of the
module together with students' end of module reflective accounts based on their original SWOT analysis, and their end of module evaluation each provided a stimulus for critical self-analysis that permeates the module. There is a clear emphasis in this category on the 'how' rather than the 'what' of learning, and on the "connectedness between the action that students undertake in relation to the module outcomes and in response to (a) taught sessions, (b) directed learning, and (c) assessment régimes" [20]. These two categories are structurally more complex than the categories relating to the experience of generic and subject-specific skills. They are perceived as being hierarchical because *Changing as a Person* subsumes *Growth in Self-Reflection*; in other words, those who change as learners also report becoming more self-reflective.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in relation to the teaching of subject related skills in this research suggest that there is insufficient emphasis on skills in the module. In order for all students to achieve a high level of competency there needs to be more opportunities for the development of these skills. The dislocation between the development of these skills and the context in which they are applied appears to preclude their effective development; suggesting that the embedding of these skills within subject modules over a three-year program might be efficacious.

This article has investigated the range of perceptions of first year students in relation to the acquisition of generic, subject-related and metacognitive study skills. A range of perceptions was
found which suggest that the integration of a module within a program of study is not the most effective way to promote these skills for all students. This raises the possibility that if a more inclusive environment, which engages all learners, is to be created, then the teaching of subject-related and metacognitive skills needs to be embedded in subject teaching and learning. Further
research is needed to posit models of acquiring generic study skills and to establish if the embedding of skills into subject modules poses an appropriate solution.

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Appendix A

The Outcomes and the Context and Scope of the Learning for Success Module

Skills	Context and Scope
Generic Study Skills	
Communicate effectively.	Formal group presentation using appropriate style and supported with visual aids and handouts.
Apply numerical analysis to data.	Gathering, analyzing and presenting quantitative data. Basic Excel® techniques to assist data analysis and presentation.
Make effective use of information technology to promote own learning.	Use OPAC, BIDS to locate source materials. Use the Wolverhampton On Line Learning Framework (WOLF) to access module materials and take part in on-line discussion forums. Use appropriate software to assist presentation techniques during summative assessment.
Work effectively with others.	Work as an effective member of a co-operative group for the purpose of summative presentations and formative library tasks.
Subject-Related skills	
Apply models for the development of skills of reading, note-taking, writing and planning to their own program in H.E.	Reading for Meaning and Understanding, note-taking, essay planning and writing.
Plan and carry out a small-scale research study using and combining quantitative and qualitative techniques as appropriate.	Quantitative and qualitative research principles. Designing effective data collection instruments. Data collection, analysis and presentation techniques.
Metacognitive Skills	
Improve own learning performance.	Self-motivation and resourcefulness – demonstrate decision-making skills. Assess progress, monitor, review and reflect upon own performance and achievements
Solve problems	Work co-operatively individually and in a small group. Develop problem- solving skills in a variety of contexts and evaluate their effectiveness.
Apply theoretical knowledge and the results of assessment and analysis to planning for the development of own study skills, time-management skills, stress management skills and personal organisation.	Theories of learning: Behaviorist, Cognitivist, Goal setting, objectives and strategies for them, reflective self-analysis.
Assess strengths and weaknesses in relation to learning styles, approaches to study, time management, stress management and personal organisation.	Study skills, approaches to study, personality inventories and questionnaires, C.V.s, portfolios, time logs.