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‘Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio.’

The Second International Residential Seminar

COMMENTARY ON THE PRESENTATION GIVEN BY THE NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY TEAM:

“Illuminating and measuring personal development: the impact of this work on learning and teaching”.

Wendy Clark, Jackie Adamson, Jamie Thompson, Alan White

BACKGROUND

This presentation reports on a small-scale case study research project, based on a 2nd year cohort of students from the Business Information Systems area of the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences at Northumbria University. The aim of this employability module is to prepare students for the recruitment process for their placement year in industry and to inculcate proper professional attitudes and behaviour. The teaching strategy uses the precepts of PDP, and an eportfolio is the vehicle for learning and assessment (Slide 2).

The research project was designed to investigate how successful we have been in encouraging students to take control of their learning, to realise that learning is a skill that can be consciously improved, and that their ‘learning power’ can increase.

The difficulty with such a project is the identification of an appropriate measuring tool. The Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI), which identifies 7 dimensions of learning ‘energy’, was developed in response to the growing realisation that the instrumental approach to learning and teaching which has dominated formal education – an approach consisting of, typically, codified curricula and high stakes assessment in the form of tests of knowledge, skills and understanding – was no longer relevant to the needs of the modern world.

In 2006, the Leitch Review of Skills (HMSO 2006) pressed universities to lead in making the UK a world leader in delivering skills for work, again reminding HE of the inadequacy of codified curricula to meet the constantly changing needs of the modern global workplace. Staff in HE already implementing PDP to address these challenges recognised the potential of ELLI to both enrich the learning experience and provide a means of evaluating its effectiveness. Continuing research into the connection between ELLI and student achievement has established a very strong correlation between 2 of the ELLI dimensions, Critical Curiosity and Changing and Learning, and high student achievement. Strategic Awareness also showed a positive correlation to high achievement, although not statistically significant.

METHODOLOGY (Slide 3)

The importance of reflection in the development of the deep approach to learning necessary for learning autonomy is widely recognised. Because of the personal nature of reflective writing and the commitment needed on the part of the students to produce good reflective writing, it was felt that the quality of the reflective writing could be used as a proxy for engagement with the process. A taxonomy for the assessment of reflective writing was therefore developed, based on the work of Biggs and Collis, Hatton and Smith and Jenny Moon. Analysis was then carried out to determine whether changes in the measured learning power of the students were mirrored by their reflective writing marks.

FINDINGS 1 (Slide 4)

Comparison of ELLI 'scores' achieved at the beginning and end of the module showed positive development in most dimensions, including those identified as having a significant correlation with high achievement (Critical Curiosity, Changing and Learning and Strategic Awareness)

FINDINGS 2 (Slide 5)

First year 'scores' were then compared with the second year results with reference to reflective writing ability. Those who engaged with the PDP/eportfolio process –ie those whose reflective writing showed deeper thought – showed most positive change, whereas those who did not engage showed a decrease in learning 'power'.

STUDENT QUOTES (Slide 6)

Textual analysis of student reflective writing showed that many students were becoming aware of learning as a process, as a skills that could be consciously improved with practice. Our analysis also indicates that ELLI constitutes a very useful way of increasing awareness of the PDP/eportfolio aims. Its novelty arouses curiosity, and its vocabulary helps students and staff to articulate their thoughts about learning itself.

CONCLUSION

Our experience suggests a way of understanding how ELLI has contributed to a synergy between PDP and ePortfolio. We have evidenced that the language of ELLI and engagement with the tool has been a catalyst for reflection, self awareness and understanding. The language of ELLI and the dimensions it describes has also provided a useful structure for portfolio structure. From such a foundation we can build a model through which students can understand the process (and necessity) of becoming lifelong learners (Slide 8).

Our project in the context of the wider ELLI research now has to address some key questions. The Dispositions to Stay (and Learn and Succeed) research has indicated that three specific ELLI dimensions are associated with academic success. (Critical Curiosity, Orientation to Change and Strategic Awareness). For staff and students – what does this mean? More specifically – in what ways can we devise PDP and ePortfolio structures and processes that encourage growth and development of these dimensions? We will be exploring these questions and evaluating our initiatives in the next stage of the project.