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Chris Morgan
Southern Cross University

Don Dingsdag

Helen Saenger
Southern Cross University

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Notes on Contributors

Chris J Morgan is Educational Developer/Lecturer in the Teaching & Learning Unit. *Address* Teaching & Learning Unit, Southern Cross University. PO Box 157, Lismore. 2480. N.S.W. Australia. Phone (02-66203018) Fax (02-66203022) Email cmorgan@scu.edu.au.

Dr Donald Dingsdag is Lecturer in the School of Social and Workplace Development *Address* Southern Cross University. PO Box 157, Lismore. 2480. N.S.W. Australia Phone (02-66203866) Fax (02-66221833) Email ddingsda@scu.edu.au.

Helen Saenger is Lecturer in the Teaching and Learning Unit, *Address* Teaching & Learning Unit, Southern Cross University. PO Box 157, Lismore. 2480. N.S.W. Australia. Phone (02-66203165) Fax (02-66223180) Email hsaenger@scu.edu.au.

LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS: DO THEY HELP?

Mr Chris J. Morgan
Lecturer/Eductional Developer, Teaching & Learning Unit,
Southern Cross University. PO Box 157, Lismore. 2480. N.S.W. Australia
Phone (02-66203018) Fax (02-66203022) Email cmorgan@scu.edu.au.

Dr Donald Dingsdag
Lecturer, School of Social & Workplace Development,
Southern Cross University. PO Box 157, Lismore. 2480. N.S.W. Australia
Phone (02-66203866) Fax (02-66221833) Email ddingsda@scu.edu.au.

Mrs Helen Saenger
Lecturer, Teaching and Learning Unit,
Southern Cross University. PO Box 157, Lismore. 2480. N.S.W. Australia
Phone (02-66203165) Fax (02-66223180) Email hsaenger@scu.edu.au.

ABSTRACT

The development in learners of generic skills and deep approaches to learning are much valued goals of tertiary education. While on-campus students have access to a variety of means by which they can improve their learning skills and approaches, distance learners are often left to their own devices, and develop learning skills on a trial-and-error basis. This project introduced a learning strategy to distance students and evaluated the response, in terms of both student satisfaction and intended ongoing use. A cohort of 97 adult learners participated, by undertaking a unit of distance study in which the structured study strategy was embedded. Findings indicated that while less experienced learners embraced the study strategy with considerable enthusiasm, more experienced learners rejected it if it conflicted with their existing study strategies, time constraints or their need for self-direction. It was found that this learning strategy was useful to the degree that it was not imposed upon learners and was introduced early in learners' pathways.

INTRODUCTION

This project sought to use and evaluate a study strategy to foster generic skills and deep learning in undergraduate distance students. The context was a unit of study 'The Future of Work' within the Bachelor of Social Science at Southern Cross University**.** The underlying educational philosophy of this unit is one of constructivism, whereby learners are encouraged to create and negotiate their own meanings from the diversity of material and arguments presented. However, the unit developers were keen to ensure that students' efforts were academically rigorous and that they resisted the temptation to simply present viewpoints rather than reasoned and researched argument. The unit developers were looking for evidence of a deep approach to learning and essay writing, demonstrated by the following higher order generic skills:

• thinking and reasoning skills such as critical, analytical and evaluative thinking;

• research skills, such as literature searching, purposeful reading, thesis building;

• written communication skills, such as coherent essay structuring and representation of convincing argument.

Generic skills development

Although these generic higher order skills have long been a valued outcome of tertiary education, a renewed emphasis upon these skills was heralded in the Higher Education Council Report *Achieving Quality* (1992). The report (p.20) identified 'generic skills, attributes and values' as the 'central achievement of higher education as a process'. However, as Clanchy and Ballard (1995) argue, the report is dogged by 'vagueness and inconsistencies' relating to the nature of those generic skills, and how they may relate to their different disciplinary contexts. Clanchy and Ballard provide a more systematic, albeit 'preliminary', analysis of higher order generic skills and group them into categories of

thinking, research and communication. They argue that more work needs to be done in identifying and teaching these skills within their disciplinary contexts.

Deep approaches to learning

Efforts in fostering generic skills are closely allied to efforts to promote deep learning in higher education. Educationalists such as Biggs (1988, 1989, 1991) and Ramsden (1992) emphasise the importance of encouraging students to adopt a deep rather than a surface approach to learning. Deep and surface approaches to learning have been identified by a variety of researchers (Marton & Saljo 1976; Entwistle & Ramsden 1983, for example). Biggs (1989) describes deep learning as activities which maximise understanding, wide reading, discussion, theorising, linking, hypothesising. Surface approaches, on the other hand, are characterised by a focus upon the literal, the concrete, lower order skills such as rote learning, and the paring of tasks to bare essentials. In essay writing, students adopting a surface approach focus on:

quick returns that satisfice, rather than satisfy, the task demands. In writing, attention is focused during these activities on the level of ideational complexity no higher than that contained in a sentence. Sentences, thus tend to be linked in a linear sequence (eg chronological or narrative) which is inappropriate for most academic purposes (Biggs 1991, p.139).

Students in this approach are tending to engage in lower order skills such as describing, relating, ordering, and explaining, similar to what Hounsell (1997) describes as the 'essay as arrangement'. In adopting a deep approach, students engage in activities that:

integrate detail and high level ideation. In writing, the detail in an ill-set sentence can be cut-and-pasted to the appropriate context, or deleted; in both cases, the decision is embedded in high level or thematic thinking...(Biggs 1991, p.139).

Students are here demonstrating skills more appropriate to a higher education context, such as synthesising, integrating, evaluating and thesis building.

Learning strategies in distance education

Can learning strategies be introduced to foster deep learning in distance students? A study by Bernt and Bugbee (1993) showed that distance students' achievement of high and low passes could be predicted on the basis of the strategies they used. However, they caution against the prescriptive imposition of learning or study strategies upon the adult distance learner. Indeed, the large body of literature of adult learning would caution against any prescriptiveness which undermines learners' inherent self-directedness (Knowles 1980) or which extinguishes opportunities for autonomy in learning (Candy 1990). Further caution is raised by Ramsden (1992) in instructing students in the use of deep approaches to learning, due to the inevitable gap between the educator's intentions and the learners' perceptions of the context of learning.

However, the fostering of deep learning is arguably a fundamental role of distance educators. Morgan (1995, p.80) argues strongly in favour of attempts to promote deep learning, acknowledging that distance learners get little support in study skills, that there is much emphasis on written assessment for which students are ill-prepared, and considerable restrictions are placed upon learners' interactions due to limitations of space and time. Hounsell (1997) notes that even in study skills manuals where essays are of major concern, issues of form dominate at the expense of substance:

Accomplishment in essay writing is often seen in terms of style or bibliographic finesse, or as a matter of planning and organisation. Amidst the flurry of technical tips, it is hard to get a sense of the student as a 'maker of meaning' (Perry, 1977) or of writing as 'a struggle to give meaning to experience' , 1979) . (Hounsell 1997, p.108)

Introducing a learning strategy

A learning strategy, developed by Parry (1989) for on-campus students, was used as a model in this unit, due to its strength in fostering deep learning skills through essay writing. The strategy was adapted and modified by the unit developers for distance learners and named the 'Evaluative Learning Process' (ELP). The ELP process was embedded in the unit assessment essay questions and was also modelled at various points within the study guide. Students were asked to use the process, summarised below, in their assignments, which required them to respond in essay form to assertions or propositions by leading commentators:

1. Defining and exploring the thesis

What is the author's central argument? What are the major points? What evidence is used to support the position? This first step is designed to trigger a deeper understanding of an author's position, and to curtail any superficial responses.

2. Differentiating between descriptive and evaluative key terms

What are the descriptive (non-value laden) terms used? What are the evaluative (value laden) terms used? This step furthers learners' analyses of the author's stance, and clarifies underlying values.

3. Which decisions do you need to make?

How do you stand in relation to values expressed? Which 'problems' do you have to make decisions about? Learners begin to analyse and sort arguments with relating data.

4. Thesis building

Which impressions or opinions are you forming? Will they stand up to scrutiny? Learners subject their developing arguments to a critical questioning process

5. Thesis, arguments and data

Learners begin to draw together separate strands of analysis into the beginnings of a united thesis, marshalling arguments and data.

6. Form and structure of essay

Learners make decisions on how to best represent and structure their arguments

7. Formulating final essay

Learners synthesise and represent findings using essay structure.

Thus the ELP focuses on developing the microskills which support disciplined knowledge building, and it enables learners to break this task down into manageable portions. Its principle objective is to develop thinking, researching and written communication skills which they may apply in a range of disciplines. This evaluation investigated student satisfaction with the ELP and their intended ongoing use of the ELP. Our discussion then addresses the question: Can we provide a learning strategy for distance education students that encourages deep learning through essay writing?

METHODOLOGY

The sample consisted of 97 students who were adult, distance learners aged between 30 and 49 years. Females comprised 48.5% and males 51.5% of the sample. The evaluation comprised both quantitative and qualitative methods. The collection of qualitative data was thought to be important to clarify and augment the quantitative data, and provide additional insights. There were three stages in the evaluation as follows:

Stage 1: A questionnaire was designed from preliminary unstructured telephone interviews with students which provided useful insights into students' initial reactions to the ELP (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was mailed out to all students enrolled in the 'Future of Work' prior to their completion of the unit.

Stage 2: A follow up semi-structured telephone interview was carried out with eleven students to further our understanding of how students reacted to the ELP and its intended ongoing use. inform the existing data (see Appendix B). These

interviews were conducted with a representative sample of the student population selected on the basis of grades (ranging from High Distinction to Pass). Interviews were conducted by two of the researchers who did not have direct involvement with the students. The interviews were semi-structured and took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Stage 3: The results were analysed using SPSS 4.1 to obtain frequency data on the responses. Thematic analysis was carried out on the qualitative data in the questionnaire and the telephone interviews.

FINDINGS

General characteristics of learners and prior essay writing habits

Thirty three questionnaires were returned which represents a 34% response rate. For the majority of the group (81.8%) the primary motivation for study was for professional development. A small group (18.2%) identified either personal interest or a combination of factors as their primary motivation for study.

The respondents were adult learners with almost half rating themselves as either moderately successful (48.5%) or very successful (45.5%) in their previous attempts in writing essays. Two (6.5%) rated themselves as extremely successful and none of the respondents rated themselves negatively as either slightly or not at all successful.

Respondents described how they had developed learning and essay writing strategies in a trial and error manner, relying mostly upon feedback from previous efforts - a source which respondents stated was highly variable and idiosyncratic. In describing their approach to writing, students tended more towards matters of form and structure (such as to 'develop introduction,

headings, subheadings, conclusions') rather than the actual processes, such as argument and thesis building, in which they might engage.

The following tables describe students' use, satisfaction and intended further use of the ELP:

Table 1. The stages of the ELP and their reported usefulness to students

Stages	Extremely useful	Very useful	Moderately useful	Slightly useful	Not at all useful	T
1. Defining the author's thesis	3.0%	39.4%	33.3%	6.1%	18.2%	33
2. Analysing the major key terms	6.1%	39.4%	21.2%	18.2%	15.1%	33
3. Identifying 'problems' for decision-making	12.1%	21.2%	18.2%	15.2%	33.3%	33
4. The thesis building process	3.0%	33.3%	24.3%	9.1%	30.3%	33
5. Formulating thesis, argum-ents and data	3.0%	39.4%	21.2%	12.1%	24.3%	33
6. Developing form and structure of the essay	6.1%	21.2%	27.3%	12.1%	33.3%	33
7. Formulating final output	3.0%	24.3%	21.2%	21.2%	30.3%	33

Table 2. Student satisfaction in using the ELP

To what extent do you agree that	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	T
ELP was challenging?		21.2%	9.1%	57.6%	12.1%	33
ELP was off-putting?		30.3%	9.1%	33.3%	27.3%	33

ELP was useful as a method to analyse unknown areas of knowledge?	12.1%	15.2%	3.0%	57.6%	9.1%	32
ELP is adaptable to other units?		9.1%	15.2%	63.6%	12.1%	33
ELP has contributed to a change in your approach to learning?	21.2%	33.3%	15.2%	24.2%	6.1%	33
ELP has given you confidence with the assessment process in the Future of Work?	24.2%	24.2%	24.2%	24.2%	3.0%	33
ELP should be adopted to all units?	24.2%	18.2%	36.4%	12.1%	6.1%	32

Table 3. Continued use of ELP

Use of ELP	All of the time	Most of the time	Half of the time	Some of the time	None of the time	T
Would you use ELP again?	9.1%	24.2%	6.1%	36.4%	24.2%	33

Perceived strengths and weaknesses of ELP

Students were asked to comment on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the ELP. Their comments could be clustered around two central themes; the *structure* provided by the ELP and the *process* which the ELP facilitated.

(a) Structure

There was strong support for the structure provided by the ELP, with up to half of the students commenting favourably. Commonly these were students for whom the ELP reinforced and strengthened their existing study patterns and methods. For example P: "We use the ELP approach in nursing. It was a reinforcing principle I know. It's the way I've always approached writing essays. It makes sense". For these learners the ELP made existing skills explicit and helped to consolidate them. Other learners welcomed the structure because it systematised their less developed processes and enabled a more disciplined approach to essay writing. R comments: "The logical approach is better than the haphazard approach I have used in the past. In the past I have drawn on the same principles but not in a systematic and logical way".

To a lesser extent, students found the structure too prescriptive. For example S commented: "I just ignored ELP and did my own thing. I did look at it to see if it was a better way of writing and developing an argument but I found it too prescriptive and four years into my course I didn't want to change my style." Imposing this level of structure upon some students was just too late in the study process. It would have been more useful if offered earlier in their study career. M: " I found it confusing and repetitive - I didn't want to change my style." Some students indicated it would have been more helpful for new learners.

(b) Process

Comments on the process of undertaking the ELP were equally divided. There were those who welcomed the process of ELP because of the skills development they enjoyed, which stimulated responses such as: "It is a method which encourages critical and analytical thought"; "it helps break the assignment down into workable parts which then form the whole"; "it enforces a logical approach to study"; helps with "interpretation of terms, value judgements and objective

terms"; and "forces you to focus on different arguments and question them ... to develop your own argument".

Yet many resented the process of ELP, commenting that it was too complex and too time consuming. Some found it confusing and a source of considerable upset M: "I was in tears. I couldn't answer the essay question and do the process together". A number of students commented about the confusion arising from having to focus simultaneously on the content of the unit and the ELP processes. Time was also a big factor - problems cited by one student included difficulties of access to literature and employment and family commitments: "The children of any studying parent will be disadvantaged by this method. Unlike our full time counterparts, reference material is not at our door". This comment is more reflective of the general trials of a part-time distance learner rather than a specific criticism of the ELP, which did not require additional resources or references beyond the study package.

Perceived use of Evaluative Learning Process in the future

Mixed responses of students in telephone inteviews suggests the ELP will be adopted to varying degrees. There were students who liked the ELP and found it a valuable exercise because they were naturally attuned to a structured learning style. For them, the ELP made the structure explicit. Another group adopted the ELP in order to meet the requirements of the assignment, but haven't continued to use it. Some students rejected the ELP completely.

For others it was just too late in the study process and would have been more useful if offered earlier in their study career. Other students would like to use it again but there was mixed experience in applying it - for instance, T: "I've slipped back into my old style - more to do with time constraints and my own

situation at the moment". Some students felt the ELP was not applicable in all disciplines. More disturbingly, some students felt penalised for using this process in other units within the same discipline - M: "You develop a style that individual markers are looking for, but it changes from unit to unit. I was very disappointed because I used the ELP....and used it well, but I got a very poor mark".

DISCUSSION

The findings above indicate a mixed, and at times, contradictory, response by students to the use of the ELP as a learning strategy. One major contradiction was that while 66.7% either agreed or strongly agreed that the ELP was useful, 60.6% either agreed or strongly agreed that it was off-putting (see Table 2). This evident ambivalence was explained in the follow up interviews by comments that, while the ELP was useful for some in an abstract way, they already had their own style of learning and essay writing and felt this was an imposition. A general pattern emerged: experienced learners who had gained success using other strategies were less likely to use it or approve of it. Less experienced learners, or those who have used similar study strategies, were far more favourably disposed to the strategy, and were more likely to use it. This pattern is consonant with literature suggesting that experienced adult learners develop preferred learning styles and approaches (Morgan, 1993) and strategic approaches to studying (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) which may also combine with a developing need for self-directedness (Knowles, 1980; Candy, 1990). This literature amply explains the variety of reasons why learners might be unwilling to embrace the ELP or parts of it.

Another important factor in this study was the issue of time and the reluctance of some learners to take on what they perceived to be the additional work that a

deep approach demands. In addition, access to resources was another issue which was cited as an impediment to using the ELP. As Evans (1994) reminds us, the contexts of distance learners are complex, diverse, dynamic and incapable of rigid classification. However, as more than 80% of this student cohort were studying part-time for professional development reasons, we can assume that study is mixed with a range of other competing demands, including work, families and recreational commitments. Contextual issues, described by Ramsden (1992) such access, time, interest, and prior experience, combined with a range of other issues such as the effects of assessment, experiences of teaching and teachers, effects of courses, departments and institutions, will all impact upon student motivation and students' consequent willingness to adopt deep approaches to learning.

In highlighting learning from the student's perspective, Ramsden (1992, p.62) stresses the importance of students' *perceptions* of the context. For instance, the effects of different teaching methods on students are often unpredictable. 'Students respond to the situation *they* perceive, and it is not necessarily the same situation that we have defined' (Ramsden 1992, p.63). Instructing students in the use of deep approaches will not always have the desired outcome, warns Ramsden, because of the gap between the lecturers' intentions and the students' perceptions of the context of learning. Indeed, unintended consequences of attempts to induce deep approaches to learning have been highlighted in various studies (Marton & Saljo 1984; Ramsden, Beswick & Bowden 1986). Clearly students did perceive ELP in markedly different ways, from the highly beneficial to the highly intrusive, based on their own unique perceptions and contexts.

Yet in this study there were also positive unintended outcomes. Whether learners welcomed or rejected the ELP process, or parts thereof, it prompted considerable critical reflection upon their existing learning and essay writing

experiences and strategies. In this process, unconscious actions became explicit, and much sorting and sifting became evident - T: "As an external student, I've done it the way that I thought best, but I hadn't reflected on what I was doing - so it (ELP) really helped". Students recounted and reinforced their positive past learning experiences and discussed, remedied and even discarded current strategies or recounted how they had discovered through their past efforts what the ELP had clearly articulated and elucidated for the first time. Further, for some students, the problematic nature of differing disciplinary discourses, and differing expectations even between lecturers in the same program became explicit for the first time.

CONCLUSIONS

To return to our opening question (Can we provide a strategy for students that encourages deep learning in essay writing?) the findings of this study suggest that imposing a single study strategy onto a diverse group of distance learners will be received with a mixed response. Clearly, our findings are not conclusive on the merits of introducing study strategies for distance learners. However, it is clear from these findings that any efforts to impose a single learning strategy will be met with resistance to the degree that it:

- conflicts with learners' existing strategies with which they are satisfied
- inhibits inclinations towards self-direction in learning
- creates additional work or time commitments which learners are not prepared or able to invest.

On the other hand, the enthusiastically favourable response from a significant number of students suggests that efforts to develop generic skills and enhance deep learning are clearly justified and require further thought. Distance learners, it seems, are hungry for this kind of support, particularly in the early stages of their study pathways.

It is also clear is that any efforts to prompt reflection by learners on their learning and essay writing strategies will produce positive outcomes. This study triggered reflection by learners upon the strengths and weaknesses of their existing strategies, empowered them to made decisions regarding future approaches and enabled them, in some cases, to recognise the problematic nature of differing academic and disciplinary contexts.

While imposed or embedded study strategies may not be the solution to the quest for encouraging deep learning, they do at least place renewed focus on *process* rather than content, and *skills development* rather than acquisition of atomised knowledge.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Questionnaire

FUTURE OF WORK ELP QUESTIONNAIRE.

1) What was your motivation for studying at university.

a) Professional development ❐ (b) Personal interest ❐

Other

(2) Briefly describe the strategy you have used to complete an essay prior to receiving your Future of Work package.

(3) Overall how would you rate your previous success in essay assignments

Extremely successful	Very successful	Moderately successful	Slightly successful	Not at all successful
❐	❐	❐	❐	❐
1	2	3	4	5

(4) Briefly, in what ways is the evaluative learning approach (ELP) different to your usual approach?

5) What in your opinion are the strengths of the ELP?

(6) What in your opinion are the weaknesses of the ELP?

(7) To what extent do you agree that: (Please tick appropriate box)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
(a) ELP was challenging?					
(b) ELP was off-putting?					
(c) ELP was useful as a method to analyse unknown areas of knowledge					
(d) ELP is adaptable to other units.					
(e) ELP has contributed to a change in your approach to learning					

(f) ELP has given you confidence with the assessment process in the Future of Work

(g) ELP should be adopted to all units.

(8) Would you use ELP again. Tick the appropriate box.

All of the time	Most of the time	Half of the time	Some of the time	None of the time
❒	❒	❒	❒	❒
1	2	3	4	5

(9) Which stages of the ELP were the most useful for you:

	Extremely useful	Very useful	Moderately useful	Slighty useful	Not at all useful
a) Defining author's thesis					
b) Analysing the major key terms					
(c) Identifying problems for decision making					
d) The thesis building process					
e) Formulating thesis, arguments and data					
f) Developing the form and structure of the essay					
g) Formulating your final output					

(10) Any other comments

Thank you for your involvement.

Appendix 2

Questions used in telephone interviews

(1) How successful were you in the Future of Work?
    (a) If successful, was success due to ELP?

(2) How many units have you completed at SCU and other Universities?
    (a) Have you developed your own style?
    (b) Would ELP have been more useful earlier in your study pathway?

(3) Have you used the ELP in your assignments for this semester?
    (a) If yes which parts did you use?