Aspect: Positive learning and teaching strategies for students with Asperger syndrome

The project has been conducted in collaboration with the Disability team and with Professor Marie Harder. Activities have included the establishment of an interest group, consultation with the Disability team, academic staff, local voluntary organisations and in-depth interviews with people with Asperger Syndrome / Autism who have experienced Higher Education. Outputs include the development of resources and updating of available information for academic staff. Findings have been presented at a university wide meeting and at the Learning and Teaching conference 2010.


This two phase local research study explores the experiences and perceptions of International (including EU) doctoral/PhD students and supervisors in the context of supervisory relationships. The project focuses on ways in which cultural factors influence supervisory relationships, and consequently student learning and progress within their doctoral studies. The project adopts a mixed methods approach, which incorporates qualitative in-depth interviews with students and supervisors, followed by a survey across the University.

Jennie Jones and Gina Wisker presented the findings of this research, together with previous research into cross-cultural supervision, at the ICED Conference in Barcelona in June 2010 http://congresos.ultramarexpressevents.com/congress/en/iced-2010/inicio/ and at the Learning and Teaching Conference at the University of Brighton in July 2010. A short article about this research was published in Academic Practices, and a recent Talking about Teaching session focused on ways in which the research findings can inform cross-cultural supervisory practice.

National Student Survey

In 2007 Adrian Chown and Stuart Cameron of the CLT conducted a small research project to identify characteristics of those University of Brighton courses that receive high ratings in the National Student Survey. (The annual National Student Survey asks final year students to provide feedback on their courses; the information is published to help future students in choosing courses and institutions.)

The survey covers six aspects of each course:

1. teaching
2. assessment and feedback
3. academic support
4. organisation and management
5. learning resources
6. personal development

Some courses at the University of Brighton have been particularly well rated in the NSS, but the survey provides little detailed information about the particular features of these courses that students value. The project was designed to identify some of these detailed characteristics.

Online support for academic writing development: Write-On

In 2009 Jennie Jones was awarded £2,500 from HEA to complete and write a synthesis of literature and UK research into on-line support for academic writing, 'Write-On' (link 2). This focuses, firstly, on theories which demonstrate the effectiveness of the Internet, and particularly Web 2 technologies, as channels for providing both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (time-delayed) academic writing support for students and academic staff in higher education. Secondly, the synthesis describes a variety of exciting UK on-line writing support projects that are currently emerging across the sector, together with accompanying research which has been conducted. Summaries of projects and research include a synopsis of findings from a pilot study which explores the experiences of academic staff who attended the Writing for Academic Publication course at the University of Brighton in 2009.

Perceived influences of Web 2.0 technologies on the academic writing development of WAP course participants at the University of Brighton

Adopting an Appreciative Inquiry approach, a pilot research study at the University of Brighton has explored ways in which Web 2 technologies support WAP (Writing for Academic Publication) course participants in terms of their academic writing development. A second longitudinal research study (2010) is currently being conducted. The findings of this research will help to identify ways in which the on-line support provided in the WAP course has been beneficial, and may be applied in subsequent WAP courses; and ways in which such on-line support may be developed in the future. Jennie Jones & Gina Wisker have co-written and presented 2 conference papers based on their research. 'Articulate' was presented at SRHE in December 2009 and at the Pedagogic Research Conference at the University of Brighton in January 2010.

Open Minds

This was a Widening Participation research and development project relating to student mental health and wellbeing, run from the Centre for Learning and Teaching (Spring Term 2008 – 2010). Responding to current concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of students in Higher Education, the project was designed to work collaboratively with colleagues from across the university to explore ways to enhance the learning experiences of students with identified mental health difficulties and the wellbeing and success of all students. Building on previous research in this area, the project has taken a three-pronged approach to enhancing the learning experiences of students with mental health difficulties including (1) awareness raising / anti-discrimination campaigning; (2) research into inclusive practices and student experiences to underpin staff development and resources
(3) the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, linked to pedagogic practices. Download the final report here.

Learning and Teaching Fellowships within Communities of Practice

A small scale qualitative research study, adopting an Appreciative Inquiry approach was conducted (2008-2009) which explored academic staff experiences of Fellowships within Communities of Practice. The main aims of this research were to understand the ways in which Learning and Teaching Fellowships at the University of Brighton:

1. Enhanced the fellows’ own academic practice
2. Affected their professional development
3. Enhanced the academic practice and professional development of colleagues within the Fellow’s school
4. Enhanced students’ learning
5. Enhanced the success and development of learning and teaching as a result of Fellows’ membership of Communities of Practice

The research shows that the Fellowships are a truly beneficial means of enhancing academic staff pedagogic practice and professional development; and their students learning; and that some (though not all) potential obstacles to development in this context can be surmounted, because of influential factors associated with the Fellowships, and linked to Fellows’ membership of Communities of Practice. It is clear that there is a correlation between the Fellowships, and the memberships of different communities of practice which contributes to the greater success of the projects, and the sustainable growth of ensuing developments which take place as a result. It is also evident that the Fellowships are valuable in their beneficial effects on different aspects of learning, teaching and professional development. For a report of this research please follow this link.

Jennie Jones co-presented the interim findings of this research at the SEDA conference with Gina Wisker in November 2008, and presented a paper at the Learning and Teaching Conference, University of Brighton, in July 2009. An article was published in Educational Developments in December 2010 entitled ‘Learning and Teaching Fellowships within Communities of Practice: If we let them, will they grow?’. A second article entitled ‘Building Teaching Excellence: Learning and Teaching Fellowships within Communities of Practice at the University of Brighton’ is due to be published in Innovations in Education and Teaching International in May this year.

The impact of Pathfinder/E-learning intensive course redesign sessions on lecturers’ pedagogic practice

During 2007-2008, the CLT and UOB Learning Technology Advisors were involved with consultants from Oxford Brookes University in developing and delivering the HEA funded ‘Pathfinder’ e-learning course intensive redesign sessions. We accompanied this process with a longitudinal qualitative research study to explore colleagues’ experiences of these sessions; ways in which engaging in the sessions were beneficial in supporting colleagues’ incorporation of e-learning in teaching; and ways in which their plans in relation to blended e-learning developed over a six month period. Adopting an Appreciative Inquiry approach in two stages, we conducted 2
focus groups and several individual interviews with staff who attended the course redesign sessions; together with one focus group discussion with the Learning Technologies Group. The research revealed some valuable and significant findings, which provides crucial information for the University; clarifying future staff and student e-learning development needs. The research clearly demonstrated that lecturers' attendance at intensive course redesign sessions:

• Provided sufficient space and time during the sessions for course teams, and multidisciplinary teams to work together; and to brainstorm e-learning development ideas and plans.
• Developed greater staff awareness of available support from the Learning Technologies Group to help develop and embed appropriate e-learning in courses.
• Created greater academic staff recognition and respect for Learning Technologists as equal partners in the e-learning development process.
• Made a positive long term impact on academic staff attitudes towards e-learning.
• Created enduring staff enthusiasm to develop e-learning.
• Started a continuous process of sharing and disseminating e-learning practice among staff.
• Initiated progress in developing e-learning ideas, which will be embedded in courses.
• Initiated progress in e-learning development which has already been successfully embedded in courses.
• Made a perceived positive impact on students’ learning and wellbeing, and is likely to have a positive impact on their achievement.
• Contributed to the future sustainability of e-learning development across the University.

However, the findings also clarified that there were still barriers to be overcome, and solutions needed to further enhance the development of e-learning by staff at this University, which would speed up the process of e-learning sustainability. The full report is here.

Troublesome Encounters: Strategies for managing the wellbeing of Postgraduate Education students during their learning processes

This Escalate-funded project was designed to contribute new knowledge and develop theory relating to the relationship between learning, teaching and wellbeing, enabling HEIs to meet these responsibilities through learning, teaching and supervisory practices which enhance students’ wellbeing and empower their learning.

While postgraduate learning is often exciting, profound ontological anxieties and uncertainty may accompany encounters with unfamiliar concepts and ways of being, described here as troublesome knowledge. Intellectual boundaries, ways of seeing the world and teaching practices are tested and possibly transformed (Barnett, 2007; Meyer and Land, 2003; 2006) and so for Education students, this may impact on personal, academic and professional identities. Theories of threshold concepts, conceptual thresholds, and the accompanying notion of troublesome knowledge, provide a framework for approaching these challenges to ways of thinking and being in the world, as learners and educational practitioners.

This project was conducted in the context of growing concern, debates and research around student mental health and wellbeing, which in turn relate to wider debates around equity and
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sustainability. Developments such as the national Mental Health in Higher Education project, a Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education committee and the Health Promoting University movement have highlighted these concerns. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995), SENDA (2001) and the Disability Equality Duty, which came into force in 2006, along with the Duty of Care legislation require that higher education institutions attend to the wellbeing needs of their students. Through embedding wellbeing and enabling postgraduate students to build emotional resilience, this project offers a sustainable approach to the personal and learning development of Education professionals – enabling them to cope and engage with the many intellectual and professional challenges that arise. The continued promotion and development of wellbeing, to which our team are committed, has the potential for widespread health, economic and social benefits nationally and internationally. Expanding and developing the concept of wellbeing, the research will explore the personal, emotional and ontological as well as academic dimensions of postgraduate student learning. These have tended to be neglected as has the relationship between wellbeing and learning more generally (Poyatos-Matas, 2009). While previous developments have tended to focus on the physical dimension of wellbeing, this project explores affective domains of learning and intellectual wellbeing. Wellbeing enhancement strategies, for example, the development of emotional resilience (Wilkinson, 2009), will be explored and operationalised as tools to empower students to cope with risk, uncertainty and insecurity in their learning. A survey, focus groups and interviews have been conducted to investigate these issues.

Escalate_project_interim_report.pdf
ESCALATE Final report.pdf

Visual Learning

This area of research developed out of the work of the LearnHigher Centre of Excellence in Teaching (CETL), a partnership of 16 universities representing a broad cross-section of the university sector with expertise in different aspects of learning development. LearnHigher was one of 74 CETLs funded from 2005-10 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Within LearnHigher, Pauline Ridley of the CLT co-ordinates the Visual Practices learning area, which provides resources for staff and students to support the development of visual, spatial and tactile knowledge and skills in any discipline. These are not usually included in general study guides, but they are important in most subjects, including science and humanities subjects as well as art and design. Typically, they include such activities as:

- observation and recording of visual data (e.g. during field visits, laboratory work or in clinical settings);
- demonstrating and learning technical procedures of all kinds;
- evaluation and analysis of visual evidence, and the ability to use this in developing ideas and arguments;
- visual research methods;
- effective use and understanding of visual communication (sometimes known as ‘visual literacy’).