

E-Learning Study Skills Training Using Proven Pedagogies

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INTRODUCTION

Due to lack of effective study and learning skills, most leaving certificate students who enroll in degree courses in Ireland find it difficult to adapt to the vastly different higher education environment. Students find that the study strategies employed in secondary school don't always work at the university level.

For students to be successful in higher education, they need to acquire efficient and effective study, learning and professional skills (Tinto, 1994). In college, students need to become independent learners. They need to examine past experiences and make any amendments to their practices essential to surmount new challenges (Ritzen, 1996). Research has also shown that graduates do not possess the necessary skills required for full time employment (Blair & Robinson, 1995, Connelly & Middleton, 1996). In fact, it is often communication, problem-solving and interpersonal skills that distinguish those who are preferred for employment (Blair & Robinson, 1995). It is the responsibility of all higher education institutions to ensure that their students are equipped with the necessary skills that will not only assist them throughout their higher education but will also be of great benefit to them when they graduate (Marshall & Rowland, 1998).

Higher education institutions worldwide employ a variety of study/professional skills training approaches. Unfortunately the success of these have been limited due to a number of factors. One of the most significant limitations to these approaches is that they deliver study and transferable skills training using conventional methods. Research has shown study skills training is hard to achieve since skills ultimately must be adapted and personalised by the individuals to suit their needs and learning style, and therefore cannot be taught using conventional training means (Connelly & Middleton, 1996).

Consequently, there is now a drive by higher education institutions worldwide to utilise ICT-based learning systems and associated e-learning technologies (Barajas & Owen, 2000). In most cases, it has been shown that such systems coupled with multimedia technologies can provide flexible and cost-effective complementary learning environments, offering the students more control over the content to be learned, how to learn it and the pace of their learning (Sparrow et al., 2000). As a result, dynamic web-based learning environments are becoming increasingly popular as a support tool in assisting educators in creating study/training programmes that are both stimulating and engaging (Connelly & Middleton, 1996).

The work reported here addresses the important issue of study, interpersonal and professional skills training at higher education levels by investigating a solution that overcomes the short-falls of current training approaches. To achieve this we are proposing a solution in the form of an interactive study skills training system facilitated by a dynamic web-based learning environment. Specifically, we highlight the pedagogies adopted to deliver the study skills module material and how they foster and support student-centred learning.

BACKGROUND

In general, higher education institutions employ three main approaches for the development of study and transferable skills of their students: special modules as part of the course curriculum; extracurricular classes/workshops; and the provision of written and other multimedia materials. Each of which will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

Special Modules as Part of the Course Curriculum

This approach for delivering study and transferable skills' training involves the inclusion in the course curriculum modules dedicated to the development of a number of skills deemed to be of great importance to students' success in their university education and beyond. By way of example, consider the University of East London in the UK (University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2004). Students of this university are required to complete three modules centred on study, interpersonal and professional skills development. It is believed that by including these modules as part of the curriculum students may take more of an interest in acquiring and developing these necessary skills. In order for students to attain credit for the module the students may be required to complete one or more assignments and most often a final exam. This skills training approach has however one serious limitation that should be noted. The study skills modules are seen as being unrelated to the main discipline and hence perceived by the students as having little or no bearing on their course of study thus reducing motivation to complete the module to a satisfactory standard.

Extracurricular Classes/Workshops

This approach involves a series of classes/workshops usually offered centrally to various disciplines by specialised university departments. For example, in the University of Limerick the Centre for Teaching and Learning (University of Limerick, 2003) run a series of workshops covering a number of study and interpersonal skills required to succeed in higher education. Unfortunately, a number of shortcomings to this method can also be identified. Often these training methods are viewed by many students as being remedial and hence if voluntary are not attended, particularly by those who would most benefit from them (Blair & Robinson, 1995). Also, as there is no credit for the completion of these classes/workshops there is little or no motivation for students to sacrifice their personal time in order to attend. Finally, the lack of flexibility and inadequate timing of these additional courses often contribute to their poor attendance (Blair & Robinson, 1995).

The Provision of Written and Other Multimedia Materials

Many colleges and universities produce booklets, create various multimedia materials and develop websites in order to make available to their students study skills training resources. It is then up to the students discretion if they have a problem with some area of study to find the information from one of these resources so as to aid them in acquiring and developing the study skills they lack. An example of a higher education institution, which utilises this approach, is Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in the USA (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2005). The Cook Counselling Centre in this institution makes available a study skills website entitled 'Study Skills Self-Help Information'. This website provides a number of online workshops and extra study skills help pages. The online workshops present general information in a text-only linear fashion but also include a number of activities, which engage the student, and encourage them to be actively involved in their learning. These activities are designed to encourage the students to reflect on their own study habits and past experiences and accordingly apply the information presented so as to improve their study skills. As the case with the preceding approaches, there are a number of shortcomings associated with this study skills training approach. If a comprehensive booklet or any other similar resource were to be compiled it would contain a vast amount of information all of which would be relevant. As this is undesired, many of the materials produced are mere summaries or outlined guidance. Another downfall associated with this method is the generalization of the material. Each student when acquiring and developing their study skills tend to adopt and personalize their own styles, which is very difficult to achieve when presented with very general information.

Emerging Trends in Higher Education

Rather than the conventional teacher-centred model, the focus is continuously shifting to being learner-centred (Arendale, 1998). The conventional approach is to assume that learning occurs in a classroom setting, where a lecturer transmits information to a group of students in a lecture format. Although the lecturer may entertain a few questions, the student is generally a passive rather than an active participant in the learning process, and

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