

‘Getting Started’: Pre-Induction Access to Higher Education

Sue Watling
Learning and Teaching Coordinator
Centre for Educational Research and Development
University of Lincoln
Brayford Pool
Lincoln
UK
LN6 7TS
swatling@lincoln.ac.uk

Abstract: The transition to higher education poses challenges on many levels. One UK University has piloted a scheme that is designed to prepare prospective students for academic study. ‘Getting Started’ gives prospective students access to the university’s virtual learning environment, prior to induction where they are invited to post queries to a discussion board moderated by a team of support staff and tutors. In 2008 the decision was made to extend the project to include a suite of learning development materials. ‘Snapshot’ contains bite sized chunks, or ‘snapshots’, of academic practice including academic thinking, reading and writing. Each chunk of information includes an activity designed to encourage early independent, self motivated learning. These combined projects tackle the challenges of entrance into higher education for students from both traditional and non-traditional backgrounds and offer a model of good practice designed to convert offers to places and improve retention.

Introduction

‘Getting Started’ is an opportunity for prospective students to access the university’s virtual learning environment prior to induction week. Entering higher education can be a stressful experience with many students unsure of what to expect and in the weeks leading up to induction many of them find they have questions with no obvious answers. Initially, ‘Getting Started’ was seen as not only a reassurance for prospective students, but also having the potential to alleviate pressure during induction week; a traditionally busy period with extensive demands on staff and resources.

This paper will begin with an overview of the ‘Getting Started’ project before describing how it is being extended in 2008 to include the ‘Snapshot’ learning development resource. It will then examine the underpinning theory for the provision of scaffolding as student support before concluding with predicted outcomes for this dual approach to ensuring effective learning experiences.

‘Getting Started’

Prospective students on the Social Work degree are given access to a purposely designed area. This contains links to generic information about the university and specific information about their course. Social Work students in receipt of an offer of a place are sent an information pack which includes a Code of Practice and Net-Etiquette Guidelines. On receipt of the signed conduct code a learning account is set up and students sent their log in details with an invitation to access the online area. The area also contains a discussion group where students are invited to post questions to staff and make contact with other prospective social work candidates. The staff team consist of administrative, library and academic staff as well as technical support. Students have access to advice and information prior to induction week and also gain pre-course experience with the institutional online learning environment.

Common queries are about timetables, reading lists, public transport, car sharing and car parking facilities. These have been used year on year to build a Frequently Asked Question bank. Many students use the discussion group as an opportunity to express concerns about entering higher education. Not only are staff able to give reassurance but

the students themselves give support and encouragement to each other. Evaluations show these opportunities ally and share fears are greatly valued. Examples from the student voice are given below.

“I feel more prepared, as I now know essential information such as the timetable for the year. Also it has been reassuring to know that I am not the only one who is feeling nervous about starting university.”

“I think the discussion group has been really worth while. It has helped loads with answering any questions I have had and it has made me feel loads better to read that other people feel the same as me!!! I think it is really worth doing especially for people who will be in our position next year. Thanks!!!”

“It has put me in the right frame of mind....I found by accessing the site over the past few weeks I felt I had a better understanding of what might be ahead.”

Higher education can be demanding of time and motivation and managing student expectations is a critical factor for retention. Preparation opportunities for higher education provide invaluable pre-induction confidence. The ‘Getting Started’ project attempts to put in place scaffolding integral to independent learning. It provides the peer, social and task support identified as necessary for becoming self directed; a key feature of the higher education experience (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap 2003). Putting in place an activity involving online collaboration enables prospective students to have early experience of being ‘self-regulated’ (McLoughlin 2002) while participation in virtual ‘conversational frameworks’ (Laurillard 2002) prepares them for the situated online learning experiences which are integral to teaching and learning in higher education.

There is evidence that proactive management of transition is a key factor in student retention and success (Yorke & Longden, 2008). ‘Getting Started’ offers prospective social work students an opportunity to become prepared for the challenges they will face on arrival at university. It begins the process of building links between the student and their department and is a model of good practice much valued by participants.

Extending ‘Getting Started’

In 2008, a change in institutional VLE, and subsequent change in the system administration, encouraged a rethink of current provision for students prior to induction. Additional impetus was derived from the appointment of a Learning Development Coordinator to the educational development team; this prompted the revisiting of an original idea to provide pre-induction academic study materials. The decision was informed by research into retention and reasons for withdrawal given by first year undergraduate students (Yorke & Longden; 2008). The research indicated that many students have difficulty with transition to higher education in particular the expectation that they will be independent and self motivated learners. This report looked at the first year experience of higher education in the UK and found that the difference between school and university was cited as a contributory factor in student withdrawal. Examples from the student voice (Yorke & Longden; 2008) are given below.

“[I was] not well enough prepared for the difference between school life and university.”

“I did not feel prepared for study at university, it was very different from what I had been used to at grammar school.”

“I felt like I was thrown in at the deep end when lectures started.”

“Freshers week was to introduce you to the social side of university life but there was no proper introduction to studies.”

“The week lectures started I still hadn’t settled down and learned everything I wanted to from Fresher’s week. In no way do I blame the institution as I recognise I should have had more self-discipline but by the time I was ready to settle down and start working in was too late. I was so far behind with the work, it just became a downhill struggle from then on.”

Prospective students may fail to appreciate the challenge of higher education and the expectation for independent learning. Being self-directed involves multiple demands; students need to demonstrate the self discipline to manage their study, to work on their own and to organise and plan their time. Expectations are high; higher education is a different learning experience to being at school or college and an increasing number of students arriving on campus have been out of traditional education for some time. Social work in particular attracts the mature student who may already have family and other care commitments or be juggling part-time employment. Taking on the additional challenge of an undergraduate degree puts responsibility on the student to succeed and the institution has a duty to ensure appropriate support mechanisms are in place. Learning development tools are crucial to academic study and without support for their learning, new students may feel disconnected and subsequently isolated from their peers.

The decision was made to extend ‘Getting Started’ with ‘Snapshot’. ‘Snapshot’ introduces prospective students to academic practice. It identifies areas of generic learning support and uses friendly self-paced content and activities

designed to encourage participation. Access to this prior to induction is a major step towards ensuring a successful student experience.

‘Snapshot’

‘Snapshot’ comprises a set of learning development materials aimed at introducing the academic study requirements of independent learning. It is designed as a support resource informed by the principles of constructive alignment proposed by Biggs (1999); each section makes it clear to students what they need to know before offering appropriate learning activities and a concluding assessment

Navigation has been designed using a non-linear structure. This enables students to pick and choose from the Home page the areas they have most interest in. Academic Practice/Study activities include introducing the student to the ideas preferred study methods. Here is a selection of short profiles based around preferred learning styles, multiple intelligence and Visual, Aural, Read/Write, and Kinaesthetic (VARK) evaluations. This section also includes time management and organisation skills with information on reflection, internet literacy and plagiarism. Each chunk or ‘snapshot’ of information is grounded in academic practice explaining its relevance and is accompanied by interactivity designed to ensure the student ‘interacts’ with their new knowledge. Familiar concepts such as newspaper articles to introduce critical thinking, and optical illusions to demonstrate perception, help ease the transition from the known to the unknown. All areas encourage self assessment with multiple choice questions containing feedback constructed to continue the learning experience and drag-and-drop activities which use sequencing and order to reinforce learning. Students are able to find out more about the grounding elements of Academic Study including Academic Thinking, Writing, Reading and Note-Taking. Every chunk of information continues to be accompanied with interaction and all areas include sources of additional information. Students are encouraged to create their own ‘learning logs’ using the ‘Snapshot’ materials as a resource base. Finally, the Academic Language section aims to demystify the ‘jargon’ of academic study with a quiz that offers fuller explanations of terms such as assignment, dissertation and assessment criteria.

Underpinning Theory

‘Snapshot’ offers a creative approach to the rational context of effective learning development. When designing ‘Snapshot’ it was felt important to move away from a content driven style that replicated the transmission model of face-to-face delivery. Rather than passive absorption of text based resources, a more interactive environment was sought, one which supported a constructivist approach where students could engage in meaningful learning experiences. ‘Scaffolding’ is a term used to describe support, in this case support for learning and encouragement of independent thought. Such scaffolding derives from the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) defined by Vygotsky (1978) as the distance between the learner’s current level of development and their potential cognitive development, or problem solving ability. Vygotskian scaffolding consists of timely support provided by, in the case of ‘Snapshot’, the use of appropriate resource materials. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest a Vygotskian model of apprenticeship learning where an optimal learning environment offers shared opportunities for ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (LPP); the apprenticeship process being described as a process of discovering how to engage in learning. ‘Snapshot’ supports this model by offering potential students the opportunity to develop and adopt the appropriate tools for higher education. McLaughlin (2002:155) lists the characteristics of effective scaffolding which provides support as required but can be gradually withdrawn as students develop in confidence and competency. These characteristics of effective scaffolding have been identified as:

- Reducing the scope for failure in the task the learner is attempting
- Enabling learners to accomplish a task they would not be able to achieve on their own
- Moving learners to a new and improved state of understanding
- Bringing learners closer to a state of independent competence

‘Snapshot’ embraces these characteristics and adopts the role of mentor. It provides content designed to stretch the ability of potential undergraduates and ensure they are better informed about what lies ahead of them in terms of academic expectations. The nature of this support will change as students arrive on campus. ‘Snapshot’ will retain availability should content need to be revisited but will be relocated into the Learning Development Community on the institutional VLE. Here academic study support is developed in more depth and students have access to a wider range of resources including self-enrolment onto a programme of learning development workshops.

Characteristics of successful online learning environments are commonly expressed in terms of embedding social, cognitive and teaching support or presences. This support from staff or peers, who already have prerequisite skills for academic practice, not only provides effective scaffolding but creates a framework for a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) or a 'community of inquiry' (Garrison & Anderson 2003).

As previous users of Getting Started have testified, the communal support from peers, and access to additional information from online resources and university staff, provides valued support at a time of change and challenge. It is hoped that the inclusion of Snapshot will continue to be of value to prospective students.

Conclusion

'Getting Started' offers a proven opportunity to allay fears and stresses about the potentially life changing challenge of higher education. It is anticipated that extending this to include 'Snapshot' with its focus on preparation for academic practice may not only take the pressure off induction week, and give students prior access to the VLE they will be using on their studies, it will also help towards ensuring they become more effective learners. 'Snapshot' has the potential to offer a pedagogically sound and safe environment where students can experiment with content designed to help them become better prepared for what lies ahead. Its formative design and interactive nature includes question and answer techniques with carefully designed feedback constructed to extend the learning process. The availability of 'Snapshot' within 'Getting Started', and its relevant course information and discussion group, should together create a powerful tool for guiding new learners towards competence with academic practice at an early stage in their student experience.

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