

Integrating academic skills in the curriculum: a partnership approach

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Presentation abstract

Supporting our new students to make the transition to higher education, so that they stay with us and succeed beyond their first year, has been a priority focus for the University of Salford over the past 18 months. As an academic skills team, based in the Library, we have carved out an integral role for our service in responding to this challenge. Building on the prior success of a standalone eLearning programme, we have developed an extensive set of eLearning pathways and complementary learning activities designed for academics to easily and flexibly integrate into their course delivery so that every student is connected with the right academic support at the right time.

In this presentation, we aimed to share how our active blended learning approach is scalable and allows for local ownership and opportunities for contextualisation by academic colleagues. We explored how we established our role in this strategic project and the value of our partnership working with the academic community and the VLE support team. We hoped to provide helpful examples of how it has worked in practice to support students to learn how to learn at university. Finally, we sought to reflect on the journey so far – acknowledging the bumps and bends in the road – and initiate a discussion about where to go next.

We anticipated that the presentation would be of particular interest to colleagues looking to influence learning and teaching practice, practitioners supporting students with the transition to university, and those with an interest in the role of eLearning within learning development services.

Community response

The community response to this presentation provided a space for practitioners to reflect on the ways in which e-learning design could facilitate an embedded approach to academic skills at their institutions; it also prompted reflection on the potential for collaboration between learning developers and Faculties.

Firstly, there was an acknowledgement that this type of project could potentially stimulate a 'culture shift' which required a level of commitment to, and investment in, using the resources from the academics or Faculty colleagues delivering modules. Respondents recognised that this is naturally more challenging where learning developers are not embedded in academic or disciplinary schools. Others noted how significant it was that the presenters had successfully advocated for the use of the materials within particular courses and modules and that academics had 'curated' and 'adapted the materials for this purpose. Similarly, others shared their own journeys in attempting to embed skills into curriculum areas using features such as the Reading List Online (RLO) function in BlackBoard which academics could then choose to switch on or off. With this project, the evidence was that students preferred these resources to be carefully selected and embedded into the area where the assessment is placed. There was an acknowledgement here that academic colleagues are, in many cases, trying to embed academic skills but 'careers, employability, sustainability, and graduate attributes' can compound the issue.

Secondly, it is clear that practitioners in our community were interested in applying learning from this project in the context of their own organisations and organisational structures. One respondent noted that they had been exploring ways in which they might create some 'curated learning pathways' with resources that could punctuate the academic year and be 'anchored within the curriculum'. This would guard against the 'front loading' of 'skills acquisition' that typically happens at the point of induction. Others similarly noted that this model would support the structure of support throughout the student lifecycle and could be replicated using VLE content for students.

Thirdly, practitioners from the community were considering how they could apply learning from the presentation in relation to particular student cohorts. One respondent noted, for example, the relevance of this approach for apprenticeship students who are supported

online and are often working full-time. It was also clear that facilitating student choice was key, with a 'pick and mix' approach allowing something tailored to individual needs.

Authors' reflections

Introduction

With this presentation, we chose to share a large, ambitious, and still-in-progress piece of work. It is rewarding to see, through both the live chat and the generous, rigorous audience responses within this collaborative writing piece, how it resonated with people across different institutions. We are glad to have offered some food for thought when it comes to tackling a challenge that many of us wrangle with: how to help as many students as possible to benefit from learning development by embedding it into the heart of their learning experience – their course. We recognise, though, that because we chose such a large topic we had to leave a lot out, and this was frustrating (or, if we might frame it more positively, tantalising) for some. We therefore take this unusual opportunity for post-conference reflection and dialogue to address participants' questions and responses, elaborating on the main themes where there was an appetite to know more or where we realise we neglected something important. In the spirit of exchange which ran through the conference, we then draw out some of the connections and thinking that other parts of the conference activated for us, and indicate key areas for future development we have identified as a result.

Extending the dialogue: responses to audience questions/comments

The question of how we achieved academic buy-in to integrate our content into their modules was the one most often raised. In our presentation, we touched on some of those critical success factors: the institutional strategic project which set an expectation that first-year students should receive essential academic support through their course to support their transition and the long history of effective relationship-building between our team and academics. We also shared that, in spite of these enablers, we have by no means reached or convinced everyone. This is true of some programmes that had not previously engaged with our provision, and of other programmes which have engaged with us in the past but had seen us as providers rather than partners. In these latter cases it has sometimes been challenging to shift the conversation away from what we can do for them and towards how

they might do things differently in their own teaching. The many rich discussions on the subject of academic engagement across the conference gave us some pride in where we've got to, but also a sense of mutual support and solidarity around the difficulties of reaching the hard to reach. Last year, we had significant work to do even to reach those who were willing; the conference has made us think hard about how we might further develop our strategies for engaging those other groups.

Where we started – to answer the question some participants asked us – is a) by working with senior leaders in Schools, who set an expectation and created opportunities for us to engage with their teams; and b) by making it as easy and flexible as possible for busy academics to make good use of our resources, for example, providing a toolkit of complementary learning activities they can adopt in their own teaching (this toolkit is a work in progress, with far more to do). That said, there were technicalities to negotiate around how to set up the content in the VLE, which meant that sometimes the deeper, more valuable conversations about why and how to integrate academic skills development into the learning experience took a back seat to practical questions, so we are now focusing hard on simplifying the technical side of things as far as we can. And while the institutional strategic project has been an important enabler, it is no quick or easy matter to land that kind of strategic change, especially in the shadow of a pandemic and external turbulence, so that hasn't been a silver bullet either. We know – and hearing others with similar challenges at the conference reinforced the fact – that to achieve our goals we need to sustain momentum, hold to our principles, and seek every opportunity to hook into wider institutional projects and priorities. We know this kind of change takes more than one cycle – indeed, probably more than three – and sharing our challenges and successes with ALDinHE has provided just the kind of energising boost we need to do just that.

Another set of questions and comments related to how our eLearning was delivered and to whom, and its relationship to the rest of our offer. On a practical note, in terms of the learning technology we use, Amy Pearson is our eLearning developer who builds much of our content using Articulate Storyline. But as we grow our eLearning offer, and work towards a fully blended offer where we use eLearning content as an integral part of both synchronous and asynchronous teaching, we need to ensure it is not too labour intensive to create, update, or adapt. We are therefore now also using an authoring tool called Articulate Rise which is simple and quick to learn, so we are starting to grow our capacity for eLearning development by upskilling other colleagues in the team. We welcomed

colleagues' interest in our eLearning, and are always happy to share what we do: indeed, apart from the quizzes we use to check learning which sit within our VLE, the rest of our content is openly available via www.salford.ac.uk/skills.

The digital-first model we shared in our presentation is the one we are using to integrate essential introductory academic skills content in a scalable way across as many level 3 and 4 programmes as possible. So far, our attention has been on level 3-4 education and supporting the transition to HE. However, as was suggested at the conference, our intention is to develop content to support key transition/stress points at levels 5 and 6 over the coming two years and to roll this out using a similar model. At later levels, we expect more discipline-specificity to be necessary, so will need more of a focus on empowering programme teams, and likely a smaller core of generic eLearning. We are keen to share this next phase with the learning development community at that point, as we have more to learn about supporting those transition points. Alongside the model we shared in our presentation, our team also still very much does create and deliver – and where possible co-create and co-deliver – sessions within programmes. This is particularly the case at level 5 and above, but at levels 3 and 4 too there are programmes where more intensive or in-person Library-led interventions are valuable and necessary. Crucially, creating our eLearning pathways cuts out multiple repetitions of the basics and allows for flipped classroom approaches, so the time we spend with students can be more interactive and specific to their course. But this is only one step on the journey towards a rich, active blended learning offer: until relatively recently our eLearning and our classroom teaching were separate, and we still have more to do within our own practice to deepen their integration. In terms of how we influence academic practice, too, our ideal of a set of 'pick 'n' mix' content which academics contextualise, build on and bring to life in their own teaching requires capability, capacity, and buy-in which will take far longer to achieve. This is, evidently, a major barrier for many in the learning development community, and is the reason we have re-introduced a standalone option that students can be signposted to where a fully integrated approach is not yet feasible. Hearing from other institutions where creative solutions to this challenge have been introduced – notably the 'Integrated Learning Support' model in place at Northampton – has been a particularly valuable takeaway for us, which we are already starting to talk about with senior colleagues at Salford.

We were asked about whether it is equitable for some programmes to make some of this content part of an assessment (formative or summative) when others don't. The question of the equity and rigour of whether and how it is assessed is something we considered, in dialogue with our Quality team. Completion of our eLearning alone should not result in credit, but, as with any other learning resource, students' understanding and application of knowledge can be assessed through, for example, a reflective piece on their personal or professional development so far, *if* this aligns with the programme learning outcomes and assessment strategy. That is a decision for the academic programme team, depending both on assessment methods and on the extent to which they are integrating and scaffolding academic skills development within their teaching. Encountering our eLearning should be different on different programmes, if it is to be part of a coherent, contextualised learning experience.

Reflections on future work

So what are we going to do with the feedback and reflections the ALDinHE conference has generated for us? Sharing our work with the learning development community has been valuable and energising, and there are a number of actions we want to take in response to the audience responses and the conference more widely. There were three areas that provoked and inspired us above all: one related to the topics we cover; another to how we are measuring engagement and impact; and a third to how we can better share our work and learn from the wisdom of the LD community on an ongoing basis.

In relation to content: wellbeing is already a key feature in our work, but we returned from the conference inspired to further strengthen the 'golden threads' running through our resources relating to independent learning, belonging, and self-efficacy – all in the context of Covid-19 – all of which were explored in varied and creative ways on the conference programme. The exceptional opening keynote by Maha Bali on compassion, equity, and social justice in higher education prompted us to think about how we could more fully address issues of social justice and develop even more inclusive and participatory pedagogical strategies within our eLearning.

How we are measuring engagement and evaluating impact was both a question raised by participants and arose in our own reflection, prompted by hearing about so much excellent action research across the field of learning development at the conference. While we have

engagement measures in place, these are imperfect due to the reporting functionality we have access to, but we have shifted our approach for the coming year which should enable us to paint a far richer picture. Still, we have not yet adopted the kind of research methodology that would allow us to meaningfully evidence impact. We are conscious of the complex factors involved that would make it impossible to claim direct causal impact on student outcomes; however, there is of course value to telling a compelling story about our contribution to those outcomes. We have work to do here as a team and as an institution to embed pedagogical research practice in our everyday work. We have started to build this through recent small-scale research bids, but we have come away from the conference with new motivation and ideas to help us facilitate a more research-informed approach at Salford, given the value it has for our services, our institutional profile, and our colleagues' professional development.

Finally, we intend to invest more in sharing our practice with the community. There was real interest and appetite to see what our eLearning looks like, and to understand how we engage academics, which we could only skim the surface of during our presentation. We want to think through how we might make more of our resources open (we're already looking to build toolkits for our academics – could these be of wider benefit?). And we, along with other colleagues from our team who have been instrumental to creating and delivering this work, intend to use other ALDinHE channels (including an LD@3 session) to continue the enriching dialogue that began at the conference and runs through this innovative writing project.

Next steps and additional questions

The community response demonstrated an appetite for further discussion of this model of support and ways in which it has been or could be, evaluated. Ongoing questions for our community include:

- Would the authors be willing to share their learning at an LD@3 presentation?
- Would the authors be willing to share examples of their quizzes and activities?
- How should we measure engagement for projects like this one?
- Should we as learning development practitioners have a forum for discussing successes and challenges with embedding skills?

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