

Using student feedback to develop resources for time management in Higher Education

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“Time management is the skill which above all others can make the difference between graduating and drop out.” - *Pickford & Brown (2006)*(1).

Introduction

This paper is an early progress report on a research project concerning best-practice study resources to support the development of time management practices in Higher Education students.

The Study Advice team at the University of Reading are responsible for the learning area of Time Management within the LearnHigher CETL. LearnHigher’s objectives are to use practice led enquiry to produce: a sound evidence base to ground learning development practices; a bank of best practice resources, which relate directly to student needs. The project described here relates specifically to the second aim, but inevitably also has relevance for the first. It was grounded in our everyday experiences as University Study Advisers, advising students on an individual basis, and developing resources such as paper and online study guides, lectures and workshops.

In developing new resources on study practices, the areas that needed addressing included:

- **content**, e.g. what kind of advice had proved in practice to be effective;
- **provision**, e.g. what kind of advice was currently unavailable or available but could be improved upon;
- **demand**, e.g. what students felt was needed;
- **access**, e.g. how to maximise the utility of resources by considering issues like dissemination and preferred formats.

Information about current practice was collated from two sources: anecdotal evidence was gained by speaking to students about their needs and the success or otherwise of suggested strategies; more structured feedback was collected on existing resources on time management. Following reflection on these data, new resources were developed, which were in turn assessed. Through this ‘action research’ approach, an iterative cycle of practice, evaluation, reflection and development of best-practice resources has been established which we anticipate playing a central role during and after the life of the CETL. At the same time, the process models the Self-Regulated Learning style we hope to foster in our students. (2)

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Supporting good time management practices in university students

As learning developers, our focus is on enabling students in HE to develop their study practices and become effective independent learners. Managing time effectively is central to successful independent learning. Success in all other study practices depends on the ability to use time efficiently in order to manage increasingly complex academic demands, often in addition to extra-academic commitments.

However time management practices are seldom seen by academic teaching staff as an academic issue. In 2005-6, at the University of Reading, only one degree programme handbook out of 31 offered any advice on the topic. In contrast, study practices which promote communication (such as essay and report writing, referencing or oral presentations) are increasingly understood as an integral part of the learning process (see, for instance Robert Barrass's insistence that 'Scientists must write!' (3)). This is matched with a growing number of Reading depts offering subject specific advice on such practices in course handbooks and embedded as part of subject teaching. Developing time management practices is delegated to other student support providers working outside of subject modules, including the University Study Advice team. Thus most of the advice available on time management to students at Reading is generic rather than subject-based, and voluntary rather than embedded.

This raises two issues. Firstly, are generic resources appropriate for time management, and if not, could resources be developed on a 'reusable learning objects' model, to be adapted by depts for incorporation in subject modules? Secondly, how could we reach and engage with students who needed time management advice, but might not be aware of the support available, or might feel it was not appropriate to them? These have crystallised as research questions which we hope to answer as a result of this project.

Pickford & Brown (2006) note that "students sometimes believe that effective time management is a characteristic rather than behaviour, that is, something that you inherently have or have not, rather than a pattern of activity that can be learned." (4) This may be supported by our experience of students seeking advice at Reading, who tend to focus on developing practices which they see as action-based: how can I improve my essay writing? Give a good oral presentation? Get better marks in exams? In an online survey of students who had had one-to-one advice sessions in 2005-6, there was an increase of 10% in relation to time management when we asked consecutively: what did you originally seek advice on, and what did you receive advice on? The same result was verbalised by students attending focus groups on paper resources on time management. A typical remark was made by a Final year student who said, "I wish I'd known that I could get help with this when I was trying to write my dissertation". It seems then that there is a need for time management resources which is apparently not matched by demand because of misunderstandings about what can be learnt. A key challenge for this project will be, not only to provide best practice resources, but to find ways to engage students in utilising them: essentially to normalise learning how to manage one's study time.

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Original resources and feedback

It is a commonplace to note that consumers do not ask for services that they do not know exist. As described above, many students are unaware that time management can be learned. This suggested possible difficulty in achieving informed responses when surveying students on what kind of study resources they thought were needed.

An approach that attempted to avoid this problem entailed using our existing resources as a ‘jumping-off’ point. The original resources were:

- Organising Yourself and Managing Your Time: detailed Study Guide in A4 booklet format; the same text presented as a webpage;
- Managing Your Time: workshop.

We had previously used feedback forms collected at the end of workshops to refine material for the next delivery. This practice was expanded with focus groups on paper resources and online surveys on web-based and other resources. Participants were selected in various ways, with selection appearing to affect the tone of responses. Voluntary attendance at the workshop produced a self-selected group, and feedback was correspondingly more positive. An online survey of students who had attended one-to-one advice sessions were generally positive about these sessions (perhaps because of the relationship established between adviser and student), but gave more varied responses to questions about other resources. Focus groups were recruited partly by advertising on the University online noticeboard, and partly by approaching passing students on the day. They produced the most varied set of responses from students who had not yet developed a relationship with the Study Advice service.

The main points arising from these evaluations were:

1. Study Guides had too much text - it was difficult to find information about any particular aspect, and there was simply too much to read especially if you were to pick it up when you were in a situation of crisis over time management.
2. Advice felt very prescriptive - comments that “not everyone works the same way” were typical. In particular, the extensive use of bullet points was felt to encourage this impression.
3. Resources were not attractive and engaging - it was felt that the addition of illustrations and humour would help to address this.
4. The paper Study Guide’s A4 booklet format made it feel too much like lecture notes - it was felt that it might easily get lost amongst other pieces of paper.
5. There were concerns about ease of access, for instance taking time to attend a workshop at a specified time, knowing about the availability of Study Advice resources, and how to contact or even physically find the service itself, despite its central location on the main university campus. It was felt that those who needed help most wouldn’t find it.

We responded to these points in our development of the next series of resources:

1. New leaflet with ten headings on cover as brief aide-memoire, expanded inside to one paragraph per point. Special attention paid to improving navigation in online resources.
2. More reflective exercises in workshop to encourage self-knowledge of learning preferences and practices.
3. Added pictures and adopted more light-hearted tone of writing in paper and online resources.

4. Used single-sheet tri-folded leaflet with ten brief tips on front, suitable for pinning- up on noticeboard and differentiated from A4 format of lecture notes.
5. Online interactive version of workshop with links to downloadable workbook and external websites. Complete re-design of Study Advice website and wider dissemination of information about Study Advice at targeted periods (i.e. revision planning advice prior to exam periods), and through other services that students access (Library, Student Union, dept secretaries and administrators).

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New resources and feedback

The following new resources were produced:

- Ten Top Tips for Managing Your Time: brief single page tri-folded leaflet; the same text presented as a fully navigable webpage;
- Meeting Your Deadlines: a workshop with dedicated workbook containing a series of exercises designed to promote reflection on study practices; the same workshop as an online interactive study guide with links to downloadable workbook for reflective exercises plus links to external websites.

Student feedback on these resources was again elicited through online and paper questionnaires and individual interviews. In each case a more structured approach was taken. With the Ten Top Tips resource, the cohort was broadened by presenting the resource as part of core module lectures to a ‘captive’ or at least non-voluntary audience.

Other new resources produced which included advice on time management but were not evaluated as part of this project included:

- Planning your revision: A5 paper leaflet with advice on planning time when preparing for exams; the same text presented as a fully navigable webpage;
- Planning and structuring exam answers: A5 paper leaflet with advice on planning time when preparing for exams; the same text presented as a fully navigable webpage.

In addition, a pilot ‘kit’ for teaching staff was produced containing resources for embedding advice on effective exam preparation practices in subject revision sessions. This included resources on planning use of time for revision and in the exam room.

With the Ten Top Tips leaflet, the same information was presented to 1st year undergraduate students in three depts (Classics, Geography, Psychology) representing three of the four faculties of the university. Students were given access to the information in three formats: a brief oral presentation given at the end of a core module lecture (aiming to get maximum attendance); paper copies of the leaflet; a web-based version of the same text made accessible through the VLE (Blackboard) for the subject module. Timing was significant; previous experience suggested that students tend to discard such information if given early in the course, before the need for it has become apparent. For all three groups, the resource was delivered in Week 6 of a 10 week term: after they had received coursework tasks and had begun to become aware of the scale of planning and organisation they needed to achieve. At the beginning of the following term (i.e. after the first set of assignments had been due), students were sent an email invitation to complete an online survey, with the incentive of a prize draw for a £20 book token. Approximately

20% of the students contacted completed the survey. They were also asked to volunteer for more detailed interviews; these are scheduled to take place this term.

For the Meeting Your Deadlines workshop, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on their time management practices before the session started. They were then asked to give feedback on the workshop at the end of the session. The online version included a link to an online evaluative survey.

The main points arising from these evaluations were:

1. Complaints about size, wordiness, prescriptiveness and lack of engagement made with the original resources did not recur.
2. In total 96.4% of the students who actively used the resource said that it had helped them to improve their time management.
3. With the Ten Top Tips resource, the paper leaflet and oral presentation were preferred over the online format (45.5% preferred paper, 29.5% oral presentation, 4.5% online). Students felt that information in the paper format was easier to remember, to understand and particularly to use (73.9%). This result was unexpected in view of the current orthodoxy in teaching and learning that students prefer to use online resources where available. (5) It highlighted the need to always provide access to printable versions of online resources.
4. When asked what was missing from the resources, 85.7% wanted more on time wasting. There was a similar response from the workshop attendees.
5. The point that all students are not the same was repeated in a separate context, when some students noted that specific student groups might need different advice at different times. Comments included: “Research postgraduates need advice on managing big projects”; and “More specific help for mature students who end up wearing lots of different hats.”

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Future plans

We envisage this iterative process of practice, evaluation, reflection and development continuing beyond the life of the LearnHigher CETL. In the immediate future, following the generally positive tone of the second set of evaluations, we intend to start by putting the new resources already developed into wider circulation, both at Reading and (via the LearnHigher website) to the rest of the HE sector. In addition we plan to:

1. Research and develop new paper and online resources on aspects related to time wasting including procrastination and motivation.
2. Research and develop targeted resources e.g. for mature students, freshers, research postgraduates.
3. Consider how to encourage greater involvement in both the development and the delivery of time management advice by academics.

A potential problem with the practice-led methodology of LearnHigher is that it tends to focus attention on a single student community (in our case, Reading) who may have significantly different experiences to students at other HEIs. This has become apparent

through discussing the results so far with other LearnHigher partners. It is anticipated that research in Year 3 of the project into time management needs for particular student profiles ((3) in the first list) will suggest ways of making the resources produced by this project relevant to students both at Reading and beyond.

Research for the LearnHigher project impacts directly on the service provided by the University Study Advice team at Reading. Planned actions locally as a result of data gained by the project so far include:

- Pressing depts to accept more embedded delivery of study advice on time management, supported by the evidence of 96.4% students saying that their time management practices had been improved by access to resources.
- Developing more resource ‘kits’ for teaching staff following the success of the pilot kit on exam resources. This venture has already received the support of our University Sub-Committee on the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, who have proposed that every member of academic staff be automatically enrolled on the VLE course.
- Developing more interactive online workshops and courses to be delivered via the university’s VLE (Blackboard) to give students better access to reflective learning development tools.
- Work on accessing the opinions of a wide cohort of students who would not usually have contact with the Study Advice service. In pursuit of this we have been building links with the Student Union and hope to collaborate with them in using their facilities (online and public space) to make contact with this group of students.

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References

1. Ruth Pickford and Sally Brown, *Assessing Skills and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2006), 47.
2. On Self-Regulated Learning, see for instance B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunk (eds.), *Self-regulated learning and academic achievement: Theory, research, and practice* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1989).
3. Robert Barrass, *Scientists Must Write* (London: Routledge, 2002).
4. Pickford and Brown, 49.
5. It may be the case that evidenced heavy use of web resources in researching assignments is motivated primarily by difficulties in accessing books and journals.

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