

## A discipline-based undergraduate skills module

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*This paper describes the development and evaluation of a discipline-based skills module at Level 1 in the undergraduate psychology curriculum. The module combined generic and subject-specific skills teaching, linked skills provision with the personal tutor system and included practical exercises to promote deep learning and improve study skills. Student feedback showed that workshops and tutorials on essay writing were the most valued part of the module. The module assessment (a coursework essay about skills in higher education) was the part that most students asked to change. The response of psychology tutors was mixed and many tutors initially expressed misgivings about teaching generic skills. Following feedback from both students and tutors, the module developed to allow closer integration between generic skills and subject-specific teaching. Student progression across the psychology programme as a whole was not markedly higher after the introduction of the module by comparison with before, but other factors may also have affected student progression during that period. The module was designed to support student learning in psychology but, with adaptations of content, the approach of linking skills provision with subject-specific teaching and the personal tutor system could be applied in a range of other disciplines.*

### INTRODUCTION

'Skills' have been the focus of many recommendations and initiatives in higher education during the last decade. 'Study skills' have long been recognised as important aspects of student support, especially in relation to the 'baseline skills' of entrants to higher education, who, with widening participation, increasingly include individuals with little confidence or expertise in advanced study (Hall *et al.*, 2001; Warren, 2002). 'Transferable skills', 'generic skills' or 'key skills', especially those with relevance to employability, have also been identified as important learning outcomes in their own right. One of the recommendations of the National Enquiry into the Future of Higher Education in the UK was that learning outcomes should be formulated in terms of key skills (Dearing, 1997). In line with that, benchmarking statements for degree courses include both subject skills and generic skills (QAA, 2002a).

Skills teaching can be provided in a number of ways, but there is growing recognition of the value of discipline-based provision. Students often perceive little connection between skills teaching and their subject learning (Lucas *et al.*, 2001; Norton and Dickins, 1995). In one report, discipline-based study skills programmes were better attended and in greater demand among students than generic study skills courses (Durkin and Main, 2002). Discipline-based skills training allows generic skills to be related more directly to subject-specific studying, so that the relevance of generic skills is clearer to students and allows skills training to be integrated with students' programmes of study and other discipline-based mechanisms for student support.

One form of discipline-based student support that can play an important role in the delivery of skills teaching is the personal tutor system. In the 'curriculum model' (Earwaker, 1992, in Owen, 2002), personal tuition is incorporated in a module of the programme of study. A pilot scheme for such a tutorial module, with timetabled weekly classroom meetings between small groups of students and their personal tutors, produced encouraging results.

*The module was thought to bring about better relationships between staff and students and among students themselves, there was small group teaching of skills, obvious familiarity with the personal tutor, and the incorporation of personal tutoring with academic teaching. (Owen, 2002, p. 22).*

Psychology provides excellent opportunities for the integration of subject skills and generic skills teaching, as the psychology benchmarking statement recognises:

*Psychology is distinctive in the rich and diverse range of attributes it develops, drawing, as it does, on skills that are associated both with studying in the humanities (e.g. critical thinking, essay writing) and the sciences (hypothesis-testing, numeracy).*

*In addition, the nature of the discipline, and the kinds of learning opportunities that it provides, allow students to develop a special blend of generic skills which can be underpinned by their own formal knowledge of psychological processes. For example, communication skills can be enhanced by knowledge of theories of communication, critical thinking can be underpinned by knowledge of cognitive biases, and group work can be supported by knowledge of group processes (QAA, 2002b, p. 4).*

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In 1998-1999, a discipline-based skills module was incorporated in the undergraduate psychology programme at London Guildhall University (now London Metropolitan University). The module has now been in operation for several academic years and this article describes its design, development and evaluation.

## DESIGNING THE MODULE

### Background

At the university, the Learning Development Unit (LDU) offers an impressive range of optional courses and classes in generic and study skills that are delivered by specialist study skills tutors and are open to students from every subject area, including psychology. The discipline-based skills module was designed to complement the generic skills provision offered by the LDU and was introduced as part of a comprehensive review of the undergraduate psychology programme. The module ran in the first semester of Level 1 and was taken by all Level 1 students on the BSc Psychology programme (107 students in 1998-1999). The rationale for the emphasis on skills in the programme review was that

- widening participation in higher education meant that first year psychology undergraduates had increasingly variable baseline skills;
- generic skills were expected to become an important element of the benchmark standards for teaching in psychology; and
- study skills had been identified as an important influence on student progression and achievement in psychology.

The decision to adopt a discipline-based approach was informed by the department's needs to

- consolidate the benefits students obtained from the psychology induction programme;
- increase students' awareness and understanding of the recently developed assessment criteria for psychology assignments;
- increase the effectiveness of the personal tutor system;
- maximise the numbers of students exposed to skills training and increase student awareness of the optional skills classes offered by the Learning Development Unit;
- promote independent learning on the part of students; and
- promote greater participation in seminar work in psychology and increase the benefits students obtained by attending and participating in seminars.

The module was discipline-based in that it was part of the psychology curriculum and involved regular small group sessions led by students' personal tutors. It also involved a generic skills element, however, in that some of the sessions were taken by study skills tutors

from the university's Learning Development Unit (LDU). We believed the module would benefit from the considerable specialist expertise in generic skills that was available from the LDU and we hoped that, by exposing all students on the programme to LDU tutors, the uptake of optional LDU skills classes by psychology students would be increased.

### Syllabus

The syllabus needed to include at least some of the generic skills specified by the psychology benchmarking statement (QAA, 2002b). This requires that psychology graduates:

- 'can communicate ideas and research findings by written, oral and visual means;
- can interpret and use numerical, statistical and other forms of data;
- are computer literate, at least in the use of word processing, databases and statistical software;
- can approach problem solving in a systematic way;
- can be aware of contextual and interpersonal factors in groups and teams;
- can undertake self-directed study and project management in a supportive environment; and
- recognise the need to assess their own skills and to harness them for future learning' (QAA, 2002b, p. 8).

In addition, the syllabus needed to support student achievement in assessments for other psychology modules, the weakest aspect of which was examination performance, support greater participation in psychology seminars and increase the benefits obtained from the psychology induction programme, especially those related to academic services, including the library.

The syllabus shown in Table 1 was implemented in a programme of 11 small group sessions delivered on alternate weeks by students' personal tutors in psychology and Learning Development Unit (LDU) study skills tutors. The workshops led by LDU skills tutors were designed to provide a 'specialist' generic element to the module and encourage students to appreciate the value of generic skills. The tutorials led by psychology tutors were designed to cement relationships between students and the member of the psychology staff who would be their personal tutor throughout their undergraduate psychology programme, and encourage students to make more, and more appropriate, use of the personal tutor system. They were also designed to make explicit links between generic skills and the Level 1 psychology programme, and to support student learning and achievement across the psychology programme. To achieve this, specific exercises were designed for the tutorials, together with reading from a discipline-based core text for the unit (Heffernan, 1997). For several tutorials there were also preparatory exercises for students to conduct beforehand.

**Table 1**

The skills module syllabus

Week	Type of activity	Session leader	Topic (tutorial exercise)	Assignment/preparatory exercise
1	Tutorial	Psychology personal tutor	Introduction and orientation	Identify forthcoming lecture for Week 3 lecture consolidation exercise
2	Workshop	LDU study skills tutor	Study skills and independent learning	
3	Tutorial	Psychology personal tutor	Listening and note-taking (lecture consolidation exercise)	Locate and study readings from a list supplied by the tutor for Week 5 library exercise
4	Workshop	LDU study skills tutor	Essay writing: structure, planning and research	
5	Tutorial	Psychology personal tutor	Use of library and reading (library exercise)	Make notes on readings for Week 7 seminar exercise
6	Workshop	LDU study skills tutor	Essay writing: analysis, grammar and presentation	
7	Tutorial	Psychology personal tutor	Learning in seminars (seminar exercise)	
8	Workshop	LDU study skills tutor	Revision and examination techniques	
9	Tutorial	Psychology personal tutor	Introduction to assessment criteria	Mark specimen essays using the assessment criteria for Week 10 essay marking exercise
10	Tutorial	Psychology personal tutor	Application of assessment criteria (essay marking exercise)	
11	Tutorial	Psychology personal tutor	Revision and examinations	

Note: LDU = Learning Development Unit

### Tutorial exercises

The exercises associated with each of the tutorials were designed to increase active, independent student learning and to consolidate links between generic skills and discipline-based content. This did not mean necessarily that psychology theory and research were applied to skills, but that skills were presented in the context of the study of psychology. For example, the autumn semester Level 1 psychology programme included modules on cognitive, developmental and social psychology, and students had seminars on topics such as memory, attachment and conformity, with associated coursework assignments to complete during the semester in which the skills module ran. The tutorial exercises were designed to link to the lectures and seminars on those topics that students were attending and the coursework they were undertaking, so that tutorials would promote relevant study skills but also reinforce subject learning.

In Week 1, students were asked to identify a forthcoming psychology lecture that all students in the group would be attending and to bring their notes from that lecture to the tutorial in Week 3. The lecture consolidation exercise in that tutorial focused on note-

taking skills, different note-taking strategies and what psychology the students had learnt from the lecture.

In Week 3, students were asked to prepare for the library exercise in Week 5 by locating and reading a research paper, journal article or book chapter from the library. Each student was assigned a different item of reading, but each group focused on a single topic that was part of the psychology teaching in other modules taking place at that time. This could include locating reading that related to a current coursework assignment. The aim was to get students into the library and consolidate the introduction to the library system that was part of the induction programme, but also to link their learning about the library to their study of psychology. The Week 5 tutorial then dealt with using the library effectively and using the reading material effectively, including the importance of abstracts or summaries, differences between types of reading material, locating key information in reading and dealing with complicated or detailed sections of reading material.

The seminar exercise in Week 7 was designed to develop the skills needed for more effective participation in seminars. It consisted of a discussion

that approximated an academic seminar but focused on material already familiar to students from the library exercise and was conducted in a more informal and supportive way. It included opportunities for students to raise and discuss issues like their uncertainties about what is expected in seminar work, what kind of preparation is needed for seminars and what factors inhibit or prevent students from participating during seminars.

The tutorials on assessment criteria in Weeks 9 and 10 focused on the recently developed departmental assessment criteria, which specified the standards expected at each grade band for each of seven aspects of students' assignments, in the form of a matrix of grade descriptions (Elander, 2002). The tutorial exercises were similar to interventions developed elsewhere that used assessment criteria in workshops to improve students' understanding of the assessment process (Price *et al.*, 2003).

*Any consideration of a department's assessment strategies should surely therefore consider at least the inclusion of marking exercises in year one module or modules, as an important part of the students' skills development (Rust, 2002, p. 152).*

In Week 9 there was a discussion about what criteria such as 'addressing the question', 'critical evaluation' and 'development of argument' really mean and what markers look for in students' work when they make judgements about those criteria. Specimen essays on topics relevant to Level 1 psychology were then given to students, along with the assessment criteria, and students were asked to mark the essays themselves, using the criteria, in advance of the Week 10 tutorial. The essay marking exercise in Week 10 then focused on how the assessment criteria applied to the essays, what students saw as the strengths and weaknesses of the essays, and how those points could be applied to students' own work.

The tutorial on revision and examinations in Week 11 focused on the application of generic revision and examination techniques to psychology examinations, using past examination papers and the forthcoming psychology examination timetable.

### Form of assessment

The assessment for the module was a coursework essay with titles that invited students to reflect on the role of generic and study skills in higher education, the relevance of skills to the study of psychology, and ways in which students had applied generic skills in their own studies. The rationale was to encourage students to reflect on the role of study skills in higher education and provide further formative feedback on a form of assessment (essay writing) that was widely used in both coursework and examinations in psychology modules. The psychology programme depended quite heavily on essays for student assessment at this time and essay writing practice was expected to support student achievement in other parts of the programme. The titles used in the first year were: *Assess the importance of study skills as a component of university education* and *"Study skills are the key to academic success". Discuss.*

Those used in subsequent years included:

*Studying psychology involves developing both subject-specific and transferable skills. Describe the skills that you have used so far at university, and discuss how you would expect those and other skills to be helpful to you after you have graduated;*

*Discuss the relevance of academic skills to employability, relating your answer to the YP127 skills workshops and the skills a psychology student would need when they enter the job market;*

*What kinds of skills are involved in successful study at university, and how are these relevant to the study of psychology?*

*"The development of key transferable skills is more important than developing subject specific skills". Discuss this view in terms of the skills you believe would help a psychology student to gain employment after graduation.*

### EVALUATION OF THE MODULE

The evaluation of the module drew on three sources of information: student feedback, feedback from tutors, and student progression data for the BSc Psychology programme as a whole during the period before and after the introduction of the module.

#### Student feedback

Student feedback was elicited using the classic 'Stop-Start-Continue' method: a short three-item questionnaire that requested free-format comments about the module under three headings. 1) Unsuccessful features that should be changed (stop), 2) things we don't do at present but would be helpful (start) and 3) useful features that should be continued (continue). The psychology tutors also canvassed student opinion about the module during the penultimate tutorial and passed those comments to the module organiser at a tutors' meeting immediately afterwards (see *Feedback from tutors* below).

A summary of the results of the questionnaire survey conducted at the end of the semester in which the module ran, in the first year of operation, is shown in Table 2. There were a total of 32 'stop' comments, 29 'start' comments and 71 'continue' comments, so in terms of the numbers of comments made, the student response was broadly positive. (The Table shows only those comments made by two or more students – comments not shown in the table included a wide range of both general and specific aspects of the module.) Student opinion was often divided, so that certain aspects of the module (for example the library exercise) were commented on both as successful and unsuccessful features. The aspects of the module that were most valued by students were the workshops and tutorials on essay writing and there was evidence that students would have liked even more time devoted to aspects of essay writing. However, the form of module assessment (a coursework essay) was the feature of the module most frequently nominated for change.

**Table 2**

Summary of student feedback on the module (numbers of students making each type of suggestion are given in brackets)

<b>Stop</b> ('Unsuccessful features that should be changed')	<b>Start</b> ('Things we don't do but would be helpful')	<b>Continue</b> ('Useful features that should be retained')
Form of assessment of study skills (essay) (6)	One-to-one time with personal tutor (2)	Essay writing (14)
Organisation of time/rooms (5)	Discussion of work in other modules (2)	Preparing for exams (9)
Smaller groups needed for study skills classes (4)	More focus on essay writing, esp. introduction and conclusions (2)	Note-taking (7)
Involve the class more in study skills sessions (3)		Tutorials gave confidence/were helpful/enjoyable/useful (7)
Library exercise (2)		Handouts generally (6)
		Study skills generally useful (3)
		Previous exam papers (3)
		Exercises generally (2)
		Seminar exercise (2)
		Library exercise (2)
		Opportunity to reflect on lectures/seminars (2)

Note: 35 students returned completed questionnaires. Only comments made by at least two students are shown.

### Feedback from tutors

The psychology tutors met at the end of the module to discuss the student response, their own experiences and how the module should develop. Tutors' responses are described below in terms of broad points that emerged from group discussion. This information is admittedly unsystematic and imprecise, but it provides a limited insight into the staff perspective to supplement the more systematic student feedback.

Firstly, tutors passed on views about the module that had been expressed to them by students, which were broadly similar to those expressed by students in the questionnaire survey. They were that students had not found the skills exercises very exciting, but had enjoyed the tutorials and appreciated the opportunities for group discussion, social networking, discussing their essay work and talking about problems they were experiencing. Students also suggested that the work on study skills should be more closely related to their work for other course modules and that the timetabled tutorials should continue in the second semester.

The psychology tutors themselves made a number of comments and suggestions about the module and some experienced considerable difficulty, especially during the first two years of the module's operation, but there was general agreement that the module should develop incrementally rather than change radically from one year to the next. Some but not all tutors considered that smaller groups would be desirable. Attendance was highly variable both between and within groups and many tutors observed that attendance was lower when the group had been set an assignment and towards the end of the module. (Students were told that they were expected to attend all of the module sessions and attendance registers were kept, but compulsory

attendance was not enforced.) Some tutors felt that a minimum level of attendance should be compulsory, but others argued that this would introduce a further way in which students could fail to progress and would require an administrative machinery for processing appeals and mitigating circumstances related to non-attendance.

Many psychology tutors found it difficult to fill time on 'content-free' aspects of skills. Several suggested that more time be devoted to psychology topics within tutors' areas of expertise, including those for which students were concurrently preparing assignments for other psychology modules, so that generic skills would be dealt with in a more implicit way. Some tutors found that considerable time in tutorials was spent in discussion of issues raised by students that were not included in the module syllabus. Those issues sometimes generated very relevant and useful discussion in tutorials and many tutors requested greater flexibility in the delivery of the module's learning outcomes. (The learning outcomes were that "on completion of the module, students should have developed as independent learners with a skill base appropriate to the demands of the psychology programme".) Most of the tutors found the highly structured programme for the module helpful, but some would have preferred to run the programme of tutorial exercises at a slower pace, with more focus on skills such as note-taking, or would have adjusted the order of the exercises. The main reason for this was to align the programme of the skills module more closely with students' work in other modules, so that, for example, essay writing and assessment criteria were dealt with well before students submitted coursework essays for other psychology modules. It was also suggested that the skills topics should be more free flowing, rather than presented as discrete topics.

Several alternatives to the form of assessment for the module were suggested. One was for tutors to rate students' attendance and participation in tutorials. Another was for students to undertake an individual project involving gathering material, making notes and writing a report or making a presentation. Another was to leave the assessment essentially unchanged, that is, an essay on skills, but widen the scope of the essay so that students would be able to relate skills development to their own study of psychology and to their career plans. This was the option that was agreed on, so that essay titles from 1999-2000 onwards were drafted to enable students to include more material from psychology and to reflect on their personal development (see *Form of assessment*). In the future, however, it is likely that an alternative form of assessment will be used for the module (see *Module development*).

The LDU study skills tutors also requested smaller groups for the sessions they took and suggested that the workshops they ran should focus more closely on students' psychology coursework. The study skills tutors felt that this would make their sessions more relevant and might also improve the standard of students' psychology coursework. They asked for more detailed information about the psychology coursework that students were undertaking for other modules, including titles and deadlines, so that their sessions on study skills could be structured accordingly.

**Impact of the skills module on student achievement and progression**

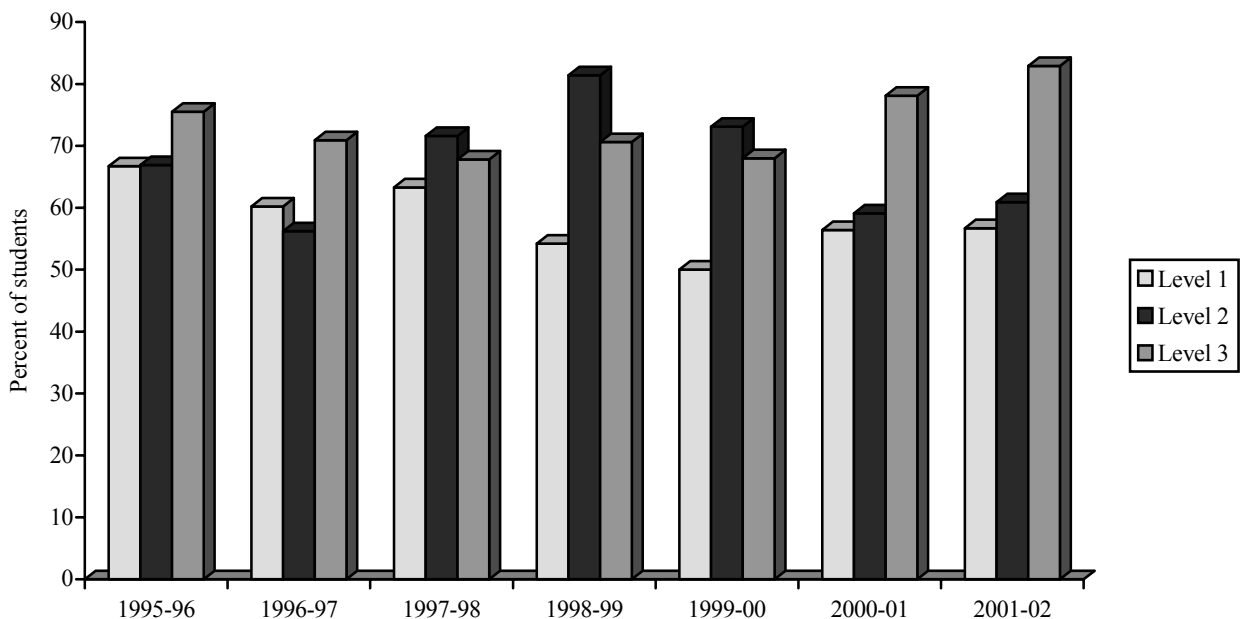
Figure 1 shows the percentage of students who progressed successfully from each level of the BSc

Psychology degree programme since 1995-1996. The skills module was introduced at Level 1 in 1998-1999, so that the cohort of students who first experienced the module would have progressed from Level 1 in 1998-1999, from Level 2 in 1999-2000, and from Level 3 in 2000-2001. In 1998-1999 the percentage of students progressing from Level 1 was actually lower than it had been in the previous three years and dropped slightly further the following year before rising again, so that the module had no immediate impact on progression from Level 1. In 1999-2000, Level 2 progression fell back from a historic high point in 1998-1999 and has fallen back since then to levels observed in previous years. In 2000-2001, Level 3 progression began to increase to higher levels than during previous years.

The skills module was therefore associated with improvements in student progression only for Level 3, whereas the main benefits of the module were expected, or hoped for, mainly at Level 1. The progression data are for the psychology programme as a whole and represent a rather blunt instrument for the purposes of module evaluation. They were chosen because the module was intended to improve student achievement beyond the module itself and because concerns about overall progression rates were one of the reasons for the module's introduction. The progression statistics are affected by a number of factors as well as the introduction of the skills module, however, and their precise interpretation is extremely difficult for at least three reasons.

**Figure 1**

Student progression before and after the introduction of the skills module in 1998-1999.



Note: Levels 1 and 2 figures are percentages of students progressing to the next level of the programme, Level 3 figures are the percentages completing an award.

Firstly, the introduction of the skills module was one of several other changes that were made to the BSc Psychology programme at that time, so that changes in student performance arising from the programme review cannot be attributed solely to the skills module. Secondly, the pattern of student recruitment changed considerably during the period covered by Figure 1. In 1998-1999 there was a decrease in the numbers of students entering the BSc Psychology programme (from 147 the previous year to 107) and an increase in the proportion of new students recruited through clearing with lower entry qualifications than otherwise. The corresponding decrease in students' baseline skills would therefore have been expected to reduce student progression from Level 1 at about the same time as the skills module was introduced. It is possible that Level 1 progression at this time would have been lower had the module not been introduced, but without a comparison group who were not exposed to the module, that possibility cannot be tested. Thirdly, there is potentially a dynamic between progression at different levels, because lower progression rates at one level have the effect of filtering students for the next level, where progression would be expected to improve as a consequence, so that each level should not be considered independently. There is evidence for this in the fact that as Level 2 progression rates fell between 1998-1999 and 2000-01, Level 3 progression rates increased between 1999-2000 and 2001-2002.

### Module development

As a result of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation, a number of changes were made during the four years of the module's operation so far and further changes are proposed for the future. The changes that have already been made are consistent with the module evaluation described above. These allow for more integration of skills teaching with the rest of the Level 1 psychology programme and more flexibility for the psychology tutors to adapt the programme of exercises.

In its most recent form, the tutorials programme consists of a series of suggested exercises, including those indicated in Table 1, from which tutors design a programme of work for their students that fits with students' requirements. In some cases this has involved tutors making closer links between the tutorials on skills and the areas of their own psychology teaching. In others it has involved incorporating exercises developed elsewhere (e.g. the 'tutor pack' resources to promote deep learning, developed by Lin Norton and disseminated by LTSN Psychology). In others, tutors have developed their own exercises (e.g. IT exercises requiring students to obtain a university IT account, send their tutor an email, obtain specified information from the university web pages and use psychology literature databases).

Proposals for further changes to the module are now being prepared as part of a major psychology programme review. These include increasing the role of the psychology tutors, broadening the scope of the module to provide an orientation to the study of psychology and higher education more generally, and

encouraging students to identify personal and professional development needs. The module assessment will consist of a reflective learning profile and learning plan, in which students identify strengths and weaknesses and formulate a plan for maximising their subsequent learning and achievement.

### DISCUSSION

Not all the evidence about the module's impact was positive, but the fact that most of the ways in which the unit has developed since its introduction involve further integration of skills with subject content suggest that the decision to adopt a discipline-based approach was the right one. Many of the psychology tutors had reservations at the beginning about being asked to teach skills, often citing the fact that they had no training in generic skills teaching. However, almost all engaged in a positive way in the module, probably helped by the fact that all of the students in their groups were their personal tutees, and the module has led to the development of considerable expertise in skills provision among the psychology staff.

The evaluation data are extremely limited in that there was no comparison group and the quantitative data focused only on the broadest possible outcome, progression across the course as a whole. It is possible that the module was associated with more subtle outcomes, like improvements in the grades obtained by those who did progress, or more difficult to measure outcomes such as how students viewed the module in retrospect. Future research at London Metropolitan is unlikely to be able to make a controlled comparison between students enrolled on the same programme who did and did not take the skills module, but could examine student outcomes following the module in more detail. Considering that the student feedback seemed to indicate a bimodal response, with student opinion often divided, it may be worth examining outcomes among different subgroups of students, such as those who began the course with standard versus non-standard, or lower versus higher, entry qualifications. Outcomes could also be examined as a function of other student factors, such as pre-course learning experience, age, expectations and success in the degree programme, and staff factors such as experience or training in skills teaching, or attitudes to the incorporation of skills in academic programmes.

The fact that the essay assignment was so frequently nominated for change by students may reflect the fact that many psychology students continue to see generic skills teaching as not relevant to their discipline. Students sought more guidance about writing essays on psychology but failed to see the benefits of practising essay writing on a non-psychology topic. If so, the views of students coincide with those of others who have been critical of the recent emphasis on skills in higher education. Kemp and Seagraves (1995) argued that a more radical restructuring of courses would be needed to incorporate transferable skills and Whitston (1998) questioned the concept of transferable skills, arguing

that skills are inseparable from knowledge and much less transferable from one knowledge domain to another than has been assumed. Knight and York (2003) argued that reflectiveness and beliefs about the value of effort are more important than 'transferable' skills.

The discipline-based skills module represents a compromise between those critical views and the traditional generic skills approach. The module was designed as a psychology-based approach to skills, but could potentially be applied in other disciplines, for only the content of the tutorial exercises and the associated materials were psychology-based. The structure of the module, the use of personal tutors and the approach of placing generic skills in the context of a specific discipline could all be employed in a potentially wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. We have still to demonstrate a significant impact on student progression, but the module provides an example of how skills can be integrated with both subject-specific teaching and the personal tutor system.

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