

SWAP Projects

TITLE OF PROJECT: *Read to Succeed: Supporting first year undergraduate students to make smooth transitions to university and apply their reading to practical and current contexts*

INSTITUTION: London Metropolitan University

PROJECT LEADERS: Sarah Cousins (Senior Lecturer Early Years), Denise Adams (Academic Liaison Librarian)

DISCIPLINE/DEPARTMENT: Faculty of Humanities Arts Languages Education, Initial Teacher Education

MODULE: Aspects of Early Years Play and Learning

YEAR/LEVEL OF STUDENTS: 1st Year Undergraduate – Certificate Level

NUMBERS OF STUDENTS IN MODULE: 27

CONTEXT:

Many of the written assignments submitted by first year students on the BEd Early Years Teaching programme reveal a difficulty with reading. Students may be able to refer to some key texts, but they frequently find it more difficult to make links between their reading and their practice on placements, to access a wider range of pertinent and current reading material and to develop their own critical stance in relation to their reading.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

The aim of this project was to explore effective ways for academic liaison librarians to work with academic tutors to support first year undergraduate students in their transition to university and to help them acquire the new academic discourses. Students were supported to make links between their reading of policy documents and theoretical works and their emerging professional practice on Placement Experience in Children's Centres across London.

It was anticipated that students would be helped to acquire the skills needed to access, read and apply a range of reading materials in order to:

- Feel supported and experience a smooth transition to higher education
- Succeed in the module formative and summative assessment
- Achieve greater independence and autonomy as new academics
- Gain in self-confidence as academics and aspiring teachers
- Relate their wider reading to their practical experience on placements.

METHODOLOGY:

A narrative approach was adopted. All students on the module contributed quick evaluative accounts of how their learning on the module had impacted on their professional and academic practices. A range of students also volunteered to tell their learning stories since beginning their university course, and particularly since beginning the module in question. The module tutor carried out a series of structured interviews. The project leaders themselves also articulated their own learning stories to each other, as they evaluated each session and planned the next. Furthermore, they informally re-told their respective experiences of participating in the project to their own sector colleagues. All records of accounts were analysed and synthesised into an overall account of the project at its current stage. In these ways, the narrative is multi-focal, continuous, reflective and living.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT:

The Academic Liaison Librarian (ALL) and the module tutor collaborated on a Semester 2, Year 1 module to scaffold students' reading skills. The context was a particular module, Aspects of Early Years Play and Learning, on a professional degree preparing students to become Early Years teachers.

The ALL was present for a proportion of each session over six weeks, offering incremental steps in learning and relating the learning content to the module formative and summative assessment tasks. The module tutor planned the face-to-face and virtual learning opportunities as opportunities for students to represent or realise their reading in a range of modes, including drawing, acting, making, discussing, writing, blogging and posting online comments. Students were supported to 'become actively engaged in their learning and the learning and teaching process, rather than be passive recipients of knowledge and information.' (Groves & O'Donoghue, 2009, p.147) This was in order to include all learning styles and acknowledge that learning can be realised multi-modally. As one student clearly articulated during a structured interview, "Ideas come to me when I do things", and another student said: "I've always learned better from being practical."

The project leaders adopted a social constructivist approach, striving to support new students to read widely, negotiate meanings with their peers, assimilate new learning and begin to make links between their reading and practical experience on placements. To this end, students were invited to post their reflections on children's play experiences on their own learning blogs. This online activity was linked to the final presentation assessment at which students were asked to refer to their blogs. Although this approach was targeted primarily at students who needed to be 'extrinsically motivated' (Ibid.) in order to engage in their learning, nevertheless it ensured full participation (on a range of levels) and helped to secure higher levels of progression than in the previous (and first) year of the course. As emphasised by Groves and O'Donoghue, 'the technology does not have to be complex or leading edge. It does, however, need to be constructively aligned with the curriculum objectives and learning outcomes.' (Ibid., p.148)

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT OF PROJECT:

The students who participated in the project achieved high levels of success both in the module and their Professional Placement. Some students commented that they were able to see particular theories of play and learning in action at their placement settings. Other students were able to make links between their observations of children at play and their reading.

Students were invited to carry out very quick reflections at the end of each face-to-face session at university under the following prompts:

- What did you learn through your reading and by participating in the session activities?
- How will this affect the approach you adopt on your professional placement experience?
- What do you want to read more about?

Some responses referred to emotions, with one student making reference to what she experienced as 'the joy of learning', and another student expressing that she was 'moved' by a certain aspect of history she had read about, associated with an educational approach. Many of the responses revealed a deep level of learning and contained evidence that, as in a study by Lopez-Estrada with a similarly diverse group of students at Texas Pan American University, these first year students at London Metropolitan University were 'bridging theory to practice, and deepening their critical thinking skills.' (Lopez-Estrada, 2008, p.89) It was pleasing to discover that 97% of students who submitted their module assessments passed.

DISSEMINATION:

- London Metropolitan University Learning and Teaching Conference, July 2010
- Paper to be submitted for publication in the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education Journal.

AVAILABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES

- Contact Sarah Cousins or Denise Adams for further information about the project (s.cousins@londonmet.ac.uk d.adams@londonmet.ac.uk)
- Request to become an auditor on the WebLearn (Blackboard Vista ©) platform for the project module and view all module materials.

FUTURE PLANS FOR PROMOTING PROJECT WORK/OUTCOMES:

1. The academic tutor and liaison librarian will continue to work in partnership on this professional, undergraduate programme. In 2010-11 they will trial the intervention on a Semester 1 rather than a Semester 2 module .
2. The academic tutor, in her role as course leader, will support her programme team to adopt this approach.
3. The academic tutor, in her role as Blended Learning Consultant, will share the approach at faculty workshops.

REFERENCES:

Groves, M. & O'Donoghue, J., (2009), Reflections of Students in Their Use of Asynchronous Online Seminars. *Educational Technology & Society*. 12(3), 143-149

Lopez-Estrada, V., (2008), Integrating Web-Based Technology with Action Research during Student Teaching: An Instructional Model. *International Journal of Learning*, 15(7), 86-89