

# A Framework for Transition: Supporting 'Learning to Learn' in Higher Education

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## Abstract

*In this paper, a framework for developing first-year students' learning is proposed. Its aim is to increase university managers' and teachers' awareness of two issues: (1) that the currently predominant 'skills' approaches to the enhancement of student learning are based on a deficiency model and achieve little more than remedying the overt problems of individual students and (2) that a holistic, subject-specific approach is needed to support all students in the complex process of learning to learn in higher education. The framework aims at facilitating transition to university by helping students to understand what is expected from them at university, by addressing their conceptions of learning and knowledge and by gradually developing their competence as independent learners as well as their competence in constructing knowledge in their discipline. Different contexts are used to apply complementary methods for the development of learning.*

*As the framework relies on the engagement of academic teachers, it is critical that university managers and policy makers give appropriate recognition to effective teaching. This involves instigating changes in conceptions of teaching, providing opportunities for educational development and setting incentives for teachers' commitment to student learning.*

## Introduction

This paper focuses on 'learning to learn' as a key aspect of students' transition from school to university. The transition period has a major impact on student retention. In the UK, for instance, about two-thirds of withdrawals happen during or at the end of the first year (Yorke, 2001). Among a range of factors that make it difficult for students to adjust to university life, such as the need to earn money, the inability to integrate socially and the wrong choice of subject, the foremost factor described in

the research literature is the lack of preparation for and understanding of the type of learning that is required (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Drew, 2001).

Researchers have stressed the importance of effective transition methods in order to ensure student retention and progression (Tinto, 1993; Edward, 2003). With respect to learning, however, many universities persist with outdated models of support, failing to recognise that learning to learn at university means a fundamental change in students' beliefs, is a complex process and requires support measures that go beyond *ad hoc* initiatives.

A comprehensive framework that uses different contexts for developing student learning in the transition period stretching from admission to the end of the first term is proposed in the succeeding discussion. Several support activities described in the framework are already in place at many universities. The innovative aspects of the framework are that existing contexts are used more effectively and that the methods of learning development are arranged across the contexts in a mutually reinforcing way.

The learning needs of students entering higher education and current provision of learning support at UK universities are discussed first. It is then considered what learning at university really entails, followed by a discussion of university teachers' attitudes towards developing student learning. The proposed framework aims at distributing the task of supporting student learning among different methods and agents.

### **Students' learning needs and current learning support at universities**

The rapid increase of students in higher education in the UK has brought about a student population with diverse entry qualifications, abilities and learning experiences. More students than in the previous highly selective system encounter difficulties with learning at university. Despite the changes in the student population, traditional expectations towards students have not changed: they are to manage their learning and acquire academic literacy independently. In the crucial area of academic writing, for instance, which is the 'key assessment tool' (Lillis, 2001, p. 20), there is only 'fragmented and limited additional provision' of support (p. 22).

Research studies tend to focus on the problems experienced by 'non-traditional' students (e.g. Macrae and Maguire, 2002) who access university through widening participation initiatives. But not only do these

students find the transition to university difficult. Research into reasons for non-completion revealed that 'traditional students' who enter university from secondary school are not any more adequately prepared for the demands of studying at university. Under the pressure of league tables, students in secondary schools 'tend to be "spoon-fed" for longer, and are less equipped with "self-learning skills" ' (National Audit Office, 2002, p. 15). Several researchers have described students' lack of 'preparedness' for learning in higher education (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Haggis and Pouget, 2002). Students encounter difficulties because they lack an understanding of what learning at university involves (Gamache, 2002).

Blythman and Orr (2002, p. 46) point out that most students need learning support 'for successful achievement and progression within the education system and beyond' and recommend that universities devise inclusive strategies to enable all students to study successfully (Thomas, 2002).

Regardless of student needs, most universities still follow a remedial practice of learning support, offering extra-curricular skills courses in student support units or study skills centres. These generic skills courses address organisational techniques such as time management and revising for exams, as well as academic tasks such as essay writing, referencing, note taking and reading. For the latter, generic courses are not effective, as is further explained in the following section.

The provision of extra-curricular skills courses may be convenient in terms of cost-effectiveness and administrative effort: it requires only a certain number of 'learning experts' to cater for students of all disciplines. It also releases lecturers from the responsibility of enhancing their students' learning. However, the provision has severe limitations, as the next section shows.

### **Limitations of extra-curricular learning support**

Generic, extra-curricular learning support works on the assumption that students who do not progress satisfactorily have certain 'deficiencies'. Study skills courses are usually attended by students who were identified as 'at risk' and referred to them, and for those who voluntarily sought help. But students tend to avoid generic courses because they regard them as irrelevant to their subject (Durkin and Main, 2002). Extra-curricular skills courses therefore cater only for a few selected or self-selected students. They attempt to remedy obvious problems experienced by students who are already well into their course. However,

many problems might be prevented if guidance was given at the beginning of the course. Guidance is needed in particular on the epistemological aspects of learning in higher education (Gamache, 2002). It should be provided to all students for an easier transition to university.

Furthermore, the extra-curricular provision is based on the perception that effective learning at university requires a 'set of atomised skills' (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 159). The predominant 'skills approach' equals learning with 'skills'. Targeting academic reading, essay writing, or problem solving with generic, decontextualised courses implies that they are context-independent techniques that can be practised in the void. However, they are complex tasks that require subject knowledge and, above all, an understanding of the nature of knowledge in the specific discipline.

For instance, many students lack 'essay-writing skills'. Generic essay-writing courses may develop certain techniques such as structuring the essay, building paragraphs, or referencing conventions. But what students really need to understand in order to write essays is the academic discourse of the discipline (Northedge, 2003) and the underlying epistemology. They have to understand the discipline's conventions of constructing knowledge (Lea and Street, 1998).

There are clear epistemological differences between disciplines: in the pure sciences, for instance, there is a higher degree of 'shared assumptions' (North, 2005, p. 519), while in the humanities and social sciences knowledge is more the object of interpretation (Neumann, 2001). Obviously, extra-curricular skills courses cannot help students to assimilate into the practices of their discipline.

### **Requirements of learning in higher education**

Understanding the conception of knowledge in one's discipline is a fundamental aspect of effective learning in higher education. Students also need to understand what their role as learners in higher education involves. They have to become independent learners, taking responsibility for their own learning. In addition, they must learn to actively and critically engage with knowledge instead of passively receiving it. Therefore, 'learning to learn' at university can be described as two major areas:

1. understanding 'learning' and becoming an independent learner;
2. understanding 'knowledge' and becoming competent in constructing knowledge within a discipline.

Independent learning requires students to switch from their previous experience at school, when learning was planned, closely monitored and evaluated for them by their teachers, to an environment in which they have to plan, monitor and evaluate large portions of learning by themselves. Fazy and Fazy (2001) point out that students have the potential to be autonomous learners, but that it is the responsibility of teachers in higher education to enhance the necessary metacognitive skills. These include reflection and a deep understanding by students of their learning processes (Rawson, 2000). Personalised attention and support is needed to enhance this development.

Unrealistic perceptions of learning at university are a major factor for students' failure (Haggis and Pouget, 2002). Many students enter university with epistemological beliefs that stem from their previous learning experience at school: they see learning as the 'passive absorption' (Gamache, 2002, p. 277) of external knowledge that is owned by authorities such as their tutors or their textbooks. Higher education, however, requires learning of a higher cognitive order, including critical thinking and the application of knowledge to different contexts. These goals of learning in higher education have remained constant (Ramsden, 2003), but most of today's university students need more help to achieve them.

Because of the disciplinary differences in the construction of knowledge, the support of subject tutors rather than that of external 'learning experts' is needed for students' 'epistemological empowerment' (Hendricks and Quinn, 2000). A mutual understanding between tutors and students of what 'knowledge' means in their discipline and what 'learning' implies has to be established at the outset of the university course.

'Learning to learn' at university is a complex personal development process involving the change of perceptions, learning habits and epistemological beliefs. This requires a systematic and comprehensive approach to supporting students. Most students might receive *ad hoc* support, such as advice on specific learning issues by their tutors. However, institutions should not leave learning development to chance. Structures need to be put in place to ensure the consistent and gradual development of learning for all students.

Some educationalists recommend the embedded approach, in which learning is developed through the subject teaching (Gibbs, 1994; Cottrell, 2001). This system involves all tutors and all students.

The literature shows, however, that many university tutors are unwilling to support students' learning as part of their teaching.

## University teachers' attitudes towards the development of student learning

The reluctance of university teachers to teach more than subject knowledge has been demonstrated by research into the development of key skills. Fallows and Steven (2000) describe academics' concern that limited curriculum time will be spent on skills rather than on subject content. A survey conducted by Drummond, Nixon and Wiltshire (1998, p. 23) revealed that 'a small number of committed individuals . . . were struggling to effect meaningful change' while the academic priorities in many institutions lean towards research. In the UK, academics' preference for research is encouraged by the dual funding system in which research and teaching are each funded separately (Brew, 2003).

Kember (1997) distinguishes two broad categories of teaching conceptions, teacher centred/content oriented and student centred/learning oriented. Teachers with a teacher-centred/content-oriented approach believe that their role is delivering knowledge, not supporting student learning. Research suggests that many university teachers fall into the first category (Biggs, 1996; Bennett, Dunne and Carré, 2000). Bennett, Dunne and Carré (2000, p. 49) claim that many institutions and individuals 'seem ill-equipped to deal with what must be central to progress – how students learn'. In addition, university teachers' expectations of students may be too high. Haggis and Pouget (2002) point out that assumptions about students' abilities need to change and that teachers should engage in an explicit discussion with their students about the expected learning approaches.

Therefore, initiatives are needed that raise lecturers' awareness of what kind of support is needed, and provide them with support methods that are in their view reasonable in terms of time investment and workload.

These methods then have to be integrated into a comprehensive learning support framework that involves different contexts and agents.

## Contexts, methods and agents of learning support

It has been argued before that learning support has to be subject specific. In addition, because of its complexity, it is necessary to develop learning over time, in different contexts and with different methods. Using different contexts is not only the best way of reinforcing learning; it is also a way of addressing tutors' reluctance to devote teaching time to

*TABLE 1*  
Components of 'learning to learn'

I. Understanding 'learning' and becoming an independent learner	II. Understanding 'knowledge' and becoming competent in constructing knowledge
1. Gaining awareness of conceptions of learning and knowledge in discipline	1. Approaching information (lectures, texts) in a focused and critical manner
2. Assessing one's present abilities as learner	2. Evaluating existing knowledge
3. Setting short-term and long-term goals and targets	3. Synthesising different sources into a coherent argument
4. Planning action for reaching targets	4. Expressing own voice
5. Monitoring progress in reaching targets	
6. Evaluating progress/achievements	

learning. Different contexts involve different 'agents', and therefore, the onus of developing learning is not entirely on subject teachers.

In order to explain the framework, it is first necessary to look in more detail at important components of 'learning to learn' in the two areas previously described. Then, context, methods and agents for developing these components will be considered. The components are listed in Table 1. The list may not be complete, and particularly in the second area, adjustments may have to be made for specific disciplines.

The first step for learning in both areas is to raise students' awareness of conceptions of learning and knowledge, and of the expectations placed on them that are different from their previous educational experiences. Methods of raising this awareness are explicit information, case studies and discussions in which current conceptions are challenged. These methods could be applied in pre-induction and induction courses. The contexts are further explained in the succeeding discussions.

The two areas of learning then take different routes. The first area involves personal development and requires individual attention to students' personal preconditions and goals, and a high degree of reflection on the student's side. As many goals are likely to be linked to the discipline, experts from that discipline are needed as agents. Methods of support are reflective tools, such as self-assessment questionnaires, action-planning forms, diaries, portfolios and progress evaluation forms. Regular meetings must be held with students to guide them in using

these tools and to help them assess outcomes. The ideal context for this personal development process is the personal tutorial. This context exists already in most universities, where all first-year students are assigned to a personal tutor who they are supposed to meet regularly.

The second area requires less personal attention, but classroom time and lecturers' input. The classroom is the ideal context for students to observe how experts deal with knowledge. Lecturers need to demonstrate and model – as an integral and explicit part of their regular teaching sessions – the critical approach to information and the dialectic processes of constructing knowledge. In addition, a teaching approach in which students are encouraged to think critically and to debate is needed. The classroom context should give students the opportunity to practise knowledge construction and the required academic discourse.

Specific guidelines are needed for the agents: personal tutors, who are to guide students' development into independent learners, and subject teachers, who are to help students to understand the concept of knowledge and the ways of constructing it. The guidelines will enable them to use the existing contexts, i.e. personal tutorials and regular teaching sessions, for providing targeted learning support effectively. In the case of subject teachers, guidelines must show how 'reasonable' adjustments can be made to their teaching without too much deflection from the subject content. For instance, the guidelines should advise subject teachers to build into their regular lectures explicit references to: (1) inappropriate epistemological assumptions; (2) the processes of knowledge construction; and (3) the students' active role in it.

Two further contexts for developing student learning, pre-induction and induction courses, have been suggested previously. The potential of such courses is explained here in more detail because pre-induction is a fairly unknown concept and because induction courses often miss the opportunity to enhance learning.

Pre-induction is an innovative way of providing additional support at a time when many students feel anxious, i.e. in the weeks between admission and the start of the term. A successful – in terms of take-up, student response and retention – web-based pre-induction course was developed in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing at Bournemouth University (Keenan, 2005). The course has the following main objectives:

- to engage students early and relieve anxiety;
- to reduce information overload in induction events;
- to encourage students to reflect on learning;
- to prepare meaningful activities in Induction Week.

In addition to these objectives, pre-induction could be specifically used to raise students' awareness of learning requirements at university. This could be achieved by presenting case studies with relevant questions and by asking students to fill in a self-profiling questionnaire. The case studies would help students recognise their own learning habits and how they differ from the learning expected at university. The self-profiling questionnaire would make them aware of their present abilities as learners. These methods would also provide a link to induction activities: the case studies and the self-profiling questionnaire can serve as a basis for discussion and action planning in small group work during induction.

In most study programmes, first-year students are requested to participate in induction courses, often in the format of a 'freshers week' (Edward, 2003) before the beginning of term. These events, however, tend to cover organisational aspects of studying. Edward (2003, p. 226) describes induction events where students sit in a lecture theatre all day, and speakers queue up 'to deliver their concentrated 20-minute talk' on the course, facilities and welfare services. This type of induction seems to be quite common in UK universities (Laing, Robinson and Johnston, 2005). In Edward's (2003) context, an engineering course, inadequate induction was ranked highly by respondents to a survey as a reason for dropping out. Students could not take in all the information and felt 'disoriented in an impersonal environment and homesick and lonely'.

Clearly, more interactive and student-centred induction activities that help students to bond with peers, to meet their lecturers and feel accepted by them, and to gain a sense of belonging are needed. Looking at the components of learning to learn, induction courses also offer a great chance of: (1) giving students a first understanding of the conception of knowledge in their discipline and (2) reinforcing the message given in the pre-induction course, that learning requirements at university may be different from students' previous learning experience.

This means moving students out of the lecture theatre and creating small group activities led by subject tutors and/or personal tutors in which discussions about student expectations and epistemological beliefs take place. Effective methods of stimulating such discussions are case studies or reports by second-year students on their transition experiences. In this student-centred and personal environment, students can be first introduced to the reflective tools that will later be used in personal tutorials. The information that is commonly delivered by a series of speakers can at least partly be presented in different formats, by leaflets, or online in the pre-induction course. The small group setting

can be used for a 'wrap-up' of the information or quizzes in which students find out how much of the information they have taken in.

It was discussed earlier why learning should be developed in different contexts and by different agents. Pre-induction brings in a third agent, web-based teaching. The potential and problems of web-based teaching and learning have been described elsewhere (e.g. Watson and Anderson, 2001). Within the proposed framework, web-based teaching is a powerful agent. It provides a chance to enhance students' 'preparedness' before their arrival at university. It also prepares and complements activities in the other contexts, as is shown in the next section.

So far, the four contexts have been explained individually. In order to maximise the impact of the individual methods, it is important to arrange them in a way that they complement and reinforce each other. This requires the integration of contexts and methods into a holistic and comprehensive framework.

### **Integrating contexts and methods into a comprehensive framework**

The framework in Table 2 shows how the different contexts are linked by the various methods.

In the framework, the various methods build upon each other and complement each other over a period of time. It is important that the 'agents' are familiar with the whole framework and are able to make links between contexts and methods explicit to students.

Of the four proposed contexts, pre-induction and induction obviously have a time limitation; therefore, they have a preparatory role in developing learning. By contrast, the activities in personal tutorials and the classroom should be extended over the first semester or year and facilitate the gradual development of students into competent learners.

The framework requires coordination as well as cooperation of the staff members involved in first-year teaching. How this can be achieved is considered in the next section.

### **Practical and managerial considerations for the implementation of the framework**

While the 'shell' for the pre-induction web-based course can be created generically, it needs subject experts to fill it with subject-specific materials. Equally, while induction and classroom activities can be described generically, as in the framework presented in Table 2, the

*TABLE 2*  
 Framework for the coherent and comprehensive development of learning

Objectives	Context	Agent	Methods
Students to gain awareness of conceptions of learning and knowledge in discipline	Pre-induction course	Online materials	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Case studies with relevant questions (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> induction 1)</li> <li>2. Self-profiling questionnaire (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> induction 2)</li> </ol>
	Induction course	Subject and personal tutors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Small group discussions based on case studies and/or reports by second-year students (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> pre-induction 1)</li> <li>2. Introduction to reflective tools (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> pre-induction 2; <math>\leftrightarrow</math> personal tutorial 2)</li> </ol>
Students to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– assess their abilities as learner</li> <li>– set goals and targets</li> <li>– plan action</li> <li>– monitor and evaluate progress</li> </ul>	Personal tutorial	Personal tutor (online materials)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Regular discussions between tutor and student</li> <li>2. Reflective tools: self-assessment questionnaires, action planning forms, diaries, portfolios and progress evaluation forms (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> induction 2)</li> <li>3. Personal tutors encouraging students to observe processes of knowledge construction in the classroom (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> classroom 1)</li> <li>4. Personal tutors encouraging students to take an active role in classroom and to monitor this role via reflective tools (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> personal tutorial 2, <math>\leftrightarrow</math> classroom 2)</li> </ol>

TABLE 2 Continued

Objectives	Context	Agent	Methods
Students to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– approach information in a focused and critical manner</li> <li>– evaluate existing knowledge</li> <li>– synthesise different sources into a coherent argument</li> <li>– express own voice</li> </ul>	Classroom	Subject tutors (online materials)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tutors demonstrating, modelling critical approach to information and construction of knowledge (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> personal tutorial 3)</li> <li>2. Teaching approach that encourages students to think critically and debate (<math>\leftrightarrow</math> personal tutorial 4)</li> <li>3. Assessment methods that facilitate students' development into knowledge 'creator' rather than recipient</li> </ol>

*Note:* The links are indicated with the symbol  $\leftrightarrow$ .

content has to be subject specific. For instance, case studies and reflective tools have to be adapted to the discipline's context.

In practice, this requires input from two sources: educational developers for the creation of the web-based shell, the reflective tools, and the activities in personal tutorials and classroom, and subject experts for adapting the framework to their specific context.

Second, it is essential that all staff members involved in the teaching and tutoring of first-year students are aware of the components of 'learning to learn', as appropriate to their discipline, of the different support methods and of their own role as an agent.

From a management point of view, the development and implementation of the framework requires

1. leadership within a faculty or study programme to initiate the process;
2. a steering group of educational developers and subject tutors to create the subject-specific version;
3. educational development measures to enable all tutors to make their contribution.

Educational development measures play an important role in overcoming the reluctance of academics to engage in the development of student learning. As explained before, a key message to tutors must be that a greater focus on learning means a difference in approach, but not a deflection from subject content.

## Conclusion

The main argument of this paper is that learning to learn means giving students epistemological access, making them independent learners and making them competent in constructing knowledge in their discipline. This involves a change in conceptions and learning habits for most students. The skills approach to developing learning that currently predominates in UK universities fails to address these fundamental requirements. This approach offers remedies for organisational and technical aspects of studying to a selected number of students who have obvious problems during their course.

The proposed framework represents a holistic approach to supporting all students in learning to learn at university. It relies largely on structures that already exist. Utilising these structures for learning support and complementing them by web-based materials would make a substantial impact on student learning.

The framework, or any other holistic approach to the development of student learning, depends on, for the reasons explained earlier, the involvement of subject tutors. As teacher-centred and content-oriented conceptions of teaching seem to be widespread, the biggest challenge of implementing the framework is to engage academic staff in supporting learning.

This requires commitment to and investment in student learning at the institutional, faculty and departmental levels. It requires policy makers to give more weight to effective teaching in universities. Academic staff have to be given the time, expertise, as well as incentives to help students become competent learners. In the present research-driven climate, important opportunities for supporting all students adequately during the critical transition period are missed.

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