Please note: Due to changes in the requirements of the PGCTHE portfolio, not all teaching cycles uploaded to CADAIR share the same properties. It is important that these teaching cycles are only used as a resource and not a guide to what is needed to fulfil the requirements of the PGCTHE. If you have any queries, please contact thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

This Teaching Cycle of the PGCTHE portfolio has been submitted to CADAIR with the permission of the author detailed above. It is to be used as a resource for future PGCTHE candidates and other staff as part of their professional development at Aberystwyth University. If you wish to cite this work then please contact the author. Contact details can be found at http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/directory/.
4. Teaching Cycle 2

TEACHING CYCLE 2: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY

A Report Illustrating How Subject-Specific Welcome Talks During The Induction to University Programme Can Help Students to Settle Into Departments And Familiarise Themselves With Necessary Study Skills
Executive Summary

This report describes how departmental advisory talks during the university induction programme can be useful in helping students to familiarise themselves with departmental systems and subject-specific study skills. The findings of this report are based upon an initial welcome to study skills talk held in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning of the University of Wales Aberystwyth in September 2006 and the subsequent study skills e-folder on Blackboard. Such an intervention was implemented with the main aim of empowering students to develop their study skills with close guidance and support. Comprehensive feedback via questionnaire data and staff and student meetings suggest that the initial talk and e-folder helps students to engage more fully with the skills needed for higher education study.

1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to illustrate how departmental advisory talks during the induction to university programme can be used to empower students to develop their study skills.

1.1 The Traditional University Induction Programme

At the beginning of the academic year University of Wales Aberystwyth holds an induction programme for all new students. This includes generic ‘using the library talks’ and ‘getting to know each other’ activities. Departments also hold talks on the first day of this induction week. Traditionally, the Education talks are held on the main campus and give an overview of how students should go about registering for certain modules. This talk is only scheduled for 45 minutes and gives just enough time for brief introductions and module details to be highlighted. The attendance at these talks has generally been very poor.
Following this talk, the department does not see new students again until they start attending lectures for modules. The first seminar for each first year education module usually focuses on study skills, including how to find the library and perhaps even stretching to referencing guidelines, although this is often scheduled for the second seminar!

1.2 Intended Outcomes

During Undergraduate Committee meetings, the issue of improving students' study skills is regularly an agenda item. In one such meeting (May, 2005), the suggestion of an introduction to study skills workshop for first year students was made. It was thought that this would not only emphasise the importance of study skills to students but would ease the pressure of the first seminar where basic issues are dealt with, allowing more detailed discussions of study skills to be explored. Furthermore, the retention of students is always a priority issue at both a departmental and institutional level. Therefore a further support mechanism to meet all of these points was the main rationale behind this intervention.

1.2 Brief Review of the Literature

Edward (2003:226) explains that induction means “lead in” and that such university programmes are usually the first time that students make contact with fellow students and staff. Because of this, Edward (2003) progresses to explain that students need to be motivated and familiarised with the university culture. Furthermore, Tait & Godfrey (2001) explain that the student population is changing rapidly and therefore higher education institutions should consider refreshing induction programmes to promote study skill awareness, as well as providing social encounters. Hartley (2002) expands upon this by suggesting that skills which have not
traditionally been taught in higher education, including illustrating the use of computer software, should be clearly illustrated to students. Tait & Godfrey (2001) evaluate the use of induction programmes to increase student awareness of these skills and propose that “good preparation for study in HE is a major contributor to effective and independent study and is therefore a key ingredient of a good student experience”.

Combining this with the fact that undergraduates have less contact time with staff compared to further education students (Marland, 2003), the initial student induction appeared a suitable place to initiate an introduction to study skills. Laing, Robinson & Johnston (2005), whilst reframing their university induction programmes, included sessions relating to methods of assessment, plagiarism, referencing and personal and social development. The researchers report positive outcomes of these aspects and, therefore, their inclusion in the teaching cycle would perhaps be beneficial.

2. The Teaching Cycle

2.1 Planning, Structuring and Implementing the Cycle

Prior to starting the first academic year, all new first year students are sent a pack regarding induction to university information. Therefore for the academic session (2006/07), included within this pack by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, was a short note inviting education students to attend one welcome talk out of two possible sessions. The sessions were held on the Thursday of the first week of term. The students were reminded again about these talks again at the induction on the first Monday and sent an email as a third reminder.

The talks were scheduled to last an hour and, as mentioned previously, the students were told to attend one session of their choice. The talks took place in a
lecture theatre of the Old College. This ensured students found the department prior to the commencement of lectures the following week.

The advisory talk was initiated by welcoming all of the students to the School and introducing key members of relevant Undergraduate staff. Following this, a PowerPoint presentation covering the following areas was given:

- Finding and using the Education library
- Pastoral support
- Academic and personal progress reviews (APPR)
- Accessing and using Blackboard
- Undergraduate handbook
- Study skills folder on Blackboard

Then the Director of Learning and Teaching addressed the following issues:

- Bad/Unfair practice
- Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC)
- Course evaluation and assessment

The session was brought to a close by a question and answer time where the students raised any questions or queries they had.

This introductory talk was followed up by weekly postings of useful study skills information on Blackboard. The postings followed the schedule below:

- Week 1: Studying at university
- Week 2: Further reading and referencing
- Week 3: Assignments
- Week 4: Learning styles
- Week 5: Oral presentations
- Week 6: Writing reports
• Week 7: Examinations
• Week 8: Group work
• Week 9: Seminars
• Week 10: Reflecting and planning

More details of this schedule can be found in appendix 8.

2.2 Gathering Evidence as a Method of Evaluating the Intervention

The following approaches were utilised as a method of obtaining evaluations of the cycle.

• Discussed as an item at the Staff Student Consultative Committee
• Discussed as an item at the Undergraduate Committee meeting
• Questionnaire to all first year students

2.3 Limitations

As with all interventions, a number of possible limitations did arise:

o Only 1 hour session
o Students bombarded with information at the beginning of the year. The advisory talk may have just added to this.

3. Interpretation and Analysis of Feedback

3.1 Staff Student Consultative Committee Meeting

The Staff Student Consultative Committee meeting was held on 21st November 2006 and included four first year student representatives. The students were very positive about the advisory talk and suggested that it was useful to be introduced to important elements of higher education study, thereby supporting Tait
and Godfrey (2001). They all suggested that visiting the department prior to the
commencement of lectures was useful.

3.2 Undergraduate Committee Meetings

The Undergraduate Committee met on 27th November 2006 and again the
advisory talk was agreed to be useful by members of the committee. The Director of
Learning and Teaching pointed out that the School was the only department to be
holding a study skills advisory talk during the induction programme and this had been
raised by Faculty as an example of good practice. Staff also suggested that some of
the pressure was eased off the first seminars, thereby meeting the intended outcome.

3.3 The Student Questionnaire

All of the respondents indicated that the advisory talk was useful. The graph
below illustrates the students’ perceptions towards the items covered in the talk. The
tabulated data can be found in appendix 9.
The graph illustrates that the components most likely to be regarded as ‘excellent’ were meeting staff, introduction to Blackboard and unfair practice.

As far as the study skills e-folder on Blackboard is concerned, 21 of the students (out of 27 respondents) indicated that they had accessed the folder. Finally, all of the students suggested that a similar advisory talk should be held for new first year students next year.

4. Reflection

The use of an advisory talk at the beginning of the induction to university programme appears to be generally beneficial. Despite this however, upon reflection, a number of useful amendments are likely to benefit the students’ experiences of the talk. The first of these relates to the first departmental induction talk given on the Monday of the first week. Students are bombarded with information during the induction programme and therefore it would perhaps be best to reduce the information given in the first talk. Students could merely be welcomed to the university and told how to register for certain modules.

The second point relates to the topic of pastoral support. The graph above shows that 3 students suggested that the information given on personal tutors was poor. Given the importance of the personal tutor in the retention of students, it is perhaps necessary to address this issue and ensure that all personal tutors are present at the talk. Tutors could also even hold smaller follow-up introductions with their students after the meeting.

5. Conclusions and Evaluations

The overall conclusion is that an advisory talk is a particularly useful tool in introducing students to the systems and skills they will need to become familiar with
during higher education study. Therefore, it is proposed that this practice should be continued, with necessary amendments, in future sessions. It could also be useful to share the findings of this invention with other departments as a means of sharing good practice and enhancing continuous professional development. In conclusion, the talk and e-folder appear to have been received positively by students and can be a useful tool for bridging the gap between school and university study.

6. Recommendations for Future Practice

- Continue the practice of using advisory talks and subsequent study skills e-folders on Blackboard.
- Reduce the amount of information given in first induction talk.
- Discuss the proposal of follow-up introductions with personal tutors
- Share practice with other departments