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Doing away with 'study skills'

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This paper argues that the widespread approach to enhancing student learning through separate study skills courses is ineffective, and that the term 'study skills' itself has misleading implications, which are counterproductive to learning. The main argument is that learning how to study effectively at university cannot be separated from subject content and the process of learning. The role of 'study skills' within universities' skills frameworks, and as a component of students' long-term development is discussed. Then, it is examined, with a focus on academic writing, what learning at university entails, and what is needed to support this learning. Finally, effective approaches to the enhancement of learning at university and beyond are considered.

Background

Student numbers and the diversity of the student population have increased considerably in the UK in recent years. This diversity poses a great challenge to universities to ensure the progression of students from different educational backgrounds and abilities. The post-1992 universities in particular, with their larger share of students from non-traditional backgrounds, have introduced a range of strategies to support student learning (Paczuska, 2002; Thomas, 2002). A common approach to providing learning support is by extra-curricular 'study skills' courses, often offered in dedicated learning support centres (Gamache, 2002; Haggis & Pouget, 2002). This approach is referred to as 'bolt-on' (Bennett *et al*., 2000), as opposed to the 'built-in' or embedded approach where learning is developed through the subject teaching. As will be discussed in more detail below, the bolt-on approach has severe limitations, mainly because it separates study skills from the process and content of learning.

The bolt-on provision has its origins in the previous highly selective system in which students were expected to enter university equipped with adequate skills to study effectively. The lack of 'study skills' was regarded as the problem of a few 'at risk' students, and, in what Cottrell (2001, p. 40) calls the 'remedial approach', these students were sent outside the department for help. More recently, however, there has been a growing awareness that not only 'non-traditional' and a few weak 'traditional' students struggle with the demands of studying at university. The National Audit Office (NAO, 2002) found that due to changes in the secondary

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system, most students from the traditional A level route are not adequately prepared for the independent learning required in higher education. Academic writing in particular is increasingly seen as problematic (Winch & Wells, 1995; Lillis, 2001), as many students are no longer required to write essays at secondary school. Students from all backgrounds need support 'for successful achievement and progression within the education system and beyond' (Blythman & Orr, 2002, p. 46). Thomas (2002) points out that institutions need to be wary of confining support strategies to students deemed to be at risk.

However, practices at universities remain largely unchanged, and are still based on the deficit model of providing support to weak students. A random search of the web sites of 10 pre-1992 and 10 post-1992 universities in the UK revealed that all but two offer bolt-on study skills courses, either through student services, the student union, or through special skills centres**.** The skills most commonly addressed in these courses are time management, essay writing, presentation, note taking and revising for exams.

Another version of the bolt-on approach is the advice given in web sites or course-materials, for instance student handbooks. Although these materials are provided by individual departments and courses, the advice is usually not embedded in subject-specific content. Rather, general guidelines are given on how to manage time, write essays, take notes, etc. The web sites typically consist of lengthy instructional texts and links to other web pages with more instructional text.

Limitations of the bolt-on approach to developing study skills

The described methods have several drawbacks. Extra-curricular skills courses are often not attended by the students who need them most, but by higher achieving students who want to enhance their performance further (Durkin & Main, 2002). In addition, students do not recognize generic courses as relevant to their subject (Drummonds *et al*., 1998; Durkin & Main, 2002). In view of the above claims that all students need support for effective learning, the bolt-on approach is of limited use. Instead, inclusive models are needed that reach all students.

The provision of advice on study skills in the format of instructional texts contradicts experiential learning theories which emphasize that effective learning takes place when learners experience a problem and take action, reflect on the action, form concepts on the basis of their reflection and apply these concepts in new situations (Kolb & Fry, 1975). For the development of effective learning, students need to be given the experience of dealing with academic tasks, and feedback on this experience in order to encourage reflection. On the basis of that reflection, they then can develop concepts and strategies to deal with similar tasks more expertly. Instructional texts do little for experiencing and reflecting. Also, many students, already overburdened with the amount of reading in their subject area, might not find it easy to read through lengthy guidelines on study skills, and transfer them to their particular context.

The most severe drawback of the bolt-on approach is that study skills are divorced from subject content and knowledge. This separation suggests that there is a difference between studying successfully and learning, and that, if certain techniques are acquired, students can study successfully without deep engagement with the subject. As Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986, p. 9) point out, some skills courses 'degenerate into techniques for passing examinations, for coping with the system rather than developing the skills of learning'. Teaching study skills without linking them to subject content inevitably encourages the undesirable epistemological belief that knowledge is an 'external, objective body of facts' (Gamache, 2002, p. 277) which can be acquired with certain tricks and techniques. This assumption, in combination with the predominant assessment methods in higher education, fosters a surface approach to learning.

The labels of most study skills describe academic tasks, for instance 'essay writing', 'presentation' and 'note-taking'. Study skills training should enable students to carry out these tasks. The question is whether that can be achieved in generic courses without the specific academic content. Do such courses, and indeed the term 'study skills' itself, trivialize learning? This question will be further examined in the context of academic writing.

Researchers agree that a far more effective approach is the embedded model, in which skills are developed as an integral part of the study programme, and are assessed (Gibbs, 1994; Drummond *et al*., 1998, 1999; Cottrell, 2001). This model addresses the complexity of skills in an inclusive and holistic manner by providing learning opportunities for all students progressively throughout the degree course. In the universities where this model is used, there is also a broader view of skills as not only useful for academic study, but also for students' lifelong personal and professional development. Drummond *et al.* (1999, p. 14) point out that the embedded approach 'involves a coordinated and structured provision running through the different levels of any programme of study'.

There seem to be four main reasons why the predominant approach to developing learning at universities is the bolt-on model of developing study skills. The first two are interrelated and concern the difficulties involved in implementing the embedded approach: the organizational and managerial challenges in coordinating progressive skills development throughout degree courses (Drummond *et al*., 1999), and the reluctance of many academic staff to concern themselves with student learning (Biggs, 1996) or with developing work-related skills (Drew, 1998; Bennett *et al*., 2000). Embedding skills, as described by Drummond *et al.* (ibid.), relies on the commitment of all academics teaching in degree courses, and therefore requires staff consultation and development measures.

The other two reasons have to do with the conceptualization of 'study skills' and perceptions of learning. Firstly, 'study skills' rarely have a confirmed place in universities' skills frameworks that aim at graduate or employability skills, suggesting that they are regarded as separate from skills needed in students' long-term development. Secondly, the complexity of the skills needed to carry out academic

tasks does not seem to be properly understood by those who think that students can acquire them outside the subject.

The latter two reasons are discussed in this paper. The role of study skills within universities' skills frameworks is examined in the next section. Then, with the focus on academic writing, the nature of learning at university is considered and, consequently, what learning support is needed. Finally, some solutions are proposed for the effective enhancement of learning at university and beyond.

Skills frameworks and the role of study skills

In this section, the argument follows Cottrell's (2001, p. 46) proposal that study skills are 'part of a broader process of personal, academic and professional development' continuing throughout the degree course into working life. Most universities in the UK have implemented wider skills development schemes, accompanied by structures that help students to plan their development as lifelong learners. These schemes were introduced following pressure from employers' associations and Government agencies to equip students with skills that are transferable to contexts outside their academic discipline (Drummond *et al*, 1999). The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) acknowledged that transferable or 'key' skills should be developed at university. While certain skills such as problem-solving and communication had always been developed implicitly in university courses, at least to a degree, many students were not aware of them and their transferability to the workplace. Dearing recommended that skills should be an explicit and assessed part of the curriculum and that they should be specified in the outcomes of degree courses (ibid., Recommendation 21).

As individual institutions value their independence and prioritize skills differently according to their context, there is a wide diversity of practice across the universities (Murphy, 2001). Most universities, as well as individual faculties and departments, have developed their own skills agendas. These agendas often derive from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) key skills framework, consisting of communication, IT, numeracy, problem-solving, working with others, managing own learning and performance (QCA, 2000).

Although there is some variation in the labels for universities' skills schemes, ranging from 'transferable', 'graduate' to 'employability' skills, the label 'key skills' has become predominant. Initially, according to Drummond *et al.* (1998, p. 22), the provision of key skills has been 'patchy', but by now many universities have developed institutional approaches. Unlike study skills, key skills are often embedded into the subject teaching, or at least given a more prominent role in the curriculum. In some universities, all modules are utilized for their progressive development (for instance the University of Luton and Queen's University Belfast). Other universities offer credit-bearing courses that lead to Skills Awards (for instance the Universities of Birmingham, Warwick and York).

In most existing key skills schemes, study skills do not explicitly feature. The reason might be that they are either regarded as identical with key skills, or, as the provision of bolt-on courses suggests, that they are regarded as discrete skills.

The following statements suggest that study and key skills are identical, and transferable from study to work. The QCA (2000) claims that key skills are 'commonly needed for success in a range of activities in education and training, work and life in general'. Fallows and Steven (2000, p. 7) quote a statement by the (then) DfEE: 'The processes which make learning effective in a changing higher education also develop the qualities which are needed in the changing workplace'. However, this view is not shared by Murphy, who presents a narrower conception of study skills:

> It is important to make the distinction here between basic skills (such as literacy and numeracy), key skills (the generic skills of application) and study skills (skills particularly associated with induction into higher education) even though there are some overlaps between these three groups. (Murphy, 2001, p. 7)

Here, study skills are separate from key skills, and the impression is given that they can be acquired simply through induction activities. This view neglects the complexity of learning at university.

The perception of study skills as separate entities is detrimental to their effective development. It implies that, while key skills are important for employment and therefore for students' future life, study skills are only useful for the immediate purpose of succeeding at university. Secondly, as shown above, it leads to the separate provision of study skills training with all its shortcomings.

For these reasons, it would be more helpful for students' long-term development if the skills that are needed for studying effectively at university were presented and taught as the starting point in the development of those skills that are required from graduates. The same categories should be used for skills that are needed for academic study and employability. This approach is rarely to be found at UK universities. Below, an example will be presented of a university where study skills are the initial component in a long-term developmental process.

Academic writing and the study skills approach

Different levels of learning are necessary for students to be able to carry out academic tasks. To what extent can this learning be equaled with study skills? The focus of this discussion is on writing, because 'writing is a key assessment tool, with students passing or failing courses according to the ways in which they respond to, and engage in, academic writing tasks' (Lillies, 2001, p. 20).

Furthermore, findings from research in various disciplines demonstrate that in higher education writing is essential for the understanding and construction of subject-based knowledge (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

As discussed above, the bolt-on approach to study skills is predominant in developing student learning at UK universities. The drawbacks of this approach are illuminated again here in the context of writing.

Lillis (2001, p. 26) compared the development of writing in different countries and pointed out that in North America, unlike in the UK, there is a widespread understanding that undergraduate students 'need to be taught how to write academic texts, which is manifested in the universal requirement of writing courses'.

In the UK, the 'notion of writing-as-skill' prevails, in which the problem is regarded as 'textual'. The resulting pedagogical approaches focus on the teaching of technical aspects of academic writing. Advice is given on 'surface language features' such as spelling, grammar, and 'the most visible of academic conventions, such as simplified representations of text structure and citation practices' (ibid., 22).

Table 1 illustrates the complexity of academic writing for a novice writer, showing that advice of the above type is not sufficient.

Although Table 1 provides only a rough outline, it shows that different levels of learning are involved in academic writing. The first level consists of techniques, while the second one is far more complex. It involves understanding the nature of knowledge and how it is constructed.

Table 1. Academic writing and levels of learning

Stages in writing academic texts	Levels of learning	
	Techniques	Understanding
1. Selecting/evaluating information sources	• Finding information in library and internet	• Making meaning within unfamiliar discourse • Understanding which information is relevant
2. Synthesising the ideas/ arguments from other sources with one's own ideas/arguments	• Referencing: conventions of citation • Avoiding plagiarism	• Knowing why, when and whom to reference • Understanding referencing as a method of: a. providing evidence b. acknowledging the work of others in the field c. giving greater authority to one's own ideas d. constructing knowledge
3. Writing ideas/arguments up into a structured, coherent text	• Structuring • Language skills (spelling, grammar, rhetorical strategies, cohesion) • Using appropriate terminology/style/ conventions	• Participating in specialist discourse • Understanding rhetorical processes needed for the construction of knowledge

In order to illuminate the two levels of learning, a closer look is taken here at referencing, as this plays a crucial role in the construction of knowledge.

The technique of referencing involves acquiring the conventions of the discipline, for instance using brackets for the names of authors, year of publication, and providing page numbers for direct quotes. Hendrick and Quinn (2000) found that most students used these conventions successfully after these were taught explicitly in a generic course. Generic teaching, however, did not succeed in enabling students to understand the sources, to select the relevant ones, or to know why and when to reference. For the latter, 'an understanding of knowledge as constructed, debated and contested' (Angelil-Carter, 1995, cited in Hendricks & Quinn, 2000, p. 448) is necessary. This understanding usually requires an epistemological shift, as students tend to see knowledge as uncontested facts that they have to absorb and then report in their writing. It is therefore necessary to teach students that knowledge is constantly developing, and that they are expected to question existing knowledge and contribute to its development, using evidence from previous contributors.

Closely related to referencing is the understanding of how propositions and arguments are counterweighted, questioned, or supported; in other words the rhetorical processes in academic discourse. While the necessary language devices (for instance discourse-organizing words) can be taught as techniques, the ability to use them for synthesizing different arguments in a coherent text requires 'a critical mass of knowledge in a certain field' (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000, p. 448), as well as the ability to participate in this discourse.

The type of support needed for the development of writing

The examples of referencing and of the rhetorical processes in academic discourse show that the problems students face with writing are by no means confined to textual ones, but that more complex learning is involved. The 'notion of writing-as-skill' (Lillis, 2001, p. 22) does as little justice to the complexity of this task as the associated approach to develop this 'skill' by bolt-on courses. Both the notion and the approach may to a certain extent be adequate for the development of techniques. The complex level of learning, called 'Understanding' in Table 1, is not appropriately described by the term 'skill', and cannot be achieved in extra-curricular courses. It can only be achieved within the subject and through explanations, modeling and feedback by subject tutors.

Northedge (2003) explains in detail students' difficulties in making meaning within an unfamiliar discourse (Stage 1 in writing, see Table 1), and the tutor's role, as an expert speaker of a specialist discourse, in giving students access to that discourse. Inducting students to an academic discourse, however, is only one aspect in the process of developing effective academic writers. This aspect has been termed 'academic socialization' (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159).

The 'academic literacies' approach challenges both the study skills approach, i.e., the notion that students' problems with writing are predominantly textual and language based, as well as academic socialization (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001).

Rather, reading and writing are regarded as cultural and social practices that depend on their context and tutors' and students' assumptions of what constitutes knowledge.

Lea and Street found that writing practices may vary even among different tutors on one course, and that there are gaps between tutors' and students' understandings of what is required in the areas of 'epistemology, authority and contestation over knowledge' (1998, p. 160). Through interviews and the analysis of student essays and tutor feedback, they revealed that tutors refer to categories such as 'argument', 'structure', 'clarity' and 'analysis' in their feedback, when in fact students' writing does not comply with their own perspective of constructing knowledge. For students, these categories are confusing. Although they are aware of the requirements of developing an argument and structuring an essay, they are uncertain 'how to write specific course-based knowledge for a particular tutor or field of study' (ibid., 164).

Lea and Street's research findings support the argument that writing needs to be taught explicitly within the subject context, by subject tutors. This is the only way of developing students' understanding of subject-specific writing requirements.

In order to develop this understanding, tutors should, in their teaching sessions:

1. Address epistemological assumptions.
2. Demonstrate how knowledge is constructed in the specific discipline.
3. Make it explicit that students are not recipients of, but active contributors to knowledge.
4. Demonstrate rhetorical processes in academic writing, for instance ways of integrating one's own voice with existing knowledge.

However, the suggestion that subject tutors spend teaching time on the development of learning tends to meet with serious concerns about time and curriculum constraints. But does teaching to write really divert much time and attention from the subject content? At least in some disciplines, for instance the humanities and social sciences, lectures have large elements of dialectic discourse, in which lecturers question the authority of existing knowledge, discuss different perspectives, and use them to support their own argument. It is not difficult to make the link to students' writing. For instance, the tutor's critical approach to knowledge can be used as the basis for discussing the students' etymological beliefs. Subject-specific examples can be offered to demonstrate to students how the challenging of findings or ideas leads to the advancement of knowledge

In addition, it should be made explicit to students that the tutor's way of discussing knowledge can serve as a model for their own writing. As a result, students will pay more attention to the dialectic and rhetorical processes in texts and lectures.

Effective institutional approaches to the development of student learning and skills

What has been argued for the development of writing holds true for other so called study skills such as 'presentation' or 'note-taking'. They also require what was

previously called the complex level of learning that involves the understanding of the nature of knowledge. For instance, students may fail to take meaningful notes because they uncritically accept everything in a lecture or in a text as equally important 'knowledge'. Generic skills courses provide little support with this problem, whereas subject tutors can demonstrate in their regular lectures how to identify key issues as well as less important information.

The complex level of learning cannot be adequately described by the term 'study skills', as this term implies the following:

1. That techniques and surface problems are concerned, which can be fixed relatively easily.
2. That acquiring these skills serves the short-term purpose of succeeding at university.
3. That they are unrelated to skills needed for 'work and life in general' (QCA, 2000).

Therefore, it seems constructive to abandon the term 'study skills' altogether. Instead, as indicated above, 'study skills' would be better integrated into a wider skills framework in which they would be seen as part of students' overall personal, academic and professional development. This approach would recognize (a) the complexity of the learning involved and the time needed for it; and (b) the relevance of the skills beyond university.

The integration of 'study skills' into a wider skills framework means that they are subsumed under, and taught within the wider skills categories, as shown, with the example of the QCA key skills framework (QCA, 2000), in Table 2.

The right column in Table 2 presents common academic tasks, most of which are listed under the term 'study skills' in the various courses, web sites and handbooks. It can be easily recognized that all of them fit into the broader categories, and that most of them are skills that are needed in the workplace as well.

However, integrating 'study skills' into the key skills framework is only part of the answer. To enable students to achieve the complex level of learning, an embedded approach with a long-term developmental perspective would also be desirable.

Table 2. Integration of 'study skills' into key skills categories

QCA key skills	'Study skills'
Communication	Written: essay, project, report writing Oral: presentation
Information technology	Library/information skills
Numeracy	Using graphs, statistics in written work, presentations
Problem-solving	Planning and conducting projects, experiments
Working with others	Planning and conducting group projects
Managing own learning and performance	Time management, memory

A few universities have implemented this approach, for instance Luton, Kent, Portsmouth (Cottrell, 2001, p. 3) and Surrey, and under a different classification (key, subject-specific, and employability skills), Queen's University Belfast (Tariq, 2004).

The University of Luton (http://lrweb.luton.ac.uk/t_and_l/index.php?content_skills) serves as a good example of both the integration of study skills into the key skills framework, and the embedded provision of skills training throughout the degree course. Descriptors for the six key skills are formulated for the different levels of courses, ranging from sub-degree to graduate level. For each skill, the development from the initial stages to graduate level is demonstrated in the level descriptors, and for each skill and level it is stated which evidence is required from students.

How skills are developed progressively is illustrated here again with the example of writing. Writing is part of the category of communication, and developed from Level 1 (sub-degree) to Level 4 (degree).

The descriptors and the required evidence for these two levels are compared in Table 3.

The descriptors and the associated evidence show:

1. That there is a steep progression from the required accuracy in surface features in level 1—which is in fact the 'study skills' level—to the construction of knowledge by synthesizing information in Level 4. This progression would be hard to achieve without embedding 'learning to write' in all levels of degree courses.
2. That the ability to write is not developed exclusively for the academic context; students write for different 'purposes' (Table 3, 'Required evidence'). This demonstrates a long-term perspective towards writing beyond university.
3. That writing is seen as part of a long-term strategy of using communication skills. Students are at this level expected to take responsibility for their own learning, by devising, monitoring and evaluating strategies. This demonstrates a wider perspective of developing lifelong learners.

Table 3. Level descriptors and required evidence for writing (University of Luton)

Descriptor	Required evidence
C1.3. Write two different types of documents about straightforward subjects. Include at least one image in one of the documents.	Present information in a form that suits your purpose; Ensure text is legible; and Make sure that spelling, punctuation and grammar are accurate so your meaning is clear
(C4.1.Develop a strategy for using communication skills over an extended period of time)	Evaluate and synthesise information from different sources;
C4.2. Monitor progress and adapt strategy, as necessary, to achieve the quality of outcomes in . . .	Communicate relevant information with accuracy, effectively using a form, structure and style that suits your purpose, and respond perceptively to contributions from others; and
. . .one extended written communication about a complex subject	Monitor and critically reflect on your use of communication skills. . .

In the University of Luton's skills framework, the term 'study skills' does not appear, and is indeed not needed. This is because the framework is based on a conception of learning as a lifelong developmental process in which skills are not regarded as discrete techniques that serve short-term purposes. This conception leads to a holistic approach towards learning, supporting students in gradually building up their skills and broadening them from an initial focus on study to the wider focus of employability and lifelong learning.

It was already mentioned above that the embedding of key skills throughout the curriculum requires an institutional approach and profound changes (Drummond *et al*., 1999). It is unlikely that many universities will take up this challenge. It is especially unlikely that research-intensive universities, which attract a large percentage of high-achieving 'traditional' students, will see the need to make such a commitment to student learning.

However, wide-ranging institutional changes are not necessary in order to provide more effective support for student learning than that currently offered in bolt-on courses and materials. Much would be achieved if more academic staff could be encouraged to develop their students' learning within their regular teaching. In the final section, some suggestions are made of how to engage tutors in this task.

Conclusion

In this paper, two extremes of skills development were examined: firstly, the bolt-on approach that is remedial, not inclusive, and divorced from subject knowledge. It has been argued that this approach is not capable of developing more than study techniques. Secondly, the 'long-term' embedded approach was discussed that develops the learning of all students in a progressive and holistic manner throughout the degree course. Although this approach is regarded as highly effective in developing student learning for university and beyond, its implementation is difficult.

An realistic and effective approach for universities would be to promote the embedding of skills on a smaller scale, by encouraging academic staff to integrate the development of learning into their teaching. Undoubtedly, the teaching quality in higher education has improved through the learning and teaching enhancement initiatives of the past decade. However, the fact that bolt-on study skills courses are the predominant method of supporting students' learning suggests that tutors' understanding of the nature and complexity of learning at university needs to be improved.

According to Lea and Street (1998), many tutors may not be aware that students' difficulties with academic tasks often stem from epistemological assumptions rather than from a lack of techniques. Raising this awareness would help tutors to recognize their essential role in developing students' deeper understanding of knowledge. Further aspects of this role are providing student with opportunities for reflection, and with feedback on their performance.

Therefore, the understanding of what learning at university involves is a key factor in engaging academic staff in the development of their students' learning.

For this understanding, it would be beneficial to do away with the term 'study skills', which implies that quick fixes are possible, and focus resources on educational development initiatives, which enable staff to effectively enhance student learning.

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