

Issue 7 | April 2011

InForm

A journal for international foundation programme professionals

Further ideas for assessing English on IFPs

Learning from intercultural groups

Assessing academic practices

Designing an exhibition

Britain in focus

And more ...



InForm

Conference 2011

Internationalisation – how far can it go?

We are proud to announce the second *InForm* Conference which will provide a welcome opportunity for interaction and sharing of practice with others from the international foundation programme (IFP) sector. The event will take place at the University of Reading and will include seminars and workshops on themes related to international foundation programmes.

Saturday 16 July 2011

Palmer Building, Whiteknights Campus
University of Reading

Conference fee: £55.00

Registration

To register, please complete the enclosed registration form or download a copy from www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Registration forms should be received along with the conference fee no later than 31 May 2011.

Keynote speaker

The plenary session will be delivered by Jude Carroll from Oxford Brookes University, who will represent the Teaching International Students (TIS) project. TIS is a joint initiative between the Higher Education Academy and the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs (UK-CISA). The project focuses on ways to maintain and improve the quality of teaching and learning for international students.

Speaker proposals

Speaker proposals are invited from professionals involved in the delivery of international foundation and pathway programmes. As usual, the focus should be on issues associated with teaching and learning in this particular sector. Sessions need to appeal to tutors and course managers from across the curriculum.

We are particularly interested in receiving proposals which involve collaboration between tutors across subject areas, as this aligns with the inherent diversity embedded within most international foundation programmes.

In order to submit a proposal, please submit an abstract of no more than 60 words and a presentation outline of no more than 250 words.

A speaker proposal form is enclosed in this edition and available for download from

www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Please email all speaker proposals to inform@reading.ac.uk by 30 April 2011.

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InForm

Issue 7 | April 2011

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From the Editorial Board ...

With Issue 7, *InForm* has entered its fourth year and it is pleasing to see how it continues to develop as a forum for members of the international foundation programme community. We hope that this issue will continue to encourage discussion and debate in this inherently cross-curricular field. The articles here showcase some of the diverse themes of interest to our contributors and our readers.

The topics which are discussed within these pages include: the use of film to teach international students about British culture; methods to improve intercultural group work in the classroom; the use of critique writing as an assessment tool in a pre-master's programme; and investigation into the demands of an undergraduate group project to feed back into the preparation of IFP students for their future studies.

Two papers in this issue explore the theme of assessment. The first one examines how diversity and standardisation can be melded together in English language testing, following on from Gerard Sharpling's invitation in *InForm* issue 5. The second focuses on mathematical knowledge and suggests a new approach to assessing the numeracy of international students entering foundation programmes.

'InFormal' is a new section which has been introduced to allow for the exchange of ideas and sharing of practice among colleagues in a more relaxed format. Two articles launch this section. One shares ideas about pastoral care and residential support for IFP students, while the other is a reflective paper on teaching business in an IFP.

We are pleased to announce that the second *InForm* conference will take place on 16 July 2011 at the University of Reading. This year's theme is internationalisation. Speaker proposals are still welcome and more details are available on the *InForm* website.

As always, we welcome contributions and suggestions for future editions. If you would like to write an article, comment on issues raised or make a suggestion, please contact us on: inform@reading.ac.uk. We also encourage you to join our new JISC mailing list through the link on our website: www.reading.ac.uk/inform.



Elisabeth Wilding

Chairperson *InForm* Editorial Board

'Dear InForm'

Dear InForm,

Gerard Sharpling's article raises issues which have long bedevilled language tutors on IFP courses. At the heart of the matter is the attitude of receiving institutions; as long as universities make offers conditional solely on IELTS grades for language requirements, students will continue to prioritise studying for the test, sometimes to the point of absenting themselves from EAP classes once they have achieved the required grade. The confusion amongst students about the relative status of components of the assessment scheme already exists. As Dr Sharpling points out, tests such as IELTS, despite the advantages of independent markers, do not measure 'added value.' I would like to argue that diversification is the way forward to obtain a more rounded and accurate picture of individual learners' readiness for university study.

Internal assessment often consists of a combination of coursework and in-house exams but at New College we rely on examinations which are held three times a year. The most important aspect of these is the integration of reading and writing and students are given an essay title and one or more reading texts; they make notes and use these to write the essay. (This is explained in more detail in my article in *InForm* Issue 3 April 2009). This tests their skills in examination conditions but the time allowance is generous, to allow for individual differences in working speeds, and they are allowed to use a dictionary. The essay title is not subject-specific but subject-related; for example, this year's final exam texts were about globalisation and the use of English as a lingua franca. As the year progresses, the students are expected to show evidence of progression in areas such as use of functional language and synthesis of sources.

It is sometimes claimed that internal assessment is not reliable but experience of our system over a number of years has shown that students on our International Business Foundation course consistently find it more difficult to achieve high grades on the EAP module than they do on the business modules. There is no reason why internal assessment cannot match the rigour of tests such as IELTS while giving a fairer picture of a student's language skills.

Jacky Murphy

EAP Tutor
New College Nottingham

Dear InForm,

It was refreshing to read Jacky Murphy's response to my recent article in *InForm*. In her letter, she provides a convincing argument for implementing a diversified approach to English language assessment. Diversification, as Ms. Murphy argues, enables less easily 'testable' aspects of the EAP curriculum such as source handling to be more directly factored into students' assessment profiles. Ms. Murphy further emphasises the value of repeated, summative-type assessments that are used in a formative way, to track progress. When using such an assessment type, there can indeed be greater flexibility in terms of time, and progress can be efficiently plotted across a range of repeat performances. This provides a longitudinal, developmental profile of a student's language improvement, not thought to be possible in proficiency testing alone. Ms. Murphy is quite right to suggest that if well prepared, such assessment approaches need not be unreliable; and of course, such practices bring the validity of such testing practices further to the forefront.

Yet oddly, we again find that picture to be complicated by a growing counter-argument which is extolling the virtues of single-shot proficiency testing over the diversified types of assessment that Ms. Murphy advocates. Why is this? It seems that this counter-movement is mainly occurring as a result of the increased scrutiny of language tests by regulatory bodies such as the UKBA, and the more direct linking of language proficiency with the granting of visas. What can such lists of tests tell us? And are they a strong measure of quality? This is a debatable point, but I have often felt that such lists say much more about the ideology of those who are involved in doing the 'including' and 'excluding' than they do about the tests themselves. This is not least because professional and regulatory bodies may actually have little knowledge of the tests they are seeking to classify. As a result, the drive towards creativity and diversification triggers a perpetual, regulatory counter-movement, which serves to challenge the very humanistic practices that Ms. Murphy outlines in her letter.

It would seem that very often, the most effective types of English language assessment for IFP students may well be those that lie beyond the legitimising scrutiny of the public gaze. Key data on student attainment can be provided through formative assessment, and this serves to track progress within the relatively concealed space of the classroom, whilst providing feed-forward to students through dialogue with the tutor, and negotiated action plans. This type of assessment cannot, of course, feature on regulated lists of tests, as is the case with primarily commercial products; but as Ms. Murphy suggests, the formative use of summative assessment is no less rigorous, or reliable, for all that – and no less welcome.

Dr G. P. Sharpling

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Further ideas for assessing English on IFPs

About the author



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'... imagine the ideal scenario to be one where assessment is both diverse and standardised.'

This article responds to Gerard Sharpling's invitation in Issue 5 of InForm to take forward the themes he raises. Sharpling concludes that better assessment can be achieved through either greater diversity or greater standardisation. This article develops this idea and proposes a best-practice approach which, rather than placing them in conflict, melds diversity and standardisation together.

Introduction

Getting the balance right on high-stakes language courses, such as English modules within IFPs, has long been debated, especially by tutors who have both teaching and assessing responsibilities. There are questions about what kind of assessments to use, which skills to cover and to what extent. There is the question of exams vs. coursework. Moreover, there is often a lack of time to deal with such questions in full, and the simpler solution of using an external test might be considered. Sharpling (2010) fittingly brings these issues to *InForm*, and this article is an attempt to build on his ideas.

Approaches to assessing English language

Sharpling (2010) identifies three broad approaches of assessing English language: coursework tasks, in-house examinations, and an additional external proficiency test. These points are being re-labelled here as:

- a) coursework tasks
- b) internal tests
- c) external tests

The reason for this is mainly to make the terminology simpler, although it should be noted that the term 'proficiency' is deliberately not mentioned, since this concept is not necessarily limited to external tests.

Regarding the questions of how to assess English language module students on IFPs, Sharpling makes some important observations:

- external tests give objective results, but they are limited in scope and can be bland and overly general
- while external tests generally have high reliability, there are factors irrelevant to the skills being measured which could disadvantage a particular student, such as illness or noisy exam rooms
- using in-house assessments such as portfolios, self-assessment, group work, alongside tests, has major validity advantages.

While it is true that the 'closer' an assessor is to the students, the less objective the assessment, internal assessments will match closely to student needs. In addition, problems in basing all assessment of a year-round programme on a single external test may lead to learning, and probably teaching, 'to the test', no matter how keen the tutor may be to avoid it (Hamp-Lyons, 1998 p. 332).

However, Sharpling also presents a dichotomous choice: use diverse assessment or use standardised assessment. It is probably better to think about the problem in a more flexible way. The reader may rightly imagine the ideal scenario to be one where assessment is both diverse and standardised. Any uncertainty about this point may simply be a problem with the definition of 'standardised assessment', and therefore the meaning of this notion is taken up first.

A definition of 'standardisation'

A 'standard test' might be thought of as simply the same single test for everyone. It might be thought of as a test that has been thoroughly checked for consistency in its administration and reliability in its results. These factors together might influence test users to think of the only truly 'standard' tests in EAP as IELTS and TOEFL, both of which are well-known 'external' tests. However, a wider meaning of 'standard' or 'standardisation', used in assessment circles, can be used to describe:

- achieving similar difficulty levels of items, as defined by either item statistics or benchmarking exercises
- keeping parallel formats and demands across different versions of tests/tasks, as defined in specifications, i.e. text length, time allowed, number of items, etc.
- attaining good agreement with marking standards, i.e. objective marking with a robust key, or subjective marking within acceptable boundaries of leniency or harshness.

These same principles may be applied to not only international tests, but to internal tests/other assessments. An ideal scenario would be a bank of tests and tasks created in-house which match students' specific needs, cover the full spectrum of relevant skills, and at the same time are justifiable in terms of format, difficulty level, and marking standards. All stakeholders would benefit from such a setup. The benefit for students is obvious, but as a lot of involvement from teaching staff would be necessary, additional benefits result from engaging teachers through training, and giving them more confidence in the exact meaning of the 'levels' they have to assign.

The difficulties of creating diverse-yet-standardised assessments

A thorough assessment system within an IFP would over the course of a year include tests, group activities, portfolios and so on. Maintaining the system will clearly be time-consuming. Teaching staff may or may not be paid specifically for time creating and marking assessments, but even if so it is unlikely to be a significant amount of time. There may be a lack of staff with skills to take on the jobs of ensuring appropriate difficulty levels (including use of statistics), consistent test construction or equivalent marking standards. Additionally, there is usually a requirement to make past papers publicly available, thereby taking away the possibility to re-use a recently-used test or task and creating a seemingly endless demand for new tests.

Sharpling rightly makes the point that having all sorts of different assessments may also confuse students, especially young ones, as they may not understand the importance of each. High-level administrators in the institution may also question the need for complicated systems.

Getting over difficulties

Here are some practical suggestions for developing a 'diverse-yet-standardised' scheme:

- review available resources (mainly staff time) and make room for assessment training
- exploit institutional systems of internal and external examining and moderation, and go the extra mile: encourage forums where knowledge of assessment construction, approach and marking are discussed
- have 'leaders' identified who have a particular interest in assessment
- organise standardisation meetings before major assessment events, e.g. marking a large cohort's exam papers, and plan such meetings well in advance
- be honest and if necessary critical about tutors' test-writing or marking skills, but remain diplomatic and friendly (avoid a dogmatic approach)
- do not scrap assessments after one use – consider recycling tests and tasks, using non-obvious cycles, possibly over a number of years – review and improve them based on an analysis
- emphasise the formative role of tasks even when they are ultimately summative (Tomlinson, 2005)
- build in explanatory sessions to inform and remind students about the assortment of assessments
- publish and present on how the assessment system works
- if none of the above is possible because tutors are already over-worked with assessing, review the current assessment scheme and consider ways of making it less complicated and less demanding.

Most teaching staff find that undergoing some sort of standardisation training is very informative, whether it be benchmarking or awareness-raising, and whether the subject of discussion is test-writing or marking methods, or item difficulty-levels. Such training usually results in not only more accurate and appropriate assessing, but also tutors who feel more confident in that vital role of making judgements of level.

Pre-sessional English language programmes can work on exactly the same principle (Howell & Slaght, 2007).

Indeed, a similar approach might be applied to any subject, and it is hoped that further comment on this topic in the *InForm* journal goes beyond English language modules.

Conclusion

Diversification and standardisation can and should sit side-by-side, but as with other positive initiatives, it should not be left up to keen individuals to put in unpaid overtime to achieve these aims. A lot depends on managers agreeing to the value of such work and allowing for resources to become available. Although this is challenging in the current economic climate, it is hoped that the importance of professional and thoughtful assessment is not overlooked.

Hamp-Lyons, L. (1998). Ethical test preparation practice: the case of TOEFL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32/2, 329–37.

Howell, B. and Slaght, J. (2007). TEEP: A Course-Driven Assessment Measure, in Alexander, O. (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 2005 joint BALEAP/SATEFL conference: New Approaches to Materials Development for Language Learning*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Sharpling, G. (2010). To standardise or diversify: How should English language be assessed on foundation programmes? *InForm* (5), April 2010.

Tomlinson, B. (2005). Testing to learn: a personal view of language testing. *ELT Journal* 59 (1), 39–46.

'Diversification and standardisation can and should sit side-by-side...'

Learning from intercultural groups

About the authors



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We have noticed that given the choice, most international students in their first year abroad form mono-cultural groups and many are unfamiliar with working as a team. This implies that students' engagement with group-based learning outcomes, i.e. those relating to group experience, may be limited.

Universities recognise these issues and promote efforts to integrate international students with British culture and education. However, on international foundation programmes there is a need to focus on integration between international students, specifically in the classroom, as cultural variances prevent effective group work, with gaps between some international cultures being wider than those between some international-UK cultures.

We note that students from varied cultural backgrounds need to develop an understanding of a global 'middle-ground' before either the universities or the students can sustain a bridge between UK and 'international' culture. We focus on improving intercultural group work in the classroom and invite discussion to formulate methods for understanding these differences and on how findings may be applied in order to foster group working skills.

Introduction

The internationalisation of HE has become a central tenet of many universities in the UK and has earned the interest of institutions in many countries. The learning strategies that students adopt have been categorised into three strategy types (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) and they are metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies. The latter involves some form of shared learning such as group or pair work or merely asking questions in class, and was the strategy which was least frequently reported.

What may be a genuine additional burden for some is finding that the anonymous security that teacher-led classrooms offer has been replaced by the expectation of peer-learning in groups. We have noted that students on foundation years (without previous experience of cross-cultural interaction) choose to work in groups of familiar cultures although a wider social interaction in the classroom may better foster a change in learning strategy. There may be several reasons for this but some are directly related to a low level of 'intercultural effectiveness' (Stone, 2006). Firstly, though they recognise the importance of understanding the UK education system, many students do not recognise the 'need' to work in cross-cultural groups. Secondly, students find cross-cultural groups difficult and even intimidating, because of differences or nuances that different cultures exhibit when working as a group.

This suggests the need for tutors to help international students with intercultural communication and working, in addition to bridging the gap between foreign and UK educational cultures. We contribute to this by targeting

the area of cultural dynamics in group work projects with the intention of improving team working skills as well as intercultural effectiveness among international students.

Application and methods used

An understanding of cultural differences between students in a classroom can improve the teaching and learning of team working skills in a cross-cultural setting. However, there are several challenges associated with studying these differences in the classroom including (i) the selection of a mechanism for assessing differences and for categorising them, (ii) extension and application of these concepts in the classroom in order to understand the dynamics operating between individuals from different backgrounds when working in multicultural groups, and (iii) presenting cultural differences to students without reinforcing (or creating new) cultural stereotypes. The following sections discuss some methods for addressing these challenges.

Analysis of cultural variances using cultural profiles

Some form of vocalising and categorising these variations is required for analysis and discussion. Social scientists have studied cross-cultural communication and the categorisation of cultural differences has been attempted (Hall, 1976; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) by employing a set of 'dimensions' (Table 1 overleaf).

This work has been extended by various research efforts in education (Stone 2006) and other fields (Trompenaars, F. 1993; Meeuwesen et.al., 2009). These concepts can be used as a guide to design activities used with

Table 1: Hofstede’s dimensions of culture

Dimension	Description
Power distance index	The degree to which less powerful members of a society accept the unequal distribution of power.
Individualism [vs collectivism]	The degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. This relates to levels of loyalty and may directly affect group dynamics in the classroom.
Masculinity [vs femininity]	‘Masculine’ countries show a larger gap between men’s values and women’s values.
Uncertainty avoidance index	The extent to which members of a society feel comfortable with unfamiliar situations.
Long-term orientation [vs short-term]	Society’s attitude towards time and traditions.

thought-based or discussion-based evaluation. However, it should be noted that there is much criticism of categorising cultures and these implementations come with a warning that researchers should ensure that stereotypes are not strengthened or fostered, thereby inhibiting the development of skills in cross-cultural interaction.

Classroom study

Studying and supporting cultural interaction in the classroom can be a cyclical process where findings feed into teaching in the classroom and vice versa. To further explore the inferences of cultural analysis in terms of effective international student experience in UK higher education, practical activities in the classroom are observed to obtain student feedback.

One such activity, used to elucidate student preferences pertaining to different methods of working, involved presenting them with a series of options on nine cards which were arranged using the ‘diamond ranking’ method (Woolner et al., 2008), according to best fit with the subjects’ views where the optimum choice was placed at the top of a diamond configuration (Figure.1).

For numeric analysis, the numbers shown in the diagram may be used to score options in order to judge the relative importance of concepts. Initial results

‘Studying and supporting cultural interaction in the classroom can be a cyclical process ...’

indicate that individual opinions differ after intercultural group discussions surrounding the task. This suggests that exposure to alternative points of view through discussion influenced students’ thinking (Figure 2).

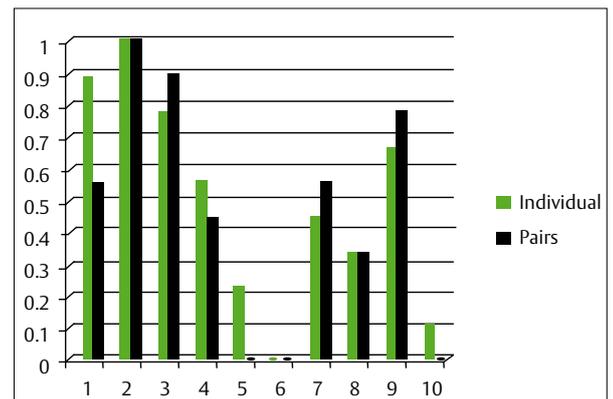


Figure 2: Percent rank of individual student and pair choices compared

Observing and presenting cultural differences

A problem posed at the stage of collecting responses and feedback is that students are likely to be hesitant when speaking about cultural issues and may filter what they say; this may be because cultural identity is closely linked to personal identity. A way of minimising this may be to use an interactive response system like

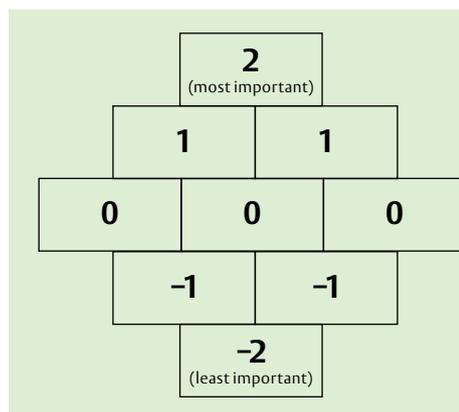


Figure 1: Diamond ranking method

Example list of items to rank

- interest in the work
- research the topic
- plan time for the work
- complete work on time
- ask friends for help/advice
- organise thoughts on paper
- check grammar and spelling
- avoid plagiarism
- use diagrams and/or tables

'... social and intercultural competence directly affects the process of language learning.'

TurningPoint (www.turningtechnologies.co.uk) to capture student responses anonymously.

Students can then be made aware of the results of the class activities with the purpose of increasing their ability to empathise with different cultures. As mentioned earlier there is a challenge of presenting cultural differences to students without reinforcing (or creating new) cultural stereotypes. TurningPoint software is used to present back to the students, almost instantly, their responses without identifying the respondent. Details of nationality and culture can be omitted from classroom sessions e.g. data presented may be in the form of '30% of the class prefer A'. This provides an opportunity for reflection on the collaborative learning that has taken place.

Anecdotal evidence from pilots suggest that students are more willing to provide answers to questions when asked using TurningPoint compared to verbal questions in class or questionnaires that are filled in by hand.

Various scenarios can be used throughout the course as need arises, e.g. the example shown in Figure 1, or concepts like personal space, which introduces the issue as well as creating an awareness of the variety in the classroom. These topics are tailored from class to class depending on the issues that are likely to exist.

Observations and feedback from students at the end of the semester will be used to evaluate this strategy and to identify improvements achieved in the effectiveness of student group work.

Conclusion

Our primary aim is to increase the cultural awareness of our students and promote intercultural working

skills so that they may benefit fully from group-work-based learning activities. Research in education has shown that social and intercultural competence directly affects the process of language learning. We have identified some challenges for educators in this area and presented an approach involving the use of class activities and intercultural concepts to elucidate and create cultural awareness.

Hall, T. E., (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press.

Hofstede, G. & Hofstede, G. J., (2005). *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind* (2nd edition), McGraw-Hill, New York.

Meeuwesen, L., Brink-Muinen, A. van den, & Hofstede, G., (2009). Can dimensions of national culture predict cross-national differences in medical communication? *Patient Education and Counselling*, 75, 58–66. Elsevier, Ireland. Doi:10.1016/j.pec.2008.09.015.

O'Malley, J. M. & Chamot, A. U., (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stone, N., (2006). Conceptualising Intercultural Effectiveness for University Teaching. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. 10, 334–356.

The Toolkit and Dialogue Project, <http://smtltd.wetpaint.com/page/20+Diamond+Nine+Ranking+Activity> [last accessed 10/09/10]

Trompenaars, F., (1993). *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*. London: The Economist Books.

Woolner, P., Clark, J., Hall, E., Tiplady, L., Thomas, U., Wall, K., (2008). Pictures are necessary but not sufficient: Using a range of visual methods to engage users about school design. *Learning Environments Research*, 13:1–22.

Assessing academic practices

About the author



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This paper discusses the use of a written critique for assessment purposes on an international pre-masters programme. It examines the rationale behind the selection of this form of assessment, the problems encountered and the subsequent steps taken to overcome these challenges.

The International Pre-masters Programme at King's College London has an annual cohort of 90 students, with 72 September starters and a further 18 students enrolling in January.

Course participants follow three modules:

- EAP and Study skills, which totals 50% of their final grade;
- Culture, theory and society (a General Studies module), totalling 25%; and
- an elective module (from Business Management, Law, or Europe and the World, the latter an International Relations module), also 25%.

A suite of procedures and tools are employed on the EAP module to measure the students' ability to engage with academic discourse, both receptively and productively, with an assortment of genres and contexts. Subsequent iterations have witnessed our attempts to refine these procedures, and this article discusses the rationale behind the selection of a 2,500-word critique as an assessment instrument, problems encountered, and steps taken to mitigate these.

The development of critical-thinking skills is a key learning outcome of the Pre-masters Programme at King's.

In addition, a critique was selected over other types of written work as:

- it has a high feed-forward element, since much of the students' future academic practice will prioritise responding critically to reading;
- a critique requires the application of a number of macro- and micro-skills, such as identifying sources, extensive critical reading for meaning, inferring, dealing with cohesion, summarising, paraphrasing and taking a position;
- the skills employed are transferable, not only academically, but also into wider real-life practices;
- students begin to engage in a process of Socratic dialogue in relation to their paper, which encourages them to become more critical and independent thinkers.

The structure of the critique is not prescribed, although students are expected to provide a context for the paper (by making the field accessible to the reader), summarise the content and then select salient aspects of the text to comment on.

Writing a 2,500-word assignment was onerous, especially given the product-based approach that students were focused on. This was resolved by staggering submission. Students now submit three unassessed, but marked, pieces of work which build up to form the basis of the final assessed critique. This involves selecting a paper early in term two, and writing a rationale for its selection. This is followed by a 500-word synopsis of the text, and then finally, mid-term, students submit a critical summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the text in 750 words. This breaking down of the text allows provision to focus on different areas at each stage, with training on identifying and selecting sources earlier, moving onto summarising and paraphrasing skills and then drilling down into the skills required for critical reading and evaluative writing, drawing on a range of teaching materials (e.g. Swales & Feak, 2004, pp.180–214).

Some examples of critical episodes from students' writing are as follows.

- Sampling methods seem dubious. A survey of 400 entrepreneurs – 50 in each of the six regional cities and 100 from Moscow in 2003, and nearly the same number of respondents in 2004 – is not capable of defining business activity in the huge country.
- Article accepts that the picture is complex, but does not suggest which elements need more analysis and investigation.
- In this study, a questionnaire is used to obtain findings on the gap between faculty's perceived importance and self-rated importance in twelve fundamental competencies of a medical educator.

Brown et al. (1997) highlight how changes in assessment procedures tend to be problematic, requiring

the validation, both overt and tacit, of a variety of stakeholders, from institution-level module approval to students' own recognition of the validity and relevance of the assessment tools. A number of problems we encountered, and the steps taken to remedy them, are as follows.

Initially, students found it difficult to identify suitable sources, and/or attempted to critique complete books or chapters of books. This was addressed by requiring students to select a paper related to their future field of study, and class time is dedicated to the use of College and online academic databases. Students critique a paper, rather than a book/chapter, since papers provide a distillation of the ideas expanded on in a book. Their workload is thus reduced, and time saved is dedicated to finding related papers, allowing them to situate their paper within their field. An added benefit of this wider reading is that they can reference this reading when writing personal statements, providing admissions tutors with an indication of what the students have been reading in the field recently.

Secondly, students resisted commenting negatively, therefore failing to align their practice with that expected of the genre. This was addressed by analysis of a sample critique to raise awareness of the features of the genre. They similarly found it difficult to find suitable areas to critique, or provided a critical evaluation of the field/subject, rather than of the paper itself. Content frequently prioritised a synopsis of the text rather than critical evaluation. Trial and error has shown that papers with an empirical focus tend to be easier to critique, allowing as they do for a critique (both positive and negative) of research methodology and data interpretation.

Finally, despite awareness-raising and training, some critiques evidenced unacknowledged citations. This was addressed by 'designing out' opportunities for plagiarism' (Hughes, 2009:553) by requiring students to use journal articles rather than books since these occur on Turnitin more frequently than complete volumes.

We feel that we have now reached a stage where the use of a critique for assessment purposes works well, and provides the students with a greater awareness of what effective academic practice involves. Students have also attested to the preparedness they felt when embarking on masters-level courses and the head start that they have over other students who have not taken a preparatory course.

Brown, G. with Bull, J & Pendlebury, M., (1997). *Assessing Student Learning in Higher Education* London: Routledge

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'... we have now reached a stage where the use of a critique for assessment purposes works well ...'

Designing an exhibition: exploring a complex, group case study

About the author



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'... help IFP practitioners to develop group tasks that will better prepare students for group collaboration in their academic disciplines and beyond.'

Case studies are now an accepted mode of learning in professional schools as they provide a view of the real world with all the twists and turns of authentic life. They can be used to explore connections between theory and applied practice and to develop problem solving, critical thinking, reflection and face-to-face interpersonal discussion.

In order to facilitate the future success of students entering undergraduate study, the Foundation Certificate Programme at the Centre for English Language Education at the University of Nottingham, prepares students to cope with the demands of group case study projects. These are integrated into two core modules: Oral Communication and Study module (Smith, 2009), Information Technology and two content modules: Business Methods and Media and Texts.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to gain a more detailed understanding of the demands of an undergraduate group case study project in the qualifying year module 'Computers in Business' at the Nottingham School of Business. In this first-term project, the group, working as consultants, must create an exhibition bid to win a government-sponsored project. It reveals the type of real world design project undergraduates face (Long, 2005; Long and Crookes, 1991; Skehan, 1998). Colbeck, Campbell and Bjorklund (2000, p.70) found that 'students liked working on "real world projects" ... problems faced by industry that had many possible solutions, and where the focus was more on the problem solving process than on calculating a predetermined right answer.'

Greater understanding of group case studies may help IFP practitioners to develop group tasks that will better prepare students for group collaboration in their academic disciplines and beyond. This project requires groups of five to seven students to actually prepare a design bid for a green computing exhibition with online promotional support. The exhibition should inform smaller enterprises how to reduce their environmental impact through improving their green computing. It carries 60% of the module assessment and consists of a 4000–5000 word report and a ten minute presentation. The project document stresses: 'You should bear in mind that marks will be awarded for the rigour, quality, accuracy, clarity and creativity of the work your group undertakes, and not for the word count devoted to each section of your final document' (Barnatt, 2008, p.6). The exhibition project is intended to develop group

skills and test a range of competencies including information communications technology, strategy formulation, collaborative document preparation and presentation skills.

Designing an exhibition

After familiarising themselves with the requirements of the overall project and completing early tasks, such as investigating the required online readings and further literature, the next task in the chain is planning and preparing the design bid (Ellis, 2003; Mohan & Smith, 1992; Willis and Willis, 2007). The groups have to select key points and synthesise complex task instructions from various parts of the project document into a cohesive work plan. Creating the exhibition design in the designated exhibition space (14 x 18 metres) is a highly interactive, cognitively complex task which requires information exchange and extensive negotiation in order to agree on specific criteria for the one-year exhibition at a London science park. It also includes managing time, allocating tasks, taking minutes and resolving any misunderstandings or intercultural miscommunications.

In some areas, groups can be creative and make their own choices but in others they need to follow explicit guidelines. For example, 'There are no prior expectations of what will be included in the exhibition space aside from the fact that it must feature the "energy reduction zone", "resource reduction zone" and "travel reduction zone". You also need to provide workspace for the two individuals expected to be working full-time within your exhibition, and who will also be engaged in its online promotion. You may choose to segment such back-office working space from

public display, or to integrate it into your exhibition' (Barnatt, 2008, p.4).

Once groups have created their exhibition design, they prepare an exhibition brochure which explains the exhibits for the visitors in everyday English. They also need to identify specifically where and how the two IT staff will work within the exhibition. In terms of English code complexity, they design and write the brochure and the website text; promote the website using persuasive language and collaboratively write it up for the final report. In terms of communicative stress, the groups have limited time, multiple steps to follow and must negotiate and agree on the design bid, website, promotion and budget.

The task presumes familiarity with the concept of 'exhibition' as well as designing and planning. It requires documents that not only use academic language but also use appropriate everyday language or online genre. The time limits and the need to adhere to the necessary sequences as well as group negotiations around website creation, promotion, budget and exhibition guide can all be stressful. All these aspects render this to be a highly complex task.

Task difficulty

Interviews with the module convenor/business lecturer (Barnatt, 2010) confirmed that the exhibition design bid is a challenging task for all students as the groups have to deal with various components simultaneously. He described the dense project document as 'quite challenging' and identified a number of student problems including poor reading skills, difficulty identifying the different component parts and their requirements as well as limited subject specific language. For example the word 'exhibition' is used 32 times in different instructions and a number of phases relating to 'your exhibition' are illustrated below.

who would be running your EXHIBITION
working full time within your EXHIBITION
the key features of your EXHIBITION
that will accompany your EXHIBITION
to integrate it into your EXHIBITION
that will support your EXHIBITION

In addition, the lecturer stressed that some groups have difficulty applying theoretical knowledge and green computing knowledge from the lectures, creating diagrams and other visuals (as the best groups produce models, videos, posters, and handouts), inventing interactive exhibits for visitors and developing the promotional visitors' guide. Other groups do not specify precisely where and how the two IT staff would work; create online software materials too slowly; rely on school-level IT skills; fail to explain how Web 2.0 would be used or specify particular products with real prices from named suppliers. Lack of work, exhibition and budgeting knowledge was reported as a significant drawback as well as failure to address ethical issues.

Lack of understanding of the boundaries of 'creativity' for practical applications was challenging for international students.

Conclusion

The investigation of this first-year undergraduate case study project has revealed the nature and complexity of semester-long group projects that foundation graduates face in their first semester in the Nottingham School of Business. IFP practitioners may need to reconsider the type of challenges they provide their students to ensure they finish the year able to cope with such complex group case study projects. In our case, group project documents certainly need to be more challenging, giving instructions that combine what is required and what is not with areas where students can be creative and make their own choices and decisions. Perhaps the next group project will be a design bid for an exhibition.

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'... the exhibition design bid is a challenging task for all students as the groups have to deal with various components simultaneously.'

Britain in focus: using films to teach Foundation students about modern Britain

About the author



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'... no other medium could as rapidly and vividly capture a mood, a place, a time – and convey through its special means ideas about life in Britain.'

Films can be an appealing and motivating way to interest international students in the culture, society and history of modern Britain. Films also offer students an alternative means of engaging in authentic listening and reading, critical observation and analysis, interpretation and discussion.

The background

'Modern British Cinema and Society' is one of a range of elective modules on Oxford Brookes' International Foundation Diploma. The class consists of mainly international students. Very few are familiar with recent (i.e. post-war) British history; however, most are keen film-viewers. Yet only a handful has seen – or can remember seeing – any British films (some students think all films made in English are American).

While there is a vast range of books and journals on both modern British cinema and contemporary history, there is very little on how one might use the former to teach the latter. The only two books that might be considered relevant are *Film* by Stempleski & Tomalin (2001) and *Teaching Contemporary British Cinema* (Benyahia, 2005). Therefore the task of creating a new course and developing a way of helping students to engage with the chosen films has been a challenging but pleasurable one.

The module runs over 12 teaching weeks, with a weekly three-hour seminar plus a separate showing of nine films. The module is assessed by a 1,600-word essay and two in-class assessments.

Why use films?

Film is a dynamic, fluid, accessible medium which can appeal to students through its immediacy, its imagery and its narrative techniques. This combination of factors can be a powerful motivator. In an academic course whose primary focus is on the written text, film offers an alternative way of reflecting views and attitudes. Film has its own ways of communicating meaning: different from a text, yet similar in that it can evoke a personal response and can be 'read' in different ways and on different levels. Certainly, in terms of this course, no other medium

could as rapidly and vividly capture a mood, a place, a time – and convey through its special means ideas about life in Britain.

Some teaching considerations when using films

Five aspects should be borne in mind when using films with Foundation students:

- the language level of the students
- the students' 'film awareness'
- their social/ historical awareness
- their analytical skills
- time constraints.

Criteria for the selection of films

Criteria for selection were twofold: a) quality, i.e. films which have received some critical acclaim; and b) 'exploitability' of content, i.e. films with links to some key historical or social themes, and containing subject matter which may appeal to students and provide sufficient scope for analysis and discussion.

Some themes and films

Themes or aspects of society which the module has covered over the years are:

- **World War Two:** This has been a staple of British cinema for the last 60 years. I have used three films over the years, *In Which We Serve* (1942), *Reach for the Sky* (1956) and *Hope and Glory* (1987).
- **The 1960s:** This was a rich period for 'new wave' social realist British cinema with many excellent films. Those I tend to use are *A Taste of Honey* (Richardson, 1962), which introduces the theme of teenage pregnancy, *A Hard Day's Night* (Lester, 1964) to illustrate the huge impact which music (and marketing) started to have on the lives and spending habits of young people from

the late 1950s onwards, and *Kes* (Loach, 1969), a story which links to the theme of education – and wasted opportunities.

- **The ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland:** Many films have dealt with this theme, but one that I regularly return to is *In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan, 1993). Students always like it, and the film enables us to discuss not only the origins of the conflict, but also the British legal system and the role of the police.
- **Immigrants in Britain:** Films with this theme can be either broadly comic or focus on the darker side of life. Two of the latter type that I have consistently used are *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002): the former blends many contemporary themes including racism, Thatcherism, business practices, and sexual identity, while the latter offers insights into the lives of legal and illegal immigrants doing the dirty jobs in London.

‘... several of the skills normally covered in academic literacy modules can equally well be replicated on a film-based one ...’

Teaching materials

The main purpose of the classes is to give students the chance to express their views and interpretations of the film. The types of questions for discussion of a film might include the following:

- **context questions:** where and when is the film set? Is this relevant in any way to the themes of the film (e.g. urban/rural settings)? What kind of language do the main characters speak (i.e. standard English, dialect, a lot of slang)? Does the film take place over a period?
- **narrative style:** is the film’s narrative linear or are there ‘jumps’ or flashbacks? Is there a first-person voice-over narrator? Do we see events mainly through the eyes of one character? What is the effect of these narrative choices?
- **character-based questions:** for example, motivation behind actions, attitudes to other characters, aspects of the main character’s personality, with evidence from scenes in the film.
- **questions seeking meanings and interpretations:** in essence the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. Typical examples are: which or whose side is the film on? Why do you think the director used a flashback here? Why did the director choose to make this (1960s) film in black-and-white? How can you link this film to any other you’ve seen on the course?
- **‘Modern British Society’ questions:** each film worksheet will contain questions to bring the students back to specifically British themes. The questions about Britain might relate to:
 - specific events
 - contemporary trends
 - attitudes revealed through the plot and interaction of characters
 - changes over time (across the nine films)

Some conclusions

Firstly, it seems clear that films are a valid and motivating way to interest international students in the culture, society and history of a country. Secondly, through their dramatic vividness, films possess a special ability to communicate ideas and move an audience. Films convey their messages through imagery and montage, as well as language. Culturally, films can also give students a strong sense of what a period, a city or a conflict actually looked and felt like for those who lived then or there. Methodologically, students must be allowed opportunities in pairs and groups to give their insights and compare their views. Worksheets are helpful in building on students’ observational powers before encouraging them to develop more analytical and interpretive skills. I would argue that several of the skills normally covered in academic literacy modules can equally well be replicated on a film-based one: authentic listening and reading, critical observation and analysis, interpretation and discussion, together with historical and cultural insights.

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Accessing the numeracy and mathematical knowledge of students entering foundation programmes: a new approach

About the author



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With acknowledgement and thanks to Dr Harriet Jones of the University of East Anglia for source material

‘... international students coming into UK Higher Education come from a wide variety of mathematical backgrounds. The result is a huge range of abilities in student intakes.’

It is now widely recognised that many students studying on foundation year and degree courses in science, engineering and social sciences can struggle to solve simple mathematical problems. This is despite having otherwise excellent academic qualifications.

The background

In 2007 Dr Christie Marr, head of the Mathematics Support Centre, based at St Andrews University was quoted in *The Telegraph* in an article titled ‘University students struggle with maths’ as saying ‘A growing number of university students have trouble with basic maths... Even the brightest students may need help... We cannot assume a level playing field when it comes to a mathematical background.’ (Paton, 2007). In the *Times Higher Education*, Jones (2009) was arguing that ‘Many science undergraduates struggle to write well or solve simple maths problems... It is no secret that many undergraduates enter university lacking some basic skills in literacy and numeracy.’

Most of the attention has focused on UK students entering science and engineering undergraduate courses, but the problem is wider. In *InForm*, MacLeod and McEwan (2010) commented that ‘A thorough grounding in Mathematics is key for international students... However, the diversity in mathematical attainment of international student cohorts can be extremely problematic’. They went on to present Kaplan International Colleges’ strategy to address the problem, a key part of which is a baseline knowledge test.

There are also a number of discussion and support web sites devoted to the subject. Within the UK’s Higher Education Academy which provides resources to support university teachers there are areas devoted to mathematics within both the Economics (ME:TAL) and Biology (Biomaths) subject centres. The latter notes ‘The level of mathematical skills present in Bioscience entrants is becoming of increasing concern’.

What is the problem?

The general low numeracy and general maths skills of (UK) students, especially those coming onto ‘soft’ and social sciences programs without an A level in Mathematics. School exams results do not give sufficient information, basic skills taught in primary school are not reinforced through secondary school, and there is an over reliance on calculators. Of course international students coming into UK Higher Education come from a wide variety of mathematical backgrounds. The result is a huge range of abilities in student intakes.

What can be done?

It was around the time that the *InForm* article being written that the Password team contacted Dr Jones with a view to seeing how we could collaborate to aid institutions grappling with the problem. Password would contribute their experience of developing online tests for Higher Education. Dr Jones, a senior lecturer in Biology at the University of East Anglia, is an expert in the transition of students from UK sixth forms and overseas study into university. A consultation was held with interested HE stakeholders which confirmed the area of greatest interest as ‘around GCSE’ level, and that an online test to both assess the suitability of students for courses pre-arrival and to identify students needing additional help post arrival was needed. It should separate out the really good students, stream the remainder into groups based on ability and consequently avoid pitching the teaching too high. The latter is a common problem, and a hugely demotivating experience for the student. To quote Dr Jones ‘I was extremely surprised to find that ten per cent of students could not determine the area of a square with sides of 2cm. A similar proportion could not calculate 50 per cent of 40.’

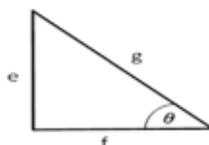
Academically, the Password Maths test has been researched and designed by Dr Harriet Jones, who has used a paper test for incoming students for many years at the University. Dr Jones produced extra extended question sets to allow randomised testing. Password took these question sets and put them into the proven test template (as widely used for English tests). The result is an online test of 44 multiple choice questions divided into four sections of increasing difficulty, with up to one hour allowed for completion. The randomisation mean each test is essentially unique, and the template provides assurance that testing is reliable and secure. Instant results are available at the end of the test which are all held in one place, can be viewed or downloaded over the Internet, and of course no marking is needed. Result certificates are available if required.

Question types

Password Maths probes a candidate's knowledge of numeracy, arithmetic, percentages, ratios, algebra, re-arranging equations, basic geometry, statistics and calculus. Diagrams are used where appropriate to avoid a test of mathematical English language such as 'circumference'.

There is not space in this article to explore the full range of questions, nevertheless, here are some examples :

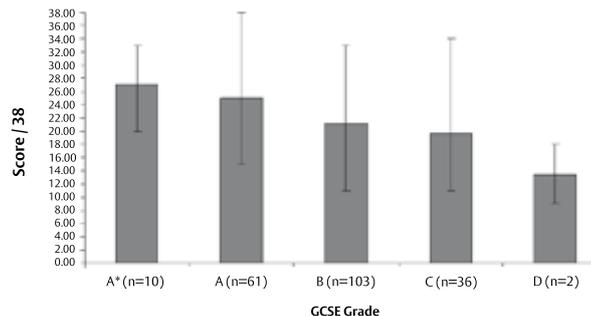
- Calculate 7×15
- What is the mode of this series of numbers?
5, 8, 7, 2, 7
- Calculate 15% of 64, to one decimal place
- Divide 120 into a ratio of 2:7:3
- Rearrange $v=st - u$, to make s the subject
- Solve for x , $5x=3x - 6$
- If $y=7$ calculate $(5y)^3$
- Simplify $d^3(e^f - c)^7/g(e^f - c)^5$
- What formula would you use to calculate angle θ
using sides f and g
- Evaluate $2-32^3$
- Calculate $\log_{10}(1030)$



In practice

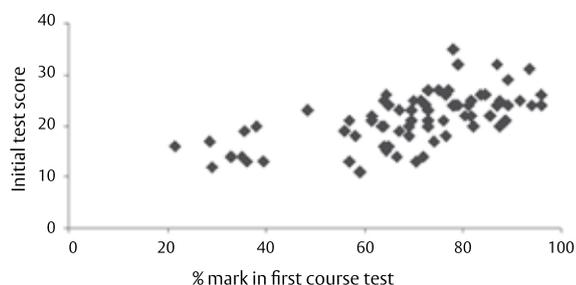
The diagram below tabulates maths test mean scores with bars showing maximum and minimum scores and how this varies with their GCSE grades. Although the mean values for test scores do decrease with GCSE grade, the spread of marks for each grade is considerable, demonstrating how grade alone is not a good indicator of math ability. Note Dr Jones' original paper test had 38 questions before extension to include statistics and calculus.

Because students' mathematical exposure varies so much post GCSE, and several years have elapsed, it is



unreasonable to expect superb correlation between GCSE results and the maths test, however some exists.

The diagram below, again using Dr Jones' data to compare students' score in the entry maths test to their result in the first course maths exam, shows there is an overall correlation coefficient of 0.641 (0.665 when errors in units taken into account).



A final thought

It is not so long ago that the use of a well-researched and standardised test of English language was novel; it is of course now standard practice for international students entering foundation programmes. Is it possible the same will happen with maths?

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'Informal'

Additional residential support for international foundation students

Mark Peace, IFP Course Tutor,
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The Halls Liaison Tutors scheme of the University of Reading International Foundation Programme is now in its third year. The scheme provides pastoral support for students living in halls of residence and has proven successful in reducing the number of disciplinary incidents occurring within halls, whilst resolving many of the problems experienced by IFP residents. It has also been instrumental in generating a positive atmosphere of co-operation between the IFP and halls staff. The work of the halls liaison tutors is presented, including student meetings, the provision of an IFP Halls Survival Guide and the running of social activities, as an example of good practice developed by an IFP.

Introduction

The majority of International Foundation Program students (150) at the University of Reading reside in halls of residence. The Halls Liaison Tutors (HLT) project was initially established by the IFP as a response to complaints from hall staff about certain IFP students or cases where individual IFP students were unhappy or had problems within hall. The halls liaison tutors are two IFP course tutors, one male and one female, whose role, while not disciplinary in nature, aims to address behaviour issues in halls; this is achieved by encouraging social interaction, supporting and advising students and liaising between IFP and hall staff. Meetings and activities are conducted in the halls themselves so students are aware that both the support and behavioural expectation that applies within the IFP on campus, also applies in halls of residence. Social events and sports activities are also organised regularly and a guide to living in halls has been published.

Delivering support

The halls liaison tutors have used different approaches to offer support, initially offering a weekly drop-in surgery in each hall for students seeking advice or for those having been referred to us with problems. The surgeries proved successful not only in conveying the message of a fully supportive IFP available to students, but importantly, the HLT's regular presence in halls ultimately fostered a more constructive relationship with hall staff. There were not, however, a great many students who casually dropped in. In the second year therefore, the number of surgeries was reduced and ad hoc 'corridor meetings' were arranged for groups where particular problems had arisen. The success of these meetings has meant that now in the third year, corridor meetings are held regularly with all IFP students and drop-in surgeries are no longer required.

Issues addressed by the halls liaison tutors

There are two types of issues requiring intervention: those brought to us by hall staff and those by IFP students. Common problems raised by hall staff include students violating hall

rules, such as persistently smoking in bedrooms, covering up smoke alarms, tampering with door locks so that friends can visit without card keys and generating excessive noise. Problems associated with cleanliness in shared areas such as kitchens are also frequent. Concerns brought to us by students usually relate to excessive noise and mess generated by others, annoyance at receiving fines for problems caused by others and individuals dominating the kitchen. Where problems are referred to the halls liaison tutors by hall staff, it is not within our remit to discipline students but rather to discuss the issues with them, explaining the aggravation caused to hall staff and the possible eventual disciplinary actions which are to be avoided. In the case of students' concerns, maintaining their enjoyment of living in halls is our main priority. In both cases, corridor meetings have been found to be the most effective means of resolving problems.

Corridor meetings

IFP students generally integrate well and the majority find living in halls to be a highly enjoyable and rewarding experience, but where problems do arise, these are often the result of lack of communication; this tends to lead to factions forming within a corridor between neighbours annoyed by each other's actions. In such situations, students are encouraged to address contentious issues directly through dialogue and discussion. The real value of the corridor meetings can be seen here since potentially awkward and uncomfortable issues can be aired before they are allowed to escalate.

Students are notified by email prior to these meetings, in which all the students along a particular corridor gather with the HLTs for an informal meeting in the shared kitchen. Even where no issue has been raised prior to a meeting, the intention is to encourage everyone to air grievances and wishes about their corridor. The tone is kept light-hearted and informal but the focus is kept very much on identifying problems, however trivial, and confronting them frankly. The problem is then discussed by the group and solutions and compromises are identified. Where there are incidents of behavioural problems and possibly hall fines involved, students can feel they have been treated unfairly. This meeting provides an opportunity to negotiate promises of improved behaviour in exchange for the HLT presenting the students' case to the hall staff. Students might be advised to explain themselves in person or in writing, with our help, to the staff. Obtaining agreements from students has been effective in maintaining harmony within the corridors, where fines and warnings by hall staff have previously failed to have the desired effect.

Having seen the benefits of the HLT approach, one hall of residence is now implementing corridor meetings for all their 400 residents, clear evidence of how positively the scheme has been received by hall staff.

Social activities

Each year the halls liaison tutors organise a cooking competition, an inter-hall football competition and sports practice for IFP students. These fun activities help build the HLTs relationship with the students. It also ensures email communication from us is not solely about meetings or problems in hall. The cooking competition has the added benefit of encouraging students to expand their diets beyond takeaway and frozen pizza.

Halls survival guide

This year, additional support for IFP students was provided in

the form of a booklet – the IFP Halls Survival Guide, a colourful guide to living in halls and away from home distributed in Welcome Week. It provides information about local shops, buses and services, tips about getting on with neighbours, avoiding hall fines and dealing with problems should they arise. It also includes simple recipes to encourage students to cook their own fresh food and a ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ section. Students are clearly using the guide and refer to it regularly, and requests have been made for its wider distribution across all halls of residence.

Conclusion

The work of the halls liaison tutors has been very positively received by both hall staff and students. It has resulted in noticeably fewer fines and disciplinary cases in halls and greatly reduced the number of persistent cases that are referred to the IFP for further action. This has in turn developed the relationship between hall staff and IFP students and by resolving problems between flat mates, makes hall a more relaxed and enjoyable place to live and study. The expectation is that this experience will ultimately impact positively on their studies. With hall being a popular accommodation option for the first year undergraduate, ensuring a positive experience in hall during the foundation year will provide more reason for IFP students to remain at the University for their undergraduate studies.

Desperanto? Six ways to teach business on the IFP

Terry Bevis, Lecturer, University of Kent

This paper focuses on the business context for IFPs and identifies some of the key resources upon which business tutors can draw. It argues that innovation and resources are needed to maintain the learning experience for international students.



As international student recruitment becomes increasingly important in this ‘post-Browne’ era, the need for us as IFP tutors to provide a quality learning experience in a contemporary context becomes ever important, for both student needs and institutional objectives. Recently the outlook for higher education has been bleak. This article identifies a number of key resources available to the IFP business tutor. Parallels are also drawn which demonstrate how the business context is particularly relevant to this sector of international Higher Education.

1 Harnessing the dynamic business forum

Teaching business management on the IFP at the University of Kent is a privilege, not just because of being in the UK’s European University, but also because of the watershed economic times we are living through. The need to remain contemporary and relevant has never been more crucial in the competitive HE context that we now work in, but this has arguably always been a feature of the good business curriculum. The business landscape changes almost day by day, and digesting and imparting the mixture of scientific and technological breakthroughs with financial and resource constraints means that there is rarely a shortage of newsworthy case studies to discuss with students. In the technological age which we live in, there are a wide range of resources available to us as tutors for this purpose, including digital media such as the BBC website. Wherever possible, it is important to keep

lectures and seminars up to date with reference to key events in the news, so that students can relate to the concepts which are being imparted. Referring back to the recent developments in HE funding the funding situation which we now face can even be examined as a business case study itself.

2 Draw on in-built diversity

When teaching a module which is studied predominantly by international students, it is important to factor in the different perspectives international students themselves bring to the lecture and seminar sessions. The experiences they share with colleagues are an integral part of assimilating the global business concepts that we consider, and what they bring is as important as what they take from the sessions. When introducing a new concept or business theory, contextualising input by encouraging students to give examples which relate to their own cultures can ensure both a more critical approach and also a more internationally focussed experience. After all, the likelihood is that our students will be moving in international circles when they eventually move out of the classroom and into the business world.

Budget cuts or cost constraints mean something different to us in the UK in general, and academia in particular, than is likely to be the interpretation in, for example, Bahrain or Qatar. Stars, cash cows, dogs and problem children or question marks may be interpreted one way in our Boston Matrix driven western business society, but may be interpreted in a different context in China or Taiwan.

3 Content and language- a symbiotic approach

Although I am not a language tutor, keeping in touch with the syllabus delivered by language tutor colleagues is also extremely important. The development of students’ skills in the English language enables them not only to express their business ideas more clearly, but to understand the business culture which is unique to this country, given its development from the industrial revolution. There can hardly be a more interdependent academic relationship than that which exists between our English language colleagues and we who deliver the social science modules. I therefore take every opportunity to engage in collaborative projects with language teaching colleagues and firmly believe that for IFPs to work effectively, this type of interdisciplinary activity is crucial.

4 Contemporary communications

Increasingly, new technology and the social media revolution is influencing the way we do business in the real world and this is something that we should not avoid referring to in our classrooms. Long gone are the days of the business letter, couched in a way which is considered archaic; we are more likely to tweet than to conclude our communication by being someone’s humble and obedient servant. Life is fast and distances are disappearing in our realisation of the 24/7 internet driven LinkedIn society. Herein lays the challenge of understanding business language from different global perspectives. Referring to new means of communication such as this is crucial to keeping the curriculum alive. Where possible, bringing students face to face with relevant business experiences can also be a very useful tool. A recent visit to a meeting of the Chartered Institute of Marketing is one example how this was achieved at Kent.

5 Enhancing the student experience

Our programme management and human interactions can be considered as a microcosm which is transferable to the business

context. This is why the total University experience at module, programme and institutional level is incredibly important. It should not be underestimated the extent to which the total University experience will help our students to understand how to create the atmosphere in which they do business globally in the future. In addition to our current students and their academic development, the more time we take to consider the student experience from a holistic position, the more likely we are to develop meaningful international alumni connections. If we are to benefit from the fruits of our academic labours then it is not just the fees that arrive but the friends that depart who affect our international business relations in the future.

6 Step back for the future

So, what of the future? It is likely that an even greater integration of our social science and language efforts will be worth considering. For example, the 'business pathway' currently consists of mathematics, economics and business management. These are complemented by academic skills development. Individually, these components are undeniably strong. It is possible, however, to take a further step back to consider additional enhancements which would facilitate an even more holistic approach in order to increase the value of the programme to students from very different scholastic home backgrounds.

Key considerations such as the following may help:

- How do modules fit together?
- Are the module specs relevant and up-to-date?

- How does the module fit with undergraduate studies?
- Can visits or experiences help inspire learning?
- Can extracurricular activities be organised?

Just as, in business, retailers try to provide a co-ordinated offering in fashion or in food, then we, in an increasingly internationally competitive environment, need to provide a blended offering of skills.

Conclusion

It is reassuring that we are still highly rated in the provision of language and social science skills, and that reputation has been well earned in our UK academic community but, perhaps in these seemingly desperate economic times, we need to up our game even further to bring new ideas to the table; in brief, to innovate and invest. The rich resources available to us along with the scientific and technological developments mentioned earlier need to be matched by increasingly sophisticated ways of using them to maintain our edge in the higher education market. So provided that we employ the educational capital available to us, perhaps the sombre discourse at the moment; which I have unfairly translated from the international language as 'Desperanto', should really become 'nil desperandum'; there is no cause for despair.

Call for papers

InForm is a journal of teaching and learning-related issues for members of the academic community associated with international foundation programmes.

The submission of papers is now invited for the eighth edition of *InForm*, from tutors who represent a variety of academic disciplines commonly found within international foundation programmes. The eighth edition will be published in October 2011.

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