

Collaborating with students in critical thinking and citizenship

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Abstract

Quality education and lifelong learning for all has been acknowledged as being a key element in UNESCO's mission (2008-2013). Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO (2014, p4) further stated that; '... Global Citizenship Education must also be considered crucial elements for well-rounded educational systems.' However, in the era of globalisation, migration and conflict, a holistic methodology rather than the individualistic approach is one that is required and this paper will demonstrate that the inclusion of citizenship and employability can augment the critical learning experience, especially when embedded in the student's own disciplines.

The rationale for investigating the teaching of citizenship and employability originated from a personal perspective of the author being an adult returner. As a student there was little understanding by the author of how to study, and furthermore, the terminology used was incomprehensible. This lack of familiarity with terminology and the world of higher education concur with Lea and Street's (2006) concept re academic literacies, in that the student is expected to understand different genres and also be able to engage and negotiate their way through the institution's multilayers of power and authority with the acknowledgement of the balance of power is weighted towards the institution as it decides on the level of the awards the accreditation and uses specific language.

The academic literacies model requires the student to recognise and engage in the levels of power that have been adopted by the institution and to be able to apply the different learning approaches as required according to the individual settings. By using the academic literacy model, the student can move from one form of discourse to another without either losing their own 'voice' and yet meet the requirements of the institution. This is important as this model sees itself very much as one that is not deficit driven; rather the student is working with the tutor in order to make sense of his or her learning environment. Nevertheless, Hayes (2005) contend a more pertinent question concerning Lifelong Learning (LLL), which is why do some learners disengage with learning or even feel barred from the higher education establishments.

Although the aim of this paper is to illustrate how students can be encouraged to become independent and effective learners, it is acknowledged that the curriculum must be inclusive. Students are encouraged to become critical learners but this is still within the institution's framework as they control the assessment process.

Higher Education has a key role to play in this process, in encouraging critical learning and ensuring that the concepts of citizenship and employability can be included in the programmes, but it can be challenging for students who may feel that citizenship has no relevance to their programme of study.

Thus the paper focuses on one approach that demonstrates how the inclusion of teaching about citizenship and inclusion among students at one higher educational institution has engaged students. The interventions employed recognise that the students are digitally engaged and the 'Real World' is one that compliments their learning that compliments their

learning in the 21st Century.

Introduction

Independent learning and lifelong learning are terms that are strongly associated with learning. This paper seeks to explain why the learning that is on offer should not only be one that is of quality and enrich the learner's experience, but also should engage with the real world. This means, that at times, the learner should be exposed to areas outside their immediate discipline, including concepts such as citizenship and as Barnett (2012) notes we live in times of uncertainty. UNESCO (2014, p25) further stated in their Vision, that the educators have a responsibility to carry out '...problem-solving and creative thinking; understanding and respect for human rights; inclusion and equity; and cultural diversity...' Indeed, their fifth target states that 'By 2030, all learners acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to establish sustainable and peaceful societies, including through global citizenship education and education...' (UNESCO, 2014, p26)

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) is a vocational orientated university, and employability skills and citizenship are therefore taught in partnership with the students. This paper suggests that the teaching of employability and citizenship are underpinned by the employment of theoretical models such as academic literacies and in accordance with the 21st century, the teaching and learning experience should also incorporate the application of blended learning. The paper illustrates by way of a case study in one Academic School, in GCU, how blended learning has supported the teaching of citizenship and employability within the students' discipline whilst acknowledging the diversity of students' backgrounds.

Glasgow Caledonian University

GCU situated in the centre of Glasgow, Scotland and has approximately 17,000 students studying in its three academic schools: Glasgow School for Business and Society (GSBS), School of Health and Life Sciences (SHLS) and the School of Engineering and Built Environment (SEBE). A key element is its commitment to increasing access to study and lifelong learning (GCU, 2015).

The university was formerly the Glasgow College of Technology, and following a merger with the Queens College, the University gained university status under the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992. A major premise is GCU's strong commitment to encouraging improved access to its programmes through widening participation (GCU, 2015). Many of GCU's adult returners have selected to re-enter education via community based adult education or through the college sector. Often these students lack confidence, are unaware of the aspects of independent learning and have challenges to overcome with issues such as time management and motivation (Shapiro, et al., 2016). GCU recognised that these students required additional support and responded to that need by establishing a university wide service to support students throughout their academic studies called, The Effective Learning Service.

The Effective Learning Service and the role of critical thinking

The Effective Learning Service (ELS) first commenced in GCU in 2001. Although the service was originally aimed primarily at students accessing GCU via widening participation (Figg et al., 2006), from its inception, the ELS staff selected to support all of the students through the application of an integrated approach. Accordingly, all of the ELS team worked across the university, irrespective of the student's background or level of study.

The ELS Service operated as a centralised unit, which was felt to be advantageous for the users in that expertise could be shared and students and staff could select to work with specific members of the ELS team. Annual surveys distributed among the students indicated that the students liked that the ELS team were not assigned to particular academic departments and was therefore regarded as being a neutral space for users. The provision included a long thin model of induction activities; individual appointments (up to one hour); a daily drop in service; small group support; context based workshops in collaboration with teaching staff; generic workshops; a website with online information; paper based hand-outs; on line tutorial support; English for Academic Purposes and support that was dyslexia specific (McAllister & Shapiro, 2004).

In academic year 2004/2005, the ELS team undertook research specifically to evaluate user satisfaction, perception and awareness of the service. In terms of level of study, final year and post graduate students accounted for over a quarter of users (26%) suggesting that support was not viewed as an entry level provision. The typical individual user profile showed a high proportion of mature students (70.8%) and significant number of international students (16%) with one in eight identifying as being dyslexic. There was strong gender bias with more females (76%) using the service when seeking help independently than males. Certain schools within the university also recorded higher usage, specifically the former Schools of Nursing, Midwifery and Health, Health and Social Care and the Caledonian Business School (Figg et al., 2006).

The ELS team decided that workshops that were embedded in the students' disciplines were more effective in the support of students in that this system assisted all students. As a result, the service was felt to be more equitable and accessible rather than being a service that was used by those who felt confident about accessing support. This approach was also regarded as being more inclusive in that it further included those who could neither identify nor articulate their requirement for study skills support.

Findings from the research over the academic session 2004/5 also highlighted that few males booked appointments in advance. In response ELS then offered a fifteen-minute drop in slot for two hours, four days a week, which was attractive to many of the male students who tend not to seek assistance until the last minute. This aligns with Woodfield and Thomas (2012) in their report for Equality Challenge Unit. Although the report acknowledges there has been limited research into the topic of gender and support in higher education, they noted that more women appear to respond to offers of support than men. This issue continued even when the male students acknowledged there was a need for study skills support. The report also found that males believed that gaining assistance related to employment was more important than seeking help for academic subjects.

Although the shorter time slots helped some students focus on the reason for the appointment, and have more realistic expectations of what ELS staff could achieve; this type of provision was found not be useful as it was more of a 'sticky plaster approach' and was contrary to Lea and Street's model of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006). Additionally, a fifteen-minute appointment does not assist the student in critical thinking and merely approaches surface thinking.

Introduction of blended learning approaches

By 2007, online materials were being extensively used which reflected the increase of academic materials becoming more accessible through blended learning. This further necessitated a different approach by ELS staff in that the relationship between the student and the staff member became a different experience. Littlejohn et al., (2008) wrote about

the association between online resources and users. The key term that appeared was the importance of being accessible and usable by different communities. Accessibility needed to be considered by the users whether they be tutors or students in that all parties should be able to easily access the learning resources. When working with students on line, at times issues can arise if the student uses a different platform from the tutor, or has difficulty understanding the taxonomy in use. Other factors that require consideration when communicating on line is the tone applied in the conversation referred to by Littlejohn, et al., (2008, p768) as 'materials being "contextualised' The learner also needs to be engaged and therefore the learning design requires to be attractive and accessible by the different users, whether they be home students, students with disabilities or students from countries where English is not the first language.

In 2010, together with a learning technologist the author of this paper carried out a GCU action based research project to enhance learning and teaching practices through blended learning approaches (Shapiro & Johnston, 2010). This project was undertaken with a view to embedding materials within the general writing genre and to raise awareness of subject specific academic writing practices. Vidcasts were developed which replicated the experience of workshops in real time. Vidcasts are media that use a blend of narrated audio and on screen images and slides (Traxler 2008 cited in Shapiro, & Johnston, 2010) Shapiro and Johnston (2012) felt that the vidcasts assisted in acknowledging that students were at different stages in their 'long conversation' as well as incorporating elements of the academic literacies model. The project therefore accommodated individual learning needs and made the sessions explicit and accessible, in keeping with an academic literacies pedagogic practice. Four vidcasts on the subject of academic writing practices were then produced for the students across the institution.

The establishment of the Learning Development Centres

Although the ELS team and many of the students felt that the students were being supported throughout their academic journey, in 2010, GCU undertook a major review of its academic departments and associated support services. One of the proposals was that the ELS be decentralised and be devolved into Academic Schools. As was noted earlier in this paper, certain subject disciplines did not avail themselves of the ELS, namely those studying Engineering and Computing related subjects.

Accordingly, in 2011, the university's senior management adopted a model of three distinct Learning Development Centres (LDC), one was placed in each of the three Academic Schools. The author of this paper joined the SEBE's LDC continuing the pedagogical approach of working collaboratively with staff and students in enhancing the learners' experience through the development of critical academic thinking and writing. Additional vidcasts were also developed meet the requirements of SEBE students and these are now available on Youtube and on GCU's internal internet system. Good use has been made of the vidcasts by STEM students with 'Writing a technical report' having been viewed over 24,500 times (Shapiro & Johnston, 2012).

Employability, diversity and citizenship

GCU has recognised that the learning experience should not only be one that is of quality and enrich the learner's experience, but also should also engage with the real world. This means, that at times, the learner should be exposed to areas outside their immediate discipline, including concepts such as citizenship. Indeed, there is an expectation that Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) graduates will be major contributors in knowledge transfer. The Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2016,

p2, Section 2.6) observed that employers still consistently placed a high level of importance on graduates requiring: '... a strong set of 'soft' or 'work ready' skills'...with a large body of evidence pointing towards continued employer dissatisfaction with graduates...'

This has also been noted by the Confederation of Business and Industry (CBI, 2010, cited in Shapiro, 2015) who had also expressed their concerns in regards to graduates' limited levels of communication, leadership, team working and business acumen. GCU has endeavoured to meet this by offering '...[learning] experiences which equips students with the employability and entrepreneurial skills to succeed as global citizens ... '(GCU 2015). The learning opportunities that have been adopted include the integration of theory and practice including students taking an active role in learning about accommodating cultural diversity. As the author was involved in blended learning and is a member of the Gathering the Voices (GtV) Association (a community based group who were collecting testimonies from men and women who sought sanctuary in Scotland as a consequence of Nazi persecution) it therefore seemed logical to collaborate with students and staff engaged in STEM disciplines on developing outputs for this project.

Gathering the voices

In November 2012, a community-based group, the Gathering the Voices (GtV) Association commenced a partnership with GCU (Shapiro, et al.,2014). An important output is making the testimonies freely available online. In addition, another outcome was to collaborate with young people in the creation of developing digital artefacts. By doing so, it was hoped that this would enhance the students' employability skills as well as enabling young people to learn about the contribution of the Holocaust survivors to Scottish society in an inclusive way. The intention was that the project would be a collaborative venture, reaching out to the learner who would not normally engage in this subject.

By involving students, the intention was that this would support and enhance both the students' knowledge and their experience in liaising with the world of work. The notion of collaborating with undergraduate students in a project focussed with citizenship and employability skills is also consistent with GCU's initiative: The Real World project (Realising Work-Related Learning Diffusion), (McKinnon & McCrae, 2011 cited in Shapiro, McDonald &Johnston, 2014).

With the exception of one project, which was a design brief, the teaching staff gave the students the option of collaborating with the GtV Association. The teaching staff were facilitators together with the GtV Association. However, the role of the self-directed learner was a challenging one for the students. Time management, presenting findings and accepting criticism from the clients were all major issues for many of the students. Some students also experienced challenges in understanding the importance of 'total commitment to the job' and the ability to adjust to changes or criticisms.

Conclusions

The concept of self-directed learning is inherent in higher education and there is a strong emphasis on this being an essential component for the student. At the time of ELS, critical thinking was taking place among the students but there was evidence that students on the STEM programmes were not engaging as much as other students. Although the inclusion of blended learning has encouraged students studying STEM related subjects to interact, it was difficult to find out how many were from GCU.

However, when self-directed learning was combined with real world learning, the staff

noted that the students had gained confidence and that they understood the importance of transferring that learning into the work environment. The students produced concepts that were attractive to the 21st century learner and several of their concepts have been integrated into the website. The students have learned about subjects outside their immediate subject discipline; including working with clients, learning negotiation skills and had the support of staff throughout the project.

The students also engaged with the Gathering the Voices project in accordance with the academic literacy model (Lea & Street, 2006). This model acknowledges the importance of collaboration and power sharing that needs to occur in teaching. Through this model, the students negotiated the requirements of different discourses and shaped their own voices yet met the requirements of the institution, or in this case the GtV project. This is important as this model sees itself very much as one that is not deficit driven; rather students are working with the staff in order to make sense of their learning environment.

All those who interacted with the activities felt that they learned from the process, whether they were the university staff, GtV Association or graduate students. Indeed, it became a community of learning because of the mutual respect exhibited and blurring of roles (Christie, 2014). In a small way by participating in the project, the participants have contributed to enhancing education about citizenship and the participants have increased their understanding about the contribution that refugees can make to their new country.

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