Working with the Challenge of Designing and Implementing a Stand-Alone Learning to Learn Module in A Large Arts Programme.

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Abstract

Supporting students through the development of their learning to learn competencies is one approach to supporting transition to higher education. The literature highlights that the most successful approach is to embed these competencies into the curriculum, which requires a systematic and co-ordinated staff approach. However, as our institution's Bachelor in Arts programme had multiple pathways, it was difficult to attempt to systematically embed this approach. Therefore, we were faced with the challenge of having to pilot a 'stand-alone' module. The module was designed based on an extensive review of the literature. 331 1st year students were part of a pilot study. The results, from an action research mixed methods approach, highlighted that the students had mixed views on the relevance of the module. The most relevant theme was 'time-management'. The students performed well on the module, but were they were less satisfied with it than their other modules. The discussion highlights the debate surrounding supporting students' learning to learn competencies and presents suggestions for improving modules that are required to stand-alone.

Keywords: module design; study skills; first years; stand-alone; process and product-orientation

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Introduction

Students new to higher education can often struggle with the competencies and demands required of them in their first year. There has been a growing interest in the developed of support for students' transition to learning in higher education and, in particular, with their experience of first year (Gibney et al, 2010; Krause et al, 2005; Nicol, 2009; Taylor, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Some of the interest in this early stage of the curriculum has been driven by poor retention issues (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008; Krause et al, 2005; Tinto, 2006) and the need to support students in the new ways of learning in higher education (Nicol, 2009; Sadler, 2010). The Irish *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* highlights that

> '*Higher education institutions should prepare first-year students better for their learning experience, so that they can engage with it more successfully'* (HEA, 2011, p18)

It is often, although not exclusively, in this year that there is an emphasis on the learning to learn competencies (often described more narrowly as 'study skills') required for this stage of learning. The research into this practice however is quite critical of some approaches (Blythman & Orr, 2002; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Gamache, 2002; Sloan, Porter & Alexander, 2013).

In 2006, Wingate maintained higher education should 'do away' with stand-alone learning to learn modules. Yet, she acknowledged the more successful embedded approach requires a coordinated systematic approach across a programme and that widespread staff commitment can be a challenge. She also highlighted that a stand-alone module, divorced from the subject matter, is not popular or relevant to the students (Wingate, 2007; 2006). Black et al (2006, p126) in more school-based literature, also highlights the danger of this separation of learning to learn from other forms of learning.

It follows that considering learning to learn in isolation from other aspects of learning is likely to produce a narrow conception of learning and might lead to a limited focus on study skills and to neglect of fundamental changes that may be needed to the learning environment (Black et al, 2006). Despite these criticisms, and possibly due to the difficulty in engaging the wider academic community in this task, there has been some use of and benefits from learning to learn workshops or modules, for example, Bailey et al (2007) and Harwood and McLaughlin (2012).

Following a study on retention in our institution, University College Dublin (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008), the development of a learning to learn module was recommended for first year students in the Bachelors in Arts (BA) programme. The Arts programme in University College Dublin has approximately 12,000 students, with approximately 85% of first years under 21 years of age. It offers a diverse range of modules in the first year and, as for many international universities, retention and social isolation can be a concern (Krause et al, 2005). Given the level of module choice in the Arts programme, the decision to implement a more systematic embedded approach was a challenge and it was decided to design a stand-alone blended learning module, incorporating an existing commercially available on-line resources (Palgrave, 2014). This resource was chosen due to its extensive suite of interactive online resources in a range of related areas (see Palgrave, 2014). It allowed students to self-assess their progress and had the functionality of being embedded in the institution's VLE system. The content built on the

work of earlier hard copy resources in this area (Cottrell, 2001).

It was planned that there would be a balance between information specific to the programme, in this case Arts, and some more general support for this period of transition.
The development and implementation of a learning to learn module for this programme offered an opportunity for action research. This paper therefore focuses both on the module design elements and students' views of their initial implementation. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do we design a stand-alone learning to learn module for students taking a general Arts programme?

2. What are students' experiences of engaging with the institution and this module?

3. What aspects of the module's design were most beneficial to the students?

1.1 Research Methodology Overview

An action research approach was used (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, cited in Hopkins, 2002**)** as we (the authors) were invited by the institution to reflect, plan (design), act, observe on a pilot module in 2011/2012; with a view to repeating this cycle for a revised module for all students on the BA Arts Programme in subsequent years. This paper focuses on the first roll out only (Cycle 1), titled 'Learning for Success at University' (LSU module). Central to the study was the module design process, which draws on the literature on transitional modules, the broader curriculum design literature and finally the reflections of the authors on the process of design. The first author was an educational developer with expertise and scholarly research in curriculum design. The second author was selected to deliver the programme and had significant experience of large group teaching of generic modules in first year.
For resource reasons, the planned roll out in year 1 (Cycle 1) could not accommodate the full cohort of 1st year students, so for reasons of fairness a random sampling was used. 349 first year students were randomly allocated to the module, with 331 students registered for the module by the end of the semester. This sample (n=349) represented 25.5% of students entering the BA Arts programme in that year (2011/12). Having to use a random selection, as opposed to the full cohort, is a limitation of the study. In addition, some students may not have wanted to do this module, and alternatively, others may have wanted to do it. However, all students had access to the online Palgrave materials (Palgrave, 2014).

Question 1: How do we design a learning to learn module for students taking a general Arts programme?

Based on good module design practices, our starting point was considering the module's learning outcomes (Fink, 2003). We adapted the original module's learning outcomes to state that by the end of the module the students should be able to:

· Engage in the process of learning at university as an individual
· Understand what is expected of a university student
· Improve their reading abilities

· Identify their optimal learning style and its implications for their university learning
· Improve their writing abilities, time management skills and information skills
· Improve their critical thinking abilities
· Engage in the process of learning at university in groups

Process and product focused approaches

In the area of curriculum design, Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) highlight that there are two orientations and understanding of curriculum, a more product and a process- orientated approach. The product-orientated approach emphasises the content and structure whereas the process emphasises the dynamic student learning activities and can emphasis student learning skills. In the design of this module we were keen to not only introduce students to some of the topics around learning to learn (product-orientated), such as critical thinking, but to also give careful consideration to giving them experiences of new approaches to learning (process-orientated), for example, on-line and group-work. Therefore we made some design decisions based on these two, not mutually-exclusive, categories.

Process-orientated decisions

Given the availability of the on-line resource the module was designed using Fink's idea of a castle-top design for a blended learning module (Fink, 2003). This design highlights the importance of an integrated and active approach to in-class and out-of class activities. Similar to Littlejohn and Pegler's blended learning model (2007) which places emphasis on the task at the centre of the design, the module was developed and made available in the virtual learning environment, Blackboard^{TM}, as a series of tasks to be completed. In many of the process-oriented designs, there is an emphasis on students having an experiential approach to their learning, therefore the early use of Blackboard was intended as an orientation to the institutional VLE. We built early on-line tasks into the assessments that allowed them to have an experience of skills they would need in the programme, for example, the early use of on-line plagiarism software.

As there is an expectation in higher education that students should be reading as they progress (Cottrell, 2001), structured engagement with the on-line resources and other material was built into the design. The literature on the first year experience highlights the importance of students starting to be able to self-monitor their progress (Kift, Moody & Kim, 2009; Nicol, 2010, 2007; Belski & Belski, 2014). Therefore, we designed an on-going process of feedback on grades as they completed assessments on the commercially available Skills4Study resources (Palgrave 2014). The students also gained marks for participation in this activity. Students' peer-reviewing their work was also included in the critical thinking workshop and one of the lectures. This is often described as 'assessment *as* learning' (Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 2010).

The module gave students an introduction to many of the different formats used in higher education, including lectures, tutorials, group-work, on-line work and self-directed learning. It encouraged them to apply some of the early strategies for working in groups. In-class activity was facilitated in the large lectures, using buzz groups (discussion in pairs) and mini quizzes. In addition, based on the institution's first year assessment principles (O'Neill, 2011), the critical-thinking assignment had a group work element. The other assessments included reflective writing tasks and performance on the on-line quizzes. As developing an including time-management is one of the key challenges for students in higher education (Cottrell, 2001),

we built in an early formative assessment task that required students to investigate their assessment demands across all modules in the first semester and present an activity plan based on this. The weighting of the summative assessments were:

- · 60%: Continuous Assessment: Six online assessments, the first of which is formative.
- · 20%: Reflective Journal: Reflection on the application of module skills to your study pathway (500 words)
- · 20% Portfolio: Short portfolio based on your engagement with a group task on critical thinking

In addition, the module encouraged students to get to know others, in order to reduce the sense of isolation and to see their peers as a useful support for their learning. To start to explore some of the disciplinary/subject differences in how they will experience learning and assessment (Wingate 2007, 2006), we also provided examples and links to specific supports as an attempt to orientate them towards having an identity as a BA programme student.

Product orientated decisions

The themes to be included in the module were similar to many of the learning to learn modules in the literature and aligned with both the module outcomes and some, but not all, of the Skills4Study themes (see Palgrave 2014). The themes included: Transition to University (Drew, 2001); Note-Taking (Harwood & McLaughlin, 2012); Critical Thinking (Cottrell, 2001); Exam Techniques (Cottrell, 2001); Academic and Reflective Writing (Drew, 2001); Information and Library Skills (including plagiarism) (Harwood & McLaughlin, 2012). In each of these areas, materials were used from the on-line generic resources and we added additional institutional/Arts programme-specific information to address the critique of these modules as being de-contextualised from their subject area and to enhance students identity as an Arts student (Wingate, 2007; Sloan, Porter & Alexander, 2013).

This five ECT credit blended module was implemented in the first semester of first year in the shortened time span of eight as opposed to 12 weeks. This was to both prepare students for assessments in other modules, which often occur in weeks 9-13, and to ensure less assessment at the end of semester. Therefore, we gave considered reflection to both the process and product-orientated aspects of this module.

Question 2: What are students' experiences of engaging with the Institution and this module?

In this observation stage of the action research, we explored the next two inter-related questions of what were students' experiences of engaging with the module and what aspects of the module's design were most beneficial to the students. The results will explore the data from the full LSU sample in this cycle, those who complete the *Institutional Student Feedback Form* (ISFF) and those that complete the *Learning for Success @ University* (LSU) survey pre and post-module. The LSU survey, included some questions from the *Shortened Experience of Teaching & Learning Questionnaire (SETLQ)* (ETL Project, 2005).

The ISFF had a higher response rate post module (n=113 students, 34%), than the LSU survey at that time point (n=31, 10%), however being anonymous it did not allow for a break down by age or gender. On the LSU Survey, there was a response rate of 64 students (18%) at Time 1 and only 31 (10%) students at Time 2 (at the end of the semester). The pre and post-module

groups in the LSU survey groups had a similar age profile, where the majority of students were aged 21 years or under (75%). Although the proportion of males and females was not the same at both time points, there was higher proportion of females in both cohorts (Time 1: n=36 (56%), Time 2: n=19 (61%)).

These students, both on entry to the institution and after one semester, strongly agreed that they saw themselves as students of the institution (Table 1). There was no significance difference between their pre and post-module identity scores for any of the three categories (Table 1). The students 'agreed' with the statements that they were confident both pre and post-module with: the requirements of the subject; the knowledge of the Arts programme; and the institutional policies/practises.

Table 1: Students' Identity, Confidence and Social Isolation (LSU Survey)

	Comparison pre and post module	Pre-module Time 1 (n=61)			Post Module: Time 2 (n=22)			Test ***
		Mean	SD	Median	Mean	SD	Median	
Identity	I see myself as 'Institution' student	4.54	.80	Strongly agree	4.50	.74	Strongly agree	NS
	I see myself as an Arts student	4.30	.73	Agree	4.14	.84	Agree	NS
	I see myself as a [subject] student	4.21	.79	Agree	4.39	.73	Agree	NS
Know-ledge of system	I am confident in my knowledge of institution (e.g., academic policies, school practices, etc.)	3.77	.81	Agree	4.18	.67	Agree	NS
	I am confident in my knowledge of the Arts programme	4.02	.71	Agree	4.18	81	Agree	NS
	I am confident in my knowledge of the requirements of the subjects I am studying	3.79	.91	Agree	4.25	.84	Agree	NS
Social isolation	I am confident in my ability to make friends	3.74	.92	Agree	3.86	.93	Agree	NS
	I feel isolated **	2.30	.93	Disagree	2.29	1.3	Disagree	NS

*1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree; **Negatively worded; ***Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test (n = 22, as this is based on matched students); NS= Not significant.

The respondents in this study did not appear to be struggling socially as they disagreed that they were isolated and felt confident in their ability to make friends (Table 1). This did not significantly change over Time 1 and Time 2.

In looking more closely at the module, students who had been randomly allocated to the module highlighted very mixed responses to the choice of this module (mean=3.12) In particular, some students felt very aggrieved with being 'chosen' and as a consequence losing out on an elective module, especially if they perceived they had done aspects of this in their earlier education. One student noted that for their previous School system examination:

> .. I had no difficulty revising, having the motivation to do it, or having the skills to do it. I took my own notes, and I did very very well in my exams. Despite there being studyskills talks during our final year of school, my teachers told me not to attend, because they knew I was doing just fine as a was.

Others were open to its potential of the LSU module, in particular some of the mature students:

> As I am a mature student returning to education after a long time I am delighted with the support and help Learning for Success is and will be for my study and for settling in to University.

On the whole students believed at the start that the module would be important to their study at the Institution and to the workplace, but these both significantly dis-improved post-module. On the SETQL statements (Table 2), the lack of relevance to work/career was also supported, in that these 1st year students were very unsure that it had included things they needed to know for their careers. In addition they were unsure of any benefit of it on their CVs, this was the case pre and post-module.

The students had mixed feelings about finding it 'interesting', but they agreed somewhat after the module (Table 2). They were unsure about whether it would be an easy module, but post module this significantly changed to 'agree somewhat' that it was easy (p=0.04, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test). The open-ended comments, however noted that students did not always value this as a positive aspect, as some student highlighted that this seen as nearly 'too easy' for their perceptions of a University module.

Students expected that it would assist them in understanding their other subjects better, but this was not borne out post-module (p=.002).

Table 2: Comparison of LSU students' pre and post-module score on the SETLQ

Shortened Experience of Teaching & Learning Questionnaires Statements	Pre-module Time 1 (n=61)			Post Module: Time 2 (n=22)			
	Mean	SD	Med.	Mean	SD	Med.	Test*
It's something I expect to/found interesting.	2.84	1.1	Neutral	2.89	1.3	Agree	NS
It supposed to be/was a fairly easy course unit.	3.72	.83	Agree	4.32	1.1	Strongly Agree	Z=2.04 P=.04
I think it looks good on my CV.	2.85	1.0	Neutral	2.79	1.4	Neutral	NS
It should/has helped me to understand my other subjects better.	3.44	1.0	Agree	2.61	1.3	Disagree	Z=-3.02 P=.002
It included things I will need to know about for my career.	2.93	.99	Neutral	2.64	1.3	Neutral	NS

5= Strongly Agree, 1= Strongly Disagree; *Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test (n = 22); NS= Not significant

Students experience of Success: Academic Performance

Overall student performance in the module itself was examined for all the students (n = 331) who completed the module. It is clear that the majority of students successfully completed the module (89.4%, n = 295, including those who passed by compensation). In addition, a large proportion (74.5%, n=246) achieved honours grades (A – C), with a modal grade of B.

Question 3: What aspects of the module's design were most beneficial to the students?

Table 3 presents the student feedback scores for the five core statements on the ISFF tool for the LSU sample. An initial analysis noted that the scores for the LSU cohort were significantly lower than their other College modules as comparison groups (p < 0.01, adjusted for paired tests).

Table 3 : Scores on the core statements on the *Institutional Student Feedback Form*

Core Statements		Modules			
		LSU (n=113)	All Level 1 Arts & Celtic Studies (n=4,202)	All Level 1 Human Sciences (n=3,364)	All Level 1 (n=16,731)
I have a better understanding of the subject after completing this module	Mean	3.13*	4.22	3.99	4.04
	SD	1.24	0.87	0.98	0.97
The assessments to date were relevant to the work of the module.	Mean	3.60*	4.27	4.14	4.10
	SD	1.1	0.81	0.83	0.89
I achieved the learning outcomes for this module	Mean	3.37*	3.99	3.82	3.85
	SD	1.1	0.89	0.94	0.94
The teaching on this module supported my learning	Mean	3.31*	4.12	3.86	3.88
	SD	1.23	0.97	1.70	1.07
Overall I am satisfied with this module	Mean	2.73*	4.03	3.80	3.84
	SD	1.41	1.01	1.10	1.09

*Significantly lower mean (p < 0.01, adjusted for paired tests).

Looking to the LSU responses to the ISSF core and optional statements, the highest statements in this survey highlighted that the teaching staff made them

'*feel welcome in seeking help/advice in or outside of class*' and '*were dynamic and energetic in delivering the module*'.

However, one of the striking aspects of the LSU module was its low score on the core institutional statement '*Overall I am satisfied with this module*' (n=113, Mean 2.73, SD 1.41).

The LSU Survey data gave more details of student expectations and experience of the module's specific sub-components. Students indicated, post-module, that they 'had been successful' (median score) in engaging with all the module's subcomponent. Pre-module, the students also had reasonably high expectation of their success in all these areas, for example, 'engaging in process of learning at group' and 'individual' level. Their expectations of success had been achieved post module.

In relation to the teaching and learning formats used in the module, on the LSU survey, the 'in-class critical thinking workshop' was highlighted as the most useful (Mean 3.33, SD 1.39); the 'skills4study on-line resource' was also reasonably useful (Mean 2.86, SD 1.68).

On the LSU survey, the students (n=32) were also asked to rate the relevancy of the module's themes. The proportion of student who rated them as either 'relevant' or 'very relevant', in descending order were: time-management (61%); reading and note-taking skills (59%). critical thinking (57%); library and referencing (57%); transition to University (53%); exam skills (50%).

Reflection and Planning for 2nd cycle.

The results of our study were not surprising at one level, in that the students, as noted by others (Black et al, 2006; Blythman & Orr, 2002; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Gamache, 2002; Wingate, 2007) are in general less satisfied with stand-alone learning to learn modules than they are with their other more subject-specific modules. This does provide a dilemma in attempting to address a need for these skills and experiences in programmes that have a wide diversity of module choices. Such programmes can struggle in attempting to systematically embed these skills (Wingate, 2006).

In the absence of this embedded approach (Sloan, Porter & Alexander, 2013), we need to learn lessons from attempting to use a stand-alone approach. What was surprising was that the majority of students who responded to the LSU survey were not as isolated as we had thought, although there was a high variation in their response indicating some may be more at risk in this area. Students had very high expectations for their success and in addition received good grades on this module. In parallel with this, however, they described the experience of the module as being at times a little too easy. It appears that although we may need to support students in their transition to higher education, we need to also ensure that they are challenged in their learning. The just-right challenge is a concept supported by others in the literature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and indeed many students learn best at the 'edge of chaos; where there is a good balance between challenge and order (Tosey, 2002).

Some of the school-leavers had highlighted in their comments that they had already completed aspects of the module's design in particular, note-taking and study skills. It is worth noting that 75% of this cohort were under 21. Given that there was a need to support other students in the programme returning to education, the perception of it being too easy could also be addressed by empowering students with some level of choice of these activities/topics and allowing

students to focus on those that they would find more useful (Huba & Freed, 2000; Nicol, 2009). It is within these selected topics/activities that there could be built in more challenging 'lively' or 'fun' elements to bring the learner to closer to the 'edge of chaos' which could enhance the learning experience (Tosey, 2002).

Despite students overall low levels of satisfaction compared to other modules, they did acknowledge that they were successful in obtaining some process and product components. The module was particularly successful in 'engaging in the process of learning at an individual level (self study)' and the 'time-management' theme was consider the most relevant of all themes. We had included an activity that encouraged students to create a plan to prepare for the assessment in the other modules for that semester and this seems to have been well received by the students. We plan therefore to consolidate this further and incorporate this as a summative assessment in the next reiteration of the module. One of the strongest features to emerge was the support and dynamic staff involved in the module's implementation, it does highlight the importance of the teacher at this early stage of the students' experience. Evaluation surveys have often reported the importance of teacher enthusiasm as a variable for enhancing student learning (Kunter et al, 2011).

Wingate (2007) maintains that one of the reasons that the stand-alone learning to learn modules are less effective are they are seen as irrelevant to their subject. Despite attempts to include some Arts programme specific material, the students' identity as an Arts student was not significantly enhanced by the end of the module. Care is needed in interpreting the difference between the pre and post-module results as the sample size for post-module was only 31 students. We may have been ambitious in expecting to develop the complex concept of identity within the time-frame of an eight week module however it may well be useful to give further consideration in the next roll out to more Arts related activities. For example, there has been a decision that the title of the next reiteration will be 'Introduction to Arts' and not emphasising the learning to learn focus in the title, as many of the recent school-leavers perceptions were that they had already done learning to learn activities. Thomas (2012, p90), in their extensive report from the UK,

> '*recommend contextualised study advice. The context could be school-based (as at Oxford Brookes) or centrally delivered but focused on the academic discipline (as at Reading).*'

In reflecting on the module's components, Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd (2013) challenge ours and the current understanding of learning to learn as they believe it is overly focused on the cognitive and self regulatory skills of the learner. They challenged us to think about it from a more

> '*active, ethical, embodied and engaged form of citizenship than the mere mastery of a pre-determined inventory of 'social and civic competences'* (p622).

They recommended a more student-centered and creative approach to this issue. One of the strengths of the module was the work that was given to its structure and design, however this could be balanced by more student choice, alternate tasks and innovative assessments. This may help address the issue of creativity. We recognise that our own module is only a starting point for the learner in this programme. It is neither embedded in the programme nor is it part

of a sequence of approaches in the programme. Bailey et al (2007, p84) highlight that learning to learn

> '*support available to students needs to be actively and constantly promoted—a single promotion never reaches everyone*'.

In addition to keeping what aspects have worked well it would be important that this support for students is not a once-off approach and that more needs to be done, preferably embedded in a range of modules in the programme, to push a more challenging, creative, student-oriented approach for an engaged form of citizenship. In addition, there is a need to develop a more local sets of resources that are contextualized to the students' institutional and discipline environment.

In cases where such modules are required to be 'stand-alone', staff need support in developing and assessing these. These modules require different types of teaching, learning and assessments and, as highlighted in the study, they can suffer from student disengagement. Staff need to become familiar with some of these techniques and there is a need for specific staff development, including the development of national or local communities of practice, where staff can share some of these ideas.

In summary, despite the challenge of having to use a stand-alone learning to learn module, and despite students overall low levels of satisfaction, there were many elements of the module's design that were very successful and were valued by the students.

Based on these observations, we have reflected both ourselves and with others on what has worked well and what was less successful. Many of these changes were made to the next reiteration of the module and it has been rolled out to the full cohort of 1,200 student in first year Arts in University College Dublin. Further research is being carried out both on this new cohort (Cycle 2) and the original cohort from Cycle 1 (giving feedback a year later), including its impact on their performance in other modules in 1st year and subsequent years. We plan to also disseminate the results of this further research.

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