

**LDHEN / ALDinHE Symposium: 12 April 2007.****Using discussion in study skills support classes:** presentation proposal.

Jonathan Staal,  
Student Academic Support Co-ordinator  
University of Abertay Dundee.

**A) Abstract:**

The paper explores the use of discussion in study skills support classes to:

- Facilitate students' reflection of their experience of and approaches to study;
- Facilitate students' assessment of challenges;
- Allow students to share examples of effective study practice and to consider alternative approaches.

It combines consideration of relevant theory based on a literature review of the area and practical suggestions on using discussion in study skills classes, concluding with the initial outcomes of small-scale action research undertaken by the Student Academic Support team of the University of Abertay Dundee in semester 1 of academic year 2006/2007.

**B) Introduction:**

Higher education staff charged with assisting students to develop their approaches to study are presented with a series of challenges. One challenge is to make skills development attractive to students focused on their subject, most commonly because of either selective academic interest or strategic instrumentalism. How then can we address students' broader development while not appearing irrelevant to their immediate needs? Another is how to provide appropriate, accessible study skills support and suggestions in mixed-ability settings, responding to the range of ability levels and needs in a mass higher education system by providing more than a single simplified 'this is how to do it' message. A further practical challenge, for stand-alone support teams, and for staff delivering skills support embedded in the curriculum, comes with delivering content effectively within time constraints.

To plot a consistent, coherent course through those challenges seems impossible: compromises must surely have to be made. On the one hand, providing quick-fix solutions can satisfy students whose ability levels and burden of non-study commitments, such as work and family, mean that they find themselves adopting an instrumental approach. As a retention measure, that can possibly seem a justifiable response. On the other hand, though, that would fail to address skills development from a longer-term perspective and ignore concerns for students' meta-cognitive growth. It must be acknowledged, though, that that second response is difficult to pursue effectively when skills development is addressed largely on an ad hoc basis only, when tutors request classes or when students arrange appointments.

The use of discussion in study skills-focused classes presents opportunities to meet those challenges while still maintaining a rigorous, uncompromised approach. By maintaining throughout the discussion a focus on the students – their prior experiences and their immediate needs – the relevance of the exercise can be made clear and the students' interest more readily maintained. The concentration on the students' own situation also supports mixed-ability delivery, each student supported in building approaches to study appropriate to the personal needs they have identified. Finally, the basis in critical self-reflection of the discussion process itself offers opportunities to help students to identify their place on path of longer-term meta-cognitive development.

### **C) Aim:**

The aim of the paper is to explore the potential benefits of using whole-group discussion in classroom-based study skills support, developing a rationale for its use and exploring its possible benefits and pitfalls.

### **D) Context – responding to key trends in contemporary UK higher education:**

#### **1. Students' approaches to higher education study.**

It is important to recognise the complicated heterogeneity of the student population of most British universities today. Progress in widening participation, the success of the UK's higher education sector to market itself internationally as an education destination, the development of a market in degrees, driving the introduction of novel courses in part through the whims of fashion, the growth of a consumer culture in which gratification is a swiftly available prospect – all of these trends and more have led to greater diversity of students and student demands. That diversity cannot be viewed or understood in straightforward binary terms defined against single criteria – male or female, traditional versus non-traditional, school leaver or mature entrant, home or international. In approaching issues of students' needs and how we might respond to them, we must consider the potentially intractable consequence of students' exhibiting cross-cutting multiple learner identities. Proponents of moves towards the personalisation of higher education (QAA 2007) suggest that students can be considered effectively only on an individual basis, an approach rejected conventionally on financial grounds but supported by educational theorists (Haggis 2004).

In conventional views, students' approaches to learning can be categorised as either 'learning as discovery' following a traditional, liberal model or a more strategic 'learning for employability' (ibid., p.346). Again, being prepared to accept complexity and to operate from a complex position, we can allow for students to hold a range of attitudes towards higher education and be motivated by their studies for several intersecting reasons, running across categories such as social advancement, becoming more highly skilled, personal development and intellectual curiosity (ibid., pp.346-348). Effective, honest and coherent support for students to succeed in their studies requires their needs as individual learners to be met with individual responses.

## 2. Addressing students' skills and meta-cognition.

Having begun to consider how students should best be supported in their studies, attention should be given to the means of delivering that support and what form it might take. Given the diversity to be found within universities and between them, it should be of no surprise that the nature of learner support provision is also varied across the UK's higher education sector. Study skills support can be delivered by subject specialists fully in the context of core curriculum teaching or by a stand-alone team delivering additional support or working in tandem with subject specialists to contribute to regular timetabled classes. Study skills support can be offered by institutions as a remedial or retention measure or as a progressive step to support students' higher-order conduct in the academic environment. Arguments of the superiority of one approach compared to another are usually unhelpful and unprovable, generally resting on assertions of a clear-cut divide between approaches to allow the author to demolish one and promote another (Wingate, 2006).

Regardless of rationale or approach, we can perceive two broad means of supporting their development of attributes that we regard as important to students' success in higher education. One means would be to address skills – can they perform? The other means would be to address meta-cognition – can they develop a capacity to recognise what is required if they are to perform adequately? It would be helpful to draw out further the distinction between skills and meta-cognition.

The skills-focused approach is largely context specific – time, place and activity – and that is routinely recognised, albeit usually implicitly, in education. For example, commonplace assessment methods such as examinations are used because they are context specific: under a set of restricted conditions, can the student perform to the standard required of them under those particular conditions? Away from the specific context, a student's skill level can be less clearly validated (Holmes 1994). A skills focus to student support work has its place, offering students examples of how they might work in the set of contexts in which they can routinely be expected to perform. Capable, motivated students can be adequately served by manuals and guides to approaches to university-level study; a different approach is required for less capable and less well motivated students.

The meta-cognitive approach aims to support the student outwith a specific context by focusing on the processes of learning, rather than on particular procedures required for effective learning (Newble and Entwistle 1986, cited in Sobral 1997, p.40). Rather than presenting the student with solutions to the immediate skill challenge confronting them, a meta-cognitive approach would address underlying attitudes towards the task and related behaviours.

Offering support to students to develop their meta-cognitive behaviour is challenging. However, it presents the potential benefits of improving students' motivation and of deepening their approach to learning (Biggs 1987 and Entwistle 1997, cited in Sobral *ibid.*). Returning to a key point from the previous section, it also provides opportunities to consider the student as an individual rather than

suggesting standard approaches that work in standard situations that might not necessarily be the student's own. Research supports paying attention to students' meta-cognitive development. Deep active learners with a richer qualitative understanding of approaches to study in which they must actively seek greater knowledge and understanding are typically found by studies to be higher achievers in higher education (Birenbaum op cit., p.750). As will be explored in the next section, discussion is one method that offers opportunities to address student meta-cognition and that can provide individual insights even when conducted in a group classroom setting.

It would be wrong to suggest, however, that there is a stark division between supporting skills development and supporting meta-cognitive development, with practitioners required to align themselves on one or other side of a divide. For much of the time, work addressing the two will appear superficially similar even when the rationale behind the activity might be quite distinctly addressing one rather than the other.

Yorke's and Knight's USEM model (2006) serves a useful purpose in bringing the two together, focusing attention on the interplay of students' skill development with meta-cognition, plus also self-efficacy and subject knowledge. It has been influential, regularly cited in policy positions taken by funding councils and individual institutions, both in the UK and internationally. Although its basis in quantitative research is attractive, care must be taken in seeking to use it. Causality is not proven for all of the correlations drawn between students' circumstances and their progression rates. The possibility of interplay between two or more factors is not sufficiently explored. Insufficient explanation is given as to why for two students with similar backgrounds, one might prosper and one might fail (Yorke et al, 2002).

With causality unproven and complexity downplayed, we are left either to abandon the model, which is not necessarily desirable because it has its benefits as suggested above, or to take it as simply a starting point in addressing the complexity arising from the four factors it identifies as significant to students' performance in higher education. Taking that latter approach, the USEM model points student support practitioners further in the direction already suggested: the highest ambition of learner support becomes to address students' individual needs on an individual basis. Operating on a broad-brush basis, offering standard solutions to the generalised needs of a student community conceptualised as a simplified model, might support efficient resource allocation and, for some or most of the time, be the only practicable option. However, we should aspire and seek wherever possible to offer students individualised support.

By seeking to support students' meta-cognitive growth on that basis, the critical subject becomes the individual student and not of either their membership of a broad category – 'mature', 'direct entrant', 'wider access', etc – and or a specific skill challenge. If there are experts in that critical subject, it is the individual students themselves, not members of staff, however knowledgeable and experienced they might be. The positive role open for staff then becomes to

support students to access and to explore the expertise that they hold about themselves; contributing generalised lessons from their professional knowledge and experience becomes a secondary activity. In that way, we move from an 'inside-out' approach built on teachers' prior conception of their students' needs, abilities and interests to an 'outside-in' approach, in which the teacher first addresses the students' own conceptions of their needs, etc. (Birenbaum 2007, p.749).

## **E) Discussion in a study skills classroom.**

### **1. The value of discussion in the study skills classroom.**

Having established a need and a rationale for addressing students' meta-cognition on an individual basis, we now turn to discussion as a possible means of meeting that need. The focus of this section is on an exploration of discussion as a method for supporting students in considering and enhancing their meta-cognitive behaviour in the context of higher education study,

Why discussion? Returning to the idea of students' being their own expert on the critical subject of the themselves as students, we can frame the student's development – effectively, their learning to learn – as a 'continuous process where an individual constructs and reconstructs his or her conception of the world' (Tynjälä 1998, p.211). That learning to learn, supported crucially by meta-cognitive growth, draws on students' prior experiences and their knowledge and understanding both of curriculum subject matter and also of the process of learning. In particular, it draws on their experience of the learning process and other relevant factors from their private lives, which they might not necessarily relate directly to their lives as students, and how they conceptualise those factors. Interactive and co-operative modes of study, such as discussion, are ideally suited to helping students to overcome problems associated with developing their own subjective understanding of concepts (ibid.). If we are to exploit that expertise, we need to provide opportunities for students to identify and offer their personal expertise and support them in doing so.

Discussion in a safe, supportive environment is one means of achieving that, by providing opportunities for students to engage actively and co-operatively on an equal standing within a group of peers. Discussion provides a tool for students to consider a subject. Through discussion, there is a chance to develop and challenge their own, each others' and their teachers' ideas. Participants have opportunities to draw on personal experiences to construct actively new approaches to study. Students can develop flexibly their self-theories and their reflection on their past experiences as engagement with the discussion requires them to recollect those experiences, to package their memories into coherent thoughts and to communicate them. Crucially, discussion requires participants to unbundle other students' contributions – both their contrasting personal experiences and their thoughts on what others have said – and adjust repeatedly their conceptualisations of their own experiences in response to what they have heard. Much of this will be familiar already to practitioners accustomed to the rich conversations that can be enjoyed in one-to-one appointments with students. A

key ambition here is that discussion in the classroom can provide an experience of comparable value to that possible in appointments.

There is much support for the proposition that the process of learning must be modelled in situations in which the content can be applied if it is to be readily transferable (Tynjälä op cit.). If, as professionals charged with supporting students to develop as learners, our 'content' is the learning process itself, we should model 'learning' in our classes. That can be seen as an argument for form to follow function. Support in classes for students to confront their shortcoming as learners and the roots of those shortcomings should come in the form of activities that allow students to explore their behaviours and pre-conceptions (Hansen op cit., p.11) and in which the member of staff is also seen to be learning actively and not, as might be more common, the source of proven knowledge and conventional understanding. Discussion, in which the member of staff contributes either from the fringes as facilitator or more actively as a peer whose suggestions are no more valid than those of any other member of the group, offers opportunities to model that critical, self-reflective learning process (Tynjälä op cit.).

When so much of university curriculum content delivery is still delivered in classes that would have been familiar a century ago – a combination of lecture, lab and tutorial – it becomes significant when a class clearly does not follow one of those conventional modes. Lectures are typically recognised as a one-way channel of communication, a mode of delivery best suited to broad coverage of factual content, with students expecting to be 'receiving' information. The moment at which students are offered the opportunity to consider and to challenge that information is normally expected to come at a later stage (Goldstein and Benassi 2006, p.688). For study skills classes, what might be recognised conventionally as factual content can be limited and not necessarily of primary importance if the critical content becomes the student themselves. Reflection on the effectiveness of individual approaches combined with consideration of developments to improve effectiveness is generally more important. That discussion-based classes might not be familiar to students could also be a benefit as well as a possible problem. 'Learning that matters has to be somewhat unsettling in that it defamiliarizes the familiar, upsets students' equilibrium, and generates cognitive and even emotional dissonance' (Hansen 1998, p.8).

Discussion provides a means by which we might move away from a teleological understanding of undergraduate education, in which each stage of development is viewed through the prism of an end result of graduateness and move instead towards liminality (Meyer and Land op cit., p.380). Our first step is to recognise that students can face challenges in persisting with and succeeding in their studies repeatedly throughout their course – at the point of entry, between semesters, on confronting new, difficult subject matter or modes of assessment, at the start of each successive level of study, for example. We can then frame our approach to support students around their experiences as source material for developing individually appropriate approaches with which they might address new challenges. In the context of discussion presented as being safe and

appropriate to their current circumstances, students can consider looking back, including the recognition of past errors and omissions, as a source of strength rather than an embarrassing admission of weakness.

Another potential benefit in a mass higher education system of the use of discussion is in meeting the demands of mixed-ability teaching. Student-led discussion offers the member of staff, acting in the role of facilitator, opportunities to generate with the class a 'praxis of not being so sure' in which 'discrepancies, repetitions, hesitations, and uncertainties, always beginning again' can be viewed because it has become contextualised in and by the student's engagement in discussion as routine and potentially beneficial (Lather 1998, pp.491-492, cited in Meyer and Land op cit., p.379). Again, that provides an example of the twin benefits of discussion as process and as an end in itself.

A side benefit of discussion in the classroom and a focus of a lot of the literature on its use, is its potential contribution to the citizenship curriculum, co-operation and collaboration, as exhibited in good discussion, being seen as a fundamental underpinning of democracy. Other skills developed by involvement in discussion as a curriculum outcome themselves are also considered beneficial to the development of responsible citizens, including making claims backed by evidence, contributing to a group's exploration of a topic, being critical about ideas but not the individuals holding them, developing as a group a shared understanding, and building self-confidence especially in engaging in the public sphere (Barber, 1984; Larson, 1997; Mathews, 1994; Parker, 1996, cited in Larson 2000, p.663). Good citizenship might not be immediately relevant here, but those attributes will be familiar as being valuable to successful students (Burns and Sinfield 2003; Cottrell 2003; Parker and Hess op cit. p.284).

## 2. The nature of discussion in the study skills classroom.

If we are satisfied that discussion has a useful role to play in the classroom to support students' development of their approaches to study, what form might that discussion take? Here, the literature offers a range of views on the different forms that classroom discussion can take, with overlapping terminology. Parker and Hess (2001, p.282) offer a convenient overview, suggesting that discussion has three broad forms: deliberation, in which a practical course of action is selected through discussion to achieve a set objectives; seminar, in which issues are explored with no set objective or timescale to respond to; and conversation, which establishes general principles or outlooks.

Overlaying those three forms of discussion, Parker and Hess offer two general approaches, the 'structured academic controversy' (op cit., p.276) and the 'Socratic dialogue' (op cit., p.279). The 'structured academic controversy' provides a focus on students' sharing of experiences to form a collective discourse about their approaches to study, in particular: (a) conceptualising and expressing complex notions of their own approaches to study; (b) challenging their past experiences and approaches; (c) listening to other students' contributions and evaluating the experiences that they are hearing about, largely as suggestions of possible alternative approaches that they might be able to adopt to good effect; and (d) concluding with one option identified as superior.

The 'Socratic dialogue' seeks to achieve the same overall objectives but ideas are not held to be in competition, with one required to be judged superior by the end of the discussion. The process of sharing and developing ideas collaboratively is valued more than the output, with a range of outputs acceptable, the suitability of each varying between individuals. Socratic dialogue is more likely to be appropriate for use in study skills classes if the emphasis is on supporting students' personal exploration and sharing of ideas, although there might remain a role for the member of staff acting as facilitator to step in to contextualise (rather than contradict) suggestions that seem potentially harmful, if they arose.

Participating members of the discussion maintain multiple roles within the discussion. All members of the group (students and staff) can take on the role of protagonist, each contributing their own ideas from their own standpoint. They can also serve as protagonists in putting contra-ideas to others' comments on the ideas they have offered to the group. In addition, they can act as antagonists in their responses to others' contributions (Van Rees 2001, p.464).

### 3. Using discussion in study skills support classes.

Discussion-based classes must be introduced carefully before the discussion can get underway. Basic ground rules must be explained, such as politeness, from which the participants can develop and agree a scaffold covering the structure of topics, ways of discussing, etc, with which they can collectively guide the development of the discussion. An opportunity for practice might be offered. The role of the member of staff initiating the class and discussion must also be explained clearly at the start. The member of staff can act as facilitator – supporting the conduct of the discussion only – or as facilitator-evaluator – concerned with both the smooth conduct of the discussion activity and also in some ways assessing students' contributions. That evaluator role would not be unfamiliar students; it might well be expected. It offers the staff member opportunities not only to assist the progress of the discussion, but possibly also to gauge contributions, providing a 'generative paradox' by putting both roles simultaneously to positive use (Robertson 2005, p.189). The member of staff can serve a third role, that of contributor on an equal footing with the student members of the group, offering useful information drawn from their own experiences and thereby modelling processes. In that role, the member of staff must be able to consider the appropriate use of self-disclosure, which students typically value (Goldstein and Benassi op cit., p.688), but which can raise ethical issues. The discussion-leader's skills are clearly relevant, with strong communication and inter-personal skills required, along with the ability to think fast especially if the role of evaluator is to be maintained.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the member of staff initiating the discussion-based activity lies in not talking too much. If a key objective of using discussion is to generate student-student discussion of individual and shared previous experiences and their possible application to future challenges, a secondary objective is to reduce the role of the teacher, especially students' dependence on the teacher (Parker and Hess op cit., p.278). Again, the process and experience of the discussion are considered equally important and are

coherent with the stated objective of raising individual students' critical faculties and independence as learners.

There are risks associated with the use of discussion. Students might benefit most academically from teachers who disrupt their comfort zone but like most those whom they trust with their 'psychological comfort' (Robertson op cit., p.186). Students lacking maturity or self-confidence might find it difficult to engage meaningfully with the activity. External academic-related factors, such as feeling over-burdened by an assessment schedule and associated workload, can pre-occupy students, again inhibiting their willingness to engage (Sobral op cit., p.48). It is also important to recognise cultural factors, both for their potential impact on students' capacity to engage in the process but also to contribute to the discussion. That is especially true for students used to a strictly didactic approach in which the tutor is considered the unchallengeable expert.

#### 4. A case study.

The final part of the paper focuses on the use of discussion in skills support classes at the University of Abertay Dundee and so it might be helpful to set in context at this stage the university and its study skills development team, Student Academic Support. Abertay is a small post-1992 university, drawing its students predominantly from its local region, which includes some of Scotland's most deprived communities. Mature students and first-generation participants in higher education form a core component of its student body, although the proportion of non-UK students has grown significantly in recent sessions.

The Student Academic Support team is focused on retention activities, ranging from pre-entry preparation work to individual support from first-year undergraduates to post-graduate students. Its delivery of study skills support, on an individual basis in appointments, through stand-alone activities such as its preparation programmes and individual appointments, and through classes integrated with curriculum delivery through partnerships with teaching staff, is informed by its core mission of contributing to the improvement of the university's retention rates. Thus, in response to the institution's widening participation strategy, the team has built its roster of activities in part around the USEM model. In particular, efforts have been made to address meta-cognitive aspects of students' approaches to their studies, not least to meet the needs of less well prepared or academically weaker students – the focus of retention activities – for whom conventional study skills advice might be inaccessible or inappropriate, either because those suggested solutions might not be achievable by them or because they might not engage with them as intended.

The first case study is of a discussion-based workshop targeted at honours-year students required to complete a dissertation, run twice during the induction week at the start of academic year 2006/2007. Almost 50 students attended the workshops, divided about equally between the two dates. Students were self-selecting, having responded to a mailshot promoting a set of induction week workshops aimed at returning students, and were drawn from a wide range of programmes. Both sessions were held in the Student Centre rather than a

regular teaching room, intended as a welcoming, 'less academic' and non-threatening setting. Both sessions lasted for approximately 90 minutes.

The introduction to both sessions was the same. The session began with the member of staff explaining the purpose of the session, firstly to help students to identify the requirements of their dissertation and secondly to help them to plan and to prioritise their workload, across their modules generally and specifically with regard to their dissertation. The basis of the session in student-led discussion was then explained, with a rationale offered that emphasised the value of students' learning from their own experiences, and from those of others, and for taking an active role in planning their workload well in advance, especially with a dissertation that was of a larger scale than most previous assessments. The final stage of the opening part of the sessions saw students asked to introduce themselves to the group, giving their name and their programme.

In feedback, while the purpose of the session as explained was considered appropriate by participants, the students would have appreciated knowing more in the advance information about the structure of the session and the expectations that would be placed on them to contribute throughout in whole-group discussion. Especially in the case of the second group, feedback comments could be seen to reflect students' preferences for being instructed in ways of working that could seem to offer 'sure' success rather than the greater challenge of engaging with the support that was offered through the session to explore for themselves what might be realistic and successful approaches for them personally.

As preparation for the discussion to follow and to help students to adjust to the perhaps unfamiliar requirement of providing the bulk of the session's content themselves, they were asked to consider on their own or in pairs if preferred what were the biggest and most worrying challenges facing them in completing their dissertation. Each student was then invited to share their suggestions in turn, with contributions collected by the member of staff on a flip chart. Acting at this stage not only as facilitator but to a limited degree as evaluator, the member of staff exercised personal judgment in grouping similar subjects. As a precaution against misinterpreting students' contributions and to model good practice in listening skills and engaging in discussion, the member of staff sought students' opinions on whether they had grouped topics appropriately. The preparation stage of the session ended with a review of the topics raised and how they had been grouped, which topics had been suggested most frequently and which groupings seemed to be most troubling. Students were then invited to consider the most frequently chosen topics and most troubling groupings and to confirm which they would like to devote the rest of the session to discussing in depth. The complete list of topics was subsequently emailed to all participants as a useful reminder of the range of issues demanding their early consideration as part of the preparation work required for the dissertation and posted to the service's blog as a guide to other honours-year students who had not attended.

The remainder of the session – about two-thirds of the total time available – was devoted to student-led discussion of the key topics they had selected from their

list. The intention had been that, at this stage, the member of staff would withdraw to a much more peripheral role as facilitator. However, the under-preparedness of the students, the relative unfamiliarity of the exercise and undoubtedly the member of staff's inexperience in that role meant that facilitation became more active at times than might be considered desirable in a healthy, vibrant discussion. For short periods, the discussion broke down to take on a more 'call and response' format of students offering contributions to a direct question or request from the member of staff more than sharing ideas entirely of their own volition. As well as detracting from the benefits of the discussion process itself, that shift in structure risked students' identifying the member of staff as evaluator even when that was not intended, putting further at risk the potential benefits of discussion as a means of supporting students' critical self-reflection. On a positive side, those lapses from a true discussion format did allow students to air a great deal of content, including worries that drew the group back into discussion once more.

The differences in feedback between the two groups highlights a possible pitfall of giving students complete discretion over the course a discussion might take and the content it covers. While the format for the session outlined above had the potential to be empowering, with the member of staff modelling a democratic approach and offering opportunities for each student's voice to be heard and all their opinions to be valued, it did risk students' regretting the choice they made in deciding the main topic for discussion. In the first session, the students chose to focus on issues surrounding the research required for their dissertation; students at the second session chose to discuss project planning. While discussion of both topics could have been valuable, feedback from the second group was more negative, especially about the merits of devoting the bulk of the session to considering the subject the students themselves had chosen. How the member of staff could have guided the students in the second group away from a topic that had its merits to one more interesting or useful without detracting from the benefits of the discussion process or undermining the behaviours being modelled requires careful consideration; that problem possibly cannot be resolved and must be accepted as a risk of using discussion.

The second case study deals with the use of discussion in study-skills classes requested by a module tutor for a group of stage two nursing students, which ran during routine timetabled lecture slots and were intended to cover topics identified by the tutor as being of concern. The first looked at note-taking, the second at progress in a new subject area; the third at preparing for the module assessment. With a set of classes running intermittently through semester 1, it was possible to establish greater familiarity among the students of the use of discussion – its purposes and its benefits – and to support them in becoming familiar with the format.

The structure of the first session, on note-taking, followed a similar format to that used in the honours project workshops, with the purpose of the session and the use of discussion explained. Instead of asking students to identify and then share issues that they wanted to talk about, greater focus was provided early on by setting the group the task of explaining why their module tutor might have

thought that they could benefit from help on taking notes since they had proven their ability as students (and presumably as note takers) by successfully completing stage one of their course. The member of staff acted mostly as facilitator, making limited contributions with supplementary questions posed in response to students' contributions. This stage of the session was particularly fruitful, with students generally recognising the value of considering further their use of notes and approaches to taking notes in a broad and deep manner that probably exceeded what the member of staff might have raised in a more conventional didactic class for fear of over-loading the students. The remainder of the hour was spent in a combination of small-group discussion followed by feedback contributing to whole-group discussion, that mix being intended to lend a slightly faster-paced dynamic to the session. Again, the content of the class was shared with the group by email and more generally through the service's blog, both to be helpful and also to demonstrate the value the member of staff considered it to have.

Having established and practised the use of discussion in the first class, its use in the subsequent two sessions became much easier, with students becoming more willing and fluent with their contributions. The process by which topics for discussion were selected shifted, with the selection made by the member of staff in response to students' initial contributions challenged by individuals. The group became much more pro-active in monitoring the course of the discussion and regulating it, with students pursuing what were considered generally to be tangential topics sanctioned appropriately. The member of staff continued in a facilitation role, especially to encourage all members the group to contribute and to ensure that the loudest or most enthusiastic voices did not dominate unfairly. In that way, during the second class, students began the discussion with the topic originally identified by their tutor but chose mid-way through the class to discuss the broader issue of their current attitudes towards the course and their levels of motivation, although students wanting to speak just about negative experiences of placements (a topic already shared extensively out of class) were asked to engage more constructively. The group became stronger with each class in working together to generate possible solutions to problems experienced in common, including the active preparations that they might make for their next placement and ways in which they could address their concerns that they were under-prepared to tackle the forthcoming assessment. A measure of success of the approach was the strong attendance at all three sessions, which increased slightly rather than tailing off as might be expected in the second half of the semester as workloads increased. The students also became more satisfied that the process of each session and the outputs generated could be useful without there being a directly relevant message or solution taught by the member of staff.

## 5. Conclusions and next steps.

Discussion as a means to model good learning behaviours and to support students' development of their meta-cognitive approaches to study has a place in the study skills classroom that can be justified through theory, research and experience of its practical application. It presents many benefits, not least the support to lends to helping students address their underlying approaches and to move away from looking to simplistic 'quick fixes' that might serve to short-term

crutches but offer less long-term advantages. It is not a universal panacea, however, and its use comes with difficulties and risks, associated not least with students' unfamiliarity with the approach and disinclination to engage. It also presents challenges for the practitioner, who must address their own skillset. Nevertheless, as a coherent response to the demands of supporting a broad range of students in today's mass higher education sector, the benefits of discussion in the study skills classroom suggest that its use should continue to grow.

**E) Bibliography, partially annotated:**

- Barber, B. 1984. *Strong democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Cited in: Larson, B.E. 2000. Classroom discussion: a method of instruction and a curriculum outcome. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 16: pp.661-677.
- Biggs, J. 1987. *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research. Cited in: Sobral, D.T. 1997. Improving learning skills: a self-help group approach. *Higher Education*. 33: pp.39-50.
- Birenbaum, M. 2007. Assessment and instruction preferences and their relationship with test anxiety and learning strategies. *Higher Education*. 53: pp.749-768.

Studies a link between students' preferences for teaching and assessment methods. Very American context but adds depth to discussions of Biggs and constructive alignment. Emphasises the need to make changes in teaching methods apparent and comprehensible to students.

- Brookfield, S. D. and Preskill, S. 1999. *Discussion as a way of teaching: tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*. USA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

One of the key texts referred to regularly by other authors exploring the use of discussion in the higher education classroom. A strong advocate for the classic US liberal arts education, on which it is tightly focused, as much as for discussion as a teaching method. Provides lots of examples and ideas for adaptation.

- Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. 2003. *Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at university*. GB: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Cottrell, S. 2003. *The study skills handbook*. 2nd ed. China: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Entwistle, N. 1987. Motivation to learn: conceptualisations and practicalities. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 35: pp.129–148.
- Goldstein, G. S. and Benassi, V. A. 2006. Students' and instructors' beliefs about excellent lecturers and discussion leaders. *Research in Higher Education*. 47(6): pp.685-707.

Examines the similarities and differences in perceptions held by US students and lecturers of good discussion leaders. Offers warnings against over-enthusiastic adoption of discussion as a classroom technique if that risks alienating students who prioritise factual instruction.

- Haggis, T. 2004. Meaning, identity and 'motivation': expanding what matters in understanding learning in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*. 29(3): pp.335-352.

Exciting article on exploring complexity – here, in students' motivation and approaches to higher education – and to accept it and use it in responding to students' needs in contrast to what is presented as the conventional response to generalise and stereotype for theoretical or practical convenience.

- Hansen, E.J. 1998. Creating teachable moments...and making them last. *Innovative Higher Education*. 23(1): pp.7-26.

Focuses on interesting and motivating under-prepared students in classroom teaching. Suggests that learning can be most effective and enduring when students are unsettled. When with students' self-reflection, constructive 'dissonance' can support them in relating what they are studying and their approaches to study to their everyday lives, offering the prospect of making their education more engaging.

- Holmes, L. 1994. *Is competence a 'confidence trick'?* [online] Relational Skill & Learning. Available from: <http://www.re-skill.org.uk/relskill/confid.htm> [Accessed 13 December 2004].

Typically provocative and raises questions about the validity of socially constructed, subjective assessments of skills that post-Macpherson Report, should not probably be left unanswered, but entertaining and well worth reading.

- Hsu, S. 2004. Using case discussion on the web to develop student teacher problem solving skills. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 20: pp.681-692.

Looks at the use of online discussion with student teachers, but lessons can be drawn more generally for the use of self-reflection and discussion in classroom settings, including the challenge of initiating and sustaining discussion. Also interesting for the challenges of meeting students' concerns about sharing personal experiences.

- Kusnic, E. and Finley, M. L. 1993. Student self-evaluation: an introduction and rationale. In J. MacGregor (Ed.), *Student self-evaluation: Fostering reflective learning*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. No. 56 (pp. 5-14). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Cited in: Hansen, E.J. 1998. Creating teachable moments...and making them last. *Innovative Higher Education*. 23(1): pp.7-26.

- Larson, B.E. 2000. Classroom discussion: a method of instruction and a curriculum outcome. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 16: pp.661-677.

Examines teachers' use of discussion, both as a teaching process and as the subject of the teaching itself and the need to address both equally if discussion is to be used effectively in the classroom.

- Larson, B.E. 1997. Social studies teachers conceptions of discussion: A grounded theory study. *Theory and Research in Social Education*. 25(2): pp.113-136. Cited in: Larson, B.E. 2000. Classroom discussion: a method of instruction and a curriculum outcome. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 16: pp.661-677.

- Lather, P. 1998. Critical pedagogy and its complicities: a praxis of stuck places. *Educational Theory*. 48(4): pp.487-498. Cited in: Meyer, J.H.F. and Land, R. 2005. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*. 49: pp.373-388.

- Mathews, D. 1994. *Politics for people*. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press. Cited in: Larson, B.E. 2000. Classroom discussion: a method of instruction and a curriculum outcome. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 16: pp.661-677.

- Meyer, J.H.F. and Land, R. 2005. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*. 49: pp.373-388.

Conceptualisation of students thinking on the boundaries of their knowledge and understanding to explore 'troublesome' thoughts, and the importance of the associated development of their language in addressing that 'troublesomeness'. Provides an additional reason to engage in discussion as a technique to promote students' self-development.

- Newble, D.I. and Entwistle, N. 1986. Learning styles and approaches: implications for medical education. *Medical Education*. 20: pp.162-175. Cited in: Sobral, D.T. 1997. Improving learning skills: a self-help group approach. *Higher Education*. 33: pp.39-50.
- Parker, W. C. 1996. Curriculum for democracy. In R. Soder, ed. 1996. *Democracy, education and schooling*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 182-210. Cited in: Larson, B.E. 2000. Classroom discussion: a method of instruction and a curriculum outcome. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 16: pp.661-677.
- Parker, W.C. and Hess, D. 2001. Teaching with and for discussion. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 17: pp.273-289.

Addresses the challenges facing teachers hoping to use discussion in their teaching practice through a study of trainee teachers. Commends practitioners to consider whether they are using discussion as an approach to deliver content or as a curriculum objective in itself.

- QAA. 2007. First year enhancement theme, project 7: personalisation of the first year. [online] Quality Assurance Agency. Available from: <http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/projectSeven.asp> [Accessed 10 April 2007].
- Roberston, D. R. 2005. Generative paradox in learner-centered college teaching. *Innovative Higher Education*. 29(3): pp.181-194.

Examines contradictions in learner-centred teaching, including the need for the teacher to act as both facilitator for student-led personal development and controller of the delivery of curriculum content. Has implications for the use of discussion in a classroom setting that should be addressed if it is to be incorporated in a joined-up skills-development strategy.

- Sobral, D.T. 1997. Improving learning skills: a self-help group approach. *Higher Education*. 33: pp.39-50.

An experiment with American medical students on the potential benefits of active learning techniques focused on self-reflection, including small-group discussion. Includes a warning on managing the appropriateness of discussion for a heterogeneous student population.

- Tynjälä, P. 1998. Writing as a tool for constructive learning: students' learning during an experiment. *Higher Education*. 36: pp.209-230.

Provides evidence to support the use of active learning techniques, including discussion, in the classroom. Suggests that the use of discussion can support

students' broader development, including in their self-reflection and their approaches to their studies.

- University of Abertay Dundee. 2004. *Widening participation strategy*. [online] University of Abertay Dundee. Available from: [https://portal.abertay.ac.uk/portal/page/portal/University/Abertay\\_Knowledge/Teaching%20learning%20and%20assessment/Widening-Participation-Strategy-V1-0.doc](https://portal.abertay.ac.uk/portal/page/portal/University/Abertay_Knowledge/Teaching%20learning%20and%20assessment/Widening-Participation-Strategy-V1-0.doc) [Accessed 10 April 2007].

- Van Rees, M.A. 2001. The diagnostic power of the stages of critical discussion in the analysis and evaluation of problem-solving discussions. *Argumentation*. 15: pp.457-470.

Analyses the conduct of discussions with a focus on what can go wrong. Provides guidance on considering and addressing different attitudes towards engaging constructively in discussion that might be held by student participants.

- Wingate, U. 2006. Doing away with 'study skills'. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 11(4): pp.457-469.
- Yorke, M., et al. 2002. *Transition into Higher Education: some implications for the 'employability agenda'*. [online] HE Academy. Available from: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded\\_object.asp?id=18537&filename=EMPL014](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=18537&filename=EMPL014) [Accessed 10 April 2007].
- Yorke, M and Knight, P. T. 2006. *Embedding employability into the curriculum*. [online]. HE Academy. Available from: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded\\_object.asp?id=20063](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=20063) [Accessed 10 April 2007].