Exploring the Application of a Self-Determined Approach to Learning

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Abstract

University education has traditionally been seen as a dyadic relationship between the lecturer and the learner: typically, it is the lecturer who decides what the learner needs to know in terms of knowledge and skills, and indeed, how the knowledge and skills should be taught. The aim of this paper is to critically explore the contemporary debates on the application of self-determined learning within a higher education setting. This research project used a series of qualitative focus group meetings. This research recommends that there is a need for a clearer requirement for on applying heutagogical principles for promoting engagement in the higher education teaching and learning environment.

Key words: Heutagogy, Higher Education, Learning, Teaching, Virtual Learning

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Whilst there has been some change in pedagogical methodologies and their application to learning, current practice still has connotations of a hierarchical dyadic academic relationship. However, as a result of the distinct socio and economic changes that have taken place within UK society, it is becoming increasingly essential that community development curricula, as Rossi and Rosliassert, "transfer 'productive knowledge' ...and engage with a multiplicity of stakeholders in order to deliver economic benefits" (2014: p. 1). Furthermore, as Barnet states, educators need "to give serious attention to the potential for radical *educational* innovation, concerned with students who have to make their way in a challenging world. And for that, space for imaginative educational experiment – and failure – should be opened" (Barnet, 2014: p. 9).

Communities, groups and society are in a constant state of change, resulting in significant challenges for educators ensuring that their curricula are fit for purpose, responding to the challenge of productive knowledge (Drissi and Amirat, 2016; Wong, et al, 2015; Kess et al, 2010). Barnett (2011, p. 6) alludes to a super complex world in which the world is changing and presents "proliferating and competing frameworks by which we understand the world". What constitutes as learning? The development of knowledge and skills in one context may not be appropriate for another context: each individual, group and community is unique. They are different in terms of need and demand for skills and knowledge; furthermore, how, what, where and when they learn is unique to the individual.

Barnett (2010; 2012; 2014) alludes to the development of a self-determined approach to learning, and that the student should be at the heart of this process. This paper presents an overview of a research project that explored the application of such an approach, using heutagogy as a framework, and adopted Mentor Assisted Learning and a solution focused approach to learning as the strategy. A key element of this strategy is to develop a curriculum that is flexible, responding to Barnett's challenge of enabling student flexibility in determining how, what, when and where they learn.

This initiative enabled the development of a curricula framework that reflects this diversity, and the adoption of an approach that is student focused, avoiding a 'broad brush' approach to delivery that inevitably 'pigeonholes' students who are exposed to predictable and fixed methods and approaches to teaching. Key features that supported this approach were use of the Virtual Learning Environment in particular a social media platform, and the role of the mentor in translating learning and encouraging autonomy.

Adopting a case study approach, this paper has a further two sections. The section two critically discusses the experiences of the application of an heutagogical approach to learning that applied the principles of mentorship. After this section, the paper presents the main findings of the research project. This research has concentrated on a solution-focused approach to teaching and learning within a first year undergraduate module that is delivered as part of a Community Studies degree.

2. The Research Project

To meet the aim of this research project, the study had two overarching objectives, which were:

1. To utilise a heutagogical approach enabling students to become independent and autonomous learners, encouraging them to determine how and what they learn

2. To develop a VLE/social media platform to support flexibility and engagement in student learning, enabling them to choose when and where they learn

Drawing upon the principles of heutagogy (see Snowden and Halsall, (2014) for a review of the pedagogy of the approach), using two key strategies, we adopted a solution-focused approach to teaching and learning with support from Mentor Assisted Learning to deliver a 40 credit foundation module as part of a three year, full time degree. Mentor Assisted Learning comprised of both face-to-face mentoring and on-line virtual learning environment (VLE) mentoring.

This project, drawing upon a conceptual framework influenced by Barnet and Coate (2004), employed a collaborative case-study approach of mixed methods to data collection and analysis.

An evaluation focus group interview was held with 25 students (mentees) participating in the module. The data collected was analysed using template analysis. A data set was established that identified student satisfaction scores and assessment performance by grade score average for all participants, and a comparison made between grade score averages and student satisfaction scores of the same student group in modules that did not participate in the project.

Ongoing VLE mentoring was supported by the adoption of a one-to-one model of matched mentorship: each foundation year student (mentee) was matched with a volunteer third year student who acted as a peer mentor. Each peer mentor was also mentored by a graduate of the host discipline, thus ensuring a tripartite approach. Peer mentor and mentee were required to negotiate a needs-led mentorship contract based on a pre-determined template that included specific guidance on their respective roles, assessment of need and preference, skill, and, in collaboration with the tutor, design a curriculum of learning. The notion of belonging, identity and engagement was reinforced during this process. Peer mentors and mentees were encouraged to discuss and construct the preferred content of modules and mode of assessment. Both peer mentors and mentees participated in a series of training events, and dyads were achieved by a process of matching based on the notion of similarity and agreeableness (Snowden and Hardy, 2012).

Adopting the approach presented by McAllister (2003), students, with support from their mentors, were encouraged to:

1. Assess

In the first two weeks of the module, students identified, in collaboration with their mentor and tutor,their personal learning aims and objectives.

2. Planning

Following individual and group discussions a scheduled programme of learning was timetabled at week three, and scheduled to run for the remaining 20 weeks of the module. Students were also encouraged to choose their preferred mode of delivery: seminar, lecture, VLE learning through webinars or discussion based e-forums using 'Unilearn.' Students were also encouraged to express their preference of assessment method in order to assess their agreed learning. This could be essay, case study or portfolio; students were also invited to mark their work.

3. Adaptation and Engagement

Through a process of continuous dialogue, students were encouraged to apply their learning within their preferred context; an important feature of this learning was the continued negotiation of learning context throughout the year.

3. The Research Findings

It is clear to the project team that student independence and autonomy did develop as the project progressed during the term, and that the peer mentor played a significant role in this process, as illustrated by the following sample quotes (see figure 1).

> "*The best bit about having a mentor was that he really helped me to realise what was important so we could choose what to do.*"
>
> "*The sessions were OK, but I really learned stuff that mattered on my work experience it was great "cos" I learned what I wanted to learn not what you lot [lecturers] wanted us to learn.*"
>
> "*My mentor was brilliant. I liked the way that she encouraged me to speak out and actually say about what I wanted to learn.*"
>
> "*I was really worried at first; I thought that being at uni meant that we would be told about what we had to learn. I didn't know that we could actually choose, so it was great when we could actually speak out. I came on the course 'cos [sic]I wanted to learn about sexual health and it wasn't really covered. But you made the change, which we all felt was great. It's a shame that other tutors don't do this.*"

Figure 1: Student views on being mentored.

The peer mentor was seen as someone who encouraged the student to 'speak out' and, through the process of developing the learning contract, was able to support the student in articulating their need: students were able to negotiate what they learned. This collaborative approach to learning was also supported by enabling students to adopt their preferred mode of assessment and what they should be assessed upon. For example, dependent upon their preferred learning style, a student could choose to submit their assessment as a case study, portfolio or essay. The student, within their learning agreement, in collaboration with their peer mentor and the module tutor, also agreed the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Students, using the criteria they developed and the standard generic university-wide assessment foundation level criteria, were encouraged to mark their work, identifying strengths and weaknesses and allocating a mark out of 100. The student, following this, would then meet with the tutor who had also marked the work, and, through a process of discussion and negotiation, agree a final mark.

150 students participated in this exercise. 61% students fell into the same marking band (bands of 10 marks) as the tutor of the tutor, 36% were one band lower and 3% were one band higher. See sample comments from students (figure 2).

> *"I thought it was really hard deciding on the test we had to make; I think we need much more help in this. Having said that my mentor was great and she did say that all this was new, actually said that she wished she had done it this way."*
>
> *"I really liked how we could choose what we had to learn. I tried a lot harder on my test in this module than the others as it meant more."*
>
> *"I thought it was odd marking my own essay, but I liked it when we sat down and talked about the grades and stuff."*
>
> *"The approach is great, but I know that the other tutors don't really like it."*
>
> *"It's hard, when we could choose stuff in one module but not the others. Why don't you all do the same thing?"*
>
> *"I learn a lot in class, and I enjoy that, but what I really like is learning from [tutor]. She really knows her stuff as she's done the job before."*
>
> "*I've learned loads in this module, but I wasn't too sure about it when started. I didn't really believe that we could actually choose what we learned. I thought it was great though that we could choose when to hand in our assignment; that was really good."*

Figure 2: Students opinion on the assessment.

Enabling students to choose their assessment and participate in the marking of their defined assessment was challenging for student and tutors. It is clear that some students were not comfortable with the process; some students did not feel at ease with this as they felt unsure of the process and how to allocate marks, although when they sat with the tutor to agree a mark they all agreed that this was a valuable exercise. Students also enjoyed constructing an assessment around what they wanted to learn, and learning something related to their needs and aspirations. However, in future it would be appropriate to consider a more gradual approach to assessment in this manner, ensuring that the learners have knowledge and understanding of the nature of assessment criteria and to ensure that all students are confident with the process of assessment.

One feature that can be described as an incidental finding is the reaction of colleagues, who have commented that the students are being more assertive and inquiring about what is to be delivered as part of their curriculum, questioning content and how they are assessed. Colleagues seemed reticent towards enabling students to have a 'voice' in their learning, suggesting that it is the tutor that should drive learning and not the student. This aspect of the study is worth investigating at a later date.

The mentor clearly contributed to enhancing the learning experience by increasing the level of support; the mentor is able to encourage use of the academic community's resources and support services, and promote a sense of belonging and empowerment. The mentor enables the mentee's time to be used more productively, and make best use of the resources available by accessing the 'inside knowledge' that the mentor possesses. Distinctly, the mentor provides a model of positive behaviour that reflects success and experience, acting as a powerful transmitter of values and attitudes, which reinforces successful and double- loop learning. Mentors contribute to the 'self–efficacy' of mentees by procuring skills that Alred and Garvey (2000) suggest enhance learning and the production of knowledge.

A key feature of the solution-focused approach developed was the use of the VLE and social media. A mentor assisted learning site on Unilearn (the university's VLE platform) was developed and set up to support peer mentors and their mentees. This comprised of discussion groups and forums for the respective groups, and a folder for mentoring articles and resources to be used as part of the programme. Whilst all mentees and peer mentors had access to the site, it was seldom used. This was highlighted within the first four weeks of the programme when an initial evaluation was performed. Students and their peer mentors both commented that they found it cumbersome to use and navigate, difficult to access (and find) and very time consuming. In response to this a Facebook page supporting Unilearn was constructed and offered to students, based on the rationale that students were familiar with Facebook as it is a popular social media site.

However, it rapidly became clear from interim evaluations that the VLE support provided by the mixed mode platforms of Unilearn and Facebook presented a further obstacle.

Students were very unhappy about enabling access to some personal (non-confidential) information stored and shared within Facebook. Some users expressed a desire not to share personal information stored on Facebook with university peers (see figure 3).

> *"I don't like it when we had to use Facebook. I'm not being funny but I didn't think it was right that other people like class mates I don't really get on with could see all my photos and my friends."*
>
> *"I didn't use Facebook 'cos [sic] didn't think it should be used for uni work[…] I like to have a break and being reminded all the time about my work and what people are up to."*
>
> *"I liked the way that we could apply to become a proper qualified mentor"*
>
> *"I don't think I would have been a mentor if I couldn't use the work for my assignments."*

Figure 3: Students' impression of Facebook.

Consequently, following a review of alternative social media platforms, Yammer was considered and trialled as an alternative to Facebook. Yammer is a social networking service similar to Facebook, however Yammer is much more tightly controlled than Facebook: access is determined by the institution's internet domain, and consequently, only those individuals with the appropriate e-mail address are able to join the network (in this case it was the university domain and was only open to those participating on the programme). This is, in turn, controlled by the Yammer administrator for the site, ensuring only those involved in the programme could access and participate on the site.

Following a four-week evaluation of Yammer in this context, it was observed that:

- Participation was increased – students were seen to be 'posting' on a daily basis, offering responses to questions and observations, in addition to raising questions, offering support and solutions to problems, such as reading material and sources of advice.
- Students engaged with content presented within the 'scheduled' session and offered their experiences and perspectives of learning.

Students commented that the site was:

- Easily accessible – engaging with content and discussion within two clicks
- Easy to access when off campus

- Easy to use
- Adaptable and easy to operate on a range of devices: iPads, iPhones, Android devices, etc.
- Prevents 'inbox' filling up with messages
- Video links easy to upload
- Real time discussions
- Easy to create groups and sub groups
- Maintained privacy – only group members could participate
- More learning orientated than Facebook and some students commented that it was more 'professional' than Facebook
- Encouraged the student to engage with learning rather than socialise on Facebook.
- Allowed students to receive a response to a query quickly, which students liked. Whilst the site was monitored by an academic during office hours, students found that many of their queries and sites were answered by peers, and their peer mentors, during 'out-of-office' hours.

Challenges of Developing and Managing the Yammer Site

Indubitably, the Yammer platform was the preferred option for students and learning. However, whilst the platform is relatively straight forward to set up and requires no higher order IT skills, the construction of the Yammer mentoring group, subsequent sub groups and ensuring appropriate access to resources was labour intensive. In addition, due to the enthusiastic participation by students, it was extremely time-consuming replying to messages, answering questions and moderating discussions. Students accessed and participated throughout the day over a full week. Consequently, much of Monday morning was spent catching up with discussions and questions that had occurred over the weekend. It was apparent that there was a distinct increase in activity outside of office hours; subsequently, a considerable amount of time each morning needed to be devoted to Yammer messages.

The findings from the project suggest that the blending of peer mentorship principles that focus upon learning (mentor assisted learning) and the adoption of solution-focused teaching and learning has a positive effect upon the student learning experience.

Reviewing student performance data:

Assessment

Reviewing the final assessment marks for thoseparticipating in the scheme revealed that the students mean mark was 7% higher (63%) than their performance in those modules that did not adopt the approach (53%).

Satisfaction

95% of students indicated that they were satisfied with the overall teaching and learning of the module compared to 85% in other modules.

This project has enabled development and evaluation of two key strategies that will enhance the student experience by adopting heutagogical principles to develop a pedagogically robust approach to flexible learning. Barnet asserts that educators need "to give serious attention to the potential for radical *educational* innovation, concerned with students who have to make their way in a challenging world. And for that, space for imaginative educational experiment – and failure – should be opened" (Barnet, 2014: p. 9). This project embraced this challenge and provided the opportunity to develop a transformative model of learning, underpinned by a heutagogical framework, that applies the principlesofmentorship and solution-focused learning to aid learning development.

Experiences from the project have provided the opportunity to explore and illustrate how two key strategies that promote the student as an architect of learning, Mentor Assisted Learning and Solution Focused Teaching and Learning, can be used to enhance the learning experience and bridge the theory/practice gap of learning. Flexibility and the development of 'learning' space, is crucial for success in this approach; a useful measure to assess the nature of a flexible curriculum is provided by Barnet (2014). The project has highlighted the case for self-determined, heutagogical principles for promoting engagement and learning within some aspects of the flexible learning framework proposed by Barnett (2014). This approach can:

1. Lead to a qualification that leads to a major award

Drawing upon their experiences, mentors participating in the SolutionFocused Approach and Mentor Assisted Learning Programme were encouraged to develop a portfolio of their experiences that was congruent with the European Mentoring Coaching Council's 'practitioner' award standard. This portfolio could also be used as part of the summative assessment contribution to a careers oriented module they were required to study. The mentoring experience therefore provided a contribution to an academic and vocational award.

2. Offer all students access to suitable materials and appropriate cognitive and practical experiences

All students participating in the module were provided with the opportunity to utilise real world approaches to learning and teaching, based on their aspirations and needs, which provided appropriate academic challenge.

3. Offer academic interaction with other students

Collaborative learning strategies and the use of the social media platform, Yammer, provided an engaged learning community, with excellent interaction with peers*.*

4.Offer access to tutors in real-time interaction

Within the constraints of the working week this was achieved; a much more flexible arrangement needs to be employed to achieve a consistent real time interaction. This requires further investigation in view of contractual stipulations.

5. *Offer prompt and informative feedback from tutors*

This was achieved by the collaborative marking and discussion of scripts between student and tutor, a particular strength of the process adopted.

6. *Offer access to other academic services*

Peer mentors drawing upon 'inside knowledge' were able to signpost their mentees effectively to appropriate services.

7. *Offer financial services*

Due to the complexity of student finance, this aspect was not explored.

8. Enable students to offer feedback on their total experience

Honest and continuous feedback was received by the collaborative process adopted as students negotiated changes as their knowledge and skills developed. This was achieved

through formal mechanisms, but much more effective was the informal mechanisms of Yammer conversations and discussion drawn from the interaction with mentors.

9. *Provide a pedagogical openness*

Crucial to a successful approach to solution-focused teaching and learning is openness and the tutor shifting the focus of control to the student, establishing a learner-centric approach to learning rather than tutor-centric.

10. Be academically and educationally structured

Appropriate pedagogy should inform the process; in this case, adopting heutagogical principles to mentor assisted learning within a solution-focusedapproach to teaching and learning.

11. *Offer ladders of progression*

This project, within a single module, offered no distinct progression.

12. *Be suitably robust and reliable*

The approach was robust, and drewupon key pedagogic principles.

13. *Be cost effective*

Whilst this model is labour and resource intensive, and is more 'expensive' than a tutor-centred learning approach – large group teaching fixed curricula etc. - the net gain in terms of progression, retention and enhanced performance is a cost-effective model. The retention of a single student provides the institution with a £27,000 tuition fee. The benefits far outweigh the additional cost in terms of time.

14. *Have sufficient structure so as to enable student completion to be a likely outcome*

The project clearly demonstrates that performance was enhanced and satisfaction increased; more students are likely to have a positive outcome as opposed to where the approach was not adopted.

15. *Contain sufficient challenge that students are likely to be cognitively and experientially stretched and to be informed by the spirit of criticality appropriate to each stage of a programme of studies*

Students within this module were stretched and challenged far more than in their comparative modules. Students were seen to be developing as criticallyengaged learners embracingthe elements of academic study. As part of this study the authors have provided a Mentor Assisted Learning model that encapsulates the key characteristics (see figure 4).
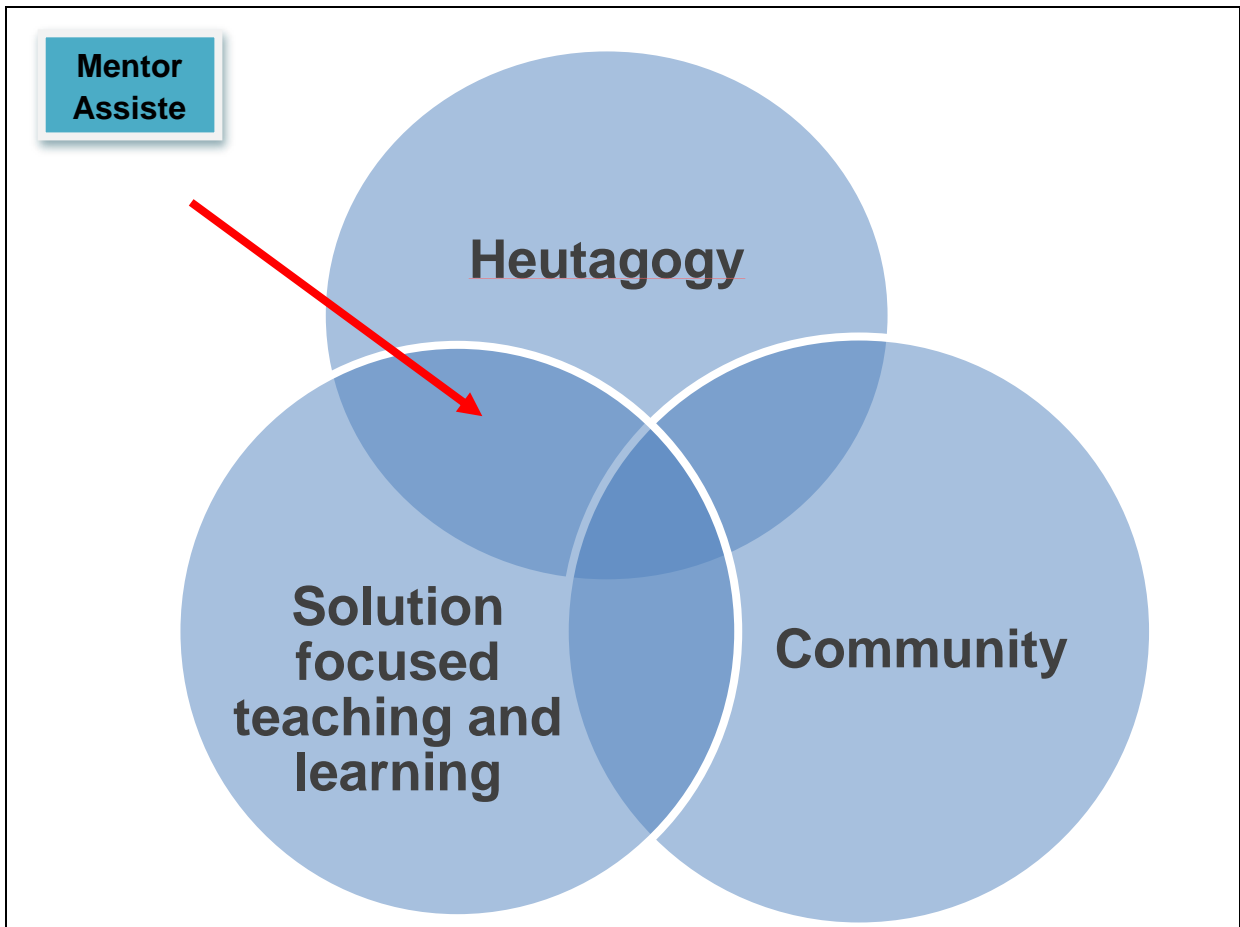
Figure 4: The Mentor Assisted Learning within the social science discipline

4. Conclusion

This small-scale project presents the argument that a self-determined learning approach, a shift in thinking towards Heutagogy, will enhance the learning experience for students and student communities. The case for the application of heutagogical principles, where the learner is able to develop space, and promoting the learner as an 'architect' of learning, have been presented. A key concept alluded to by the findings of the project is the notion of the student as an architect of learning, where learning is arranged around activities rather than content, thus allowing the content to be context specific and negotiated by the student. This is reflected by Barnett's notion of 'habitus' (2010), where the student is seen as an arranger and exploiter of space. The interdependence of habitus, architect and heutagogical learning is alluded to by the findings of this project, where students will create their own pattern of ideas and experiences relevant to their own mind and being, promoting the 'knowing,' 'being' and 'acting' of an engaging student-centred curriculum as part of a distinct community.

Whilst we do not advocate that students are given a *tabula rasa* on entry to university, we conclude by placing emphasis upon the case for the adoption of heutagogical principles for promoting engagement and learning, and emphasise the importance of committed educators, who can develop a challenging pedagogical environment that embraces the epistemological, ontological and skill development of graduates. University education requires educators to be responsive to the needs of the students and its community, in an ever-increasing performance driven and consumerist culture. Heutagogy, as illustrated by this project, is an approach that can be adopted to enhance the curriculum, encouraging students to determine what, how, when and where they learn, and for educators to be more flexible in the delivery of their curriculum.

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