

Collaborating for Foundation Degrees : an ongoing case study

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Abstract

This paper looks at a project at the University of Portsmouth in the UK to provide an institutional focus for supporting students on Foundation Degrees. The project includes writing online materials for a Professional Development Unit that underpins the degree. These materials have been developed in a truly collaborative way by staff from a number of departments and central services across the university including the Library, Careers Service and Academic Skills Unit.

Background

The University of Portsmouth (UoP) is one of the major providers of Foundation degrees in South East England. Foundation degrees are two-year courses aimed at improving the education of the workforce in areas previously not represented in Higher Education (HE), for example the police and probation services and those working in early years care for children. Foundation degrees are developed in liaison with employers and a progression route to an Honours degree must be provided (Foundation degree students exit at the same level as those completing the second year of a standard honours degree course).

Foundation Degree students have different learning needs to 'traditional' students, as they are usually busy, mature, work-based students, often lacking in academic study skills but with other work related skills and they are usually very motivated. They can present a challenge as their identification is with their workplace rather than the University, and their part-time mode of study (which may be at a distance also) means they require services of different sorts and at different times to the more 'traditional' students. It can also be challenging working with students who have a lot of experience in stressful and demanding workplaces who are learning to see the relevance of academic study and its applicability to improving practice at work. Foundation degree students often see themselves as 'doers' rather than thinkers so there are often confidence building issues to be addressed

Foundation Direct is one of two Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at UoP. It is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for 5 years following a two stage bidding process in 2004. After the initial five year funding each CETL is to become sustainable. Foundation Direct aims to provide enhanced campus-based and online support for the university's growing number of vocational foundation degree students (who now come from all subject areas). Centre tutors will provide generic skills and subject-specific guidance, careers management and Personal Development Planning (PDP). Current projects include working with workplace mentors, developing student IT skills and looking at pre-entry needs. There are researchers employed to develop an evidence-base that will be shared nationally and internationally. Physically Foundation Direct will be housed in a new Library extension due to be opened in October 2006.

The Professional Development Unit (PDU)

Central to the philosophy of Foundation Direct is the idea of using Personal Development Planning as a vehicle to enable and facilitate students to acquire new skills, develop existing skills and move towards becoming reflective practitioners. In recognition of the experience and knowledge most Foundation degree students already have, these units have been badged as *professional* rather than *personal* development units. This does not mean that the personal has been ignored however as will be seen below. The units are being developed within a WebCT virtual learning environment. As can be seen from the screen shot (*Fig 1.*) below the units aim to help students reflect on current skills, identify gaps, plan how to fill those gaps and plan how they will progress to become professional practitioners in their subject field. The current materials shown below are being developed to support a particular

foundation degree, the FdA in Early Years Care, which is offered in partnership with a local Further Education college.

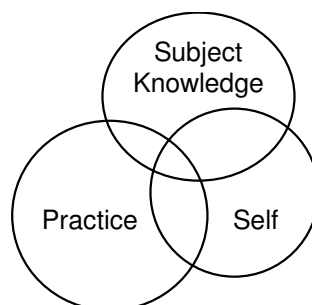
Fig. 1.

The screenshot shows a WebCT course page titled 'Professional Development' provided by 'Foundation Direct'. The page has a purple header and a yellow navigation bar. The main content area is divided into three columns. The left column is a purple sidebar with a 'WebCT' logo and a 'Unit Content' menu listing: Introduction, Expectations and Benchmarks, Reflective Writing, Finding Information, Report Writing, End of Semester Report, Critical Thinking, and End of Unit Report. Below the menu is a 'Resources' section. The middle column is yellow and contains the title 'Introduction to Professional Development', a welcome message, and a list of three aims for the Professional Development Unit of Study. The right column is purple and contains sections for 'Topics' and 'Useful links'. The breadcrumb trail at the top reads 'you are here >> Introduction/'.

The PDP aims :

- To provide an online structured learning environment and core learning management and support tool for students
- To facilitate meaningful personal development processes
- To support flexible and customisable learning that encourages interactions between students and instils a sense of self-ownership of learning.
- To support holistic reflection on the degree experience, maximising the integration of students' learning through the three domains (Barnett and Coate, 2002). This approach recognizes the learning domains of knowledge, action and self. The 'knowledge' domain refers to those components of the curriculum that are based on discipline or profession-specific knowledge. The 'action' domain refers to competences associated with practice. The 'self' domain refers to personal identity. For the professional identity of work-based foundation degree learners, the student will be required to demonstrate a high degree of integration across the three domains although the action domain (professional practice) is slightly more weighted than the knowledge and self domains as shown in the model (Fig 2.) below. The level of integration of learning is expected to grow as the learning professional progresses.
- To monitor student involvement and progress and intervene where progress has slowed, or threatens to lapse

Fig. 2. The 3 domains of learning



The two PDP units are 'long, thin units' which are studied alongside other shorter units, and it is within these units that information literacy is based within a section called 'Finding Information' (Fig 3.). The skills elements provided through online exercises will be available following *just in time* principles. These exercises will also encourage and maximise peer-to-peer interaction. The aim is that as students come to a realisation that they need a certain skill they can dip into the online materials – and also revisit at other times. The sections are written so that 'experts' don't have to mechanically study each part but can pick up and develop extra knowledge if they wish via 'See also' links. New learners can work through activities and also use 'Useful links' links to further material if more help and explanation is needed. Thus different levels of prior knowledge are catered for.

Fig. 3.

The screenshot shows a web page titled 'Professional Development' provided by 'Foundation Direct'. The page is for a unit called 'Finding Information'. On the left, there is a 'Unit Content' sidebar with links to Introduction, Expectations and Benchmarks, Reflective Writing, Finding Information, Report Writing, Developing your Progress Review, Critical Thinking, and End of Unit Progress Review. Below this are 'Resources' (Key Texts, Contents (pdf print-outs), Glossary) and 'Guidelines' (Using Course Contents, Communication Tools, Study Skills, Netiquette, Regulations, Using WebCT). The main content area is titled 'Using books for study [2]' and includes an 'Activity' section with a flowchart. The flowchart starts with 'Decide what kind of information you are looking for', branching into 'Quite specific information' and 'General topic information'. For 'Quite specific information', it suggests looking up keywords in the index at the back, and if nothing is found, to find an alternative book. For 'General topic information', it suggests looking for keywords on the contents page at the front, and if nothing is found, to look for different keywords on the contents page at the front. Both paths lead to scanning pages indicated for the specific topic. On the right, there are 'Topics' (Finding Information, Using books for study, Finding books for study, Using websites, Finding websites, Evaluating websites), 'Useful links' (Reading from BBC Skillswise), and 'See also' (BBC Skillswise).

One way of building the confidence of students is the use of quotation and recommendations from other students within the materials, to reinforce points, suggest previously used materials and indicate to the nervous newcomer that others like you have been this way before. This strategy also can be useful for students who don't often meet with each other.

The team

The writing team has been drawn from expertise from across the institution, this can also change as different expertise is needed. What has been exciting for the team is the opportunity to work collaboratively and synergistically with others from across the University and outside. The current team (and this will change as more materials are developed) includes staff from :

- Academic departments including those teaching on the course at Portsmouth and the partner college
- Members of staff with expertise in delivering online learning and research interests in the pedagogy of online learning
- Academic Skills Unit
- Library
- Careers
- Educational developers with technical expertise, this allows the materials developers to be able to work without having to learn the technical aspects of the environment. This can lead to greater creativity

'Finding information'

Cook (2000) sees '...the rise of information literacy as the primary focus of the teaching library'. The 'finding information' section has the majority of the information literacy material – although there is some embedded within other sections also – and has been written jointly by the Academic Skills Unit and Library team members. *Fig. 3.* shows the sections completed for Year 1. Currently Year 2 materials are being developed (Using journals and Finding journals in particular). The sections have been written to be as stand-alone as possible to aid just-in-time learning, this also makes them easily re-purposable for other degrees and for use in other places such as the University Library website. UoP Library has developed a Framework for Information Literacy which plots skills at different levels within courses and this section is in line with the framework. There is some degree of customisation as examples chosen for activities are subject specific whilst the 'shell' of each section is more generic. The plan is that as other Foundation degrees decide to use the PDP model each Faculty Librarian can re-purpose the materials and supply more relevant examples for activities. *Fig. 4.* shows a customised activity

Fig. 4.

The screenshot shows a web page with a yellow background and a purple sidebar on the left. The sidebar contains a 'Guidelines' section with links: 'Using Course Contents', 'Communication Tools', 'Study Skills', 'Netiquette', 'Regulations', and 'Using WebCT'. The main content area features the 'SOSIG' logo and text: 'www.sosig.ac.uk is a subject search engine for all social sciences, including Education.' Below this is 'Activity 2' with an illustration of a woman at a computer. The activity text says: 'Look at the Education section of SOSIG.' followed by two bullet points: 'Think about the plus and minus points about using this type of resource. (My observations?)' and 'Think about when you would use SOSIG and when you would use a general search engine. (My observations)'. On the right, there is a 'See also' section with a link: 'Tutorials on other subjects'.

It is important to stress that materials creation does not happen in a vacuum, each team member is encouraged to play a full part in taking forward and developing the PDP. Weekly meetings and postings to the electronic discussion forum cover assessment, areas of future development, models of development, editing of materials, design of the site as well as the more philosophical and visionary questions about the venture. Presentations within the University are often made by a mix of staff from the wider team, not just the full-time core team.

Collaborative working

Collaboration on this project has moved beyond the networking and liaison work which are bread and butter to academic librarians and into true collaboration, defined by Hope and Peterson (2002) as work which has 'shared common goals, shared commitment, joint work, and shared rewards'. There is also a sharing of authority, accountability and risk. It is important that there is a shared vision if the relationship is to work. This is a more formal relationship than much faculty/library liaison and this has been reflected in a formal secondment with a financial transaction between the Library and Foundation Direct.

Uniqueness

Collaborative work of this kind on PDP is unique (to our knowledge) within UK universities. It reflects the move towards converging 'student facing' departments such as library and academic support departments which seems to be becoming more popular within UK universities (the more usual convergence has been of library and IT departments). It also reflects the fact that PDP has been one vehicle HE librarians have used to advance the information literacy agenda (Stubbings & Franklin, 2006). Much of the literature is about library/faculty partnerships rather than cross-institutional collaborations of this kind reflecting its uniqueness.

Creativity

This collaboration has allowed space for synergy and creativity to happen within a safe space for open discussion and questioning. Working in 'neutral territory' – being out of one's usual physical setting - helps one think differently, and possibly more creatively. As well as working in a physically neutral space the materials are being developed for a virtually neutral space so again without the usual constraints and pre-conditions a more creative blend can be achieved. This echoes an ongoing collaborative project between the universities of Portsmouth and Southampton which also saw neutral virtual space as an important element (Gwyer & Morris, 2004).

Academic/practitioner mix

The mixed team of academics and practitioners have learned from each other and this has allowed richer materials to be developed than by each individual working in isolation. The fact that team members have different points and types of contact with students adds to this rich mix. The group has differed from the usual course development group as it was practitioner heavy and the more academic perspective was brought in. We have speculated amongst ourselves whether this has made a difference and whether this has created more approachable and usable materials for foundation degree students who are also practitioners. It is often the other way round and a lone librarian or student support person is parachuted into a team to help with a particular project. Employability has become a central concern of UK universities and these materials, with their focus on employment and careers skills address this agenda. This is further enhanced by the inclusion of staff from the University's Careers section as members of the team.

Student input

From the beginning the project team was convinced of the need to hear the voice of the student. As we are currently in a pilot run through of materials it was important that we listened to feedback from students, but collaboration with students has gone beyond this. For example, when writing the section on reading academic books we asked current students about their reactions when they first started using course texts and libraries. These comments were fed into the course materials so that students (who are part time and may not see other students very often) speak to students and offer a more authentic voice than academics or librarians. This models how students and professionals learn. The PDU encourages students to communicate online to build a community of practice.

Trust

Shane (2004) talks about the need for building trust as a key part of achieving collaboration, saying that this takes time and a lot of listening to each other. Part of the PDU process for students is the writing of a benchmark statement at the beginning of their course that is then built on throughout as part of the process of reflection. Recently team members all wrote their own benchmark statements about working on the unit, which they shared. The fact that all team members felt able to write honestly (I hope!) and to share their statements is proof of how trust has built. Another indication of trust was seen in the group editing of materials in which each team member edited the work of another member and was empowered to make changes.

Time

Part of the process of building trust is achieving enough of a consensus about what the unit is trying to achieve and the philosophy behind it. Although this was probably very clear in the mind of the Director of Foundation Direct, team members needed to build a team and arrive at a consensus for themselves. Extensive discussion time was needed as this felt like cutting edge stuff. The group needed time to settle and to go through the usual group processes (which have been described as forming, storming, norming and performing). This process has run its cycle and the team has been expanded with new, full time members so the process starts again.

Conversely, one of the great differences in working within this team is that one can get instant feedback. It is possible to discuss an idea at a meeting and start to realise this with people on hand to discuss ideas from pedagogical, e-learning and technical viewpoints. It can be helpful not only to get feedback when writing materials but also to hear from a member of the teaching team how they were received and what the External Examiners thought about the students' work on the Unit.

Promoting the PDU

Within the institution the team have taken opportunities to present their work, both as an example of good practice and to get some buy-in to the concept to ensure its sustainability. This opens up people's views of what's possible, they can't say 'it won't work here' – it already is! Alongside this large project the Library has been working on a smaller, university wide project on referencing which has built on this cross-institutional approach. Working collaboratively within an institution opens people to the possibility of working collaboratively between institutions, including collaboration with partner libraries in Further Education and the NHS (who are both major partners on foundation degrees). This has started a process where we are engaged in discussion about understanding each other's services and working together to try to make movement between the services for students as seamless as IT and licence agreements will allow. This is reflected in the learning materials that are not just focussed on the University of Portsmouth resources.

Playfulness

This could all sound like a lot of hard work, and indeed it is – but there is also an element of playfulness about it. As one team member said :
"Putting together a team that includes a librarian, engineer, Irish fiddler, skills tutor, cultural anthropologist, online learning consultant, careers experts, web designer and an Early Years tutor from our FE partner college was bound to result in innovative and playful learning for the students and the team itself."

Impact on the materials

Given the nature of the collaboration what has been the impact of this way of working on the materials themselves?

Less is more

One of the problems of being an expert is that it is easy to lose sight of how it feels to be a novice. Writing for a 'just in time' model focuses the mind on reducing content to what the student needs to know now. Each section is written to stand alone, as students can 'dip in' to the sections they feel they need at any one time. Students needing more explanation or practice are directed via links to further resources (e.g. PDFs of leaflets, handouts or notes) and those students who would like to explore or take the topic further are also directed to links (internal and external). Although the screens may look simple there is a wealth of information behind them. The main screens are generic and students will be directed to customised activities. The online materials are supplemented by face-to-face meetings with mentors and formal classroom teaching as we dealing with a blended not a fully online approach. Writing materials in this way certainly challenges any tendencies to wordiness. Much has been said about the problems of engaging the 'digital native' or millennial generation with information literacy and this is one approach which could be explored further.

Other perspectives

Another problem for academic librarians has been that of trying to embed information literacy within courses, rather than being 'parachuted' in to do odd sessions often at induction. Working as a member of the PDU team enables embeddedness. Being able to discuss common student perceptions or problems around information use with a member of the teaching team means that the materials produced address the needs of the students rather than those perceived by librarians alone. Other team members have different types of contact with students and these perspectives can be taken into account, e.g. the Academic

Skills Unit sees students who are finding aspects of their course challenging, or students who would like to improve their performance, this perspective is very helpful. These different perspectives add a depth and breadth which single discipline teams or librarians working alone may lack. Having said this, all materials were also sent out to library colleagues for comment so that there is some consensus about them within the library.

Learning styles

Similarly writing materials in isolation, even with an awareness of different learning styles, can lead to less lively materials than writing within a group. It was, for example, very helpful when writing the 'Finding information' section to work with my colleague from the Academic Skills Unit who is a much more visual learner and so produced much more imaginative graphics and diagrams than I could have.

Challenges

All this sounds very positive – and generally the experience has been so, but it would only be fair to mention some of the challenges also. The timing and nature of the funding of this project meant that we were writing the materials at the same time as building the team and developing the Unit. This put great time pressures on the team that might have been prevented with a longer planning time. Writing materials is a lengthy process, especially the time spent deciding what to include and finding good examples for activities and helpful links to further materials. Consultation and consensus has been fundamental to the process but again this takes a lot of time. As well as writing there is time needed to contribute to the team, read and respond to discussion boards, read and comment on other peoples' work attend team meetings and present at internal and external conferences.

After time comes money! Formal secondment gave some time to enable all of this but was only a partial answer as it was difficult to 'buy time in' from outside. This method of producing online materials is very expensive, however they can be re-purposed and used elsewhere, either on other courses (and two more foundation degrees are starting to use the PDU this autumn) or on other websites (such as the Library website), they then become university wide resources.

Responsibility for organising the product needs to be made clear from the start. We began our work as a group of seconded individuals all writing our own sections, it was some time before a full time person was employed to co-ordinate. This led to the usual problems of editing and revising materials, taking responsibility for making changes and archiving copies. This is resolving as the team matures. I am a great believer that muddle can produce good ideas and work, but others may not be so tolerant of this view and find a less structured environment has the opposite effect on their creativity.

Professional isolation could be a problem in some teams, especially when having to argue one's corner over certain issues. It is important to build individual confidence to speak up within the team.

We have started working on the 'Finding information' section for the second year of the PDU. This presents it's own challenges as the selection of resources becomes a bigger factor – which of the plethora of journal websites should we direct students to, for example. It is hoped that some more formal evaluation of the use of the materials will be carried out as there are researchers employed as part of the funding. Now that other courses are planning to use the PDU the 'Finding information' materials will be passed to library colleagues who will be able to add customised activities and resources.

Conclusion

Where blended learning usually means online plus other modes of learning or learning media, the Foundation Direct approach means that a number of 'blends' have been created, these

include : a new Community of Practice blended from the different team members; new blends of support for learners from mentors, subject tutors, peers and support services; online, work-based and academic synthesis through just in time and layered curricula; development of academic, practical and self knowledge and finally, a blend of self-assessment, mentor appraisal and tutor assessment. Thus 'blended' means more than just the medium, it means holistic approaches to curriculum design, authorship and assessment. As Raspa and Ward pointed out in 2000:

'...collaboration has become the educational imperative of the next century'

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Some of this article is taken from a paper written for an internal learning and teaching event at the University of Portsmouth :

Gwyer, R. & Lyons, F. (2005). The Foundation Direct way to PDP. In A. Van Westhuizen, (Comp.), *Innovation and engagement in learning, teaching and support : new and different ways in supporting teaching and learning : Learning and Teaching Conference 2005*. (pp. 157-64). Portsmouth : University of Portsmouth.