

INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on the study skills that students need to acquire and develop at the outset of their studies, and explains how history departments can enhance and support their students' learning by providing study-skills modules that are taught by historians as an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum. Elizabeth Foyster explains the need for, and benefits of, study-skills teaching in history; examines the merits of various 'indirect' and 'direct' approaches; and offers advice about good practices in this field, based upon a reading of key literature, a survey of current practices, and the experience of delivering and developing a study-skills module at the University of Dundee.

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BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The starting point for this project was a 'Study Guide and Workbook', 62 pages in length, which was devised and written by myself for Level I History students at Dundee University. The Guide contains advice on how to acquire the basic skills of the historian such as using the Library, effective reading, note making, essay writing, and using secondary and primary sources. It also explains the purpose of lectures and tutorials, and gives advice to students about how to get the most out of these learning opportunities. Throughout, the Guide is an interactive teaching tool. Each section is accompanied by an exercise which asks students to apply what they have learnt. It is designed to be completed individually and in groups during tutorials. This is not stand-alone skills teaching, as the exercises are based on material that relates to the content of the first module of the Level I History course.

The Guide was piloted for the first time in 2000-2001 among Level I History students. The response of both students and tutors was mixed, as will be discussed. Hence the chief aims of this project were to:

- systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the Guide from the student and staff perspective
- compare this approach of teaching study skills with practice in History Departments of other British Universities
- in light of the above, revise and improve the Guide, and provide recommendations of good practice that could be applied in other institutions

These aims were achieved by:

- Seeking feedback from Dundee University History students through comments pages contained within the Guide, course questionnaires, and informal discussion with tutorial groups working with the Guide
- Collecting and analysing data on Dundee History student entry qualifications and performance on the Level I course
- Observing the use of the Guide by fellow staff members during tutorials
- Visits to observe the teaching of study skills at Leicester and Stirling Universities
- The collection of course materials from a significant number of other universities which teach study skills
- A visit to observe the teaching of history at Higher and Advanced Higher level at Harris Academy, a school local to Dundee University
- Discussions with the co-ordinator of the University of Dundee's Genesis programme which offers teaching in generic study skills for undergraduate students at any stage of their studies
- Correspondence with educationalists who specialise in history teaching in schools
- A reading of a sample of the literature which has been produced on this area of teaching and learning.

DEFINITIONS

There have been numerous attempts by those interested in teaching and learning in higher education to define what they mean by 'skills'. Various labels have been attached to skills such as 'study', 'personal', 'academic', 'key', 'generic' and 'transferable' (Booth, 2001; Gillespie, February 2002; Bell and Egan, June 2002; Vernon, 2002). In this project 'study skills' are defined as the skills that are needed for students to make the most out of their learning experiences at university and beyond. They are skills that are concerned with learning how to learn, and hence enable students to fully participate in higher education. Many of the study skills listed below would have applicability in a wide range of humanities courses at university level. Others are discipline specific.

In current history departments a wide range of skills are currently being taught under the banner of study skills. These include:

- Skills for negotiating the university environment (for example, how to make the most out of lectures, tutorials and seminars)
- Research and investigative skills (for example, how to use reading lists, libraries, archives, and the world-wide web)
- Reading skills
- Note-making skills
- Critical and analytical skills
- Essay planning and writing skills
- English skills: grammar, spelling and punctuation
- Referencing and bibliography skills
- Writing under timed or examination conditions
- Time management
- Using primary sources
- Oral communication and presentation skills
- Numerical skills
- IT skills
- Team working skills

This project looks at how these study skills are being taught in higher education.

RATIONALE

The teaching of study skills to undergraduate students has not been traditionally within the remit of the academic historian. Until very recently, lecturers at universities were solely expected to teach students about their specialism within the discipline, and to share their knowledge of and enthusiasm for the past. It was widely assumed that students arrived at university with qualifications and experiences of learning that would enable them to adapt with little difficulty to university teaching and study, and that by progressing through a degree programme, students would acquire the skills they needed to achieve success at this level.

Particularly over the last decade, this situation has changed. Defenders of history as a discipline have demonstrated its wider utility by pointing to the 'transferable' skills that a history degree fosters. Hence the History Subject Benchmarking Group Statement lists both the 'Historian's Skills and Qualities of Mind', and the 'generic skills acquired through the study of History' (QAA, 2000). Others have demonstrated the range of skills and aptitudes that are fostered through university history curricular (Hitchcock, Shoemaker and Tosh, 2000).

Undoubtedly there are skills that are acquired or developed as a consequence of practising history, or doing a history degree. But this project is based on the assumption that students will not be able to become historians, or do history at university, if they do not have a set of skills at the outset. Skills are important as enabling tools as well as being measurable as outcomes. In this context, a recent study distinguished between 'the skills necessary to participate fully in the academic environment', and those 'key skills' which are sought by employers (Bell and Egan, June 2002). One of the recommendations of the 1997 Dearing Report was that universities should ensure that students were taught the skills to allow them to adjust to university-level study (Hopkins, 2001).

Today there are a number of reasons why the teaching of study skills has become a matter that all History departments in universities need to address. We need to develop study skills because:

This is a logical step following the widening of student access and participation in higher education

There is little point in ensuring that students have equal access to enter higher education, if they do not have equal opportunities to complete their courses. Retention of students has become an important political issue, and a financial concern to many universities. It is an area that is beginning to attract wider attention, and one that is likely to become of increasing importance as the numbers of students entering higher education continues to rise. A recent survey conducted by The Times Higher and reported in The Herald compared those higher education institutions that were able to combine both wider access and high retention rates. Six of the top ten institutions were in Scotland, including the University of Dundee (Buie, 2002). Providing opportunities for skills development within the curriculum was also one of the recommendations made by those who recently examined issues of student retention at Greenwich University (Jones, 2002). It can be argued that providing support to students in their learning, as well as in other aspects of their social and personal environment while a student, can play an important part in ensuring retention and completion.

Teaching study skills enables universities to meet student needs

It follows that as student access has been widened, students are now entering higher education with a wider variety of educational and social backgrounds. Chart 1, for example, shows the entry qualifications of students taking the Level 1 first year history course at Dundee University in 2001-2002. Out of a total of 249 students, 25% entered the university without Highers or A levels.

In the Scottish higher education system, all students study three disciplines for the first 2 years of a 4 year undergraduate honours degree programme. This results in large 1st and 2nd year lecture classes, and it means that students in these classes may not have chosen History as their first 'choice' as a degree subject upon entry to university. Furthermore, unlike the experience in English or Welsh history departments, where students tend to study a single or combined degree subject from the outset, history lecturers in Scotland are more likely to be teaching students who have not studied history before. For example, Chart 3 shows that 29% of students taking the first year history course at Dundee University in 2001-2002 had not previously taken history courses at Higher, A level or College level.

There is evidence that there is currently a particular need to teach study skills at university level which improve grammar, spelling and punctuation. The poor command of written English by school and university leavers is attracting national media attention and debate. Recently, for example, letters and comment abounded in *The Herald* newspaper after Joseph Farrell, of the modern languages department at the University of Strathclyde, claimed that Scottish schools were 'producing an uneducated generation'. Farrell argued that students entering university had a 'lack of knowledge of the workings or structure of any language, including their own', with the result that his department had to redesign its 'first-year courses to provide what is often no more than remedial education.' In a country proud of its educational system his warning that 'students coming from Scottish schools with supposedly high-quality certificates are consistently lagging behind their counterparts of comparable age and intelligence from other EU countries', was bound to sound alarm bells (Farrell, 2002). The problem is growing particularly acute as school teachers (and presumably university lecturers) who were trained themselves in grammar reach retirement age (Nelson, 2002).

In all British history university departments, it is important to acknowledge that even if students have studied history before they enter undergraduate programmes, there is still a need for students to be taught study skills. As university teachers it is not only good practice to start with what students know (Frederick, 2002), but also with thinking about how students learn (Raaheim, 1991; Cannon and Newble, 2000). It has been recognised that when students arrive at university, they do so with some deep rooted approaches to learning. Discussion with educationalists and teachers of history at school level, and observation of the teaching of Highers and Advanced Highers History was carried out as part of this project. At first sight, students at school appear to be approaching their learning of history and completing similar assignments to those expected at university. Students examine and comment upon primary source documents, write timed essays, and complete an extended essay requiring a degree of independent work, the submission of a plan of work as well as the written essay, and the use of academic referencing and bibliographies in the final written version.

But there are key differences in the skills required of students studying history at undergraduate level and school, which extend beyond simply expecting a greater depth of knowledge and understanding. The majority of marks awarded for answers given to document exercises and essays at school level are given for content and knowledge recall. There is less emphasis at school level upon critical analysis of documents or essay titles. Students are generally not encouraged to include their own personal interpretations or views in pieces of written work. Students expect their teachers to select and supply most of the reading materials required for their essay work. As more and more work in all subjects at school level is marked by continuous assessment, school leavers are becoming less familiar with the most common form of university assessment, the examination.

The comments above are observations, not criticisms of the way history is being taught at school level. Indisputably, very important skills in history are being nurtured and developed with decreasing staff and financial resources within the school system. A greater awareness of how history is being taught and learned in school would enable more teachers in higher education to identify the adjustments of expectations that students face on entry to undergraduate programmes. Given the varied learning experiences and widespread abilities of undergraduate students, and that unlike in the school environment, there is no 'streaming' or differentiation made between students at university, the task of enabling all students to make the most out of their experiences at higher education has become increasingly vital.

Teaching study skills allows History departments to meet student expectations

Many History Departments in higher education institutions (including Dundee University) attract and recruit students to what, for most, is a non-vocational subject on the basis that history is a degree subject that teaches students the kind of skills that they will be able to transfer to a variety of careers upon graduation. In order to avoid this element of recruitment campaigns becoming misleading, skills need to be not only made explicit in course design and curriculum, but also actually taught.

Surveys which have been conducted into why students choose to study history at university have shown that decisions are often made because students perceive history as a subject that will enhance their personal skills. Alan Booth's survey of 300 history students at Nottingham University, and 120 history students at Bath Spa University revealed that 86% of students chose history because they believed it would contribute to their 'personal development'. Only 3% of students said that career factors had been very important in their decision of degree subject, compared with 97% of respondents in a similar questionnaire directed to engineering students (Booth, 2000). These results are interesting when they are compared with the initial findings of the Enhancing Teaching-Learning (ETL) Project currently being conducted by Charles Anderson and Kate Day with first year Dundee University History students. When students were asked in a questionnaire what they hoped to get out of their time in higher education, they scored highly on statements that showed intrinsic rather than extrinsic aims. Typical statements showing intrinsic aims were:

- 'I want to develop the knowledge and skills I can use in a career.'
- 'I want to study the subject in depth by taking interesting and stimulating courses.'
- 'I hope the things I learn will help me to develop as a person and broaden my horizons.'
- 'I want to learn things which might let me help people, and/or make a difference in the world.'

Statements that illustrated extrinsic aims, such as:

- 'I mainly need the qualification to enable me to get a good job when I finish',

scored particularly lowly. In short, students who choose history may already have an interest in the subject which they hope will be deepened, but they also expect that studying history will provide them with the skills for study and beyond.

METHODS

History Departments that currently provide information on study skills to students use a number of different methods. Some institutions combine a number of these techniques. They can be divided into two broad categories:

1. Indirect

These methods can be defined as indirect because the take up of information is a matter of student choice, and because usually the teaching is left to non-historians:

- Many universities have specialist units offering different courses on study skills (see, for example, Dundee, Sheffield, South Bank Universities)
- Other universities have produced skills development materials and packages that are available commercially for departments or individuals to buy (for example, the Open University or Sheffield Hallam University). These supplement the growing body of textbooks that have been produced as student guides to study in higher education (see for example, Abbot, 1996; Black and Macraill, 1997; Cottrell, 1999; Drew and Bingham, 2001)
- But the most common method of relaying information about study skills within history departments remains by written communication. Information on essay writing, meeting deadlines, using the library etc. can be contained within course materials, departmental handbooks, or on the world-wide web. Students access this information when, and if they want (see, for example, Glasgow University).

2. Direct

These methods are more central to course design and delivery, all students are actively involved, and history staff tend to deliver the teaching:

- Study skills modules. For example, at Leicester University there is a compulsory first year module on study skills (called Historical Skills). Lectures are run jointly by members of the History department and the specialist Student Learning Unit. The exercises completed on this module are replicated in the assignments set in the more traditional History modules that run alongside the study skills module (for another example, see Nottingham University).
- Other universities run occasional skills days or workshops. For example, at Stirling University, each first year module begins with an 'Induction morning' which address specific learning issues, and offers 'surgeries' run by History staff in response to student needs (for another example see the Department of Scottish History, Edinburgh University, Hounsell, McCulloch and Scott, 1996).
- Another method of study skills teaching focuses upon student peer support. This can involve: (1) organising students into study pairs or groups in which they help each other, and for example, swap and compare pieces of written work; (2) the use of Blackboard or other interactive computer programmes to set up chat rooms, discussion points or question and answer sessions; or (3) a peer-mentoring approach, most recently trialled in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing at Bournemouth University. Here second year students were trained by staff members in study skills during workshops, and were then assigned groups of first year students for which they were expected to act as mentors, by offering guidance and advice to their more junior peers during study skills sessions (Durkin and Main, 2002).

FINDINGS

There are five main findings from this project:

1. The direct approaches to teaching study skills are generally regarded as the most successful from both the tutors' and students' point of view:

This is largely because of the problems that can be experienced with the indirect approaches:

- There is a danger that if the teaching of study skills is assigned solely to 'specialist units', that both students and teachers see study skills as 'remedial' or 'special needs'. But as this project has demonstrated, all students benefit from learning study skills.
- Specialist units usually only have the resources to offer courses in generic study skills which have relevance across the humanities or social sciences. But a significant amount of research has shown that the most successful courses are those that offer skills which are directly, and immediately applicable to the courses being taught (Booth, 2001; Cottrell, 2001; Vernon, 2002). It has long been recognised by educationalists that students prefer to 'learn by doing', and in this case this would mean learning study skills by practising history. This is being achieved in some institutions by combining skills modules with teaching about the development of history as a discipline (for example at Nottingham and Sheffield Hallam), and at others by using materials in study skills sessions that are directly relevant to the topics covered in the mainstream course (for example at Dundee). In these ways students are encouraged to engage with skills teaching because its delivery is integral to a history course content which they find intellectually motivating, demanding, and stimulating.
- If guidance about the skills needed for study is left to course information there is the risk that it is lost within the mass of other written data a student receives, and there is, of course, no guarantee that the information is ever read.
- This project also revealed that the direct approach was more successful because it involved teaching by historians. This sends a positive message to students as it shows that university teachers of history value study skills, and are prepared to devote time to teaching them.

2. Developmental or gradualist approaches to the teaching of study skills are preferable

This project was based on the misconception that the teaching and learning of study skills was a concern only for teachers of 1st year history at university. But:

- The list of study skills is so extensive that it is unrealistic to think that they can all be taught or learned in a single module or over one academic year.
- There are some study skills, for example of critical analysis in reading primary and secondary sources that are more advanced, and can be expected to take longer to acquire.
- There are sound intellectual / academic benefits to a degree programme that returns each year of study to discussion of study skills, so that the acquisition of skills is a cumulative or 'building block' process that runs through the degree programme. As such departments can foster a culture of learning which sees learning as an on-going, evolving process. For example, teachers can present themselves as also being learners of study skills. In this sense, the teaching and learning of study skills becomes important in the notion of 'life-long learning' (Cottrell, 2001).

3. Study skills modules need to be compulsory

If they are optional then they are poorly attended (Durkin and Main, 2002), and/or students who do attend are those who are the most anxious, but not necessarily those in most need of learning study skills.

But there can be a 'carrot' as well as a 'stick' approach to teaching study skills:

- Modules can be credit bearing.
- There can be the 'driving licence' approach. This is followed when students need to have completed the study skills module satisfactorily before they can proceed to other courses, or achieve the credits for them.
- They can carry other rewards. Durham, Essex and York Universities, for example, have Skills Awards Courses which are partly organised and run by employers. Student applicants for jobs are regarded in a favourable light by these employers if they have attained the Award. The possible disadvantage of this approach, however, may be that the courses may be directed more towards transferable skills than discipline specific skills, and that the student motivation for entry and completion of these courses may be career rather than study success.

4. The 'packaging' or 'presentation' of study skills modules is important

As one researcher has commented, a number of students arrive at university 'skilled to death' (Vernon, 2002). Many school teachers use the language of skills in their teaching, and there are Student Skills Guides which some school students complete as part of Higher History (Hillis). Hence it is very important that skills modules and guides at university level are given imaginative titles (certainly my own title of 'Study Guide and Workbook' would not be a model to follow here!), are presented in a lively way by committed staff, and that the content of such courses is distinguishable from any learning of study skills that may have preceded it. Staff need to be open to students about the fact that some may arrive at university feeling more experienced or confident about their study skills than others. To avoid these students finding elements of study skills modules uninteresting, or in the worst case scenario, patronising, courses can be presented as 'refreshers', and opportunities for 'revising', or gaining more 'advanced' research skills. For nearly all history students entering university there are new skills to be learned, in particular oral presentation skills, and using academic libraries and archives. The novelty of learning these skills can be particularly emphasised in teaching.

5. Student involvement in study skills modules from the outset is crucial

This gives students 'ownership' over their learning and a sense of achievement about what they learn. There are many ways to achieve this. Methods which are currently being used in history departments include questionnaires that ask students to diagnose their own study skills needs upon arrival at university, and periodically after that. Students are encouraged to set their own learning goals after the completion of these questionnaires (for example, Stirling University).

Encouraging this type of reflective learning is widely agreed to be good teaching and learning practice. Teaching in this way may help students to adapt from the more generally 'passive', and highly structured environment of learning some may have experienced at school, to university where they are expected to adopt a more 'active' and independent approach to study (Booth, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project has discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the various methods of teaching study skills. Its other aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of such options upon student performance.

There are so many factors that may affect student performance at university, from home environment to ability, that it is impossible to isolate the precise impact of teaching study skills. However, if one of the justifications for study skills programmes, as outlined above in the 'Rationale' of this project, is to provide a learning environment in which every student has the opportunity to participate fully, then there is evidence that study skills programmes are achieving their aims. The entrance qualifications and experiences of first year History students were compared with their performance on Module A of the Level 1 History Course. It is on this Module that study skills teaching is combined with the 'mainstream' History course. Charts 2 and 4 show those who failed Module A were in almost exactly the same proportions, in terms of entrance qualifications and experience of studying history, as those who entered the university. In other words, entrance qualifications and experience do not appear to be predictors of course performance. Given more time for this project, it would also be of interest to compare performance on Module A with the grades achieved for Scottish Highers and A Levels. But certainly a preliminary conclusion of the current project is that the teaching of study skills helps to contribute to the elimination of initial difference between students. As one student commented during an interview at Leicester University about the Historical Skills module, 'I suppose the whole idea of the course is to pull us all up to the same level.'

Many students recognise the benefits of study skills modules. Hence on the 2001-2002 Course Questionnaire only 9% of Dundee University Level 1 History students disagreed with the statement 'The Study Guide and Workbook helped me to improve my study skills'. Positive statements made during observation of the teaching of study skills during Level 1 tutorials, on evaluation pages in the Study Guide, and the Course Questionnaire included:

- 'Having never done History before now, the essays seemed really daunting. However, the exercises in this booklet have shown me exactly how to go about successfully completing them.'
- 'The workbook and study guide have been great to keep me on track!'
- 'The workbook was helpful and progressive.'
- 'The exercises (especially the essay marking exercise) was useful to work through.'
- 'Practical tasks (e.g. the Industrial City Exercise in the Workbook) were a great way of learning information and having fun.'

Several students commented upon how focus on study skills helped to increase their confidence, and that they found it reassuring that the staff in the Department were addressing study skills issues. During interviews with students taking the Historical Skills module at Leicester University, several remarked upon the value of frequent contact time with one member of staff in tutorials, and that they believed that in future years they would feel able to approach staff members about study skills concerns. Knowing that help was available within the Department was important to these students. These student experiences of increased self-confidence, and comments that reflected a growing sense of attachment and belonging to a Department which cared about teaching and learning, were also noted in the assessment of the study skills module at Nottingham University (Booth, 2001). It can be concluded that they are another positive outcome from the teaching and learning of study skills.

Lecturers and tutors find subsequent courses easier to teach because students by learning study skills have learnt to take responsibility for their own learning, and to adopt a reflective approach to their studies. In more practical terms, teachers do not have to repeat information about essay presentation, library skills etc. because they can assume that such material has been already covered.

But it is also clear that the introduction of study skills modules can be problematic for both students and staff. Sometimes the benefits of these courses are not immediately realised by students. This time lag combined with the compulsory nature of the courses can cause resentment. When the Guide was piloted at Dundee University for the first time in 2000-2001, the balance of assessments for Module A was not adjusted, and this caused widespread student complaint. Negative student comment included:

- 'I found the workbook a waste of time and it made the workload too much. Make it graded as the Industrial City Exercise was time consuming with no good result.'
- 'The workbook was useful, but the exercises just added to the workload.'
- 'Even though we complained, the workbook was a strength as it was quite useful.'

As a consequence of these experiences, the workload was adjusted in 2001-2002. The total number of assessments was reduced to allow students time to complete the exercises in the Study Guide, and the Industrial City Exercise now counts for 40% of the final mark for the Module. The more positive feedback from 2001-2002 questionnaires may suggest that we now have the right balance. Such problems of adjustment are not unique to Dundee University. At Leicester students complained that the Historical Skills module was compulsory, and at Nottingham, the initial balance between 'skills and intellectual challenge' was reconsidered after the first trial year (Booth, 2001).

From the staff point of view, some feel inadequately trained in the teaching of study skills, and others still believe that such teaching should not be part of their teaching profile. Some expressed concern about what teaching study skills modules would represent in terms of their workload. The initial setting up of these courses is undeniably time consuming. When many 1st year History courses are team-taught it has been found to be important that all staff members are kept well informed about the aims and objectives of study skills courses and what materials they are expected to use during their teaching. At Nottingham University there is a staff handout guide, and at Leicester University a comprehensive course guide for tutors which gives them a checklist of what to cover in each tutorial.

In the light of these conclusions, this project can make the following recommendations:

- History Departments in Universities should introduce compulsory study skills modules embedded within the History curriculum and taught, at least in part, by History lecturers and tutors.
- Study skills should continue to be taught throughout the degree programme.
- Learning how to teach study skills should be an important element of Staff Development and Training.
- Teachers of History at Universities should periodically visit local schools to observe teaching in progress, and talk to school teachers.
- In Scotland, Universities should support History school teachers in their defence of the essay as a form of assessment in Higher History. Neither Geography nor Modern Studies Highers now require lengthy written answers in their assessment. The result has been that History is now perceived as a 'difficult' subject, and the results for Higher History have been poorer than Geography and Modern Studies. Since the history essay is such an essential part of University assessment, and effective written communication a vital measure of the skills of the historian, University history staff should help history school teachers resist the pressure to reject the essay as a form of assessment. Without some experience of writing essays, the gap between expectations of study at school and university could become one that even university Study Skills Modules would find difficult to address.

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