Study skills and personal development

Skills in studying are necessary for effective learning. They are often thought of as a list of activities, such as note-taking and essay writing, which have to be mastered in order to cope with a range of tasks; but, it is suggested here, this is to view outward expressions as the essence of the studying process. Becoming a more effective learner is a developmental process which involves people as whole persons – as thinking, feeling and doing beings. This paper reflects on some features of the process of studying in higher education and skills required for it. It looks also at some implications for students and for those who seek to help them to become more effective learners.

Studying: a multi-dimensional process

Each student develops a unique path of learning which is influenced by factors both external to and within that person, which interact with one another and may change over time. For example, there are some situational factors which are peculiar to those who study at a distance. They have to learn, for instance, to study in a variety of environments designed to serve other purposes. Also, as they are isolated for most – if not all – of the time from fellow students and staff, and from external motivations supplied by daily organisational timetables and direct supervision, they need sufficient internal motivation to persist in studying with only limited feedback from outside. Course-related factors are another example of external influences, and these may affect study strategies of both distance and internal students. For example, there have been various investigations into the influence of study processes on course content, workloads, types of assessment, nature of learning tasks, quality of teaching, and so on.

Other studies have been made which take as their starting-points cognitive and emotional processes within the individual, and ways in which these may interact with one another and influence outward expression. For instance, it is possible to distinguish different educational orientations, a term which refers to the quality of the relationship which a student has with a course in terms of aims, values and purposes; and types of orientation, it has been found, influence approaches to studying and what is gained from it (Gibbs et al,

1984).[1] It has been discovered also that there are different conceptions of what counts as learning, and that these, like educational orientation, may change over time. For example, Perry (1970)[2] observed that there were intellectual and ethical developments in students as they moved through college. He identified nine stages, beginning with dualistic thinking – a belief that questions have right or wrong answers – at stage one, moving on in later stages to a recognition that relativism is the rule rather than the exception. Those who journey through to the final stage of development, he suggested, are willing to commit themselves to a personal interpretation derived from the evidence. It would seem, then, that students make sense of studying in different ways. However, at the same time, they have multiple realities within education, and, within any limitations which their conceptions may impose, are not necessarily consistent in their approach to different tasks and under different circumstances, for both inner and external factors play a part in the outcome (Gibbs et al, 1982;[3] Marton et al, 1984;[4] Richardson et al, 1987[5]).

Some writers have concentrated on the emotional dimension, and have examined its influence on approaches to learning. It appears that how students *feel* about the process of studying itself interacts with cognitive processes and practical expression. For example, Nelson-Jones (1982)[6] has found that students' feelings of adequacy – their sense of competence as learners – may over- or under-estimate actual competence in terms of past achievements, and that altering sense of competence may be the key to releasing external competence. Exploring new ideas, and being creative generally, are processes likely to be associated with pleasurable increased levels of arousal and excitement (Fontana, 1985).[7] Learning which goes beyond a shallow surface approach, however, may carry with it risks and uncertainties. It may be assimilated readily into the personal internal filing system, or it may perhaps affect central values and disturb deeply-held beliefs and attitudes. This is likely to lead to intellectual and emotional interplay and conflict which a student has to work through and resolve if the learning is to become fully part of his/her being; or possibly a student learns to live with the conflict, or, alternatively, represses it (More, 1974).[8]

These very brief comments are intended to show how investigations are revealing a complex inter-relationship between and among factors internal and external to students, and to explain why it is important to regard studying as a multi-dimensional process. In the course of the process of becoming a more effective learner, an individual may sometimes deem it important to concentrate on improving expertise at a practical level, such as learning to read at different speeds; at other times, the most pressing need may be to pay attention to skills at cognitive and emotional levels; and, at yet other times, it may well be that modifying external factors which are capable of being altered, such as perhaps place of study, takes priority. Coming to decisions about how to proceed is a skill in itself. It requires the development of awareness – that is, the ability to explore characteristics and processes within the self and in the situation in which the student finds him/herself, and then to reflect on, analyse, and understand personal responses to them. This information can be used to clarify a problem and then to choose a course of action, perhaps, when appropriate, after looking through relevant literature for new ideas, and/or discussion with other people. The results of choices are in turn evaluated, not only for outcomes springing directly from

them, but also because a change along one dimension may well have repercussions along other dimensions. Thus an experiential learning cycle develops (Jaques, 1984)[9].

In this way, the person who is becoming more effective as a learner is increasing his/her range of skills, is acquiring more flexibility and confidence in using them, and is sorting out a way forward which is appropriate for him/her. It may be described as the process of becoming more autonomous. Autonomy is not synonymous with studying in isolation, or with finding unaided all the answers to all problems which may arise. It means having the capacity and willingness to take responsibility for personal development.

Facilitating study skills: a multi-dimensional approach

What implications do these conceptions of learning have for those who offer help to people seeking to improve their skills in studying? A multi-dimensional approach is required to help with a multi-dimensional process. There are no universally applicable sets of rules which can be applied to the teaching of study skills any more than there are such rules which can be supplied to those who seek to improve these skills. Educational counsellors are influenced in their task, as are students in theirs, by many factors external and internal to themselves which interact and may change over time. For instance, course content and institutional factors, such as assessment requirements and workloads, have a bearing on the tasks of counsellors, as they do on those of students. Also contact may be on a one-to-one or group basis, and it may, for example, be face-to-face, by telephone, through correspondence, or by means of audio-tapes and video-tapes. It has been suggested that student learning may be influenced by the nature of the teaching, and, likewise, if a counsellor is student-centred, the way in which that person carries out the task of helping is influenced by the needs and resources students bring to the relationship. Similarly, internal beliefs, values and attitudes affect expressions in practice of those who facilitate learning, as they do of students. Counsellors have their own orientations towards their tasks, their own personal conceptions of learning, ways of coping with associated emotions, and so on. As with students, internal and external factors are inter-related in many complex patterns.

A flexible partnership

If these comments on skills in studying and on facilitating their development are regarded as valid, then a flexible working partnership between counsellor and students would seem to be both logical and necessary[10]. The students come to the counsellor for help, and the counsellor has knowledge, experience and skills to offer. But adult students come with their own resources, which they can share with others and on which they can build, as well as with their particular needs and queries, and a diversity of aims and purposes. It is not simply a case of counsellors giving and students receiving. As in a conversation, leadership in a flexible partnership passes backwards and forwards between both parties, and there is a sharing of power and control.

In such a partnership, a counsellor can facilitate learning not only by practising a variety of strategies and tactics but also by using as resources the nature of the relationship itself and his/her own qualities as a person. For instance, a counsellor who listens carefully to

students and explores with them and seeks to understand their thoughts, feelings and actions is demonstrating by example what it means to be a willing learner; and he/she can use the knowledge so gained to assist the students. This process may also help students to learn more about themselves, to accept and respect themselves, as the counsellor has done, and to develop confidence to explore and try out different skills. No counsellor is infallible. It is possible, for instance, to misinterpret a student's contribution, or not to know the answer to a question, but this too can be used to advantage. Openly admitting a mistake and taking appropriate action to remedy the situation can of itself help students to recognise that errors can act as stimuli and challenges to further development, and are not something to be ashamed of. Through processes such as these, it is possible for a lively, friendly and relaxed relationship to develop between counsellor and students, with psychological distance being brought to a minimum, even though it may not always be possible to minimise geographical distance.

An educational counsellor who offers a flexible working partnership provides opportunities for students to exercise autonomy, and also at the same time demonstrates autonomy. It is not possible for a counsellor to plan the course of such a relationship in detail in advance. As it unfolds, it is necessary to take decisions on appropriate strategies and tactics by weighing up relevant variables, then assessing how to proceed in the light of developments and the aims of both counsellor and students. A counsellor who plans for certainty and attempts to retain detailed control over the relationship – for instance, by spending all or most of the time passing on to students written or oral information – is not acting autonomously, but is depending on the students to accept his/her chosen content and structure. This denies the students an example of autonomous action. It also denies them opportunities to risk trying out different ways of studying and to make decisions for themselves within the framework of the helping relationship, in other words, opportunities to practise within the relationship what is expected of them when they have left it.

Concluding comment

These few remarks may serve to indicate that, in a flexible working partnership, not only what a counsellor does but also how it is done are important, and that facilitating the learning of others may demand much personal effort in practical, cognitive and emotional terms. Reflection by the counsellor on the relationship and on the part he/she is playing in it are a necessary part of this effort. Sharing the results of reflective insight with students, and comparing and clarifying perceptions, can be further ways of facilitating learning. Both counsellor and students are engaged in the process of building on resources and experiences.

The process of facilitating learning, like that of learning itself, embraces a whole panorama of tasks for which many skills are required. Both processes are open-ended and can never reach a stage of perfection at which there is nothing more to learn. The title of this paper is *Study skills and personal development*. The two are intimately inter-related. The principal theme underlying this article is that both are as much the concern of those who facilitate the development of skills in studying as they are of those who seek to learn how to study more effectively.

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