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How Learning Advisors Promote Significant Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines how learning advisors, through their work with students, help in the promotion of significant learning (or learning that is important enough to produce change in the learner). Using Fink's (2003) six categories of significant learning (i.e., foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn), examples are drawn from current and previously reported work of learning advisors in New Zealand to illustrate how the different facets of significant learning are addressed in the day-to-day provision of learning instruction and support. Possible future directions for enhancing the facilitation of significant learning at the tertiary level are discussed.

Introduction

In the last two decades, tertiary institutions in general have started to pay more attention to teaching and learning issues impacting on student academic performance. This development has come about largely because of internationalization and the increasingly globalized education environment in which we operate – where establishing a favourable profile and finding a competitive niche are imperative for institutions to survive. As Trowler and Bamber (2005, p. 81) noted, one of the purposes that the production of higher education teaching and learning policies serve is simply to enable those that produce them to say “Look, we are doing something!” There is also a current trend for government and other funding to be linked to ‘activities’ in this area. For example, in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education has clearly indicated during the past few years that tertiary funding in the near future will change to take greater account of student retention and completion. Further, the establishment of a government funded National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence in order to “promote and support effective teaching and learning across the entire tertiary sector in New Zealand” (Tertiary Education Commission, n.d.) is another example of government interest in teaching and learning issues.

Despite all the ‘talk’ about teaching and learning, there is a common tendency to lose sight of the students themselves and the learning that they undertake. Questions, for example, about the development of skills to enable students to take full advantage of the instructions they receive are rarely investigated. However, seeking answers to such questions are necessary if improvements in students’ actual study performance are to be achieved. Focusing only on teacher development, and neglecting the students who need to effectively learn from those teachers, is simply not adequate. Such inadequacy is underlined by the fact that “no direct causal relationship between lecturer training and student outcomes has been firmly established” (Trowler & Bamber, 2005, p. 82).

The work of tertiary learning advisors focuses on the development of skills to enable students to learn effectively – and thus achieve success in their studies. It is important to understand this work better as there are clear indications that such work in teaching and supporting students has a clearer and more

robust link to actual student outcomes (see, e.g., Acheson, 2006; Manalo, 2006; Manalo & Leader, 2007; Manalo, Wong-Toi, & Henning, 1996; Webb & McLean, 2002). In this paper, such work will be examined using Fink's (2003) framework of significant learning.

Significant learning

Fink (2003) described 'significant learning' as learning that produces some kind of lasting and important change in the learner's life. Fink elaborated on this notion by pointing out that significant learning produces one or more of the following benefits. It could enhance our experience of life through, for example, the enjoyment of art and music, or the development of a more meaningful philosophy of life. It could enable us to make greater contributions to the many communities we belong to, such as our family, our local community, our religion, our special interest groups, our country – and even the world. It could also prepare us for the world of work, so that we develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to succeed in our chosen fields of work.

Fink devised a taxonomy of significant learning which comprises six major categories: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. He based this taxonomy on his own observations and conversations with students and teachers. He also constructed the taxonomy partly to provide another way of describing learning – one that goes beyond the cognitive aspects of learning that Bloom's (1956) taxonomy provides (evaluation, synthesis, analysis, application, comprehension, and knowledge). The following section briefly outlines each of Fink's six categories.

Foundational knowledge

Fink's (2003) category of *foundational knowledge* combines remembering and understanding of information and ideas (which are two separate categories in Bloom's taxonomy, 1956). Fink stressed the need for students to have in their possession the necessary knowledge and understanding which form the basis upon which other kinds of learning can be established.

Application

Application (also a category in Bloom's, 1956, taxonomy) pertains to learning how to perform various kinds of skills, whether they be intellectual (e.g., critical, creative, practical thinking skills), physical (e.g., playing the piano), or social (e.g., effective communication). Fink (2003) pointed out that application learning is crucial because it enables other kinds of learning to be useful.

Integration

The third category of integration (which is synonymous to Bloom's, 1956, 'synthesis') occurs when students perceive meaningful connections between different things. These new connections learners perceive may be between different ideas, different realms of ideas, people, different realms of life (e.g., between school, work, and/or leisure life), or any combination of these. According to Fink (2003), integration provides intellectual power to learners.

Human dimension

Human dimension, the fourth in Fink's (2003) taxonomy, pertains to students learning something important about themselves and others. As a consequence, this kind of learning enables students to "function and interact more effectively" as they "discover the personal and social implications of what they have learned" (p. 31). Learning about the human dimension gives students new opportunities to better understand who they are and what they want to become. It also provides opportunities for understanding others, including how and why others behave the way they do – which is necessary for effective social interactions.

Caring

Caring refers to experiences whereby new feelings, interests or values are formed as a consequence of the learning that occurs. It incorporates both caring more about something or caring in a different way. According to Fink (2003), caring is important because it provides the energy necessary for

action – whether it be to learn more or to incorporate the new learning into our daily lives. Without the energy for learning that results from caring, “nothing significant happens” (p. 32).

Learning how to learn

The sixth and final category in Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning, learning how to learn, pertains to “students learning about the process of learning itself” (Fink, 2003, p. 32). It includes learning how to become a better and more effective student, how to engage in inquiry and find out more about a particular subject or topic, and how to effectively become self-directed learners. The value of this kind of learning lies in enabling students to continue learning “and to do so with greater effectiveness” (p. 32).

Learning advisors’ facilitation of significant learning

Ideally, the teaching and support work that tertiary learning advisors undertake with students ought to promote more lasting effects – in other words, such work should promote significant learning as Fink (2003) described it. This section examines the ways in which the work of learning advisors facilitates significant learning in students, and provides some examples of such work.

Foundational knowledge, which we usually conceptualise as the subject content – whether this be a particular procedure in chemistry or an important theme in an English novel – is usually dealt with in subject departments. This comprises knowledge that students need to demonstrate they can remember and understand in order to pass their courses. Most learning advisors would be quick to point out that they deal more with the ‘learning processes’ rather than such content. However, whilst learning advisors do not usually teach subject content in the same way that professors, lecturers, and tutors in subject departments do, many learning advisors teach and advise on methods that help enable more effective retention and understanding of the subject content. Doreen Hartnall, for example, presented a paper at the 2003 ATLAANZ Conference on the use of co-operative learning as a strategy to promote mathematics and statistics development (Hartnall, 2003). She described the use of a problem solving method in these co-operative learning situations to help students develop a deeper understanding of math concepts and procedures. This kind of work clearly contributes to the establishment of foundational knowledge.

Application pertains to how we use knowledge, and involves the development of new skills. When learning advisors teach and advise students how to manage the many complex and demanding aspects of their courses of study, they are in effect promoting application learning. For example, at the University of Auckland’s Student Learning Centre, an intensive preparatory course is offered in November each year to English as an Additional Language (EAL) students who are intending to undertake a thesis or dissertation in the following year (described in Manalo, 2006). The course deals with how to effectively manage the complex tasks of designing, conducting, and reporting a research project – something that most postgraduate students launching into thesis or dissertation research for the first time may have little experience in. It deals with writing issues, and examines potential problems and how to avoid and/or solve such problems. When learning advisors engage in this kind of work, they are assisting students to develop the application skills necessary to utilise knowledge they have gained through their courses of study.

When we achieve *integration* in our learning, we see and understand connections between different things. This includes interdisciplinary learning, the connections we make through learning communities, and insights we get about the relationships between our academic work and other areas of our life (e.g., personal, social, work). Tertiary learning advisors promote the establishment of these connections when they encourage students to reflect on their learning, when they facilitate effective group work, and when they provide mechanisms for students to teach and learn from each other.

For example, Nisarg Dey described a language exchange programme at the 2004 Communication Skills in University Education Conference (Dey, 2005). In the paper, she detailed how the programme provided a way for students with complementary language skills and needs to help each

other: for instance, a Japanese student who wants to improve her English language skills could be paired with a native English speaking student who is studying Japanese and wants to improve her skills in that language. Tutors of the programme match students, provide guidelines for mutually beneficial exchanges, and monitor the progress that students make. Through such work, learning advisors facilitate learning integration at a number of different levels. They facilitate connections between students, between study materials and use in real life settings, between the students' knowledge about their native language and corresponding aspects of the language they are learning, and so on.

The *human dimension* category of significant learning pertains to discovering the personal and/or social implications of what we learn. This includes, for example, understanding how and why others behave the way they do. The human dimension of learning is important because it enables more effective interactions with our own self as well as with others. A lot of the work that tertiary learning advisors carry out in advising students – whether it be about how they might effectively approach a lecturer to ask a question, or about how they might best conduct meetings with their research supervisors – facilitates this kind of learning. Nina Pelling and Tafili Utumapu-McBride presented a paper at the 2004 ATLAANZ Conference in which they dealt with the issue of breaking down barriers and empowering Maori and Pacific students at the tertiary level.

The work they described exemplifies the critical role of learning advisors in promoting the human dimension of learning. In their presentation, and the resulting paper (Pelling & Utumapu-McBride, 2005), they stressed the importance of the relationships between Maori and Pacific students and their teachers – and that understanding those relationships is a key to promoting their success.

The *caring* category of significant learning involves changes in feelings, interests and/or values – for example, changes that might occur in the way we feel about a subject and consequently wanting to find out more, enjoying coming to lectures, thinking about the subject matter more, and so on. It may entail caring more or differently about the subject being studied, about the ideas relating to that subject, about our own self and/or others, or even the process of learning involved. Jerry Hoffman's paper at the 2003 ATLAANZ Conference provided an example of how learning advisors have a potentially powerful effect on the extent to which students care about their studies. His paper described the impact of the individualised support provided by learning advisors on students' views about themselves, their courses of study, their institution, and so on (Hoffman, 2003).

Facilitating *learning how to learn* amongst students can be considered as core business as far as the work of tertiary learning advisors is concerned. Through orientation and other induction-type courses (e.g., O'Neill & Harker, 2003), learning advisors clarify for students the expectations associated with tertiary level study, the specific ways in which things work in their institutions (and sometimes in their particular area of study), and the major pitfalls to avoid. Through skills development workshops (see, e.g., Acheson, 2005; Manalo, Wong-Toi, & Henning, 1996), learning advisors explain and provide practice to students on how successful learning can be undertaken – including effective alternative strategies that students could use (e.g., alternative methods of notetaking from texts). Learning advisors also provide individual support (see, e.g., Morris, 2002; Olliver-Richardson & Bowker, 2003) and learning resources (such as handouts and guides) that can often turn a problematic situation for students (e.g., not knowing how to complete an assignment) into one where they feel they can manage (e.g., having a better understanding of the steps involved in successfully completing an assignment – including the one they are working on).

Considerations and implications for future research and practice

In the literature to date, there has been little explanation about *how* the work that tertiary learning advisors undertake impacts in significant and positive ways upon student learning. Examining such work through the theoretical and applied constructs of models like the one used here – Fink's (2003) taxonomy of significant learning – may be useful not only in helping learning advisors understand their own work, but also in helping others (e.g., subject discipline instructors, other tertiary level

service providers, institutional managers) understand and appreciate the value of such work. As noted earlier, working with students to enable them to take full advantage of the instructions they receive appears to have a clearer and more robust link to student outcomes, than a sole focus on lecturer training. However, for skills development to be firmly established as a central, indispensable component of institutional teaching and learning initiatives, the theoretical basis and practical value of such development need to be better understood. Promoting this understanding is crucial: for example, as Radloff (2006, citing earlier comments made by Webb, 2004) noted, those in senior management positions within tertiary institutions may have “little or no interest in supporting learning skills advisors and their work” (p. 13) as they do not understand the value and significance of such work in relation to the core business of running the institutions.

There are likely to be many other perspectives that could contribute towards this understanding – either through further exploration of the factors involved in significant learning (including related theories and models), or through different approaches to understanding the processes and resulting benefits involved in the provision of learning instruction and support at the tertiary level. This could involve for example, investigating the cognitive developmental processes involved, or the parallels with other support practices such as counselling.

As far as research in student skills development and significant learning is concerned, it would be beneficial to look into more efficacious ways of promoting all the different aspects of significant learning. For example, could tertiary learning advisors do anything more (or differently) to better promote *application* learning or the multi-faceted aspects of *caring* in learning? Reflections about, and investigations into, methods for more effective measurement (both quantitative and qualitative) and documentation of how significant learning is facilitated through the learning instruction and support that is provided would equally be important in future research in this area.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief exploration of one way of understanding tertiary learning advisor work. Examples of published descriptions of ATLAANZ members’ work were used to demonstrate how such work promotes all six of the major categories of significant learning (as portrayed by Fink, 2003). In the current tertiary education environment, where greater accountability about student academic performance is increasingly becoming an established requirement both within and of institutions, this kind of understanding is important at different levels. Learning advisors need to continue developing and promoting such understanding so that their work does not remain in the marginalised state that other authors (e.g., Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004; Radloff, 2006) have noted. Senior managers within tertiary institutions need to be open to such understanding so that they can in turn make appropriate and unbiased decisions about the establishment of learning environments that really do produce learning. And students need to gain a sufficient degree of such understanding to predispose them towards taking full advantage of the instruction and support that tertiary learning advisors provide.

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