

## *Do I Do This In My Own Time?*

# Using Induction Week to Maximize Student Engagement

Jane Williams  
University of Wales, Newport

*This study presents a project undertaken to address a potential problem in getting new students to engage with their academic life. In September 2009, a new course design was introduced into the BA (Hons) Education program at the University of Wales, Newport. The course team was keen to ensure this new development did not lead to a fragmentation of the new cohort, and wanted to develop an approach to aid the formation of a group identity early on. They decided to introduce a non-assessed group activity during induction week: the new cohort was given the task of creating a video guide to information literacy within the first four weeks of the course. The project resulted in the creation of video guides, and demonstrated that students engaged in a focused manner with a range of services and developed a level of awareness and familiarity to support them during their student life.*

## Introduction

There is a significant and growing body of research exploring the complex themes surrounding student engagement (Westlake, 2008). One of the areas identified as being fundamental to students' success is their experiences during induction week. Our study addresses the extent to which an induction week task enhanced student engagement as described in Chickering and Gamson's (1991) seven principles for good practice

in undergraduate teaching. From here, two distinct approaches to the induction week experience emerged: 1) a 'softly, softly' style which aims to gently introduce students into their new lifestyle; and 2) a style which is much more direct about getting students to work in an academic environment as soon as possible (Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2006). At the University of Wales, Newport, September 2009 saw a new development to the

BA (Hons) Education program with the introduction of a new course. This development acted as a catalyst for the course team to re-examine the philosophy and design of the existing induction week approach.

With the new program, four degree programs were created (Education, Early Years, Inclusion, and Education Studies). These consist of a variety of shared and program specific modules. Prior to this, all education students studied the same modules, and the course team felt that there was potential for this new organization to result in the cohort becoming fragmented, with the students from the four different programs only interacting with those in their area. The team felt that the promotion of cross-course links would be a useful precursor to the collaborative skills that education practitioners need in the workplace and as such decided to develop an intervention to try to prevent this situation from arising. Within the course design there were a number of specific approaches to highlight the importance of collaboration, including a compulsory module examining the challenges and benefits of working collaboratively; so the induction week task would be built upon throughout the course.

Taking inspiration from Chickering and Gamson's (1991) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate teaching and Brindley and Cuthbert's (1996) findings that introducing tasks during the earliest stages of university life encourage student enthusiasm, the team decided that a non-assessed group activity would be introduced during induction week. The task would be to create a video guide to information literacy which would give the group a meaningful reason to engage with University information services, link directly to their studies, and use a range of different skills.

## Method

The study used an action research approach, which focused on "finding a solution to a local problem in a local setting" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p.108), and entailed identifying the issue, undertaking and intervening, evaluating the outcome of the

intervention, and subsequently identifying the next steps. While this method is useful to the local setting, it must be noted that this can limit its generalisability.

## Procedures

As outlined above, the potential fragmentation of the new cohort of education students was identified as a concern so the course team decided an intervention that encouraged the group to work co-operatively could be a useful method to avoid this. However, it was also felt that giving the new group a 'traditional' academic task that would be assessed could be overwhelming so early in the course. Chickering and Gamson's (1991) work suggested that tasks which promoted active learning and respected diverse talents were useful in promoting student engagement. This led the team to develop the idea of using a creative task which would provide a range of roles and require a variety of talents. The team decided that the task should not have a written outcome, and should be different from the 'traditional' academic work that students engage in but should result in something that all the students could share. This focus resulted in the idea of producing videos. The University's Institute of Digital Learning was then approached, and worked collaboratively with the team to provide the technical input, hardware, and software needed to implement the task.

The task was introduced to the students during the welcome meeting on the first day of induction week. The whole of the new cohort, 44 in total, were asked to identify what they felt their strengths were. Prompts such as 'creative,' 'methodical,' and 'multi-tasking' were put up on the board to help them shape their responses. The students wrote their ideas onto Post-It notes. On the walls around the room posters were put up with titles of roles associated with film making (i.e., 'producer,' 'editor,' etc.) and the students were then asked to match their skills with these roles. This was followed by a discussion. At this point, the students were divided into groups of 10, each group consisting of students from different programs. The groups discussed what skills and roles were represented; each group had a representative spread

of skills. The groups then received the supporting information pack that the team devised, which clarified the rules that needed to be filled, outlined the timescale, suggested useful points of contact, and gave the schedule of taught sessions. This was devised according to Chickering and Gamson's (1991) principles to promote meaningful contact between the students and the faculty and develop co-operation between the students within a clear timeframe. It was also highlighted to the students that while there were aspects of the task that various personnel could help with, they needed to be prepared for the fact that there might be issues around working as a team that they would have to sort out themselves. This mirrored the potential situation they may face in their future professional lives.

The students were given four weeks to complete the task. During that time, they attended two sessions where they learned how to use the available hardware and software, but there were no formal sessions regarding content or organization. In the final session, the videos were shown to the group and the students then completed a questionnaire about their experience (Appendix).

The questionnaire was comprised of a range of open and closed questions, with an option for students to add their own comments or observations. The students were also asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a focus group about the process, but only one student agreed to this so that option was not viable; this could suggest a lack of engagement with the task or the associated process. The closed question responses from the questionnaires were analysed quantitatively, with qualitative data used to illustrate the responses wherever necessary. Following the completion of the task, the team held a meeting to discuss the intervention and its impact. The outcomes of these discussions and the questionnaire data are presented below.

## Results

The results are presented in relation to Chickering and Gamson's (1991) seven principles, which underpinned the study.

### Encourages contact between students and faculty

The questionnaire data showed that the students contacted academic, technical, and library staff as a direct result of the task. They also spoke with student mentors and existing students. This was mirrored in the feedback from the course team, who felt that the fact that the task was not assessed made the act of getting in contact less 'official' and as such students had been in touch with them, both face to face and via email.

### Develops reciprocity and co-operation between students

Eighty one percent of the group agreed that the task encouraged them to work with their fellow students, with 71% saying that they made connections more quickly than they would have if left to their own devices. Thirty five of the 44 students identified the ability to work together to solve problems as a strength of their group, and 17 said that they felt the chance to develop relationships with their peers was a strength. However, while recognizing that the task promoted the development of these connections, it was also apparent that some students did not necessarily enjoy this rapidity, as Student 39 writes, "it was awkward because no-one knew anyone." The difficulties associated with the groups were identified as the main weakness of the task, with issues such as getting everyone to attend meetings and managing time highlighted as problematic.

### Encourages active learning

All the students stated that they found information from a range of sources, including the internet, library leaflets, and other students, suggesting an active involvement with the process. The feedback from the team meeting also indicated that questions asked by year one students in lectures and tutorials demonstrated an understanding of the significance of reading and referencing that was higher than previous years, although this could not be directly attributed to the task.

### Gives prompt feedback

The feedback about the videos was given directly following the viewing and students said this was clear and prompt. Most of the group (39 out of 44) felt that the videos were good, with comments such as “funny” and “helpful.” The main criticisms were the length of one of the videos and the lack of professional finish.

### Emphasizes time on task

Ninety-five percent of the group found the information sheet provided in the initial session useful. The students felt that the time scale was clear and sufficient. Although the majority agreed that the timeframe outlined was suitable and useful, they felt that their ability to organize and manage the time was weak. This was illustrated at the end of the introductory session when one student asked “do we do this in our own time?” which suggested a lack of understanding about the independence needed for undergraduate study. Students’ feedback in the tutorial sessions indicated that doing the task highlighted the importance of time management skills. These aspects of independent learning that students had not fully comprehended before starting the course were an issue that the team had not considered when devising the task.

### Communicates high expectations

The fact that the videos were to be made available to the whole cohort was stressed from the start, and the student feedback showed that this resulted in positive peer pressure to do the best they could.

### Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

The vast majority of the cohort felt that they had a clear role and could evidence why they had been assigned it. Often this was directly linked to the strengths that they had identified in the initial session as shown by Student 32: “I felt my strength was creativity and organization so I was a set designer.” Forty of the 44 students identified this clarity and recognition of roles as a strength. A wide range of skills were identified, including information

and communication technology (ICT) ability, communication, social skills and organisation and every student was able to identify at least one new skill they had learnt.

## Conclusion

The results above show that the introduction of the task has had an impact on the cohort. Whilst there is no comparative data from other year groups it could be said that these initial indicators suggest the task has contributed to a clear and positive group identity within the cohort, and this is supported by the feedback from the team and by assessment, attendance and retention data. Whilst the catalyst for the intervention was the concern about student engagement the impact of the content of the videos on academic skills has been noticeable and this has helped students’ grades, which in turn has contributed to their positivity about their studies.

The evaluation of the study showed that while there were some evident benefits from introducing the task there were also some aspects that could have been done better. Most of these were organizational issues, for example, all of the students attended the sessions on using the hardware and software, though it may have been more efficient to deliver it to those members of the groups who were directly involved in these tasks. Also, more specific input about team working and time management would help to address the weaknesses identified. Overall this project has been successful in its aims and as such will be continued next year, with some of the students who were involved this year helping to deliver the input in order to try address the weaknesses identified in the evaluation.

## References

- Brindley, C. & Cuthbert, P. (1996). Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Student induction on an HND extension degree. In G. Wisker & S. Brown (Eds.), *Enabling student learning: Systems and strategies*. London: Kogan Page.

Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. (Eds.). (1991). *New directions for teaching and learning: Vol. 47. Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Blass.

Fitzgibbon, K. & Prior, J. (2006). Students early experiences and university interventions: A timeline to aid undergraduate student retention. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 8(3), 17027.

Leedy, P. & Ormrod, J. (2005). *Practical research, planning and design*. New Jersey: Pearson.

Westlake, C. (2008). Predicting student withdrawal: Examining the reasons through a preliminary literature review. *Newport CELT Journal*, 1, 29-33.

## Biography

Jane Williams (Ph.D.) is the programme leader for the BA (Hons) education programmes and has tutorial responsibility for first-year students at the University of Wales, Newport.

## Appendix

**University  
of Wales,  
Newport**  
Newport  
School of  
Education

**Prifysgol  
Cymru,  
Casnewydd**  
Ysgol Addysg  
Casnewydd

### **BA (Hons) Education LNA** **Information Literacy Video Task – Evaluation**

Over the past four weeks you have been involved in the production of an information literacy video. This questionnaire aims to find out what the strengths and weaknesses of this task were. The results will be used to evaluate the process and inform the BA (Hons) Education LNA team about which aspects were particularly useful or difficult. The responses will be anonymous, however, there may focus groups held to further discuss key issues and if you would like to be involved in these you will need to give your name at the end of the questionnaire.

Name of Course:

1. One of the aims of the task was to encourage new students to make contact with University staff and services. Which of the following staff / services have you been in contact with as part of this task (contact can be electronic or face to face)  
Tick as appropriate.
  - a. Tom Hadfield / IT support
  - b. Madeleine Rogerson / Library and Information Services
  - c. Kerry Bellamy / Student Advice Services
  - d. Rebecca Tucker - Student Mentor
  - e. Jane Williams / module leaders
2. List any other staff / services / people that you contacted
3. Where did you find out the information about referencing?
4. During the first session you were divided into groups and had to assign roles within the group. Was your role clear? Yes/No
5. What was your role and why were you given it?
6. What was the main strength of your group?
7. What was the main weakness?
8. How clear and helpful was the information sheet that you were given in the first session?
9. Do you think the time given to complete the task was sufficient? Yes/ No  
If no please say why

10. The task aimed to allow students to use their skills and talents to access new ways of learning. What skills and talents did you use?
11. What do you think of the finished videos?
12. Can you list 3 things that you found useful or interesting about the task, and 3 that you felt were challenging or problematic
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- 
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
13. Which of the following statements do you agree with? Tick all that apply.
- The task allowed me to access University services in a more focussed way.
  - The task was a waste of time.
  - The task encouraged me to work with my fellow students.
  - Having a task set in the first session was a surprise.
  - I enjoyed the task.
  - I think I will use the video to remind me about referencing through the year
  - I learned some new skills.
  - I didn't know what I was doing.
  - I didn't enjoy the task.
  - The task encouraged me to interact with the rest of the group more quickly than I would have if I had been left to my own devices.
14. Any other comments, observations or feedback

Thank you for your time and help.  
Jane Williams