The role of object-based learning in transferable skills development

JENNY MARIE

Abstract

This paper considers how object-based learning (OBL) can be used to complement reflective skills development systems, which are commonplace in UK universities. It describes how some UCL students had difficulty understanding the concept of such a system and in choosing skills to develop. We therefore began developing a series of OBL activities, which could be used to help students understand how the system should be used and to identify their skill strengths and weaknesses.

Introduction

The development of transferable skills has become a major issue in United Kingdom (UK) higher education in the past decade.[1] Many UK universities support skills development through electronic skill systems, which allow students to reflect on their skills, plan their development and record evidence of their skill levels. This paper will suggest that object-based learning (OBL) can provide a complementary aid to such systems through a discussion of the key skills/OBL project based at University College London (UCL).

Background to the project

UCL has had a paper proforma, which prompts students to think about their skills development, since the late 1990s. However, it recently decided to create an electronic key skills system, with the aim of encouraging the practice to spread more widely across the university. It is intended that both transition mentors[2] and personal tutors[3] will support the system. A paper version of the system was piloted in 2008/2009 in eight academic departments (archaeology, biological sciences, civil, environmental & geomatic engineering, Dutch, economics, English, mathematics and science & technology studies). During the pilot it became apparent that students found it hard to select skill areas to develop and that they did not necessarily understand the purpose of reflecting on their skills. These findings prompted the formation of the UCL key skills/OBL project, comprised of Helen Chatterjee (Director of Studies for Biological Sciences and Deputy Director, UCL Museums & Collections), Celine West (Head of Learning and Access, UCL Museums & Collections), Hayley Noakes (UCL Transitions Programme) and myself (UCL Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching). Helen Chatterjee and Celine West advised on the OBL side of the project, Hayley Noakes on working with transition mentors and I advised on the key skills side. The project was funded by the UCL Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching. Before looking at the project in more depth, I wish to first consider how skills are developed.

The development of skills

A skill is an ability to do something, such as play the piano or work productively in a group. Skill development occurs through the process of learning from experience, which is modeled by the Kolb learning cycle (and see DUHS 2010).

---

[1] As evidenced by the Dearing and Roberts reports (THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION 1997; ROBERTS 2002).

[2] UCL has a system whereby second and third year undergraduates are recruited and trained to give first year students help and advice during their first term (for further details see www.ucl.ac.uk/transition/student-mentoring, accessed March 30, 2009). These students are termed 'transition mentors' because it is intended that they aid the process of making the transition from school to university.

[3] The system of personal tutoring is widespread in the UK. Personal tutors are responsible for the pastoral care of students and in many instances they hold an overview of the students' academic progress and thus also undertake some academic tutoring.

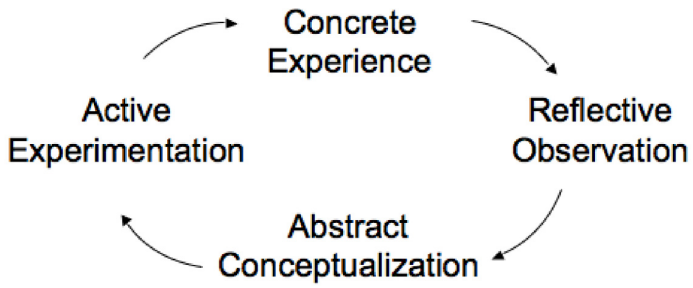

Fig. 1 - Kolb learning cycle (KOLB 1984, 42)

David Kolb argued that our senses provide concrete knowledge of an experience. If we reflect on that concrete knowledge we can transform it into a concept about what happened and why. To test the theory we must actively experiment, which in turn will create another concrete experience. To develop our skills, we must therefore do something and reflect on it to come up with an idea as to how we can do it better. We must then try this out and reflect on the results to see if our idea was correct and what else we can improve.

Transferable skills, such as listening, interpersonal communication and teamwork underlie most activities. Undergraduate students practice these skills everyday in both their normal academic work and extra-curricular activities. What they may not do is reflect on what these activities tell them about their skill levels and how they could develop them. UK universities have therefore focused on supporting the reflective part of the learning cycle.

The difficulty arises when students fail to see the link between this abstract reflection and the realities of everyday life. Feedback on UCL's pilot suggested that students found it hard to select skills to develop and they could not understand why they were being asked to reflect on their skills: they would much prefer to be offered workshops. Students did not recognize that the system was intended to support learning from what they already do rather than being a complete teaching tool in itself. A solution to this seemed to be modeling how the system should interact with everyday activities and demonstrating how reflection on these activities could reveal areas of weakness, which they may wish to consider developing further. We therefore set about creating loan boxes and activities for students to use in combination with the key skills system as an exemplar of how it could aid their development.

Project progress

So far the UCL OBL/key skills project has created two loan boxes and five activities that are intended to be relevant to any undergraduate student. The activities are:

1. *Mystery object handling*: groups of students try to work out what different objects are by handling them, discussing and asking questions about them.
2. *Describing and drawing objects*: students work in pairs. One describes the object to the other who cannot see it and the other tries to draw it from the description.
3. *Contentious issues*: groups of students debate an issue related to a set of objects. For example, "Museum objects should be kept locked away to preserve them for future generations, not taken out and handled in the name of a 'good experience' ".
4. *Creating a questionnaire:* students work individually to create a questionnaire of approximately ten questions regarding a set of objects. They then ask each other to fill in the questionnaires, analyze the results and present these to the group.
5. *Writing and drawing a story:* students choose an object from the loan box and write a short children's story about it, illustrating it if they wish. They then share the stories.

We tested the activities with a focus group of six transition mentors, who we hope will run the tasks with their mentees. They all either commented that the objects were interesting or that they were a good range of objects from various disciplines. Of the three activities we trialed, there was a consensus that the drawing task was most enjoyable, then the mystery object handling task, with the writing and drawing a story task being the least enjoyable. They stated that they became frustrated with the story writing task because they wanted to discuss the objects.

Five of the mentors said it was a good way to develop transferable skills. The other one was concerned that students would only engage if they already wanted to develop their skills. Most thought it was important to develop their transferable skills but that it was important to make the relevance of the activities obvious, possibly by linking them to the group's discipline.

The mentors also emphasized the importance of keeping the exercise fun. They found the recording side less enjoyable and worried that this may not occur in a voluntary session. For the same reason they thought the session should not be labeled 'transferable skills' but equally they did not know what object-based learning was. They also told us the exercises helped them to understand what some of the skills were. However, if they were to run the sessions they would require training first.

Having analyzed the feedback from this focus group, we intend to refine the activities we have and to further test them with other groups. We also want to work with academic staff to develop discipline-specific loan boxes and activities, so that students can see the relevance of the activities.

Conclusion

OBL can offer a way into transferable skills development for students. They have many opportunities to practice their skills and so many UK universities, including UCL, have focused on supporting the reflective part of the skills development process. However, our piloting of a reflective skills system suggests that students do not find it easy to understand the purpose of such a system nor to identify which skill(s) to develop. OBL offers an enjoyable way to model how activities should be reflected upon and recorded in a skills system.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Celine West, Helen Chatterjee and Hayley Noakes for their hard work on the project. I would also like to thank CALT, for supporting this project with an academic development grant, and all the members of the key skills working group, key skills project board and personal tutoring project board, whose work made the piloting of a transferable skills system possible. Finally, my thanks go to Helen Chatterjee and Jack Ashby for organizing the OBL day at UCL, where this paper was first presented.

Literature cited

DUHS, R. 2010. Learning from university museums and collections in higher education: University College London (UCL). *University Museums and Collections Journal* 3, 183–186.

KOLB, D. 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION 1997. *Report of the National Committee*. www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/ (accessed March 30, 2009).

ROBERTS, G. 2002. *SET for success: The supply of people with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills*. www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/ent_res_roberts.htm (accessed March 30, 2009).

UCL's Transition Mentor Program. www.ucl.ac.uk/transition/student-mentoring (accessed March 30, 2009).

Contact

Dr Jenny Marie
Senior Teaching Fellow
Address: Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, University College London, 1–19 Torrington Place, London, WC1E 7HB, United Kingdom
E-mail: j.marie(at)ucl.ac.uk
www.ucl.ac.uk/calt