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## **Developing “*SotonSmartSkills*”: A Reflection on Scaffolded Independent Learning Programmes**

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### **Abstract**

By focussing on the physical and virtual space of a Language Resources Centre and the development of a wide set of digital literacies skills, this article discusses the *SotonSmartSkills* (Mar-Molinero & Lewis, 2014) programme developed at the University of Southampton, UK. Through a wide range of scaffolded courses designed to support the transition to the learner autonomy required of students in Higher Education, the programme equips students with skills, strategies, techniques and tools vital for success in their language learning (for international students) and more generally, in their academic achievement and professional life. In this paper we illustrate this initiative with the specific example of an integrated *SotonSmartSkills* module on our Pre-Sessional English programmes

*Keywords:* Language Resources Centre (LRC), independent learning, flipped learning, learner autonomy, digital literacies

In recent years the importance of the role of independent learning (IL) (Race, 2002) with its emphasis on student-centredness has been recognised as an integral part of higher education programmes. However, many of our students, both home and international, struggle with the transition to learner autonomy. Within the department of Modern Languages at the University of Southampton (UoS), based in the Language Resources Centre, we have developed “*SotonSmartSkills*” (SSS) (Mar-Molinero & Lewis, 2014), a wide range of modules, with both compulsory and non-compulsory elements, delivered in both virtual and physical spaces. Designed to support this transition to higher education and equip cohorts of students with skills, strategies, techniques and tools, *SSS* is vital to student success in not only their language learning but in their academic achievement and professional life.

### ***SotonSmartSkills for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Pre-Sessional Programmes***

For the purpose of this paper we will consider a module<sup>1</sup> within our Pre-Sessional EAP programme. From June to September a cohort of approximately 1300 students, predominately from East Asia, follow modules in *SSS* as well as in reading, writing, listening and speaking. Below we will discuss the elements that make up this module, its pedagogical underpinning, and reflect on the experience to date.

#### ***The Language Resources Centre (LRC) as the heart of a conceptual space***

The focal point of the *SSS* module is the physical space of the Language Resources Centre (LRC). *SSS* was developed at UoS to bring together and update the ethos physically created by the LRC in terms of language learning and autonomy. An LRC encompasses a variety of “resources (materials, activities and support) [...] that accommodate learners of different levels, styles and with different goals and interests” (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001, p. 25) with the aim of supporting and encouraging learner autonomy. For this reason, an LRC can be considered as the hub or “nexus of practice” (Scollon, 2001) where all forms of IL and language learning actions and interactions converge. Indeed, environment, meaning and interaction, are considered important pedagogical elements of constructivist theory (Waring & Evans, 2015, p. 55)<sup>2</sup> which underpin our approach. According to Evans (2015) “individuals process information in different ways” and an understanding of this fact has been vitally important to us as learners, teachers, and researchers. The Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy (PLSP) (Evans & Waring, 2009; 2014) was developed to support awareness of the role of cognitive styles in learning, and importantly to demonstrate pragmatic ways in which this knowledge could be used effectively in teaching. The research and practice-informed PLSP was specifically designed to support student and teacher/lecturer agency and empowerment in learning. Comprehending how to incorporate an understanding of cognitive styles (how we process information) into pedagogical practice is essential within 21st century learning environments if we are to support learners to become effective self-regulators throughout their lives. Fundamentally, the PLSP is an example of a culturally inclusive pedagogy in that it

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<sup>1</sup> At UoS a module is a 12-week long credit-bearing course contributing to the overall programme.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these theories, see Evans’s report outlining the Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy (PLSP) (Evans, 2015)

uses the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of diverse learners and builds a pedagogy incorporating this awareness of individual differences with the intention of ensuring that all learners have access to learning and teaching environments. The actions that take place in our LRC space ascribe the ‘meaning’ that creates the LRC’s identity as the foci for language learning and autonomous practices whether as a physical or virtual place (Creswell, 2004; Massey, 2005; Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014).

### ***The SotonSmartSkills structure***

The SSS module is a combination of compulsory (see Appendix 1) and non-compulsory elements. Together with the physical context of the LRC, advancements in technology have created new virtual spaces that enhance and promote learner autonomy (Watson & White, 2012). The compulsory elements of the module are delivered through a flipped learning environment hosted on an online platform where students use interactive vidcasts (video lectures) filmed in the LRC, podcasts and interactive quizzes to achieve Learning Objects, on weekly topics such as motivation, digital literacies, or concepts of IL for language learners. This prepares them for the related seminar workshop sessions with an Independent Learning Facilitator (ILF). Also on this platform, students write or record reflective blogs or vlogs of their learning experiences. Students also attend regular compulsory language advising sessions, either face-to-face in the LRC or via Skype with their ILF.

The non-compulsory elements, some of which take place in the LRC, encourage students to take further responsibility for their learning and to effectively engage with learner autonomy. By choosing to attend, for example, further language advising sessions, specific skills workshops, language cafés (an informal discussion language group), British culture seminars and other activities suited to their individual needs, students gradually form the habit and reflect on the benefits of autonomous practices.

### ***A Scaffolded approach to learning***

The working concept of IL used to design this module is defined by Race (1996) as a process in which a student is equipped with the tools, techniques, and strategies which over time empower an individual to learn for themselves (see also, Broad, 2006). The module is underpinned by Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the Zone

of Proximal Development (ZPD) and also the pedagogical concept of scaffolding the learning process (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The module is scaffolded to support, develop and give the students opportunities to adapt to a different set of educational expectations in a new learning environment and culture.

Scaffolding is reflected in the module's learning aims. These aims acknowledge "the range of cultural contexts that an individual inhabits impacts on the individual use and development of styles" (Waring & Evans, 2015, p. 93) and that development of learner autonomy is about better awareness of their cognitive styles which allow more informed decisions to be made in relation to the students' learning and development (Waring & Evans, 2015). Some of the scaffolded elements delivered in the LRC include: support in how to use, access and find resources in the LRC both physically and virtually (including virtual and physical orientation briefings); how to find appropriate resources for student learning needs and abilities; how to use and work with a large variety of virtual resources, and signposting to non compulsory support sessions.

### ***Pedagogical integration of flipped learning***

Another integral aspect of the module design is the pedagogical integration of flipped learning, i.e, "a pedagogical model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of the course are reversed" (Educause, 2012, p. 1). Flipped learning was employed for various reasons in relation to promoting learner autonomy, individualisation, motivation and developing a transferable skills set. Moreover, technological functionalities can present the learner with a range of "eligible alternatives" and flexibility to enhance their learning (Wall 2003, pp. 307-8. as cited in Hamilton, 2014, p. 3). Providing access to this range of resources is important because it "ensures principles of enriched styles pedagogies are fully integrated into the curriculum" (Waring & Evans, 2015) and students therefore have access to this flexibility, variety and range of resources from the start of the module in order to promote and scaffold IL.

Flipped learning is also employed so as to meet the needs of the students. Using students' prior knowledge of IT creates a more student-centred learning environment as it integrates the learning histories of the students with new concepts (Waring & Evans, 2015). Yet, importantly there is an understanding placed on the fact that students may not have the skills to use these tools for educational purposes.

Therefore, flipped learning is used to scaffold the module framework. Laurillard (2012) argues that the role of the educator has changed shape but has not been replaced by a proliferation of education technology, as some academics suggested as far back as 1973 (Illich, 1973). The Internet hosts information but does not scaffold and support learning, or teach (Laurillard, 2012). This further highlights the educator's role in relation to the development of high-level cognition skills and the ability to be proficient self-regulators, as these are the same skills the knowledge society requires (Laurillard, 2012).

### ***Threading prior knowledge through to future learning with digital literacies***

**Vidcasting.** Prior knowledge is utilised to scaffold the module by using vidcasts within the flipped learning environment. Vidcasts are used in the module to reflect the students as *YouTube* generation learners, where skills are gained by watching videos. This allows student support and development in an environment that they are familiar with. The content of the vidcasts is created for the student to watch, and interact with, in preparation for the workshops. Therefore, the student builds prior knowledge of the topic before the session, reflects and brings questions to be discussed in the workshops.

Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) observe that “flexible, autonomous, lifelong learning is essential to success in the age of information” (p. 176). Waring and Evans (2015) emphasise that pedagogical decisions should be made not only to encourage students' understanding of a specific context but also to be more generalisable in the future. Therefore, students are made aware of, and guided in, the adaptability of the educational digital literacy skill sets incorporated into the module, and encouraged and facilitated to consider how such “integrated pedagogies” will benefit them “beyond the immediate learning context” (Allcock & Hulme, 2010, as cited in Waring & Evans, 2015, Table 11.1).

**Vlogging and blogging.** Blogs and vlogs are embedded in our curriculum and act as tools during the module for reflective and critical thought. Students engage by reflecting on their learning journey and development in their blogs and vlogs. They also have the option to create ePortfolios of their academic interests for networking purposes later on in the course, which promotes the transferability of the skills set they acquired when initially creating their blogs or vlogs. During this module, vlogs

and blogs allow the student to take ownership and to publish their work within a safe and private environment and to understand how they may be used in the future. Waring and Evans (2015) highlight the importance of student ‘voice and choice’ in terms of nurturing autonomy. Students are encouraged to revisit their blogs and vlogs to assess their own development during the course. At the beginning of the module, blogs and vlogs are private between ILFs and students, but during the module, as the student develops, they have the choice and ability to increase their audience if and when they are ready. This allows the student to make decisions on and as “co-designers” of their learning (Waring & Evans, 2015).

### **Reflections on Work in Progress**

Because of the intense nature of the Pre-Sessional programme, a common problem that we find is that students do not have the time to reflect whilst actively practising many of the skills that are in the module. The focus for the student is on ‘passing’ the EAP programme and at times, without experience of the wider university environment’s expectations of IL, we have observed that students find it difficult to grasp concepts that are suggested in the module. They often comment later that only once they are taking their substantive degree programmes and have been faced with these challenges do they begin to understand the importance of the SSS in relation to their future studies and success.

To avoid the problem raised above, we employ various strategies. For instance, we have employed a peer-to-peer learning scheme where a variety of graduates and postgraduate students who have been through this transition first hand are recruited and trained as ILFs, to work with students one-to-one and in workshop sessions. Additionally, on other SSS modules we have been piloting, we include guest Q&A sessions from students who have experienced the same process. These sessions are also recorded and placed online. It is hoped that these initiatives will help to support learners to integrate into communities of practice and that through peer learning or “shared action and discussion with more experienced learners” (Waring & Evans, 2015, Table 11.1). Students on the module will be encouraged to develop “cognitive insights about teaching elements” (Waring & Evans, 2015).

Recently we have begun to collate data so as to research the effectiveness of the module. A mixture of data collection methods was employed for a pilot study, which was examined to arrive at preliminary findings toward attitudes and changes in learning over the eleven weeks and the progress of our students. This is arrived at by comparing the first assessments in the students' first week used to attain a map of language levels, quantitative and qualitative data collected during the 11 weeks (importantly this includes non-compulsory elements), and the students' grades in their final assessments overall for the programme. A significant statistical correlation appears between the students who first choose to attend non-compulsory elements of the course, and then those who continue to attend these, as shown in their grades and learning in general indicating a greater improvement than those students who did not attend the non-compulsory elements. However, until we have conducted further research, we cannot be sure that this is not only to do with general maturation. We refer to the improvement gained through proactive engagement as "protonomy" (Lewis & Mar-Molinero, 2014) or pro active autonomy, as the student begins to recognise the benefits of autonomous practices and proactively applies the skills, techniques and strategies learnt in the SSS module to meet academic expectations.

### **Looking to the Future: Some Suggestions and Advice**

In recent months the physical space of the LRC at the UoS has undergone a radical change and has been physically incorporated into the library. This is the second phase of changes as the 'ownership' of the LRC was moved from the Modern Languages academic department to the library professional services structure in 2013. The new space has been renamed as the "Library and Learning Commons" and redesigned to reflect the integration of the general library space. Alongside this, the Language Resources Manager role has also been split into two positions: the "Library & Learning Commons Manager" and "Academic Engagement Librarian for Modern Languages". As this is the first academic year of these changes we are yet to be able to comment fully on the outcomes of these changes.

However, in the light of these changes various questions must be raised. Firstly, in relation to the SSS modules the impact of any such changes must be carefully monitored. In addition, deeper pedagogical questions related to the LRC and learner autonomy in language learning must be considered. In respect of the



integrated pedagogy, questions such as: have the students' perceptions of the use of library versus language learning spaces changed?; will the actions that were ascribed when creating the LRC space change?, and what effect will this have on the *SSS* module? Further questions must be considered with the changes to the LRC managerial role as the literature shows this role to be far more complex than other librarian managerial roles (See Ciel Language Support Network, 2000; Gardner & Miller, 1997, 1999; Lonergan, 1994). We have yet to see what the outcome of removing much of the physical foundation of the autonomous language learning structure and thereby creating fundamental changes will have overall on *SotonSmartSkills*. Institutions looking to implement similar restructuring as that taking place in UoS might be advised to do this in careful conjunction with stakeholders who design and implement the curriculum which is based on the LRC space for pedagogical reasons.

Nonetheless despite the challenges facing us with the uncertainty over the future of the LRC space, we continue to endorse and recommend the successful and effective aspects of *SSS*, and would offer the following recommendations for anyone developing a similar programme:

- flipping aspects of the course to allow for more reflection/discussion in sessions,
- using videos and other formats that students are familiar with,
- providing appropriate scaffolding for the activities, and
- employing ILFs with first hand experience of the transition to more autonomous learning environment.

### **Notes on the contributors**

Vanessa Mar-Molinero is senior teaching fellow and assistant director of Pre-session English Programmes at the University of Southampton, UK. She is the coordinator for Independent Learning in the Faculty of Humanities. Vanessa is co-founder and co-director of the *SotonSmartSkills* hub. She specialises in innovation in digital literacies for education and learner autonomy. She is particularly interested in the interaction between cultural theories and the advancement of learner autonomy pedagogy having studied an MA in transnational studies. She has published and given conference papers and training sessions on these topics.

Christian Lewis is a language teaching fellow at the University of Southampton, UK. He is presently coordinating learner autonomy modules on several in-sessional English language programmes and is a course leader on the summer Pre-sessional. He also regularly leads training sessions for the University Graduate School. He completed an MSc in computing and is especially interested in the application of digital tools and pedagogies to enhance student engagement. With a background in project management, he specialises in planning, time-management, and motivation. His other academic interests include behaviour and motivation. He is a co-founder and co-director of the University's *SmartSkills* hub.

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Appendix 1

Pre-Sessional Programme 2015  
Independent Learning Module  
Syllabus Overview

Week	Session Overview
1	Introduction to Independent Learning
2	Applied Project Management: Time, Practical Planning and Risk
3	Critical Thinking and Analytical Strategies and Motivation
4	Practical Researching Skills
5	Academic Problem Solving: Feedback and Reflection, and Practical Applications
6	The Essential Tools for Referencing
7	Consolidating Knowledge and Examination Strategies
8	Opportunities for Enhancing the University Experience and Employability (Part 2)

Pre-sessional Course A 2015: Independent Learning Syllabus  
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