

Literacies for learning

How can we avoid swamping or spoon-feeding our students?

According to a recent study, it seems everyone is aware of the danger of swamping students with too much to read. Interviews with both staff and students revealed for example, how neither anticipated that students would read the large amount of induction materials they are routinely given at the start of their courses – materials designed to help them understand processes and procedures and identify sources of help. Tutors felt that students may not be able to navigate such large amounts of text, and students said that they didn't read the documents because they were unclear how they were useful or relevant and because they didn't like the tone, style and language used.

To help students, subject tutors said that they tried to simplify their teaching and assessment documents, although they considered this approach unsatisfactory 'spoon-feeding'. But simplified handouts often tended towards presenting students with a bulleted text, which had the effect of decontextualising the material being presented – sometimes to the extent that the content of the document lost substantive meaning. The researchers found that students as a result rarely engaged with extended texts, thereby limiting possible attainment. So is there a better approach?

During the final phase of their research, the researchers found a number of innovative approaches being developed. In the course of developing these interventions, tutors often adopted tactics that seem very familiar – but what was different about them was the way in which the interventions were understood, discussed with students, and viewed by tutors.

One approach involved using mind-maps as a way of developing the note-taking skills of students. What was different and novel about it was the extent to which tutors offered this device to students in a variety of forms, leaving it up to the student to decide which was best. The tutors introduced the technique as a practice that students might adopt to assist their understanding and which would help their personal development. They took a view that was genuinely empowering and student-centred in that it gave the students real choice and control over how they used (or didn't use) the technique. Importantly, the approach began with the tutor valuing the students' existing practices or preferred ways of learning. Students were then encouraged to translate the technique into forms that made sense in the context of their own practices and learning.

How would you do things differently?

You might like to discuss with your colleagues different ways of responding to this scenario.

In the course of a construction exercise, a group of students was presented with a detailed set of instructions and drawings to work from. The instructions were given in fairly dense blocks of text and included a great many technical terms. Almost immediately, one student commented that the instructions were 'boring'. Whilst the students completed the task, the tutor had to step in from time to time, to explain aspects of it and help translate some of the technical terminology. The tutor reminded all the students that they had been given a glossary of terms at the beginning of the course and asked them to go back after the class and make sure they understood them all. One student complained that the proper terms were rarely used in the placement he worked in. At the end of the class, the tutor reminded all the students that they would have to sit a written test in a few weeks time and that it was important they read over the handouts. But at the end of the session, the tutor found more than half the handouts had been left behind.

Evidence source

Edwards, R. & Smith, J. (2005) Swamping and Spoonfeeding: literacies for learning in Further Education, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 57 (1) pp. 47 – 60. Available at:

www.tlrp.org/dspace/retrieve/1306/Swamping+and+Spoonfeeding.doc