

PTAS RESEARCH SUMMARY: DISCOVERING DEVELOPMENT

Background

Competence in research design, methods and analysis is essential to the discipline of psychology, and at postgraduate level students are expected to engage with research at a sophisticated level, demonstrating knowledge of the philosophy of research paradigms, critical awareness of research approaches, and ability to engage in the design and execution of empirical research. Within the Section of Clinical Psychology a range of postgraduate Masters programmes have been recently developed. These postgraduate programmes and their students have some specific features that are pertinent to the design of research courses:

- The programmes are intended for psychology graduates and mental health practitioners from a range of academic backgrounds. A baseline level of research skill can be assumed within psychology graduates (Reese, Forbes & Kubler, 2007) but is not necessarily the case for students from other academic/professional training backgrounds
- Students may be part-time, are not always based in Edinburgh, and some courses are delivered partly or wholly online
- Students need access to research teaching at different times of the year, depending upon their baseline skills and knowledge, and the demands of their programme of study
- The programmes all have a child and adolescent focus, meaning that classic research methods cannot be applied without some reappraisal and modification

These factors led the team to identify the need for an online teaching resource that allowed students with different pre-existing levels of knowledge to access child and adolescent focused research learning asynchronously. Initial investigation of online and blended research methods teaching and resources both within the university and the wider academic community has revealed a multitude of pedagogical approaches and technological options. The team sought to develop a resource that facilitated engagement and learning, ultimately producing confidence and competence in postgraduate students' research practice.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project was to design and evaluate one module/course as a pilot for the overall development of a set of online interactive learning resources for psychological research methods and statistics.

Discovering Development will be delivered as part of the MSc Applied Psychology with Children and Young People, and the MSc in Children and Young People's Mental Health and Psychological Practice.

Discovering Development should meet the following objectives:

- Engage students in conceptualising research from a number of different angles (e.g. philosophical, political, scientific, pragmatic)
- Engage students in active learning by using problem-based learning to test out theoretical concepts and decision-making issues in research design
- Facilitate translation of academic learning to real-life by using experiential learning (e.g. developing own research proposal through different modules)
- Provide students with tutor access and a sense of community without being overly time-intensive for tutors

- Make use of platforms and software that are compatible with existing university resources, and are accessible from NHS computers, where possible
- Uses online tools that allow interactive, creative and fun approaches to learning

The pilot module would attempt to meet these objectives and provide a template for further resources that would ultimately comprise Discovering Development.

Outcomes

We met our aims, and exceeded them, by developing an entire 20-credit, SCQF Level 11, course was developed in BlackBoard Learn. The course was developed by a team including three academics, an elearning developer and two PhD students, and was informed by a reference group of current MSc students who tested elements of the course and gave feedback on the work of the team.

The course was approved for delivery by the School Board of Studies in March 2014, and delivered to the MSc in Children and Young People's Mental Health and Psychological Practice in September 2014. This initial delivery (pilot phase) informed a number of improvements, carried out over summer 2015, prior to a second delivery in September 2015, including students on a third MSc programme (MSc Psychology of Mental Health (Conversion)). A further expansion to its delivery is planned for 2016-17 to include the MSc in Applied Psychology (Healthcare). The course currently caters to 81 students.

In the first round of feedback, students felt the course had prepared them for their dissertation, and that the assignments were highly relevant. Some students expressed a wish for classroom-based learning experiences to augment the online experience. This has been reflected in other online courses delivered within the MSc programmes in the past, although we see it diminishing year-on-year, suggesting that students are becoming more acclimatised to the digital learning environment. The importance of 'presence' online by teaching staff was highlighted. This was addressed in the second delivery through some re-organisation of the online materials and pedagogical approach to improve task-clarity and accessibility, and we provided weekly classroom-based tutorials, offered as an alternative to an online tutorial. Although an aim was to deliver the course efficiently, online courses have been found, in our programme, to be generally more resource-intensive for teaching staff than classroom based courses, and this course appears no different. The provision of classroom tutorials has allowed us to preserve the quality of the online course without running into unmanageable teaching overheads. This aspect of the delivery will be reviewed again, as part of ongoing quality improvement of all courses.

Dissemination

As the course has only just moved out of the pilot phase, we have not presented the outcomes yet. However, we plan to present at the PTAS conference in 2016, and to present our experience at the School Learning and Teaching Away-Day.