LEARNING TO LEARN: RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN STUDENT LEARNING

DAI HOUNSELL
Institute for Research and Development in Post-Compulsory Education, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with systematic attempts to help students to learn more effectively. Current approaches to learning-to-learn, chiefly in Britain and involving groups rather than individuals, are reviewed against the background of recent research findings on student learning. Four issues are identified and discussed: contrasting conceptions of learning-to-learn; responses to the problems posed by subject and contextual variations in learning demands; the implications of autonomy, change and the individual learner; and the relationship between research on learning and the development of approaches to learning-to-learn.

Introduction

The concern of the contributors to this special issue of Higher Education is to discuss the findings of recent investigations of student learning, a field of research which has blossomed dramatically in the space of a few years. No less remarkable is the parallel development of new approaches to helping students to become more accomplished exponents of the process of learning. The strength of this interest in "learning-to-learn" is not apparent from published sources alone: those involved in development do not have the same obligation as researchers to provide a public record of the work they have done, and evidence of interest in this area often takes elusive forms — in publicity brochures for courses and workshops, or in topics for unrecorded discussion sessions at conference. It can also be gauged from a clearly impressive "bush telegraph" of informal contacts which has placed one learning-to-learn manual (Gibbs, 1977b) in the hands of over one thousand teachers in higher education without any major publicity or marketing exercise.
In the British context which is the main focus of this article, the reasons for this upsurge of interest can only be guessed at. Higher education institutions in the U.S.A. have had a long tradition of courses in skills such as writing and reading (see for example Perry, 1959), and the influx in the last decade of "non-traditional" students lacking the skills necessary for academic survival has provided a renewed stimulus to training provision (see for example Roueche and Snow, 1977). The British higher education system, however, remains highly selective, and learning-to-learn activities tend to be regarded as a form of "consciousness-raising" suitable for students in general rather than those in urgent need of what Roueche and Snow (1977) call "redemption".

The purpose of this paper is to review recent approaches (chiefly in Britain) to learning-to-learn and to relate them to research on student learning. The review concentrates on activities designed for groups of students rather than on individual counselling. Following a survey of different approaches, four issues will be explored: learning and studying: problems of subject and context: change, autonomy and the learner: and the relationship between research and development.

**Learning-to-Learn Within Existing Courses**

One approach to learning-to-learn is to work within the framework of an existing course. Helweg-Larsen (1977) for example, suggests that tutors using programmed texts who wish to improve their students' learning performance should discuss with them the kind of thinking and understanding which the text seeks to foster. This would entail going beyond the information presented to examine the format and construction of the text itself. Helweg-Larsen argues that the more thorough understanding of the mental processes required by the text could be applied by the students to other texts, and should encourage a more active and creative involvement with the process of studying.

Entwistle (1979) provides one illustration of an intervention strategy of a limited kind. One of the aims of a first year course in educational studies at Lancaster University was to introduce students to problems and issues in learning in higher education. Through lectures and small-group discussions, students became acquainted with psychological evidence on topics such as motivation and memory and discussed recent research on student learning. An investigation of the impact of the course did not, however, reveal significant differences in the performance in other subjects of these students and students who had not taken the course. Students felt that the student learning component of the course had been useful, but thought that it had been too brief to have had any more substantial effect on their study methods. In