

# Social interaction and peer-support in the development of student-mediated learning in Higher Education

Stephen M. Rutherford

*School of Biosciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK.*

## Abstract

*Student-mediated learning is a fundamental aspect of higher education, and university students need to develop effective study strategies in this area. Support for the transition to university typically focuses on supporting students in independent study skills and strategies, however, students still struggle with the transition. This study aimed to highlight influences on students who are developing student-mediated study skills during their first year of university. Findings suggest that new students already have clearly-defined, and effective student-mediated study approaches, previously-developed over several years. However, they lack an understanding of how they should apply or revise these strategies to fit the expectations of higher education. Key to developing this understanding are the social interactions and peer-support networks in which the student is embedded. This study suggests that focus for transition support should be focused in helping students understand the 'rules of the game', rather than developing mechanistic study strategies.*

## 1. Introduction

One of the key requirements for university students is to develop the learning approaches that are 'andragogic' (student-led, self-directed, self-motivated and self-critical) rather than pedagogic (teacher-led, externally-directed, outcome-motivated and requiring external validation) [1]. The development of these skills is therefore a fundamental requirement for academic success. The foundations for this development occur early in a student's academic career at university, and this is one of the key changes that occur during a student's transition from secondary to tertiary education [2]. The andragogic learning approach is typically referred to as either self-directed, independent, or (more commonly) self-regulated learning [3]. However, this terminology infers that such learning is highly individualized in nature, and potentially obscures or eliminates the significance of social interactions in, and peer-based support for, study outside of the classroom. A better terminology for andragogic learning activity is 'student-mediated'

learning, as this retains the student-led focus, and the andragogic paradigm of the motivation for learning being driven by the student, but also acknowledges the potential for a variety of external impacts upon the student in their learning journey. Learners of all levels tend to develop 'personal learning networks' [4], a collection of peers, technologies and social groups who can support and help develop their learning. The development of an effective personal learning network is fundamental to efficient learning, but little focus is paid on the ways in which these personal learning networks develop, the impact they have on student-mediated learning in the tertiary education environment, and how they impact on andragogic learning strategies.

The research described here aims to investigate the factors, external and internal, which impact upon the development of student-mediated learning. Following a collection of students through their first year at university, this study identified key factors that influence successful (or unsuccessful) transition towards an andragogic approach to learning.

## 2. Body of Knowledge

### 2.1. Methodology

Year 1 undergraduate students were interviewed three times each, during Year 1 of their academic course. Students were volunteers, recruited at the start of the academic year. Participants were from Chemistry (8 students; 1 female, 7 male), History (4 students; 3 female, 1 male) and English Literature (12 students, 9 female, 3 male) to enable the analysis to address potential discipline-specific differences between science and humanities students. Interviews were semi-structured 'open-intensive' [5] interviews, held in October, February and June; each interview lasted between 35 and 65 minutes.

Interview transcripts were analysed using a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach [5], using line-by-line coding, open coding and axial coding to develop robust categories of data. Further analysis was undertaken using the Situational Analysis method [6] to develop situational maps, social worlds/arenas maps, and positional maps highlighting social interactions affecting participants.

## 2.2. Initial findings

The initial analysis of interviews across the academic year suggests that participants have already developed robust and effective student-mediated learning strategies by the time they begin their course. These strategies are typically developed by trial-and-error experiences during their pre-university studies. They strategies are usually highly-strategic in nature, focusing on factual recall and content-use. There is generally significant antipathy towards being tutored in study skills development by school teachers and academic staff at university.

However, what appears to be significant in its absence is the clear understanding of how to adapt these study skills towards application of knowledge and higher-order academic skills such as evaluation, analysis or generating original theory. Participants largely understood the need for mastery of these skills, but were not clear what the expectations of their tutors and course leaders were. There appeared to be a clear feeling that the participants were aware of there being conventions and ‘rules of the game’ in higher education communities of practice, but these are obscure or arcane, and the lack of clarity over how to gain this understanding was a cause of considerable frustration over the course of the year.

At the beginning of the academic year, participants were typically aware that there were different expectations of higher education, compared to their previous experiences in secondary education; however beyond the understanding that student-mediated learning was required, few were able to vocalise what these requirements were. At the mid-point of the year, the participants were beginning to understand that their previous concepts of effective study were insufficient, but still typically could not conceptualise what the deficiencies were in their learning. A common response to this gap in understanding was to cling to ‘familiar unfamiliarities’ – i.e. areas of their course which they had not yet mastered, but could conceptualise (a typical example being the use of referencing conventions in written work). By the end of the first year, participants were usually more confident, had a clearer understanding of what was expected of them, and no longer focused on familiar unfamiliarities. A key agent for this change is the development of effective peer-support *via* social interactions.

Interestingly, the more potent social interactions appear to be those between cohabitants in student accommodation, rather than academic peers on their course. The fusion of social interaction and academic support mechanisms appears to develop quickly in the year, but often changes as social groups themselves develop. Participants frequently expressed that they were key players in a series of personal learning networks of others, often adopting specialist roles in the support of peers on a variety of

degrees, according to their own areas of expertise. For example, English Literature students acting as proof-readers for essays for their peers.

Social interactions therefore appear to be fundamental to the development of student-mediated learning skills, but the social worlds outside of the academic course need to be considered as important, aside from those within the academic course.

## 3. Conclusions

The support of students during the transition to higher education is typically focused on the development of study skills which many students may already possess. Instead, focus might need to be applied towards enabling students to conceptualise the requirements of a university education, and to provide exemplars of analysis, evaluation and synthesis early on in the course, to provide a conceptual framework against which students can adapt their existing learning strategies. Attention needs to be paid to developing rich and wide-ranging social interactions between students so that they can develop personal learning networks, and peer-support networks, that are robust and effective, and provide mutual benefits.

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## 4. References

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