CARITAS RiT Project final report June 2009

Project title:

Collaborative Application of Research Into Tutoring for Autonomous Study (CARITAS)

Project Team:

Rod Parker-Rees, John Burnett, Norman Gabriel, Joanna Haynes, Hazel Lawson (moved to Exeter University in summer of 2008), Julie Luxton, Mike McInerney

Aims of the project:

The aim of this project is to help tutors to access recent research on approaches to supporting students who are undertaking study either as individuals or in small study groups.

The project is intended to:

- support tutors' engagement with research literature, enabling them to draw on up-to-date knowledge in their teaching;

- provide a forum in which tutors from different programmes can share good practice and identify areas for further development;

- improve students' experience of support for self-directed study.

Methods used:

Tutors from a range of programmes within the Faculty of Education each identified personal areas of interest related to supporting students in autonomous learning:

- supporting students' participation in knowledge building communities;
- promoting students' metacognitive development;
- fostering ethical sensitivity;
- constructs of 'independence' in independent study in HE;
- how the library can support students with independent study;
- the artistic process as a model of knowledge acquisition in autonomous study;
- tutorial support for undergraduate research students.

We conducted literature searches to identify relevant research publications and prepared brief reviews which informed extensive discussions at awaydays in December 2007, March 2008 and July 2008.

We initially planned to enable other tutors to join us in our discussion by developing an interactive sharepoint site which would provide easy access to the research literature via a series of prompt questions. This was developed in pilot form and presented to LTHE students on May 20th 2008, at a staff development session for staff of the Faculty of Education on May 28th 2008 and in a workshop at the VC's Teaching and Learning Conference on July 4th 2008. A short video presentation on the project was also made for the VC's conference.

Following the VC's conference the team agreed that the sharepoint site was not likely to be used sufficiently to justify the work that would be needed to bring it to the state needed to open it to all tutors and the focus for the project shifted to working with a group of tutors and students to explore their perceptions of their experience of being supported through their Y3 research projects. Initial focus groups with a group of tutors (May 22nd 2008) and with a small group of students (June 10th 2008) informed planning of a series of focus group meetings in 2008-9 (Jan 29th, March 12th, May 7th). The intention was that these groups would include both tutors and students but in the end only two tutors (Rod Parker-Rees and Joanna Haynes), both members of the CARITAS group, were able to attend, together with students from three BA programmes (Early Childhood Studies, Education Studies and Music). The transcripts from these meetings will inform a paper to be written by Rod Parker-Rees and Joanna Haynes and submitted for presentation at a conference in December 2009

Number of students involved

8 – 3 in pilot focus group, 5 in focus groups in 2008-9

Findings/ outcomes/ impacts

An immediate outcome of the project has been the setting up of a Faculty of Education reading group which has met three times (as of May 2009). This was in response to the project team's recognition of the value of opportunities to talk about aspects of practice and to share readings which have been particularly influential.

The development of the sharepoint site raised issues about the appropriateness of the emphasis on individual research at undergraduate level (a focus on planning a development project might also be appropriate) and on issues around group and individual tutorials. We were particularly interested in the concept of 'becoming peer' as described by David Boud and the kind of culture and practices that this implies. We believe that this is something that has significant potential for further development and we are considering ways that this might be taken forward.

Discussions with students in the focus groups has highlighted a number of themes and we are in the process of analysing these. One of the issues that struck us very strongly was the preference expressed by several students for working with peers who were being assessed at similar levels. There are some echoes here of research

studies on the powerful role of assessment in driving students' approaches to learning. Linked to this feedback, we have discussed the potential value of more student presentations and other group processes in the early stages of a module, rather than towards the end (students would value more opportunities to get to know other members of their group and recognise that this would benefit the group dynamic, making later discussions more effective).

Continuation/ dissemination plans

Joanna Haynes and Professor Dave Harris from Marjon have put in a collaborative bid for ESCalate small grant research funding to investigate 'teaching to the test' and the impact of assessment on tutors' teaching. Joanna is proposing to invite the Caritas team to participate in this study, which ties in closely with a major theme to have emerged from the focus group discussions.

The Reading Group will continue to meet monthly.

Rod and Joanna will present a paper based on analysis of the focus group discussion with students to the SRHE **(**Society for Research into Higher Education) annual conference in Newport in December 2009.

This paper will also be presented within the University.

Following feedback from these presentations, we will submit the paper for publication in one of the journals related to research on teaching in higher education.

We are looking into the possibility of inviting David Boud (based at the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, and a leading academic in the field of peer learning) to come and lead a research seminar on the notion of 'becoming peer' (Boud, D. and Lee, A. 'Peer learning' as pedagogic discourse for research education', *Studies in Higher Education Vol. 30, No. 5, October 2005, pp. 501–516)*