

# **An Embedded Approach to Learning to Learn Online: Strategies to Increase Student Retention through Developing Subject-based Competence**

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## **Abstract**

Increasing student retention on elearning courses is a matter of great concern to providers. One of the strategies employed by Oscail – the National Distance Education Centre has been to address the preparedness of students to learn online, and ways in which student expectations can be ascertained and managed (see Lorenzi & Mac Keogh, 2006; Stevenson, Mac Keogh & Sander, 2006; Mac Keogh and Lorenzi, 2005; Lorenzi, Mac Keogh and Fox, 2004). Oscail's SPEL programme is a preparatory course for students intending to enrol on an undergraduate BA programme and represents the 'embedded' approach (Wingate, 2006) to developing skills for learning. However, on tracking the performance of students transferring to specific subject programmes, it has become evident that a generic, once-off, elearning study skills programme is insufficient to prepare students for learning within a disciplinary culture. Even students who have successfully completed the SPEL module drop out when faced with the obstacle presented by the first subject-based assignment. As students discover, each discipline has its own unique method of enquiry, discourse and language, and reference system, which is often implicit rather than explicitly stated. This paper will review the outcomes of the generic SPEL programme in terms of progression and retention. It will then outline the way in which the SPEL approach has been embedded in the foundation modules in arts and social science subjects, where students are introduced to the subject, while being led through a series of online tasks designed to develop the skills necessary to succeed in mastering the subject.

## **Introduction**

There is extensive literature on the issue of drop-out and retention in higher education, both among on-campus students and distance education students. Researchers have identified two general approaches to tackling this issue: the first approach is deemed the assimilation approach, whereby students are assisted in adapting to the institutional culture, whereas the second approach involves the institution adapting its structures and facilities to the needs and circumstances of the student. Distance education approaches have been to the forefront in adapting higher education structures to the needs of mature and often heterogeneous groups of students, widely varying in age, educational background, location, and time constraints. Most distance education systems offer flexibility in time, pacing, location, modular structures, credit accumulation, yet, distance education systems also experience lower retention rates than on-campus systems (Simpson, 2004). While much student withdrawal is beyond the competence of the institution to influence, arising from changes in financial, domestic, health or other circumstances, nevertheless student retention is a major concern for all higher education institutions, with considerable efforts taken to identify strategies to minimise to the greatest extent any avoidable withdrawal from courses. This paper will focus on the strategies adopted by Oscail in preparing its students for higher education at a distance, with a view to minimising drop out arising from deficits in learning competences as well as misperceptions of what higher education involves. The paper will outline the transformation of the Introductory Module to the Bachelor of Arts programme utilising traditional distance education methods, to the Student Passport to Elearning (SPEL) module, with its focus on preparing students for learning online. It will discuss the outcomes of the SPEL module in terms of its limited impact on retention as students transfer to degree level modules. Current developments with regard to embedding the SPEL approach in

Foundation Modules will then be described before concluding with some general observations on the need to adopt an embedded approach to the teaching of learning and study skills.

### **The Introductory Module 1993-2002**

Oscail is a faculty of Dublin City University with a national remit to deliver distance education programmes throughout Ireland in cooperation with the Universities and other higher education institutions. The Bachelor of Arts (BA) was introduced in 1993, and is accredited by six universities; the programme comprises five subject streams (History, Literature, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology) with thirty modules in total. Over 800 students were enrolled on the BA in 2006.

The level of student retention on distance education programmes varies widely, ranging from 20% to 100% but, generally, it is acknowledged that retention is lower than for on-campus education which is largely taken by a younger, more homogenous group of students (Simpson, 2004). The level of retention on Oscail modules overall is relatively high compared with other distance education systems, with over 70% of BA student successfully completing their modules each year. While many students withdraw for reasons which are not within the competence of the institution to resolve, it has been a matter of concern to Oscail that the major locus of drop out is in foundation modules, despite the fact that all students are required to complete an Introductory Module before enrolling on degree level modules.

The Introductory Module is a short, non-credit module, designed to serve a three-fold purpose: assisting students to develop the study skills required for successful participation in higher education; exposing students to the experience of studying through distance education; and introducing students to the subjects offered at credit module level. The Introductory Module acts effectively as a filtering device, as students can make an informed decision about enrolling for the BA in Humanities degree based on their experience of the level of effort required, the nature of the subjects offered, as well as the challenges presented by the distance education method. One of the attractions of the Introductory Module to students is that it allows students to test the waters of higher education without making the onerous personal and financial commitment involved in embarking on a full degree programme. The decision to continue or withdraw therefore does not have the same consequences as dropping out at degree level. Typically, some 55-65% of students successfully complete the Introductory Module, with on average 50-60% electing to enrol on the BA programme.

Between 1993 and 2002, the Introductory Module was presented in the traditional distance education format comprising printed course materials and supplemented by three two-hour tutorials in study centres, and assessed by two assignments. This low-technology approach was dictated by limited access to the Internet and computers in Ireland in the 1990s. However, by 2000 the technological environment in Ireland was changing, with substantially increased access to the Internet and computers, as well as growing awareness of the potential of ICTs in enhancing learning. The introduction of online access to full-text journals, and virtual learning environments (VLEs) in the higher education institutions served to make elearning more accessible to distance education students. In 2001, DCU made extensive online library databases accessible both on campus and from remote locations by all staff and students, thus for the first time enabling distance education students to overcome the barrier of access to library facilities. DCU introduced WebCT in the same year, but subsequently opted for the open source VLE Moodle, in 2004. By 2002, it had become obvious that the original Introductory Module format was only partially responding to the needs of our learners, and was not sufficient to prepare students for learning in the new elearning formats.

Oscail recognised at an early stage that the availability of innovations in ICTs and elearning would not automatically lead to adoption. Surveys were carried out to ascertain the attitudes of students and tutors to the new technologies which discovered a number of potential barriers to adoption, including poor levels of skills as well as resistance to new technologies (Mac Keogh 2001). Based on this research, it was decided that a number of bridging activities were required which would ease the introduction to elearning while at the same time building competence in using the technology. Funding was obtained in 2002 from the Higher Education Authority to develop a bridging programme to be called the Student Passport to Elearning (SPEL).

As the Introductory Module had already offered a strong basis for the enhancement of learning skills, and an entry point into distance higher education, it also offered a suitable starting point for a further transition. It was decided that, in the first instance, the SPEL module would be based around the original Introductory Module, with reuse of some of the study skills and course content. However, building competence in using electronic resources was not conceived of only in terms of upgrading existing skills. The whole structure of the Introductory Module had to be re-engineered, involving a transition from a print-based, supplemented by face-to-face tutorial system, to an online system with all course materials and tutorial support provided within the VLE, and a portfolio approach to assessment. In a previous paper (Lorenzi et al, 2004) we identified a key issue in building competence is that of student support. In order to ease the transition from traditional face-to-face tutorial based course delivery to online, forum-based interaction, it was essential to think in terms of students' readiness to embrace the change and to tailor support on the basis of learners' competence in using technology.

Earlier research had shown that proficiency among Oscail students varied with the type of technology, but that expertise tended to be related to positive perceptions of technology (MacKeogh, 2001). Therefore, in order to foster a positive attitude towards the use of technology it was necessary for the SPEL module to both build competence and also give a positive experience of using technology.

The need to design a module to address elearning competence also offered an opportunity to rethink how study skills were taught. There is increasing criticism in the literature of what is described as the 'skills approach' which makes use of 'a set of atomized skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to 'fix' problems with student learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology' (Lea & Street, 1998: 158). The 'skills approach' has also been described as 'bolt-on' (Bennett et al, 2000 cited in Wingate, 2006). This is a remedial approach which is based on the assumption that a de-contextualised set of skills can be developed and training offered to those who are less adequately prepared to engage in higher education learning activities.

Such an approach, apart from singling out those perceived as potentially weaker students, does not address the specificity of context in which the skills have to be applied. Often the transferability and applicability of skills is not fully understood by students and this results in a skills acquisition in theory but not in practice. Tutors also often fail to understand this inability to apply and transfer skills and in some instances have taken an unsympathetic approach to reiterating advice.

According to Wingate 'for the development of effective learning, students need to be given the experience of dealing with academic tasks, and feedback on this experience to encourage reflection...Instructional texts do little for experiencing and reflecting' (Wingate, 2006: 458). Thus, separating computer based skills and study skills from the disciplinary context to which they must be applied will prove ineffective in enabling students apply their skills to mastering the subject content.

In developing the SPEL module we took the view that ICT skills, and study or learning skills, had to be integrated with the subject content. The SPEL module takes a task-based approach to learning and development of competence. It is based on the principle of 'learning by doing' and relies on a structured and scaffolded approach to the tasks. The SPEL module requires students to carry out a series of sixteen tasks which gradually acquaint them with the use of ICT applications such as email, internet search engines, computer asynchronous conferencing communication, web-based library databases and basic software packages such as Microsoft Word and Excel. The tasks include using these applications for time management, reflective learning, gathering, analysing and interpreting information, developing critical thinking through interaction in online discussion forums, and adopting structured approaches to assessment tasks. The scaffolding approach enables learners to progress through tasks, starting from simple tasks to more complex tasks which build up competence acquired in previous ones. The paced progression gives learners the opportunity to gain confidence in applying their newly acquired skills to specific activities. This means that learners do not just learn about skills but learn how to use the skills in relation to activities which will be repeated over and over again during their learning journey at university. Students present the task outcomes in a portfolio which is assessed at the end of the module.

The tasks are focused on enhancing understanding of the subject content, rather than on acquiring ICT competences per se (see Table 1). For example, one of the tasks requires students to prepare a bibliography for an essay title. To complete this task, students must search the online databases and library catalogue using key words and search terms; they must apply their judgment in identifying and selecting references relevant to the topic; and they must present the bibliography using the required referencing system. There is an interplay of skills involved in this particular activity. Students not only learn how to present a bibliography, but they also learn how to locate and select the sources, and, while doing this, they also learn how to use the online database as a resource for locating and selecting the relevant sources. This activity ensures that the 'building a bibliography' skill is not reduced merely to the technicality of applying the conventions for presenting the information. It allows students to develop analytical skills in terms of selecting relevant information. It also shows to students that carefully selected key search terms increase efficiency in using online databases. Therefore, using an online database becomes an integrated task. The fact that the database is online becomes secondary to the ability to search effectively and searching effectively is secondary to the ability to identify key terms in the essay title.

Students taking the SPEL module are also encouraged to become reflective and self-monitoring learners. As part of the tasks they are asked to keep a structured learning diary where on a weekly basis they record their thoughts on what they have learned in terms of content and process, but also in terms of themselves as learners. In analysing reflection diaries submitted by students during the past four years it has emerged that the learning diary has played a strong motivational role for students. Before submitting the Reflection Diary as part of their Assessment Tasks Portfolio, students were able to look back at their reflections during the first weeks of the course where the comments were high on anxiety and difficulty and low in competence and eventually had reversed the balance. The documented sense of achievement week after week was a written reminder of how they had managed to overcome their fears and gain both competence and confidence. Furthermore students were also asked to fill a learning log. The learning log represented the quantitative aspect of the learning experience. Students were asked to enter in an Excel worksheet with clearly defined headings the number of hours spent on each of the activities carried out during the SPEL module. This is another example of a task that combines more than one skill. In this case students are able to identify their study patterns and time-management by analysing their logs and also learn to use Excel for this particular purpose.

Finally SPEL students were asked to interact online with tutor-led discussion forums on both learning skills and subject-based topics. Each week tutors posted one subject-related topic based on the content of the 'Introduction to the Humanities' text, which comprised units on the theme of identity dealt with from a range of disciplinary perspectives. The second weekly topic encouraged students to discuss learning related topics, such as information gathering, research, note taking. The online interaction gave students the opportunity to briefly explore subject specific domains by engaging in discussions on the topics they had read in their course text. Through writing brief contributions on a regular basis, students were able to build up their confidence in engaging in academic writing. The process also allowed students to gain a better understanding of what the subjects were about and thereby to make a more informed decision on what subjects to select at credit module level.

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### SPEL Module Learning Tasks

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1. Maintain a learning log throughout the module using Excel and Word
  2. Write an introduction to yourself and post it to the discussion forum
  3. Prepare a study schedule for the module
  4. Post at least two contributions per week to the discussion forums
  5. Write a weekly reflection on the learning experience – process and content
  6. Review websites related to topic on the course
  7. Write a review of a film, book, or play
  8. Make short notes on one of the course units
  9. Search university online catalogue; identify 20 items for a bibliography for an essay & list using appropriate referencing format
  10. Prepare spider diagram and outline structure for an essay on a course-related topic
  11. Download an article from an online database; post summary to forum
  12. Peer review of another student's review (task 7)
  13. Prepare an answer to an exam question (topic from course content)
  14. Prepare a report on a statistical analysis for time spent on different learning activities
  15. Write an essay on 'Learning with Oscaleil: where to from here'
  16. Assemble task outputs and submit a portfolio for assessment
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**Table 1: SPEL Module Learning Tasks**

Up to 2006, students could choose to take the traditional Introductory Module, or the SPEL module. In the first four years of presentation of the SPEL module, the proportion of students choosing the SPEL module rose dramatically. In 2002, 10% of the new students had chosen the SPEL module and this had risen to 61% in 2005/6. To a certain extent, this mirrors a significant change in attitude in Ireland towards ICTs and the benefits of the new technologies, brought about by greater access to the internet, and elearning has also benefited from this change in perspective.

Student evaluations of the SPEL module have been positive and there is evidence that students who transfer to credit modules are more comfortable in the online environment than those who have taken the traditional Introductory Module. However, despite this, there is little evidence that the SPEL module has served to increase student retention rates. Of the 303 new students who enrolled in 2005/6, 120 elected to take the traditional Introductory Module and 183 took the SPEL module. As Table 2 below demonstrates, just 53% of SPEL students successfully completed the module compared with 60% of traditional students. Just two students in total who submitted their portfolio received fail marks, while the remaining students did not submit the portfolio. Again the transfer rate of SPEL students to credit modules was slightly less than that of traditional students, 42.6% compared with 45.8%.

	Mode of Study						
	Traditional Distance Ed			SPEL		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
N Started Module	120	100.0	183	100.0	303	100.0	
Passed Portfolio	72	60.0	97	53.0	169	55.8	
Failed Portfolio	1	0.8	1	0.5	2	0.7	
Did not submit portfolio	47	39.2	85	46.4	132	43.6	
Transferred to Foundation Modules	55	45.8	78	42.6	133	43.9	

**Table 2: Retention and Transfer Rates. Traditional Introductory Module and SPEL module compared**

In terms of subsequent performance on credit modules, while SPEL students tended to obtain higher marks in most subjects than those who had taken the traditional Introductory Module, a higher proportion of traditional Introductory Module students completed their modules. As Table 3 shows, students registered on a total of 274 modules (some take more than one module); of these 54.5% of SPEL students completed compared with 63.3% of traditional students. With the exception of Sociology, where over two thirds of SPEL students (67.6%) completed, compared with just over half (53.3% of traditional students), in each of the other four foundation modules, SPEL students were less likely to complete their studies when compared with those who had taken the traditional format Introductory Module. This result was, naturally disappointing, as it would appear that while the SPEL module clearly meets the need to prepare students for learning in an online learning environment, it does not provide all the support needed to retain students when they moved into the next level of their studies. Following evaluation of the outcomes of the SPEL module, it became clear that an intervention was needed at Foundation Module level to increase the level of retention of all students. Thus, it was decided to embed the SPEL approach into the Foundation Modules of the degree. The rationale and implementation of this phase of SPEL will be discussed in the next section.

Module	Traditional			SPEL			Total		
	Registered	Passed	% Registered	Passed	% Registered	Passed	%		
His1	17	12	70.6	33	19	57.6	50	31	62.0
Lit1	19	13	68.4	32	15	46.9	51	28	54.9
Phil1	4	4	100.0	15	11	73.3	19	15	78.9
Psy1	39	24	61.5	51	22	43.1	90	46	51.1
Soc1	30	16	53.3	34	23	67.6	64	39	60.9
All	109	69	63.3	165	90	54.5	274	159	58.0

**Table 3: Performance on Foundation Modules. Comparison between traditional Introductory Module and SPEL students**

#### **From the SPEL module to the Subject Specific SPEL module**

According to Simpson (2004) until recently there has been a passive acceptance of the fact that the low retention rates in distance education were due to the extra difficulties of distance learning and to the open access to distance education courses. This attitude has resulted in a lack of intervention to increase retention rates as the causes of drop-out were perceived to be somehow beyond the control of distance education institutions. However Simpson (2004) clearly shows that not all drop-outs are unavoidable and distance education providers need to explore patterns of withdrawal on a more proactive basis in order to minimise drop-out. He proposes an intervention model based on both reactive and proactive activities.

Research on both distance education and traditional systems shows that the first year of study is the crucial period for implementing retention strategies (Murtaugh et al 1999; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). According to Yorke (2002) at least 10% of students in traditional undergraduate education in the UK drop out of their programme within twelve months of enrolling. While much focus on intervention has been on the development of orientation programmes, such as the Introductory Module and the SPEL module, the outcomes of these interventions, as outlined above have not served to retain students when they continue on to the first year of their degree programme.

Based on informal interviews with Oscail students and tutors, it has become apparent that the first assignment in the Foundation Module forms a significant barrier to students, despite their exposure to researching and writing essays in the Introductory and SPEL modules. Approximately 13% of Foundation Module students do not submit their first assignment, which inevitably results in their total withdrawal from the module. One of the causes of such early drop out is that many students are unable to relate the generic skills they have learnt to the new context. The approach to writing assignments between subjects can be quite subtle or bewilderingly at variance: for example when citing sources, Sociology students are required to use the Harvard (author/date) system, Psychology students must use the American Psychological Association Guidelines, while History students use a totally different system based on the Irish Historical Association guidelines. Historians use footnotes, whereas these are discouraged in the social sciences. Headings are used to denote the structure of the argument in Psychology and Sociology, but are discouraged in Literature and History. The style of discourse also varies between subjects, with Literature and Philosophy drawing on personal responses to a greater extent than in the social sciences which require more external substantiation of statements and positions. The unease of students in approaching subject specific domains goes beyond mere technicalities of applying subject-specific conventions and surface features of disciplines. The deeper issue of the ignorance or lack of ability to engage in subject specific academic discourses emerges as a greater concern. As Northedge (2003) notes, students are often locked out of the subject-specific discourses, as members of the subject-specific knowledge communities take frames of reference for granted, while students struggle with making sense of the specialist discourse.

Therefore, students taking two or three subjects will be exposed not only to the new subject content, but also to the different ways of responding to this content in the form of writing assignments. A number of tutors working with students at Foundation Module level (i.e. immediately after the completion of the SPEL or Introductory Module) had reported having to invest time - which would normally be devoted to subject specific tuition - in further work to fine tune the skills already acquired during the SPEL module. Because of this it has become evident that the generic orientation provided by the original SPEL and Introductory Modules was insufficient to orientate students to the specific requirements of the different subjects.

A growing number of studies have indicated that ways of maximising retention appear to fall under two categories: 1) administrative activities aimed at increasing student support; 2) academic activities aimed at fostering a positive learning experience (Rekkedal & Qvist-Eriksen, 2004; McGivney, 2004; Tait, 2004; Woodley, 2004). According to Woodley (2004) both approaches should aim to increase social integration, by reducing isolation and allowing students to effectively integrate study in their life-style.

With regard to administrative supports, Oscail offers support to students through its Student Information and Advisory Service and Programme Support department. These two departments are responsible for relaying course related information to students and for resolving any administrative problems encountered. Recent developments on Moodle VLE and the Oscail website (<http://www.oscail.ie>) have improved the flow of and access to information for students.

With regard to the second approach, that of developing academic activities aimed at fostering a positive learning experience, the focus has shifted from a generic orientation programme for degree level study to a specific orientation programme targeted at individual subjects. As previously mentioned a stumbling block for many students appeared to be the first Foundation Module assignment which was normally submitted to the tutor at the end of the first eight weeks of the module. The SPEL module has now been integrated into the first eight weeks of each of the five foundation modules on the BA programme currently offered in History, Literature, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology. The first assignment for all Foundation Modules has now been replaced by the SPEL portfolio, and specific activities leading to the preparation of the second assignment – effectively the first assignment-type task - have been incorporated in the SPEL portfolio tasks.

The SPEL Tasks outlined in Table 1 have been redesigned to address specific tasks for each subject strand. While the tasks vary between the different subject subjects, they fall into three separate groups: Reflective Learning; Learning Skills; and Course Content. As an example, the tasks for Psy1: Psychology Foundation Module are outlined in Table 4 below. Effectively the tasks have been embedded in the subject specific domains and the activities take different shapes according to the subject requirements. The Portfolio now attracts 40% of the continuous assessment mark, and the essay topic for which students have already prepared a bibliography, summarised and reviewed articles, and produced an outline structure forms the second assignment attracting a further 20% of marks.

The introduction of the SPEL element into the foundation modules has two important consequences: 1) the emphasis has been shifted from the end product - the essay - to its preparation; 2) students receive feedback on activities aimed at the preparation of the second assignment as part of the feedback on the SPEL portfolio. This in turn means for students that they receive individually tailored advice on how to improve their preparatory activities and ultimately have a better chance to produce a well thought-out second assignment. In doing so the formative element of the assessment has been strengthened.

Another way in which students benefit from the SPEL module is through the introduction of weekly discussion topics set by their tutors. All tutors are subject specialists and the weekly online discussion topics are designed to expand on and explicate the course content as set out in the course units. Through written interaction in response to the stimulus messages from tutors, students practise the subject specific language, in a way which replicates, and perhaps improves the type of discussion which might occur in a face-to-face tutorial discussion. As with all asynchronous online discussions the language used combines oral and written elements and while it maintains a certain informality, it is hoped that it will allow students to post reflective contributions and to internalise the subject specific language in a more lasting and hopefully deeper way.

Yet another benefit of placing all interaction in an online environment and pacing tasks from the first week of the module is the potential to track participation and to identify those who have not logged on, as it is unlikely that those who have not engaged within the first few weeks will continue with the course. Just over 300 students enrolled on a total of 651 Foundation Modules in October 2006, with 28 online tutors supporting this phase of the Module. By the end of Week 2 of the programme, it was possible to see that 82% of Foundation Module students had already logged on to Moodle. The Student Advisory service then set about contacting those who had not logged to find out why. It is intended to monitor the participation on the programme and to carry out a full scale evaluation at the end of the module to identify whether the new Foundation Modules have had an impact on retention or not.

Task	Reflection	Learning skills	Course Content
<b>Task 1:</b> Maintain a Learning Log throughout the course – using Excel to record each day, the time spent on different learning activities.	✓	✓	
<b>Task 2:</b> Post an introduction to yourself to the Moodle forum VLE		✓	
<b>Task 3:</b> Prepare a study schedule for the module at the beginning; write an evaluation of your study schedule and learning experience at the end.	✓	✓	
<b>Task 4:</b> Post at least two contributions to the Tutor-led discussion forum on Moodle per week: one topic on the Learning Process; one topic on course content.	✓	✓	✓
<b>Task 5:</b> Write a weekly reflection on the content and process of the learning experience; post the reflection on Moodle	✓	✓	
<b>Task 6:</b> Make short notes on Unit 2: Investigating development & post on Moodle		✓	✓
<b>Task 7:</b> Post report (2-300 words) on search for websites relevant to Unit 3: Biological process		✓	✓
<b>Task 8:</b> Search the Online Library Catalogue (OPAC) and produce a bibliography for an essay on child development		✓	✓
<b>Task 9:</b> Download and summarise an article from <i>Annual Review of Psychology</i> using online bibliographic database.		✓	✓
<b>Task 10:</b> Prepare a spider diagram and outline the structure for an essay on the topic: The role of biological, cognitive and social processes in child development		✓	✓
<b>Task 11:</b> Search for an article related to the essay topic in Task 10 on the PsycArticles online database; post a brief review of the selected article on Moodle.		✓	✓
<b>Task 12:</b> Prepare a statistical report on time spent on learning activities, using the data in the Learning Log maintained in Task 1.	✓	✓	
<b>Task 13:</b> Write an answer to an examination question		✓	✓
<b>Task 14:</b> Assemble and submit portfolio		✓	✓

**Table 4: Tasks for SPEL Psy1: Psychology Foundation Module**

The initial reactions from students to the SPEL module have been positive, even among students who are not in their first year of the BA. As students can take a foundation module at any time during their studies, due to the modular nature of the programme, some students already have experience with studying, but still find that a new subject presents different challenges. According to one such 'experienced' student:

I've completed four modules with Oscail so far and have to say I've enjoyed every minute of it. I completed an Introductory Module which was independent of the foundation modules

and found it to be excellent. There was, however, at that point no e-learning element to it. I find this SPEL phase and the idea of the portfolio really helpful and I love being able to be in contact with others through the forums.

A new student finds the SPEL module equally helpful:

The SPEL is proving very useful, I've examined my learning process and am now skimming through the course texts while commuting and on lunch hour and then reading in depth and taking notes when studying at home. I'm also going to try the kinesthetic approach and try reading on the exercise machines at the gym, so hopefully I won't be getting carried away literally as my co-ordination isn't always the best.

## Conclusions

The format of the SPEL-Foundation module is based on 3 key principles:

1. By improving the quality of the learning experience better retention rates may be achieved.
2. Tasks are explicitly embedded in the subject domain.
3. Formative feedback on progress through tutor comments online, and through assessment of the portfolio is an integral feature of the approach. By starting to engage with course tasks from week one, students gradually accumulate experience and expertise, thus increasing their knowledge of the subject, as well as their confidence that they have the learning skills required to master the subject.

Yorke (2001) has argued that formative assessment in the form of feedback has the potential to increase retention as it increases social integration between teachers and learners and focuses on student self-awareness and self-development. By making the role of feedback on the portfolio central to development of further assessment activities, it is envisaged that the revised SPEL modules should give the opportunity for a gradual enhancement of learners' ability to successfully complete the first essay-type task and ultimately allow the student to gain greater control over his/her ability to respond to assessment tasks in a more autonomous fashion. The guiding philosophy of the SPEL approach is that while retention is certainly a reason for concern, the focus should be on the improving the efficacy of the learning experience with better retention rates emerging as the result of a more fulfilling experience for student.

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