The co-creation of exam support: students as partners in the research, planning, design and quality assurance of learning resources

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Introduction

Support is delivered to students at the University of Manchester (UoM) through the multi-award-winning 'My Learning Essentials' (MLE) skills programme. This comprises three strands: the Embedded Programme, built in collaboration with academic staff to the specific needs of individual programmes or modules; the Open Programme, where students self-select the support they require and the online resources, which can be open or embedded, depending on where they are located. The Library's Learning Development, E-Learning and Teaching and Learning teams all collaborate to develop high-quality online and face-to-face materials which work in concert, not in parallel. Students can thus use each of the elements individually or as a holistic group. Within this 'blended' model, all materials are created to be pedagogically relevant to their method of delivery: face-to-face materials are interactive, inclusive and require a human, creative element; online materials are created to be delivered online, with an understanding of the limitations and possibilities this presents. The two do not duplicate: what is delivered to students face to face (through the Open or Embedded workshops) differs from the online content they can access. Although the skills that students work on can be the same, the way in which they work on them differs, in order to make the most of face-to-face delivery. This case study focuses on the creation of a new workshop for the Open Programme, entitled 'Academic Writing for Exams'; it was developed in response to staff and student feedback about common problems and challenges that students face on this topic. The paper presents a snapshot of the development process and quality-assurance procedures behind the MLE Open Programme and showcases the role that the members of our Student Team (paid student members of staff) play in the development of support delivered to their peers.

The MLE Open Programme is informed by research conducted as part of an NTF-funded project called 'HEARing student voices' (Blake, Wass and Walmsley, 2011). The study looked at a broad cross-section of the support services on offer to students at the UoM and found that, although these services were extensive, they operated in a disparate way and were scattered across the campus. As a result, students generally lacked awareness about what support was on offer to them and, if they engaged with the support services at all, sought to do so only when they reached a crisis point with a problem. At this point, students rarely received more than a one-off intervention and it was often too late to give them the support they needed.

The University of Manchester Library (UML) is a centralised place at the heart of the campus. All students have access to the Library buildings and resources and we know – from analysing the entry data gathered by our Sentry gates (where students scan their cards to enter) – that all faculties and schools are represented amongst Library users. Bearing in mind previous work done by the UML (which traced a correlation between the use of Library resources and student attainment figures), the timely building of our new Alan Gilbert Learning Commons (AGLC) in October 2012 presented us with the unique opportunity to launch a skills programme which all students could access in the same way as our other

Library resources. MLE launched in October 2013 and support, previously delivered in many widely-spread locations, is now available centrally from the Main Library and AGLC buildings, which are adjacent to each other. Because the MLE programme is a central service, founded on the Library's considerable understanding of student needs and habits, students and staff are encouraged to engage proactively with it; problems and skills can therefore be addressed before a crisis point is reached.

Now in its fifth year, MLE allows academic skills and wellbeing support to work in partnership with one another and to be delivered in Library spaces and via the Library's webpages. This partnership is valuable both to the students – it improves academic performance and de-stigmatises access to wellbeing support – and to the support services: the Counselling Service, for example, now sees a wide cross-section of students, rather than just those actively seeking a one-to-one appointment. Students who might not feel comfortable seeking an appointment with the Counselling Service – either because this would require them to search for and travel to the Service or because they do not feel the problem is at a 'crisis point' – don't mind attending wellbeing workshops delivered alongside academic skills support. That both types of support are on offer in the same place demonstrates to the students that academic and wellbeing skills need to be cultivated and developed, so as to maximise their academic performance and equip them with essential skills. The Counselling Service works in partnership with the UML to deliver workshops as part of MLE and, in doing so, has extended its reach: it can engage with more students by delivering to large groups and anyone can access the open online resources which have been produced. The almost simultaneous opening of the new AGLC and the launching of the MLE skills programme served to acclimatise students quickly to the provision of both types of support within our new Library study space.

The AGLC changed the dialogue between students and the UML, as the student voice played (and continues to play) an important role in the design of the building and the policies and services within it. Each stage of the building's development involved consultation with students and, through this project, the nature of the UML's relationship with students evolved so that we no longer view them as 'customers', but consider them as 'partners' with joint responsibility for the co-creation of their learning spaces (Jones and Grayson 2015). In order to preserve this partnership with students, the MLE Open Programme has formative and iterative feedback mechanisms built into its evaluation processes, giving students the opportunity to inform the creation of new workshops and shape the support on offer. The UML has worked hard to sustain an open dialogue with students and one of its most successful measures towards achieving that is the recruitment of a team of student members of staff: the Library Student Team.

The Student Team is composed of paid staff members who work, on average, two four-hour shifts per week. They were originally recruited in the hope that they would be able to conduct research into how the AGLC was being used, so that the services and policies within could continue to be developed; they were envisioned as an extension of the Customer Service Team – not fixed at a desk but a visible presence out on the floors to assist with enquiries, troubleshoot problems, gather feedback and respond to comments and suggestions. However, in reality (and particularly because of their integral work for MLE) the role of the Student Team has evolved so that its members now play an active (and intrinsic) role in the

design and delivery of support to their peers through the MLE skills programme, open days and other Library services.

Pedagogy and practice

The MLE programme purposefully incorporates current pedagogical research and best practice into its face-to-face and online sessions. The workshops are part of an open blended learning offer and work in partnership with the online resources, so that students can themselves select at the point of need the support they require. The face-to-face sessions provide free tea, coffee and biscuits to help establish a welcoming and supportive atmosphere in which people feel able to discuss openly the areas where they may be struggling. The delivery of the workshops deliberately focuses on the co-creation of knowledge and experience, using a facilitative methodology and a 'release of responsibility' model that encourages participants to take ownership of their learning (Fisher and Frey, 2013; Jones and Blake, 2013). This model embraces a gradual transfer (or 'release' of responsibility for creating the learning which takes place – in most cases, students steadily take responsibility and control from the facilitator, whose release of it allows them to become true co-creators and the dominant force in the room. At the beginning of such a workshop, the facilitator asks the students to set the agenda for the session. (We ask: Why did you book onto this session? What do you want to know?) As the students contribute their ideas for the day's work, they begin to take responsibility for the direction of the workshop and, as it progresses through the activities and strategies, the students continue to shape the learning being done. In many sessions, this involves students' creation of a final product (an action plan or some materials) that they take away with them. In a nutshell: the facilitator starts; the students do the work; the students finish the work and take away a plan or idea of what else needs to be done. Because the design of the workshops supports students' construction of their own learning, such sessions stimulate engagement with both the process of learning and the content, further enhancing the impact of the sessions themselves (Blake and Illingworth, 2015). With active student participation, the sessions reflect the students 'in the room' – creating a personalised experience that incorporates different approaches to learning. This personalised experience is a key factor in the success of the programme, as, in these sessions, students feel that they are getting the support they themselves need, not hypothetical support pre-designed by someone else. By deliberately incorporating opportunities for student participation to shape the activities and content, each session is both unique and what is needed on the day; accordingly, the workshops encompass far more than the skills and strategies they may focus on.

One result of this personalised experience, in which the design of the session deliberately encourages participants to take ownership of the occasion and the learning that happens there, is an enhanced feeling of community and peer support: students work together to complete activities and aid each other's understanding. It is well recognised that a sense of belonging (feeling part of a community) is a key factor in promoting social mobility amongst students from non-traditional backgrounds (Thomas, 2012). Throughout the session, even those who may feel that the topic presents them with significant challenges are able to contribute and engage with others in the room. Students self-select their own support and they self-refer; no outside force is judging them in relation to their concerns and, if they feel they need support, they attend the appropriate sessions. Although staff do point students towards MLE as a supportive intervention, there are no formal referrals. Interaction with their

peers acts as a scaffold for students' understanding and is an opportunity for them to discover or highlight areas of competence. In effect, the workshops create, within each session, a peer-mentoring network which is made up of the participants attending that day and often continues beyond the scheduled face-to-face time. The MLE workshops emphasise that independent learning does not have to mean learning by oneself, as students are encouraged to engage actively with others, to further mutual understanding of topics and skills by mentoring, questioning and listening to one another (Andrews and Clark, 2012). In addition, students who return for subsequent sessions and report back on what they have done allow the service to respond to their feedback so that they may form and shape the provision of support for the future.

The presence of the Library Student Team further extends the peer support network. As the team consists of current students employed as casual staff by the Library, they are able to attend the workshops and support many of the sessions by actively linking the participants, the facilitators and the wider student body together in a community of practice that encompasses all the work done on MLE. Thus the release of responsibility encourages students to continue working together and disseminate what they have learnt beyond MLE – to the wider student body.

The development of learning materials and resources

The UoM student feedback which inspired the 'Academic Writing for Exams' workshop was first gathered from an online survey sent out to all attendees of MLE Open Programme workshops. The programme facilitators' question 'What other topics would you like us to run sessions on?' encouraged students to request support with writing for exams. Research which demonstrates how important it is for students to feel that their feedback can inform change (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) supports the programme's commitment to acting on such feedback, as does the inclusion of this type of question in the survey.

We aim to develop new workshops quite quickly (within the same academic year), so that those students who request the support are able to attend. In addition to the student feedback, staff at the University also alerted the MLE team to students' common and repeated mistakes with exams: *viz.* not planning their time effectively and not breaking down or answering the question(s) properly. Finally, as part of the workshop development process, the Student Team members indicated that their peers were experiencing problems in relation to managing nerves and taking the time to plan – many were rushing through an exam just to get it over with. These three separate perspectives fed into the development of 'Academic Writing for Exams.'

The MLE development process requires a check that the support is not being delivered elsewhere on campus and that it fits within the criteria of the Open Programme. The criteria take the form of four questions for any new workshop, resource or area of support:

- Is there a skills focus?
- Is it open to all students?
- Does it make the most of technology available in the AGLC? (The AGLC is meant to support and integrate current educational technology into the student experience.)
- Is there a demonstrated need?

The workshop was put together by the Learning Development Team, which worked closely with the Student Team to consider: which areas would be most appropriately addressed via facilitative face-to-face support; which tools could help students address the exam problems mentioned above. As the workshop plan was put together, the scope was gradually limited to:

- transferring the skills gained from writing assignments to writing in exam conditions;
- breaking down exam questions to assess what is being asked;
- planning and structuring the answer in line with time constraints.

The Student Team assisted with conducting research into the topic, putting together the slides used in the workshops and creating materials for activities, handouts and other useful resources. The Team's members, with their digital and design skills, were and continue to be a tremendous asset to this process: their work contributes significantly to the community and friendly 'feel' of the materials created, in terms of the language, phrasing and visual presentation of resources.

The table below outlines the steps in the process and the role that the Student Team played at each stage:

Development Process	Role of the Student Team
Informing initial development	Input given in respect to their own experiences and those of their peers
Researching the topic	Helping to conduct research and create MLE-branded learning materials
Developing the workshop plan	Input into changes and adjustments, working alongside the Learning Development Team
Developing the slides	Working closely with the Learning Development Team to create accessible high-quality slides within branding and quality-assurance boundaries
Attending the pilot	Giving feedback to suggest improvements and changes to activities and content
Approval group	Assist with implementing any suggested changes to slides and materials
Running the live workshop	Welcoming attendees and chatting about the topic
Evaluating the workshop	Use iPads to conduct quick impact surveys with attendees

Table 1. Development process and Student Team roles in it

Once the plan and slides had been created, a pilot workshop was organised and members of the Student Team attended to make their input into: how the activities worked in practice; whether the content was clear and relevant; whether any adjustment needed to be made to the timings. Their feedback was invaluable and acted upon to shape the final version of the workshop.

The pilots are a great opportunity for the Student Team to see the fruits of their labour in action and make further contributions to shaping the evolving support on offer. The more Student Team members who can participate in this part of the process the better: the MLE team gains both a unique insight into how, from the student perspective, the support will be received and also an idea of what changes might be required for all students to get the most out of engaging with others and the face-to-face support.

A member of the Student Team (Megan Stock) reflects here on her role in putting 'Academic Writing for Exams' together. She observes that attending the pilot workshops allowed her to have direct impact upon the support on offer to students: *"I am able to provide insight into what students specifically want and need to hear in order to succeed."* She explains that the Team's attendance at pilot workshops not only enables her individually to make a positive contribution to the development of learning resources for maximum impact on students; it also enables all the members of the Team to refine their own academic skills and practise articulating their ideas and concerns in a work setting. The Student Team is able to make specific suggestions for improvement and these are acted on and incorporated into the final, live iteration of the workshop. Megan goes into some detail about her role in influencing the final version of the workshop:

> *"…during the Academic Writing for Exams workshop pilot, I provided feedback on the lack of clarity in regard to a particular activity which split the process of 'writing for assignments' and 'writing for exams' into 'before', 'during' and 'after'. This was taken into consideration and the facilitator now explains the divisions in more detail before the activity begins and this change is reflected in the workshop plan. Furthermore, during the creation of the slides I was able to give feedback on realistic timings for writing an exam essay which are now used as a guide in another activity."*

Our Student Team members feel empowered and valued when their feedback is listened to and acted upon, although they also report that it can be difficult to shift their perspective at times: *"…I can find it difficult to remember that what some people may find useful, I may not, and vice versa."* This observation illustrates the value of having as many members of the Student Team as possible at pilot workshops, in order to gain a variety of insights and thereby reach a consensus in relation to points of discussion. The Team is very aware of the power that its input into the development process has and the impact that its members' insights have on the MLE programme. Megan comments: *"I believe a key part of the success of MLE workshops is the Student Team influence behind the scenes, in creating slides and providing feedback in pilot workshops, and I enjoy being a part of the development process."*

Members of the Learning Development Team reflect on what it is like to work alongside the Student Team to develop new workshops and resources. Nicola Grayson explains: *"It works really well to have the Student Team not just as consultants, but as co-creators of the MLE workshops particularly in relation to the slides, handouts and learning resources."* In the

research stages of putting together the 'Academic Writing for Exams' workshop, the Learning Developers spoke with different members of the Student Team to gain a sense of which aspects of the exam process they (and their peers) were finding difficult:

> *"It was surprising to hear how many of the Student Team's friends had trouble with planning their time during exams and also with controlling nerves and making sure they answered the question. We know from consultation with staff at the university that this is an area where students consistently lose marks."*

The Student Team members work hard to create slides and materials for the Open and Embedded MLE workshops and their role in attending the pilots is invaluable for the MLE teams, which are able to gain feedback from students before a workshop goes live, so as to check timings and activities and overcome any uncertainties. It is a great opportunity to ask for input and advice in relation to whether content and activities make sense and whether the workshop meets the learning objectives; the presence of the Student Team in the development process makes for the creation of better resources for both the Student Team members and their peers. The Student Team plays a vital role in many stages of the development process and has also contributed to evaluating the support delivered as part of the Embedded Programme by giving feedback which is used to shape and adjust future sessions.

Evaluation

As specific requests for exam writing support were received in February 2017, the workshop had to be developed very quickly in order for it to be made available to students during the May 2017 exam period. Owing to the extremely limited turnaround time, we were unable to publicise the workshop on the materials produced as part of the Library's 'Exam Extra' campaign for May 2017 (though it was advertised through our regular channels), but it will now form part of MLE's core offer over each exam period. Up to January 2018, the workshop has run five times and has an average attendance of sixteen people (equivalent to our popular 'Academic Writing' workshops and slightly higher than average workshop attendance). However, attendance at this workshop is generally even higher (Table 2.) as the average is lowered by the scheduling of the workshop during re-sits over the summer. (We have since learnt that this was not necessary.)

Date of workshop	No. of attendees
18/05/17	11
10/08/17	1
26/10/17	18
28/11/17	29
10/01/18	19

Table 2. Workshop attendance

To give an insight into the number of students supported annually by the Open Programme workshops, we see approximately 4,000 students a year in the face-to-face workshops (eleven per cent of the UoM population). The Embedded Programme delivered face-to-face support to approximately 9,000 students last year and the online resources had 99,988 hits altogether (4,451 from the Widening Participation programmes, 72,242 from the Open resources, 23,295 from those Embedded in Blackboard).

In relation to 'Academic Writing for Exams', our quick impact data shows that (of the students surveyed immediately after the workshop) 87% rated the workshop as 'very engaging', which shows that the suggestions our Student Team members made during the pilot work well when put into practice. In addition, 94% said they felt more confident as a result of what they had learnt, 92% said that what had been covered would be beneficial to their learning and 90% said they would change their behaviour based on what they had learnt. The data shows the positive impact that working in partnership with students can have on the student experience and the provision of exam support. The longer email survey provided us with qualitative feedback through which students articulated a desire for further support with exams: *"…could you do a session for answering short answer questions in exams e.g. 1 hour long exams"*. Students also fed back on the workshop and requested *"More time to explain specific techniques and skills"*. These feedback channels are a valuable and valued connection to the student voice and, alongside the input and hard work of the Student Team, enable the MLE programme to promote a community of learning in which student feedback is captured, responded to and incorporated into MLE as an evolving supportive intervention.

Lessons learnt

'Academic Writing for Exams' has now become part of MLE's core offer for every 'Exam Extra' campaign and it is a key component of the year-round support. In relation to attendee profile data, it was interesting to note the popularity of this workshop with postgraduate students (42% of attendees so far have been postgraduates), as it was aimed generally at undergraduates – if the programme had not been 'open', this group of students (who reported benefiting from the support) would not have been able to attend it.

The role of the Student Team in influencing, creating and attending pilot workshops ensures that the support delivered through MLE is relevant, that the topics covered are required and that the format, structure and activities are clear. The feedback and experience(s) of the Student Team serve to supplement and enhance the other established feedback channels so that the MLE teams can respond quickly to the needs of current students and adapt to changing requirements. Working in partnership with students to co-create their skills support gives them the opportunity to shape and create a responsive programme that remains relevant to their changing requirements.

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