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# Learning strategies for student engagement and achievement

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## Abstract:

This paper presents a research-based model for helping students identify opportunities for taking control of and responsibility for their own learning, developed through one-to-one skills tutorials with students across a range of subjects and year groups. Although interventions must ultimately accommodate the needs of the individual, they can be broadly characterised so that certain strategies will be more effective than others according to confidence level and purpose of visit. For students low in confidence coming to check their work is correct, having a practical checklist to follow connects to their concerns for task diligence. For more confident students, rehearsal and discussion are central to their self-improvement. Where the purpose of the tutorial is more questioning, low confidence students would benefit from goal-setting and planning, to structure progress and break down tasks, whereas more confident students are likely to appreciate learning for its own sake and so guidance on placing each task in context will be useful for them. By helping students take control of their learning, their motivation and engagement are likely to increase, giving them a more positive learning experience and potentially improving their academic outcomes.

## Introduction

One-to-one tutorials with a learning skills tutor can be seen as a way to bridge the gap between subject competence and academic insecurity, by guiding students through the structural barriers that might prevent them from expressing their subject knowledge. Learning cannot be divorced from the context in which it takes place (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999); knowledge and the skills needed to communicate it well are similarly entwined (Cottrell, 2001). For students to come to a learning skills tutorial implies an appreciation of this relationship and a desire to improve it. Moreover, as these tutorials are entirely voluntary, attendance is in itself a measure of engagement, motivation and at least some level of students' awareness of themselves and their abilities. This paper presents a research-based model for helping students identify opportunities for taking control of and responsibility for their own learning, developed through one-to-one tutorials with students across a range of subjects and year groups. When students recognise that their learning is within their control, their learning effectiveness is likely to increase, giving them a more positive learning experience and potentially improving their academic outcomes.

## Learning skills at Solent

The learning skills tutor is part of the Library and Information Service, existing independently of the Faculties. Tutorials are therefore accessible to all students throughout the university,

either by dropping in or by emailing to arrange an appointment. Students can also be referred to the tutor by a librarian, lecturer or other support service. Between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, 115 individuals had attended a total of 223 appointments, with most falling towards the end of the term and the approaching assignment deadlines. The majority of students were first and third years, and there was no single course or faculty that made significantly more use of the service than any other; students were drawn from all corners of the university.

In terms of student queries, essay writing was by far the most common topic, but this masks an underlying complexity that became the foundation of the research informing this paper. Whereas some individuals were concerned with understanding the requirements of the question and how best to structure their answer, others were more worried about checking their grammar and language. Some students therefore queried the underlying architecture of the essay, while for others it was sufficient to have their verb choice, vocabulary and punctuation checked. A similar pattern was seen in the nature of referencing queries, with a division between those questioning citing and referencing as a concept and those unsure of where to place the comma or how to reference an email. The split between the mechanical, performance-oriented approach and the more structural, learning-oriented approach gave rise to the first dichotomy of the model the purpose of the tutorial. In turn, the purpose is mediated by the level of confidence the student has in their own ability and capacity to succeed (high vs. low), creating four possible broad categories for each student to fall into. It is unlikely that these tendencies (which will vary from assignment to assignment) are restricted to academic skills but instead also underpin each student’s approach to their subject area.

## A learning strategies model

The model was developed over three months’ observation of student activity at tutorials. It became clear early on that the types of queries and the student’s confidence in themselves and their work resulted in the need for different types of learning and feedback strategies. Although interventions must ultimately accommodate the needs of the individual, they can be broadly characterised such that certain strategies will be more effective than others according to confidence level and purpose of visit. Consequently, each of the four categories identified above will have its own learning strategy, best suited to purpose and confidence level. These observations were followed up and corroborated by a formal questionnaire sent to 15 students who have attended tutorials several times, in order to establish their confidence, motivations and goals in more detail.

The questionnaire asked each respondent to rate their level of confidence on a number of issues, such as producing work to the required standard, writing in an appropriate academic style, understanding the topics discussed in lectures and seminars, and remaining motivated until the end of their degree. It then asked them to choose one answer from a range of possibilities to indicate the main reason they came to learning skills tutorials; what they considered to be the most useful outcome of a tutorial; and the most likely reason for doing well in an assignment (Table 1):

The main reason for coming to learning skills tutorials

To get the grammar or referencing checked  
 To make sure I’ve answered the question properly  
 To get help with structuring my work well  
 To make sure I understand what I’ve got to do  
 For help with academic practices like writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, etc.

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The most useful outcome of a learning skills tutorial	To have any grammar mistakes corrected To talk through the question and what I have to do to get a good mark To get some ideas on how to go about completing the task To learn more about academic skills so I get it right next time
Reason for success in an assignment	My own ability Putting in the effort Luck (e.g. lecturer marking it was in a good mood) I got help (from a tutor, friend, etc) It wasn't too difficult

*Table 1  
Establishing the goals of a tutorial and attributing success*

Although confidence can and does vary with context and activity, along a wide continuum (Sander and Sanders, 2006), the students questioned here can be categorised as being relatively more or less confident in terms of their academic ability. When this was mapped against what they felt was the most common reason for coming to a tutorial, there were some overlaps evident in their reported preferred outcomes. From this information, it was possible to build up a model of the learning strategy that would be most effective for each kind of learner (Table 2). 'Checking' is considered to be focussed on areas such as grammar, spelling, referencing and writing in the third person, while 'questioning' covers the underlying elements of structure, understanding the brief and building a relevant argument:

		CONFIDENCE	
		Low	High
PURPOSE	Checking	Practical tasks Checklist	Rehearsal Discussion
	Questioning	Planning Goal-setting/monitoring	(Task in context) (Activity)

*Table 2  
Student-valued learning strategy according to confidence and purpose of tutorial*

Those students who were low in confidence who came to have their work checked appreciated using checklists and strict, narrow guidelines for fulfilling requirements, such as referencing examples. In this way they could take control of their learning by following small, set tasks, gaining a feeling of competence as they gradually worked down the list. For questioning students lacking in confidence, a similar strategy can be employed but on a more structural level. Agreeing tasks and activities for the student to complete - either in that session or by the following one - engendered a similar feeling of control and progress, but looked a little deeper below the surface to the underlying architecture of the assignment. Tasks set might include developing an essay plan, drafting an introduction or preparing aims

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and objectives. The purpose is to help the student take control by goal-setting and planning the different components of the assignment.

Where confidence is greater, the learning strategy changes accordingly as the concordant increase in self-efficacy allows for improved performance. Self-efficacy describes an individual's own perception of how well they will be able to deal with a particular real or potential situation (Bandura, 1982). Checking for these students becomes more a matter of rehearsal, of trying out tasks, taking more of a risk and discussing the requirements in more detail. These students often query the meaning of particular words in essay titles, for example, but come with their own definitions to test. In theory, students high in confidence who come with a questioning stance would be likely to value taking this further and looking at each task in the context of their course or learning as a whole, making links between each piece of work and the skills involved. As yet, no student comfortably falls within this category although some certainly come close.

## Student motivations and goals

It is the reasons behind these choices and preferences that can provide a gateway to student motivations and greater understanding. To be constructive and useful, a teaching session must help the student to make progress within the context of the individual's expectations, prior experiences and perceptions of the task demands. It is often feared that by encouraging 'surface' learning processes, the student will continue to rely on them, but the best approach chosen is the one that best matches the student's motivational state and experience of the particular teaching environment (Biggs, 1994). So although checking may appear to be a surface strategy concerned only with outward appearances and thus should be developed towards a more questioning stance, for the student low in confidence that would not necessarily be the most useful direction for improvement. Gains in confidence is often cited as a principle benefit of being a student (Morgan and Holly, 1994) and it may be more appropriate for that student to retain a more mechanical approach, but become more confident in their work and their ability by focusing on the task. In this way, the uncertain student has the opportunity to become comfortable with the discourse of learning and take a more active role in their own knowledge construction, since to grasp the meaning behind the discourse is to create new meaning and take control of learning (Marton, 1975).

Insight into the processes that drive these preferences can show the best tactic to take with different students. The model is expanded below to underline the students' approach and overall motivation for learning (Table 3).

		CONFIDENCE	
		Low	High
PURPOSE	Checking	1. Viewpoint: temporary exertion ⇒ Task diligence	2. Viewpoint: aptitude ⇒ Self-improvement
	Questioning	3. Viewpoint: chance ⇒ Making progress	4. Viewpoint: expectancy ⇒ Task appreciation

*Table 3  
Student approach and motivation*

For students low in confidence coming to check that their work is correct, having a checklist to follow and focussing on corrections and improvements that are immediately achievable connects to their concerns for task diligence (sector 1). Achievement goals of this nature do not rely on prior experience, ability or confidence for success but do nevertheless allow for student engagement with the task (Covington, 2000). In a sense this rewards the student for investing in their learning but is not a stable, long term strategy. The expectancy of success is a key motivator for action but depends on whether the cause for success can be considered to be stable or not. When a positive outcome can be attributed to a stable cause, such as aptitude, then the student is more likely to believe that the next attempt at a similar task will be equally successful. However, a cause such as effort is more unstable, and so the outcome cannot be predicted: it could be just the same as before, or it could be different (Weiner, 1985). The aim, therefore, is to move the low confident, checking student, towards a viewpoint of aptitude with the goal of self-improvement, represented in sector 2 of the model.

The use of discussion and rehearsal acknowledges a student's higher level of confidence and adds challenge, but remains contained and controlled. As the emphasis is on the student's own aptitude, the causes of success are considered to be more stable and therefore assured, and so aspiration will continue to rise (Weiner, 1985). This creates a positive feedback loop, as a student confident enough to anticipate success - and, moreover, to attribute that success to an internal cause (their own ability) - will experience enhanced self-esteem when the result is indeed successful, and thus raise their confidence further. For these students, the difference lies in their expectations. Low confidence students display outcome expectations, whereby fulfilling certain behaviours, such as checking their work against referencing guidelines, will lead to a certain outcome. Students with more confidence concentrate instead on their own ability to produce the behaviours that will lead to a satisfactory outcome (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002).

For students to be able to transfer their learning from one context to another, they need to be able to recognise commonalities in the underlying structure of their work (Cottrell, 2001). In terms of learning skills tutorials, those students who start with more of a questioning mode, seeking to understand that structure and its meaning, these students are focussed on making progress overall, rather than just in the particular task at hand. Although their confidence may be low (sector 3), they are becoming active agents in their own learning, setting goals and planning ways to improve (Dickinson, 1995). The focus on mastering the task at hand is a way of increasing their competence, but the planning aspect helps to remove the task from the immediate context and allow for its connection to other, similar ones. The goals set are generally manageable and achievable, and directed towards learning overall. By shifting the focus from the task to the person in their learning context, the student is better able to break out of what might be a constrained pattern of behaviour to one which is more responsive to the situation. Instead of restricting their activities to those which conform to an idea of a good student, i.e. one who can cite and reference correctly, or construct a grammatically correct sentence, they are more aware of their academic goals generally and their own capacity for dealing with any challenges that may arise as a result (Ridley, 1991).

Chance is considered to be these students' dominating viewpoint because their low confidence can inhibit their sense of self-efficacy. Where self-efficacy is lacking, people can behave inefficiently regardless of how well they might know what it is they have to do, as success is predicated on people making optimal use of their abilities. Questioning and clarifying task requirements and regularly appraising performance and progress can help to strengthen self-efficacy by demystifying academic skills and practices, as well as by providing a means of coping with task demands (Bandura, 1982). In addition, setting realistic, achievable goals, planning ahead and beginning to take responsibility can all contribute to helping the student take control of their learning (Dickinson, 1995), since the achievement of goals and subgoals marks out the distance travelled and the progress made, thus confirming increases in self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982).

The aim for students who fall into this category would be to help them develop and enhance their confidence, in order for them to internalise the locus of control and feel responsible for their successes thus moving into sector 4 of the grid. Ultimately, students will see the task in

context, understand how it relates to their learning generally and approach it with an expectancy of success through confidence in their own ability (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). As yet, none of the students who answered the research questionnaire appeared to fall into this category. Of the 15 respondents, ten gave answers that suggested they belonged in sector 2. Most of these were third years, so it would be interesting to expand the research to establish whether there is a change over time and with experience. These students are motivated to succeed and want to do more to understand. Over time, and with continued practice, a deeper appreciation of how their learning connects and relates will be available to them. An alternative pathway into sector 4 is open to the three respondents placed in sector 3. For these students, time, practice and encouragement to reflect on their achievements will translate their more luck-based viewpoint into one of expectancy. The final two students both identified themselves as belonging to sector 1, and their development could take either of the two pathways possible; which one depends on student attributes, prior experiences, motivations and self-awareness. Neither should be considered as less useful or desirable than the other.

## Conclusion

The benefits of this model to those involved in student learning are twofold. First of all, it can help structure the content of tutorials towards what would be most immediately beneficial to the student, answering their needs for control vs. reassurance; task performance vs. self-improvement. However, more than that it can help map out a route towards learner autonomy and outcome expectancy. By understanding how students approach their tasks in terms of their motivations, confidence and sense of control, it is possible to understand the reasons behind their behaviour and suggest more targeted ways of improving it. It is often not simply a question of ability but the interlinking of self-awareness, self-efficacy and confidence to create an attitude to learning that may be at odds with that desired by tutors. However, this model identifies a number of strategies that can be employed to enhance and emphasise student engagement and motivation, giving them a more positive learning experience and potentially improving their academic outcomes.

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