

Preparing students from a different culture for examinations: A pastoral care investment with costs and benefits

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Abstract

This study sought to address perceived student study skills needs, as part of a secondary school's pastoral care program. Utilising a teacher action research approach, the inquiry focused on three main areas: investigating students' prior study habits; the nature of existing, ineffective study habits that impaired performance; and ascertaining the impact of a study skills intervention program. Findings indicated that many students either were unaware of, or not employing, study skills. Ineffective time and self management impaired students' study performance, possibly linked to a 'cultural trace'. Perceived improvements in students' study habits were reported, both by students and teachers. Three likely reasons were identified: The imminence of exams acting as a catalyst, the newly learned study skills, and encouragement by the teacher.

Introduction

Study skills programs have become a significant tool in improving student study habits. Researchers accept that academic achievement becomes more difficult if effective study skills are not learnt and practised (Hulick, 1989) and that some students, if left to themselves, tend to employ ineffective study habits (Trawick, 1995). Instrumentally, effective study skills are needed as important learning tools in preparing students for examinations – especially those that have career implications for the individual. This has particular relevance for students in developing countries of the South Pacific, where the cost of 'squandering' once-only educational opportunities can be far-reaching.

Study skills programs (SSP) are often 'stand alone' efforts. However, they may also be perceived as part of, or foundational to, a school's proactive pastoral care program that is committed to meeting the personal, social and learning needs of students

(cf. Best, et al. 1996), and to developmental and educational goals such as those proposed by UNESCO: *Learning to know, to do, to live together* and *to be* (Delors, 2000). Moreover, there is a growing recognition by education authorities (cf. LNCT Glasgow, 2007), schools and colleges (cf. Danebank, 2007; C.H.A. College, 2007; Koonung Secondary College, 2007), mental health institutes (Vincent and Hazel, 2005) and academics (Hornby, et al. 2003) that pastoral care in schools incorporates the *intellectual* needs of students; which includes the learning of effective study skills. This viewpoint maintains:

Pastoral care and academic progress are inextricably linked. Academic care involves promoting well-being through academic structures and processes which are sympathetic to adolescent needs. It is linked to pastoral care in its attention to positive learning and developmental outcomes including knowledge of self, self efficacy, healthy risk taking, goal setting, negotiation, reflection and empowerment (McLaughlin, 2001, p1).

Context

Betikama Adventist College (BAC) is located on the island of Guadalcanal on the outskirts of Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. It is a multi-cultural, boarding secondary school operated by the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, with 25 teaching staff, whose qualifications range from certificate to master's level. There is also 26 ancillary staff.

While numbers may vary somewhat from year to year, student enrolment at the time of the study was over 400, with boys slightly outnumbering girls. One half of the student body came from a village background, and about 20% belonged to a range of Christian denominations other than the SDA faith tradition. About 20% of students came from

“Study skills programs are a significant tool in improving student study habits”

Guadalcanal, 30% from the large neighbouring island of Malaita, and the remainder from the length and breadth of the island nation. The student groups incorporate the three dominant cultures – Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian.

Students' ages ranged from 12 to 21. Form 6 (F6) is the final year of secondary schooling; (F7 has since been added) culminating in a Pacific-wide examination which is organised by the South Pacific Board of Educational Assessment based in Suva, Fiji. Each year there are some disappointments and unfulfilled potential, with easily observed poor study habits a likely cause. F6 students are taught some general study skills in English, but this is limited; there is no monitoring, and it seems that the exercise has minimal impact on student performance. This should be a concern for many teachers.

BAC is different from other local schools. It runs a farm to grow food for the kitchen and a carving shop and copper works to sell artefacts to tourists. As part of the school's philosophy of self-sufficiency and educating the whole person, *students* (boarding) are expected to help run the school program by working 12 hours per week during afternoons. This is the 'workline' program.

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Purpose and significance of the study

The purpose of the study was to teach F6 students study skills that would help them to overcome 'bad' (ineffective) study habits, and to encourage them to apply new skills effectively in their study. The study also sought to explore the impact of the SSP on student study habits.

The action research was significant because the study skills program was not just aimed at helping current students to develop effective study habits (including the efficient use of time resources); it could also lead to the study skills program being included, in the future, as part of the regular curriculum to assist other students. The potential impact of such a move should not be under-rated, given the very limited availability of local career openings as well as higher education, and overseas tertiary scholarships. The study thus met basic criteria for significance 'in terms of its potential for personal practice, institutional influence and (to some extent) the wider body of educational knowledge' (McDermott, 2002, p 141).

Research questions

The value of the study skills program was the central focus of the teacher action research. Three questions were investigated:

1. What study skills do F6 students already know and practise?
2. What 'bad' (ineffective) habits are impairing students' present study performance?
3. What impact will the implementation of a study skills program have on students' study habits and practices?

Definitions and de/limitations

For the purpose of this study specific meanings were given to selected terms. *Study skills* were defined as a variety of intervention strategies that enable students to utilise study time effectively; while *study habits* was a loosely used term to include pre-existing behaviour patterns that BAC students exhibited during their study time. *Action research* was regarded as systematic inquiry by teachers in the teaching/learning environment to gather information with the goal of gaining understanding (through reflective practice) and bringing about positive changes in educational practices and individuals' lives (see Mills, 2000, p 6).

It was felt that the large number of students (53) in the two F6 classes placed limitations on the available time resources. Also, it was decided to delimit the length of the study skills program to allow for maximum practice time before the scheduled examinations. The program was run with only the F6 'arts' (humanities subjects) class and monitoring concentrated on boarding students because of ease of access. Although motivation was regarded as a key factor in the literature for the success of study skills programs, it was considered to be too broad an area for investigation and beyond the scope of this study.

Review of the relevant literature

Current general literature (cf. Danebank, 2007; Vincent & Hazel, 2005; Carr-Gregg, 2004) effectively argues that pastoral care/student welfare includes caring for students' intellectual and academic needs. More specifically, earlier research has shown that students may not develop good study skills unless they are helped (Trawick, 1995), particularly erratic students (Levine, 1988). If study skills are not taught, significant differences develop between students (Haynes, 1990) and by tertiary level it tends to be only high achievers who have learnt how to study (Oosterhuis-Geers, 1993). It is evident that *teaching* study skills can improve students' study habits (Mussano, n.d.). Benefits of good study habits may include: Better grades (Thomas, 1993); fewer academic problems (Odell, 1996); increased ability to handle stress (Mussano, n.d.); reduced anxiety and increased perception of personal skills (Hulick, 1989); and enhanced self-regulation (Talbot, n.d.).

When should study skills be taught? Some proponents (Thomas, 1993) advocate developing them at every academic level. However, others (Tabberer, 1984) say senior high school (e.g. F6) is a particularly appropriate time because this is when students face new demands and have to work with

greater independence, but tend not to use study time well unless they are taught the skills.

It was anticipated that if the literature proved to be a reliable guide, F6 study habits were likely to be generally weak before the study skills program commenced. Consequently the program would teach students skills which, if practised, should bring benefits. However, it has been pointed out that good study habits do not guarantee success (Biggs, 1978), and that getting students to practise them can be challenging (Rauch and Fillenworth, 1995). Finally, motivation was identified in the literature as a factor in successful study skills programs (Tuckman, 1996). Overall the literature provided information that 'shed light' on the problem, helped enlarge the frame of reference for the present study, and assisted in collecting appropriate data.

Rationale for the methodology

An action research approach was taken in this study because of the perceived 'fit' between this methodology and pastoral care. Some scholars see action research as a distinctly caring practice:

While action research might begin with the commitment of the individual 'I', this is an 'I' who recognises her or himself in relation to others; and this is a reciprocal commitment enacted collectively.... And we care enough to take the trouble to do something about our own personal practice for the benefit of each other. Such recognition of personal accountability is an act of devotion, a prayerful act of care (McNiff, 1999:51).

This 'partnership' between action research and pastoral care has been illustrated, in the U.K., by the 'ARTE International Project,' supported by the University of Cambridge and three participating secondary schools in East Anglia. The ongoing project has demonstrated how action research in teacher education (ARTE) is utilised to explore personal and social dimensions of teaching and learning – a direction followed in the present SSP study in which participants were committed to students developing appropriate study skills.

The present study was *typical* in that it followed accepted positions of action research by (among others):

- focusing on professional and workplace situations;
- involving reflection and action;
- requiring (self) evaluation;
- incorporating collaboration with colleagues;
- endeavouring to bring about improvement;
- addressing a real, relevant problem;
- having participants gather data themselves.

On the other hand, the study was *atypical*, in not prescriptively following any specific model(s) of action research (and also in not using a customary free-flowing, narrative genre in reporting the

Table 1: Sequence of data collection procedures

1. General preliminary observations and reflection on F6 study habits.
2. Collegial dialogue with fellow F6 teachers about F6 study habits. (What are the perceptions and views of colleagues?)
3. Initial student survey of prior knowledge about study skills. (Students were required to make a list of study skills they knew or used.)
4. Student questionnaire/self-evaluation: 40 items, structured and open-ended, using a five-point Likert scale and covering four main areas:
 - identification of personal effective study strategies
 - 'bad' (ineffective) habits that spoil one's study
 - procrastination and failing to try
 - perceived needs in studying more effectively.
5. Student brainstorming session regarding six issues:
 - barriers to asking for teacher help
 - affirmation of students
 - the function of sanctions
 - 'workline'
 - teachers monitoring study
 - peer support groups.
6. Report to the staff (during a regular staff meeting) on student needs arising from the questionnaire and the brainstorming session.
7. Student Study Skills Program: Construction, implementation and application based on revealed need.

This was conducted over several sessions and included a ten-page booklet. Emphases were placed on:

 - time – when?
 - place – where?
 - subject matter – what? / priorities
 - strategies – how? how well?
 - goal setting – why?

Students were encouraged to apply the strategies in their daily study.
8. Interim survey of student progress. Students were required to respond to two multiple choice questions regarding:
 - (a) observance of timetable schedules for study
 - (b) self evaluation of current study practices.
9. Monitoring of student study practices on an informal basis by teachers.
10. Follow-up student questionnaire Students were asked to respond to questions about their study habits in relation to:
 - before the program
 - at the commencement of the program
 - after the program and continuing
 - never having adopted study skills strategies.
11. Post-survey of teachers: A one-page form requesting feedback according to seven criteria on a 4-point Likert scale, and also inviting comments in an open-ended section.

research, in preference to a more structured, stylised format).

Collection and analysis of data

Multiple complementary data collection procedures were employed to obtain various perspectives on the problem, and to increase the reliability of the findings. Table 1 outlines the sequence of data collection procedures. In many cases these were

not pre-determined but 'grew' from observations, discussion, earlier findings, brainstorming, and reflection. The initial observations and reflections (in phase 1) occurred over a five-month period, while the remaining phases (2-11, see Table 1) took up three months of intensive investigation.

Twenty-nine students participated in the study (N=29); twenty girls and nine boys, with seven girls being non-boarding students. Collaborative strategies involved the teaching staff as a whole, as well as specific groups of teachers.

The responses from surveys and questionnaires were tallied and totals were converted to percentages for analysis to reveal patterns or trends. Comments, observations and suggestions received from students and staff in response to open-ended questions were read, categorised according to common themes, summarised and reflected on.

Ethical considerations

BAC school administration and staff were consulted about the purpose of the action research, including the reason the program could not be extended to the Science class. This was explained to all F6 students. With anonymity for all student responses assured, and with no apparent sensitive issues involved, ethical criteria for the study were met.

Findings

Personal observation and reflection over two school terms identified a potential student need, while teaching colleagues showed a general interest in the area of study skills following a staff meeting.

The *initial student survey* was very revealing. It showed that 36% of students were unable to name any study skills, and a further 32% could name only one. Thus two-thirds of the class knew almost no study skills while the remainder named very few.

This highlighted a considerable need and concerned teachers. At the same time it raised the potentially sensitive question of what study skills (if any) these students had learned during junior or middle high school classes!

The *student questionnaire/self evaluation* findings disclosed much about student study habits. Students followed relatively few 'good' (effective) study habits on a regular basis. On the positive side, 'taking notes and filing them' appeared as one of the stronger habits (55%). Some 'good' habits the students *did* follow (e.g. 'taking short breaks') were open to abuse, such as time wasting. It was surprising to discover that students 'usually' or 'always' prayed about their study (59%); perhaps a 'pious hope' in light of their other actions (or lack of). Helpful habits like asking teachers for help were followed by very few students (4%). Students were much more likely

to seek help from their peers (44%), which pointed to possible alternative bases for organising existing study groups. Furthermore, responses why students might *not* ask teachers for help with their studies indicated that girls were two or three times less likely to approach teachers for help than boys. The main reasons given by girls were shyness, fear, or lacking courage or skills to ask 'properly.' It is reasonable to conclude that these responses seem to point to deeply embedded cultural issues regarding the role of women in Solomon Islands society.

Several 'good' habits were conspicuous by their absence. The F6 class was almost unaware of self-motivational strategies (81%), and the majority had neither a list of study priorities (61%), nor an effective study timetable (70%).

The data indicated that 'wasting time in study periods' (45%) and staying up late (44%) ranked high on the 'bad' habits list. Procrastination was also a significant problem (79%), with perceived causes commonly centering on ineffective self-management and lack of self-confidence, two areas that study skills are claimed to address.

Of the various options of assistance offered, many students wanted all of them, with 'teachers giving extra study help' (93%), 'teachers monitoring student study' (78%), and 'a study skills program' (74%) being the most popular choices. The term 'peer support group' (one of the options) was not understood. This is ironic, given the Solomon Islands' strong communal culture. This avenue of assistance was not pursued further.

The *student brainstorming session* yielded some useful ideas about student-teacher relations in the context of extra help, with emphasis on teachers making themselves more available for help and students taking greater responsibility for their actions.

A *report to the staff* on the findings of the student survey, questionnaire, and brainstorming made staff aware of how they could help, but they did not agree to students having extra study time. They insisted that students effectively utilise existing, available time resources; teachers first wanted to see some improvement in study habits. A request to re-instate 'class devotional periods' into the timetable was granted and this helped strengthen student-teacher bonds and also appeared to increase student motivation.

The *study skills program* was well received and very well attended. It was conducted over several sessions in out-of-class time. Participants appreciated the ten-page booklet which dealt with the effective planning and management/utilisation of:

- time;
- the study environment (physical and

“Students followed few effective study habits on a regular basis”

- emotional);
- goals and tasks;
- strategies to learn subject content (understanding, recording, reviewing and memorising).

An *interim survey* of students' progress, however, showed only limited improvement, initially. A majority (68%) of the class did not persist in monitoring their study time and 28% had not even started, while the desire to engage in personal monitoring was maintained by only one student. However 60% claimed that their study habits had improved, but only 'a little'. The remaining students admitted to no improvement. However, this admission stirred them into action.

As time passed, *monitoring of student study practices* showed that students' study habits improved noticeably; students were quieter, they increasingly sought solitude for their study, and wasted far less time, presenting quite a contrast to the Science class (who were not part of the study). It was interesting to note that while the Science class members were given a copy of the study skills program for their notice board and were offered their own personal copies if they asked for them, they declined the challenge. Instead, they were observed frequently wasting time and making a lot of noise.

On reflection, there were three likely reasons for the observed improvements: The nearness of the approaching exams, the newly learned study skills, and encouragement from the teacher.

The *follow-up questionnaire* was administered just before the exams. Student responses, supported by teacher observations, showed that whilst some 'bad' habits persisted (e.g. procrastination, and late nights), many of them decreased or ceased. Also, many new ideas/techniques were tried and adopted, notably: Following priorities, setting goals, and dividing up big tasks. The only program suggestion shunned was asking teachers for help (a cultural problem), whereas devotional periods and prayer, note-taking, reading and memorising skills were deemed particularly helpful. On a 10-point scale, most students felt their study habits had improved 3-5 points, with six students feeling they had improved 10 points! This was probably an overstatement, but it certainly indicated a considerable improvement in confidence and coping skills. Reasons given by students for improvements centred on insights gained from the study skills program. The tiny minority, who improved little, admitted a lack of interest in achievement.

As part of the *post-survey of teachers*, five teachers (who were responsible for teaching six Humanities subjects) were surveyed about F6 study habits. All of the teachers noticed some

improvement, the only exception being in Maths, a regular 'bane' of many Humanities students. There may be a logical explanation for this, however. For entry to tertiary education, the result in one subject (the lowest) is not counted. With Humanities students often struggling with Maths, it is usually the subject in which they 'economise' on effort.

In comparing teacher and student perceptions it was noteworthy that teachers' perceptions of improvement were lower than students' own estimates.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study dealt with three questions. These focused on investigating students' prior study habits, the nature of existing ineffective study habits that impaired performance, and ascertaining the impact of a study skills intervention program.

The various data which were collected clearly showed that the majority of students (although in their final year of secondary schooling) seemed unaware of, and practised few, study skills. This highlighted a manifest deficiency and the need for students to acquire effective learning tools earlier on in their secondary schooling *vis a vis* their final year. It also raised the question of a whole-school approach to learning, the need for clear communication between teachers of junior classes and senior classes, and the setting of common goals.

Ineffective time and self-management by students were revealed as being impairments to study performance. A case could be argued that these two impairments have a cultural trace. This should not be surprising as education always takes place in a cultural context (the family, classroom, school, and the wider community) and teachers with a Western background should not underestimate the strength of traditional Solomon Islands culture, in which using available time resources for social-community purposes competes with, or in many instances has priority over individual academic (study) considerations.

Furthermore, some data indicated that cultural factors appeared to work against female students. In a patriarchal society, cultural correctness does not encourage a younger person asking an older person a question, particularly in a learning/school context, where the flow of questions is usually expected to be in the opposite direction. The situation increases in cultural sensitivity when the questioner is an adolescent female student and the questioned an adult male teacher. It could be a mistake, however, to attribute too much importance to gender. Against a broader background of observation and teacher experience (beyond the immediate boundaries of

“There were three likely reasons for improvements: approaching exams, newly learned study skills, and encouragement from the teacher”

this study), there would be general agreement that Solomon Islands village girls will not ask questions in school, but neither will village boys. On the other hand, some urban girls will ask questions of female and male teachers. It may be that reasons such as fear (seeming 'stupid', and ridicule from peers), lack of reasoning power (because the culture does not encourage a person to think critically), and lack of interest (many students appear not to care about the quality of their work – 'rough enough is good enough'), are equally strong, or perhaps even stronger disincentives to ask questions, than gender. These considerations could well give rise to a new cycle of teacher action research to explore and understand the complexities of students' learning, in the context of two powerful cultures colliding and competing in schools.

In ascertaining the impact of the study skills program, it should be conceded that, initially, it was limited, but increased with the imminence of final examinations, and as the value of the program became more obvious. Also, students were not averse to drawing on spiritual resources to complement their human efforts.

One specific recommendation resulting from the study was that the study skills program should become an integral part of BAC's pastoral care program and that a SSP should be presented at the beginning of the F6 academic year. It was further recommended that a similar program be developed for F4 (an entry level for many students who come to BAC) when appropriate skills and self-discipline are required.

Finally, in retrospect, the program identified and supplied a need and delivered some of the benefits outlined in the literature. However, there were also costs. The adage: *No pain; no gain*, appropriately summed up the SSP (for both students and teachers) in terms of the considerable effort and time resources spent. To reap the benefits of the SSP called for patience, persistence, self-discipline, and a willingness to change priorities. It was evident that the program had a significant impact on some individuals, as evidenced by the encouraging comment of one male boarding student who had a chequered school career: 'The program was a chance of a lifetime for me, because it has created a cornerstone for my future learning'.

Endnote

* At the time of conducting this action research, the writer taught Geography and Social Science at Betikama College, Honiara, in the Solomon Islands.

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