



ltsn

Learning and Teaching
Support Network

History, Classics & Archaeology

FINAL REPORT

2. Synopsis

Project Title	Enhancing critical thinking skills among part-time students in landscape history
Project leader	Dr Susan Oosthuizen
Lead Institution	Institute of Continuing Education University of Cambridge
Planned completion date	November 2003

Abstract of proposal (150-200 words)

The project arose out of our awareness that many adult students find it difficult to progress from narrative to analytical (critical) thinking, and related to the wider context of the development of student-centred, active learning in which critical thinking plays an essential part.

The aims of the project were:

- (1) to investigate the effect of attention to critical thinking skills on student retention and success in attaining the learning outcomes of courses in landscape history;
- (2) to experiment with the development of generic materials and teaching methods which explicitly address the development of critical skills in landscape history;
- (3) to focus particularly on students who have difficulties in making the shift from description to critical analysis;
- (4) to experiment with the development of straightforward diagnostic tools to help to identify these students at an early stage in the course.

The research team was practitioner-based and included the (salaried) Staff Tutor in Landscape History and Field Archaeology, and four Part-Time Tutors. Each member of the team based his/her research on one or more courses that he/she taught over a 10- or 20-week term. This allowed small-scale research to be carried out with several groups of students; it allowed for the comparison of results from several courses; it encouraged the development of a research ethos within the team and the encouragement of staff development within a democratic framework.

Results of investigation (300 words)

Outlining the outcomes from the work, and summarising any areas for future development and lessons learned.

One member of the team prepared a briefing paper early in the project which set out a progressive framework for the development of particular critical thinking skills and mapped them against the time-frame of a putative course. This enabled members of the team to develop their own exercises to encourage these particular skills among their students within the context of their own courses, thus integrating the delivery of the thinking skills with the delivery of a specific body of knowledge.

All tutors reported success with many of their students, and results indicate that this success depended crucially on this complete integration of subject and critical skills. The students took a very positive view of their

learning on these courses and of the generic/transferable nature of their learning. This outcome is likely to form the basis of continuing exploration among landscape historians at the Institute of ways of developing generic teaching materials which also produce general critical thinking outcomes.

In the end we did not develop a formal diagnostic test for a number of reasons: their formal, authoritarian character seemed inappropriate in the more interactive and egalitarian context of continuing education. The short time-scale of our courses meant that it was difficult to test the students, communicate the results and implement individual learning plans.

The project was successful in fostering the development of a research ethos among part-time tutors who would not usually participate in this kind of research, and contributed substantially to their own reflective practice.

The project did not impose a structure of delivery or of reporting on any of the team members. There were good reasons for this, among which differences in subject matter, of personal style, and the encouragement of creativity were dominant. However, in retrospect, we think that this was a mistake. We would like to take the project further by developing a consistent method of delivery, and a consistent method of tracking delivery and results, so that we could ensure comparability of results. We would also like to work on ways on tracking students so that we can measure their progress over time. We will be seeking funding for this work in the coming academic year.

We are enormously grateful to the LTSN for this funding-opportunity and for the grant. We have been able to use this money to establish the beginnings of a track record in educational research which we may not have been able to do otherwise and on which we would like to build. The two projects funded by the LTSN have reached several hundred students and impacted on the practice of at least 6 part-time tutors. We will be disseminating this work to other part-time tutors in the coming academic year.

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