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Mediated Support for Learning Enhancement (ELLI: Effective Life Long Learning Inventory)

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Background to this report

MacELLI¹ is a project for learning enhancement undertaken in the Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow, during session 2003-04, in collaboration with the university's Student Learning Service (SLS), and the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol.

The project was funded by a grant from the University of Glasgow's Learning and Teaching Development Fund. The project was linked closely to the University's Quality Enhancement Strategy and Employability Strategy. One part time researcher was employed on the project.

In 2002, the University of Glasgow expanded its Student Learning Service. Five Effective Learning Advisers were attached to faculties to provide advice and guidance on academic skills. As the service expanded and the number of students accessing the service increased, it became apparent that a number of students lacked confidence in managing the development of their learning:

- Many had a general awareness of areas in their learning that they wished to develop;
- Some recognised that their language and vocabulary of learning was underdeveloped;
- Some found it difficult to articulate their reasons for seeking support for their learning;
- A small number said they did not know why they needed help but had been told by their tutor, or advised, to attend;
- Some accessed the service only at crisis points (e.g. examination failure) or with an important deadline looming.

The increased and more diverse student population in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in recent years, and the dual strategy of widening participation and improving retention, has heightened the imperative, yet made it more challenging for HEI, to offer quality learning experiences, provide opportunities for learning to be enhanced, and foster transferable skills.²

Growth in student numbers has reduced time that teaching staff can commit to this with individual students. HEI have sought to address this in a number of ways such as establishing centres for learning enhancement, and student learning services, developing opportunities for peer-supported learning and providing resources and learning opportunities that can be accessed by students.

This paper explores an initiative offering students an opportunity for learning enhancement at a third level institution. We:

- Outline the nature of the initiative and discuss the preferred learning enhancement resource for the project.
- Consider the impact of the resource and its potential benefits for learners by reviewing the level of learner engagement with the project and student feedback on their experience.

An analysis of student participation and feedback suggests that students respond positively to opportunities for learning enhancement. These experiences can be transformative, affirming and awareness raising. Engagement with opportunities to enhance learning can be both a reflective and developmental experience for the learner, confirming that the *process* is as important as the *outcome*. When offered a graduated programme of support, learners can choose their level of engagement. Opportunities for learning enhancement:

- should be available to all students;
- should include direct mediation for those who request it, minimising staff involvement in the initial phase.
- can allow for increased staff involvement in later phases.

Developing a learner identity

A number of students exhibit a weak-learning identity. They may lack confidence in their learning and be limited in their ability to articulate their experience using a language of learning. Without ownership of learning, understanding why and how they learn the way they do, it can be difficult for a learner to realise and develop. However, there is a danger that with a deficit model of provision, an important stage in the learning process can be bypassed.

Where learners develop a language of learning they can:

- Begin to articulate and reflect on their previous and current learning experiences;
- Consider factors affecting these;
- Work on new strategies to develop and enhance their learning.

It is an integral part of the learning process. The learner is guided from reflection to action in an enabling and empowering way. One way to achieve this is to help learners develop a learning profile.

Greater attention is now being paid to students' learning experiences and opportunities. Raising students' awareness of their learning preferences can help them adopt different styles and become more flexible learners.³ Where opportunities exist for developing learning skills, the quality of students' learning improves and they experience more success.⁴

Fostering and articulating a learning identity in university teachers is especially important. When teachers understand their own learning development, they are better equipped to help enhance the learning of others.⁵

One incentive for piloting a project with the cohort and elsewhere e.g. supervision and tutorials, is the importance of embedding academic skills as part of a programme of study, rather than an optional add on.

Resources for embedding academic learning skills

There are ranges of resources, which can help learners think about their learning. Simple examples include SWOT analysis; more sophisticated examples are VARK (Visual, Aural, Read / write and Kinesthetic) questionnaires and Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI). They are most effective when their use includes mediation by a teacher. They are not as effective in supporting learning when used as stand-alone resources. Effective mediation enhances students' understanding of their learning preferences and provides guidance on how to develop these further.

Learning Power

The ELLI project trialled a mediated online learner-profiling questionnaire, designed to find out how learners perceive themselves in relation to seven dimensions of learning power.

The ELLI questionnaire is a learning experience in itself. By visually representing a learner's profile on a histogram it demonstrates areas of strength and areas for development in learning.⁶ It challenges learners to think about various aspects of learning including some that they may not have been aware of.

Learning power acknowledges and combines:

- A complex mix of dispositions;
- Lived experiences;
- Social relations;
- Values;
- Attitudes and beliefs that coalesce to shape the nature of an individual's engagement with any particular learning opportunity.

The learning dimensions employed are as follows:

- Changing and Learning
- Meaning Making
- Curiosity
- Creativity
- Learning Relationships
- Resilience
- Strategic Awareness

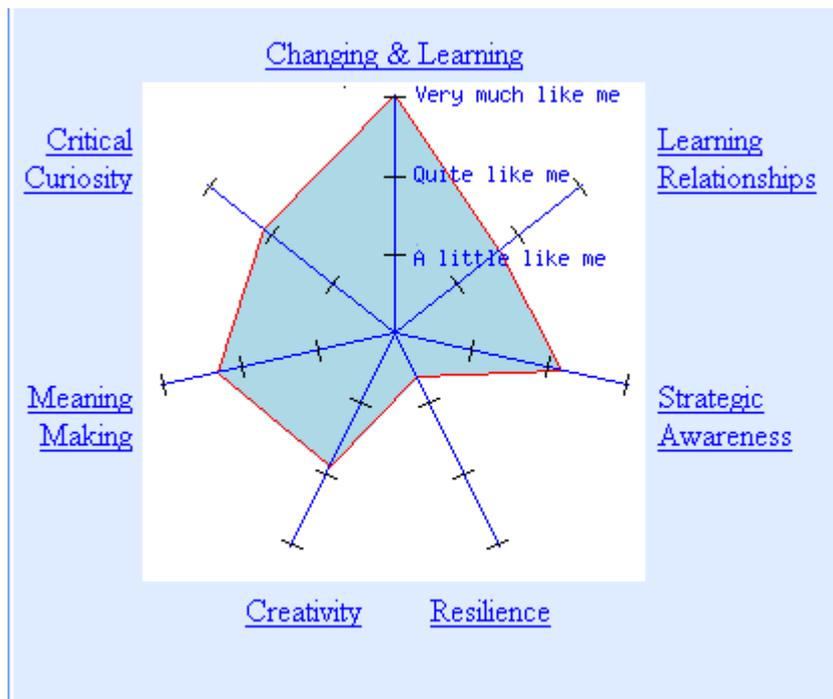


Figure 1: An ELLI Learner Profile

ELLI differs from similar resources in that mediation forms a crucial part of the learning development process, with the profile returned to the learner, learning strategies discussed and a plan of action agreed. The learner can complete further profiles to gauge development in their own learning.

Origin and development of ELLI profiling

ELLI developed out of a research project at the University of Bristol, funded by the Lifelong Learning Foundation. The aim of this research project was to identify the characteristics and qualities of effective lifelong learners and to develop resources and strategies for tracking, evaluating and recording people's growth as effective real-life learners. There were two major research strands, a scientific strand concerned with identifying the components of 'learning power' and a dynamic strand concerned with exploring how those (provisional) dimensions of 'learning power' might be useful in teaching and learning in the classroom.⁷

The ELLI project was piloted across four schools with sixteen teachers, who received learning profiles for individuals in their classes and the average profiles for the whole class. This information was used to decide on new 'learning interventions' that were specifically aimed at nurturing students' learning power. These interventions ranged from re-organising the way in which information was presented to students to a specific focus on self-assessment using the language of learning. It was found that these interventions made a difference to students' learning power profiles after two

terms - in particular they became more resilient and more strategically aware of their own learning and less dependent and fragile.

The key themes underpinning the learning interventions were:

- Teacher professional vision and values;
- The creation of positive interpersonal relationships which involved trust, affirmation and challenge;
- Quality of dialogue;
- Use of learning language, modelling and imitation;
- Teacher professional judgement.

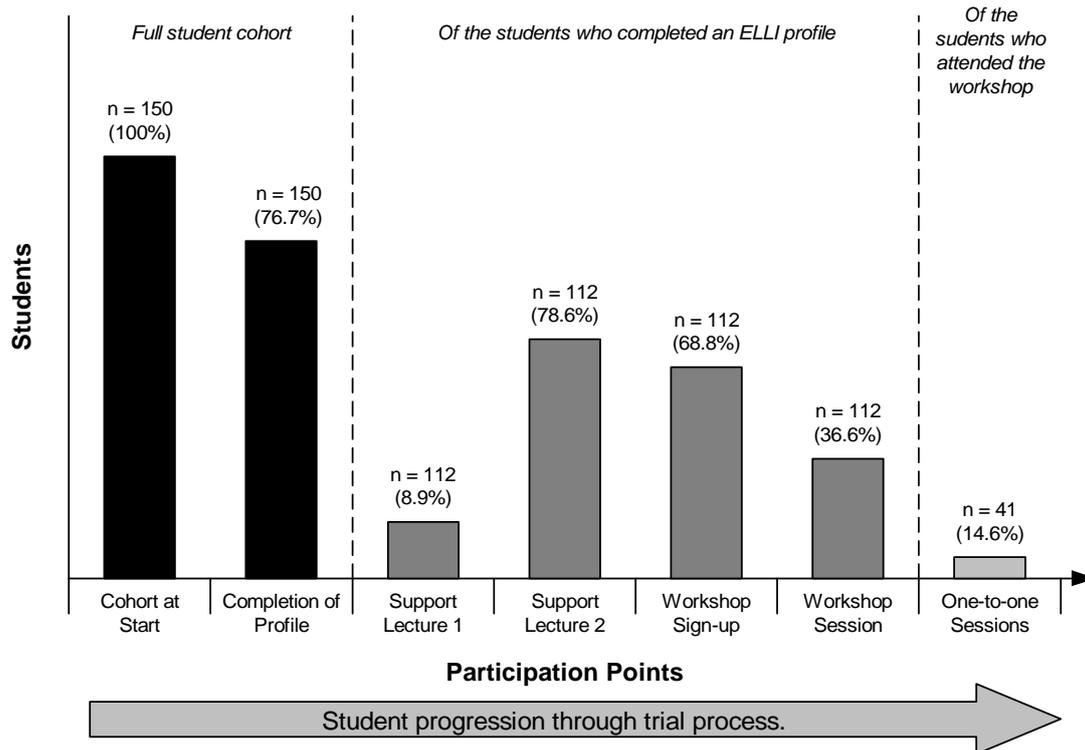
While there is no single formula for success, these dimensions appear to be an important part of the ecology of learning. The critical factor is thought to be the professional vision of the teacher and the school climate.⁸

Transferability of ELLI profiling to post compulsory education

The original resource was developed for use and was piloted in the primary and secondary school sectors. The success of the ELLI project in enhancing learning in the pilot group, suggested that this might be an appropriate resource for supporting learning in TEI/HEI. The developers wished to evaluate its transferability at third level, looking at how it would need to be adapted and its potential impact. This is the focus of a separate collaborative project.

MacELLI was offered to first year students on a BEd programme in session 2003-2004. The resource was administered and delivered by the Faculty Effective Learning Advisor (ELA).⁹ Students were initially informed about the learning profile at the BEd programme induction and were advised of the purposes of the profile, the stages involved, how to access the online profile and the forms of mediation that would be available once they had completed the profile. The profile was recommended to the students as a voluntary activity. From a cohort of 150, 76.7% of students completed the profile, many within a few days of it becoming available.

On completion of the profile, a phased programme of mediation was available. This included an optional lecture explaining the profile and strategies to enhance learning. Students could then engage in a workshop to discuss their profile further and to explore additional ways to develop and enhance their learning. Individual tutorials with the ELA were also available on request. 61.4% of those who had completed the profile attended the optional lecture. A workshop was attended by 27.3% of the students who had attended the lecture.¹⁰ 4% of the students requested an individual tutorial. Participation levels are indicated in the diagram below:



The aims of the project were:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of ELLI as a resource for use with students accessing the SLS;
- To evaluate the role ELLI could play as part of the learning experience of students on the first year of an ITE programme;
- To develop ELLI as a resource for use in HE.

It was hoped that as a result of engagement with ELLI, students would have:

- A better understanding of their learning through their personal learning profile;
- A range of learning strategies suggested and modelled for them that they could adopt, adapt or develop, to suit their learning profile;
- Knowledge, understanding and confidence in using language that describes learning, and which contributes to the view that learning is a life long experience.

The level of engagement with ELLI suggests that the participants welcomed and made effective use of opportunities to enhance their understanding of their own learning. Engagement or disengagement with the mediation process at its various stages also suggests that the participants were making choices about how well they understood their learning and the extent to which they felt it was an area they would like to develop further.

Evaluating the impact of learning experiences and opportunities has the inherent difficulty that the impact may not be immediately felt but may become more apparent or develop with time. In the context of MacELLI, it could be

evaluated by enabling learners to complete a further profile later in their programme of study, though there is concern that further completion of profiles could dilute the quality of the experience and process.

Both qualitative and quantitative measures were employed in the study. Data were used to evaluate both the participation of the students at given times within the process, and as part of the methods for evaluation of the ELLI resource.

For this phase of the programme, learners were asked to reflect on their experience of MacELLI by completing an evaluation questionnaire and by participation in a final workshop where they would write a reflective narrative about the experience. These were used to gain an insight into the students' perceptions of the ELLI system as a resource to aid their own learning. Of the 76.7% of students who undertook an ELLI profile 11.6% completed an evaluation questionnaire, which was structured around the participation points. A further 3.3% participated in the reflective narrative workshop.

The project aimed to provide students with a better understanding of their learning experience through a personal learning profile. Of the students involved in this part of the evaluation, 84.6% of them viewed the feedback provided after completing their ELLI profile within three weeks of completing it; 15.4% viewed the feedback immediately. After viewing the feedback, 23.1% of students felt that this had provided enough information for them to understand their own learning profile, 15.4% of students felt that the results from the profile were a good reflection of them as learners, 76.9% felt it did reflect them to a degree and 7.7% felt it did not at all.

A larger percentage of students, 46.2%, however, were unsure whether they understood their learning profile from the feedback provided and 15.4% felt they did not understand it. Despite this, over half of the students, (53.8%) felt that they gained a sufficient understanding to help them know what they could do to better themselves as a learner and 38.5% of them consciously modified their learning as a result.

Qualitative statements from both the evaluation and the reflective narratives support this. A number of learners felt that the profile had contributed to an improvement in their learning and that they had developed beyond their initial profile. For example,

'I am now more aware of myself as learner and that learning is a lifelong process'

'I have now given more thought to learning processes and now know that there are situations that can enhance or inhibit my learning'.

'It gave me a great insight to into my learning and helped me understand it';

'It helped me recognize traits and preferences and showed me how to optimise these'.

In the reflective narratives, participants wrote that

'It made me more aware of my strengths as well as weaknesses';

'I learned to accept that we all do learn differently';

'I wasn't aware of the type of learner I was; however MacELLI has encouraged me to examine my learning and reflect on it. Having completed the profile, I became aware of areas of strength and areas that I would like to develop, in particular, working with others.'

The project also sought to enhance learning by providing information on a range of learning strategies that could be adopted, adapted or developed for an individual learning profile. This occurred in the follow-on workshop.

Of those students in this sample who attended a workshop session, a third felt that the workshop session helped them to know what they could do to improve as a learner and all but one modified their learning as a result. One student was unsure whether the workshop helped him to know how to better his learning, but made changes to it anyway. Within the evaluation sample, two students had requested a one-to-one session. Both students felt that these sessions were effective and further guided them in modifying their learning. These students had previously made modifications to their learning as a result of both the ELLI profile and the workshop session.

The qualitative statements show more explicitly that some learners modified their learning strategies after engagement with Mac ELLI. For example:

'I have been taught things through ELLI which I never knew existed or had not really thought about';

One learner reported making specific changes as a result of engagement with the process, modifying their approach to assignments:

'Made more plans when it came to assignments and made more time to read information. I made notes of only the necessary information for assignments instead of trying to write everything down'.

Others reported that as a result of the process:

'I thought more before starting essays and for class work' etc

One learner reported that:

'My results stated that I was not very creative when learning, I have tried to vary my learning styles throughout the year to establish the most effective method..... e.g. mind maps, instead of sticking to what I originally used ... attending the session introduced me to other methods of learning, thus allowing me to vary my learning styles.'

In the reflective narratives participants wrote

'I wanted to concentrate on being more confident in my approach to collaborative work and feel that attending the workshop did indeed help me to do this.'

'I feel that the MacELLI feedback helped me to take on board other strategies for learning.'

'I feel that Mac ELLI helped me realise that everybody learns in different ways and not to get disheartened if I don't understand at first, and just to try another technique of learning.'

As well as extending knowledge and understanding about learning styles and strategies, the project also aimed to help improve students' confidence in the articulation of their own learning identity, needs and aspirations, which contribute to a life long learning experience.

After engaging with the MacELLI process, 38.5% of students felt that they had developed a wider language with which to describe their own learning. All of these students also felt that they had gained confidence in talking about and describing their learning experiences to others. One student did not feel that their language had developed, however, they did feel more confident about their learning, having completed a profile.

The statements made in the evaluations and the reflective narratives reinforce this. For example:

'I feel I have more knowledge about learning now but am unsure how to express it'

'I am now more aware of myself as learner and that learning is a life long process'

Several learners reported that while initially they had thought of themselves as 'individual' or 'independent' learners, their learning experiences had shown that they preferred collaborative learning. This may be the result of the learning opportunities and experiences associated with their programme of study and the ELLI profile and process affirmed this. Consequently they spoke of increased confidence as a result of this. For example, one student reported that

'I felt that I was an independent learner who lacked confidence in group situations. However, now I feel that I can participate in group activities and offer my ideas as well as take others on board.'

From the cohort that completed an online ELLI profile (76.7%), only 2% undertook no further part with the process, whilst the remaining 74.7% took part in one or more of the sessions offered to use their completed profiles as a

resource to better their learning. Responses varied with regard to the mediation that was available following the completion of the profile. For some learners, the on-line profile with its immediate feedback was sufficient. For example,

'Felt the on-line report was effective, didn't need a workshop'.

For others some element of intervention was seen as helpful.

'I felt I needed some help understanding it. It was a bit hard to understand...after talking to the ELA I understood it and now I know what I need to do.'

'The workshop provided an opportunity to raise questions and discuss the results.'

Other aspects of the profile that appealed to a number of participants were the speed and ease of access from any location.

The results suggest that engaging with MacELLI can have a positive influence through encouraging students to consider their own learning processes. It would seem that whilst the feedback provided from the profiles is understood to varying levels, students are taking an increased level of control and autonomy over the way they undertake learning in response. Evidence suggests that the ELLI profiles may well be more effective at promoting this manner of thinking than workshop sessions. This indicates a level of self-sufficiency within the ELLI system making it an effective aid to learning.

The feedback also indicates that ELLI can improve the students' language associated with their own learning processes. As would be expected, it was also shown that this increased the students' overall confidence in discussing learning experiences. In the case of one student, however, evidence indicates that improved vocabulary may not be solely responsible for increasing levels of confidence, and that other factors, implicit within the student experience of using the ELLI system, may contribute. Most significantly, for several students, it was evident that the process allowed them to:

- Better understand their own learning profile;
- Instigate changes to better their approaches to learning;
- Communicate their learning experience more easily to others;
- Develop a greater confidence.

This suggests that ELLI can be used effectively to influence several dimensions of students' learning positively, both as a discrete resource but also as an element within a larger mediated process.

Undertaking a profile such as ELLI on entry to a programme of study may be a helpful way for a learner to orientate and adapt, in a supported way, to the

complex world of learning at third level. This is increasingly important as the changing world of education and employment in the 21st century means that learners have opportunities to engage with education throughout their adult life. Consequently, it is no longer possible to speak of a 'typical student'. The student population in HEI increasingly reflects the diversity of modern society. This broad spectrum includes school leavers, adult students, as well as professionals and para professionals engaging in continuing professional development (CPD). The programmes of study they undertake are varied, ranging from non-accredited to certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate programmes at masters and doctoral level. For learners engaged in programmes of study leading to a teaching qualification, the profile can help them become aware not only of their own learning but that of the pupils they will teach.

Programme development

A profiling resource such as ELLI also has potential benefits for programme tutors by providing them with an overall view of learners within a programme. While resources such as ELLI enhance learning, they can also be an early warning resource for learners and tutors. Learners can be helped to understand under performance and under achievement thus reducing the risk of failure. Tutors can begin to think strategically about embedding the language of learning into programmes, incorporating assessments which draw an experience of ELLI, both by offering a wider range of assessment styles, and by inducting students into more challenging assessment activities. The language of learning needs to permeate course team meetings where tutors discuss learning profiles and the impact of their teaching styles on students' access to the curriculum.

This type of learning profile and mediation may not however be appropriate for all learners. 23.3% of the students who had the opportunity to complete a profile chose not to engage in the process at any stage. There may be a variety of reasons for this, but it may well be the case that this type of on-line profile does not suit some learners and other resources may be more appropriate.

Conclusions

The project demonstrated that students would avail of opportunities for learning enhancement if they are available and that it can be a transformative, affirming and awareness-raising experience. It also shows that engagement with opportunities to enhance learning can be a reflective and developmental experience for the learner, confirming that the process is as important as the outcome. A graduated programme of support enables learners to choose their level of engagement. This means that opportunities for learning enhancement are available to all students with more direct mediation available to those who request it and so minimizing staff involvement in the initial phase but maximizing it in later phases.

A resource such as ELLI can play an important part in meeting the challenges faced by HE, by contributing to quality learning experiences, providing specific opportunities for learning to be enhanced and fostering transferable skills.

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¹ The learning enhancement resource selected was ELLI – Effective Life Long Learning Inventory. For its application in Scotland, the name was adapted to MacELLI.

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⁵ Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum Council (SCCC) (1995) *Teaching for Effective Learning* Dundee: (SCCC)

⁶ ELLI Homepage, www.beinglearnercentred.co.uk

⁷ <http://www.beinglearnercentred.co.uk/elli/research.php>

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Margery McMahon, one of the co-authors was the Faculty Effective Learning Advisor in 2002-2003

¹⁰ Students were asked to sign up for the workshop at the lecture. 51.3% of the students signed up for a workshop though only 27.35% of students ultimately attended the workshop.