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The evolution of a research paper course

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Area of innovation

This chapter is about learning how to write research papers, but that is not the main focus here. Rather, it is about the learning that occurs through trying to innovate – not only learning to understand the nature of innovation itself, but also learning about how others may react to an innovation, whether they are students, other teaching staff or administrative bodies.

The chapter details the evolution of a large, multi-section university undergraduate writing and academic skills course in the Department of English at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. This is a sixth-semester course, in an eight-semester degree plan, taken by English and Education majors students. Although student numbers vary semester to semester, the course averages around 10 sections with 15 or more students in each section, with several thousand students now having completed the course. Covering a 16-year development period, the chapter describes the twists and turns of negotiation and accommodation with students, teaching staff and administration, and the manner in which adjustments were made to the course design to resolve problems and improve the running of what has now become a relatively ambitious undertaking in this particular context: the eventual production of a full research paper, including all of the typical stages of question identification, proposal writing, literature survey, instrument design and data collection, analysis and findings, through to presentation at a conference. Whilst this may seem a rather commonplace demand in many undergraduate programmes, in the context described here this represents a significant undertaking, given the educational limitations and background of many of the students. For most of the students involved, the research paper is by far and away the most difficult challenge they encounter in their undergraduate studies, which requires significant skills in supervising and guiding students on the part of teaching faculty.

Impetus for the innovation

Like many innovations in education, the course described here actually began life as something of a rebellion against the established course offerings, perhaps driven more by an emotional reaction than by rational planning. On entering the Department of English from the Language Centre, English students were originally taken through a series of four language courses, entitled Language Development I – IV (LDI-LDIV). Although the precise nature of the student experience varied section to section, figure X.1 represents the typical programme of study they met, as set out in the official brief course descriptions.

Language Development I
This course aims to consolidate the linguistic and skills base achieved by students in the Language Centre courses, and to confirm and extend this base within the context of an academic department, especially students' grammatical competence beyond intermediate level.

Language Development II
This course is aimed at increasing students' ability to read independently and critically a rich variety of texts. Students learn how to analyse argument, point of view, bias, assumptions and intended readership. They continue to develop their vocabulary and background knowledge.

Language Development III
This course focuses on reading and writing analytical essays. Essay types to be written are cause/effect, comparison/contrast, argument/persuasion and another open/combination type. Readings are used as models, as topic initiators, and as material for assessment.

Language Development IV
This course develops the skills needed to write a research paper: extensive reading, evaluating sources, note-taking, paraphrasing and summarizing, quoting and citing references, composing a bibliography, outlining and drafting.

Figure X.1 Brief descriptions of the four Language Development courses.

As is commonly the case in many MENA universities, the department consisted of a substantial number of long-term staff who had been working there for ten or more years, and a smaller, but significant number of relative newcomers, who would stay one, perhaps two, contracts of three years before moving on. For the long term members, the suite of Language Development courses was 'the way things needed to be', given the rather low level of the majority of students. For some of the newcomers, however, the course structure represented a dated conception of the development of language and writing skills, and they reacted strongly against what they saw as an over-emphasis on formal grammar and an insistence on tight structures for guided writing through the entire suite of four courses, most significantly in the last course in the suite. It was, they argued, as if the students were endlessly rehearsing for some linguistic and conceptual event which never actually materialised, and for which they would therefore never have to take personal responsibility. Risk, they argued, was essentially absent in the course offering. In contrast, the long-term members argued that risk was precisely what they needed to avoid, and that there was plenty of evidence that the students needed more, not less, instruction in accuracy and that they needed clear guidance on *how* texts should be written. Only then would they be ready to write independently – when they had learned what the long-term members termed 'the basics'. Without this, and without strict control of assignments, students would simply plagiarise, they argued. This note in a syllabus document for LDIV gives an indication of the sensitivity of the issue.

> Plagiarism … is a serious offence which can lead to failure in this course. In some countries you are expelled from a university if you plagiarize. It has been a recurring problem in this course and will not be tolerated. We can detect it as easily as we can tell the difference between an apple and an orange…You have been warned!

The context and the processes of innovation

The account which follows sets out how a group of departmental members departed from the established course description for LD IV, and the manner in which the course subsequently evolved over many years. For ease of presentation, the account has been divided up into four main stages, although, of course, things happened in a much more fluid manner. In retrospect, many of the hiccups encountered along the way could have been anticipated, and the blunders in implementation now seem to be of an elementary nature. Innovation, however, is essentially about stumbling forward, dealing with outcomes as they happen, irrespective of planning, and being prepared to correct resulting errors when recognized.

Stage 1: A rebellion

Frustrated by the seeming immutability of the language development course offerings, some new staff members initially set about trying to persuade other members that things could be different. They argued that the students needed an opportunity to actually *use* their language skills to produce something original, focusing on a process rather than an end product. Long term staff members, however, insisted that the courses were designed to equip students with accurate language skills and that freer writing and creativity was a luxury that could not be afforded, given the limited time available. With such hard lines drawn between the two sets of opinions (realists v. idealists, pragmatists v. optimists, traditionalists v modernists - depending on one's position), and with such varying visions of what the students needed, it quickly became clear that any agreement on restructuring the programme would be a distant dream. It was thus perhaps inevitable that some new members took things into their own hands and, taking aim at the final course in the suite, produced a revised course description which reversed the learning-implementation sequence. Driven by a task-based view of learning, the revised course structure required the students to develop their writing abilities not through *practice* but by actually engaging in research and producing not one, but two research papers within the same course duration.

> *Language Development IV (revised)*
> This is an advanced research methods and writing development course. You will learn to identify and focus a research topic, plan your research and reading, organise your data and analyse your findings. You will develop the ability to write extensively in English and follow academic conventions in writing by writing two research papers, one based on a library review and the other on data you collect. The focus of the course is on research and writing development, but the content is very open. This is for you to decide as you identify research topics that interest you personally.

The immediate effect of this was that, within the same course, some sections were running with the original course description while others ran with the revised description. As the semester got underway, tensions and complaints from students and teaching faculty alike soon began to emerge, and by the following semester numerous problems were evident. Students in 'revised' sections found that their workload was far greater than that of their peers in the conventional sections. In addition, they now had to interact with teaching faculty in a completely different way – not as students being taught, but as developing researchers seeking guidance and advice. Other students in the 'conventional' sections felt aggrieved that they were not given the same degree of 'freedom' as their peers in the 'revised' sections and that their peers were doing much more 'interesting' work. At the same time, faculty members in the 'revised' sections, some of whom were not entirely convinced by the new course design but who had agreed to take part in the change, began to point to mounting

issues: some students would 'disappear' for weeks on end and not seek out their tutor, work which students submitted often showed clear signs of cut and paste from sources, and other work sometimes suddenly appeared without any previous discussion with the tutor concerned, prompting concerns about its authorship. To cap it all, the tutors in the 'revised' sections began to be seen in the department, not entirely jokingly, as having 'an easy time', not actually needing to teach at all.

Matters came to a head when a faculty member (who had been largely responsible for the original course design) wrote a stinging letter to the Head of Department, demanding that the 'instigators' of the revised course design be made to toe the line and adhere to the existing course descriptions. With some administrative deftness, the HoD then called a meeting, and in recognising the argument that experimentation was in principle valuable, asked all parties to set up a development committee to look at the entire suite of four courses. The committee had a few heated and extremely tense meetings, agreed to do more research but never met again, effectively postponing forever a resolution of their differences. In the meantime, the faculty member who had made the complaint left the university for another position.

Stage 2: Bringing order to chaos

Although a crisis with management had been averted, there still remained substantial, ongoing problems to resolve with the revised course design. It was, for one thing, unclear just how much learning was really happening. Some students undoubtedly made great use of their new-found freedom from the strictures of being 'taught' and thrived in the opportunities it gave them to be independent and ask their own questions. Yet, with other students, there was substantial evidence that they were not adapting at all well to the responsibilities of devising a research project. Many research ideas that students came up with were simply restatements of tired essay titles that they had been given in earlier stages in the university or quasi-religious topics:

The dowry system	Corporal punishment
Polygamy	The meaning of dreams
Traditional v. modern medicine in Oman	The seven deadly sins

Other topics sometimes bordered on the bizarre, perhaps misled by the notion that 'problematic' meant 'problem':

Burning car tyres	Medical errors
The advantages/disadvantages of selling babies	Foreign housemaids
The effects of Chernobyl	Western values and Omani culture

There was also a problem that the requirement to produce *two* research papers, one based on a review of literature and one based on data collection, meant that, for many students, problems with topic choice effectively doubled. Without prior experience in what 'research' is, many students also opted for cut-and-paste approaches to a literature review (with a varying commitment to citation) and ill-conceived designs for data collection which mainly resulted in so-called 'analysis' sections which simply restated in words the dubious quantitative data gained. It was difficult to see, for example, how a badly-worded survey of Omani students' views on the effects of the Chenobyl disaster, or a privacy-violating survey about medical errors could be argued to have any real validity.

The realisation that had to be faced, therefore, was that the students did indeed need more guidance than the new course description offered. Rather than returning to the controlled content and practice model evident in the original course design, however, the problems in the revised course were seen in terms of a need to provide more detail

about the *process* that students should go through. This led to two major revisions to the way the 'revised' sections ran. Firstly, the course would now open with two weeks devoted to exploring the question 'What is research?' Students were given sample research questions (not topics), some of which were potentially researchable and some of which probably were not, and asked to discuss and decide whether they felt each question met a set a criteria, in order to raise their understanding of what research is and what is researchable:

Criteria for a research question

- It is based on a question that must be potentially answerable.
- It has 'a literature' – that is, there must be relevant academic sources.
- It is possible to 'localise' the question, by collecting data here in Oman.
- It does not require specialist technical knowledge.
- It is not about religion, politics or your personal beliefs.
- It is original, or at least original in respect of new data.

A second major change was that students would now be required to work on one research paper, not two, with a maximum length of 8,000 words and a single consistent research question of their own choosing. For this, students were asked to come up with three potential questions which they were to test against a flowchart, as shown in figure X.2. This flow chart progressively eliminated questions that had little potential of working, or topics which had been covered many times before.

REVIEW YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION (RQ) !

For each of your three possible Research Questions, answer these questions to confirm their suitability.

Questions		Answer	
1	Do you have a topic or a question?	***I have a topic.*** Stop! Make it into a question before you continue!	***I have question.*** Good. Continue to Question 2.
2	Is it a question that you can answer with a *yes* or a *no*?	**Yes.** Think again! Your RQ should usually be a *wh-* or *how* question.	***No.*** Good. Continue to question 3
3	Is your RQ on the 'List of Topics That Won't Work'?	***Yes.*** Choose another RQ!	***No.*** Continue to Question 4
4	Does your question start with 'Should…' or does it ask 'What is the best/better….'? or 'How can…?'	***Yes.*** Rephrase it. Your RQ should not involve a personal opinion.	***No.*** Good. Continue to Question 5
5	Is your RQ potentially answerable?	***Yes.*** Continue to question 6.	***No.*** Choose another RQ!
6	Does it involve *describing* more than *analysing* something?	***Yes.*** Choose another RQ!	***No.*** Continue to Question 7
7	Is your RQ and the probable answer 'problematic'? That is, is it complex and probing?	***Yes.*** Good! Continue to question 8.	***No.*** Choose another RQ!
8	Does it require or involve specialist technical knowledge or detail?	***Yes.*** Choose another RQ!	***No.*** Continue to Question 9
9	It there 'an academic literature' related to the topic?	***Yes.*** Continue to question 10.	***No.*** Choose another RQ!
10	It is about religion, politics or personal opinions?	***Yes.*** Choose another RQ!	***No.*** Continue to Question 11.
11	It is possible to 'localise' the RQ by collecting data (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, etc.) here in Oman?	***Yes.*** Continue to question 12.	***No.*** Choose another RQ!
12	Have you done any work on this in another course in SQU?	***Yes.*** Choose another RQ!	***No.*** Continue to Question 13.
c	Will it be original, or at least original in respect of **your** data?	***Yes.*** Continue to question 14.	***No.*** Choose another RQ!
14	Has a former student on this course answered this RQ in the past four years?	***Yes.*** Choose another RQ!	***No.*** Continue to Question 15.
15	Are you *personally* interested in finding an answer to the RQ?	***Yes.*** Good! This may be a possible RQ. You need a total of 3 possible questions.	***No.*** You should think again. If you aren't interested in your RQ, 15 weeks is a long time!

Figure X.2: Flowchart for the refinement of a research question

Once students had selected three possible questions, they were then required to write a letter to their section tutor, outlining their research ideas. For this, they were given a letter outline, from which they were free to depart if they wished.

Dear Dr _____

I have read the various documents that you sent me about the course, and have checked the criteria for suitable research questions. I have three possible questions which I would like to discuss with you.

My first possible research question is *[state your question]*. This question focuses on *[explain a lot more what the question is about]*. I think this is a problematic, complex question because I think that we can answer it from a number of different points of view. For example, *[explain the different ways you can analyse the question]*. I have looked for sources and so far I have found articles/papers/books which discuss *[explain what]*. As far as data for this question, I think I could collect it by *[explain how you would collect data and what you would be looking for]*. I am particularly interested in this question because *[explain your personal interest]*.

Alternatively, a second question I have is *[state the question and repeat the outline from above]*.

A third possible question is *[state the question and repeat the outline from above]*.

I look forward to starting work on one of these questions as soon as possible!

Thank you and best wishes

[your name]

Tutorial meetings were then set up, so that each student could discuss their letter and potential research questions with their section tutor, aiming to eliminate two of the questions, and giving them a focus for initial literature searches. This then led to the students producing a second letter, which finalised their choice of question and which was discussed in a second tutorial meeting.

Dear Dr _____

I have been doing some searching for my research project, and have made some progress.
My preferred research question is ……. To clarify, this question concerns … *[lots of detail please!]*
I am particularly interested in this question because ….

From my searches, I have found that the following aspects or themes are relevant:
- *[list and clarify several further points. These points should be large enough to require a lot of space in the final paper]*
-
- etc

I have also identified some sources. For example, *[name the sources]*. This *explains/describes/reports* on *[explain the content of the source]*. Another example is *[name the source]*. This *[provides detail about the content/ideas/concepts in the sources]*

I also now have a clearer idea of the data I can collect. For example, I could.... *[describe HOW you can collect data and from WHOM or WHAT and WHAT you will be looking for and HOW you will analyse it]*

With thanks
Signed
Your name

The net result from these improvements was that students began the course with a much more solid idea of what they were supposed to be doing and with a clearer picture of the literature they needed to search for and the data they needed to collect.

More importantly, it focused on their interests by providing a platform for them to investigate an area relevant to them and their world. The following is a sample of the types of questions that now emerged, and which now fulfilled the specified criteria:

Why do some students drop out of high school in Oman?
How do male and female students at SQU differ in their perception of each other?
How much realism is there in Omani literature in English?
How do perceptions of female beauty differ from region to region in Oman?
How much do students use school libraries in Oman?
When and why do Omani men cry?
How does the West see the Middle East, and how does the Middle East see the West, as represented in their newspapers?
How do SQU students experience the Research Paper course?

Two further developments established more structure to the first stages of the course: a requirement to submit a 1000 word proposal and a 1000-word annotated bibliography by a specified date after research question finalisation. For the proposal, students were given a document which guided their writing. This helped them structure their ideas, and set up the framework for their final paper.

1 What is the general nature of your topic? How does it link to other subject areas?
2 Why are you personally interested in this topic?
3 What is the precise nature of your research question?
4 Explain further: What you will be looking at? What do you expect to find? How is your question problematic? How will you localise your question?
5 What data will you collect and how?
6 Draft outline: provide an outline of your paper, as bullet-pointed text, section by section. Indicate actual content of subsections, as far as you are able at this point.
    1 Introduction
    2 Background and Literature review
    3 Data and data collection
    4 Findings
    5 Conclusion.
7 What is your schedule? Give precise dates for each stage of your research.
8 References: list all sources you mention in the proposal.

Stage 3: From control to support

During these early years, 'traditional' sections, using the 'official' course description, ran parallel with 'revised' sections. This showed an acceptance of differing tutor priorities having been established, even though everyone probably had reservations about what other faculty members were doing. This was not an ideal situation, particularly as students had no choice in what course description they ended up with, meaning there were recurring complaints about fairness in work load. Significant problems with the 'revised' sections continued, however, even though the definition of the research question was now more firmly determined. There were still the perennial suspicions of widespread plagiarism and students who disappeared for weeks on end, only to suddenly appear at the end of the semester with a complete research paper. There was also a good deal of unevenness in how much support students were given, with suggestions that in some cases the final paper was more the work of the tutor than of the student. Any deadlines or any leniency in delivery dates set up by tutors immediately generated complaints of unfairness from students, mainly along the lines of 'It's not fair. Students in section x don't need to / are able to…'. A wide disparity in grades across sections also emerged, with some tutors insisting on their traditional 'academic freedom' to run and grade their section according to the way they felt most appropriate. These inconsistencies meant that pressure to return to

the former course description began to gain ground, with the familiar argument that the students 'weren't ready for freedom yet'.

Rather fortuitously, however, a major decision at university level changed the prospects of the revised course design. A new requirement appeared that all undergraduate students should produce a graduation project of some kind, mainly intended to improve and demonstrate the marketability of their skills. Clearly, the original course could not provide this, and the ground was set for a reimagining of the revised course. LDIV was done away with completely, and a new course, built on the foundations of the work of 'the rebels' took its place, now entitled 'Research Project'. The shift was now firmly away from *teaching* students new content towards *requiring* students to engage in their own learning and produce tangible outcomes, against a specified timeline. As the new Research Project course got underway, however, new problems arose – this time from the student body. As the course entered Week 4, the course coordinator was presented with a petition, signed by almost every student, protesting against the tight timelines and arguing that this made it impossible for them to produce high-quality work. Given the generally acquiescent nature of the student body, this came as a complete surprise and a significant challenge to the manner in which the course development had until then been undertaken.

The petition proved to be valuable in a number of ways. Firstly, it helped bring to the surface issues which could seriously have derailed the course later on. Secondly, and more importantly, it demonstrated the students' commitment to the goals of the course and their eagerness to benefit from the research process, and the fact that flexibility needed to be built in. From this perspective, the acknowledged presence of substantial plagiarism (evidenced by data from Turnitin.com) began to be seen not as an attempt by some students to cheat the system but more as evidence that they were probably overwhelmed by the demands of the course, and so plagiarized as a 'coping strategy'. Attention thus moved towards providing more hands-on structure to the design of the course, so that the obvious and ongoing problems could be mitigated whilst still placing responsibility directly in the hands of the students and maintaining the much cherished 'academic freedom' of the tutors concerned.

As a result of the shift in perspective and the new founded 'officially authorised' confidence in the course, a number of further enhancements were made immediately. These included the following:

- a bi-weekly general plan for what would happen in class (looking at examples of a literature review, reviewing different methods of data collection, reviewing examples of data analysis, reviewing examples of data discussion)
- the development of source materials for the above, which tutors could (if they wished) use
- fixed dates for all sections for the delivery of the proposal and the final complete paper, but flexible 'guide dates' for all other elements (the annotated bibliography, introduction and literature review chapters, and data collection instrument).
- a requirement that all main stages of the students' work needed to be seen in draft form before submission
- a requirement for students to meet their tutors regularly to review their drafts
- central submission on the due date for all students' completed papers
- descriptors for each grade band, covering both the language quality and content of the research paper

- ‘advisory’ cross-marking meetings to review a random sample of final papers, with the tutor concerned making the final decision about the grade

These changes, and others, marked a significant improvement in the quality of the outcomes of the course. Incidence of plagiarism dropped dramatically, and except in a few cases, the course became largely ‘plagiarism-free’. The quality of the students’ work also improved significantly, with some excellent papers now being produced. Students also clearly developed a greater sense of ownership of their work, with a selfie-at-the-submission-box becoming a familiar sight. To recognise these achievements, an annual Student Research Conference Day was inaugurated, for which students competitively submitted abstracts to be included in the programme of parallel presentations of their research work. This large event raised the status of the course substantially as it became a fixture on the department’s academic calendar. A journal, *Exposition*, was further published by the department, showcasing some of the best work of these students, an outcome which they could use to support their employment applications. Student satisfaction with the course (as evidenced in the semester evaluation reports) also became consistently positive overall, always averaging over 3.5 on a four-point scale. Written comments (submitted in addition to a Likert scale questionnaire) showed that many students appeared to value their experience of the course.

What did you like best in this course?

- It makes you think. The first time I have been asked to do it here!
- This course is the toughest course that I have studied ever and until now I am surviving. I am proud of what I have achieved.
- It reaches parts of the brain that other courses cannot reach.
- I learned a lot from this course - more than I've ever had from any other course. It developed my research skills in a way that’s going to help a lot in my future.
- This course has helped me to be a more independent thinker.
- Freedom to choose the research topic.
- We get to do something by ourselves for the first time.
- The best is how to think critically, to specify my questions, to think about different issues, and how to conduct real research

Other comments, however, pointed to some continuing issues. Recurrent problems were time, course credit and workload. As the significance of the research paper in the students’ perception of their studies increased, it became clear that the course caused many students to experience notable stress, either because they wanted to devote more time to it or because they felt the course packed too much for the standard three credit points allocated to it.

What difficulties did you encounter in this course?

- I struggle with time. The discussion part of the project is difficult and needs too much time to synthesize it.
- I think that this course should be taken with only one or two other courses since it needs a lot of time.
- This course should be taken in two semesters instead of one semester because I do really want to conduct a great research project.
- It should be divided into two parts and spread over two courses.
- I think it is better to increase the credit hours for this course from 3 to 6 because this course takes a lot of time and that decreases our attention in other courses.
- Although the course is very useful it causes stress and pressure.
- There is not enough time to finish our work therefore this affects the quality of the research we conduct.

Stage 4: A stable, evolving present

As the course now enters its seventeenth year, it is evident that there is still much work left to do to refine its operation. Problems with time, as frequently cited by students, are something which course tutors have been aware of for many years now. Despite the coordinators' best efforts, the university and departmental authorities have been unwilling to allow either more credit hours to be allocated to the course (which would mean another course would need to be dropped) or for it to be spread over two semesters (leading to staffing problems). There is a vicious circle in these arguments which opponents of the course (of which there are still some) have used to prevent the course expanding according to student and tutor requests; while the course has the same credit value as other content courses in the department, it can make no claim for more time. And while the course is still limited to one semester, it cannot make a claim for a higher credit value. These remain issues to be resolved. There is obviously a danger of recurrent student complaints of time, pressure and credit value ultimately damaging the reputation of the course and its longevity.

There are also continuing concerns about some of the design aspects of the course. One of the strengths of the course is that within an overall structure, a high degree of tutor independence has been preserved, with a limited number of set requirements (overall structure of the research paper, length, and main delivery dates) combined with support instruments (teaching ideas, online source materials, grade descriptors, cross-marking groups, guide dates and so on). This mix of freedom and constraint has undoubtedly enabled the course to survive and thrive, and has resulted in a generally harmonious operation. Yet, there are recurrent worries over areas such as students' topic choice, with students in some sections being allowed to move far from their major (e.g. Education students doing social science research) whilst other students are directed to work strictly within the specialization of a particular tutor. While at coordination meetings faculty agree on encouraging text-based research in areas of students' majors (literature, linguistics, EFL, education), this rarely translates into practice, and the course has probably reached saturation point in the use of survey instruments, which inevitably mainly get distributed amongst the student body. Similarly, staff members all agree on the importance of maintaining an up-to-date database of previous papers, via Turnitin.com, but not all of them regularly upload their students' papers nor can they be required to do this. There is now the real problem that the same few topics 'do the rounds', partly because they are of interest to the students themselves, but also because they may have access to earlier papers of friends or family members. This makes the detection of plagiarism difficult. Added to that is an emerging problem of students possibly buying papers online, for which constant close supervision of student work over the semester appears to be the only solution. As section numbers have steadily increased, this, of course, makes for a very challenging scenario.

Findings

As the preceding narrative of events will have made clear, the evolution of the course was mainly determined by an initially emotional rejection of the nature of the existing courses and a stumbling forward from that, dealing with crises and problems as they arose. With the benefit of hindsight, however, it also possible to see a number of significant themes in the development of the course, and ways in which, over time, it has developed a specific epistemological standpoint in relation to student learning. Although broad issues of theory were rarely centre-stage in the struggles for the development of the course, it is clear now that its development can be seen as largely in harmony with shifts in teaching methodology, and with writing skills development

in particular, across the world. This realisation has added a clearer sense of purpose and direction to further developments, enabling the identification of basic principles that need to be maintained, and an identification of the many strengths which the course now offers. Here, we would like to focus on five main themes.

A higher level of cognitive challenge, right from the start

One of the most telling but simple remarks repeated in much student feedback is that the course 'makes you think' and, most succinctly, 'it reaches parts of the brain that other courses cannot reach'. One of the main problems with the original course description was that it focused almost exclusively on writing *form*, with little attention to the value and significance of content or ideas. There is a well trodden path in education which emphasises this as a preliminary step towards 'higher level' work, arguing (as the protagonists of the original course description had) that students need to first learn 'the basics' before they can be required or allowed to take on more intellectually demanding work. This line of thinking has to some extent been underpinned by what we would see as a misreading of Bloom's well-known taxonomy of learning (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001). Frequently represented by a pyramid of levels, the taxonomy seems to imply that students need to master the lowest levels (remembering, understanding and applying) before they able to move to higher levels of cognitive engagement (analyzing, evaluating, creating). The development of this course, however, has shown the fallacy in that argument. By immersing students in a scaffolded act of *creating* (the very top of Bloom's taxonomy), by stimulating their own ideas and interests in research, the course has shown that Bloom's lower levels can be incorporated in a much more interesting and purposeful manner, with noticeable gains in commitment and quality of outcomes. The pyramid is upended, and the familiar teacher-led route to knowledge (as exemplified in the original course description) has been usurped.

Learning by doing

One of the most noticeable features in moving from the original course description to the revised course description was the shift from a *transmission* mode (where students were told how to write) towards an *experiential* mode (where students were simply required to *produce* and discover for themselves how). This perspective on education, of course, has a long history going back centuries, most clearly formulated in the writings of John Dewey (1916) and more recently Kolb (1984), Kolb and Kolb (2006) and others, and is a familiar feature of much western pedagogy. In the MENA context, however, it is precisely this shift which continues to cause many students considerable disorientation as they move from more conventionally taught courses into the research paper course. This has necessitated reflection on the part of faculty to preserve the experiential nature of the course so as not to revert to transmission modes. The outcome of this, developed over many years, has been the gradual evolution of scaffolded, hands-off, guidance in the form of guided strategic questioning, sample documents, provocative feedback and discussion to ensure that the essential core has remained and that the course focuses on learners doing learning, rather than teachers doing teaching.

Constructivist and dialogic teaching

One of the first insights that began to emerge with the shift towards the revised course description was that students by and large had very little understanding of what 'research' actually meant. This was evidenced, for example, in the kinds of topics they proposed and what they understood as constituting 'data'. In moving towards an exploratory methodology in which students discussed in groups whether certain

questions were researchable, in tracking their own questions through a flowchart of criteria, and in sharing their ideas through guided letter writing, the clear aim was to support the students' construction of their own understanding of what 'research' involves. In this sense, then, the evolution of the course has taken us closer to what Vygotsky and others have posited as a constructivist approach to education, distinct from conventional transmission approaches. Central to this is language, where language functions not as a 'conduit' for knowledge, but as a stimulus for developing higher mental capacities through dialogic teaching and what Mercer (2000) refers to as 'exploratory talk' – that is, questioning designed not to test but to challenge to think. Most frequently, this occurs in student-tutor supervisory meetings, but a major aim of staff currently teaching the course has been to try to engage students in critiquing each others' work, to capitalise on the *social* construction of knowledge in a whole-class setting (Alexander 2008). Given the traditions of education in MENA contexts, this has not been easy; students are reluctant to challenge or question their peers and most often default to socially more comfortable praise for their colleagues' efforts. Over time, and particularly through the impact of events such as the annual Students Research Conference Day, we anticipate this changing, but progress has been slow in that regard.

Undergraduate studies as a process of acculturation

The research paper is by now, of course, a common feature of many undergraduate programmes around the world. Its significance as a tool for learning has long been recognised, and has for example been cogently argued for in publications such as the Boyer Report (1998, 2003) in the USA, and in work published by the Higher Education Academy in the UK (see for example Healey and Jenkins 2005 and Jenkins and Healey 2009). In the context of our own research paper course, faculty members have frequently remarked that it is only once students have completed the course that they have *truly* become undergraduates, definitively leaving behind them the mindset of a school learner, and embarking on an acculturation into what university education actually should be. In common with others writers (see, for example, Douglass and Zhao 2013), faculty members and students alike have reported impacts such as students' improved time management, improved emotional management of challenges, greater sense of confidence in communicating knowledge, and stronger sense of identity as an independent thinker. We remarked earlier that, in the context of this research paper course, we have preferred to see problems with plagiarism as an indication that students are not coping, rather than assume a knee-jerk reaction that they are deliberately attempting to cheat the system (whilst recognising that some may indeed be trying to do this). In this sense, then, plagiarism can be seen as evidence of insufficient acculturation into university work, something which only a greater engagement with dialogic methods of teaching is likely to remedy.

Autonomy, ownership and responsibility in learning

The 'selfie-at-the-submission-box' which we mentioned earlier has become a familiar sight at the end of the semester. For many students, the research paper course presents itself as an impossible challenge, an almost unreasonable demand for what needs to be achieved in the short space of a 15 week semester - a view previously shared by many staff members. Yet, achieve it they do – often impressing themselves, and faculty members, with the quality of their work. As one student put it

> This course is the toughest course that I have studied ever and until now I am surviving. I am proud of what I have achieved.

The extent to which the students surprise themselves in what they achieve can, in no small part, be ascribed to the recognised benefits of allowing for personal autonomy,

the cultivation of a sense of ownership, and in the encouragement of personal responsibility for getting things done. Rotter's (1954) well-known social learning theory, for example, emphasises the impact that the learner's perception of the 'locus of control' (that is, where decision-making lies) has on motivation, a point underlined by Williams and Burden (1997: 128) who argue that where learners feel that the locus of control is internal to them, stimulating a sense of ownership and personal responsibility, this is generally associated with greater levels of sustained motivation (see also Littlejohn, 2012). There is a fine line to be acknowledged here, in that where a challenge appears too great, feelings of helplessness can result, and consequent low levels of self-efficacy. Once again, therefore, we return to the importance of the tutor's role in maintaining and encouraging a sense of learners' competence.

Implications for innovation

As the course has evolved over the best part of two decades now, it is clear in retrospect that there are a good number of lessons to be learned about how course innovation can be effectively - and ineffectively - managed. While the course is still far from perfect (with ever-present tensions in faculty-student ratios, standardisation v. variability in tutor offerings, time v. workload, to name but a few), the course has certainly developed into a much richer experience for the students than its original version. To conclude this chapter, we would therefore like to offer what we see as some of the lessons we have learned along the way.

Take risks

There is an old adage that you can never really know what you can do until you try to do it. This is certainly true for the students taking the research paper course, but it is equally true for course developers. The significant gamble and risk that 'the rebels' took in departing from the already established course design could, indeed, have resulted in disaster – and very nearly did – but without that risk it is possible that things would have remained the same. That said, the risk was managed, in that both the original and the revised course designs ran in parallel for a good number of years.

Provide structure and extensive support

One significant element ensuring the sustainable nature of the course is that a good deal of support and guidance has been provided throughout to tutors and students, keeping to a minimum the specification of obligatory requirements. This has ensured that the sense of ownership and autonomy which students feel in their work is equally true for the tutors running their own sections.

Recognise and value achievements

The establishment of both the annual Student Research Day Conference and the publication of student work has had a very important role in honouring student commitment and in maintaining a sense of purpose and value for the course. The net effect of both these additions is that the course is now an integral feature of the work of the department, thus further ensuring the course's longevity.

Significant content and ownership are key

We believe that the transformation in student commitment and motivation which we have seen relative to student participation in more conventionally taught courses is in no small part due to the fact that the course builds on students' own questions and own interests, and fosters a sense that they become experts in their own research. There are lessons here – reported by numerous other researchers (see for example the edited collection by Breen and Littlejohn 2000) – in the importance of ensuring that

students have a meaningful decision-making role in their classroom work, and in ensuring that the focus of classroom work is perceived to be of value by the learners themselves.

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