

CETL-MSOR Conference 2015

Philip Walker and Sonia Hussain: How do our students revise?

Given the dominance in university mathematics of closed-book examinations as the culminating mode of assessment for a module, students' revision practices may be expected to form an important contributing factor to their overall performance. This perception is broadly held: in the wider educational space, there exists a wealth of advice on good revision techniques. However, student strategy in planning and executing their revision appears to be an under-investigated area of educational research, frequently subsumed, where considered at all, under the more general category of theories of learning.

Since students are known to exhibit strategic behaviours in their approach to learning, it seems likely that revising for an examination cannot be identified exactly with a more generalised notion of learning. Rather, one should expect that student revision takes on a distinctive form due to the time and performance pressures that are exerted. This being true, it follows that there is a gap in our understanding of student learning at precisely the key points that contribute to their measured learning outcome.

In order to contribute towards filling the knowledge gap in this area, we have investigated the revision habits of a cohort of joint honours (Maths and X) students on a recent first-year module at the University of Leeds. We were interested in answers to the following questions, relative to that cohort.

1. What revision activities do students conduct?
2. How does their emphasis on these activities relate to the utility they perceive them to give?
3. How do students fit together their revision activities into an overall revision strategy?

We adopted a two-phase, mixed-mode approach to our investigation, in which a broad survey instrument collected initial quantitative data from the cohort at large, followed by more intensive interviews of a smaller group of volunteers from the class. We also considered indirect quantitative data compiled from the University VLE, the Maths Support Centre and the School's own Peer-Assisted Learning scheme in the context of the direct survey and interview data.

I will present some of the themes that have emerged from this work, together with some suggested implications for academic practice and further avenues for investigation.

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