



Deficit to development: rethinking centralised workshops

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Abstract

Centralised academic skills provision has been criticised for being ‘generic’, ‘remedial’, or ‘bolt on’ (Wingate, 2006). Critics argue it takes a deficit approach towards student learning, simplifying academic processes and failing to meet students’ discipline-specific needs. Embedded provision is often seen as the solution. However, embedded does not necessarily mean non-deficit. Indeed, Schneider (2023) highlights that academic tutors can perceive students in relation to skills they are lacking. Subsequently, Learning Developers can be brought in to ‘fix’ students, and as such, embedded sessions may still be disconnected from the curriculum and designed to offer pre-prescribed solutions, reflecting deficit approaches. As Webster (2023) asserts, the Learning Developer’s role is not ‘to give students academic skills’ but rather to help them make sense of the skills and literacies that are hidden in the curriculum.

In this workshop, we discussed how we redesigned our entire skills programme using a non-deficit pedagogic approach that aims to help students ‘uncover their curriculum’. Inspired by the University of Manchester’s constructive and collective approach (Blake and Illingworth, 2015), we see our co-curricular offer as providing a unique opportunity to create empowering and developmental learning spaces which sit alongside embedded provision. To meet these aims, our redesign was informed by four principles:

- Reflection: centring students’ prior knowledge and experience.
- Collaboration: harnessing knowledge from a community of learners, rather than a ‘sage on the stage’.

- Choice: students customise their own learning experience, tailoring sessions to meet their own needs.
- Application: students relate session content to their own discipline and apply learning to their own work.

Workshop participants considered debates around deficit thinking in relation to centralised training, working together to redesign learning activities and reflect on the opportunities and challenges of such an approach.

Keywords: non-deficit pedagogy; students' agency; non-essentialism; study skills.

Community response

This workshop offers an opportunity and stimulus for a collective social action at two different but intrinsically intertwined levels. First, the workshop advocates for empowering students and promoting their agency. This is through adopting an enabling approach, whereby the authors support students to lead their learning by equipping them with the capital to interact with the curriculum and shape their own learning experiences. Second, the authors' excellent practice of stimulating discussion and reflection with colleagues on the problem of viewing students through a deficit lens rather than a non-deficit perspective.

One colleague commented:

This session ... made me think that as a Learning Designer, it is not enough to think about what [a particular training] session is about, but who the audience is and more importantly, to create space for the audience to bring (or find) themselves in the session (Louise Usher, Solent University).

This was a particularly popular session at the conference; the room was packed to capacity with a scramble for additional chairs, and there were lively discussions at all of the tables. The authors' emphasis on language choices was praised, as were the rhetorical advantages of appealing to students through catchy titles deemed likely to inspire higher levels of engagement.

The authors' conception of students as social agents manifested in their approach towards supporting students to 'uncover their curriculum' and spoke directly to the theme of empowerment running through many of the presentations at the conference.

Next steps and additional questions

While students' enablement is the core focus in this workshop, their input and voice on the use of the 'non-deficit' model developed by the authors is absent. This might give the impression that the authors are speaking on behalf of students, so one form of follow-up action could be to reflect further on feedback received from student participants through a qualitative analysis. The type of workshop advocated in this presentation has the potential to create a positive impact in Learning Development by accommodating students' learning experiences and perspectives in the debate.

- What differences are experienced by students participating in this 'non-deficit' approach compared to more traditional methods?
- Are students better equipped with the requisite study skills if they follow this pattern of engagement?
- What are the best strategies for managing student expectations of empowerment within the confines of what is nonetheless a hierarchical, tutor-led environment?

Authors' reflection

Before submitting our abstract, we were concerned that we were the only ones continuing to grapple with the notion of what a non-deficit approach to LD really means. So, it was reassuring to have a fully attended session and the discussions within the session illuminated that what is deficit and non-deficit in terms of language, pedagogical approach, and perceptions in LD is not so clear cut and that we and others were sometimes subconsciously perpetuating deficit approaches. This would be an area worthy of further research, analysis, and discussion.

There were two aspects of the session that were really valuable to us as presenters. As part of the session, participants had the opportunity to evaluate some of our teaching materials. One of the groups suggested a subtle improvement to one of the activities to better meet the ethos and framework we had presented in the session. Despite having looked over the materials numerous times ourselves, we had not picked up on the way the activity perpetuated a deficit approach and that a small change in the wording could make a significant change in the way the student might approach the activity. To us, this showed how deficit approaches can persist without us realising. Therefore, we must continue to consciously consider the notion of 'deficit' in our practice. The second impactful moment was when one participant said they had managed to quickly construct an outline of a workshop they wanted to create using our framework and how helpful they had found that. This was really encouraging that, despite our initial reservations, the approach we are taking is worth pursuing.

In terms of next steps and additional questions, we certainly need to consider how we measure the impact of this approach. It is always challenging to be able to isolate particular interventions to know whether it was that specific approach or intervention that made the difference. However, we do have feedback that we could analyse to give us an insight into students' experiences in the first instance. Also, involving or even co-creating teaching materials with students is something we think would be not only valuable but would really encapsulate the non-deficit, student-centred ethos that we want to apply. Hopefully this is something we will be able to present about in the future.

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