

Foundation Year Network Workshop:
Developing the Independent Learner at Level 0
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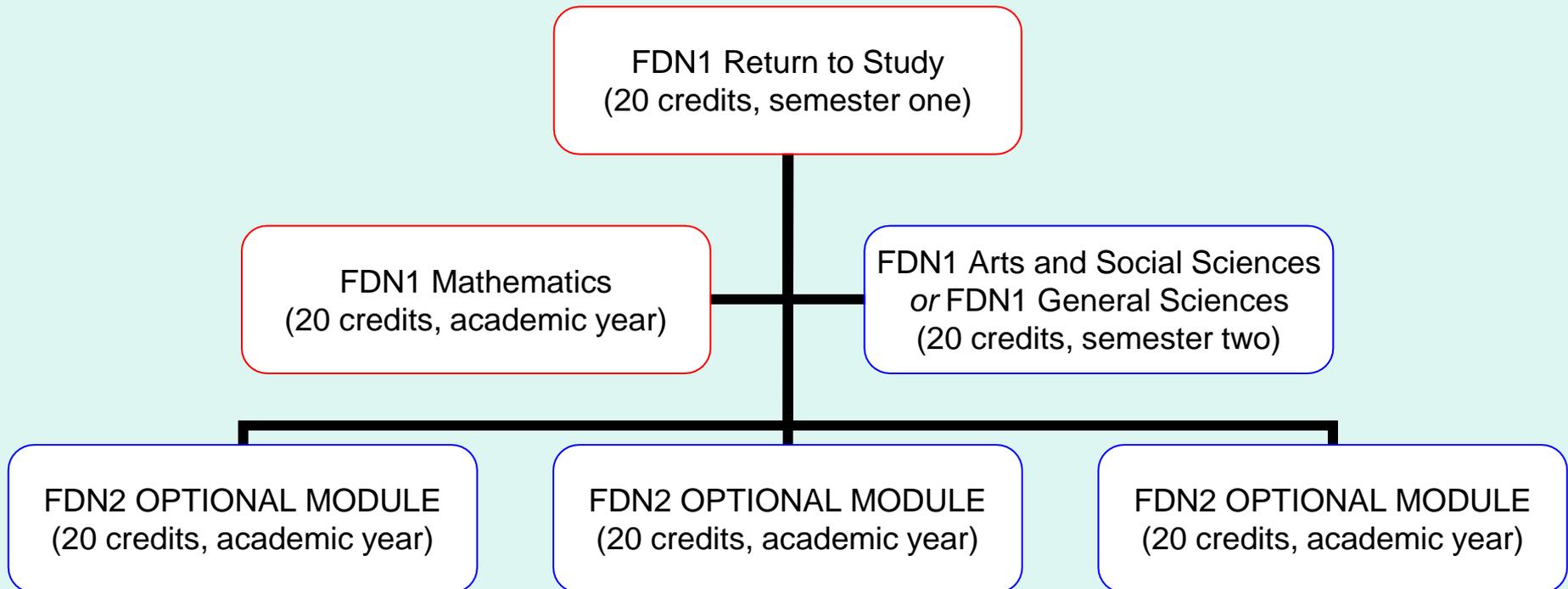
**Foregrounding inquiry based
learning approaches in
Foundation Year programmes**

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BA/BSc Combined Studies (Foundation)

- **Part-time** L0 Foundation Year over one/two years with automatic progression onto p-t degree tracks in variety of arts and social science subjects;
- First year particularly targeted at **adults returning to learn** after significant break from formal education;
- Many apply via UCAS and progress onto a wider **range of full-time degrees** upon successful completion of year two (science subjects also offered in year two as necessary preparation).

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Key challenges for year one students:

- **Gain confidence** in unfamiliar University environment;
- Refresh and develop **key** writing, numeracy and **ICT skills**;
- Develop necessary **independent study, research** and **time-management** skills

What is inquiry-based learning?

- **Modelling** the **research** process in the classroom;
- Tendency toward **inter-disciplinary** approaches;
- **Collaborative** and **process-led**;
- Tendency toward **group work**, not lectures;
- Premium on **information literacy skills**;
- Use of multi-media or other **less conventional assessment outputs**; e.g. films, portfolios of minutes and agendas, group or individual presentations;
- **Treasure Hunt** (IBL purists might argue this is “PBL”) or genuine **Voyage of Discovery**?

Three examples of ICT-rich IBL

- **Place-names exercise**, “hybrid IBL” within introductory L1 “History of English” module (Philip Shaw, Dept. of English, Uni of Sheffield);
- **Collaborative**, communicative and/or reflective **blogs** of different shapes and sizes (n.b. different styles for different purposes);
- Use of **wiki tools** to create (individually assessed?) class-based **glossaries**, collaborative **revision notes** etc.

Motivations for embedding IBL and media rich ICT within TILL's Foundation Programme

- IBL plays to mature students' strengths ... **self-motivated** and with a relative **wealth of experiences** to share;
- Opportunity to address common weakness ... can be **less ICT literate** than younger students;
- Responding to **changing needs** ... in particular, the increasing emphasis upon VLEs across many full-time degree programmes

Approach adopted

- CILASS one-year individual project grant;
- Focus upon three key areas:
 - Developing ICT elements of semester one “Return to Study” core module: **assessment revised** to include integrated web, library and e-journal searching, and submission via WebCT;
 - Use of **WebCT & open source software** in semester two “Arts and Social Sciences” optional module to encourage wide-ranging exploration of **“My Sheffield” theme** running throughout module;
 - Use of “soup blog” to enable **collaborative experiments** between Arts & Soc Sci and “General Science” optional modules

Advantages of VLEs and online discussion

- Distinct space to **extend discussion** beyond classroom and upload collaborative class notes;
- Clear benefits for **absentees** and some disabled students;
- **Incentives** to develop IT skills in order to access shared resources (and in some cases to reward active discussion on site);
- Ability to add resources and circulate announcements **rapidly**;
- Opportunities to develop “**bite-sized**” learning tasks and self-assessment exercises;
- Increased opportunities for **socialisation** and development of distinctive community of learning.

Disadvantages/challenges of VLEs and online discussion

- **Technical hitches**, registration problems and/or technophobia;
- **Lurkers** and/or online absentees (20%:80% rule?)
 - **insecurities** both familiar and different;
- Potential to leave **weaker students** further behind?
- Tendency toward **tutor-student**, rather than student-student, interactions;
- Can put **increased demands** on tutor time ... but manageable if approach is “little and often”;
- Leading a merry dance – on structured discussion, [hubs](#) and trees.

Advantages of blog, flickr and similar open source software

- Fewer problems of **access** (particular benefits for WP/outreach activities);
- Greater **potential for collaboration** in one-stop shop;
- **Anonymity** easily assured (but potentially a much wider audience);
- Develops ICT skills set further and **encourages wider exploration** of web 2.0 potential – a **new way of structuring** independent research findings in relation to the more (and less) familiar?

Disadvantages of blog, flickr and similar open source software

- Increased **anxiety re. scrutiny** (of peers, and of wider world);
- Danger that **technology**, if overdone, **can be a distraction** and/or get in the way of more mundane learning needs;
- Consider tying online activities more closely to **assessment**?
- More **for tutors' entertainment** than for students' development?

Advantages and disadvantages of IBL approach at Level 0

- **Time rich – time poor** ... makes inevitable demands upon students' **independent learning hours**, but can also impinge markedly on more “traditional” classroom contact hours too;
- At this level, online elements can only ever be **an extension of**, rather than a substitute for, classroom contact;
- Requires clear introduction, continuous and carefully structured support (“**scaffolding**”);
- Facilitates “**de-centring**” of classroom engagements – less didactic, more collaborative;
- Liberating and **self-affirming** ... but tendency toward relativism too if left to own devices?
- Inexorable rise of web-based resources emphasises need to keep clear focus upon **information literacy skills** ...

Student feedback: positive aspects of Arts & Soc Sci

- ✓ “It was very interesting. The online support was very helpful. It seemed easier to operate within a smaller group. We were given all the support we needed with assessed work.”
- ✓ “I liked the flexibility of the classes. Class discussion was encouraged as was personal research. Generally a good environment for communicating and sharing ideas.”

Student feedback: negative aspects of Arts & Soc Sci

“I didn’t really understand the content of the course. This may have been because there never seemed to be enough time to look at any one subject area in detail. This was explained to us from the beginning but that didn’t make it any easier to follow. There seemed to me to be more questions than answers and I found it difficult to follow the quick pace in which it was delivered.”

Student feedback: negative aspects of Arts & Soc Sci

“Sometimes it felt a little rushed, particularly through at the beginning of the course. I would have liked to do a little more work on each science, to give a more comfortable base to begin essay writing. It might be easier with one tutor, giving a clearer direction, sometimes it was a little difficult to follow the track of discussion.”

And in the students' final analysis ...

- I found the module really enjoyable if not a little confusing. I realise that the whole module was an experiment in teaching and learning techniques; keep tinkering!
- Happy with feedback. I sometimes found the module a bit “soft” on facts, but it was possibly due to the nature of the subjects and my lack of understanding, rather than the module content.

Some web addresses

- Foundation Programme site:

www.shef.ac.uk/till/prospective/programmes/foundationprog.html

- Foundation Soup Blog:

www.foundationblog.group.shef.ac.uk/blog/

- Arts and Social Sciences flickr site (tillfrog):

www.flickr.com/photos/7147832@N03/

- CILASS (Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences):

www.shef.ac.uk/cilass/