

Topic 3 Problem Solution

Question

Why do some students have difficulty in coping with the written component of their courses? What can be done to help them?

Answer 1

Many more students are entering University than in the past, not all of whom have been fortunate in their previous experience of education. Moreover, training which in the past was largely practical now has to be done at degree level and this demands a mastery of abstract thought.

Students who are used to learning what they have been taught without thinking about it have difficulty in moving into the world of abstract thought. Although they work hard and fulfill their commitments, they do not get the marks they deserve on written assignments and particularly in written examinations. This is a pity from every point of view: they may drop out without completing their courses and society loses a potentially valuable professional worker. At worst, they may be reduced to plagiarising from the Internet and risk being expelled. Above all, they remain confused and never discover the joy of mastering their subject and becoming part of the academic community.

This has changed with developments in modern linguistics. Analysis of academic texts shows that abstract thought is not something woolly and intangible but is created by language. Quite specific features of language are used in the creation of abstract thought. These can be described and what can be described can be taught. The present course gives students the opportunity to acquire this language.

Many students have already benefited from an earlier version of this course. When it was used in a secondary school the percentage of pupils gaining five GCSE's grades A - C doubled. The present course has been rewritten with older students in mind and there is every prospect that, by working through it and applying the insights to their own subjects, they will quickly become familiar with the abstract thinking which underpins their chosen field.

Answer 2

In the twentieth century there was an explosion of knowledge in every field. Nowhere was this more important than in the study of language. The old systems of analysis were enlarged and refined and this meant that a scientific description of all styles of language could be made.

This has been applied to the kind of language necessary for academic success. It is exciting to discover that this kind of language is the same across the curriculum.

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This has important consequences for students who enter University without the language skills needed for academic success. It means that they can be taught the language they need in order to complete their theoretical assignments and to pass their examinations.

This is important for society as well. The twenty-first century demands that more people will be needed in the professions, and in every field there is a skills gap. People who have the other attributes needed for their chosen profession need not fail because of their inadequacies in a particular style of language. For example, nurses need to be strong both physically and emotionally, sensitive in dealing with people under stress and be accurate and reliable in patient care. It is a shame if people gifted in these respects drop out of University because they feel unable to cope with the theoretical demands of their course.

Professions which used to be essentially practical now have a theoretical component which demands academic language. Language for Learning in Higher Education is a course that can provide students with training in the kind of language which will enable them to succeed.