

The 12 Rs in Higher Education

By Peter Fox

How are the 12Rs are useful in the pre-, post- and during assessment of college students? As important indicators of suitability, maturity and engagement respectively.

I'd like to float a little something past those involved with higher education entrance standards. The 12Rs. Essential basic skills.

Reading	The mechanics of reading
wRiting	The mechanics of writing
aRithmetic	Basic ability with numbers
Relationships	Don't learn social skills from the TV!
Reasoning	Simple problem analysis
Remembering	An oft-forgotten skill
Reviewing	Analysing source data
Responsibility	What is 'good behaviour' and why is it good to be good
Reflecting	Self awareness and analysis
Researching	Discovering information
Reporting	Clear communication
Resolve	Determination and focus on results

The foundation of these is 'basic life skills', but they can be applied as requirements for learning in some institution or being employed in a specific job. From the point of view of higher education we're hoping that schools have equipped new entrants with a minimum set of living skills; but does that mean 'a college education' doesn't involve developing them beyond the school-leaver stage? Then there's the matter of needing an above average grasp of most of these Rs to be able to get to grips with the rigour of learning in a college environment.

Just as somebody who can't do simple sums is unlikely to be suited to higher education, at least until the lack of basic skill is dealt with, so we can say something similar for all of the others. For example we'd like potential students to have some idea of their strengths and weaknesses - Reflection.

We're not expecting everyone to be mature or expert when they start, after all they only become "students" (autonomous learners as opposed to "pupils" with rigid learning regimes) when they reach college, and even then it's still a development process. Using Reflection for example again, we could reject somebody who can't give a decent answer to "Why do you want to study X and do you think it will suit you?" as being indicative that they haven't Reflected... which they really ought to have done if they are committing to three years of their life... and stand a high chance of changing their mind after the first few weeks... wasting everybody's time and blocking another potential student's place.

These Rs are technically independent (you could be blind but still manage all the Rs except Reading) but in practice of course there can be common close connections... or dis-connections: John may be absolutely focussed on being a doctor because his parents have made it clear that's what he'll do! Resolve without Reflection could be a warning sign of a troubled future.

So as well as making sure that prospective students have basic learning skills we can usefully, and in my opinion need to, check all these Rs to ensure students can learn to learn efficiently, manage their lives at a difficult time and complete their course successfully.

What about the, err, rounded, mature, enthusiastic and skilled graduates at the end of their course? How has their mastery of the 12Rs developed during three formative years of their lives? What level of competency should we expect from somebody called "a graduate" - obviously a higher level than "a school leaver"? This is both a general question (we expect all graduates to be fully literate and numerate even if they've studied pottery) but we don't expect the pottery graduate to demonstrate the same level of Reviewing and Responsibility as a doctor.

So here are some coffee-break questions:

- What do students require of these skills to succeed on our specific course?
- What level do they need before starting?
- Are there any we don't care about: Pedagogically and pastorally?
- What Rs do students need for happy college life and efficient course study?
- How can we assess these Rs at application stage?
- Should we have a first-term investigation and boost programme?
- Could we usefully study the correlation between Rs and drop-outs?
- How could we assess the general finishing level of Rs so we can be confident that every graduate is worthy of a degree awarded by our college?
- What would happen if we assessed teaching staff!

Strangely you can't skip off to the library to clarify stages, levels, tests, contexts, statistics or examples. Most of us 'know what we mean' by the Rs but as the questions above should have elicited, there's a gap when it comes to specifics. (Or a vagueness of definition when it comes to the three established Rs.) That ought to be a cue for the many readers who are practitioners in these fields to investigate a bit further.

I am merely a systems analyst who breaks things down into bits so that they can be examined more fully on their own and so that the overall structure of a system can be understood and experimented on.

The 12 Rs project page is at <http://vulpeculox.net/12>

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