You can take a horse to water: students’ self-evaluation of their literacy skills, implications for support

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Abstract

Universities are always concerned at what they consider high levels of failure and attrition rates in first year, resulting in a focus on support that might enhance students’ success at university and their progression to second year. In the area of academic literacy there is a body of research employing the MASUS (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) Diagnostic Procedure that suggests a significant relationship between literacy skills and successful progression through the undergraduate years. But what of students’ self-evaluation of their literacy skills? How realistic are they? Students’ “engagement” with their studies and their progression to second year are likely to be enhanced when perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses in academic literacy are both realistic and based on specific diagnostic feedback. These perceptions may also be crucial in motivating students to seek assistance. This session will firstly, present the findings of a study conducted with 135 Pharmacy 1 students at the University of Sydney in 2003. It will examine students’ self-evaluations of their literacy skills in the four main areas investigated by the MASUS Diagnostic Procedure, and the relationship between these self-evaluations and their performance on the MASUS. This is followed by group discussion on the implications for support delivery.

Questions discussed will include: how should we respond to discrepancies between self-evaluation and assessed performance? How can we encourage students to seek help in time to make a difference?

Background

This session addresses the ongoing concern of Australian universities about the high levels of failure and attrition rates among first year students and their progression through the undergraduate years. Competing for students and funding that is tied to retention rates, universities have developed policies and programmes designed to increase retention rates by enhancing the experiences of all their students and by providing support especially for those students who may be ‘at risk’ of failing.

Within this paradigm there is a body of research that highlights the importance of the development of literacy skills for student progression. The Learning Centre in collaboration with the Faculty of Pharmacy at the University of Sydney developed and trialed the MASUS (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) Diagnostic Procedure (Bonanno & Jones 1997). The MASUS assesses students’ literacy in four areas

- **MASUS A. Use of source material**
- **MASUS B. Structure and development of the text**

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with the feedback providing the basis for literacy support and skill development.

The MASUS has generated other research projects. One series of longitudinal studies investigated the relationships between academic literacy skills as measured by the MASUS Procedure, academic performance, and progress through the Bachelor of Pharmacy degree from 1992-1995. Student performance in three out of four MASUS assessment areas (MASUS B, C and D) and total MASUS score were found to be significant predictors of progression rates through the degree. MASUS A was not found to be significant (Holder et al. 1999).

These studies did not, however, investigate students’ evaluation of their own literacy skills. Pharmacy 1 students complete one semester of their course before they do the diagnostic task. Thus it is of interest to know how realistic they are in their self-evaluation of literacy skills after a semester of tertiary study, particularly in relation to higher and lower order cognitive skills as theorised by Bloom et al. (1956). One of the aims of this current study was to investigate the relationship between students’ MASUS total and sub-scores and students’ self-evaluation of related written communication skills.

**Brief report on Current Study**

A sample of 135 Pharmacy 1 students at the University of Sydney completed the MASUS Diagnostic Procedure during a core lecture at the beginning of Semester 2 in 2003. This task is used by the faculty as an assessment task and requires students to write a persuasive essay under time conditions. The essay is based on a reading relevant to students’ coursework and distributed to students prior to the testing situation. It assesses students’ literacy skills in the four above areas on a scale of 1 – 4. A comparison of the percentage of inadequate (scores of 1 or 2) and adequate (scores of 3 or 4) levels of literacy skills revealed that between a quarter and a third of the students had difficulty in one or more of the MASUS sub-scales and that poor literacy skills were most evident for MASUS B. This finding agrees with the results from the 1992-1995 cohorts (Holder et al. 1999). MASUS B, Structure and development of the text demands more higher order skills such as criticism, analysis and development of an argument.

Students were also required to complete a three-part survey, Part 3 of which was entitled “Self-Evaluation of Skills”. This section asked students first, to give a general rating of their skills in written communications from 1 (very competent) to 5 (unsatisfactory), and second, to rate their ability on a four-point scale from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent) on ten writing skills that corresponded to the four areas assessed by the MASUS (adapted from Kett et al. 2001).

The survey’s skills 1 – 4 (corresponding to MASUS A: Use of source material) were
1. understanding referencing principles,
2. selecting relevant information from my reading,
3. including information from my reading in my written text, and
4. understanding when to quote and when to paraphrase.
Skills 5 – 8 (corresponding to MASUS B: Structure and development of the text) were
5. organising the text as a whole,
6. constructing a logical and clear argument,
7. expressing relationships between different pieces of information in writing, and
8. beginning and concluding appropriately.
Skill 9 was using formal academic writing style (MASUS C: Academic writing style) and skill 10 was using accurate sentence-level grammar (MASUS D: Correct grammar usage).

The Nuts and Bolts Session

This session is based on the following two premises: that literacy skills are important for academic success and student progression, and that realistic self-evaluations of their literacy skills based on specific diagnostic feedback will encourage greater student “engagement” with their studies and increase their motivation to seek assistance.

Presentation (15 minutes)

This section will present a brief background to and some of the findings of the study. Findings will include
• the students’ general ratings of their skills in written communications as well as their perceived ability in the 10 written skills
• the results of analyses conducted to determine (a) the factors that predicted MASUS scores and (b) the self-ratings likely to differentiate between ‘pass and fail’ MASUS results as well as ‘pass’ and ‘good’ MASUS results
• the self-perceptions of students whose literacy skills are inadequate
• the support provided to these ‘at risk’ students in Pharmacy 1, one model of support

Discussion and Discussion Feedback (25 minutes)

The presentation is followed by a discussion (18 minutes) on the implications of the research for support delivery and suggestions for best practice. Participants will be divided into 3 groups, each group discussing one question.
(a) How should we respond to discrepancies between self-ratings and assessed performance?
(b) How can we encourage students to seek help in time to make a difference?
(c) What models of support can provide a long-term solution to literacy inadequacy?
The session will finish with feedback from each group and wider discussion (7 minutes).

References


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