Engaging first year students early and often through online delivery of a writing tutorial program

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Providing access to non-traditional students is of little use if they are not supported in their learning (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), and clear correlations have been drawn between performance in first year and longer term retention and success. Ideally first year curricula should scaffold academic literacies development, and early assessments should provide explicit explanation and modelling of language and other requirements. However, even when done, this does not preclude the need to further support students through their early writing experiences.

This paper reports on a program designed to engage students early in their first year through online delivery of a series of tutorials on writing built around key assessment tasks. These tutorials, open to both distance and campus-based students, provided opportunities to ‘deconstruct’ assessment tasks and better understand the stages required in successful completion. They introduce key principles of academic writing within the context of discipline and assessment task requirements.

Background

Evidence, experience and common sense all suggest that the early experiences of writing at higher education (HE) level are significant in shaping students’ self-esteem, motivation and self-belief. This is particularly so for non-traditional students who may be entering the HE learning environment less well-prepared than some others (Zepke, 2013). Thies (2012, pp.A16–A17) refers to Bourdieu’s theory of capital, by which individuals’ access to economic, social and cultural capital is determined by their social position. She notes that “all students who enter university do not do so with the same stock of cultural and social capital, and are therefore not equal in their capacity to participate in academic discourse”. As an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) specialist my orientation brief to new students invariably ends with a warning to seek help early if required, rather than waiting till experiencing failure. However, it is not easy for commencing students to ‘know what they don’t know’ and to judge when the general sense of unease and anxiety which tends to pervade most first semester experiences at university has spilt over into a specific need for support and assistance. Undoubtedly, building support explicitly into curricula in a proactive way is preferable to waiting for students to react to feelings of not coping or impending failure. Similarly, making contact with those positioned to offer academic support early and within the context of their core discipline learning is preferable to students being ‘sent to support’ once identified as ‘at risk’.

Victoria University, Melbourne has made a clear commitment to providing access to HE courses for non-traditional students and with this comes a heightened need to ensure that students are supported in every aspect of their study and learning. In the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Dermal Therapies), this has led to development of a program of online tutorials designed to help students acquire some of the basic academic literacy skills required to manage their early assessment tasks. However, while awareness and skills development is one goal of the program, another of equal importance is ensuring all students, and particularly
potentially vulnerable students, feel supported in their learning and able to engage in a
dialogue about the learning process. This is in recognition of the important role of dialogue
and feedback in helping students to cope with and feel engaged in their first semester of
academic study. For example, Poulos and Mahony (2008) highlight the importance of regular
feedback for all students, but particularly for those with less self-belief or who may be
characterised as under-prepared. Such students may at times become ‘paralysed’ without
reassurance that they are heading in an appropriate direction in terms of their learning, and
particularly writing.

The less students believe in themselves the more explicit and frequent feedback
they require (Knight & Yorke 2003). This is emphasized in a survey of
noncompletion students, which identified the quality of learning experience as an
important factor in their decision to withdraw at the end of first year, thus
emphasizing the importance of constructive feedback at this critical time. (Yorke,
2002, as cited in Poulos & Mahony, 2008)

What has been done

Rationale

Students in the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Dermal Therapies) come from a range of
backgrounds and pathways. However, the student profile tends to include a significant
number of students who are female, low socio-economic status (SES), speak English as an
Additional Language (EAL), and are first in their family to attend university. In addition, a
significant number are mature-age students returning to study after gaining industry
experience. In better understanding this type of student cohort, the concept of generation 1.5
(Rumbaut & Ima, 1988, as cited in Harklau, 2003) seems relevant, with many students from
EAL backgrounds being quite fluent in spoken English and familiar with Australian
mainstream social and cultural conventions, but often “less skilled in the academic language
associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing” (Harklau, 2003). These
students are often bilingual, but may lack literacy in their first language. For generation 1.5
students, it has been argued (e.g. Blanton, 1999, as cited in Harklau, 2003) that development
of critical literacies is particularly crucial in their successful transition into the higher
education study environment.

The writing tutorial program

In Week 2 of the foundation unit for the course a 3 hour workshop was conducted for the
whole cohort with a focus on approaches to learning at university, academic expectations and
developing an initial understanding of some principles of academic literacy. In this workshop
early written assessments were flagged, and some of the academic skills required to address
these tasks introduced and examined. Attendance was approximately 81 students, with 26
distance students attending the workshop via Blackboard Collaborate.

From Weeks 3 to 10 the interactive online tutorial program titled ‘Getting started with
assignments’ was conducted. This involved a 45-50 minute tutorial each week, delivered in
real time via Blackboard Collaborate. In each tutorial a Powerpoint was delivered and formed
the basis for explanation and discussion. Students were invited to comment and ask questions
via texting rather than audio, with the lecturer drawing attention to student comments and
questions and responding to these. The tutorial content was largely based on content
introduced in the Week 2 workshop, but deconstructed and delivered with more assignment-
specific examples and more space for discussion and dialogue. Whereas the workshop needed
to accommodate a range of awareness and ability levels, and was delivered at a steady pace, the tutorials intentionally created more space for explanation and clarification, so specifically accommodated students requiring greater support. Topics addressed through the tutorial program included Understanding the task, Finding information, Writing about what you have read, Structuring your essay, Writing with impact and Writing critiques. As stated, these topics were addressed with reference to the specific written assessment tasks required of students in Semester 1 – assessment task instructions and requirements were examined and ‘unpacked’, and writing exemplars and models specifically related to the assessments were provided. In this way, the content of these tutorials, whilst exploring some general principles of academic literacy and especially writing, was highly contextualised and discipline-specific. The tutorials, including all student interaction, were recorded and made available to participants via an emailed link, as well as being posted on the Learning Management System for access by other students.

On average 17 students attended each tutorial, with the maximum number being 24 in Week 10 and the minimum being 8 in Week 3. Finding the optimum time for the tutorials involved some trial and error, with students responding to requests to elect the most practical day and time to suit their timetables and other commitments. Initially each tutorial was conducted twice in each week, but this was discontinued after week 4, with students able to access recordings of the tutorials (as noted above) if unable to attend or wishing to ‘revisit’ the content.

**Online delivery**

The decision to deliver the writing tutorial program via online delivery was initially taken to ensure access to support for distance students, who made up a significant number within this course. However, using the online delivery mode proved effective on a number of levels. It enabled tutorials to be delivered at an optimum time in terms of the students’ weekly unit timetables, without the need for students to be geographically in one location. This was important as travel was a significant issue for many on-campus students in terms of both convenience and cost. Furthermore, feedback from students suggested that they felt comfortable with the online delivery environment and that it facilitated rather than restricted meaningful interaction both between themselves and with me as their teacher.

**Expected impact**

**Discussion**

It is fair to say that the program outlined in this paper does not represent a fully integrated approach to embedding, in which the discipline lecturer is directly involved in making “…explicit for students the literacy practices of their disciplines” (Jacobs, n.d., p. 2). Rather it represents what Hunter and Tse (2013, citing Wingate, 2006) call a ‘partly integrated approach’ by which the “responsibility for inducting students into academic writing [falls] to ‘agents’ outside the discipline” (2013, p. 228). Nevertheless, the tutorial program was far removed from a generic approach, with the content highly contextualised and the involvement of discipline lecturers in monitoring tutorial content for discipline relevance and appropriacy. Briguglio (2013) has proposed a Multi-layered Model of Language Development Provision (MMLDP) with a continuum of embedded language development and support. On her continuum the writing tutorial program discussed in this paper sits about halfway in terms of the degree to which support is integrated into the discipline unit, based on the fact that delivery is done by the ALL specialist rather than a discipline lecturer or team involving both.
According to Coates and Ransom (2011) recent Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) data points to a disconnect between academic staff and students created largely by the changing conditions in which HE is delivered. In particular, they note the clear trend within HE toward less favourable student-teacher ratios and increased employment of sessional academic staff. Both these trends result in less access to staff for students, and this is occurring despite increasing evidence that the quality of relationships with members of the institutional community, and particularly with teachers and other students, impacts on retention and early departure intentions. Given these trends, Coates and Ransom (2011, pp. 15-16) advocate for more “nuanced and directed forms of support” and for the connection between support and retention to be “understood better and taken more seriously”. It could be argued that, while they are not a substitute for discipline lecturers, ALL specialists can potentially have a positive impact on student engagement, and when integrated into unit delivery be more likely to be perceived by students as part of the academic team and institutional community.

Another outcome of changing trends in HE is increased use of ‘voiced Powerpoint’ and similar applications and technologies in the production of independent learning resources to support student learning. These technologies are rightly viewed as an important addition to what we can offer students. However, a key feature of the writing tutorial program described in this paper was the opportunity for interaction. Students were able to ‘test’ their understandings of task requirements and academic expectations, for example in relation to effective paraphrasing, appropriate referencing and the logical and relevant development of essay content. They were able to take ‘small steps’ and then receive feedback specifically on their current work, before moving forward. In this way, the regular nature of the tutorials and recycling of key principles provided reassurance to students, as well as the chance to make adjustments to their understandings where required. Independently of these tutorials, students were able to contact the ALL specialist for feedback on written assessment drafts, and this provided further reinforcement and encouragement for students engaged in the tutorial program.

Evaluation

An evaluation of the program was conducted with participants via an online survey and the opportunity to provide comments through email. A limitation of this approach was lack of student anonymity, however online evaluation was appropriate given that the program itself was delivered online. Six students responded, with all respondents rating the program ‘Extremely useful’. Importantly, feedback not only referred to skills development, but quite clearly highlighted affective factors in students feeling better able to cope with early study demands and assessment requirements. Features highlighted as positives in student feedback included, direct relevance to assessment tasks, the opportunity to ask questions, a sense of anonymity as a participant (therefore less peer pressure), short duration of each tutorial (approx. 45 min) and delivery by someone not directly involved in content delivery and assessment. Comments from student evaluations on what was good about the sessions included:

- “having the current essay used as an example…”
- “Many clear examples were given, which I could read over and refer to after the class”. [The tutor] answered everyone’s questions regarding the essay…”
- “…how to start? The tutorials helps (sic) a lot. A lot of questions that we can’t discuss with [the discipline lecturer]. We feel discomfort to ask [the discipline lecturer]…maybe he refuse, maybe class fellows make fun.”
Evaluation was also sought from unit lecturers. The following excerpt from staff evaluations highlights the fact that not only students but discipline lecturers need support and encouragement to effectively address the academic literacies development of their students.

Because of the pathway from VE [Vocational Education] into our course many of our students have had limited experience in academic writing and find this daunting and challenging. It is then challenging for academics who are trying to focus on teaching the content of the units, but are needing to give students help with the basics of writing. Therefore these sessions were invaluable.

As noted above, and indicated in the title of this paper, two key features of the tutorials were that they commenced early and were conducted often (at regular intervals), thus meeting two essential criteria for effective engagement with students on academic literacies development.

Questions for discussion

1. To what extent is teaching by ALL specialists integrated into course delivery at your university? What impact is this likely to have on student engagement?

2. To what extent is online delivery being used within courses at your university? What are the advantages/limitations of online delivery?

References


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