All hands on deck: A team approach to preparing year one arts students for their first major assignment. A Practice Report

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Abstract

First year student's unwillingness to access to university-wide teaching support services and low usage of tutor office hours has become a noticeable trend over the past five years. The assistance students need to succeed is available, but what is the economic sense of paying for services which they increasingly indicate do not suit the way in which they wish to learn? The solution was to create the FYE Targeted Learning Sessions, which are designed to attract students in selected large year one courses to engage with an easy-access option of discipline specific academic support. This report sets up the aims of the project and gives a systematic breakdown of the way in which course convenors, the First Year Experience program, library and Student Learning staff combined forces to offer students a new way of seeking discipline specific academic support.

Introduction

As Kuh (2007) documents, changing demographics in the student population mean that tertiary educators now must work with a highly variable range of skills, language proficiency, and preparedness, which has impacted on the fail rate in the first year of tertiary study—and it is no different in the University of Auckland's Faculty of Arts. In the review of the first year of the First Year Experience Programme (FYEP) at the University of Auckland's Faculty of Arts, we canvassed for feedback from course convenors and analysed the grade distribution and pass rate for all the major courses in the programme. An almost uniform response indicated that academic staff felt that the students were arriving in their classes with varied levels of academic proficiency, and increasing numbers were not prepared for the level of academic work required at year one. They also noted with concern the very low usage by students of tutor office hours, particularly leading up to major assignments.

The need to improve the pass rate and grade point average of first year students is a major academic aim in our Faculty's annual strategic plan and is therefore a logical issue for our FYEP to address. The challenge was to come up with a scheme which would make better use of existing resources and appeal to this generation of student learners. Following consultation with course convenors, Student Learning staff and subject librarians, it was decided to implement a special project which would normalise help-seeking behaviour around assignment preparation, research, writing and referencing skills. It was hoped that a more public approach to offering academic skills training to all

students would demystify any lingering doubts that seeking academic support was an admission of incompetence.

Current situation

Some library skills instruction is integrated into the curriculum or delivered online. But in most cases, first-year students must voluntarily enrol in generic or course-specific library workshops. The workshops are conducted by a librarian in purpose-built computer training rooms, that accommodate a finite number of participants (Beard & Dale, 2010). Such workshops attract – and can cater for – only a relatively small percentage of students, partly due to the enrolment numbers for first year Arts courses (up to 1,000 students) in relation to the availability of human and physical resources. Despite strong academic and library staff collaboration on workshop content, students must self-select to attend a library workshop, which is additional to their existing timetable of lectures and tutorials. A further drawback of course-specific library workshops is duplication for students enrolled in two or more first year courses, each of which offers a workshop. Although some content is unique, a proportion is generic and students understandably resent repetition.

Although the University offers generic writing skills support, record keeping from the Student Learning Centre and discussion with their writing tutors indicate that the majority of students do not take advantage of these services even when they receive specific referrals from their academic tutors. Student Learning believe that students bypass these services for a variety of reasons, the most common being ignorance of what is available, and an assumptions that any generic writing

assistance will be of no use to get them better marks in a specific assignment. If they cannot see it directly helping with coursework, they are unwilling to schedule the extra time. Student feedback through in-house questionnaires (Henley & von Randow, 2005-2008) indicated that nearly 80% of students in a large year one class wished their contact with tutors to be via email rather than in person. This is backed up by comments in course surveys where students expressed their unease about contacting an authority figure for help and are fearful of appearing ignorant in a one-on-one situation. The challenge therefore, was not to increase the assistance available to students, but rather to facilitate *access* to what is already there, and to normalise help-seeking behaviour.

The solution

The Targeted Learning Sessions attempt to circumvent these issues in three ways. First, they normalise seeking help, making assignment preparation standard for all students so that it carries no remedial stigma. Second, they tie the intervention to curriculum by providing it just before a major assignment is due. Third, they facilitate one-stop skills shopping by bringing all of the support services together in a user-friendly, open-plan space.

The scheme is an adaption of work done at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), which uses open-plan library space to provide targeted academic support for students. We took the key principles that power the QUT scheme and brainstormed the best way to build these into a system that would work in our academic and institutional context. It was a case of finding academics and professional staff who were willing to try something new and

negotiating between us what was possible. The strength of the scheme was that it solved key pedagogical and economic issues in the delivery of academic support, and successfully demonstrated to staff and students that this was "everyone's business" (Kuh, 2007) and they didn't have to "go it alone."

The first step was to pitch the sessions as directly tied to curriculum, and to recognise that many students just do not know how to get started with their assignments. In other words, we needed to say to students "You have a big assignment coming up in your Sociology class. Let's help you get underway." Scheduling is critical, and we needed to be very mindful to offer the sessions exactly at the point that students began to worry about their assignment. Too early, and they aren't yet engaged. Too late, and they cannot make productive use of the advice (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Mentors advertised the sessions in the lecture, and the course convenor encouraged attendance and reinforced the link between the sessions and assessment success.

Next, we needed to convince students that the sessions were worth attending. We emphasised the fact that the Targeted Learning Sessions are just that: *targeted*. The sessions are designed to rapidly locate the place where they are stuck, and get them to the next stage. Key to this was that there was no set *amount* of time for them to attend. They could come and go freely, and stay as long as they liked. Students really appreciated the freedom of movement. They didn't need to waste any time; they got exactly as much help as they wanted.

Finally we used an open plan set up so that students were part of a constant flow of traffic. They could then get what they needed without feeling singled out. The library space was designed as a predominantly static area of high density shelving interspersed with study desks, but a simple reconfiguration of furniture and clear signage made it easy for the students to move about unobtrusively, listen in to advice as it was given to others, or even figure out what to ask by listening to what other people asked. An unintended benefit of this environment was that it sparked conversations between students. We could hear good advice gleaned by one student making its way through the grapevine to others. It was an environment in which they felt comfortable, and they animatedly shared their learning. For some students, it was the first time they had entered the library or spoken to a librarian.

Preparation

Planning

There were a total of seven Targeted Learning Sessions in 2011. These were chosen based primarily on class size, as we wanted to reach as many 1N (first year of study) students as possible. At each session, there was a minimum of 10 staff on hand to work with the students. Care was taken to insure there was a mix of familiar and new faces. They included academics, staff from Student Learning, First Year Experience Mentors, Tuākana (Māori and Pasifika academic support) and librarians. The co-operative nature of the sessions distributed responsibility among a team of subject librarians who provide services to the Faculty of Arts. For some sessions, it was necessary to co-opt librarians from outside the team who also

had experience in answering students' research questions, thus building collegial relationships and providing staff development. Close collaboration with the FYE Programme Manager and the academic course convenors facilitated advance notification of the assignment topic and its requirements, the date it was due, and the expected outcomes.

Advertising to students

As with most interventions, getting the students to participate is often the most difficult part. As the year progressed, we refined our technique for advertising the sessions.

- *Video:* A week before each scheduled session, students were shown a short video of how the process works, taken at one of the first sessions. It gives a good overview of what sort of help is available and serves to familiarise students with the layout. The video can be viewed at: http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/for/future-undergraduates-2/student-support-services-1/first-year-experience-programme/recent-fye-events

- *Sign-up sheets:* A couple of days before the session, students were reminded to attend and given a sign-up sheet with allotted time slots. This served to give us an idea of the numbers attending, and helped to spread the traffic more evenly across the hours available. It also encouraged a higher level of commitment from the students to attend.

- *Course Cecil announcements:* Around the same time, a reminder was posted on our Cecil online learning system,

along with some questions to help students think about the assignment more carefully and consider what sort of help they might need.

- *FYE announcement and reminder from mentors:* Reminders of the sessions were posted on the weekly FYE Cecil Announcement, and mentors encouraged their students to come.

Advertising to Staff

A seminar for staff involved in year one teaching was held at the beginning of the year. This looked at ways to structure curriculum to maximise student success, including the use of graded trigger assignments to gauge students' preparedness for a major piece of assessment. The Targeted Learning Sessions were pitched to course co-ordinators as a way to improve their Did Not Sit (DNS) rates and increase Grade Point Average (GPA). It was also an opportunity for staff to receive feedback from course convenors and tutors and to learn more about the specific sorts of problems their students encounter.

The Manager of the FYEP gave a talk to librarians on the Targeted Learning Sessions at the conclusion of semester one. Again, this was an opportunity to hear about best practice models and refine the sessions for semester two.

Potential course convenor recruits were encouraged to drop by the library to see a Targeted Learning Session in action with a view to incorporating future sessions in their courses. As word spreads, we expect these interventions will become increasingly popular.

How the Sessions Worked

The use of space is critical to create a friendly, casual atmosphere, but at the same time to move students through efficiently so that there is no waiting. It was necessary to creatively re-configure the library space into an area which would enhance student learning (Weaver, 2006) A group of centrally positioned study desks was temporarily re-located to form a boundary around an open space that was sufficient to accommodate mentors, librarians, course tutors and Student Learning staff. Its location at the top of an internal stairway and the use of directional signage enabled students to find their way easily.

The space was broken into four clearly identified sections. The section nearest the entrance was for FYE mentors. Their role was to greet the students, find out where they were with the assignment, and then match them with the help available. Another area was for staff from Student Learning, who provided help with the broad structure of the assignment and gave advice on essay writing. The next section was for the course tutors and academics. In contrast to their experience of underused office hours, tutors proved to be extremely popular in this setting. Students often had questions about how the assignment would be marked, or what were the key learning outcomes they needed to demonstrate. Academic staff also seemed to be popular with students who just had no idea where to begin, but would never have asked for advice in a departmental setting. The next section was devoted to five workstations for library staff, including a subject librarian for the targeted course.

It was important to identify the exact help needed, and direct the students to the appropriate personnel as soon as they arrived. Discussion with academic staff about assignment requirements and desired outcomes identified five key areas of information seeking that students needed to undertake: the ability to find, evaluate, use, manage and create information effectively. These key areas also correspond with some of the core responsibilities of academic libraries in relationship to users (Neal, 2009); selecting and acquiring information sources, and interpreting, organising and making them available. In turn, users are required to do the same with the specific resources that support their study.

To correspond with these key areas, hypothetical questions were created to prompt students to identify and articulate the points or steps at which they needed help, and also to eliminate where they had already made progress. The key areas translate into the following research steps:

Reading and understanding the question: What is the most important part of the question? How can I stick to the word limit? What do I do if my assignment question doesn't make sense? What if the course readings have nothing to do with the question?

Identifying the parts of question to find more information about: If there's nothing in the readings can I just Google for an answer? If something was covered in a lecture is it good enough to repeat that? What should I do if there is just too much to read? Does it matter if all the information is out of date?

Evaluating sources: How do I know these are good sources? What's the difference between a review and critical article? Can I use an article that is a bit edgy or should I stick with safe? Can I include information from a website? I think the article disagrees with the lecturer's opinion - should I use it?

Finding additional reading: Where else should I look for more information? We should only use journal articles, right? How do I manage if all the books are out on loan? Does it matter if the books say the same thing as my course readings on this topic?

Citing/referencing/creating a bibliography: Why do I need to use a particular style? Is there a University website about references? If I prefer to write my ideas - is there anything wrong with that? If I've written the essay and forgotten where I got something - can I just fudge it? Do I need a bibliography if I put references within the text? Should I acknowledge a paraphrase from a reading?

A service point for each research step question was staffed by librarians equipped with wireless laptops to access online information. The pre-announced research queries above were also available. With guidance from the mentors who greeted them, students could use these colour coded pre-announced research queries to quickly identify which workstation to go for advice. This enabled students to approach a service point without having to frame a question for themselves. Many find this too difficult and avoid seeking help for that reason. The numbers of students seeking help from librarians and the range and number of questions asked proved the device effective in removing perceived obstacles from help-

seeking behaviour within an information skills context. Once students were engaged, librarians had the opportunity to advise them of other physical and online library service points where they could find help, either for the assignment in hand, or in the future. Librarians were also able to refer students directly to their tutor or a Student Learning staff member if appropriate.

Outcomes

A survey of the students on use of traditional self-help methods (Henley & von Randow, 2005-2008) showed very low turnout and an aversion to face-to-face help. In previous years, tutors have reported that less than 10% of their allocated students used office hours for one-on-one academic support, with many seeking help too late to make a significant difference to their assessment outcome. In contrast, the Targeted Learning Sessions had a high level of student participation, particularly those in semester one. For example, in FTVMS 100,[1] approximately 300 of a total of 456 students attended.

From a library perspective, the Targeted Learning Sessions addressed the drawback of library research skills being delivered in isolation from other essential skills that first year students must acquire to succeed. Innovative and experimental conversion of existing library space provided a mutually beneficial outcome to a new venture (Nitecki, 2011). While the sessions were not compulsory, they were very clearly endorsed at Faculty level through a branded and identifiable learning programme, highlighting the library

services and resources as an essential and integral part of a students' skill set.

The best measure we have of the impact of the sessions is the number of DNS results for Sociology 100, which was cut by nearly 50% from the previous year. We also have some enthusiastic responses from students:

> It was well set up, with different desks for different queries. An excellent system.

> It was quick- I was in and out in about 10 minutes, didn't have to wait too long and got direct answers.

> I found it fantastic to be able to communicate with the tutors, FYE helpers and classmates all at once. I found it very useful especially regarding the thesis statement.

Conclusion

The uptake for this project was way beyond our expectations. Initially, we thought that if only 30 or 40 students attended these sessions it would be a start and we would get useful feedback for improvement. The high student engagement showed that they hugely preferred this model over traditional one-on-one office based assistance. The additional benefit was the extent to which the professional and academic staff endorsed the sessions and expressed very high levels of personal and professional satisfaction. They were all committed to this pilot scheme becoming embedded in year one academic programmes. What started as an experiment is now an ongoing initiative, which has enthusiastic endorsement at faculty management level. We are now gearing up for Phase 2: extending the service each semester to more first year courses in the faculty.

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[1] FTVMS 100: Media Studies is a core course for students majoring in film, media and television production.

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