

Embedding academic-professional collaborations that build student confidence for essay writing: Student perceptions and quality outcomes. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Although the ability for effective written communication is an essential graduate attribute, there is misalignment of student perceptions of expected writing styles and levels between secondary and tertiary education. This problem may be compounded by an apparent dearth of hands-on writing and related learning modalities for the vast majority of transiting students. This may be due to a range of interacting factors, including the increased numbers and concomitant diversity of students entering higher education, a reluctance among academics to hand over teaching to professional staff, and a lack of opportunities to establish collaborations between academics and co-curricular professions, namely library and learning skills professionals. This paper reports on the development, implementation and outcomes of a collaboration among these groups on an essay writing intervention for commencing students in a very large enrolment first year science subject.

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Introduction

The development and refinement of writing competencies that underpin scholarly research are fundamental to teaching and learning, and hence these skills are essential graduate attributes, regardless of discipline. However, students often have difficulty transiting from the writing styles and conventions used at upper secondary level to those expected at university, both in Australia (Krause, 2001) and elsewhere in the world (Norton, Keenan, Williams, Elander, & McDonough, 2009). Essay writing in particular is considered to be one of the most challenging aspects of students' first year experience (Moss, Pittaway, & McCarthy, 2006). A number of factors may be contributing to undergraduate anxiety about their writing. Firstly, student cohorts are becoming larger and more diverse with respect to prior learning, academic ability, and cultural background. Further, students now spend significantly less time on campus than they did 15 years ago (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2009). This means that students are, on average, less likely to engage in non-compulsory tutorials and workshops, regardless of their potential value.

The potential value of academic-professional partnerships in enhancing a range of undergraduate student experiential and learning outcomes cannot be underestimated (Bruce, 2001). The input of library professionals in curricular and co-curricula programs has typically been to underpin information literacy programs (Dorner, Taylor, & Hodson-Carlton, 2001). Learning skills' professionals, often embedded within the library, contribute to developing and enhancing student capabilities around

essay writing, lecture note-taking and approaches to study. Collaborations between such staff and academics have been shown to enhance student preparedness and skills for writing tasks such as essays (Norton & Crowley, 1995; Rayner & Cridland, 2009).

Thus, there is considerable potential for academics and learning skills professionals to collaborate on initiatives that provide students with a deeper understanding of the process of essay writing. Skills such as identification of key words, development of essay structure and the conventions associated with attribution are essential for increasingly diverse first year cohorts. Here we report on the value of implementing an approach involving academic, library and learning skills staff to collaboratively develop and deliver an introductory essay writing workshop.

Development and implementation

An assessment task for commencing students in this large enrolment biology unit is an essay. The underlying structure of this essay has been previously reported (Rayner & Cridland, 2009). Optional "getting started on your essay" workshops have traditionally been offered in weeks 2-4, followed by more advanced workshops on "locating resources," "writing introductions and conclusions," and "referencing and reference lists." Although there was general consensus that all students should have the opportunity to attend a "getting started" workshop, demand was greater than available places. Despite cohort size being a potential stumbling to block student attendance, the decision was made to implement a "getting started" workshop for all commencing students in 2010.

The “getting started” workshops integrated both didactic and peer assisted learning (PAL) approaches. The workshop began with a brief introduction from learning skills staff on essay planning and writing. Peer groups comprising 4-5 students were randomly assigned an essay question and asked to discuss and analyse it. A PAL approach to such tasks may have considerable potential to enhance student understanding of topic concepts and help identify key topic words. Groups were required to identify words crucial in defining concepts of the topic, its limits and expected direction. As a second task, groups were provided with a journal paper related to their topic and then asked to collate a list of topic-related keywords for database searching and also generate topic questions that might guide their reading. Handouts included instructions and concept map proformas for consideration and completion. During the PAL activities, teaching associates (“markers”), together with learning skills and library staff, circulated among the groups, prompting discussion on the topic, answering questions and providing direction where required. Markers were involved to provide congruency with respect to analysis of topic question and structure, thereby enhancing alignment between writing and marking. A librarian concluded the workshop with information on how to use databases to search for relevant peer-reviewed papers, before showcasing some more advanced essay writing workshops, scheduled for later in semester.

There were a number of aims of this academic-professional collaboration. In terms of student learning the aims were to: (i) provide a starting point for every student to consider and plan writing an essay; (ii) present students with indicators

regarding essay structure, the expected writing style and conventions associated with plagiarism and attribution, which are known to be troublesome to many students. In terms of transition and social inclusion, the aims were to: (i) facilitate peer interactions to ease student transition; (ii) build student confidence for essay writing and provide information about gaining assistance with essay writing.

Students were surveyed both pre- and post-workshop regarding their perceptions of their confidence about five key essay writing competencies. Perception of confidence was Likert scaled from 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (very confident).

Evaluating the collaboration

Analyses were made of (i) student perceptions of their readiness/confidence to research and prepare a biology essay; (ii) the relative effect of the “getting started” workshop, comparing among topics, on student perceptions of their confidence; (iii) the possible effect of the “getting started” workshop on attendances at subsequent advanced workshops; (iv) the improved alignment between the academic and support staff with respect to dissemination of information to students and expectations of them.

Prior to undertaking the workshop, students reported comparatively low confidence regarding two of the competencies; their ability to (i) identify a peer reviewed article and (ii) locate sources for the essay (Table 1). The “getting started” workshop generated a significant increase in student confidence for all of the five essay writing competencies (Table 1).

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Table 1 Pre- and post-workshop student perceptions of their confidence about five essay writing competencies

How confident are you to:	Mean score	
	Pre-workshop (N=881)	Post-workshop (N=879)
1. correctly analyse the essay question?	3.0	3.9*
2. identify concepts you need to understand to research the essay question?	3.1	3.9*
3. identify a peer reviewed journal article?	2.4	4.1*
4. locate sources for the essay?	2.9	4.0*
5. identify the steps in the essay writing process?	3.0	3.6*

* indicates significant difference between pre- and post-workshop means at $\alpha < 0.001$ and *Cohen's d* > 0.9

The increase in student confidence for all competency measures was similar for all but one of the nine essay topics covered in the workshop. For students undertaking this topic, there was no significant increase in confidence with respect to competency number 2 (“identify concepts ... question?”). However, there was a significant increase in student confidence for the other four competencies with respect to this essay topic.

Using a mean weighted confidence value derived from Likert scores for each competency, comparisons were made between student confidence following the workshop and their draft and final essay marks. There were no apparent patterns or correlations between student confidence and draft or final essay marks. The lack of any differences among topics in the distribution of draft marks suggests

that topic choice did not bestow any advantage or disadvantage in terms of marks gained. In other words, student confidence after the “getting started” workshop cannot be used to predict relative performance in the subsequent essay.

Of enrolled students, 99% attended the “getting started” workshop. On average, 17% of students signed up for the essay topic they covered in the workshop, a significantly higher proportion than the 11% that would be expected from a random distribution over the nine topic choices ($\chi^2 = 38.4, p < 0.001, phi = 2.1$). The distribution of draft and final essay marks, and rate of non-submission of the draft essay did not differ between those who elected to continue with the same topic and those who did not. Compared to 2009, there was a 40% increase in student

attendances at advanced library and learning skills workshops.

Discussion

The increase in student confidence regarding the key writing competencies after the “getting started” workshop is a noteworthy demonstration of the value of establishing and embedding these sorts of academic-professional collaborations in first year curricula. The significantly higher than expected proportion of students who submitted an essay on the same topic as that covered in the workshop suggests it provided considerable value to students, perhaps giving them confidence that they had a head start.

The lack of any apparent relationship between student confidence and overall essay writing performance is not unexpected given the many variables and confounding factors, including the number of essay topics (and different degrees of difficulty) and markers, and the effects of penalties associated with late submission and word length. The involvement of essay markers in the workshop enhanced the collaboration by strengthening the alignment of student-marker expectations with respect to the writing task. The potential value of markers in the workshop cannot be understated given the importance of providing consistent, accurate, useful and unambiguous formative feedback, to be used by students to refine their essay for final submission.

The differential effect of the workshop topic on student confidence demands that care be exercised in the topics used for such activities. The essay topic for which there was no increase in student confidence had a more difficult theoretical

basis than the others. Although the peer-assisted approach of the workshop may, to some extent, ameliorate this issue, poor topic choice has the capacity to undermine student confidence about their essay writing early in transition. One approach that may be worth exploring in regard to degree of topic difficulty might be to offer writing tasks based on the differential abilities of students.

In addition to enhancing student confidence regarding these competencies, this collaborative approach to the writing process generated some unexpected benefits. Firstly, the collaborations enabled greater alignment and more integrated dissemination of information. Given that writing is a source of anxiety for a very high proportion of commencing students, such alignment can improve their transition by reducing the “mixed messages” syndrome that many of them experience (Kift, 2003). Secondly, students are more likely to engage in the writing process much more early in semester. Finally, the “getting started” workshop appears to have encouraged attendance at more advanced essay writing workshops. Providing all students with details about how library staff can assist with information literacy may also have eased the “library anxiety” phenomenon (Brown, Weingart, Johnson & Dance, 2004; Turnbull, Frost, & Croud, 2000). Subsequent academic referral to learning skills staff may thus be less construed as some sort of “academic fobbing off.”

Regardless of any other effects, the greater confidence that students gained to commence the writing process demonstrates the considerable value in providing this type of workshop to all students, not just those at the two extremes of the literacy competency

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distribution. The initiative also demonstrates the potential of such academic-professional collaborations to deliver tangible benefits to commencing students. In an era of widening participation and massification of higher education, there will be an increasing need for these types of academic-professional collaborations.

Summary of practice report discussion points

Although there might be concerns that these types of collaborations may be restricted to on-campus teaching environments, continuing advances in information and communication technologies, particularly e-learning approaches, should enable effective integration of such partnerships into off-campus and distance learning modes of delivery (e.g. Dale & Drake, 2005; Minocha, 2009).

While there is common recognition among many institutions for the value of embedding learning skills and library classes into the compulsory curriculum in order to capture all students, there are limits on the costs of introducing such activities in terms of the time demands on professional staff and the time constraints imposed by content-rich units, particularly those with large cohorts. Our experience has shown that embedding just one introductory workshop had a positive flow-on effect as measured by the substantial increase in demand for follow-up essay writing workshops. The introduction of this professional-academic partnership generated returns in engendering student awareness and appreciation for the value of extra-curricula professional assistance on individual student writing and research competencies.

Introducing such a workshop in week one of semester provided a number of benefits with regard to student transition experience. Firstly, delivery of the introductory workshop straight after the unit-specific orientation class, where students were first informed that submitting an essay formed 10% of their overall unit assessment, gave the workshop immediate discipline-specific relevance for commencing students. Secondly, the partnered staff participation allowed for dissemination of information and direction about the assessment expectations, clarification of the submission requirements if needed, and functioned to unpack perhaps unfamiliar language for commencing students. Thirdly, the requirement for students to work in groups to discuss different aspects of the assessment task gave them an opportunity to make connections with peers early in the transition process. Yorke (2011) identified three key elements that contribute to easing the transition of commencing first year students. These are (i) student perceptions of the relevance of assessment tasks and class-work, (ii) clear articulation of the level of academic skills and competencies expected in tertiary education and (iii) the opportunity to interact with fellow students early in the transition experience. Demonstrating both a professional-academic staff collaborative environment and the value of extra-curricula learning opportunities so early in the transition process, may also have impacted positively on student retention. With early awareness of the extent of help on offer, students that are vulnerable for withdrawal may be less likely to give up on their studies.

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