

Academic reading requirements for commencing HE students - Are peer-reviewed journals really the right place to start?

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Australian universities are increasingly influenced by the combined pressures of growing numbers of less well-prepared commencing students, reduced teacher-student interaction time, and an increasing focus on Blended Learning. For these and other reasons traditional teaching and learning approaches are proving less effective, and traditional assumptions about learner preparedness that have tended to underpin curricula may no longer apply. This paper notes some of the obstacles that traditional curricula present for non-traditional students, and explores ways in which curricula could better accommodate these students. In particular it examines expectations of commencing students as academic readers, and considers whether these are valid and reasonable. It questions the assumption that peer-reviewed journal articles are the optimum, or even appropriate, starting point for commencing HE students as academic readers.

Introduction

In a previous paper (Hamilton, 2016a) I argued that commencing HE students should be given much more time and space in order to acquire the academic literacies they need to complete assignments and demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. In particular, I called for much less focus on attribution and referencing within early written assignments, advocating that ‘reasonable attempts’ should be rewarded rather than penalised for formatting inconsistencies and/or inaccuracies in applying particular referencing styles. An important point that came out of the discussion accompanying presentation of that paper was that novice academic writers are nearly always also *novice academic readers*, and this has implications in terms of their capacity to independently source and gain meaning from academic texts. This paper explores that idea further, reflecting on what is expected of commencing HE students as academic readers. Like the previous paper, it questions whether some expectations of commencing HE students as learners are reasonable. It explores some of the obstacles that traditional HE curricula place in front of commencing students, and examines the impact of these particularly for non-traditional students. In particular it poses the question of whether, as is often now assumed, peer-reviewed journal articles are optimum or even *appropriate* sources of information for commencing HE students. An assumption on which this paper is based is that while universities often acknowledge in policy that commencing students are ‘academic apprentices’, in practice curricula and the expectations around teaching and learning quite often do not reflect this.

Background

The Australian Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning environment has been increasingly dominated by the combined pressures of growing numbers of less well prepared commencing students (Munn, Coutts, Knopke, Grant & Bartlett, 2016), reduced teacher-student interaction time (Coates & Ransom, 2011; Gibbs, 2006), and an increasing focus on Blended Learning approaches (Banditvilai, 2016; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Falling student face-to-face attendance, negative student evaluations of learning experiences, and issues with retention and success are other factors impacting on the HE teaching and learning

environment. In this changing landscape some traditional teaching and learning approaches are proving less effective, and traditional assumptions about learner preparedness that have tended to underpin HE curricula may now be less valid (Hamilton, 2016b).

Realisation that traditional curricula place often unintended barriers in front of non-traditional students is hardly new. Sambell and Hubbard (2004) noted considerable research pointing to a tension between the move toward ‘massification’ in HE and the way in which teaching and learning was conducted, and significant differences in the levels of preparedness of newer students when compared with previous eras. According to Sambell & Hubbard (2004, p. 27):

...much of the literature suggests...the pedagogic environments that are typically offered at university present an obstacle to non-traditional students, who struggle to cope with the levels of independent study expected...

Gale and Tranter (2011) have argued that adoption of widening participation agendas by universities should (but often do not) imply a willingness to change curricula to better meet the needs of new students. They argue that universities need to create genuine *spaces* (within curricula) for diverse and newer students, rather than simply stopping at creating *places* for them (p. 42). Bowl (2001) has made a similar point, noting that universities find it easier to problematise the non-traditional student when retention and success issues arose, rather than to re-examine or interrogate their own practices. In the author’s experience a similar situation remains common in contemporary HE teaching and learning environments, with a greater willingness to attribute retention and success issues to student rather than curricular deficiencies.

Commencing students as novice academic readers

Academic reading is most often the starting place for commencing students to begin to make sense of course content and assessment tasks, though it is not always acknowledged as such. According to van Pletzen (2006, p. 125) the “relative invisibility of the reading process” has particular implications both for learners and those designing curricula. “Learners often misjudge educator’s objectives [in setting readings] and have difficulties understanding how they should approach a text, or what use they are expected to make of it” (van Pletzen, 2006, p.106). van Pletzen (citing Rose, 2004) notes that successful student navigation through many HE curricula tends to require progressively more advanced abilities and skills at independent reading, forming part of the ‘hidden curriculum’. This presents particular challenges for non-traditional students, who may commence HE courses “...without having fully developed [their] ability to learn independently from reading” (van Pletzen, 2006, p.106).

van Pletzen argues that an early goal of teaching and learning practices should be to make ‘visible’ the role of reading within a curriculum, as well as the reading practices required. Given their immersion within an academic environment, educators tend to make assumptions about student understanding of the learning process, and the role of reading within this. They may assume not only that students have the necessary skills, but also the requisite attitudes and awareness. Where a gap becomes evident, this has only rarely prompted re-examination of curricula, more often leading to a greater reliance on academic support to address this. However, notwithstanding the important role of academic support, it is desirable for core curricula to be developed with an understanding that academic reading and writing are not simply ‘skills’ to be acquired, but the “...very means through which academic learning and knowledge construction occur” (Warren as quoted in Sambell & Hubbard, 2004, p. 28).

Paxton (2006) has introduced the useful term ‘interim literacies’ to refer to the transitional stage that many commencing HE students pass through, where they have not mastered academic discourse, but are situated somewhere along a continuum leading ultimately to

mastery of the key academic literacies they will require to successfully complete their studies. It seems reasonable to assume that commencing students 'arrive' with differing previous educational experiences, degrees of social and academic capital, and interim literacies. Rosenblatt (as quoted in van Pletzen, 2006, p. 107) talks of a "...personal linguistic-experiential reservoir" that people draw on in meaning-making when reading. Clearly some commencing HE students may have 'reservoirs' that enable them to 'hit the ground running' in terms of applying academic literacies, whereas others may not. Of importance is that assignment tasks may wrongly be assumed to represent a fairly level playing field, characterised by objectivity and accessibility, when in fact they place unintended barriers and obstacles in front of some students.

As noted above, increasingly it has fallen on Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educators to help mediate this uneven playing field by supporting commencing students to varying degrees in the acquisition and development of their academic literacies. However, given the focus on essays and other written texts in early assessments, along with often limited teaching time available for 'non-core' curriculum areas, 'support' interventions for commencing HE students more often than not focus on academic writing. Despite being the platform on which most effective academic writing is dependent, academic *reading* can inadvertently assume the place of 'poor cousin' in terms of interventions and support processes; perhaps surprisingly, sometimes the symbiotic relationship between effective sourcing and extraction of information on the one hand, and its expression in appropriate academic writing on the other, is not fully understood or addressed in the academic and learning support offered to commencing students.

Are peer-reviewed journals the right place to start for novice academic readers?

I recently made an important discovery. While reflecting on the first year experience for current HE students I went back and examined many of my early assignment responses (yes I still have them!) from my Bachelor of Arts degree, commenced in 1977. These were largely handwritten essays, and assignment responses typed up on an electronic typewriter, so pre-dating personal computers. I was interested to see that my undergraduate essays, written on a range of serious, complex academic topics, were based primarily on information and ideas from *textbooks*. This is not surprising, because in the pre-digital era there were considerably less academic journals, and accessing journals was much more difficult. They tended to be bound in very large files and kept somewhere in the basement of university libraries, marked 'never to be loaned'. If we jump forward to 2016, we find a very different world in which very large numbers of academic journal articles on just about any topic are a few mouse clicks away, and readily downloadable from many university library sites. It is perhaps this that has led to the common requirement within many of the Health and Biomedicine courses in which I teach for students to use *peer-reviewed journals* as the default for most of the information and ideas contained in their assignment responses.

For many of the commencing students I see in my role as an ALL educator, a 1500 word essay assignment is commonly accompanied with the instruction that they are 'required to include a minimum of 8 peer-reviewed journal articles' in their reference list. My experience is that many commencing students struggle with this requirement, both in terms of finding relevant and appropriate sources and in writing about them in coherent and cohesive ways. In comparing my early academic reading and writing experiences from 1977 with those of my students today, what became clear is that *I* was primarily reading academic sources written with undergraduate students as an intended audience, whilst *they* (my current students) are reading academic sources primarily intended for an expert audience. Even in relatively stable areas of knowledge such as anatomy, the clarification received from discipline lecturers has made clear that textbooks are less valued as sources of information, and that students relying

as much on textbooks as journal articles for their information can expect to be penalised. This has raised some important questions. Have textbooks ceased to be valued as sources of information and ideas for commencing undergraduate students, and if so at what point did this occur? At what point was it decided that academic journals were a suitable and optimum source of information and ideas for students at this formative, commencing stage of learning? Importantly, if this shift *has* occurred, has it been based on educational, pedagogic considerations and decisions, or simply come about due to the greater availability and currency of academic journals?

In examining our expectations around academic writing, providing a much longer and more gradual orientation into the process of researching and gathering information may be desirable, as well as greater acceptance that while academic journals are an appropriate endpoint and source of information for experienced students, they may not be the optimum starting point for commencing students. When discipline lecturers are questioned, the justifications commonly given for the expectation that students rely on peer-reviewed journal articles for information are to do with currency and academic credibility. There is often a sense that textbooks quickly date, whereas journal articles tend to reflect recent knowledge. This may be true, but the question remains as to whether currency should be the primary consideration for commencing students, or whether they might benefit more from texts which provide ordered, well-structured overviews of key topics for undergraduate learning rather than the often highly complex, context specific and research-focussed information that typically characterise journal articles.

From a learning perspective, important considerations here are, if the use of journal articles is desirable, what *types* of journal articles should commencing students be encouraged to use, and what *guidance* should they be given in choosing journal articles? Is independent research a realistic expectation for commencing students, or should there be a greater focus on ‘guided research’, enabling students to be exposed to journal articles that provide good models and can be carefully selected by their teachers with regard for structure, organisation, complexity, readability and length. Would a more gradual shift from the ordered, systematic, stable information typically provided through textbooks to the more specialised, specific and complex information typical of journal articles be desirable for novice academic readers and writers? Would a more scaffolded journey into the academic literature, starting more with texts written with students in mind, not be more effective (particularly for non-traditional students) in laying strong foundations?

Conclusion

The questions raised in this short paper go to the heart of what may be required if HE curricula are to better accommodate non-traditional students, starting with a much more scaffolded introduction to academic research and reading. Not only would many HE curricula benefit from greater consideration of van Pletzen’s suggested increased emphasis on the *process* of academic reading, but greater consideration needs to be paid also to the *sources* of information for commencing students. Questioning the supremacy of the ‘peer-reviewed journal article’ as the primary source of information for commencing HE students may be anathema to some and challenge current orthodoxy, but nevertheless this paper argues that it is an important and necessary stage in re-imagining first year curricula. Many first year curricula need to be re-developed with a view to ensuring that the early reading tasks required of commencing HE students are accessible and manageable for all students, not just those arriving with a full ‘reservoir’ of social and academic capital (Rosenblatt as cited in van Pletzen, 2006). This paper asks you to consider how this important early stage in student acquisition of academic literacies can best be managed and scaffolded; in particular, *when* and *how* commencing students should be introduced to peer-reviewed journal articles, and at

what stage they can reasonably be expected to use them as key sources of information in their writing.

Questions for discussion

1. At your institution, to what extent are commencing students expected to use peer-reviewed journal articles as the main or only source of information for early assignments?
2. To what extent are commencing students expected to independently source information for their assignments? What (if any) scaffolding is provided to support them as novice researchers?
3. Could (and should) curricula for commencing students be adapted to better accommodate their stages of learning? If so, in what ways?

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