

Using threshold learning outcomes to benchmark first year English assessment in Australian universities

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This paper describes an emerging initiative to use peer review to benchmark the assessment of the foundation subject in the English major in the Bachelor of Arts in Australian universities. It contextualises this work within existing projects in standards and in peer review of assessment, explaining how it will lever off them in practical ways to maximise the chances of success.

What is being done/proposed

I propose to begin a staged and manageable process for benchmarking the assessment of first year English in the Bachelor of Arts in Australian universities. The benchmarking will occur in the context of Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for English in Australia, to be endorsed by the Australian Universities Heads of English in 2017.

The initiative aligns with the conference theme of Transitions, specifically the first year experience in the discipline of English. It capitalises on two other projects:

1. Australian Universities Heads of English (AUHE) project to define, debate, agree on and endorse national Threshold Learning Outcomes for the English major in Australian universities (Wallace et al, 2015);
2. Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) funded project, ‘Designing First year curricula in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in the context of discipline threshold standards’ (Thomas et al, 2012).

Issue addressed, rationale and purpose

In the vein of the ‘After Standards’ project in History, this initiative seeks to capitalise on the disciplinary discussions generated during the process to debate and agree on the TLOs for English by shining the spotlight on actual practices of assessment in first year English, and how well these practices actually assist the development of students in the first year of their journey towards meeting the TLOs by the time they graduate (Brawley et al, 2013). The project contributes to the cross-institutional benchmarking required of universities under the Higher Education Standards Framework and, as noted on the Australian Council of Deans of Science website, attempts to address the need to do more to make them meaningful in practice and in their impact on students’ progression, transition and success. The relationship between standards and assessment is the crucial - ethical - aspect of standards in practice, because of its impact on student achievement and future prospects.

Approach or method used

The project will proceed in these three overlapping stages:

1. Charles Sturt University (CSU)
2. CSU plus small number of other universities
3. International benchmarking with Canada

Stage 1: CSU

This stage entails action research through teaching and benchmarking two different offerings of the foundation English subject: Bathurst Internal and Wagga Distance. These offerings have traditionally been taught by different staff. In 2017, with one staff member, Joy Wallace, taking responsibility for both, there is an excellent opportunity to investigate what have been different methods for assessing the same Learning Outcomes in terms of their usefulness for student learning, as demonstrated in assessments. To that end, the two offerings are being taught substantially as they were in 2016, according to the online Subject Outlines, with the same or cognate learning activities and assessments. When the assessments are moderated, as well as comparing students' performance within offerings, the performance across both offerings will be compared to judge the effectiveness of the different kinds of assessment on student learning.

For example, Assessment 1 in LIT107 at CSU is a Minor Assessment. In both offerings, the set assignment conforms to First Year Principles in being an early, low stakes assessment on which detailed feedback is given to assist students to learn what is required to write good assessment items in English. In the Rationale, both assessments are claimed to develop and assess (the same) particular learning outcomes. The marking criteria and rubrics support these claims. Yet, the assignments are different in kind. In Bathurst Internal, the assignment is a scaffolded one which requires separate paragraph answers on the topic of medieval and modern romance. The last question requires students to locate and assess one secondary source on the topic and compile a reference list. The other questions encourage students to acquire knowledge and practise skills that they would need to write a critical essay on the topic. Yet because this is an early low stakes assessment, the value cannot be such that would make it fair to require the students to bring all these steps together and make them into a critical essay. In Wagga Distance, the equivalent early minor assignment is a short critical essay on the same topic of medieval and modern romance. Students are given guidance through the Subject Forum and Resources on how to put together an essay on the topic, and are encouraged to seek further assistance from a Learning Skills advisor. They thus get the opportunity to practise and get detailed feedback on the whole process of writing a critical essay.

While current pedagogy tends to argue for the superior value of scaffolded assessment over the writing of a critical essay as a way of developing student learning, there is little comparative research to support this argument. It is arguable that practising and getting feedback on a shorter version of the whole task of writing a critical essay is at least as valuable as practising and getting feedback on separate elements without the opportunity to put them together into one cohesive text. From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the cohesiveness of text (the whole document) is of paramount importance in assuring the effectiveness of a communication act (Halliday, 1994). To ensure cohesiveness of text, students need to work deductively from the general proposition to be argued down through the selection and organisation of topics into paragraphs that support and advance the proposition. The scaffolded assessment, by contrast, guides students to work inductively by building up the elements and skills they will need to write a more substantial piece.

I propose that by moderating and comparing sample assignments from both offerings, Bathurst Internal and Wagga Distance, we will find some useful information as to the comparative effectiveness of the two forms of assessment in developing and assessing student learning of the topic of medieval and modern romance

CSU plus small number of other universities

It is proposed that CSU will partner with La Trobe University, The University of Tasmania and The Australian Catholic University in a pilot stage of cross-institutional benchmarking of assessments in first year English in the context of the TLOs.

There are several models for scaling up the project to cross-institutional and national discipline level status (Krause et al, 2014; Booth et al, 2015). Perhaps the most developed and the most useful for the English discipline to aim towards is suggested by the Achievement Matters project for Accounting standards (Hancock et al, 2015). The value of this project is that it recognises the subtlety and complexity of standards benchmarking and moderation, which is not a simple, mechanical exercise but rather, requires judgement - and thus enters into the realm of the subjective.

The peer review method recommended by the Achievement Matters project for Accounting, and by the cross-discipline projects of Krause at al, and Booth et al., advocate for the value of face-to-face discussion and calibration of assessors' perceptions of how well standards are met, as a way of factoring in and recording for future use the uncertainties produced by individual judgement.

The points mentioned in Hancock et al in response to the matter of sustaining the benefits of calibration – and the challenges of doing so – are crucial to any consideration of how calibration benefit, once achieved, might be sustained for English. A possible opportunity has arisen from the workshops I have convened, on behalf of AUHE and CSU (who have both provided funding), to debate and refine the draft TLOs for English.

A highly effective session at these national workshops gave participants practice in working with the draft TLOs by providing copies of the Good Practice Guide for English produced by the team led by Associate Professor Theda Thomas of The Australian Catholic University. The team successfully completed an OLT-funded project on Designing First year curricula in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in the context of discipline standards, or TLOs.. The Guide for each of the disciplines we studied, including English, provided for each TLO a summary of the key challenges to student learning in mastering the skills required to meet that TLO, suggestions for teaching strategies to address these difficulties, and examples of assessments that could assist student learning in that TLO (Bacchus et al, 2015). Participants were asked to describe a learning activity or assessment item they used in any level of English teaching and identify which TLO it assisted students towards. This session elicited energetic participation, and could have run for much longer. Colleagues clearly found enormous benefit in sharing ideas for teaching and assessing in the context of the TLOs. Advocacy for a permanent and regular forum for this discussion has been an outcome of these national workshops to discuss, debate and refine the draft TLOs. There was broad support at the 2016 AGM of AUHE for an annual national colloquium on learning and teaching English to be held the day before the AUHE AGM. There was also broad support for establishing a network to focus initially on First year teaching in the context of the TLOs. The current project to benchmark assessment items in first year English subjects has been designed to direct and focus the activities of the new network, and the annual colloquium would afford an opportunity for maintaining the benefits gained from the benchmarking sessions conducted by the group including representatives from CSU, La Trobe University, The University of Tasmania and The Australian Catholic University.

International benchmarking with Canada

This stage will capitalise on the ties already established between AUHE and the association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE).

How initiative builds on existing good practice/knowledge

This initiative builds on several other projects, including much OLT-funded work. While the initiative could notionally be independent of more comprehensive work on the teaching of tertiary English in Australia and internationally, in fact it has arisen from and has deep connections with the project undertaken by the Australian Universities Heads of English (AUHE) to agree on Threshold Learning Outcomes for the English major in the Bachelor of Arts, and to benchmark this activity with international partners in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This project is well advanced, and highly rated workshops have been held in most states in Australia. The set of agreed TLOs will be presented to the Annual General Meeting of AUHE in 2017 for ratification.

To achieve maximum impact, it is proposed that the project align with review of the Bachelor of Arts, in which English traditionally has been an important major. It is thus necessary to include both First year English coordinators and colleagues more broadly experienced and qualified in curriculum review across a School or Faculty. It is proposed that the national stage of the project would initially bring together coordinators of first year English and present or recent Associate Deans Learning and Teaching (ADLTs) at Charles Sturt University, La Trobe University, The University of Tasmania, and The Australian Catholic University. All these universities are currently revising, or have recently reviewed, their Bachelor of Arts. The project thus supports the HESF requirement that universities should benchmark curriculum review.

It is suggested that participating universities would individually moderate assessment items in First year English subjects on the model described for CSU. Participating universities would then make a selection of assessment items for cross-institutional moderation.

The main challenges for the project, as the literature on benchmarking consistently points out, are in establishing, resourcing and sustaining it. That is why this project, to have the best chance of success, is leveraging off existing networks, and institutional and other professional relationships. In the absence of opportunities to apply for national funding, there will need to be negotiations over workload in individual institutions so that English discipline experts can participate. That in itself suggests the importance of including colleagues with ADLT status or experience. ADLTs get work load for curriculum review and are in a position to determine, or at least negotiate, workload for discipline colleagues.

Expected impact

The most immediate impact will be felt at the first AUHE national first year English colloquium in late 2017. The significance will be in bringing together participants from universities that traditionally may undertake benchmarking activities in certain groupings (e.g. Group of 8, Regional Universities) but not across the sector, to engage in benchmarking activities on first year English assessments.

Questions/issues for discussion

1. Experiential: Do you have any experience you could share in discipline benchmarking - either because you are in the discipline or in an academic development role?
2. Conceptual: What are some of the challenges in trying to calibrate academic judgement in standards benchmarking?
3. Systems: Do you think there are adequate templates, models or systems for recording discipline standards benchmarking for generalist degrees and their constituent sub-disciplines? Are there any good ones that you would be able to share?
4. Resourcing: Do you have any suggestions for ways of resourcing benchmarking in a discipline?
5. Sustainability: How can we make benchmarking of assessment against standards sustainable in the current funding climate of Higher Education in Australia?

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