Enhancing the FYHE experience through professional partnership: Embedding academic and library skills in a first-year psychology unit

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Abstract

To create an enhanced FYHE for first-year psychology students, an academic and professional partnership was formed among School of Psychology, academic skills, library, and faculty staff to embed research and academic skills support into the unit website discussion board of a large first-year psychology unit. Academic skills and library staff "resided" as guest lecturers on Deakin Studies Online (DSO; i.e. Blackboard) to teach and model writing and research skills in response to individual student queries. The program introduces and normalises student access to student support facilities offered by Deakin University and thus addresses a key element in student retention in online learning as identified by Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003). Feedback from staff and students is discussed and recommendations for project expansion are outlined.

Introduction

Successful transition to university requires major social and academic adjustments for most students (Dalziel & Peat, 1998). Few students enter university prepared for the academic demands of tertiary education (Tinto, 2009), with the first year experience critical in determining whether students will continue with their studies (Tinto, 1997). Students who adequately develop academic and information literacy skills during their first year are more likely to continue with university than students who do not (Einfalt & Turley, 2009). However, developing the necessary skills is a highly complex undertaking: Not only do students have to develop the "generic" academic and research skills required by the academic community, they must also develop skills specific to the students' discipline (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995; Halliday, 1993; Myers, 1992; Swales & Feak, 1994), and negotiate differences in expectations from unit to unit and from academic to academic (Langer, 1992; Prior, 1991; Zamel, 1995).

Widening participation rates made possible by the reforms as outlined in the recommendations of the Bradley Report (Australian Government, 2008) will likely mean even greater adjustments for more students. Targeting rural, mature-aged and low socio-economic student populations means that students will be coming to university with more varied levels of preparedness to successfully transition to, and undertake, tertiary education. Student diversity is also evident in the modes of study selected by students as increasing numbers of students balance work, life and study commitments. For example, in 2010 more than two-thirds of Deakin first-year students reported that they held jobs, with the number in students in full-time employment increasing from 11.8% in 2008 to 19.4% in 2010 (Deakin University

2010). With more and more demands upon their time, students require greater flexibility in how, when, and where they study. These trends add further dimensions to transition adjustment, as students and staff are less able to "connect" in real time, and students may not have the time or be physically present to access traditional forms of skills development support.

Responses from a first-year student experience survey (Deakin University, 2010) showed that 27% of first-year students considered withdrawing in the first six weeks of the course. Given that the survey was completed in the eighth week of a twelve-week trimester, this figure likely under-represents the level of concern experienced by students because it fails to capture the responses of those who actually withdrew from their course. The major concerns expressed by students were workload issues and course content. By the eighth week of trimester, 90% of students had completed their first assignment. Twenty-eight percent of students felt that the level of support and resources available to them were inadequate, 40% did not understand what was expected of them and 40% were unhappy with their result. Given the importance of achieving well in initial assessments to bolster confidence and motivate students to set high standards for success, the dismal feedback from students about their level of preparedness to complete their first assessment is disheartening.

The Faculty of Health has provided a peer mentoring program to undergraduate students for a number of years at Deakin University. Approximately 89 mentors, 625 first-year students and 20 staff from across all Faculty of Health courses and campuses were involved in the program in 2010. The mentoring program is conducted over the first four weeks of trimester and places between four to eight first-year students with a second- or third-year student mentor. Mentor groups meet once a week and at the end of each meeting students complete a mentor diary. A key objective of the mentor diary is to try to establish common patterns of concerns among first-year students during the first four weeks of university life. In 2010, the major concern for students was assessment, affecting up to 90% of students by the third week of trimester (Thomas, 2010).

Students defined their concerns about assessment as including assignment writing, referencing and academic reading. Moreover, students were concerned about how the lack of skills in these areas would impact on their assessment and academic grades. Deakin University, like other universities, provides a range of support resources to help students make a successful transition to tertiary study, and the various forms that these services take reflect the university's good intentions to support the increasing diversity of students. These various forms of support aim to teach students metacognitive skills, the "learning how to learn" (Allan & Clarke, 2007, p. 64) and include group workshops, individual sessions and the provision of self-access materials for both generic and course-specific skills development. Generic skills development, which focuses on cross-discipline, "transferrable" skills, is usually provided by academic and library skills specialists. Course-specific skills development is provided at the faculty, course and unit levels, and includes sessions on specific assignments and the provision of materials or activities designed to help students understand how to approach specific tasks. Course-specific skills development may be provided by lecturers, tutors or academic and library skills specialists, or through collaboration. There are also a number of programs which emphasise peer learning.

However, offering support to students is of little value if students do not take it up. For example, feedback from the Deakin University Faculty of Health peer mentoring diaries

(Thomas, 2010) suggests that students do not recognise the importance of attending workshops until it is time to submit an assignment, which is frequently well after the dates of the workshops and too late to allow time for the students to learn and apply the skills even if workshops were available. Many students also said that they felt uncomfortable about the idea of attending public workshops, and others shied away from private consultations because of their reluctance to be identified. This feedback is consistent with reports in the literature that often students who are most in need of skills development are not the ones who seek it out (Kennell, Maldoni, & Davie, 2010). Attendance at skills workshops can be dismally low (eg. Bailey, Harbaugh & Hartman, 2007; Salamonson, Koch, Weaver, Everett, & Jackson, 2009), particularly in generic skills workshops when offered outside the student's specific study context (Baik & Greig 2009; Durkin & Main, 2002.). Students may not realise they have weaknesses or may not see generic skills workshops as relevant (Durkin & Main, 2002). Researchers also question the effectiveness of generic programs (e.g. Durkin & Main, 2002; Hyland, 2004; Swales, Barks, Ostermann, & Simpson, 2001; Wingate, 2006; as cited in Baik & Greig, 2009), as different disciplines have different types of tasks (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984) and communication "norms" (Clanchy & Ballard, 1991; Myers, 1992; Halliday, 1993). Allan and Clarke (2007, p. 66) argue that locating academic and library support outside of a student's course of study "smacks of a deficit model", stigmatising the service and preventing many students from using it. On the other hand, this model suits students who feel more comfortable seeking support externally, without their lecturers or peers knowing about it (The University of Auckland, 2010).

The challenge for universities, then, is to provide support that is appropriate, relevant, effective, accessible and attractive to students. This entails providing a range of diverse options appropriate to the diverse needs of an increasingly diverse student population. To address this need, universities are increasingly offering course-specific skills development through embedding, whereby "the skills which students specifically need in order to follow the course are actually addressed within the subject matter of the course itself" (Luxon & Peelo, 2009, p. 57). Embedding academic and information literacy skills development within the design of the curriculum allows students to contextualise skills to task demands (Auckland University of Technology, 2010; Pritchard 2010) and within the program outcomes and learning objectives (Allen & Clarke, 2007). Embedding skills has been found to be more effective than offering dislocated academic skills programs (Casey et al., 2006) particularly when offered in conjunction with other student support services (Milne, 2008) and is recommended as an effective strategy for academic skill development (Allan & Clarke, 2007; Casey et al., 2006; Durkin & Main 2002; Einfalt & Turley, 2009; Milne, 2008; Samson & Granath 2004, Salamonson et al., 2009; Waters 2002). Embedding also has the potential to reach far more students than other methods of skills development, particularly if embedding efforts focus on large, first-year units. While some academics fear that embedding skills may mean cramming additional content into an already overcrowded curriculum, the teaching of learning skills is no less important than the teaching of the "content" of the discipline they are studying (Allan & Clarke, 2007). 'Overcrowding' is only likely to be a problem when academic skills development is taught as an adjunct to the existing curriculum. By embedding academic skills development within existing assessments, the skills are acquired as a matter of process.

Patalong (2003) argued that the extensive skill sets of specialist staff such as librarians are too frequently unrecognised and under-utilised in teaching and learning, and that the traditional perception of the role of the librarian, situated in the library surrounded by books, is

outmoded. Tinto (2009) also emphasised the need for collaboration between academics and support staff, and embedding skills development into a course opens up a range of possibilities for developing effective partnerships among academics, skills specialists and students. For academics, collaborating with academic and library specialists provides access to specialist expertise to inform development of their programs (Birmingham et al., 2008; Einfalt & Turley, 2009; Durkin & Main, 2002; Kelleher & Laidlaw 2009). Moreover, collaborating with skills specialists can free academics to focus on helping students develop higher-level skills as demanded by their discipline, while their colleagues support students with more fundamental skills. For academic and library specialists, collaborating with academics gives direct access to students' context of study. This access to the study context is essential because an informed understanding of the different expectations across disciplines and within units is essential if academic and library specialists are to advise students effectively. For students, learning is greatly enhanced when it features opportunities for interaction with a range of specialist teachers, and when provided with feedback from academic and library specialists that is immediately relevant to their task requirements and learning outcomes (Tinto, 1997).

The online environment, increasingly important as universities cope with increasing enrolments, student diversity, and demands for flexible delivery, offers the ideal opportunity for collaboration between academic and specialist staff to deliver an embedded program of academic and library skills development, and expand the roles of specialist staff in teaching and learning. Such a program is currently being piloted in a large, first-year psychology unit at Deakin University: Introduction to Psychology A (HPS111). HPS111 is currently available to off-campus students over three trimesters with on-campus offerings in trimester 1. It is run across three campuses and is also delivered through the Institute of Koori Education and Melbourne Institute of Business and Technology. Students include recent secondary school graduates, some of whom have studied secondary school units in psychology and others who have not; post-graduate, mature-age, international and special-entry students; and students who aspire to careers in psychology, those moving over from other helping professions and others who are simply "visiting". There is, therefore, considerable variability in the skills and knowledge of students coming in to the unit. Following observations of decreasing skill levels in assignments, increasing numbers of queries from students, repeated referrals to academic skills advisers and liaison librarian, and concern as to whether or not students follow through with the referral, the unit chair invited a principle academic skills adviser and liaison librarian to teach online within the unit. The principle aims of the innovation were to: (i) raise the profile of academic skills and library resource support among first-year students and (ii) normalise access to academic skills and library resource support through a presence on Deakin Studies Online (DSO; i.e. Blackboard), public question and answer forum and modelling skills to a wide first-year audience.

The Innovation

The academic skills adviser and liaison librarian were welcomed to the unit DSO site in a public announcement to students and both specialists posted warm welcome messages to students that outlined their roles within the university and the ways they could support students to develop academic and library research skills to improve their assessment outcomes. Dedicated places were created in the online teaching space for students to post questions and engage in discussion with the specialists. These discussion boards were set to "anonymous" so that students could see each others' questions but not identify the author.

Both specialists also contributed to the general Discussion Board. The academic skills adviser and liaison librarian had access to all of the teaching resources; they developed Help sheets, individualised to the unit content and requirements, which were posted to assignment folders for students to access. The Help sheets included how to organise a library PIN, a walkthrough (with screen shots) of how to navigate the library website, access the library databases, select search terms, search for articles etc. Screen shots of each step in the process allowed students to compare their progress against the example in the Help Sheet. Students were invited to provide drafts of their assignment to the academic skills adviser for confidential feedback and to post messages to both specialists on the public board or through private email, telephone or face-to-face consultation, with messages usually answered within a day of posting.

The trial took place in the second trimester of 2010 and involved a small cohort of approximately 80 off-campus students. The academic skills adviser and liaison librarian commenced working with the students six weeks into the trimester, two weeks before the submission of the major assignment, an argumentative essay. The unit chair managed all questions pertaining to the unit but referred students to the specialists when appropriate (e.g., for questions such as "How do I reduce my word count?" or "How can I reduce the scope of my database search?"). At the end of the trimester, students were invited to complete an anonymous online survey to assist in evaluating the program.

Student evaluation

Data were collected to measure student usage, attitudes, awareness and intention to utilise academic skills and liaison librarian services in future trimesters. Twenty-eight percent of completing students (N=20) completed the survey. Because access to the Discussion Boards was 'anonymous' it was not possible ascertain how many different students posted questions. Questions were also posed in other sections of the Discussion Board and fielded by the specialists so it is difficult to estimate the number of students who engaged with the specialists over and above the responses received in the survey.

As part of students' orientation at the beginning of their course, students receive information about the availability of library support resources and academic skills support from a variety of sources (e.g. speakers from the library and academic support during Orientation Week, brochures in information packs and information in unit guides). Despite this, 15 respondents (i.e.75%) reported that they had not been aware of library resource support and only became so after participating in the pilot program on the HPS111 DSO site. A similar pattern was found for academic skills support, with 12 students (i.e. 66%) reporting that they were not aware of this resource prior to 'discovering it' in HPS111. Only eight of the 20 respondents (i.e. 40%) reported that they had posted a question on DSO for the academic skills adviser or liaison librarian, but 17/20 (i.e. 85%) reported that they followed the discussions online. Two students (i.e. 10%) provided a draft for review. Of the 12 respondents who did not post questions for the academic skills and liaison librarian, seven (i.e.59%) responded that they "did not need to on this occasion"; others did not respond. When asked about their perceptions of having dedicated skills advisers on DSO, 100% of students thought it increased student awareness about the resources, 100% thought that it increased the likelihood that they would use the resources in the future, 90% said that it made skills support more accessible, and 85% said it was very helpful. When asked about preferred mode of delivery for academic and library skills support, public posts on DSO was the most popular choice, followed by private DSO posts (i.e. concealed from other students) and email, face-to-face consultation,

and finally telephone. All of the students who responded to the survey indicated that they intended to use the resources in the future, all would recommend academic skills advisers and liaison librarian support to other students and 90% felt confident to use these resources in the future.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the impact of the pilot program on student performance because the assessment weighting and structure was changed in 2010 making comparisons to a similar cohort in previous years difficult. Although student cohorts in trimesters 1 and 2 were different in size, study experience, and mode of study, a tentative comparison is offered. Student retention was lower in the pilot group (85% versus 95%) but this could be due to differences in mode of study. Students' performance on the essay was similar with both the pilot (M= 69.0; SD = 11.9) and trimester 1 cohorts (M=68.9; SD = 11.3) achieving strong results. Slightly fewer students failed the assignment in the pilot group (1.4%) than in the trimester 1 cohort (4.6%) but otherwise the distribution of scores was very similar.

Reflections on practice

This program placed skills development staff within the relevant context of the unit and allowed the students to observe and engage with assistance as appropriate. Having the specialist staff reside on DSO meant that a continuous communication channel was established between the academic and specialist staff, allowing the visiting advisers to fully understand requirements, expectations and issues as they arose. This is a huge advantage, as the more information advisers have about the assignment, the more directed and relevant their assistance can be. The skills development staff had full access to all information provided to the students as well as to the unit chair and her interaction with the students, which ensured consistency in the information provided. The Discussion Board for the visiting advisers was to set to anonymous but was visible to all. This allowed students to participate in discussion without concerns about being identified or associated with 'asking a silly question'. The support provided to students was public which meant that students were privy to the types of questions being asked of the academic skills adviser and liaison librarian, and the responses that were provided. The modelling of questions likely helped focus observing students on relevant issues associated with the assignment and the public responses informed the entire cohort, ensuring equity and reducing repetition. Having access to students' queries reasonably early in the writing process enabled academic skills and library staff to pre-empt last-minute re-writes and draft submission, and shape orderly assignment preparation. Such early formative assessment, such as feedback on drafts, has been associated with significantly higher marks for students (Fisher, Cavanaugh, & Bowles, 2009). As the pilot study was initiated only two weeks before assignment submission, students may not have had sufficient time to make the most out of the opportunities offered by the specialist skills advisers and engage in the type of early preparation and feedback associated assignment success. This might explain our failure to find improved performance on the assignment or retention. However, improved performance might be more evidence among students in the tail-end of the distribution with fewer students failing the assignment; there was some evidence for this.

The experience of the unit chair was overwhelmingly positive. Collaboration with academic skills and liaison librarian is contributing substantially to the development of the unit. This development is occurring on two levels: First, having teaching assistance reduced the teaching load and allowed greater attention to be given to the developing new ideas and resources.

Second, feedback from the skills development staff provided ideas and resources that can be incorporated in to the unit in future. The development of a relationship between students and the friendly and approachable support staff meant that students were linked in with the appropriate specialists for ongoing support where necessary. Overall, the experience for staff and students was very positive. As a result, the program will be trialled with the large on- and off-campus cohort of approximately 1200 students in the first trimester of 2011.

A potential problem with the program is its sustainability within a larger student cohort. The number of students who, for example, provided excerpts of their draft for review by the academic skills specialist was very low in the pilot program. This is a likely reflection of the small cohort of off-campus students, many of whom participated peripherally by reading public discussions, and perhaps the late entry of the academic skills adviser in to the program. The larger student cohort in first trimester will consist of approximately 1100 on-campus and 150 off-campus students, many of whom will be very new to the university. The demands of this group are historically managed well by the unit chair; however the additional intensive support offered by the academic skills adviser, such as feedback on drafts, might be difficult to manage if student uptake is high.

Outcomes: Uptake and Applications

The program is being extended in 2011 in three ways: First, by trialling with a large student cohort running concurrently on and off campus we hope to see whether the program is sustainable in HPS111 and potentially suitable for extension across additional units. Second, the academic skills adviser and liaison librarian will have a presence on DSO from the first week of the trimester as integral members of the teaching team rather than "add-ons" introduced midway through the trimester. It is hoped that this will foster early discussion around the development of academic skills, encourage student participation throughout the trimester, and improve retention and assessment outcomes. Third, an online module has been developed as an early assessment which orients students to the unit, DSO and their assessments. As students work their way through the activities they will develop skills in using library databases, retrieving articles for their assignment, engaging in focused reading, identifying arguments, evaluating evidence and synthesising information in preparation for their major assignment. The skills development staff will be available to help students develop the skills necessary to complete the early module assessment and prepare for the major assessment later in trimester.

Conclusion

Situating academic skills and liaison librarian staff as members of the HPS111 teaching team and providing students with public access to them through DSO successfully addressed each of the aims of the project. First, students who were previously unaware of the availability of academic skills support became aware. Second, students accepted the specialist advisers as part of the teaching team who were available to support all students, rather than as remedial teachers for students "in need". That all students who responded to the survey indicated that they would access these resources in the future is a strong endorsement of the quality of support offered by our specialist staff. In summary, we feel optimistic that this program will become an integral part of HPS111. We are confident that the program could be integrated in to other first-year units, and hopeful that the workload remains manageable. We are also hopeful that early and public engagement with specialist staff within the university will increase student participation with support resources, reduce student anxiety, and improve student outcomes.

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