

Integrating academic writing and information research skills in the first year subject unit MGC1010 – Introduction to Management

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Abstract

The partnership between the Matheson library's business and economics learning skills (LS) and information research (IR) team and academics from the faculty to deliver an integrated program of academic writing and information research skills to first year students taking the core foundation year unit, Introduction to Management (MGC1010), dates back to July 2007. The presenters will discuss how this partnership has developed over five semesters and share insights with associated models of teaching academic learning skills. A key discussion point is the lack of academic learning skills among first year undergraduates and how this integrated program attempts to help students acquire these core skills. The discussion will also look at how developing discipline specific academic skills can bridge the gap in expectations between staff and students in terms of academic output, and how these skills can be aligned to the more generic skills associated with graduate attributes.

Introduction

Foundational first year business subjects such as management, accounting, economics and marketing are important because, based on the perceived quality and experience of the subject, students then decide whether to continue their studies into second or third year or to major in those subjects (Kift & Field, 2008; Kift, 2009; Scott, 2008).

A key deliverable within the partnership is the development of academic learning skills for students in information research and essay writing skills which are specific in detail to management yet transferrable to all university subjects. The formal development of research, analytical and critical thinking skills is something that should be inculcated at the undergraduate level particularly in first year foundation subjects (Uchida, Caldwell, Terry & Lad, 2008).

The starting premise of the project is that students are active participants in and directors of their own learning. A key challenge is assisting students in the major transition of becoming independent learners who take responsibility for managing their own learning (Love, Love & Northcraft, 2010; McKeown & Lindorff, 2011; Scutter, Palmer, Luzickiyi, Burke da Silva & Brinkworth, 2011). Within this, the roles of the university as a whole, individual academics and professional staff create an environment which supports and encourages students to manage their learning effectively (Geddes, 2009; Love et al, 2010; Weimer, 2002, Scutter et al, 2011). Acknowledging that engagement is not generated from one incident, the larger aim of the project was to provide an integrated lecture and tutorial program for first year management students which provides a series of opportunities where they acquire and build on experiences and learn through active involvement (Bell, 2009; Starkey & Tempest, 2009, Barefoot, 2000).

Outline and format of the session

Why a disciplined based academic writing skills & information literacy program? (5 minutes)

Statistics of student attendance at generic undergraduate learning skills workshops and informal feedback indicate that students perceive discipline based academic learning skills support as more relevant to their study skills needs. This observation is similar to the findings discussed in Durkin and Main (2002). More importantly, the endorsement of academic staff was seen to be crucial in students evaluating whether a learning skills or information literacy workshop was relevant in helping them complete their written assignment successfully.

A number of partnerships with academic staff have taken the form of integrated and adjunct workshops conducted on an ad hoc basis. The partnership with MGC1010 is one that has been sustained successfully over five semesters and covers both academic learning and information research skills. As with the formal partnerships outlined in Benske, Brown and Whittacker (2011), the LS/IR team from the library work consultatively with academic staff to tailor the LS/IR teaching inputs to meet the academic writing and research requirements of the two written assignments per semester, weighted at 10% and 30%.

The need for an integrated and collaborative approach (5 minutes)

Recognising the fact that most first year undergraduates do not have the specific skills for academic writing and research work (Durkin and Main, 2002; Barefoot, 2000), an integrated approach was adopted to ensure that these core learning skills were delivered to as large a number of the cohort as possible.

There are two facets of academic skills taught in this integrated program: academic writing skills and information research skills. The academic writing skills component teaches students the conventions of academic argument and discourse (including how to analyse the essay question and structure their answers), and referencing requirements (APA referencing style). The research skills component is delivered primarily through live demonstrations on how to use dedicated scholarly databases (e.g. Business Source Premier) to source and evaluate relevant articles which would form the base of research material for students to complete their written assignments. These two components are delivered in-lecture in 30 minute segments.

In the library tutorial series, the library team of learning skills advisers and subject librarian facilitate hands-on sessions on students' academic writing and research efforts based on the worksheets which students have been asked to prepare the previous week. The Library tutorial series is a week long instalment time-tabled into the unit's tutorial schedule. Student attendance is compulsory and recorded by subject tutors who attend these sessions with their tutorial groups and participate in the ensuing discussions on the essay writing topic.

With this partnership, library and academic staff work consultatively to design assessment materials and criteria progressively increasing the level of collaboration between the LS/IR staff and teaching team with each semester's review (see Table 1 below for details of increasing levels of collaboration).

The nuts and bolts: developing an integrated program of core academic writing and research skills (10 minutes)

Building upon work such as Beard, Clegg and Smith (2007), and Weaver (2006), a suite of LS/IR programs were designed to engage students in the first year university experience. This include skills on how to analyse their assignment questions, work out argument structures, and conduct dedicated online searches of academic databases as part of the research process to complete their assessed written assignments (Barnett and Coate, 2005).

The program delivered by the LS and IR staff at the Matheson Library sought to enhance the first year student experience through teaching the following key academic learning skills:

- Analysing assignment questions – identifying topic(s), key words/phrases, instruction words/phrases (or directives), key issues and underlying debates
- Applying the structures and language of academic discourse
- Structuring the essay - developing a coherent argument (written/oral)
- Acknowledging and evaluating alternative interpretations and arguments to issues under consideration (i.e. counter arguments)
- Identifying and selecting research information from appropriate academic databases (how to search and evaluate an academic reading resource)
- Academic integrity and referencing conventions of the discipline
- Working independently and collaboratively where appropriate

Students are also made aware of how the assessment criteria are applied to grade their written assignments. Such awareness contributes to a higher level of engagement among first year undergraduates in completing their assignments. Students are able to appreciate better the rationale behind the conventions of academic writing once the assessment criteria were explained to them (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003)

In terms managing their learning, students are encouraged to exercise their initiative and approach learning skills advisers through the library's drop in sessions to discuss issues related to their essay writing efforts, and to approach subject librarians should they need help or guidance in their database research efforts. These channels of feedback serve to facilitate students' expectations of university study and hence increase the level of engagement in the first year undergraduate experience (Scutter et al, 2011).

Outcomes and impact on student performance (10 minutes)

How has this partnership impacted on the first year undergraduate experience and student performance?

The outcomes of the partnership appears to be well aligned with recent work by Love et al (2010) which advocates the need for learning skills input in areas such as practice in essay writing; confirmation of concepts; and assessment skills.

Informal feedback from students and staff indicate that the academic writing and research skills sessions were useful in developing core learning skills that can be built on in future years of study. As discussed in Durkin & Main (2002), students have indicated that they found the library sessions very helpful in guiding them to approach and complete their

assessment tasks successfully. Students also learnt the importance of key academic conventions such as discipline specific referencing style. As one student reported to her tutor, “I did not have a clue beforehand what this referencing stuff was about but I knew I would lose marks if I didn’t get it right. Thanks to those library tute classes as well as the help in tutes, I got an A+ on it.”

In terms of quantitative feedback, there is a positive upward move in essay grades, from a P+ average up to a C+ (see Table 1 below). Students’ written assignments demonstrated an understanding of coherent argument and logical development of ideas scaffolded on a well structured essay. As highlighted in section on a collaborative approach, Table 1 also charts the increasing collaboration between library and teaching staff with delivering the integrated program.

Table 1: Impact of Collaboration on Essay Results over 2 years

	Sem1/2009	Sem 2/2009	Sem1/2010	Sem 2/2010
Number of students	632	476	539	474
Features of Collaboration	Tutes moved from library to computer labs – lecture & practical exercise	Tutes moved from library to computer labs – lecture & practical exercise/ tutors take more active role	Library staff present in 1 formal lecture slot & computer lab exercise focus more on practical aspects with major tutor/library staff co-operation	Library staff present in 2 formal lecture slots – emphasis on referencing in 1 st & supported by new tutorial activity/ essay writing skills in 2 nd with computer labs now focussed on practical & increased interactivity with students & staff
Average Essay Grade	P+	C-	C	C+
Type & level of collaboration	Focus on library staff/CE – low level in tutes	Tutors becoming more involved/ their student interaction focus	Tutor/ library staff/ student interaction a key focus	Blurring of library staff/tutor/CE roles so all support student learning
General Comments	Tutes moved from library to computer labs	Active exercises added to lecture style format	Tutor roles increased as ‘roving’ facilitators/ lecture & tute lines blurring	Lecture/tutorial lines blurred across 2 assessment tasks

There is also continual review in this partnership. Academic staff and the library team meet regularly to review areas of academic learning skills need improvement with each new cohort of first year undergraduates (Scutter et al, 2011; Durkin and Main, 2002). Some of areas of review include changing the assessment tasks and marking criteria to address areas in academic learning skills that need improvement such as critical analysis, argument structure, academic integrity and referencing

The academic learning and research skills acquired through this program could be seen to feed into inculcating the generic skills relating to Monash University's graduate attributes such as critical analysis, information literacy, applied learning and communication skills (Star and Hammer, 2008).

Conclusion

The key academic learning skills benefits of this partnership between library LS/IR staff and academics of a core first year management unit include:

- Equipping first year undergraduates with core academic skills to manage their own learning. The written assignments in this unit constitute the first attempt for many students at academic argument, writing and referencing and show incremental improvements in quality as a result of LS/IR input and support into the subject unit.
- Engaging first year undergraduates to articulate in meaningful ways that renders their university experience inclusive and interesting so that it motivates them to pursue their discipline interests into second, third year and post graduate study (Clarke, 2011)
- Acquiring applicable generic skills that are aligned with Monash University's graduate attributes of nurturing Critical and Creative scholars who demonstrate critical thinking, effective problem solving skills and communicate their views well.

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