

# Improving first-year students' chance of swimming not sinking: All hands on deck

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## Abstract

*This nuts and bolts session outlines a program of collaboration between School of Psychology academics, academic skills advisers, library liaison, and faculty staff to design and implement an embedded program of academic and research skills development within a large first-year psychology unit. Three initiatives have been sequentially introduced to the introductory psychology unit over 2010-2011: a tutorial series incorporating critical-thinking skills, the inclusion of an academic skills adviser and library liaison as part of the online teaching team with dedicated space on the unit Blackboard site, and an online orientation module designed as an early formative and summative assessment. The facilitators will describe the utility of program and provide a student and staff evaluation of the project. Participants are invited to consider ways their own assessments could be deconstructed and modularised to facilitate the development of academic and research skills in first-year students.*

This paper represents the contributions of a team of academic and professional staff across School of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Student Life, and Library, within Deakin University to embed a program of academic skills into a large first-year psychology unit. The impetus for the development of the program was a desire to ease first-year students' transition to tertiary study and address noticeable deficits in students' critical thinking and academic skills. The program has taken multiple approaches in its efforts to quickly prepare students for success in our unit, and also to equip them for success in future psychology, and other units. The focus of this workshop is the development of the online orientation module; a separate paper outlining and reviewing the inclusion of academic skills and library liaison as part of the teaching team is presented separately.

Student responses from a first-year student experience survey (Deakin University, 2010) highlighted difficulties many students face in their transition to tertiary study. The survey was completed in the eighth week of first trimester. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that they considered withdrawing in the first six weeks of the course; primary reasons were workload issues and course content. Of course, students who actually withdrew in the first eight weeks did not respond to the survey, so this figure underestimates the number of first-year students experiencing significant distress. By the eighth week of first trimester, 90% of students had completed their first assignment; 28% of whom 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. Deakin students' perceptions of poor levels of preparedness and low expectations for success are consistent with other first-year students as reported in the literature (e.g. Dalziel & Peat, 1998). Very

few students enter university prepared for the academic demands of tertiary study (Tinto, 2009), but students who adequately develop their academic and information literacy skills during their first year are much more likely to continue with university than students who do not (Einfalt & Turley, 2009). As participation in tertiary education widens in line with recommendations in the Bradley Report (Australian Government, 2008) to include students from rural, mature-aged and low socio-economic populations, it is likely that the range of generic skills levels of students will also widen. In order to ensure that students who are initially disadvantaged by “under-preparedness” are not perpetually disadvantaged, it is important that first-year units broaden the scope of skills development to include generic academic skills.

Generic academic skills development programs within universities are typically accessed through variants of student support “departments”: discrete units within the university that offer group workshops, individual sessions and the provision of self-access materials to students on request. In order for students to access these resources, they need to (i) know that the programs are offered, (ii) know that they are in need of support, (iii) know that the support offered matches the support needed, (iv) feel sufficiently motivated to enrol in a program and (v) have the time to attend. Many students who are in need of academic support do not take it up. A recent survey of first-year students in the Faculty of Health at Deakin University revealed that many students did not recognise that they had a problem with their academic or research skills until their last-minute effort to complete the assignment. By this time it was too late to attend the relevant workshops and there was not sufficient time to consult with an individual skills adviser (Thomas, 2010). Other students commented that they felt uncomfortable about the idea of attending public workshops; others shied away from private consultations because of their reluctance to be identified (Thomas, 2010), and others simply did not know that programs existed (Hooley, Morrison, Thomas, & Marrs, 2010). Poor attendance of skills development workshops is well documented in the literature (eg. Bailey, Harbaugh & Hartman, 2007; Salamonson, Koch, Weaver, Everett & Jackson, 2009), particularly for generic skills workshops when they are dislocated from the students’ learning outcomes (Baik & Greig, 2009; Durkin & Main, 2002). Participation in academic skills programs seems to entail downward self-labelling and stepping out and away from the developing (and aspiring) social networks. However when skills development is embedded within units of study, students remain within their developing social networks and all students engage in skills development together, removing any stigma that might be attached to skills development support. Embedding skills development within courses also allows students to see the relevance and value of the skills they are developing (Auckland University of Technology, 2010; Pritchard 2010) and have been found to be more effective than “siloes” academic skills programs (Casey, Caro, Eldred, Grief, & Hodge, 2006).

## **The innovation**

HPS111 is a large first-year introduction to psychology unit that runs on campus in first trimester and off campus in first, second and third trimesters. Enrolments in first trimester are approximately 1200 students. The skills development program therefore needed to be sufficiently manageable, sustainable and flexible in its delivery to enable large numbers of on-campus and off-campus students to participate fully. The program we have developed has three components: two of these components involved the development of new assessments and the third incorporates specialist academic staff who reside as teachers and models on the unit website. Details of the academic skills specialist project is provided in a separate submission but it will be outlined briefly below.

## Critical-thinking labs

Separate learning outcomes were designed for the tutorial and lecture streams of the unit. In the first half of the tutorial stream, students work, in small groups and facilitated by small- and large-group discussion, through a series of critical-thinking exercises related to evidence and argument. The exercises are completed during on campus and online tutorials using *Elluminate Live!* (eLive), a synchronous and interactive communications tool that Deakin uses to run tutorials for off-campus students. Topics included evaluating the quality of evidence, inductive and deductive reasoning and logical fallacies. Assessment is by examination and a written argumentative essay that incorporates topics from the lecture stream. This program was piloted in first trimester, 2010 and has run successfully since.

## Academic skills specialist program

An academic skills adviser and library liaison have agreed to become part of the HPS111 teaching team. Both specialists reside on the unit Blackboard website (Deakin Studies Online; DSO) with their own discussion boards. Both specialist staff members have access to all of the teaching resources, contribute to discussions with students and respond to student questions within their specialty range. Both specialists developed help sheets, individualised to the unit content and requirements, and made these available to students. While assisting students, the academic skills and library liaison introduce students to the resources available to them within the university and demonstrate to students the level of support that is available. Both specialists are friendly, warm, professional and inviting; students have the opportunity to develop a professional relationship with the specialists that can continue in to the future. The academic skills and library staff discussion boards, where students post their queries, are set to “anonymous” to reduce students’ concerns about asking questions publicly. Confidential feedback on drafts is also offered by the academic skills adviser. This program was first piloted during trimester 2, 2010 when the student cohort was small and students were studying off campus. The program was highly successful with very positive feedback from both students and staff and is being trialled in trimester 1, 2011 with the larger student cohort.

## Orientation and Academic Skills module.

The third component of the program is the development of an early online formative and summative assessment that students complete in the first four weeks of trimester. The online module is in three sections and designed to (i) orient students to important information and resources on the unit DSO site and the broader university website, (ii) ensure that students are aware of the assessment requirements and understand what plagiarism and collusion are and how to avoid them, (iii) prepare students for the major assignment (an essay). In the third section, students learn how to navigate the library database and conduct a search for empirical papers that they can use in their essay. They also complete a number of academic skills tasks (e.g. evaluating an argument, synthesising information) that will help students develop skills necessary to complete the essay. Every activity and all of the text examples used in the activities are designed to help familiarise students to the psychological theories relevant to the essay question and model ways that the theories might be used to support an argument. Thus, as students work through the exercises, they should not only develop a number of academic skills; they should also develop an understanding about psychological theories, how to relate the theories to the essay topic, and how to structure their argument. The assessment is unfortunately multiple choice due to constraints with the Blackboard

system. The module will constitute 10% of students' final grade and is being trialled in trimester 1, 2011.

### **Summary**

A program of activities is embedded within the unit to support the satisfactory attainment of learning outcomes and Deakin Graduate Attributes. A scaffolded approach to teaching academic skills has been adopted, in which students are supported while they learn to navigate the university resource network to access resources, learn and apply critical thinking skills to a real-world problem, and gain an appreciation of psychological theories. A three-pronged approach has been taken involving the introduction of (i) a skills-based tutorial stream that explicitly teaches critical-thinking skills that are assessed through examination and a critical essay, (ii) incorporating specialist academic skills and library staff as part of the teaching team, teaching skills publicly through DSO to the broad population of students, and (iii) an online module that helps students develop academic skills, collect resources and prepare for the major assignment. It is hoped that the alignment of skills to learning outcomes and assessments within the unit will help motivate students to value and continue to develop their academic skills.

### **Session outline**

Ice Breaker (5 minutes):

1. What are the advantages of embedding skills within course content?
2. What are the barriers?

Facilitators (10 minutes): Outline the program of embedded skills development, with a focus on the online module

Paired Discussion (10 minutes): Ask pairs to consider:

1. How can we teach "process" as well as "product"?
2. How could one of your assessments be modularised to incorporate academic skill development?
3. Would our model be of use to you?

Facilitators + Whole Group Discussion (5 minutes): Draw together ideas from floor.

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