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Academic reading requirements for commencing HE students – A professional reflection on whether peer-reviewed journals are the right place to start. A Practice Report

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Abstract

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. Traditional teaching and learning approaches are proving less effective, and traditional assumptions about learner preparedness may no longer apply. This practice report notes some of the obstacles that traditional curricula present for non-traditional students, and explores ways in which curricula could better accommodate them. In particular, it examines expectations of commencing students as academic readers, and considers whether these are valid and reasonable. It compares current referencing requirements for early undergraduate assignments with those of the past, noting significant differences in both number and type of sources required. The practice report considers possible reasons for this apparent shift in expectations, and questions the assumption that peer-reviewed journal articles are necessarily the optimum, or even appropriate, starting point for commencing higher education students as academic readers.

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Student Success: ***A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education***

Introduction

In a previous paper (Hamilton, 2016a) I argued that commencing higher education (HE) students should be given much more time and space 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 (STARS 2016 Conference in Perth, Australia) 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 practice report 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 practice report 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

Largely as a consequence of the widening participation agenda that followed the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), the Australian higher education 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) in which face-to-face and online learning components are combined. 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 and Hubbard "… 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" (p.27).

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) makes a similar point, noting that universities found 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 the student rather than curricular deficiencies.

This practice report explores the potential impact on academic reading practices and expectations of the changes and developments noted above, arguing that new approaches and attitudes to how commencing students are introduced to academic reading may be required to meet the needs of current day students.

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) the "relative invisibility of the reading process" (p.125) 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). This is particularly so 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). Given their immersion within an academic environment, discipline educators sometimes underestimate these challenges for commencing students. van Pletzen argues that therefore 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.

Paxton (2006) has introduced the useful term 'interim literacies' to refer to the transitional stage that many commencing HE students pass through, with them situated somewhere along a continuum leading ultimately to mastery of the key academic literacies they require. 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) talks of a "…personal linguistic-experiential reservoir" (p.107) that people draw on in meaning-making when reading. Clearly some commencing HE students have 'reservoirs' that enable them to 'hit the ground running' in terms of applying academic literacies, whereas others do 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.

Given the reliance on essays and other written texts in early assessments, the skill of academic writing can significantly influence the capacity of students to satisfactorily meet assessment requirements. Despite being the platform on which most effective academic writing is dependent, academic *reading* can inadvertently assume the place of 'poor cousin'; 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. It is desirable for discipline 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).

Changing expectations – comparing referencing requirements now and then

I recently made an important discovery. While reflecting on the first year experience for current HE students I went back and examined some of my early assignment responses (yes I still have them!) from my Bachelor of Arts degree, commenced in 1976 first at La Trobe University and then at the Australian National University (ANU). These were largely handwritten essays, and assignment responses typed up on an electronic typewriter, so pre-dating personal computers. On examination, there were clearly significant differences in the referencing requirements for these essays (which were rated highly) when compared with requirements for essays in a cross section of the units into which I taught or offered support to students in 2016. These differences related both to the number of references expected, and the types of sources used, with the 2016 assignments requiring significantly more references and specifying that the sources used should be predominantly peer-reviewed journal articles.

A look at some essays submitted by a Nursing educator colleague as part of her Bachelor of Nursing studies at the University of New England and Southern Cross University (Australia) showed a similar pattern to my undergraduate essays in terms of the sources used. An essay submitted in 1994 for the unit Introduction to Sociology used eight references (six books, one book chapter and one journal article); an essay submitted in 1996 in the unit Sociology of Health Care Practice used 13 references (10 books and three journal articles). As a useful exercise, I encourage readers to look back over their own written assessments from previous studies, and in particular, to reflect on the research and referencing demands placed on them in their early undergraduate years.

Of interest is that *my* undergraduate essays and those of my Nursing colleague, written on a range of serious, complex academic topics, were based primarily on information and ideas from *textbooks and other scholarly books*. 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 the present, 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 courses in which I teach (mostly in the health and biomedical domain) for students to use *peer-reviewed journals* as the default for the information and ideas contained in their assignment responses.

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

For many of the commencing students I see in my role as an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educator in the College of Health and Biomedicine, a 1500-word essay assignment is commonly accompanied with the instruction that they are 'required to include a minimum of eight peer-reviewed journal articles' in their reference list. My experience is that many commencing students struggle with these requirements, 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 the 1970s (and those of my colleague in the 1990s) with those of my students today, what becomes clear is that *we*

were 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 raises the question of when textbooks and other scholarly books came to be valued less as primary sources of information for commencing undergraduate students, and also when academic journals came to be deemed as suitable (and even optimum) sources of information for students at this formative, commencing stage of learning. If a shift *has* occurred, it seems important to be clear whether this has been based on educational, pedagogic considerations and decisions, or simply come about due to the greater availability and currency of academic journals.

It seems appropriate to at least speculate on why expectations may have changed so much. As noted, the much greater availability of, and access to, peer-reviewed journal articles are likely factors. Another may be lecturers who have recently done postgraduate study (e.g. to attain or upgrade teaching qualifications) unconsciously using the researching and referencing standards applied to them in their studies as benchmarks for the performance of their own undergraduate students. The 'disciplinisation' process within relatively new professional degrees like Nursing and Paramedicine, referred to by Baynham (2000) as the "…emergent 'practice-based' disciplines of the new university" (p.18), may also be a factor. Lea and Stierer (2000) note that these newer disciplines often must vie with more traditional disciplines for "…academic status and respectability" (p. 9), and this can sometimes translate into pressure (both internally and externally) for them to be seen to be adopting practices that are academically rigorous (Baynham, 2000, p.21). Within the health domain in particular, one final possible factor is the elevation of evidence-based practice from an expectation to a fundamental ideology underpinning all aspects of practice and learning. Any or all of the above factors may impact on how curricula are developed and delivered.

Whatever the reasons behind changing expectations around academic writing, it is becoming clear that a much longer and more gradual orientation into the process of researching and gathering information is desirable to best meet the needs of contemporary students. Also desirable is consideration of the possibility 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 determining, if the use of journal articles is desirable, what *types* of journal articles are optimum for commencing students, and what *guidance* students should be given in choosing journal articles. While there

are clear reasons why independent research is valued, it could be argued that for commencing students there should 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. This would allow a more gradual and scaffolded shift from the ordered, systematic, stable information typically provided through textbooks to the more specialised, specific and complex information typical of journal articles.

It is important to reiterate that an endpoint involving senior students independently researching their assignment topics and basing their written responses on up-to-date information obtained to a significant measure from peer-reviewed journals is not in dispute; this practice report is simply questioning the current *starting point* for commencing students, and suggesting there may be gains in a more gradual and scaffolded entry into the academic literature.

Conclusion

This practice report is certainly not claiming to be based on a rigorous analysis of changing research and referencing requirements for undergraduate HE written assessments, but is rather a reflection on current practice. Undoubtedly there are limitations to the process of comparing assessment requirements across different disciplines and time periods. However, even such a superficial comparison throws up significant questions, and suggests possible areas for future research.

The questions raised in this practice report 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 practice report 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 practice report asks the reader 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. Discussing a topic considerably more profound than the current one, Hume (as quoted in Hamilton, 2014) wrote that "…good and ill are universally intermingled and confounded" (p.134). As alluded to earlier in this practice report, academic reading and academic writing could also be said to be "universally intermingled and confounded"; one does not exist without the other. For that reason, undoubtedly addressing the research and reading demands placed on commencing students is likely to involve rethinking the early writing tasks required of them.

It is legitimate, reasonable and important to determine whether first year curricula design is addressing, or contributing to, the issues around success and retention that concern many contemporary universities; and if the latter, to consider what can be done differently

to better meet the needs of this and future generations of HE students. Calls to make learning more accessible and assessments more achievable have tended to be equated with the 'dumbing down' of curricula. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. It is precisely through actions such as the appropriate scaffolding of early learning, a more 'guided' approach to early research, and a greater acceptance of 'fit-for-purpose' information sources in early teaching and assessment, that the long-term viability and integrity of HE curricula will be maintained.

Postscript

John has written this paper in his work as an Educational Developer and Lecturer with Academic Support and Development at Victoria University, based in the College of Health & Biomedicine. He is now a Language and Learning Adviser with Student Academic and Peer Support Services in the Division of Student Life at Deakin University.

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