2016

First year business students' perceptions of academic support through embedding. A practice report

Carmela De Maio
Edith Cowan University

Anibeth Desierto

First year Business students' perceptions of academic support through embedding. A Practice Report

Carmela De Maio and **Anibeth Desierto**
Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions of first year Business students to embedding sessions and additional support workshops offered through a collaboration between learning advisors and lecturers in a first year foundational unit. Through a social constructivist lens and utilising action research methods, questionnaires (n=42) were administered to two cohorts of students at the conclusion of the unit in 2011 and 2012 to explore firstly, whether or not they perceived the embedding sessions to be of benefit and, secondly, whether having the learning advisor in the class made them more likely to utilise additional support outside class time. In addition, the researchers sought to explore whether there were any improvements in students' final results which might be attributable to the academic support offered to them through the embedding sessions. The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the students perceived the embedding workshops as having positive effects on their academic literacy skills. Furthermore, there was a slight increase in the number of students that sought additional support outside of class time. However, it appears that the embedding workshops did not lead to an improvement in students' final marks for the unit and this is an area which requires further investigation.

Introduction

The need to support first year, new to university, students in the acquisition of academic literacy skills is both an obligation as set out in the *Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency Act* (2011) and an ongoing concern for institutions of higher learning in Australia (Chu, Perkins & Marks-Maran, 2012). Academic literacy skills may be defined as "the critical thinking, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills required by a scholarship community" (p. 77) and would include business writing skills required to complete an assessment task in a first year foundational unit.

There has been discussion in the literature on the form and structure that support for the development of academic literacy skills for first year university students might take. Three models of integrating the necessary skills and attributes have been proposed; namely dedicated, embedded and integrated (Gunn, Hearne, & Sibthorpe, 2011; Johnson, Levine, Smith, & Stone, 2010). A review of past studies conducted in Australia shows that such embedding is one form of various collaborations between academic and non-academic staff which can work in integrating academic skills into diverse disciplines (Salisbury, Yager & Kirkman, 2012; Beckman & Raynor, 2011; Gunn et al., 2011; Png & McKeown, 2011). These partnerships appear to have produced positive results, especially the initiatives focussed on the First Year Experience (FYE), for the staff involved (Taib & Holden, 2013) but whether these initiatives positively benefit students in terms of enhancing their learning experiences is inconclusive.

At Edith Cowan University, a large metropolitan university in Perth, Western Australia, where this current study takes place, Buckingham and Wexler (2013) have suggested that embedding undertaken in two first year units for Science and Engineering may have been useful for all stakeholders while for a postgraduate MBA unit at the same institution, the integration of academic and literacy skills into the unit was found to be beneficial for postgraduate students, discipline academics and learning advisors (Harris & Ashton, 2011). There appears to be a lack of research into the benefits of embedding in a foundation Business unit where academic literacy skills form and integral part of that unit. This study attempts to fill that gap.

The current study arose from a desire on the part of the researchers to examine the effectiveness of embedding sessions on the acquisition of academic literacy skills by first year undergraduate students in a unit called Business Edge (BE). This foundation unit, which ran for 12 weeks each semester, aimed to assist students in gaining the skills necessary to communicate in a business context. As part of the unit embedding sessions were conducted twice in each semester by the learning advisors in the Faculty of Business and Law, in collaboration with the business lecturer. The embedding sessions focussed on the development of written business communication in the form of an email (the BE email) to a prospective employer and a report. Although the embedding sessions had been conducted for a number of years in the unit, no research had been done to explore their effectiveness or benefit to first year students. Hence, this study was conducted to better understand the advantages of the initiative.

Through investigating the perceptions of first year undergraduate students of their learning experiences of the embedding sessions, it may be possible to understand whether such sessions were of benefit in developing students' academic literacy skills to enable them to successfully operate in a university environment and eventually in future employment. Additionally, by analysing the data obtained from this study and from university statistics for the unit, it may be possible to explore whether there were any improvements

in the final marks awarded to students through the use of such assistance. If found to be effective, the embedding sessions might then be incorporated into the foundational first year units in other faculties within the institution.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Unlike similar studies which have examined the acquisition of academic literacy skills by university students, this current study was informed by Vygotsky's (1978) educational philosophy that students need to by guided through their "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Although Vygotsky's educational philosophy centred around childhood learning, his ZPD concept is now equated with scaffolding whereby the learner is guided in the area where they are able to operate to a limited degree and lack proficiency. Through such guidance, the learner can then move on to the next stage of development (Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

Hence, while already possessing the proficiency to communicate in a non-business context, the students in this current study were being guided to reach the next level of effectively operating in a learning environment (Vygotsky, 1986) through embedding sessions in how to structure a suitable professional response utilising an appropriate register (i.e. the specific language choices made by participants in a Business context (Halliday, 1989) to complete an assessment task (i.e. write a business email to a prospective employer).

For research of educational practices and learner outcomes involved in embedding, action research was considered the most suitable approach as it also allows for reflection of such practices in order to improve them (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Action research has been considered empowering and effective for generating solutions to practical problems (Meyer, 2000).

Following on from this action research approach, the students were surveyed through the use of questionnaires. To analyse the data obtained from these questionnaires, basic coding which followed grounded theory methodology to a limited extent was undertaken. The coding of the data was not aimed at abstract conceptualisation which is the basis of grounded theory (Holton, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) but instead was limited to conceptual description which is considered grounded analysis but not for theory formulation nor to produce an integrated theory (Holton, 2008; Glaser, 1998, 2001).

The three research questions (RQs) posed to investigate students' perceptions of the embedding sessions run by learning advisors in collaboration with lecturers in the first year Business foundation unit (BE unit) were:

RQ1. Do students perceive embedding sessions to be beneficial to them as a way of supporting the development of their academic literacy skills?

RQ2. Does having the embedding sessions make students more likely to seek additional support to improve their academic literacy skills outside class time?

RQ3. Do the embedding sessions suggest an improvement in the final marks obtained by students in the business foundations unit?

To address these RQs, questionnaires were administered in 2011 and 2012, at the conclusion of the unit, to two classes of first year undergraduate students in the BE unit. These questionnaires were not part of the usual unit evaluations that university students are asked to complete, but were prepared by the

researchers and administered within the classroom setting. The respondents were Business students in their first year of study and consisted of local Australian students, mature aged students and international students from non-English speaking backgrounds, a reflection of the changed demographics of the first year student population (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Students were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with certain statements and how beneficial they found the embedding sessions to be.

Findings

Quantitative results

The quantitative data from the questionnaires was analysed using descriptive statistics. Coding for limited grounded analysis was used for the qualitative data (Holton, 2008) to elicit key themes derived from written comments provided by the respondents.

Table 1 presents the perceptions of first year students to the embedding sessions obtained from their responses to the questionnaires.

The findings from Table 1 suggest that almost all students from both classes (100% in 2011 and 96% in 2012) found the embedding sessions useful. In addition, it appears that the majority of students from both classes (95% in

2011 and 74% in 2012) would like more of these embedding sessions while over half of the students (63% in 2011 and 52% in 2012) would consider attending workshops provided by learning advisors outside of class time.

Qualitative results

In addition to these quantitative data, qualitative data represented by the additional comments student respondents were allowed to make on any of the questions were then analysed. Coding of these comments elicited three key themes: ***usefulness of embedding, impact on the development of academic literacy skills*** and ***first year experience***.

The usefulness of embedding: Comments made by the first year business students appear to support the idea that they found the embedding sessions with both the learning advisors and the business lecturer to be of benefit to them. Comments such as *Very helpful, It's all good for me because it's useful* and *Very good help for students* support this notion.

The impact of embedding on the development of academic literacy skills: Not only do the embedding sessions appear to be useful to the students, but comments made by some respondents appear to suggest that the sessions had a positive impact on the students' learning, especially in the development of writing and

Table 1: *Attitudes of students to embedding sessions*

Statement	Agree/Strongly agree (%) Semester 2, 2011 (n=19)	Agree/Strongly agree (%) Semester 2, 2012 (n=23)
The workshop on the BE email assessment was useful	100 (19)	96(22)
I would like more of these workshops in class	95(18)	74(17)
I prefer to go to these workshops outside of my class time	63(12)	52(12)

business skills and in helping them improve on their work through the support given. Comments such as *Got to correct where I went wrong or didn't understand, It is a good way to improve my business skills, Exposing us to skills we may not have seen before* and *They guided my and let me know how my work went so I got to know and could improve* support Vygotsky's (1978) notion students can be guided to their ZDP by their instructors to enable the development of the academic literacy skills required at university.

The enhancement of the first year experience: Finally, comments made by the students, such as *Enjoyable, All good, Value the opportunity* and *I liked it* suggest that the embedding sessions may have contributed to a more positive experience of their first year at university.

Summary

Thus, the findings from this study appear to answer RQ1 in the affirmative. First year Business undergraduate students found the embedding sessions useful and of benefit and that they were a positive contribution towards the development of their academic literacy skills and their overall experience as first year students in the university.

In relation to RQ2, the findings suggest that more than half the respondents would seek support for the development of their academic literacy skills outside of the classroom in additional workshops facilitated by the learning advisors. However, it appears that most students also prefer to have this type of support within the class. This could be due to a number of reasons, including lack of time to attend additional workshops and the convenience of acquiring academic literacy skills within the classroom environment. Statistics from the institution also show that the number of students from the unit who attended the additional workshops did increase slightly in 2012. However, the findings are inconclusive as

the whether or not having the embedding sessions in class made students more likely to seek support by attending the additional workshops outside of class.

For RQ3, data obtained from the university's formal evaluations for this unit suggest that the average marks for the students for their business email assessment did not change despite the introduction of embedding sessions. However, the overall pass rate for the unit improved. In 2011, the pass rate for the unit was 68% but in 2012, the pass rate increased to 83%. It is difficult to say which factors contributed to an increase in the pass rate without further research. It may be the case that a combination of factors, which include the embedding sessions and the increase in the number of students attending additional workshops, may have contributed to an improvement in the final marks of the first year students in the unit in 2012.

Concluding remarks

Based on the findings from this study, it appears that first year Business undergraduate students perceive embedding sessions as being of benefit in helping them acquire the academic literacy skills required not only to complete their first written assessment in the foundational unit, but also to improve their learning experience in their first year at university. This demonstrates that embedding works as a form of scaffolding and targets the students' ZPD as conceptualised by Vygotsky (1978).

This study has its limitations. Firstly, due to the small samples sizes, the findings are limited and cannot be generalised. Ideally, there should have been further follow-up of the respondents to see if the support they received in first year has contributed to them completing their degrees at university. That is, longitudinal studies are essential to either support or refute the findings of this study. Secondly, embedding sessions is only one type of initiative used to

support first year students at university and requires coordination and collaboration between academic and non-academic staff which may be problematic. Further research is required which compares alternative initiatives, such as team teaching, to explore which are more viable and beneficial to all stakeholders concerned.

Despite these limitations, this study is unique in the sense that is suggests that collaboration between learning advisors and lecturers in a first year foundational unit is of benefit to students in helping them improve their academic literacy skills and in enhancing their learning experience at university. It adds to the literature on supporting first year undergraduate students in university and further research is encouraged on the advantages of embedding on the development of academic literacy skills and ultimate success of students their studies in institutions of higher learning.

Acknowledgements

References

Beckman, J., & Rayner, G. (2011). Embedding academic-professional collaborations that build student confidence in essay writing: Student perceptions and quality outcomes. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 2*(2), 83-90. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i2.87

Buckingham, M., & Wexler, J. (2013). Nanotechnology, design solutions, and…academic literacy skills. In *Eleventh Biennial Conference of the Association for Academic Language and Learning, 14-15 November, 2013* (p.116). RMIT University, Melbourne. Retrieved from http://rmit.edu.au/aall2013

Chu, C., Perkins, A., & Marks-Maran, D. (2012). Delivering a transition programme in literacy from level 4 to level 5 for nursing students: A pilot study. *Nurse Education in Practice, 12*(2), 77-82. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2011.07.006

Glaser, B. (1998). *Doing grounded theory: Issues and discussions.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. (2001). *The grounded theory perspective: Conceptualization contrasted with description.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Gunn, C., Hearne, S., & Sibthorpe, J. (2011). Right from the start: A rationale for embedding academic literacy skills in university courses. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 8*(1), 1-10. Retrieved from http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol8/iss1/6

Halliday, M.A.K. (1989). *Spoken and written language.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Harris, A., & Ashton, J. (2011). Embedding and integrating language and academic skills: An innovative approach. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 5*(2), A73-A87. Retrieved from http://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/view/158/110

Holton, J. (2008). Grounded theory as a general research methodology. *Grounded Theory Review, 2*(7). Retrieved from http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2008/06/30/grounded-theory-as-a-general-research-methodology

James, R., Krause, K.L., & Jennings, C. (2010). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994-2009.* Melbourne, Australia: The University of Melbourne Press.

Johnson, L., Levine, A., Smith, R., & Stone, S. (2010). *The 2010 Horizon Report.* Austin, TX: The New Media Consortium & Educational Initiative.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner.* Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.

Lantolf, J., & Appel, G. (Eds.). (1994). *Vygotskian approaches to second language research.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub Corp.

Meyer, J. (2000). Using qualitative methods in health related action research. *The British Medical Journal, 320*(7728), 178-181. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.320.7228.178

Png, V., & McKeown, T. (2011, June-July). *Integrating academic writing and information research skills in the first year subject MGC1010-Introduction to Management.* Paper presented at the 14th Pacific Rim First Year Experience in Higher Education Conference. Fremantle, Australia. Retrieved from http://fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers11/FYHE-2011/content/pdf/3E.pdf

Salisbury, F., Yager, Z., & Kirkman, L. (2012, June). *Embedding inquiry/research: Moving from a minimalist model to constructive alignment.* Paper presented at the 15th International First Year in Higher Education Conference. Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved from http://fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers12/Papers/11Apdf

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory and procedures and techniques.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Taib, A., & Holden, J. (2013). "Third generation" conversations: A partnership approach to embedding research and learning skills development in the first year. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 4*(2), 131-136. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v4i1.178

Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency Act. (2011). Retrieved from http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2011C00582

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman (Eds.), *Mind and Society* (pp.79-91). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language.* Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.