

Preliminary essay plans: assisting students to engage academic literacy in a first year communication course

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Abstract

The engagement and retention of first year students has become a critical component of university endeavour as the diversity of the student body increases and as student enrolments drop. This paper documents a research study evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention strategy designed to increase students' capacities to engage with their university studies. The intervention strategy comprises part of the assessment in a core first year communication course conducted by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. A preliminary essay plan was introduced to help students become more familiar with academic processes to help them with their major essay – assignment 3. The research study measured the effectiveness of this strategy by first comparing the mean mark of the final essay before and after the preliminary essay plan was introduced and secondly, by documenting students' comments about the assignment. It was found that students' mean score for their essays increased by a grade from a 'C' to a 'B'. While this result was encouraging there were other variables (changes in class format, other assessment items and staffing) that could have contributed to this increase. Nevertheless, the results warranted further investigation. A qualitative analysis of student perceptions revealed wider benefits of the PEP beyond improved marks such as enhanced student planning and engagement with the course material.

Introduction

This paper documents a research study investigating an assessment intervention strategy designed to engage first year students undertaking a core communication course, *Communication and Scholarship* (CMS1000). The paper first describes the context and rationale for CMS1000 before reviewing the theoretical perspectives and the research literature (on engagement, transition and retention) which underpin the course. The assessment intervention strategy, the preliminary essay plan (PEP), is then described along with the research investigating the effectiveness of the intervention. The results of this research are promising and suggest PEP is a strategy that could be implemented more widely across first year courses at university.

The context

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a regional university whose student population is diverse (including international, alternative entry, mature-age and equity students) with 75% of its students choosing to study externally. Students are often unfamiliar with university and discipline-specific literacies. Some may also have experienced failure at school and lack the academic and linguistic skills important for university success.

The course

CMS1000 is a first year core communication course offered on-campus, externally and internationally. The course draws on philosophical and theoretical perspectives to inform and enrich its understanding of student learning and to incorporate a student-centred, research-informed design. Critical discourse theory (Fairclough, 1995; Luke, 1999) underpins the course by incorporating initiatives to assist first year students to engage, master and demonstrate key literacies, including students' learning and critical capabilities, academic and tertiary discourses, oral presentation skills, information literacies, research methodologies, communication and cultural awareness literacies. The course runs for fifteen teaching weeks and because it is a core course, there could be a tendency for students to avoid working on CMS1000 assessment to concentrate on what they may perceive as their 'real study'. It is therefore important to engage students early in the semester and to provide them with feedback to allow them to gauge how well they are doing in the course..

The preliminary essay plan

The PEP is the first piece of assessment for the course. The 2005, semester 3 course specification assessment details are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: CMS1000 Communication and Scholarship Assessment Details:

Description	Marks out of	Weighting (%)
PRELIMINARY ESSAY PLAN	100.00	10.00
ORAL PRESENTATION	100.00	20.00
ESSAY	100.00	35.00
REPORT	100.00	35.00

The PEP is designed so that first year students can engage in the course material at an early stage of the semester (Week 3 or 4). The weighting of the assignment has been kept low (10%) but its importance is highlighted because it is linked to a major assignment (the essay worth 35%). There are two parts to the assignment:

- Part A asks students to write a plan with thesis, main points and supporting points for the whole essay. Students are given a diagrammatic plan to complete and are advised to have original main points. The idea here is to give them a strong starting point where they are controlling the essay process and using references to support (not replace) their line of argument.
- In Part B students have to write their introduction and first body paragraph, as well as a bibliography of at least five sources. This is where Part A is critical as they need forward planning for the whole essay so that they can incorporate the main points in the overview in the introduction. Students are given detailed information about the structure needed for the introduction and the body paragraph. The assignment appears simple but there are important academic skills underpinning it (planning, developing arguments, structure, referencing in terms of format and integration, and tone of writing). Students are advised to treat the assignment as a learning tool and to use the feedback to help with their major essay; that is, they are encouraged to think beyond their mark for the assignment.

The criteria sheet for the PEP is produced below (Table 2). The criteria sheet focuses on assessing students' competence in the key literacies they need to demonstrate if they are to pass assignment 3 (essay), and further, if they are to succeed in the new university culture. These literacies include academic writing and referencing, information and communication-specific literacies. The criteria sheet has not changed since its inception.

Table 2: The PEP assessment criteria sheet:

PART A (Plan)	Marks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Well-focused thesis ▪ Topic sentences (not phrases) included ▪ Logical supporting points ▪ Logical connection between thesis and topic sentences 	/20
PART B (Introduction)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Background ▪ Thesis statement ▪ Main points (4-5 main points, including logical sequencing of points) 	/5 /5 /5
FIRST BODY PARAGRAPH	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear focus on topic (especially in the topic and concluding sentences) ▪ Logical support for topic sentences ▪ Accuracy, depth and understanding of content 	/15 /15 / 5
REFERENCING	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In-text reference ▪ Integration into paragraph ▪ Bibliography 	/5 /5 /5
MECHANICS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expression, spelling, punctuation ▪ Word choice (tone and style) 	/13
PRESENTATION	/2

Theoretical assumptions

CMS1000 draws on research literature from the multiliteracy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996), meta-literacy (Bright, Schirato & Yell, 2000; Schirato, 1998), tertiary literacy (Baldauf & Golebiowski, 2002; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002; Reid, 1996) and critical discourse areas (Corson, 1999; Fairclough, 1995; Van Dyjk, 1995). These theoretical perspectives have contributed new ways of conceptualising students' engagement with the new literacies they encounter in a variety of educational contexts. Lawrence (2005) applies these new ways to the higher education (HE) context by visualising the university as a culture made up of many sub-cultures, each with its own literacy. This re-conceptualisation recasts the students' transition as a process of gaining familiarity with and becoming competent with these new literacies. New students, for example, need to rapidly, and simultaneously, become familiar with and engage with faculty, discipline and subject discourses, academic, library, research, information, administrative and technological literacies as well as new teaching and learning styles and a plethora of unfamiliar cultural practices.

One of the first literacies students encounter in many faculties is that of academic literacy. An *academic literacies* ethos views the development of academic writing as context specific and inseparable from students' intellectual engagement with their subjects (Lea & Street, 1998, 2000; Lillis, 2001). From this perspective, writing is not only the major way of assessing students but also the means by which they construct, represent and develop their knowledge within the academic setting. This approach assumes that student writing in higher education is never a simple matter of 'knowing the rules' of 'basic literacy' but is a part of learning the subject in all its complexity, and an embedded part of academic practice, including information, research and referencing literacies. CMS1000 encompasses this ethos and underpins the first assessment item, the PEP, incorporated to assist students to engage with the course content and objectives, to develop their understanding and application of their academic understanding, planning and writing, and receive feedback about their competence in these literacies.

Research Design and Findings

The primary research question posed by the project was:

- Can the use of a PEP facilitate first year students' engagement and mastery of academic, information and communication literacies they need to acquire if they are to persist, first in the course, and secondly at university?

This research was conducted over two phases, the major objectives included ascertaining whether:

Phase 1: The average mark on the final essay was higher for students who were required to complete the PEP than for those who were not required to complete a plan;

Phase 2: Students' perceptions about whether the PEP had assisted them to master and demonstrate course literacies.

It is hypothesised that the preliminary plan does assist students to become more familiar with the academic and discipline protocols required in the course and, more generally, at university. The students' abilities relating to these academic demands are measured in assessment 3 (essay) and in assessment 4 (report).

Phase 1

Archival data were reviewed to determine whether there were differences between students' final essay mark before and after the introduction of the PEP. The time period was from 1999 to 2005. Students numbers (before PEP): $n = 1572$. Student numbers (after PEP): $n = 3406$. There is a discrepancy in the balance of numbers of students because the essay was not an assessment item before 1999.

Overall, the students' marks did improve rising from a 'C' grade (mean 63.9) to a 'B' grade (mean 71.4), but a cause/effect relationship cannot be proven by these results. While the results are encouraging, the increase is not seen as being statistically significant as there were many variables in the course that could account for a shift in marks. Firstly, in 2001/2002 the oncampus course changed from a one hour lecture/two hour tutorial model to a two hour workshop. This created a better learning environment as the tutors had greater autonomy and there was less ambiguity about instructions for assignments. Also, in Semester 1 2005, the examination for the course (weighting 50%) was dropped to make way for other assessment items. There is a possibility that this allowed students to devote more time to the essay. Other variables which are difficult to measure are staff changes, level of consultation and the number of students who submit assignment drafts. Bearing these variables in mind, Table 3 nevertheless shows the generally steady increase in marks for the essay.

Table 3 Result for final essay prior to and after the introduction of the PEP:

Year	Students completing final essay	Essay results, average /100%
With preliminary essay plan		
2005	655	76.3
2004	877	71.3
2003	791	71.9
2002	942	67.9
2001 (S3 only)	141	69.9
Total and mean	3406	71.4
Prior to preliminary essay plan		
2001 (S2 only)	418	63.4
2000 (S3 only)	196	66.3
1999	958	63.6
Total and mean	1572	63.9

As mentioned above, while the results are not statistically significant they nonetheless piqued the research team's interest which led them to Phase 2 of the project, an investigation of the students' perceptions of the PEP.

Phase 2

The improved essay results were heartening but a better understanding of the impact of the PEP was needed. Therefore, in the second part of the study a brief questionnaire was sent to students via email. Students enrolled in the semester 3 offer of CMS1000 were sent the following question:

We are trying to determine to what extent the 'Preliminary Essay Plan' (Assignment 1) assisted you to write your final 'Essay' (Assignment 3). Via return email, would you please comment on this aspect of the course assessment. In your comments you may like to consider whether or not the 'Preliminary Essay Plan' helped you to:

- *plan your essay,*
- *access the information you needed to write the essay,*
- *start the essay earlier than you would have done originally,*
- *engage with the subject matter of the essay more effectively,*
- *receive early feedback to help you gauge how well you were coping with university study*
- *become more familiar with academic writing and referencing*

If you feel the 'Preliminary Essay Plan' did not help you, we are keen to know this also, so please feel free to tell us if that were the case.

Of the 129 students completing the third assignment the research team received 32 responses to this question. Given this feedback was sought at the end of the semester and that many had already provided feedback for other aspects of this course (surveys on the CD-based materials and Student Evaluation of Teaching data) this response rate was pleasing.

Analysis of these data was conducted with the help of the Nvivo software package. This allowed the researchers to code the students' comments and group them into common themes. These themes were based on each element of the above question, the essence of which will be synthesised below. This analysis clearly demonstrates that students were extremely positive about the PEP and supports the continued use of this strategy in the course. There were, of course, comments that could have been seen as negative. However, on closer inspection, these comments can be seen to be more constructive criticism aimed at improving this strategy, not abolishing it. There was in fact only one student who felt that this was an unnecessary activity, commenting, "I don't generally write essay plans. They develop in my head as I go through the readings". On the other hand, it can be seen that 31 students (to differing degrees) endorsed the continued use of the PEP.

The first aspect of the question asked students to comment on whether the PEP had helped them plan for their final essay. Students found this helpful on a number of fronts,

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namely, the plan helped them with the “*thought processes*” involved, it helped them “*put it into context*” and they were able to approach the essay “*in a more systematic way*”. Interestingly, six students commented that this activity had given them “*more confidence*” to then go on and complete the essay. One of the reasons for this (mentioned by three students) was that it had saved them time as it meant they had already done a great deal of the research required for the essay in advance. Only one student said that, “*I am finding it difficult to write the essay based on my plan because I am concerned about making too many changes to my original plan*”. Although this issue is addressed in the course, this comment does highlight a need to revisit the set expectations for the essay. On the whole however 21 students had found the PEP to be either “*helpful*” or “*very helpful*”.

The second aspect of the question asked students to comment on whether the PEP had helped them to access the information they needed to write the essay. In general terms the answer to this was ‘yes’, though opinions were somewhat polarised. One student said “*Very much*”, while another said, “*Not really*”. Comments did, however, skew toward the positive with the consensus being that it had helped students research “*more thoroughly*”. It also appears that where this strategy did have the most favourable impact was in relation to students receiving guidance as to whether the information they were **planning** to use in the essay was both sufficient and/or relevant. This was particularly true for inexperienced essay writers, as the following comment indicates. “*From the feedback received I was able to gauge if I had done enough research. This was something I was worried about because it is so long since I have done any academic writing*”. This is a really important point, particularly as this course is a first year foundation course that runs across many programs and has to cater for a very diverse range of students; experienced and inexperienced. As such, it is expected that some students will come to this course knowing how to write an essay and therefore do not see the need for such help. (Often perceptions of their abilities are inflated). Others (like the student above) have insight into their strengths and weaknesses and appreciate the PEP as a learning tool.

The third aspect of the question asked students to comment on whether the PEP had helped them to start the essay earlier than they would have done originally. Fourteen (14) students clearly indicated that this had been a big advantage to them, while two students indicated that “*It did not make any difference*”. Two comments that indicate most succinctly the advantage of this strategy follow.

- “*This was probably the biggest advantage. Most busy people only do things when they need to be done, and I am sure I would not have started to think seriously about the topic so early if not prompted to. This is a very good technique to get students focused early*”.
- “*It encouraged me to get started on assignments and prompted me to study as I went along. External subjects are very easy to leave to last minute, which often creates problems for students later in semester*”.

In these comments it can be seen that getting the students started earlier, rather than later, on their major essay which is a clear advantage for those studying externally. Given that 75% of USQ students study externally this is a key consideration. This is confirmed again in this comment. *“Being a first time distance learner, I found it extremely helpful doing the essay plan”*. So, improved **time management** was an unexpected by-product of the assignment.

The fourth aspect of the question asked students to comment on whether the PEP had helped them to engage with the subject matter of the essay more effectively. Only one student answered this question explicitly, stating *“I was helped to engage with the subject matter more effectively”*, though many answered it implicitly. One student suggested that this activity had helped them *“learn and retain more knowledge”* while another stated that, it *“helped me to gauge my communication and scholarship abilities and university studies in general - boosting my confidence that I can manage well”*. Another student stated that, *“it ensures that correct essay planning processes are understood”*. Though not strictly **‘engagement’** it can be suggested that ‘understanding’ (mentioned by three students) and ‘increased confidence’ (mentioned by five students) could be important steps in engaging with the course material.

The fifth aspect of the question asked students to comment on whether the PEP receiving early feedback had helped them to gauge how well they were coping with university study. There are at least 28 comments in the feedback that suggest that the feedback students received had been helpful in them preparing for the essay. These comments fall into three main categories: firstly, because students felt that they were *“on the right track”*; secondly, it helped them *“keep focus”*; and thirdly, it helped them become aware of how *“things are meant to be presented at university”*. The only negative comments received about the feedback related to not receiving it in time or it getting lost in the system. It is seen, however, that the feedback students received could be seen as one of the key success factors of the PEP, and one that could be explored in more depth in the future.

The final aspect of the question asked students to comment on whether receiving early feedback with the PEP had helped them to become more familiar with academic writing and referencing. This was alluded to in the last part of the question and was seen as also being an extremely helpful aspect of the PEP, particularly for those inexperienced at university and essay writing. At least eight students made mention that the feedback had helped them with their *“academic writing style”* and *“appropriate academic writing and referencing”* The importance of this aspect, particularly for first year students, is summed up in the following comment’

“When a student first commences university study, it is like entering another world. And the skill of referencing is like mastering a foreign language. This course should be a mandatory first year course. It teaches one how to write in an academic style which is required in all future courses, so it should be the first thing a student learns when commencing study.”

This after all is what this course CMS1000 is all about - helping students become aware of how to succeed university, by giving them keys to unlock how to communicate in a scholarly way.

Recommendations and conclusion

Results from the qualitative and quantitative data are encouraging though not conclusive. Two important points emerge; first, it was seen that the mean result of essays has increased from 63.9 to 71.4% (a jump from a 'C' to a 'B' grade) although as noted above this is not statistically significant. The increase could be the result of a mixture of variables such as different assignment items, different class models for oncampus students and staffing. Second, student responses indicate that there have been benefits with the use of the preliminary essay plan well beyond increased marks. Although several themes have emerged from the analysis of data, namely, improved planning, time management, engagement, focus and academic skills, there is one overriding theme – confidence. The PEP is a non-threatening assignment, because of the low weighting, but it has significance because of its application to a major assignment and because it reduces students' anxiety and provides them with an early gauge of their progress. At the same time it equips them with the skills and literacies they need to persist at university. Their self-efficacy has also increased and this growth in confidence could also have a positive effect on students. One area of investigation could be explored further is the link between confidence, student engagement and retention.

The PEP clearly has useful applications, but there are still problems which have been identified by student feedback. The main problem is the early return of the assignment so that it can be used with the linked major assignment, the essay. A small number of assignments have been returned because markers have been tardy and this has made the PEP less of a learning tool and more of an exercise in frustration. Some international students did not receive their PEPs back in time because of circumstances beyond the University's control. It has become apparent that the lecturer needs to have a back-up plan to cater for these circumstances as the benefits mentioned above about increased confidence can be torpedoed by the logistics of return mail. Email submission and return of assignments could be an option which would offset this problem.

The question posed for this research study was : *Can the use of a PEP facilitate first year students' engagement and mastery of academic, information and communication literacies they need to acquire if they are to persist, first in the course, and secondly at university.* While it can be confidently asserted that many students have become more familiar with the communication literacies earlier than in previous offerings of the course, it has not adequately established the impact of the PEP on the wider context: the university. Further research is needed to make more confident predictions about the link between this intervention strategy and retention. One question to consider is whether the PEP helps with both university retention (an institutional responsibility) and student persistence (a student responsibility) (see Krause 2005)

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