

Integration of Content and Academic Requirements into a Student Resource

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the collaborative approach to subject development practices at Victoria University, Melbourne. The approach requires the integration of specialist education support services within an academic subject teaching team. This integration of an Academic Language and Literacy lecturer as an 'educational expert' has informed and helped to shape the ongoing development of assessment tasks within a first year undergraduate management subject. As part of the discussion of subject development, rich multimedia technology has been used to facilitate student learning; this is available both from within the disciplinary subject's *WebCT* site and as a DVD. This use of multimedia technology to present discipline specific academic literacy topics is illustrative of a scaffolded approach to curriculum design that is supportive of all students and encompasses transition issues as well as learning needs. The resource develops independent learning skills that are applicable to a range of subjects and the topics are presented in a format that encourages regular review and consultation by students.

Introduction

This paper is a narrative account of the lived experience of the teaching team engaged in the integration of content and academic requirements into a subject-specific student resource. The resources include academic literacy topics plus assignment content strategies. The compulsory first-year undergraduate subject, Management and Organisation Behaviour (M&OB), in which this change took place is taught across three campuses in Melbourne (approximately 1000 students per semester) with high proportions of students from a Non English Speaking Background (NESB), students who are first in family to reach tertiary level education, students from Low Socio-Economic Status (low SES) regions of Melbourne and alternative entry students. It is also taught at partner institutions in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Hong Kong and Beijing (approximately 300 students per semester).

Addressing the academic needs of these students required the teaching team both in Melbourne and at partner institutions to share each other's experiences and expertise to develop a curriculum that is student focused, sensitive to cultural diversity and ensures equivalence of learning opportunities and outcomes.

Background

The students at Victoria University (VU) come from a more complex range of cultural, language, social and economic backgrounds than most Australian institutions (McLennan & Keating, 2005). Moreover M&OB students come from a diverse range of degree specialisations including Applied Economics, Accounting, Tourism and Hospitality and Management. In this context the teaching team have a heightened awareness of the need to be explicit about the required academic skills and processes and to be conscious of the variations in terms of academic preparedness of students.

Some students in M&OB see the subject as being 'soft' compared to the 'hard' theories and methods of the 'numerate' subjects at the centre of their majors; thus students can underestimate the complexity of the assessment tasks. This underestimation of the assessment complexity results in a poor standard of work, poor exam essay writing and poor overall results. Assessment in M&OB is writing intensive, requires relatively sophisticated English language, reading and research skills, and involves self-directed learning on the part of the students. As a first year subject emphasising writing it is also perceived by other staff members as a 'building block' to the skills needed to make the successful transition to many of their second and third year subjects.

How the Teaching Team Can Influence Student Learning

Student academic literacy and learning support at Victoria University is an integral part of the educational experience offered to students by Student Learning Unit (SLU) lecturers (Fegan, Henderson & Pearce, 2000). The AVCC project Improving Language and Learning Support for Offshore Students (VU, 2005a) argued for the development of a collaborative embedded model that systemically required input from offshore teachers and students and this, it was asserted, should more comprehensively 'assist students to maximise the opportunities of the environment they are learning in' (Hicks, Reid & George, 1999, p. 4). In other words the model factors in a range of learning styles and situations and acknowledges different student needs.

Good practice in student language and learning support includes a shift from prevailing 'remedial' approaches that imply service provision from outside the curriculum towards systemic approaches involving embedding support materials in curriculum through collaboration with mainstream staff (Skillen, Merten, Trivett & Percy, 1998). This good practice approach has been a key component driving this project, by embedding academic skills development in assessment tasks and embedding an education expert in the teaching team. The role of the education expert as internal consultant to the teaching team had a positive empowering effect, which saw a very high level of constructive participation from sessional and offshore academic staff. The constructively aligned assessment tasks and the development of models for students also acted to empower students through facilitating independent learning.

Independent learning encourages students to take ownership of their learning and the confidence to take risks, though as Biggs (2003) argues, students tend to focus on assessment (i.e. marks) and disregard other subject material. This view of what is important can lead to superficial learning approaches, where students seek marks through recall without real understanding or academic skills development. Constructive alignment of assessment with learning objectives and activities that embed academic skills development promotes engagement with the discourse of management by allowing for differences in academic readiness and students are more confident in their understanding of the subject.

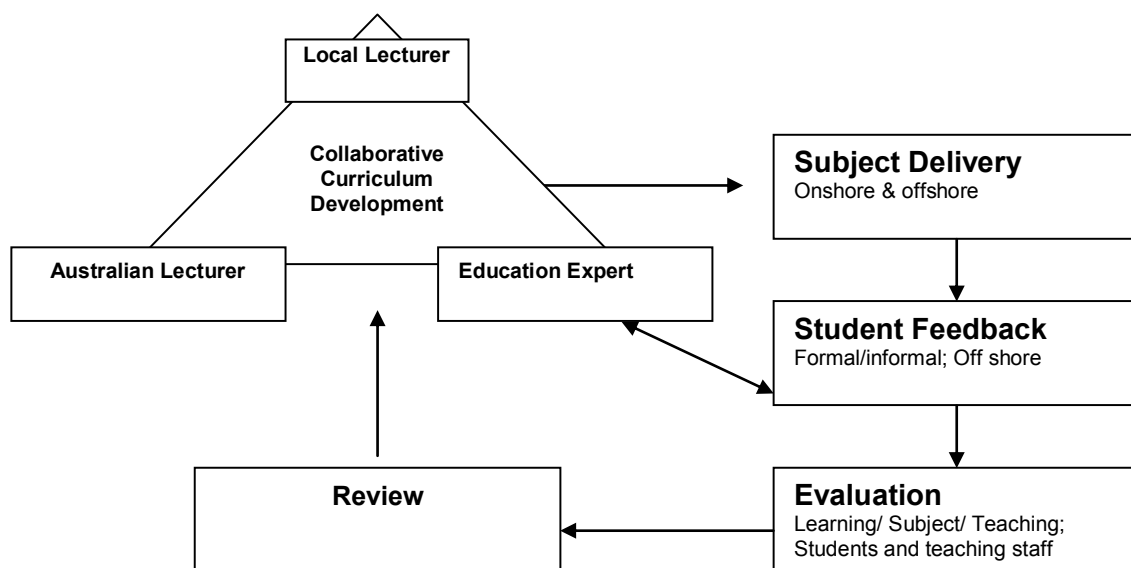
The Approach Adopted

An approach of continuous improvement was adopted (VU, 2005b). The process of continuous curriculum improvement emphasises reflective practice by the team, following a learning cycle from classroom experience through peer review and discussion to active experimentation, which involves successive iterations of new ideas.

As a diverse group, the teaching team drew on a variety of mental models and learning styles when it considered goals, strategies, frameworks and assumptions related to teaching M&OB. Through individual and group reflection, formal and informal evaluations, the teaching team sought to improve the skills required as educators of first year students coping with many forms of transition (Gabb, Milne & Cao, 2006). The

relationship between teaching team, subject, students and development of curriculum is depicted in Figure 1

Figure 1: The Teaching Relationship Triangle (adapted from 'A collaborative practice model', VU 2005, p. 35)



Input and feedback was sought from the teaching team and students onshore and offshore:

- An analysis of student exams was conducted comparing 1st semester 2006 results from Malaysia and Melbourne.
- Interviews were conducted in Kuala Lumpur with recent past students, current students and the lecturer.
- Observation and analysis were conducted of tutorials and lectures conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Beijing for 1st year marketing, accounting and management subjects.
- Interviews were conducted with international students in Melbourne and critical points in exam writing and preparation techniques were identified.
- Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with visiting academic staff from China.

The information gathered during these activities pointed to specific difficulties with the essay and manager interview assessment tasks faced by NESB students, international students from both onshore and offshore, students from low SES regions of Melbourne, and students who are first in family. Similarly, feedback from onshore and offshore teaching staff in M&OB pointed to the difficulties faced by students in these categories who, for cultural reasons or from lack of access to a suitable network of contacts, are unable to negotiate time with a manager to conduct the interview.

Findings from an earlier VU funded Language across the Curriculum project evaluation (Henderson, McWilliams, Whitelaw & Aubke, 2006) also highlight that when students in these categories do secure an interview with a manager they are unable to conduct the interview effectively. Useful insights into Chinese students' study techniques and essay writing processes as well as identifying areas to be addressed by the support materials were also found.

Solutions to Issues Identified During Input and Feedback

A United, Skilled Teaching Team

With such a large and geographically dispersed group a collaborative team approach, rather than being top-down and directive, was considered the best way to address the teaching and learning issues. The teaching team has evolved over the last six years and is now a network of interested VU and partner institution colleagues who share an enthusiasm for teaching. Six years ago, the team's objective to improve teaching and learning in the unit was enhanced by collaboration with the university's academic language and learning unit. The teaching partnership with the education expert was initially onshore, in Melbourne, only. However, the involvement of the education expert as internal consultant to the team has now been extended to involve the Malaysian (in 2004) and Chinese (in 2006) colleagues in the analysis of student needs offshore, and in the development and piloting of materials. The membership now comprises a group of 16 academics including 10 sessional staff, involved in the delivery of the subject.

Regular formal and informal communication and a free flow of ideas between team members has been a positive attribute of the project. The flexible nature of intra-group communication utilising formal and informal meetings plus regular email exchanges allows for the discussion and recognition of differences between cohorts and the development of contextualised approaches and materials. Importantly, members can address student needs as they emerge wherever they, or the students, are.

Skilling the team and building more confident teaching staff has positively changed the teacher-student dynamic particularly with sessional staff. The increased engagement of academic staff has been carried into the classroom. Sessional staff feedback is that they find the support materials, originally intended for student use, useful as teaching materials, especially for preparation for assignments, exam revision and exam preparation. Participation in the development of other additional subject materials is also seen as a professional development activity for the whole team. Reflective learning, assisted by involvement in the team, helps to develop personal mastery as practitioners, and to design practical changes for our students.

The enthusiasm of the teaching team has contributed to how we all teach whether it be in lectures or tutorials. For new staff, being able to attend another's lecture and learn prior to their own teaching, has been enormously beneficial – 'Before I started I had no point of reference, no sense of security in terms of asking others but meeting colleagues through the teaching team and observing their practice let me see the possibilities and variations' (Tutor 1 and Tutor 2, Teaching team interviews, May 2006). Another new sessional staff member said that the teaching team had informed her understanding and hence her practice: 'During our teaching team meetings, the principles and ideas behind the "experiential learning" in the tutorials were presented and discussed' (Tutor 4, Teaching team interviews, May 2006). The innovative influence extends to colleagues engaged in offshore teaching: 'With guidance from the team I have been able to adopt similar approaches at my campus' (Lecturer 2, Teaching team interviews, April 2006).

Mentoring

Informal mentoring of new staff teaching the subject fostered communication between all involved and crystallised shared values about practice. The teaching team trialled each other's ideas and so gained significant insights into pedagogies that maximise the potential for these students to learn. A practice of informal voluntary peer review of teaching evolved amongst the team. By voluntarily inviting peers to their classes, team members expressed a high level of trust in each other; which empowered and further promoted an attitude of openness and mutual support. For example, an experiential exercise used by one of the lecturers to demonstrate leadership styles was presented in a teaching team meeting and was subsequently adopted by all tutors after being peer reviewed. Feedback from staff and students showed that this exercise encouraged deep discussion and enthusiasm for the tutorial topic. Following from this experience two PhD candidates in the School of Management who were also sessional staff members of the teaching team worked together to develop a student peer assessment tool for the group assignment in M&OB. The two staff members stated that they were encouraged to bring some of the statistical analysis skills from their post graduate studies to their teaching practice by the open and supportive team environment.

Curriculum Development

Responding to the diversity of student needs and expectations the team has developed a layered and supported curriculum that fosters academic skills and a deeper engagement with this 'soft' subject. Firstly, the assessment, central in forming students' perceptions of learning goals, has been restructured and redesigned to align classroom activities and content with the tools used to judge understanding and application of knowledge. It also now reflects two of Victoria University's Core Graduate Attributes (CGAs) - written and oral communication and group work (VU, 2008).

The alignment of assessment in M&OB (which comprises an essay, field work and an exam) has been based on introducing two key learning objectives. The first is to develop the necessary academic writing skills for students to be successful throughout their course and their future studies. The second objective is to develop students' ability to understand and synthesise the key management concepts that are at the foundation of the discipline and to possess the linguistic tools to use these concepts to analyse and critique their own (and others') work. Assessment for M&OB is now designed to promote more effective learning through the requirement to apply theory to practice.

The field research group assessment task has led to a greatly improved sense of subject relevance. Students in groups of three are supported to develop strategies for group work, including practical tutorial exercises that aim to foster interpersonal interaction, negotiation of tasks and skills required for effective meetings. The main purpose of this group exercise is to see theory in practice and to build peer connections within which students feel confident to learn from each other's abilities and knowledge. These task components are closely aligned to VU's CGAs and commitment to active and collaborative learning as addressed in the Learning and Teaching Functional Plan.

In general, curriculum content should be transportable offshore but there may be a need to modify the cultural nuances (DEST, 2005). For offshore students the scaffolding of assessment tasks is more comprehensive with instructions that walk them through appropriate approaches to culturally unfamiliar assessment. In Malaysia, for example, full-time students who have no business community links are put in touch with MBA students who are also local managers, as alternative interview subjects. It is made clear to students that they are expected to engage actively with management discourse in essays. For example, students are now specifically required to illustrate their discussion of theory with relevant examples of theory in practice. Offshore students are being assisted with making the link between theory and the workplace by

the introduction of short video clips in which students who have part-time jobs reflect on management practices in their workplace. These models of examples of theory in practice demystify the task and give 'permission' to students to use examples that they may have otherwise seen as trivial or inappropriate.

Furthermore, the team has created learning materials that scaffold the skills needed for assessment tasks into steps of increasing complexity. These have been incorporated into the lecture and tutorial structure as a self-paced, CD ROM of contemporary learning experiences integrating video, audio, text and hyperlinks that can be controlled by the students to match their personal pace and level of comprehension; ensuring equity of access for all students. Students say: 'I can do this on the train'. They regard this as an effective way to engage with assessment tasks.

Evaluation

Teaching is formally evaluated at the conclusion of each semester. The specific evaluations are completed by nearly 100% of the participants and are important sources of information to guide our teaching development. Average student ratings have consistently exceeded the Faculty target of four on a five point scale. Importantly, during the life of the formal teaching team the average rating has increased to 4.5. As a specific example, the question relating to overall student approval rating of the subject increased from 4.1 in 2003 to 4.5 in 2006. This degree of improvement is reflected in results at all locations where the subject is taught. Responses to other questions indicate far greater subject clarity, relevance and sense of achievement.

Marking M&OB work over several semesters, the teaching team have reported in moderation meetings that relatively minor changes have resulted in more sophisticated essays. In interviews, students have reported that they regard management theories and concepts as more relevant to their own experience as part-time or full-time employees. Tutorial discussions are more engaged, as students seek to confirm with their tutors if their own experiences are suitable for their essays, thereby contextualising management theories and concepts. These student-initiated discussions have provided excellent opportunities for the team to explore management theories and concepts as they are directly experienced by students rather than relying on the interpretation of case studies from their textbook. This is crucial when the students' world knowledge is different to that of the textbook as is often the case in parts of Asia or with NESB and International students onshore. Student comments indicate that tutor feedback and use of the models provided has enabled significant improvements between the mark received for the essay plan and the essay itself.

The integration of the academic language and learning skills lecturer into the teaching team for M&OB has been exciting and positive. The lecturer was initially seen by the M&OB staff as an outsider providing specialist expertise, and as someone to whom they could refer students with academic difficulties for remedial help, i.e. as a person who supported the subject teaching but did not contribute to it. This relationship has changed and the learning advisor/educational expert is no longer seen as being outside the M&OB group. In the current relationship the learning advisor is an internal consultant, providing specific expertise to address subject level issues. There has also been considerable transfer of knowledge between all parties based on mutual trust and respect: the input of the learning advisor has strengthened awareness of educational philosophy and VU's teaching and learning policies in the M&OB group while the confidence of the learning advisor to competently guide the students within the management discourse has been enhanced.

Conclusion

At a very deep level, the teaching team has allowed for active and reflective inquiry into the scholarship of teaching. The enrichment of the learning process is a consequence of the dedication of the teaching team and the shared enthusiasm for

reaching beyond national boundaries to foster an internationalised, first year curriculum for management education. The result is that content and the required skill development are delivered and developed concurrently and available in a number of student-friendly formats.

The Authors

Fiona Henderson has worked as a Language and Academic Skills Lecturer with Victoria University for more than 10 years. During that time, she has taught a range of students. The increase in international students both on and offshore have led to her interest in re-examining teaching practices and approaches and how these suit students with very different educational experiences at very different locations. Currently her focus is on curriculum development with subject lecturers that incorporates academic skills in a relevant, scaffolded and timely manner. Her PhD research involves connecting higher education in China with the Chinese workplace.

Alan McWilliams has worked at VU as a Lecturer and Unit of Study coordinator for the compulsory first year Bachelor of Business subject, Management and Organisation Behaviour for 10 years. In that time the increase in International students both on and offshore has led to a re-examination of the needs of different cohorts of students. The teaching team has worked collaboratively with Learning Support Services lecturers to embed language and academic skills. The subject has evolved constantly to address the needs of all students based on student and tutor feedback.

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