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An analysis of first year preservice teacher education students' use of literacy support resources in assessment: Implications for practice and further research

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Abstract

This paper forms part of a symposium focussing on a collaborative research project undertaken by a team of first year lecturers in the School of Education at James Cook University. The First Year Literacy Initiative (FYLI) is a systematic approach to addressing concerns about preservice teachers' literacy levels articulated in national and state reviews (Masters, 2009). The preservice teacher education cohort at James Cook University, Cairns is distinctive in that students are more likely to belong to traditionally marginalised groups than the norm (JCU, 2008). As such, they are more likely to be considered 'at risk' in terms of literacy performance.

The FYLI pilot study includes five key elements (Adam, 2010, forthcoming): (i) a literacy guide, (ii) diagnostic literacy tests, (iii) formative literacy tests, (iv) a literacy assessment rubric, and (v) literacy support sessions. This particular study examines the implementation of the literacy assessment rubric and the relationship between students' self-identified use of the FYLI literacy guide and literacy performance in the first assessment task of a core first year subject. Data were collected from 130 students via an adapted feedback questionnaire (Race, 2008). Findings suggest that the FYLI approach is consistent with an effective transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) and has provided valuable insights in responding more effectively to diverse student needs in literacy.

Keywords: academic literacy; teacher education

Introduction

This paper presents initial findings from the use of a literacy assessment rubric and support resources which form part of an innovative academic literacy initiative action research project in the School of Education at James Cook University. The *First Year Literacy Initiative* (FYLI) has been designed and developed as a collaborative action research project with first year academic staff, university learning support staff, teachers and preservice teachers (Adam, 2010, forthcoming). As the first year coordinator and long-term lecturer in the core professional studies subject *Foundations of Education* I have had a strong professional and research interest in literacy and the first year experience generally, particularly transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009). Transition pedagogy is significant in our context given the high proportions of students from traditionally marginalised backgrounds who enrol at the Cairns campus such as: first in family to attend university; rural/remote; mature age women; Indigenous; low socio-economic.

Currently teacher educators in Queensland are caught between (at least) two hard places. First, the imminent implementation of recommendations from the *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report* [Bradley Review] (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008) to broaden participation in higher education will place additional onus on first year lecturers and teacher education programs in terms of catering for the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Second, professional teacher registration authorities are flexing considerable political muscle in Australia both to force universities to raise entry standards into teacher education programs and to mandate preregistration tests in (English) literacy, numeracy and science for primary teachers. Literacy proficiency is high stakes for preservice teachers and teacher educators.

Conceptualisations of literacy

The literacy review conducted for state schools by Education Queensland in 2000, *Literate Futures,* raises concern about the ongoing under-provision of effective literacy programs and practices for disadvantaged groups, particularly boys, those from language backgrounds other than English, Indigenous, non-urban and socio-economically disadvantages students, the very groups targeted for wider participation in higher education in the *Bradley Review* (DEEWR, 2008). A complicating issue for teachers and teacher educators in Australia currently is that there is no single, commonly-held definition of literacy. There is agreement in academic literature (Gee & Lankshear, 1995; Green, Hodgens & Luke, 1997; Luke, 1996; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Nixon, 1997) that literacy is, or rather literacies are, inseparable both from the practices in which they are embedded and the effects of these practices (see Taylor, 2010, forthcoming). This view of literacy stands in stark contrast to the view of literacy as a set of mass-measurable skills promoted by the federal government 'standardised national testing in literacy in schools (NAPLAN) and the Queensland College of Teachers' imminent preregistration testing program to commence in 2011.There is little literature to illuminate which kinds of literacy are foundational to academic success for teachers and there has been no indication to date from the Queensland College of Teachers as to which literacies are to be measured in the preregistration tests other than both 'content' and 'pedagogy' will be tested.

Literacy is a social practice not a simplisitic toolkit of decoding and encoding skills. Who gains access to which literacies is not value-neutral and literacy education itself can replicate inequalities, depending upon which literacies are validated or rejected within current educational structures. As teacher educators, we want all teachers to have high level technical skills in English literacy but we also need to model and engage with literacy

pedagogies that promote "the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia" (Education Queensland, 2000, p.9)

The purpose of the FYLI was to support and scaffold first year preservice teachers in academic literacy. The design of the FYLI is described in detail by Adam (2010, forthcoming) and took a cyclical approach involving diagnosis, awareness and accountability phases with "traditional emphases on reading and writing written texts and modern emphases on multimodal texts, multiple literacies, new literacy and critical literacy." (p.4) As a team of teachers and researchers we tried to strike a balance between the need for standardized explicit skills instruction and " 'dialogical approaches' to literacy (e.g. Chanock, D'Cruz, and Bisset, 2009) that emphasise the construction of knowledge through engaged conversation in context." (Adam, 2010, forthcoming, p. 2). In summary, the design included a literacy guide (*Literacy Survival Guide)* focussed on 11 distinct elements of academic literacy, two forty-minute diagnostic tests, an online test bank and resources, a literacy assessment rubric, literacy lecture segments, workshops, group literacy support sessions and individual tutorials. The first year teaching team and staff from the university student support services took an action research approach to implementation of the pilot phase of the project. The design, implement, reflect, refine cycle of action research as a methodology ensured that the FYLI would remain evolving and adaptable and encouraged us to collect, examine and critically analyse its implementation within and across different (subject) contexts.

This paper presents some initial findings from the implementation of the literacy assessment rubric and follow up survey from 150 students in the core first year professional studies subject *Foundations of Education.*

Assessment prior to the FYLI

Prior to the implementation of the FYLI pilot in 2010, assessment strategies in *Foundations of Education,* had been consistent with first year curriculum principles (Kift,2009, n.p.nos.)

> First year curriculum should assist students to make a successful transition to assessment in higher education, while assessment should increase in complexity from the first to later years of curriculum design. Critically, students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their program of study to aid their learning and to provide feedback to both students and staff on students and staff on student progress on achievement.

The subject focuses on the sociology of education and includes five days of professional experience in a school. The first major assessment piece in the subject is an expository essay to be submitted in week 5. Since 2005, I have conducted formative assessment related to students' academic writing competency in the first week of the subject. Students would complete a short (30 minute) expository writing task and received feedback on elements of their academic writing by week 2. Students who had identified literacy difficulties were counselled to attend workshops by the university learning support services and assigned a peer mentor. I also conducted (unresourced) one hour literacy-focussed sessions each week until submission of the first major assessment. Students received specific literacy feedback on the first assignment using the same rubric as in the week 1 formative academic writing task. I also used Race's (2008) effective feedback/feedforward resources, including a survey on which strategies (for example, time management and editing) students used when completing their assessment.

This approach had proven successful in that student feedback had been consistently positive. However, although this approach was systematic and contextualised within the subject, from my and the students' perspective there were three main concerns. First, there was neither discernable consistency across first year subjects nor a developmental sequence in terms of either academic literacy or literacy pedagogy across the degree. Second, feedback strategies from the formative assessment task made recommendations but there was no accountability process for students to follow through on recommendations and third, the onus of support resided predominantly with me as the lecturer in an individual subject.

The FYLI initiative took a different approach. First year and learning support staff agreed on a common a focus on academic literacy. Specific literacy resources were collaboratively developed and housed within the University's online teaching platform. Implementation involved four phases

Awareness phase

There was a short presentation about the initiative in both orientation week and the week 2 lecture which outlined the purpose and processes of the FYLI. Students were given a hard copy of the *Literacy Survival Guide* (see Adam, 2010, forthcoming, p.6) and inserts advertising support sessions from university learning support staff .

Diagnostic phase

Students completed two forty-minute tests in lecture time, one of which was extended writing encouraging students to explore their personal literacy narratives. Results from these tests were used to identify a group (*n*=30) requiring additional literacy support and group support workshops were offered.

Support phase

In addition to the hard copy of the *Literacy Survival Guide* and University learning support workshops, students were also directed to the site within the University online teaching platform which housed an electronic version of the guide, support resources and self-paced online tests linked to the 11 elements of academic literacy in the guide. I also provided open invitation weekly literacy support sessions.

Accountability phase

A *Literacy Assessment Rubric* aligned to the online resources and self-paced tests was used in the first major piece of assessment in the *Foundations of Education* subject (expository essay). Literacy criteria were graded by an independent marker who will continue to mark assessment across subjects in 2010 to ensure consistency and to provide specific, comprehensive literacy feedback to students. The rubric indicated areas of literacy strength and recommendations or requirements for students if they wished to avail themselves of the opportunity to improve their literacy grade on this piece of assessment.

Four first year staff met each fortnight to discuss the implementation of the FYLI and share data collected from within individual subjects and from online monitoring.

Implementation of the literacy assessment rubric

In *Foundations of Education,* the subject outline and awareness phase of the pilot alerted students to how the *Literacy Assessment Rubric* would be used in addition to the usual

assessment rubric for the first piece of assessment in week 5. The rubric was supplementary to the usual assessment rubric for the task. Literacy proficiency in vocabulary; spelling; grammar, punctuation, style, structure, referencing, reading comprehension and critical reasoning as identified in the *Literacy Survival Guide* , online resources and self-test bank. The rubric allowed students to see areas of literacy strength and weakness in the targeted areas and included a section where a 'provisional grade' and 'possible grade' could be assigned where movement to the higher grade depended on the take-up of specific literacy support or online modules/tests. Evidence of student completion of recommended or required literacy interventions is provided through online monitoring of completed modules and tests or, in the case of group or individual workshops, sign-off by staff.

Students submitted the first assessment piece in the first five minutes of the weekly lecture in week 5. Using an adapted effective feedback/feedforward strategy (Race, 2008) I gave students a survey to collect data on which strategies they had used when completing the assessment piece. Students were asked to tick whether: they had used a particular strategy; intended to use the strategy but ran out of time; planned to use the strategy next time; did not feel they needed to use the strategy or; had not been aware of the strategy. A benefit of using this immediate feedback approach is that it highlights to students the particular strategies that contribute to successful academic achievement. I added the use of the *Literacy Survival Guide* to Race's (2008) list of strategies.

Findings

The survey data from the 98 students in the lecture, showed that approximately thirty percent of students ($n = 30/98$) had directly referred to the guide in the construction and editing of their assignments. Eight students identified that they did not see the need to refer to the guide and 11 stated that they had not heard of the guide/resources. As the first year coordinator, I keep data relating to student attendance at orientation week and late arrivals in the subject. We know there is a strong relationship between lack of attendance at orientation week and in the early weeks of the subject and poor academic achievement/retention. Cross-referencing the students who had not head of the guide/resources with attendance at orientation week showed that 100% ($n= 11/11$) of these students had not attended orientation week. Eight of these students had not taken the diagnostic tests in week 2. Further investigation revealed that some students were not late arrivals in the subject, rather they were students who had commenced their program mid-year 2009 and had made a strategic decision not to attend lectures in the early part of the semester as these generally were focussed on orientation to the program.

As stated previously, very student received extensive literacy-focussed feedback on the first major assignment. The feedback was coded to the elements of academic literacy highlighted in the guide, resources and self-tests. Students who were identified as having significant literacy issues were flagged by attaching a coloured version of the *Literacy Assessment Rubric* to their assignment (which they collect individually). Quantitative data relating to literacy errors on this first assessment support data I have collected since 2005 showing that students have more problems and more frequently in the literacy elements of referencing, grammar and critical reasoning. Qualitative data were collected through email feedback about the testing process and resources and in the small group or individual support sessions.

Very few students (6/130) took up the opportunity to improve their literacy grade. I issued 19 coloured rubrics to assignments. These initial data suggest that the assessment rubric strategy

needs further development. Assignment grades provided to students in *Foundations of Education* are not numerical, rather they are in the form of High Distinction, Distinction, Credit, Pass, Fail. I, however, do keep numerical grades for the assignments but these are not shared with the students. This is a recommended School of Education practice as it allows for ongoing and final moderation across the subject and across modes and campuses. It is therefore not apparent to students whether engaging with the support strategies would, in fact, move their grade from one level to another.

There was poorer than expected takeup of individual support sessions (see Taylor, 2010, forthcoming) again with just 6 students attending overall and only 4 regularly. This phenomenon also needs further investigation. Prior research into the first year experience (Taylor & Worsley, 2008) indicates that students prefer to have informal sessions in social spaces with lecturers rather than having to break through the intimidating "glass doorway" into an academic office. We may need to think of more imaginative ways of providing small group and individual support.

Due to resourcing and time constraints, the second piece of assessment in the subject (a report) was not able to be marked by the independent marker for literacy although the regular markers reported a significant improvement between assessment 1 and 2.

Links between the FYLI approach and transition pedagogy

Kift (2009) posits

> The first year of university study is arguably the most crucial time for engaging students in their learning community and equipping them with the requisite skills, not only to persist, but to be successful and independent in their new learning throughout their undergraduate years and for a lifetime of professional practice in which they will be continually required to learn and to engage with new ideas that go beyond the content of their university course.(n.p.nos.)

The concept of lifelong learning is particularly important for teachers. Kift (2009) articulates six key principles of transition pedagogy: transition; diversity; design; engagement; assessment; evaluation and monitoring.

Transition

> The curriculum and its delivery should be designed to be consistent and explicit in assisting students' transition *from* their previous educational experience *to* the nature of learning in higher education and learning in their discipline as part of their lifelong learning.(n.p.nos.)

The FYLI with its awareness and diagnosis phases is consistent with the transition principle. One of the diagnostic tests led students to focus on their own personal literacy narratives to help students and academic staff connect with students' lifeworlds. As Adam (2010, forthcoming) proposes "The FYLI is deliberately designed to connect general academic literacy to students' lives in local contexts." (p.4).

Diversity

The diversity principle requires the curriculum to be accessible by all students and should take account students' learning needs in relation to their social, cultural and academic transition. The support phase of the FYLI provides multiple points of access for literacy support. First year curriculum design should be "student-focussed, explicit and relevant in providing the foundation and scaffolding necessary for first year learning success." (n.p.nos.). The FYLI resources have provided very explicit focus on literacy within a local and professional context.

Engagement

Kift (2009) recommends that first year curriculum should be infused with interactive learning opportunities and collaborations. The action research approach involving collaborations between staff and students to co-construct knowledge about literacy learning and literacy pedagogy encouraged connected and dynamic engagement from students (see Adam, 2010, forthcoming).

Assessment and evaluation and monitoring
These last two principles, are of most relevance to the focus of this paper. Kift (2009) states

> The first year curriculum should assist students to make a successful transition to assessment in higher education, while assessment should increase in complexity from the first to later years of curriculum design. Critically, students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their program of study to aid their learning and to provide feedback to both students and staff on student progress and achievement. (n.p.nos)

Clearly the FYLI provided formative evaluations of students' literacy performance both very early and in an ongoing way throughout the semester. The systematic approach and fine quantitative and qualitative data collection have provided insights into how students experienced literacy tasks as well as how well they performed in specific elements of literacy. The initiative has also introduced a level of consistency in literacy expectations across the first year subjects and some baseline data from which literacy developmental pathways through the program can begin to be mapped. The collaborative action research approach meant that evaluation and monitoring was an integral component of the FYLI design and this has allowed academic staff to be more responsive to emerging student needs and more effective in addressing them.

Conclusions

The FYLI design addresses both the traditional, explicit literacy skills required for academic success and engagement with new literacies and repertoires of practice within a framework of effective transition pedagogy. Although still in the early stages of development, data collection and analysis from a teaching perspective it has already alleviated many of the concerns about consistency and literacy development I had had previously as a lecturer and first year coordinator. The systematic and collaborative action research approach and data collection surrounding the *Literacy assessment rubric* have provided valuable insights into how and whether students were engaging with the resources and support strategies we had put in place. In the context of *Foundations of Education*, the rubric and assessment processes

have guided me to focus more sharply on particular elements of academic literacy whilst shifting some of the onus of accountability back to the student. The online resources and self-tests allow students to work at their own pace and in their own time to practise and build confidence in aspects of academic literacy. This in turn has opened up some hitherto unavailable teaching space to provide individualised support where necessary.

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