Starting university with CLASS: An academic skills development program designed for student success

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Abstract

With increasing numbers of students entering university from a myriad of backgrounds, knowledge of fundamental academic writing skills can no longer be assumed. This massification of higher education highlights the need to provide additional support in academic discourse. With this overarching imperative, The Communication Skills Centre at the Curtin Business School (CBS) has developed and refined the Course in Language and Study Skills (CLASS), a series of nine seminars designed to support students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs to gain mastery over academic writing and English grammar to complement the discipline specific curriculum. This session aims to showcase this innovative practice and adds to the body of knowledge about how targeted developmental programs in academic literacy can inform students' perceptions of their academic writing ability, provide them with the self efficacy to navigate more challenging academic writing tasks and ultimately enhance their performance. These factors contribute to engagement by students in their studies, which can result in high quality learning outcomes.

Introduction

Australian universities have experienced a steady growth of both international and domestic student numbers from English as an additional language (EAL) backgrounds, as well as from various non-traditional pathways (Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010). More recently, in the interest of widening the participation and completion rates in higher education, the Bradley Review set recommendations for reform with associated targets for attracting more students from social groups under-represented in higher educational institutions (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). In light of these primary drivers, it is imperative that Australian universities intensify efforts at equipping these diversified cohorts with skills in academic discourse to empower them to participate optimally upon entry and as they progress through the educational continuum. While several contemporary models for achieving these aims have been noted (Adam, Hartigan, & Brown, 2010; Dooey, 2010; Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010), there is a much stronger need for designs that provide accessible and ongoing scaffolding of academic and language skills that are contextualised to a discipline for these diversified cohorts. CLASS is unique in this respect because is not situated within a particular coursework unit and yet provides ongoing scaffolding of essential academic skills that extends over the duration of a semester. It is guided by first year curriculum design principles (Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2011): emphasis on transition into learning in higher education; acknowledgement of the diversity of student' prior experiences and preparation for higher learning; and balance between pedagogy, material and facilitation techniques to engage student learning. Most importantly, it is informed by practical and empirical evidence. This nuts and bolts presentation will overview CLASS and some key findings of our research into students' self-efficacy and explore implications for educators.

Context

CLASS was initially developed in 2009 and piloted under the nomenclature Starting University Confidently and Competently (SUCCESS) as a collaborative project between the unit co-ordinator of a first year business unit, TESOL specialists and staff of the Communication Skills Centre at the CBS (Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010). The initial program was adapted specifically to complement the delivery of the discipline based first year unit in business communication. Under the initial arrangement, it was compulsory for students to enrol in the module if they were found to be academically 'at-risk' as ascertained through the administration of a mandatory writing diagnostic taken in the first weeks of the semester.

Eventually, the unit-based model was discontinued in favour of allowing all business students to enrol in the module on a voluntary basis. The series of nine one-hour CLASS seminars was retained however, and continued to run independently of CBS coursework units. So, in the present iteration, attendance at the CLASS seminars is not compulsory but students are nevertheless encouraged to attend.

Design of the CLASS module

CLASS is designed to foster optimal student engagement with the material. In pursuit of this objective, topics are developed and sequenced to mirror writing milestones that would typically be encountered in coursework related written assessments, and hence provide timely scaffolding for the writing process. In the interest of ensuring continuity of attendance, each seminar is developed for delivery as a discrete, stand-alone package, which means that a student who misses a prior session would still be able to benefit from subsequent sessions without being disadvantaged. Consideration is also given to timing, where the sessions are deliberately kept to no more than 60 minutes, to avoid overloading students' already busy timetables, leading to an increased likelihood that they would attend all sessions.

The CLASS module covers the following topics:
1. Examining the structure of academic genres.
2. Analysing and answering the question.
3. Understanding qualities of academic style.
4. Writing well structured sentences.
5. Understanding different parts of speech.
6. Developing techniques for linking ideas.
7. Writing effective introductions, conclusions and executive summaries.
8. Referencing with style.
9. Editing and proof reading like a professional.

Setting students up for success

There are several indicators that suggest that the CLASS modules are successful:
- *Attendance*. Considering that it was not compulsory for enrolees to attend all sessions, attendance levels were robust. Prior to the enrolment process, it was decided that session numbers would be capped at 30 students per class, which was approximately 20% in excess of the optimal number of students planned for each class. Based on historical figures, 20% was the average attrition level for such developmental programs. As predicted, the average attendance per class in the first week was 23 students, with a total of 158 students. Over the course of the next eight

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weeks, attendance averaged at 16 students per class. This represented an attendance rate of 70%, which was a highly satisfactory level, given that students were under no compulsion to attend sessions. This high rate of attendance (and participation) suggests that students took responsibility for their own learning through their voluntary attendance at the CLASS seminars. As Krause and Coates (2008) emphasise, the ultimate responsibility for learning rests with students themselves.

- *Students' self –perceptions of their skill development.* Qualitative and quantitative data on students' perceptions of their skill level were obtained at the beginning of the module, and again at the end. The questionnaire was adapted from one administered in a study by Soontiens and de la Harpe (2002) to reflect the topics covered in the CLASS module. This instrument comprised 14 self-reflective questions using a five point Likert scale with a number of demographic questions. Of the students who completed both the initial and final questionnaires, there was a significant result to indicate a positive effect size (higher post than pre scores) in the students' perceptions of their skill development. As Bandura (2007) indicates, self efficacy is one positive contributor to the attainment of certain outcomes based on a belief in one's own efforts.

Conclusion

This paper represents the endeavours of one small academic team within a business faculty to engage students in the process of gaining mastery over academic writing and English grammar to complement a discipline specific curriculum. It finds that students who take responsibility for, and put effort into, their own learning generally exhibit positive perceptions of their skill development. These initial findings are based on small numbers and the authors believe there would be merit in determining whether such findings are repeated in the next iteration of the CLASS modules, and if they hold true for larger numbers in similar contexts.

Nuts and bolts session outline

Whole group discussion ice breaker (5 mins)
Consider the non traditional pathway students gaining entry into contemporary Australian tertiary institutions. To what extent are they able to fulfil the requirements of writing in an academic genre upon entry into their courses?

Presenter (10 mins)
Outline of the CLASS module.

Brief illustration of a CLASS session exemplar e.g. analysing and answering the question. Participants will be asked to:
- watch an interactive PowerPoint presentation, and
- attempt the task provided.

Discussion in groups of 3 – 4 (10 mins)
Questions for discussion:
- What are some assumptions that faculty-teaching staff make about first year students' ability to tackle a typical academic task like analysing and answering an assignment question?
- Which aspects of a session like this might be helpful to address the challenges faced by diverse cohorts at your institution?
- Which aspects of this session can potentially benefit your commencing students?

Presenter/ whole group discussion (5 mins)
Consolidate ideas from participants on the issues presented, and implications for providing a similar module in their respective institutions.
In particular, consider how this design could extend beyond the local experience.

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