Catching them is one thing, keeping them is something else: Reflections on teaching first year university students

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Abstract

This paper documents teaching practices that have been identified, by the teaching team, as improving student success rates in a first year tertiary level compulsory subject. Constructivism, scaffolding, social presence and reflective practice are the key concepts which have proved to be successful in transitioning students in this subject to university study. Outcomes have consisted of goal achievement by individual students, increased student retention and success rates.

Introduction

Academics employ many strategies to enable students to succeed at university. This paper is based on the reflections of a team of academics teaching into a business core subject in a regional university, who were successful in a bid to win a 2008 Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation. The Citation was awarded for incorporating strategies into the design and delivery of a large core subject which mentor undergraduate business students towards successful transition to University.

The subject at the centre of these reflections is Organisational Behaviour (OB), a compulsory, entry level subject in the Bachelors of Business and Commerce. This subject is offered in both internal and external delivery modes, held over three semesters per year, with as many as 1100 students enrolled annually. It attracts a particularly diverse student cohort including students with English as a second language, school leavers, mature age students and students from outside the Business Faculty who take Organisational Behaviour as an elective. The regional context of this university may predispose students to increased difficulties with transition to higher education. The team's response to student diversity has been to develop a range of teaching strategies that move all students towards academic independence. In summary, the strategies that form the foundation of the team's teaching practice are: to encourage students to learn by orienting them to areas of tacit knowledge needed to succeed at University, to motivate students to learn by scaffolding them from teacher – pupil dependency to adult, independent learner; to create a safe and welcoming, social and academic environment for students; and to use reflective assessment which ultimately makes learning unavoidable.

Literature Review

The team's teaching strategies incorporated four key pedagogical approaches to teaching first year university students: constructivism, scaffolding, social presence, and reflective practice.

Constructivism

Constructively aligned pedagogy may prove to be a useful construct in the development of university courses. The importance of building on students' former experiences and validating their opinions in the class or the online discussion forum provides the basis for leading students into the lesser known and understood theory within the subject (Biggs, 2001). Engagement through this process has multiple benefits for the entire student group. Moving students from the known to the unknown or the explicit to the implicit gives them a well-structured learning environment where concepts are first presented as concrete examples and are then applied to abstract circumstances. Engaging students with unit content also has the benefit of encouraging them to persist in the subject reducing the rate of students dropping-out, but more positively, it keeps them engaged with the subject. Pedagogies which promote engagement "substantially enhance student processing skills" (Tinto, 2005, p. 93), which assist in their understanding of core subjects, but also make available skills which stay with the students into the second and third years of their course of study.

Underpinning the constructive approach is the importance of aligned teaching "where all components support each other [and] students are trapped into engaging the appropriate learning activities" (Biggs, 2001, p. 226). Constructive teaching provides students with building blocks (both for content and process) and gives them the opportunity to succeed in their chosen field. First year at university can be so filled with hurdles that they miss out on the opportunity to pursue their desired course of study. By constructively aligning student opportunities for learning these hurdles become learning opportunities.

Scaffolding

The concept of scaffolding works hand in hand with a constructively aligned subject, as it provides explanations and the demonstration of 'how to' explanations necessary for an effective learning conversation (Roehler & Cantlon, 1996). "The notion of scaffolding is congruent with the essentially social nature of learning and affirms the importance of language in making meaning within this process" (Sharpe, 2006, p. 212). The value in scaffolding lies in its ability to support student learning (Roehler & Cantlon). Students who are challenged in their learning whilst being supported have the opportunity to make comparisons which to promote discussion and wider thinking about concepts.

Developing a language which is effective in the description of concepts and process and which bridges the gap between the students and the higher order thinking ultimately required of them, is the challenge that needs to addressed by academics teaching into first year subjects. This is crucial as "discourse … acts as a critical mediating tool in students' learning" (Sharpe, 2006, p. 211). Scaffolding becomes a useless attempt at moving students through the skills and content required for a unit if it is not couched in a way that is suitable for first year students.

Social presence

"The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely they are to persist and graduate" (Tinto, 2005, p. 92). The deliberate use of strategies such as a friendly manner of communicating, entire class emails and scaffolding present students and staff with the opportunity to build an intellectually and emotionally real or life-like presence in the classroom and on the online discussion board in order to build communities of learners (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1996). These communities of learners, through interactions, create a sense of community which is beneficial for all students.

In subjects where students are participating externally as well as on-campus, one of the benefits of using an everyday manner of communicating in all student interactions, particularly in the study materials and activities on the study desk, is to promote the social presence of the academic. The interaction of students with each other through electronic media promotes their own social presence online which facilitates more effective learning (Collins & Berge, 1996).

Reflective practice

Reflective assessment presents students with an opportunity to be 'trapped' into learning (Biggs, 2001). Students' own reflections on their learning experience removes the emphasis from the teaching and focuses it instead, on the students and scaffolds them into learning (Biggs). "Learning diaries, reflections or journaling activities are examples of the way in which students might be encouraged to reflect on their learning needs and processes" (Reushle et al., 1999, p. 2). Self-reflection has the benefit of debriefing students on their own performance, how they might change their strategies for achieving future academic success, and how they can learn from experiences in the current subject.

Reflective practice also can take the form of academics assessing their own teaching by keeping a reflective diary which assesses the success of teaching strategies which is an asset for the improvement of classroom teaching (Biggs, 2001). Teachers who reflect on their own pedagogical practice have the benefit of taking a structured approach to the way they develop the learning experience of their students (Reushle et al., 1999).

Methodology

This paper relates the outcomes of the OB teaching team's reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995) which has been employed to improve their teaching and the pedagogy which underlies it. Reflective practice amongst the OB unit leaders has become a hallmark in this subject and it is widely used to uncover new ways of teaching and engaging students in the course. Reflective decisions can explain "an event" (Vickers, 2005, p. 76) and the team has used their joint reflections to achieve a best practice position within OB. Other forms of feedback have been employed in the endeavour to keep the subject developing in ways to best advantage students and these have also impacted the reflections of the team (Tinto, 2005). Student feedback (USQ student evaluations) and feedback (assessment of teaching and teaching materials) from colleagues have been incorporated to assess the outcomes of the subject and to ensure that academic standards have been upheld (Biggs, 2001). The outcomes of reflections of the teaching team as they are expressed here are those which underline the teaching practice which has significantly benefited first year students in the subject.

Strategies used by the teaching team

The individuals in the teaching team are all unit leaders of OB and have taught in separate semesters. Each individual unit leader has the opportunity to reflect on her own pedagogy while maintaining the integrity of her teaching. The team meet regularly to discuss and debrief new ideas, content and process concepts. The subject has, as a result, developed into a well defined example of best practice incorporating ideas and pedagogical theory built into the subject over time. The overarching goal of the OB team is to facilitate student learning through teaching which allows the successful transition of students to university study. The strategies used to implement this include:

1. encouraging students in their learning by orienting them to the areas of knowledge needed to succeed at university and within the subject

2. motivating students to learn by scaffolding them from teacher-pupil dependency to adult, independent learner

3. developing a welcoming social and academic environment for students

4. embedding inevitable learning opportunities through reflective assessment.

Encouraging students in their learning by orienting them to the areas of knowledge needed to succeed at university and within the subject

Consistent with Lawrence's (2005) conception of the academic role in student transition the teaching team removes some of the unknowns of university life and expectations of university study (Tinto, 2005). This is achieved by making explicit, through study materials, the tasks that students must complete to be successful in the first few weeks of study. The 'Must Do Tasks' section, early in the semester, includes identifying which learning materials students need and where to buy them; IT requirements and support; as well as the protocols to access the unit Web and home pages. Scaffolding the process requirements for the subject creates an expectation of manageability at the commencement of the subject which builds the students' self efficacy and increases their chance of success (Sharpe, 2006).

Referencing is the cause of many difficulties for students. Explicit instruction in the core principles of in-text referencing through the development of an in-text referencing decision tree (Lynch, 2007) provides a user friendly way to avoid plagiarism. The decision tree outlines the three core questions which students need to answer to when creating an in-text reference and how to deal with each circumstance. The role the decision tree has in scaffolding students, from a state of unknowing anxiety to quiet confidence in their ability, is the key to the success these students experience in essay writing (Roehler & Cantlon, 1996).

Academic writing is daunting for students new to tertiary study (Lynch & Werth, 2007). This subject makes explicit the tacit knowledge and rewards associated with academic values and practices. While academic tasks, such as essay writing, are presented as challenging and even difficult at times, they are also presented as innately exciting and rewarding. In the topic area dealing with work motivation, the experience of creative flow is discussed with students. Key aspects of the theme are linked to the process of writing about the theory of motivation; acknowledgement is made of the difficulty students might experience when starting to write assignments. This kind of practical application of theory draws students into an implicit understanding of an explicit concept. The OB topic on values further adds

to this, by discussing Chinese academic traditions where scholars literally risked their lives to provide a kind of loyal opposition to the incumbent government. We also note the Harvard honour code that is so assiduously adhered to by students that invigilators are not required for exams.

Motivating students to learn by moving them from teacher-pupil dependency to adult, independent learner

Facilitation of student transition through the use of scaffolded learning opportunities is the means by which the OB team assists students to achieve a goal that they otherwise might not achieve (Lynch, 2007). The students who complete this subject are most often first year students in their first semester of study. The importance of transitioning them from a high school understanding of learning (even though some students have not studied for many years) is another key aspect of enabling student success (Lawrence, 2005). To this end the subject dedicates two of the unit's twelve modules to academic research and academic writing respectively. These are designed to move the student to independent operation as soon as possible. These modules enable the student to:

- identify the various library databases

- navigate them and find sources for assignments (by using pictures of screens from databases)

- identify what constitutes scholarly sources

- use a formula for writing a paragraph (they are taught to link the paragraph to the theme of the essay followed by links to a 'piece' of theory and to a 'piece' of case study).

These methods are used to scaffold students through their essay writing with the intention that students will use and further develop these skills throughout their course of study (Roehler & Cantlon, 1996). Other skills that OB orients students to include a range of self-management and study strategies effective in note taking, assignment writing and exam situations. For example, in the week dealing with personality in the unit, students have an opportunity to identify their personality type and their associated learning preferences and strategies. At other points in the semester students are exposed to active reading strategies and to mind mapping (Garrison, 1997). Throughout the semester students are not required to adopt any particular approach to study, but rather to explore a variety of approaches and adjust to what works for them (Reushle et al., 1999).

Developing a welcoming social and academic environment for students

Students' social and academic integration provide an important key to successful transition to university study and enhances the likelihood of academic success (Tinto, 2005). The adoption of a conversational and supportive manner of communicating in the subject materials gives a sense of social presence for students. This transition strategy is based on Tinto's findings that "successful students consistently made use of the metaphor of having successfully made the passage to college life and of having been helped over a threshold by some member of the faculty or staff" (Tinto, 1998, p. 450). This might be regarded as difficult to achieve with a subject which has a large proportion of distance students; however, the provision of audio overlaid PowerPoint lectures which encourage students to access the study desk and engage in forums have been significant in the integration of these students.

Communication with students through group emails over the semester is important in developing social and academic integration through the unit leaders' deliberate maintenance of a social presence with on-campus and distance students. A specific example of the use of this social presence is exemplified by an email routinely sent to all students while they await the return of their first assignment. The email is entitled somewhat provocatively 'What do I do if I fail the assignment?' This email challenges unhelpful 'catastrophic' thinking that students may be engaging in prior to the return of their mark. The email also removes some of the stigma and shame associated with low performance and reframes the worst possible case scenario into a learning opportunity. The email restates the message that students are consistently told throughout the subject, that they are not permanently defined by the marks they receive on any single piece of assessment. The email seeks to address student fears of failing in assessment, by normalising these fears and giving students strategies to deal with these (Lawrence, 2005).

Embedding inevitable learning opportunities through reflective assessment

Reflection on the learning experience is well-documented as a tool for learning and teaching (Biggs, 2001). Implementation of a learning diary as part of the formal assessment presents students with the opportunity to think independently about what is and is not working for them as learners. It also supplies the teaching team with data which are used to assess and monitor the progress of new teaching strategies. "Students are more likely to succeed when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their success, provide needed academic and social support, give frequent feedback and actively involve them" (Tinto, 2005, p. 95). The success students experience due to the reflective practice employed by the unit leaders can be attributed to the expectations of success which are clearly articulated to students both in class and through the study materials. This is a strategy which better aligns the objectives of the unit with those of the course of study as well as the university.

Conclusions

First year subject leaders hold in their collective hands tremendous influence on the success of their students. The strategies which enhance the first year experience benefit the students' commitment at a point when "student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent learning and persistence" (Tinto, 2005, p. 92). The OB teaching team have developed a pedagogy which has focussed on the needs of students within a responsive and supportive learning environment.

The comfortable acceptance by students of the strategies employed is reflected in their feedback and improving retention rates. The teaching team is committed to improving their teaching practice with an ongoing aim to facilitate student transition to university.

The teaching team have found that the use of scaffolding, constructivism, social presence and reflective practice have successfully enabled first year students to succeed in a learning environment which can otherwise be daunting. Mentoring students through university survival skills and conceptual thinking provides them with the self-efficacy needed to facilitate success in this subject and in future subjects. This results in positive longer term outcomes for students' commitment to their course of study and their ultimate graduation.

Social presence is not commonly built into written subject materials; however, this subject has proved that this is not only possible but can be successful. Reflective practice for this teaching team is synonymous with an openness to new ideas, flexible pedagogy and a willingness to consider the needs of students in the broader picture of goal attainment. The gentle critique of concepts amongst the team refines ideas and builds previous experience into decisions designed to benefit the students and the design of the subject. In essence, the team's reflections provide an example of how student-centred processes in the development of a teaching pedagogy can facilitate both the achievement of personal objectives for students, and they also result in the achievement of the broader aims of faculty and university through the retention of students.

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