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Reflecting on providing multiple assignment supports to first-year marketing students in a large class

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Abstract

This paper describes improvements in learning outcomes in a large undergraduate marketing class at the University of Wollongong. The authors reflect on the interventions developed and evaluated, aimed at supporting students in their transition from novice researchers into self-regulated researchers, and producing professional marketing reports in industry recognised report writing genres. The project, and therefore the paper, was focussed on the major assignment and the initial and ongoing supports provided to students. These have been developed through a continuous cycle of improvement – planned, developed in partnership with a central resource development unit, deployed using a website and classroom activities, evaluated and refined over 2 phases in a 12 month period.

Keywords

Assignment supports, scaffolding, undergraduate class, marketing

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Background to study

MARK101/213: Marketing Principles is a core subject in a Bachelor of Commerce course at the University of Wollongong. The subject has averaged 520 students per session for the past five years. Given that a large class of first year marketing students carry different expectations and research skills, it is not unusual to see a failure rate of 20% or more in an assessable component such as a major marketing report worth 25% of the total subject marks. Many of the marketing theories and models discussed in the subject are the result of academic research with regard to consumers and their decision-making behaviour and hence the role of research cannot be emphasised enough. While teaching staff accentuate this importance, many students invariably do not take it seriously in their early days of joining a university.

As Jenson (2004) noted recently, today's students struggle when using the electronic databases and indexes to which their library subscribes. Differences between journals and popular magazines, articles and abstracts, and annotations and advertisements are hard to discern when it is all on the web (Jenson, 2004). Even for those students who attend library workshops, instruction can only be generic and their searching is often limited to hypothetical research scenarios. Consequently, the co-ordinator wanted to increase the support given to students as a way to improve the learning outcomes of the assignment.

Phase 1: The assignment

The major assignment in MARK101 is to write a marketing report. The assignment has 2 main aims:

Aim 1: for students to develop independent researching skills, particularly keyword searching for relevant articles in library databases and reputable TV, magazine, newspaper and other websites.

Aim 2: to write up findings and recommendations in industry-standard and recognised marketing report genre.

To achieve these aims, the report was augmented by a second assessable task, with initial and ongoing supports provided in a combination of the face-to-face and online arenas.

The first task (task-1) consisted of a worksheet and online quiz, and was designed by the Marketing discipline in liaison with the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR) in autumn session 2004. The task required students to locate a particular journal article from (1) an online database, (2) a magazine website and (3) a TV website that would assist them to undertake their major marketing assignment successfully. The worksheet takes students through locating particular articles step-by-step and asks them to record bibliographic information of the resources found. The online quiz tests that bibliographic information, ensuring that they did in fact find the correct items.

The second task (task-2) was the original marketing report, for which a number of other types of support were offered. These included: providing comprehensive instructions/guidelines for assignments; clarifying in detail the assessment criteria; spending more class time on strategies to approach assessment and provision of a sample marketing report from the previous session (though on a different topic). The final support – the sample marketing report, was developed by the Learning Development Unit in liaison with the subject coordinator. The document uses the contents of a marketing report prepared by a Mark101 student in a previous session and walks through every paragraph highlighting the good aspects and aspects that need improvement in addition to proposing and explaining the structure of a good marketing report at first year university level. All the above-mentioned resources were provided to make assessments in large classes more manageable without undermining the quality of learning as suggested by Gibbs (1992).

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the task and support elements; the model is based on the task/support/resource model used by the Learning Designs project of the AUTC (Oliver & Herrington, 2001).

Theoretical underpinning

Research has shown that an effective way of teaching research skills is by integrating the instruction into the curriculum (Ellis & Percy, 2000; McLoughlin & Luca, 2001). It has been proven that students have a more active approach to learning research skills when they know it will help them find resources that they can use for other assessments in the subject (Ellis & Percy, 2000). It has also been shown that library instruction of this kind is effective when offered as early as possible in each student's undergraduate career (Ellis & Percy, 2000; Minkel, 1999). However, if instructions are generic, students may not be able to transfer these skills into their own professional disciplines (Hicks et. al., 1999). The integration of generic competencies into contexualised, disciplinary areas through educational technology offer learners a context in which to anchor their learning (McLoughlin & Luca, 2001; Shaffer & Resnick, 1999). Hence, the curriculum integrated research skills task (task-1) was introduced to students. This method of curriculum integrated research and citation skills teaching had been found to be successful by other researchers (Ellis & Percy, 2000). This type of an instruction is commonly termed as scaffolding (Gutzdial, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding is attributed to the kinds of supports that learners receive within a learning environment as they develop new skills or levels of understanding (Halttunen, 2003). Scaffolding enables learners to perform activities that they were unable to perform without this support (Halttunen, 2003;

Vygotsky, 1978). An important element of scaffolding is fading, which represents gradual removal of support when students can cope with the task independently. Winnips & McLoughlin (2001) contribute further by distinguishing between initial and ongoing support. Initial support is offered at the beginning of the task, and faded so that the student can learn to self-regulate. Ongoing support is provided during the task completion and is based on student input.
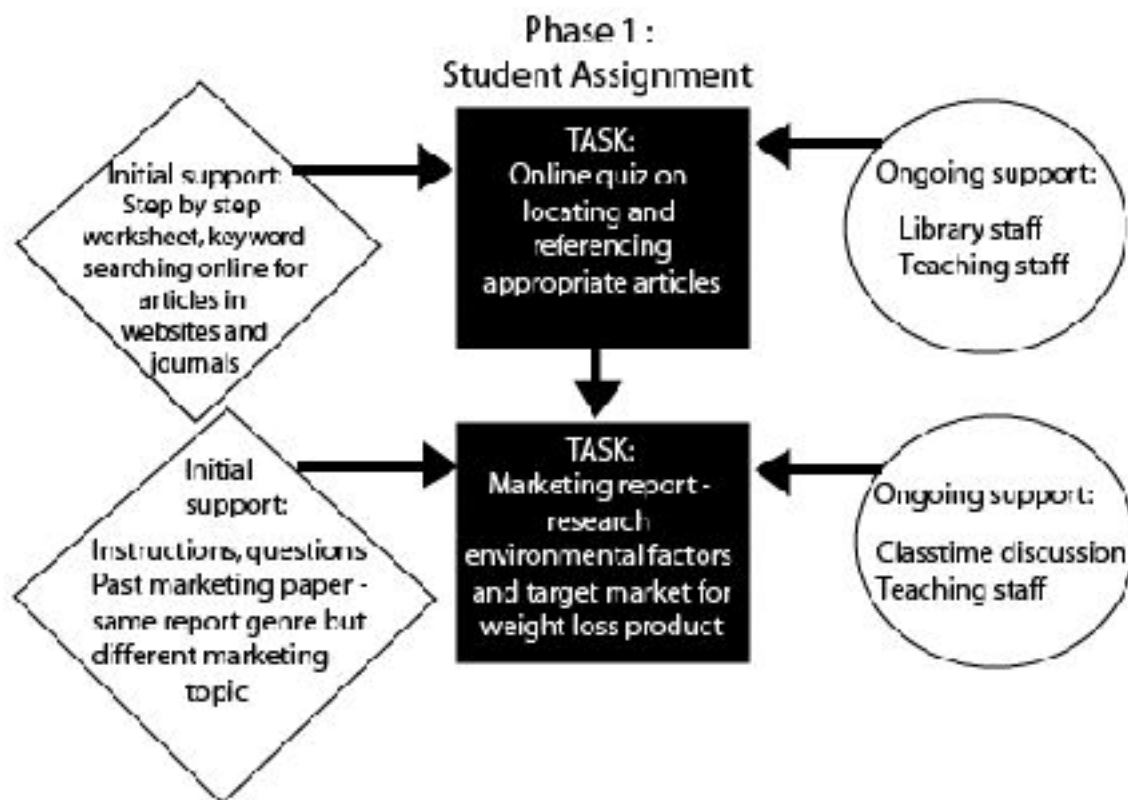
Phase 1 : Student Assignment

Initial support: Step by step worksheet, keyword searching online for articles in websites and journals

TASK: Online quiz on locating and referencing appropriate articles

Ongoing support: Library staff Teaching staff

Initial support: Instructions, questions Past marketing paper - same report genre but different marketing topic

TASK: Marketing report - research environmental factors and target market for weight loss product

Ongoing support: Classtime discussion Teaching staff

Figure 1: Task/support model showing elements of the student assignment

Phase 1 Quantitative results

An anonymous paper-based survey was completed by enrolled students in autumn session 2004 to find out if they felt that the support provided for the assessment activity was worthwhile. There were 183 completed and usable questionnaires, representing 56% of the total students in MARK101/213. For reporting purposes, we aggregated the "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" responses into "disagree", and the "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" into "agree" responses. About 75% of students agreed with the first three survey statements: Question 1: Worksheet / quiz helped me to undertake research for the major assignment**;** Question 2: Time spent on worksheet / quiz was worthwhile**;** Question 3: Since undertaking worksheet/quiz I have been able to find other relevant articles from the same sources to use in my major assignment.

For those who disagreed, some had undertaken a similar exercise, or already had the research skills. Others commented that the located resources were not exactly relevant to their essay, but this is due to the choice given to students in the essay topic.

Question 4 asked if the students had been able to locate relevant articles form OTHER online sources since undertaking the worksheet/quiz. This was important, as it tests skills transferability to something not explicitly taught in a step-by-step way. Although the number of respondents was lower (N=102 valid records) the level of agreement was higher – 81.4%. Only 3.8% disagreed. Comments included: "Agree; Expanded academic index and other online databases". One of the 19% of students who did not make the leap to independent searching said, "It did not really teach me to look up other sources, I just followed the guidelines".

Phase 1 Qualitative data analysis and results

The open-ended answers highlighted the big difference in existing research skills levels between students in MARK101/213. Students commented that the best way to address this gap was to make the worksheet and quiz optional for those who needed it. In the survey, students were also asked how staff could help them undertake first-year marketing assignments successfully.

For the purpose of this evaluation, we have employed the concept of 'conceptual ordering' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which refers to the organisation of data into discrete categories or themes according to their properties and dimensions, and then using description to elucidate those themes. Data from the open-ended question on the survey forms was coded and analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

A section of students acknowledged that they were happy with the guidelines provided. Typical responses included:

> *The resources provided were really helpful when it came to structure and the content that was required. I found the assignment extremely beneficial in applying the concepts and thus understanding them better.*

> *It was [given in] a step-by-step [manner]...Teaching staff couldn't have done much more without doing the report for students. I feel the supports for this subject were better than any I have studied in this university and I have been around for 6 years.*

Another section of students commented that they wanted a more challenging research task (with the presumption of further support would be provided) and that having found good resources, there should be more opportunity to use them in the assignment. For example, "make part-1 activity in depth and more demanding – make us use those sources".

Discussion and implications of phase-1 results: Self-directed learning

A positive outcome of this exercise in autumn session 2004 was that the major assignment failure rate halved – from 22% to 11%, in addition to 75% of the students finding the learning support useful.

The shift to student self-direction and autonomy means that students need to take more responsibility for their learning, but may need assistance in achieving this skill. Shaffer & Resnick (1999) maintain that technology can be used to create authentic contexts for

learning, and provide resources that foster reflection and deep learning amongst students. The need to foster deep learning is important given that some students in the study were passive in learning, which can be inferred from a comment such as, "Just breezed through it [marketing-curriculum integrated research skills task] by following exact instructions and not taking anything in".

However, the stimulation of reflection is essential for deep learning, as the reflective process includes synthesis of knowledge through re-evaluation of the experience by undertaking association, integration, validation and appropriation (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). Reflection may be facilitated through interaction with peers, or alone through writing (Lincoln, Stockhausen, & Maloney, 1997).

In regards to learning, Ramsden (1992) distinguishes between two approaches: deep and surface learning. A deep learning approach is consistent with a search for knowledge and understanding. This deep learning is in direct contrast to the more superficial type of learning or memorising of information with little consideration of what it means (i.e. surface learning). However, for students to be able to develop such skills, they need to be given the opportunity to engage in deep learning.

The authors argue that, to foster deep learning amongst first-year students, who have just made the transition from high school to university, students needed to be provided with additional supports or scaffolding in the light of growing disparity from staff between the expectations they have of first year students and students' performance in areas such as independent learning, research skills, academic reading and writing as well as the use of new technologies (Latham & Green, 1997). Further, given that students in a large-enrolment class such as Mark101 report inadequate opportunities to monitor their own learning and reduced contact time with instructors, additional supports could provide guidance to prevent such frustrations.

Applied to assessment and teaching approaches in higher education, the implication being that the creation of an appropriate learning environment can foster a deep approach. Gibbs (1992) emphasises that a focus on process, rather than content is essential in promoting active learning and that evaluation and assessment procedures are central to these issues as students interpret the objectives of a course of study according to the demands of the assessment system.

Phase 2: The need for additional support or scaffolding

The subject coordinator wanted to scaffold further to promote a deep-learning approach amongst students while undertaking their major assignment. This would help them to retain skills in marketing and such skills could be applied to new tasks as they progress through their program. That is, it would help students to understand learning theory, apply it to their own learning, improve their own learning strategies, and allow transfer of these skills to other areas of the course/program of study.

The initial type of support or scaffolding (marketing curriculum integrated research skills task: task 1) did not help much to promote deep learning amongst certain students as minor themes indicate. Figure 2 indicates the multiple supports offered to students in spring session 2004.
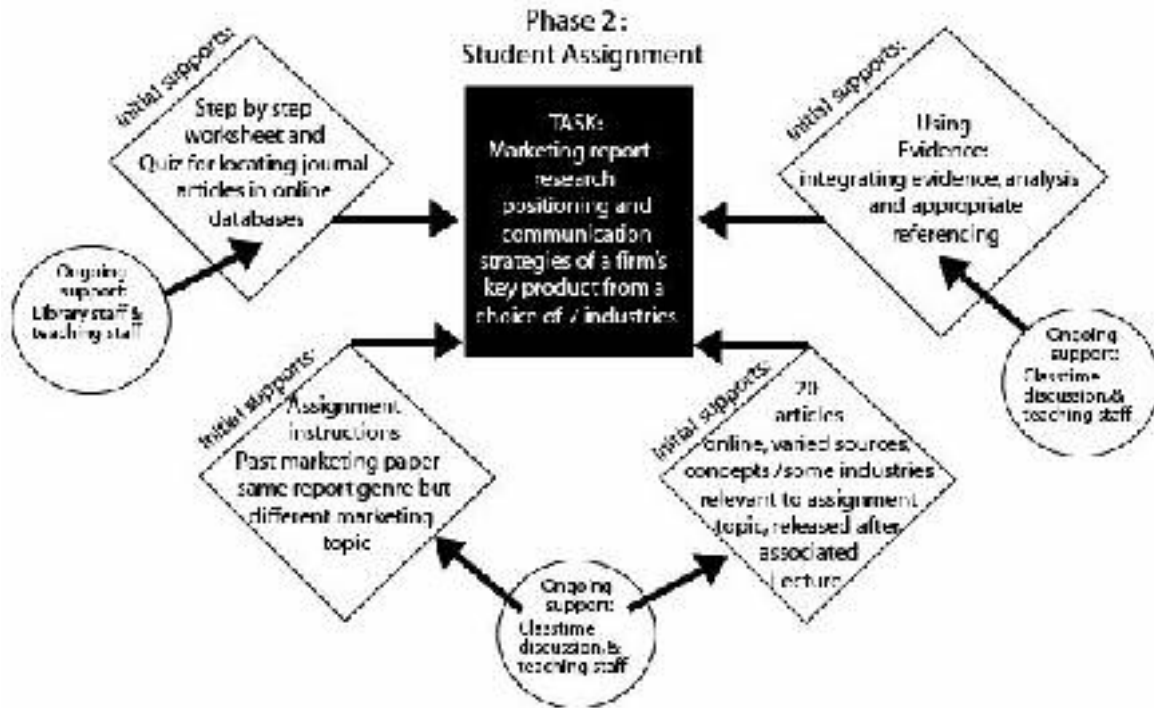
Figure 2: Task/support model showing elements of the student assignment in phase 2

The following paragraphs explain the supports illustrated in figure 2:

1. Taking into account the varied skills of the student population in spring session 2004 and student feedback in autumn session 2004, the worksheet/quiz activity was offered again in spring session 2004, but as optional and self-assessment only to the 700 enrolled students.

2. Sample Marketing Report (as described under phase-1)

3. Using Evidence Report. This was developed by the Learning Development Unit in liaison with the subject coordinator to (i) highlight to students the importance of using a variety of sources; (ii) provide examples of what constitutes a good analysis, and (iii) show students how to integrate evidence effectively into their argument via appropriate referencing.

4. Uploading of 20 articles from varied sources on to WebCT. The subject coordinator extensively searched in multiple industries relevant to students' major assignment and uploaded about five articles from varied sources on to WebCT, which totalled 20 articles. WebCT is a course management system at the University of Wollongong that enables instructors to provide paper-related support in a web-based environment. The articles were uploaded after the lecture on each of those topics was delivered and students were asked to discuss during tutorials. To encourage them to read those uploaded articles, the subject coordinator asked students to use at least 4 articles from the uploaded list and 11 articles on their own, making the optimum number of references to be used in their report as 15. This method of scaffolding not only makes

students to stick to the sources pre-selected by the subject coordinator, but also provides them the flexibility to look for similar articles on their own. Thus, this type of support serves as an introduction, not as a corral.

Using the above resources, students were asked to address the assignment questions for the key product/company they chose. All these resources were provided in order for students to forge in the path of deep learning.

Phase 2: Extending the study

As part of the extended, though a pilot study, an anonymous paper-based survey was completed by 60 students (approximately 11% of Mark101 students enrolled in spring session 2004 at Wollongong campus) to find out if they felt that the multiple supports provided, including the 20 articles that was uploaded onto WebCT for their major assignment were useful. The questionnaire was distributed when students dropped-in to hand-in their assignment on the due-date and were told that participating in the survey was optional and that if they wished to participate, they could drop the filled-in questionnaire in the head tutor's room in a ballot-type box.

Phase 2: Qualitative results

Though filled in by 60 students only, the response was overwhelmingly positive. A majority of the students mentioned that the resources were useful and that it enabled them to work on the assignment effectively. Typical students responses include:

> *At first, I didn't think it would be useful, but as I was writing, I found that they were useful references to back up what I was saying. The articles were informative, guided me in the right direction and I even starting reading those articles in my spare time.*

> *It gave me ideas for the types of materials I was searching for and types of articles that should be used and how resources should be related. It was good also to see articles that were relevant even if they weren't specifically to do with a particular topic. The guidelines helped me structure my response in a logical fashion. The marking criteria sheet was very good; good to know what is expected of you.*

> *They were useful to complete the part of the assignment in relation to communication strategy…and provided good secondary data that was reliable, clear and succinct. It gave me references I wouldn't have had otherwise. It linked me to other sources, that is, helped to prompt us where to look for similar articles. It saved me time in finding the right ones.*

> *The website resources were very useful…the sample report and referencing resources were helpful too. Learnt a lot about the industry I was researching as a result of the journal articles uploaded.*

Others said that it was only fairly useful, however mentioned that it prompted them to find relevant articles on their own and that the articles uploaded were a good starting point. Following are the typical responses:

> *They were all right, although I did find it difficult to use the needed amount in my assignment, as I did my own research. I thought they were good to start my assignment.*

They were fairly useful, but the ones I found on my own were more relevant to my assignment. The articles [uploaded on to WebCT] were however a good trigger and could see the significance of this exercise!

Very good, although referring them back to the assignment proved a bit difficult as I chose an industry other than the ones recommended in the subject outline. The WebCT articles are extremely well done sources. As a result, the expectation that we had to find in relation to the WebCT's chosen sources was very high. It was motivating!

Only a couple of them were relevant to my product. They were useful, but I don't think there should have been a clause that we had to use a certain number because it made it difficult with limited articles.

Discussion of phase 2 results: engagement, momentum and focussing student effort

As the results indicate, students found the resources helpful including the articles that were uploaded on to WebCT.

Students mentioned that the bibliographies in uploaded articles provided direction to finding their own articles. By providing a pathway or route for the learner, the scaffolded lesson is somewhat like the guardrail of a mountain highway. The student can exercise great personal discretion within parameters but not in danger of "off-road" stranding. It helped students to figure out where to focus their attention. Since "the ways in which learners are assessed and evaluated powerfully affect the ways they study and learn" (Angelo, 1993, p.6), these supports offered a way to improve their learning.

Most educators complain that some of the articles traditionally used by first year undergraduate students suffers from a low 'signal to noise ratio' – the confusing, weak and unreliable information (noise) outweighs and threatens to drown out the information most worthy of consideration (McKenzie, 1999). However, the articles uploaded on to WebCT were apparently the most applicable articles and student responses confirm those perceptions. This reinforces the idea that scaffolding identifies the best sources so that students speed to signal rather than noise (McKenzie, 1999). Further, this type of scaffolding delivers efficiency as students commented it saved time in finding the right articles. This perception was achieved, in part, by virtue of comparison with the old kind of research that was mostly about wandering and scooping (McKenzie, 1999). However, scaffolding distilled the work effort and the students' efforts were channelled. Further, as student responses confirm, scaffolding creates momentum (McKenzie, 1999). That is, the focus achieved through scaffolding concentrates and directs energy in ways that actually build into momentum. Further, as student results indicate, they seemed to be more motivated to learn as they saw the value of the exercise.

Further, the purpose of the exercise is to remove support when learners can cope with the task independently, a process described as fading, which is an important element of scaffolding.

Some students mentioned that though the articles uploaded were fairly useful, there should not have been mandatory requirements that they had to use 4 articles from the uploaded list. During the past sessions when students were advised to have 15 references, they did not take it seriously. However, the provision of 20 articles on WebCT and the requirement that

they have to use 4 of them for their major report seem to have registered in their minds seriously. This seems to confirm Angelo's (1993, p.7) suggestion that "younger students tend to achieve more by working with teachers who expect more of them". As the results indicate, some students seem to have shared the subject coordinator's high expectations and perceive them as reasonable.

As a result of these multiple supports, there seemed to be greater engagement with students in the planning stage of their assignment; more meaningful discussion took place during tutorials and student consultation hours of the subject coordinator and tutors, thus allowing opportunities for meaningful feedback from instructors. Thus, the initial support (uploading of articles by instructor and self-reading by students) and ongoing support (more meaningful discussion of how to integrate evidence and analyse during instructor consultation hours, which is face-to-face scaffolding) as suggested by Winnips & McLoughlin (2001) seemed to have positive effects on their tendency to learn deeply.

Conclusion and future study

The contribution of this manuscript is the demonstration of how the application of a type of teaching – the provision of multiple, related initial and ongoing supports and the introduction of a particular type of support namely the provision of related articles to students' major assignment topic early on during the course of the session and integrating them with lecture topics – motivates students to use them, not just mechanistically, but also reinforces their deep learning process. The results of the preliminary study validate the usefulness of explicit teaching of such repeatable research skills to students and promote self-directed learning. Students perceived the supports to be useful and the module has clearly contributed towards development of student learning strategies, and towards independent learning.

As Angelo (1993) suggests, teaching a first year subject requires a different approach than teaching a third-year subject in the same discipline. The scaffolding exercise helps to explain why students of lower ability or much weaker preparation often benefit from and appreciate highly structured course like the one offered currently for Mark101 at University of Wollongong.

In presenting the findings of this study, we acknowledge their limitations. The results of this study apply to one substantive area. That is, the students who studied Marketing Principles at the UoW in the two sessions surveyed. We also acknowledge the subjective nature of this study and as a caveat to the findings we appreciate the appropriateness of Cialdini's (1984, p.9) statement that "no matter how careful and thorough I tried to be, [what] I observed [was] seen only through my eyes and registered through the filter of my expectations and previous experience". Although bearing this statement in mind and acknowledging the limitations of the study, we also draw attention to the rich and insightful descriptions offered by students.

Currently, the Mark101 teaching team is evaluating the major assignments of students. As part of further study and to validate the usefulness of this study's findings, we intend to observe each student's reference list in the report to get an idea of the kind of articles they used to support their claims in the report. Further, we would observe if there has been an increase in the quality of reports, which can be inferred from the bibliographic lists and

students' marks and comparing them to previous session's assignments results. If the further results from this preliminary study are positive, the authors may conduct a large scale study and wish to hypothesise amongst others that integrated or reinforced scaffolding would be more effective than multiple but unrelated scaffolds.

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