

Enriching the learning for offshore students in a 1st year Management subject

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Abstract

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. 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 material in curriculum through collaboration with mainstream staff (Skillen et al., 1998).

The compulsory first-year undergraduate management subject Management and Organisation Behaviour (MOB) is taught across three campuses in Melbourne, and at partner institutions in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. Seventeen staff, including 10 sessional staff, are involved in the delivery of the subject. Students in MOB come from a diverse range of degree specialisations including Applied Economics, Accounting, Tourism and Hospitality and Management.

The team, which consists of the SLU lecturer and the subject lecturers, has developed a model to foster academic skills and deep learning (Biggs, 2003, Biggs and Telfer, 1987) within the very diverse student cohort enrolled in MOB. This partnership is innovative in that it involves the skills of both discipline and SLU staff onshore, and of offshore discipline staff in a way rarely seen in Australian tertiary institutions. The offshore lecturers are guiding the team to understand issues unique to their environments, and, with the team, building a response to offshore students' needs which is culturally appropriate. The inclusion of offshore partner staff in such teams acknowledges the expertise of staff from partner institutions and was one of the key recommendations in Victoria University's Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) project report entitled Improving Language and Learning Support for Offshore Students (Dixon, 2005).

Assessment, central in forming students' perceptions of learning, has been restructured and redesigned to include learning materials using Biggs' concept of constructive alignment; two of Victoria University's Core Graduate Attributes (CGAs – written and oral communication and group work); the unpacking and scaffolding of assessment tasks and the provision of flexibly accessible multimedia learning materials including linguistic models. There are practical, operational and cultural differences between the different locations which have led to the current developments.

Key Words

Offshore, assessment, constructive alignment, transnational education, equivalence

Introduction

Transnational education takes a variety of guises and may or may not involve offshore teaching. One model that does involve offshore teaching and learning that is supported by Victoria University is the partnership model whereby a course is delivered in conjunction with the teaching staff and using the facilities of the partner or host university. Fundamental to this paper is the principle that in recognition of the differences between educational approaches, preparedness of students and teaching and learning cultures, there is often a need at offshore locations to revisit the curriculum and assessment.

This leads to the contentious area of equivalence. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (2005) does not require standardisation of subjects but does require that learning outcomes for students across cohorts and continents are within a band of acceptable comparability for each student achievement. This is also about ensuring the value of what is offered and its suitability for purpose within the agreed 'band of acceptability'. Flinders University (2002) Policy on the Development of Offshore Programs states that the same standards must be applied regardless of where or how the program is delivered and that inclusion of local case studies; substitution of local examples in course materials; provision of local content; inclusion of

additional topics; provision of bridging topics; and some local language instruction are all possible adaptations.

The other cloudy factor is cultural appropriacy and what this means for Australian universities moving to an internationalised curricula. Borland and Pearce (1999) assert that there is a need to avoid simplistic models that assume homogeneity in culture at the same time as acknowledging differences. The position of this paper is that cultural appropriacy requires reciprocal development of a shared understanding of the learning needs of students both onshore and offshore.

This paper outlines how best the students at offshore partner universities may be supported in their understanding and learning of the curriculum. Then it will focus on the needs of one large cohort of students in Kuala Lumpur and the issues that arose within the teaching and learning of a compulsory first year undergraduate Management subject. A number of problems will be identified, analysed and ‘first-take’ responses outlined.

Academic Language and Learning Support

Academic language and learning support (ALLS) may be defined as any formally organised activity or approach that stages and scaffolds student learning and makes explicit the requirements for the successful completion of assessment tasks. Strategies that might achieve the acquisition of such skills range from generic, decontextualised English language activities to a more systemic and strategic model that aims to develop students’ skills in a subject / discipline specific context. Skillen, Merton, Trivett and Percy (1998) discuss an embedded model that enables the integration of academic literacy instruction into subject curricula. Their embedded model allows for an inclusively developmental approach toward supporting students but it does not specifically address curriculum development that incorporates knowledge of offshore locations particularly with regard to cultural appropriacy.

At offshore sites, the provision of academic language and learning support is delivered differently. The AVCC project *Improving Language and Learning Support for Offshore Students* (Dixon, 2005) 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 et al., 1999). Such a model reflects a

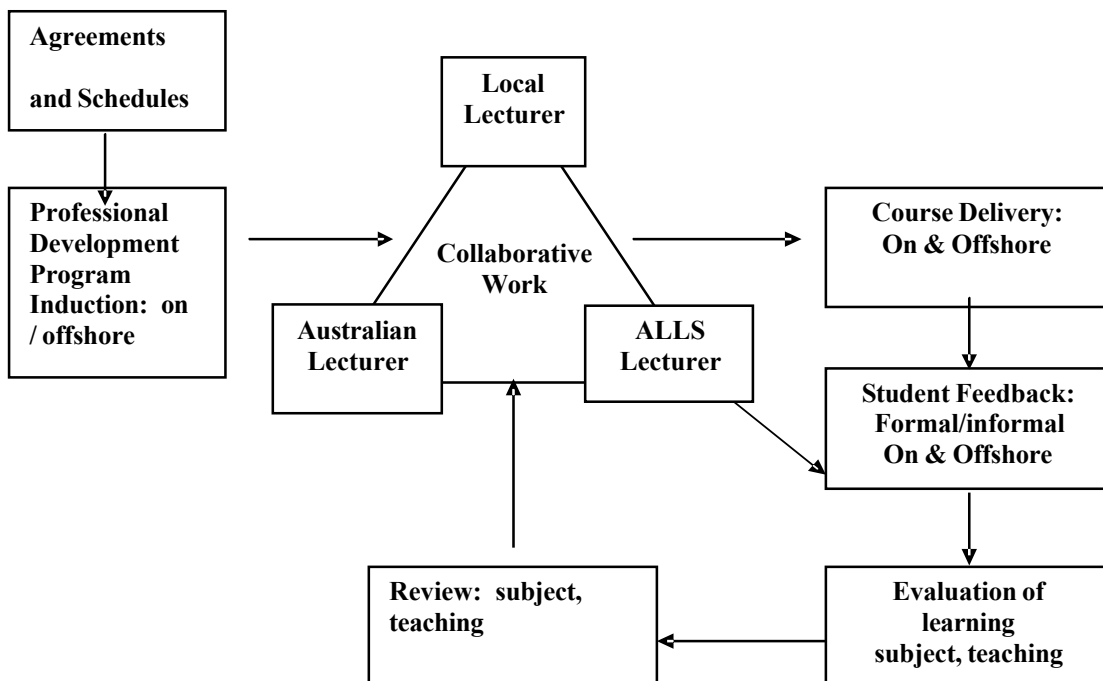


Figure 1. A collaborative practice model (Dixon, 2005)

constructivist epistemology where ownership is pivotal to good teaching. Ownership in this modality usually refers to students, but here the importance of the offshore partners' input is emphasised. In this construction of knowledge the dialogue between the two providers (onshore staff and staff from partner institutions) is facilitated by a commitment to developing the subject through a series of formal activities. This allows for greater cultural sensitivity, for regional difference and for change to be managed in accordance with cohort needs rather than being based on assumptions about those needs. In this model quality control is inbuilt as offshore partners and their students are given opportunities in a regular review cycle to gain an understanding of institutional requirements and to input into the areas where standardisation of subjects is not appropriate and adaptation to develop sensible 'equivalence' is required.

The collaborative practice model (Figure 1) features the use of teams of learning developers similar to those used in the traditional open and distance flexible model of course design. The ALLS lecturer is involved from the beginning as 'learning designer' and subsequently with the ongoing evaluation and improvement of all subject materials. Academic language and learning lecturers are an integral part of the team and advise on both the staging and scaffolding of student learning and on ways to make explicit the English language / discourse skills necessary to the academic discipline. The language and learning support in such a model becomes simply another element that is part of the process of planning, creating and delivering the course to students. Language and learning support when it is integrated from the beginning of subject design can contribute to the development of a constructivist paradigm. The model does not require the remedial post delivery assistance which often occurs in Australia but is not currently offered at many offshore partner institutions.

One Offshore Environment

In general, curriculum content should be transportable offshore (DEST, 2005). This transposition does not mean that the curriculum cannot be made more accessible (that is, differences in experience and in linguistic skills should be recognised and addressed) without compromise to concepts and technical content. In this context, there needs to be greater internationalisation of the curriculum as a whole to ensure that concepts are taught in a contextually meaningful way in terms of the ambient society and culture. There is an academic skills unit at this particular university in Kuala Lumpur which has trialled a number of supplementary programs; however, in discussion with staff running these programs it has become evident that they see the value in the provision of academic language and learning support being provided through the model of collaboration and embedding of skills.

In Kuala Lumpur the subject content is made more complex as the university is operating in an English as a Foreign Language environment with a growing number of international students from other parts of Asia, the sub-continent and the middle East. The students at this campus therefore are not an homogeneous cohort as is often assumed in discussions of offshore campuses. Hence there is a need for curricula to reflect a whole range of degrees of familiarity with terminology and examples, and to modify the cultural nuances (MacKinnon and Manathunga, 2003) that inform the accepted 'norms' which designers of programs, predominantly Australian lecturers, bring to both content and teaching approaches.

The Subject

Management and Organisation Behaviour (MOB) is a first-year, compulsory subject for all Bachelor of Business degrees at Victoria University (VU). It has an enrolment of between 700 and 1000 students per semester in Melbourne, plus an additional 250-300 student offshore in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Students in MOB come from a relatively diverse range of degree specialisations which include Applied Economics and Accounting on one end of the spectrum, with Management, Tourism and Hospitality at the other end. Students from some disciplines tend to view MOB as being "soft" when compared to the "hard" theories and methods of the "numerate" subjects at the centre of their majors. This often leads to an underestimation of the complexity of the assessment tasks and of the work required to be successful, manifesting itself in poor assignment work and poor exam essay writing. The assessment regime in MOB can be characterised as writing intensive, requiring relatively sophisticated English language, reading and research skills, and involving self directed learning skills on the part of the students.

Assessment

Most students at first year need to develop their independent learning skills. Such skills encourage ownership of their learning and the confidence to take risks, though as Biggs (2003) argues, students tend to focus on assessment (ie marks) and disregard other 'extraneous' material in a subject. 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. Feedback from students via the required formal institutional evaluations support this link. More anecdotal comments from later year tutors also indicate such a correlation.

Assessment for MOB comprises an essay, field work and an exam. These have been redesigned by the team to promote more effective independent learning through the requirement to apply theory to practice. This approach has also been adopted for the end of semester exam essay questions. In other words, the assessment reflects the growing evidence that workplace and learning in the workplace initiatives have a powerful pedagogical influence and that student diversity drives changes to the course.

Independent learning is also facilitated by developing students' capacity to learn from their experiences outside formal education, including learning from their peers and in the workplace (Boud and Solomon, 2001). The field research group assessment task addresses both areas and can lead 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. They then interview a manager and write up the findings of the interview as a group business report with reference to management theory.

Methods

The need for equivalence between approaches to the subject as taught in Kuala Lumpur and Melbourne was the reason for the study that followed. The way in which this study was undertaken included:

- Analysis of marks awarded question by question for the Semester 2, 2005 exam from the whole population of MOB students at KL and a random selection of students in Melbourne who completed the same exam
- Group interview of Kuala Lumpur students conducted in March 2006
- Interview with partner subject lecturer and tutor in March 2006
- Interview in April 2006 with past student who completed MOB in Kuala Lumpur and is now finishing his degree at VU in Melbourne

Findings

Brief descriptive statistics were used to explore the situation. Table 1 gives the analysis of the short answer questions and Table 2 the analysis of the essay questions.

Table 1. Results of Analysis of Short Answer Question Mark in Exam

Campus	Short Answer (mark out of 5)	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Melbourne	SA01	122	3.19	1.30	
	SA02	108	2.55	1.49	
	Overall	SA03	67	1.90	1.66
	Mean	SA04	107	2.63	1.38
	= 2.86	SA05	115	3.63	1.03
		SA06	69	3.21	1.53
Kuala Lumpur	SA01	166	3.63	1.36	
	SA02	105	2.72	1.79	
	Overall	SA03	106	2.87	1.45
	Mean	SA04	91	2.52	1.46
	= 2.89	SA05	137	3.66	1.34
		SA06	51	1.95	1.52

While the short answer question average marks are very similar except for Questions 3 and 6, much more variation exists when one compares each essay question average. This is confirmed by the standard deviation figures. The standard deviation scores are consistently higher for the essay questions which implies that student responses were much more varied than with their short answer responses. To explore any relationship between the campus and question marks, Pearson scores were calculated. For all the marks except Short Answer Question 2 and Essay Question 7 the resulting scores were less than 0.05 indicating there is some relationship between campus and student marks. Having shown that a difference exists, this was further explored by using Analysis of Variance to see if the difference between the means were significant; there is a clear significant difference between the marks for the two locations for all except Short Answer Questions 2, 4 and 5.

Table 2. Results of Analysis of Essay Question Mark in Exam

Campus	Essay question (mark out of 10)	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Melbourne	EQ01	66	6.65	1.87	
	EQ02	77	5.51	1.85	
	Overall	EQ03	73	6.80	1.90
	Mean	EQ04	95	5.23	2.30
	= 5.86	EQ05	37	5.93	1.80
		EQ06	67	5.35	1.88
		EQ07	23	5.52	2.09
Kuala Lumpur	EQ01	108	5.81	1.86	
	EQ02	59	4.59	2.15	
	Overall	EQ03	94	5.30	2.26
	Mean	EQ04	70	3.78	2.24
	= 4.55	EQ05	36	3.55	1.71
		EQ06	119	4.47	2.00
		EQ07	28	4.32	2.05

Assessment issues

The analysis of exam question responses indicates that Melbourne and Malaysia students do not perform in similar ways. Students in Kuala Lumpur write overly comprehensive theoretical answers to the short answer questions and earn high marks but then do the same with the essay questions without a well analysed link to an example. Students in Melbourne tend to be very brief with the short answer questions, earning average to good marks, but write clearer, better structured with well integrated business examples in the exam essays.

Students interviewed were able to articulate their study approach and writing strategy. They had ascertained that as short answer questions tended to focus on exposition of theory without calling for significant analysis or interpretation, students, who were able to reproduce large tracts of the textbook in their answers, in their own words, received better than passing marks. This reproduction of surface understanding became apparent in the end of semester exam where a lack of depth of understanding prevented these same students from successfully answering exam essay questions. They did not have a clear strategy for overcoming this although they talked about the need to have examples.

The essay questions have been modified to include a requirement that examples of theory in practice must be included. The students acknowledged this and were able to research examples, mostly from the textbook, but few of them realised or could analyse the example to the depth that the marking criteria required. Nor did they really believe that the analysing of the example could be so important and form as much as 50% of the written content of the essay.

The field research task of interviewing a manager was designed to give the students an example to reflect upon but analytically writing about this connection between theory and practice is difficult for many students. The students in Kuala Lumpur reported that they found this task hard for a number of reasons: finding and approaching a suitable person without feeling that you were a nuisance seemed to be oft repeated.

In Melbourne, many of the students in MOB have to combine their tertiary study with paid work (or unpaid work for those returning to study while caring for families); however, in Kuala Lumpur, fewer MOB students have part-time work and a growing number of students in Kuala Lumpur are international students with little or no connections to the workplace in Kuala Lumpur. This has made the link from theory to practice much harder for these students to visualise and discuss, yet the essay, the case-study and the exam all have marks allocated to the critical analysis of the theory as it happens in real life.

Work experience or part-time work creates a pool of knowledge for students to use if they have the reflective skills to do so but it also creates a number of issues. Students made comments that confirmed the researcher's idea that students in different locations value their part-time work in different ways; not all students have work experience; many students have not developed the metalinks between theory and practice (Davies, 2000).

The above findings were discussed with the offshore subject lecturer who has taught the subject for at least 8 years and who was not surprised by any of these points made by the students. She contributed to the brainstorming and development of possible solutions both in the interview and in an ongoing email dialogue.

While only a single interview, the discussion with the student now studying in Australia was particularly interesting. He was a student who had gone from Secondary School into a bank as a clerk. After a few years in this position he decided that he wanted higher qualifications. He started the VU Bachelor of Business in Malaysia as an international student and very successfully completed MOB there. He is now studying in Australia because the visa arrangements let him work part-time which he needs to do to be able to support himself. Reflecting on his study habits he admitted that he was quite strategic in locating past exam papers very early in the semester, that he carefully looked at the style and requirements of the questions, that he was keen to know more about his chosen subjects and that he knew if he did well he could have a job equivalent or higher to that of his previous manager. In his spare time he researched companies and increased his knowledge of their operations by reading appropriate business websites and journals. This indicates that for this student at least making explicit the connection between theory and practice was an important contribution to his success in MOB.

'First take' responses to the issues

For the Kuala Lumpur MOB students the scaffolding is more comprehensive with instructions that walk them through appropriate approaches to culturally unfamiliar assessment tasks. It is made clear to students that they are expected to engage actively with management discourse in essays and that the examples given in lectures might be expanded upon for use in essays. Given Tran & Lawson's (2001) conclusion that many students do little complex elaboration of lecture notes, strategies for supporting such behaviour could be built into tutorial exercises.

Currently the teaching team is compiling short video clips of past students from the subject talking about how they see the relationship between the subject content and other activities which with they are involved. These videos can be used in tutorials and will be embedded in the subject's teaching and learning resources to encourage all students to think more deeply about the applicability of the theory being discussed. This will link to a new CD of exam focused materials which is being developed. Much more development is planned using some of the web-based, case analysis tools promoted by Waters and Johnston (2004)

Alternative culturally appropriate assessment variants are now provided. Specifically to assist MOB students in Malaysia a link has been made to the VU MBA program which has as a pre-requisite for entry 2 years of work experience. Students who have no business community links are put in touch with local managers who are also MBA students, as alternative interview subjects. MOB students interview these MBA students and their responses and reflections can be the focus of the case study which requires the MOB students to analyse how the theory may be applied.

Evaluation

In all assessment tasks, students are now specifically required to illustrate their discussion of theory with relevant examples of theory in practice but in exams, in particular, this skill could be improved. Research suggests that the reasons why this skill may be difficult to develop may include: a perceived lack of relevant

work experience; an actual lack of work experience and connection with business networks; and a misunderstanding of how marks are allocated. Another reason for this task being difficult is that it has been created within a Western paradigm (Davies, 2000) that may not be totally relevant in this particular context. The dilemma, however, is offset by students wishing to work in multinational companies where such emphasis is appropriate. This needs to be more fully researched. If the collaborative embedded model and above solutions are having an effect then it may be concluded that a 'transactional space' (Collins and Berge, 1996) for the learner to independently interact with the learning materials has been achieved and that a range of approaches using multimedia have been well integrated into the subject (Clerehan et al., 1999).

The exam papers from Semester 1, 2006 will be analysed with the same statistics as the exam papers from Semester 2, 2005. An improved exam essay mark could be linked to the solutions implemented. Much more exploration is needed to fully understand why students in different locations perform the same tasks differently, what makes some questions harder and why one question is perceived as easier than another.

Conclusion

Creating culturally sensitive assessment tasks means that students are able to place the management theories in a context of their own lived experiences. This has been achieved by using case studies depicting local business examples and regional issues as well as adapting approaches to assessment tasks that are attuned to the dominant teaching style of the partner university. The approach that has worked for Kuala Lumpur will be reviewed for use in Beijing, Tianjin and Kuwait as the subject is taught in those locations over the next 12 months but the teaching team is aware that other variants may be required.

The teaching partnership was initially onshore only and more akin to the Skillen et al embedded model; the team has now been extended to involve the Malaysian partner lecturer in the analysis of student needs offshore, and in the development and piloting of materials. The collaborative embedded model has allowed for the recognition of differences between cohorts and the development of contextualised approaches and materials. This teaching and learning in MOB is innovative in that it calls on the skills of both discipline and academic language and learning staff *onshore* and of *offshore* discipline staff in a way rarely seen in Australian tertiary institutions. The assessment, central in forming students' perceptions of learning goals, has been restructured and redesigned in Kuala Lumpur to align classroom activities, content and cultural variations with the tools used to judge understanding and application of knowledge.

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