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A case of embedding graduate attributes: student perceptions of their learning outcomes

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This paper reports on an innovative strategy to improve students' oral and written communication skills by designing a subject to reposition the skills as key graduate attributes. The paper provides an empirical investigation of the student experience in the subject. It documents student perceptions of the teaching and learning and presents students' own views of their learning outcomes. The student perceptions are aligned with the pedagogy driving the course design that was created to maximise development of the graduate attributes.

Keywords: graduate attributes curriculum

Introduction

Graduate attributes have emerged as a critical construct in Australian universities in the last decade. Current pressure to embed development of graduate attributes into university curricula is reflected in their prominence in federal government quality assurance procedures (Barrie, 2006) and concern from employers and university policy makers about graduates' generic skills (Medlin, Graves & McGowan, 2003). Approaches taken by Australian universities to address the issue are as varied as academics' interpretations of terms used to describe graduate attributes (Barrie, 2006). Sporadic embedding of graduate attributes (Barrie, 2006), differing attitudes to their implementation (Barrie, 2007) and perception of their inclusion in course design as an exercise in compliance causing a surface approach to teaching/learning (e.g., Harvey & Kamvounias, 2008) are ongoing problems.

Unlike some universities which prescribe a common set of attributes across all courses, the UTS graduate profile framework describes a very broad common profile and takes the view that specific attributes are best developed in relation to the professional and disciplinary contexts for each course. The graduate profile for each course needs to address the attributes within three broad domains, *personal*, *professional* and *intellectual*, acknowledging that these attributes are interrelated in the overall capacity of a course graduate. Each faculty is thus responsible for the constructive alignment of intended graduate attributes with course aims, subject objectives, teaching and learning activities and assessment.

Repositioning oral and written communication as a key graduate attribute

Echoing concern expressed about student writing ability in the academic teaching literature (e.g., Hirst *et al.*, 2004) an Information Technology Faculty (IT) at UTS had implemented several writing programs, but with little success due largely to their 'add-on' and optional nature. However, the adoption of the graduate profile framework by the university opened up the possibility of repositioning written and spoken communication as a key graduate attribute, and therefore at the heart of the curriculum.

In 2007, the university's academic support unit was requested by the IT Faculty to develop and deliver a one semester 'Communication' subject to be undertaken by all first year students. This subject, *Communication for IT Professionals*, (CITP) took a socially constructed, cultural and contextual approach which situated the development of written and spoken communication within broad social and ethical issues relating to IT. The subject's objectives align written and spoken communication with the faculty's graduate attributes as follows:

- articulation and further development of students' ethical beliefs (*personal*)
- critical responses to the global social impacts of IT (*professional*)
- evaluation of textual, visual and multi-modal information and construction of written texts (*intellectual*).

This paper evaluates the student experience of CITP. It examines data from 2007 and 2008 UTS Student Feedback Surveys (SFS), a 2007 discussion forum and 2008 class-based survey. Student perceptions of their learning experience and outcomes are analysed to determine if they align with the pedagogic principles underpinning the course that was designed to maximize student potential for attaining the attributes.

Theoretical basis of course design

Increasingly diverse backgrounds mean students are entering university with different levels of preparedness for and expectations of university requirements. Thus prior knowledge cannot be assumed and entry level skills may require diagnosis and intervention (Krause, 2001). In order to best serve the academic language and literacy needs of CITP students, the academic support unit implemented a diagnostic assessment procedure that tested English language proficiency by requiring students to summarise and evaluate a short article. The results were used to allocate students to the class that would best serve their needs (develop; further develop; extend academic and professional English).

A specific focus on drawing students into the construction of knowledge through their active engagement with the texts that they would encounter (Lea, 2004), together with furthering their understanding by relating new ideas to previous knowledge and experience (Ramsden, 1992), underpinned the course design. Previously students had shown no interest in attending programs established to improve their written skills that they perceived as 'add on' and not central to their university experience. CITP was designed to take communication skills from the periphery by integrating written and oral communication with the discipline's body of knowledge, applied to students' specific areas of interest. The course balances intellectual stimulation and challenge (identified by Krause and Coates (2008) as a vital aspect of student engagement), in requiring student learners to create knowledge for themselves (Biggs, 2003); and academic literacy support.

To maximize development of spoken and written communication the issue of writer identity was addressed. Considering that academic writing rhetorically restrains *personality*, (Hyland, 2002), and academic novices need to develop an identity so that they ‘think’ and ‘speak’ the discourse of the university” (Northedge, (a) 2003, p. 26) measures were taken to create tasks that would help them learn to participate in the new knowledge community. These measures included self-selection of research topics and a general encouragement to use the first person in expressing views in both spoken and written tasks (Hyland, 2002). Authorial voice is a widely discussed aspect of student writing (e.g., Clark & Ivanic, 1997) and “for students with little experience in academic communities, the struggle to develop an effective voice through which to ‘speak’ the discourse, whether in writing or in class, can be long and difficult” (Northedge, (a) 2003, p.25). This kind of support is crucial in helping students from diverse backgrounds establish their own voice so that “they have the courage to venture their own thoughts in speech and writing” (Northedge, (a) 2003, p.26).

Assessment

Assessment tasks are constructively aligned with graduate attributes and require a range of academic literacy skills that build on each other to culminate in a final research report on an aspect of the social and ethical issues in the students’ *professional* field. The skills include:

- researching a selected topic: *personal*
- communicating research findings by making an oral presentation on the ethical and social issues identified: *personal*
- researching and evaluating each of three selected web articles on the topic: *intellectual*
- researching, evaluating and synthesizing three additional articles to complete a report putting forward an argument/critical response to one of the ethical/social issues identified in the presentation: *intellectual*.

Situating the development of oral and written communication within a topic of their own choosing allows students “to position themselves within the discourse and generate worthwhile thoughts of their own” (Northedge, (b) 2003, p. 178). Lecturer feedback is given at each stage so students experience the making of meaning in a gradual way.

Evaluating the student experience of CITP

The UTS Student Feedback Survey (SFS) is a framework to assist in the monitoring of subject quality and evaluation of teaching; collecting student feedback on subjects and teaching staff university wide. The standard series of questions provide staff with comparative data from a possible score of five. SFS from 2007 and 2008 from overall IT subjects, Information Systems (IT subject) and CITP are presented. Aspects of teaching and learning in the SFS aligning with the pedagogical approach taken to attain the graduate attributes are presented here. Key findings are that students rated the teaching and learning aspects of CITP more highly than both other categories, achieving higher results in its second year.

Table 1: SFS 2007/2008

	CITP 2007	CITP 2008	Inf. Systems 2007	Inf. Systems 2008	Overall IT 2007	Overall IT 2008
Learning experience interesting/thought provoking	3.76	3.87	3.71	3.63	3.74	3.74
Assessment fair and reasonable	3.76	3.83	3.69	3.59	3.71	3.69
Constructive feedback	4.06	4.22	3.69	3.73	3.71	3.68
Consistent with stated objectives	4.00	4.09	3.92	3.86	3.90	3.90
Satisfied with teaching	4.18	4.43	4.00	3.94	3.92	3.96
Satisfied with quality of subject	3.41	4.18	3.71	3.65	3.73	3.74

It is interesting to note here that satisfaction with the quality of CITP was low in the first year which was a direct contrast to satisfaction with the teaching and learning. Anecdotal evidence suggests the sense of it not being ‘mainstream’ IT may have caused this. The increased satisfaction with the quality of the subject in 2008 may be a result of awareness raised of the communication skills the subject develops.

To obtain qualitative data on the student experience of CITP in 2007, an informal (documented) group discussion took place in one class.

Table 2: Themes from class discussion

Theme	Pedagogy	Graduate attribute
Choice of research topic More thought provoking Generating good discussions	Engagement/Intellectual stimulus	Allowed articulation/development beliefs
More relaxed atmosphere/less pressuring Topics straightforward, easy to understand Assignments weighted well	Result of addressing diversity/diagnostic	Gradual intellectual development
Opportunity to write different types of essays	Clear expectations	Construction of written texts

Further qualitative data in 2008 was obtained through a confidential in-class student survey (not administered by the lecturer), asking students to outline their learning outcomes in three broad categories: control of writing, ability to put forward an argument, and confidence in construction of written texts. The survey questions were open ended and the data is reported in the language of the informants, one response selected to represent similar answers.

85% indicated choice of topic facilitated control of writing. Comments align with writer identity, articulation of a set of *personal* beliefs:

- captured my attention and interest
- motivated me to write well
- good to write something you're keen on
- allowed me to express my own opinions
- I could shape the writing
- felt more comfortable writing about a topic I was interested in
- not confined, freed up my writing style
- made me more interested.

90% indicated choice of topic helped put forward an argument. Comments align with engagement, evaluation, critical responses:

- yes, allowed opinion
- well informed on the subject and knew the advantages/disadvantages
- makes applying yourself to the subject easier
- more freedom to express my topic and focus
- my writing style could be expressed more clearly
- adept at the topic...interested in the topic
- strengthened my abilities in arguments and discussing contradicting arguments
- more interested and informed through research and establishing an idea
- many references allowed the report to create an argument
- I was able to freely argue my point although the report was a little restricting.

92% indicated confidence in construction of written texts was developed. Comments reflect activities allowing diversity, clarifying expectations and fostering intellectual engagement:

- ample feedback
- draft
- practice
- clear guidelines
- see quality needed at university
- understand what is expected
- can structure
- improved style of writing/write about our interest
- high standard expected gives experience and confidence
- understand referencing.

A final comment indicates grasp of development of attributes:

- university expects you to grow and with it, level of writing.

Conclusion

This study has evaluated the student experience of being taught oral and written communication in a subject designed to develop communication as a desired graduate attribute. Despite the widely discussed problems associated with embedding graduate attributes into the curriculum alignment of student comments to course objectives would indicate they were attained. However, to claim that CITP is a successful innovation, some points must be addressed:

- The extent to which a student attains a graduate attribute has been questioned in studies such as that of Palmer and Hall (2006). Although student identification of communication skills they developed in CITP is in line with subject objectives, variation in grades would indicate differing levels of attainment.

- Although students receive feedback on the skills they are developing, there is no feedback on how the skills align with graduate attributes or how they might track further development.
- Graduate attributes need to be systematically implemented across all programs. Communication skills in CITP are explicitly taught, but the skills are often left implicit.
- Academic support lecturers currently teach CITP. Perception of CITP as a ‘stand alone’ subject addressing communication keeps it separate from the ‘mainstream’ faculty program.

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