Leading from behind: The role of academic developers in preparing graduates of the 21st Century

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This paper describes the efforts of a group of academic developers at The University of Western Australia (UWA) working collegially to address an issue identified as a teaching and learning priority, namely the provision of improved formative feedback to students to enhance their learning outcomes. It takes a case study approach, emphasising both generic and context specific issues that arose. By taking similar but contextually different approaches to the problem the study is able to identify some challenges facing academic developers as they assist teachers in their 21st century role.

Introduction

There are some irrefutable facts around the delivery of education in today's world! First, the pace of change in all things, not the least knowledge generation, has reached an unprecedented rate. Second, students preparing to enter the workforce must be equipped in new and flexible ways to accommodate the changes. Third, it falls to the universities and training institutions and, by default, to the teachers within these institutions to prepare students for global citizenship and ensure they attain a high degree of employability.

The implications of this for university teachers are great, particularly since the context within which they operate has also changed and continues to change dramatically. The demands of an apparently ever-increasing range of stakeholders, including the students, the university and potential employers,

must be addressed in conditions of high workload (Maslen, 2000) with increasingly larger groups of students of diverse ability (Marginson & Considine, 2000) who are demonstrably less engaged with their learning than the students of a generation ago (Krause, 2005). All this is occurring in an environment where modes of delivery are changing in response to societal shifts and technological advances. The teachers need help!

Enter the academic developer. The following description captures well the function of an academic developer as,

> "an *enabling role* in improving the teaching and learning environment of the University through *the provision of* academic development *activities and resources in* the areas of teaching, learning, research education and *assessment*. Academic development staff work with academic staff to achieve the strategic teaching and learning directions of the University and focus specifically on the *learning outcomes of students*." [emphases added] (University of South Australia, 2008)

This paper, then, focuses on a case study of the 'enabling role' of members of the CATLyst Network (Ingram & Thompson, 2001) at UWA. As academic developers, they combined to investigate and provide 'resources in assessment', namely ways to improve the delivery of formative feedback to students.

Background

There are few issues in teaching and learning more agreed upon than the crucial part played by feedback and its contribution to student learning (Kwan, Mo, Yuen & Leung, 2005; Biggs & Tang, 2007). Despite a consensus of opinion regarding the value of feedback it remains problematic from the perspective of students who often complain about its relevance (Rowe, Wood & Petocz, 2008) and from teachers who complain about the time consuming nature of providing meaningful critique of students' work (ref).

The project reported here builds on previously presented work (Carr, Bovell, Delves, Miller, Longnecker, Skead, et al., 2008). Having surveyed academic staff from across the university and interviewed students in a series of focus groups, it became apparent that while there were generic requests from students regarding the feedback they received there were also faculty specific aspects to their requirements for feedback. For example, students in the Arts based disciplines noted the difficulty they experienced in adapting to the discipline specific discourse that was used by tutors in providing feedback. In Engineering and Mathematics, more numerically based disciplines, and Law, a particularly competitive environment in terms of future employment prospects, students were keen that their feedback provided an indication of their position relative to other students in the class.

In addressing the requirements of students for relevant, formative feedback, CATLysts from six faculties undertook to work with teaching staff, trialling different processes to facilitate the provision of improved feedback in one or more units within their faculties. Their experiences follow in a series of brief case studies.

The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

The case study in FAHSS looked at the feedback provided on digital media projects. During a focus group with students looking at feedback given in the Faculty, all of the students who had participated in digital media projects felt that the expectations and standards for the projects were unclear. They felt that the feedback given was inadequate due to lack of detail, and noted a lack of formative feedback for future improvement. A case study was run on a Communication Studies digital media unit where in previous years feedback on the projects had been felt to be dissatisfactory. The intervention strategy, applied with the cooperation of the new unit coordinator, was to give a statement of expectations for the project, along with details of the criteria which would be used for marking. This was followed by descriptive feedback after each project which addressed each of these criteria.

Finally, questions relating to the feedback given in this unit were included in the Student Perceptions of Teaching (SPOT) survey at the end of semester.

The students responded positively to the SPOT and Student Unit Reflective Feedback (SURF) surveys, with the SURF scores coming in higher than the University averages. This represents a significant improvement in the level of satisfaction with the unit, which previously had scored as one of the worst within the whole Faculty. It can only be presumed that the improvement in the provision of feedback on the digital media projects contributed to this level of satisfaction. This model of feedback provision on digital media projects will now be extended to other units in the Faculty running similar projects.

The Business School

The comments made by a group of Business School students in a focus interview indicated that there was wide variation in the type of feedback provided, that feedback is usually in the form of written comments made at the end of the assignment, and that comments on referencing and paragraph structure were common and generally acted on by students. Students also commented that the marker's handwriting is often difficult to decipher and that sometimes the staff even have trouble reading their own writing. The students indicated that the worst kind of feedback was where there was only the mark and no mention of how to improve, or just a general comment at the end of the assignment such as 'well done' or 'good work'.

By comparison, some Business School staff have expressed the view that students are often only interested in the mark and they wonder whether students really consider the written comments provided on their work. When surveyed, most lecturers in the School indicated that overall, they had a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the term 'student feedback'. Furthermore, those surveyed generally perceived the aim of feedback was to assist students in their learning process and to help them to improve. Most respondents were satisfied with the feedback they provided, given the resources available and the large numbers of students in some units. Ideally they preferred smaller class sizes and more tutors to assist in the marking process. They indicated that on written assignments (eg, essays) students usually receive a grade and written comments.

Taking into account the outcomes of the staff survey and student focus interviews, a small project was conducted in an undergraduate unit where students had an essay to write mid semester. The aim of the project was to provide students with specific and constructive written feedback on their essay, to indicate how the mark related to the marking criteria, and to ensure the written feedback was legible.

The project involved a second year management class of approximately 50 students, the lecturer, two tutors and the faculty CATLyst. The requirements for the essay were explained in class and there was also detailed written information in the unit outline on the general process of researching and writing essays (eg, essay structure, developing an argument, referencing etc). The lecturer and tutors were all very experienced and had taught this unit together on several occasions. The teaching staff and CATLyst met to discuss the aims of the project and to plan the approach to marking. An electronic copy of the detailed marking sheet was prepared and used by the tutors to word process their feedback. The feedback and marking sheet included all the aspects of a good essay highlighted in the unit outline. In addition, the tutors continued their usual practice of hand writing comments dispersed throughout the essay. Following the marking and return of the essays, the students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire regarding the feedback on their essay.

Forty students completed the survey. The vast majority of students agreed the feedback provided identified their strengths and provided suggestions on how to do better on their next essay. Most students read the hand written comments dispersed throughout their essay and indicated that they found these comments useful. The students were generally ambivalent as to whether the comments were hand written or word processed, provided the writing was legible.

There were a number of factors conducive to the students having a high quality learning experience in this unit. These included the inclusion of comprehensive information in the unit outline about how to go about writing the essay and the in-class discussions about the essay topic prior to students attempting the assignment. In addition, the lecturer and tutors had worked as a team previously and met on a weekly basis to discuss their teaching. The CATLyst brought a slightly new dimension to their approach, in this project suggesting modifications to the marking guide that were aimed at providing consistency and improved feedback to students.

The Law School

Law students interviewed for this project indicated that fierce competition for articles together with the strict imposition of a scaling policy demanded that feedback not only identify areas of weakness in students' performance but, more critically, provide strategies for improvement. Further, feedback should indicate a student's performance relative to the other students in the unit. While the students were not unanimous as to what form of feedback was most effective, they did articulate a dislike for the standard marking rubrics which were viewed as an unhelpful series of arbitrary ticks randomly placed on a meaningless scale. The students indicated that one-on-one face-to-face feedback would be ideal but understood that in some core units this is simply not an option.

Two first year core units were identified as the focus of the feedback project: Legal Process and Criminal Law. The feedback project implemented by the Unit Coordinators of these units with input from the Faculty CATLyst and the University's Learning, Language and Research Skills team (LL&RS) was integrated into a Law School project for developing and embedding a writing skills programme into the first year LLB curriculum. The assessment included two take home case analysis exercises. By way of feedback on the first case analysis, students received a detailed marking rubric and feedback sheet. Apart from the student's mark for each aspect of the case analysis, the feedback sheet provided details of areas of weakness and what further work the student could do to improve his or her writing skills including referral to specified LL&RS workshops and invitation to an individual discussion session with the student's seminar teacher. The feedback sheet indicated whether a student was required to reflect and report on follow up work undertaken to improve performance in an assessable reflective journal to be submitted at the end of the semester. In addition, general feedback was given in small groups detailing common errors. Results for the assessment (by student number) were posted on the Unit webpage so that students could assess their relative performance.

Following on from the Legal Process assessment, in Criminal Law students were required to complete an assignment which included analysis of three recent cases. In this assignment, students were expected to draw on the feedback they received on their analyses for Legal Process.

Although, the primary feedback strategy used in this project was a marking rubric and feedback sheet, student concerns with and apparent dislike of marking rubrics were addressed by developing a document that not only recorded a student's performance but provided details on the areas of weakness and possible strategies the student might implement to facilitate improvement. A student could gauge and reflect on the effectiveness of the strategy/ies he or she selected in the follow up assessment and reflective journal. Requiring students to submit a reflective journal on their learning journey during the semester negated the risk inherent in marking rubrics and feedback sheets, indeed any form of written feedback, that students simply do not read them.

The feedback strategies developed for this project addressed a number of general concerns Law student had raised with the CATLyst network regarding the formative nature of the feedback they were receiving: 1) students could assess not only where they needed to improve, but how they might go about doing so; 2) the marking rubric was made more meaningful by requiring markers to identify and articulate areas of weakness and strategies for improvement; 3) students could assess whether they had in fact improved over the semester; 4) each student was aware of how they performed relative to the rest of the year group; and 5) individual feedback was made available to those students with the

greatest need for one-on-one guidance. In facilitating this project, the CATLyst was able to assist academic staff in providing feedback that addressed the unique concerns of law students.

The Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences

The students in this faculty suggested that the provision of a marking guide could improve the quality of formative feedback. Similar to other faculties, a sheet outlining the breakdown of marks was provided for an assessment item in order to assess the usefulness of this tool.

Laboratory sessions are an integral part of any science course at UWA. In Semester 1 2008, each student in a Level 1 unit was given a marking guide for a laboratory report prior to the work being submitted. 252 students completed a survey after the report had been marked and returned. 95% of the students referred to the marking guide while preparing their laboratory report. Of these, 25% found the marking guide useful, 25% very useful and 49% extremely useful. Comments that were expressed included “Having not written a formal laboratory report before I found all of the sections of the marking guide useful”, “With marks there you can tell how much to write/what's expected” and “All parts of the marking guide were useful as it helped me to check if I was meeting the requirements the marker would be looking out for in the report”. Those that did not use the guide did so because they “used other guidelines from a textbook” or they “didn’t notice it”. All students said that they would use a marking guide in future, if it was supplied.

The students were also asked whether they were able to see how their work could be improved in future. 84% students responded positively. Comments regarding how the students would improve their laboratory report the next time included “Make it clear where my hypothesis and conclusion are”, “I will do more research and write more concise statements” and “More preparation into planning what I will write”. Having a marking guide provides the students with clear direction for completing an assessment. When returned, they can use the formative feedback on specific sections of the work to improve future laboratory reports.

Some comments suggested that there were variations of marking and feedback provided in the different laboratory groups. In a previous survey of staff it was found that not all unit coordinators conduct moderation exercises. This highlights the importance of moderation across markers, including tutors.

Overall the use of a detailed marking guide assisted the students with knowledge of what was expected of them in each section of the report and provided feedback for writing future laboratory reports. It also provides staff with clear direction for allocating marks in each section of the report. Using a marking guide appears to be of benefit to both staff and students. Staff members in the Faculty are keen to improve feedback to students and are willing to use tools such as the marking guide in their units. This provides an excellent opportunity for the academic developer, in this case the CATLyst, to offer an effective tool for staff members to adopt.

The Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences

A Faculty survey of staff and students about their perceptions of feedback showed that students thought they did not receive enough feedback and staff thought they were providing plenty of feedback to student and that the students only need to ask for it. Some teaching staff stated that they would prefer to be able to give more individualised feedback to students. With the recent increase in student numbers providing quality feedback to students in a personal way is challenging. The Faculty provides supplementary web based teaching and learning to all its students. As part of a review of a literature review on feedback some research focussed on providing verbal feedback (MP3 sound files) to students on a written piece of work and found that for some students it personalised the experience and seemed more genuine (Merry & Osmond, 2007). While other research found providing audio feedback saved time for the feedback giver (Anonymous 2008). This project aimed to explore the

provision of verbal feedback to students using technology, e.g. learning management system tools, the assignments tool in WebCT and creating and uploading MP3 files containing feedback to individual students.

A third year unit was chosen for the project where students complete an essay on ethics. A guide on how to complete the assignment was provided to the students, including a comprehensive marking guide. The unit coordinator and two tutors were recruited for the project. The tutors were experienced in providing written feedback to students. The Faculty CATLyst provided paper based resources and one on one training to staff on providing verbal feedback to students using an MP3 player, recording, editing and uploading the files through the assignments tool in WebCT. The students were asked to take part in focus groups and surveys about their experience, while the tutors kept a record of the time it took them to create the feedback and which sections of the essay that they provided the most feedback on.

The majority of students (86%) read or listened to the feedback at least once. An equal number of students preferred MP3 to written feedback and a small number indicated no preference. Some of the students liked to receive feedback this way "didn't get written feedback but I think MP3 feedback is a more honest and unrestricted style, that's easier for tutors to provide feedback" while others did not "It was too personal and I was nervous about hearing it. It seemed as it I was going into the office and listening" and "Written feedback seems to be more useful. I prefer having things in front of me to see rather than listening to feedback."

The tutors commented on their experiences with creating the MP3 feedback and although it was a steep learning curve it made them examine their own feedback practices while allowing them to provide more detailed feedback and to convey emotion.

The Faculty of Engineering, Computing and Mathematics

It is probably not surprising, given the numerical foundations of engineering and the reliance on numerical skills to succeed in engineering studies, that engineering students insist that their marks be numerical, crisp, just as logical and consistent, and not open to contention or interpretation. However, once assessments move out of the technical domain and become essays, for example, engineering students complain about the 'fuzziness' of their resultant mark.

The marks awarded to essays written by 4th year engineering students in a unit with a strong sustainability focus were a source of contention. The essays were designed to be open-ended with no one correct 'solution'. Academic writing, analytical thinking and the ability to present a well-researched, cogent argument were expected. The students expressed disappointment with the awarded mark.

The use of a rubric was suggested by the faculty CATLyst as a way of addressing these difficulties. The rubric – the proposed intervention - would clarify both student and marker expectations in the essay. However, the lecturer expressed doubts about the use of a rubric – was it just telling the students what to do? Both the lecturer and the faculty CATLyst attended a hands-on workshop on rubrics, where the lecturer's concerns were addressed. The rubric, while it may tell people 'what to do', does not guarantee that each person will be able to demonstrate them.

In the end, warnings and doubts about rubric use raised by other lecturers in the faculty prevented the issue of the rubric to the students. Only the tutors were given the essay rubric.

The proposed intervention did not take place. The rubric, as an assessment tool, is still seen as not being rigorous enough. In engineering, the educational robustness of tools such as rubrics, oral presentations and one on one questioning as valid and consistent measures of achievement is not adequately appreciated. The exam or test, with its 'number', is one of many assessment tools. It

should not be seen as the only valid tool. Part of the role of the academic developer is to continue to provide research evidence of the educational robustness of these other forms of assessment.

Summary and Conclusion

As outlined above, the CATLysts undertook a series of projects (with varying degrees of success) designed to enhance the provision of feedback, as measured by student satisfaction, improved learning and teacher acceptance and uptake of the procedure. With the exception of the audio feedback provided to students in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, the strategies were not new or revolutionary but rather were examples of much acknowledged best practice. However, without the CATLysts acting as driving influences in the process, it is arguable whether any changes to the well-established processes and substance of feedback delivery would have occurred.

Though sometimes only subtly different in their approach, taken collectively the outcomes of these projects provide a wealth of information for the academic developer to consider when encouraging changes in established patterns of practice. The lessons learnt from this combined endeavour can be summarised in a few key elements. Though originating from this project, we would suggest that these elements be recognised as key considerations for any academic development undertaking.

Recognise discipline specific requirements.

It was clear from the information received from students that different disciplines place different demands on the teacher when supplying meaningful feedback to students – and yet there remain universal expectations as well. Students identified truly formative and useful feedback to include, among others, the characteristics of timeliness, consistency, accountability, meaningfulness and relevance. Academic developers working within a single discipline can tailor the assistance to best suit both teachers and students within that discipline. This does not mean that lessons cannot be learnt from the experience of others as discovered comparing the various approaches taken in the case studies.

Start small with teachers willing to trial new approaches.

In each case in this project the CATLyst did not attempt to establish new processes in more than one or two units of study. In all instances, except in the Faculty of Engineering, Computing and Mathematics (FECM), the trial was successfully completed and evaluated providing a solid starting point to expand the better practice further through the faculty. The crucial element of successful collaboration between academic developer and teacher is clearly illustrated in the FECM example. At times the leap of faith required from familiar ways of operating to unknown, albeit well documented, processes is more than busy academics are willing to take. This is not an uncommon experience to be faced by academic developers and it is a timely reminder that their role includes that of coach encouraging ‘baby steps’ with considerable cajoling and support.

Develop case study evidence of success.

Perhaps one of the most productive ways to convince teachers to trial new and different procedures is to provide evidence that others have already successfully used them. If these others are known and trusted colleagues, so much the better. The case studies, with their evaluations and evidence of success, collected in the project provide a valuable springboard to encourage the spread of better practice more widely through the faculties.

Disseminate the success stories to others.

Having successfully trialled new processes it remains to build on the success by establishing a robust means of dissemination of the results such that others may be encouraged to take up the practice. This

is an ongoing challenge for academic developers who need to be vigilant that small gains in development are not soon forgotten in the academics' demanding work environment.

The role of the academic developer is a relatively new one in recognition of the fact that students, conditions under which teaching and learning occurs, and the demands of global citizenship are all rapidly and constantly changing. It is no longer an option to do things the way they have always been done. In this context, academic developers are the change agents needed, albeit if they find themselves 'leading from behind'.

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