Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Quality Conversations

Proceedings of the

25th HERDSA Annual Conference

7-10 July 2002

Perth, Western Australia

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence, expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

"Don't mention the war….": Ensuring graduates can write literate English without distorting assessment outcomes

———————————— ❧ ————————————

Leonora Ritter
Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia
lritter@csu.edu.au

Abstract: Student literacy has come to the fore in the academic arena because of changes to the demographics and goals of universities, the advent of quality assurance and a growing focus on graduate employment. Literacy is problematic as a 'zero-order' capability, only noticed by its absence. In assessing the academic endeavour, we want students to lose marks for not having it, rather than to gain marks for having it. This paper will explore the role of summative assessment in encouraging students to take the acquisition and demonstration of literacy skills seriously and in ensuring that students do not attain graduate status without them. It will then unpack the problems that follow from overtly assessing literacy in ways that affect final grades.

Keywords: assessment; literacy; graduate skills

Mentioning 'the war'

'I mentioned it once, but I think I got away with it!'(Fawlty Towers). At conferences on teaching, learning or assessment, academics raise and then shy away from the issue of ensuring that graduates are literate, meaning that they have mastered the rules and conventions of 'correct' grammar, spelling and punctuation. This issue is the subject of a growing body of research (Jones, 2001), but academics hesitate to bite the bullet of ensuring students who cannot write literately fail to graduate.

As an increasing proportion of the population attends university, academics are having to teach more students with poor writing skills (Dary Erwin, 1999; Holder et. al. 1999). Changing national demographics and international offering of courses increase the number of students for whom English is not their first language (Coley, 1999). Even for able students, post modernism's suspicion of received knowledge has done much to dismantle teaching of formal literacy; rejection of 'surface' approaches means learning and applying the rules and conventions of formal literacy have been dismissed as promoting passive student behaviour (Baillie and Toohey, 1997; Brown and Knight, 1994).

At the same time as the standard of written literacy has deteriorated, the university sector has become more self-conscious about its performance. New universities are striving for academic respectability; achievement-based models of university resourcing increasingly promote 'a highly quantitative outlook' and there is an increased focus on the universities' responsibility for ensuring the presence of the generic skills required in graduate employees (Biggs, 1999; Clifford, 1999; Holder et. al. 1999; Rhodes and Tallentyre, 1999; Miller et al, 1998; Hadrill, 1995). The American National Education Goals Panel, the Dearing Report in

the UK and a number of reports in Australia all rank communication skills among the desired outcomes of higher education (Palomba and Banta, 1999; Holder et. al. 1999). Universities increasingly demand the inclusion of communication skills in explicit statements of course and subject objectives.

Among communication skills, literate writing is significant. Its level of mastery correlates with both improved professional performance and student completion times (Jones, 2001; Holder et al., 1999). Knowledge of its mysteries improves the 'capacities and skills students have in being able to assess themselves', regarded as 'of greater long-term significance than the effect of any specific subject-matter learning' (Boud, 1995, p. 39). It allows students to evaluate the work they have undertaken, understand the basis of assessment decisions and remedy defects and omissions (Brown, 1999).

Thus universities must address the growing gap between the level of writing skills of the student intake and the expected abilities of the graduate output. This is problematic because universities have traditionally followed a deficit rather than developmental approach, correcting students' literacy in practice without taking responsibility for improving literate writing skills. Literate writing is thus constructed as a 'zero-order capability', only noticed by its absence (Ritter and Wilson, 2001); correct usage is expected to be known and style, grammar, punctuation and spelling are only drawn to a student's attention when there are errors.

The role of assessment

Many universities already use formative assessment strategies to help students to diagnose their needs, manage their learning and evaluate their progress (Jones, 2001; Beasley & Pearson, 1999; Clifford, 1999; Hadrill, 1995). In many universities diagnostic tests prior to the commencement of the academic year alert students to their need to use academic support services. Unfortunately, however, alerting and empowering students to improve their writing skills does not ensure that they will do so and certainly does not guarantee that they will have done so by the time they graduate.

It does not net the significant numbers of students who adopt strategic study patterns; some concentrating on what will get them a better mark; others doing only as much as is required to pass (Gibbs, 1999; Boud, 1995; Brown and Knight, 1994). Substantive grades, (even in the marking of formal essays) primarily indicate students' discipline specific abilities and, in the case of essays, the perceived objectives of evaluating students' abilities to analyse, argue and judge (Miller et al, 1998). As errors in grammar, punctuation or spelling rarely affect substantive grades, comments on style and expression, no matter how frequent, tend to be disregarded by students (Storch and Tapper, 2000; Jones and Grant, 1991). In many subjects a student can pass assessment tasks if the writing is comprehensible, even if many rules of grammar, punctuation and spelling are broken. If they can pass while remaining semi-literate, they will put no effort into increasing their literacy awareness.

To motivate students, formative assessment and voluntary learning must relate directly to assessment outcomes (Holder et. al. 1999; Beasley & Pearson, 1999) through helping students to understand summative criteria and reach acceptable standards (Carlson et. al., 2000). The formative strategies of evaluating drafts and allowing re-submissions encourage students to take their writing seriously (Miller et al, 1998) because (and probably only if) they provide the opportunity to improve summative grades.

Thus assessment '[conveys] to students what we want them to learn' (Biggs, 1999). A valid summative assessment strategy also allows us to assume that a student has the measured capability. For both these reasons, a valid and reliable measure of functional literacy must contribute to a student's final grade in at least one core subject in such a way that poor functional literacy will cause failure and prevent graduation.

Where should summative assessment of literacy fit into the academic program?

An obstacle to incorporating the assessment of literate writing in academic outcomes is that it is not intrinsic to the content of any particular academic discipline. One answer would be to make literate performance a separate core subject for all graduates. This would have the advantage that literacy could be separately and specifically taught and assessed. (Whether or not this would ensure the validity of the assessment instrument is arguable, but that debate is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Creating a separate literacy subject is, however, contra-indicated by significant evidence suggesting that literacy is most effectively developed in the context of a discipline, providing attention is paid to it in the assessment of the subject (Radloff, and de la Harpe, 2001; Beasley and Pearson, 1999; Holder et. al., 1999; Rhodes and Tallantyre, 1999). This tells students that these skills are an important and authentic aspect of professional competence (Biggs, 1999; Palomba and Banta, 1999). There is also resistance from academics to setting aside valuable space in a degree program for a generic skills subject. The trend in the UK, Canada and Australia, therefore is to integrate literacy and other generic skills into course curricula. It is the logical consequence of this that introduces the unmentionable 'war', the challenge to effectively include literacy in a subject's assessment criteria (Carlson et al., 2000; Brooker and Smith, 1996), without distorting discipline specific assessment outcomes.

Incorporating literacy in the assessment of discipline based subjects poses a considerable challenge for teachers (Holder et al., 1999). One major question is how to summatively assess literate writing without distorting assessment outcomes. In the days before explicit criterion referencing, when markers knew by some unspecified alchemy what grade to award, a seriously illiterate essay would be failed regardless of its other qualities. For this student, literacy had somehow assumed a value that was more than 50% of the assessment. For other students, whose literacy was proficient, no marks were gained, but none lost; for these students literacy was effectively 0% of the assessment. Attempts to replicate the old practice in criterion referencing lead to specifying that an 'unacceptable level of literacy' will fail whereas an 'acceptable level of literacy' will pass. This, however, fails the test of clarity and common understanding (Carlson et al., 2000). How does the student understand 'acceptable' or 'not acceptable' as standards?

Evaluating literacy as a component of written assignments

Literacy can become a criterion with assigned standards in the assessment of discipline based tasks in one of two ways:
1. incorporate levels of literacy in the assigned standards for each assessment grade; or
2. identify literacy as a separate criterion.

Either option requires attaching a standard or level to key skills, described by Rhodes and Tallantyre as '[t]he greatest challenge' (1999, p. 109). Incorporating literacy in the assigned standards for each grade creates tension whenever a student fails to meet some criteria while adequately meeting others (Carlson et al., 2000). For example, a student might fail to meet basic literacy requirements while achieving top standards against other criteria, such as

creativity, insight, originality and flair. A decision must be made about which of the standards assigned to each grade are sufficient and which are necessary for that grade to be awarded. In the end, there is a danger that literacy will be swamped by the perceived need for grades to reflect discipline specific abilities.

A way out of this is to score separately against different criteria. This not only simplifies the marker's task, but also enhances the feedback to students. It does not, however, resolve issues of appropriate classification and categorisation. Carlson (2000) suggests, as a solution, scoring separately against criteria of 'critical thinking' and 'organisation'. Under the heading of 'organisation', however, one is still confronted by the student whose argument is logical, but whose spelling and punctuation is so unconventional as to mar the reader's ability to follow the logic. Is even 'literacy' sufficiently specific? Should spelling, grammar and punctuation be evaluated as three separate components?

Separating literacy, or its components, as criteria also creates a new problem of how to weight them in assigning marks. One solution is to dedicate a specific number of a task's total marks to literacy. Because literacy is a 'zero-order' task, however, this has the effect of apparently rewarding failure. If a mark is to be given out of ten for literacy, a student may be given less than five out of ten to punish poor spelling because this is seen as failing the student on that component. The unintended outcome, however, is that this student is actually rewarded by gaining up to five marks. Furthermore, under this system, if a student's literacy performance is perfect, it can contribute to a High Distinction, yet the zero-order nature of literacy suggests that while its absence should inhibit attaining a top grade, its presence should not contribute towards earning one.

Quarantining the assessment of literacy to a maximum of few marks is used to limit its contribution to higher grades, but this is also problematic. There is a chance that a student who spells so poorly as to be awarded 0 out of 10 could still score up to 90 out of 100 for the task and achieve the top grade. One way around these problems is to change the base from which marks are awarded on each task from zero to some mid-point such as 50% (pass/fail) or 65% (fail/credit) of the total marks available. This allows for a marking scheme that can transparently deduct marks for zero-order tasks while rewarding higher order cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation (see appendix A). It also makes it possible to deduct as many marks as necessary to pull down the grade of the illiterate student, while not giving the literate student an excessive boost into the highest grades. It is based on the assumption that literacy is essential and therefore not exceptional; having no errors does not justify assessment of a student's performance being boosted beyond a credit grade.

Evaluating literacy using distinct tasks that focus on applied literacy awareness within discipline based subjects
One way to avoid having to unravel a combined taxonomy, or of having to identify separate criteria for a single summative task, is to evaluate literacy awareness through a separate assessment task, albeit within a core discipline based subject. For example, the diagnostic instrument, Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students (MASUS), which was designed at the University of Sydney to be used as an integral component of a course (Jones, 2001). The separate assessment of literate writing has the advantage of improving validity and guaranteeing literacy's effect on the student's final subject grade. It takes into account 'growing agreement that cognitive foundations of performance should be made overt, should be separately evidenced and separately assessed' (Hadrill, 1995, p. 174). It avoids assessing literacy merely through the observed application of rules and conventions (Rhodes and Tallantyre, 1999) and caters to those who doubt the assumption that adequate performance

represents cognitive underpinning (Hadrill, 1995). It does, however, raise issues of how to embed the literacy based task in the discipline based subject in an authentic way.

If literacy is evaluated using a distinct task, the problem of its contribution to the task's grade is removed, but the challenge is to award a valid final grade for the subject that combines measures of the different abilities of discipline specific knowledge and generic skills (Miller et. al., 1998). Simple addition of marks seems a straightforward answer, but the outcome will depend on the loading of the components. If the marks for the literacy task are a small proportion of the whole, a student who has not mastered the generic skills could excel in the subject because they have excelled in all other components. If the marks for the literacy task are a large proportion of the whole, a student who has not mastered the generic skills could fail the subject even though they have excelled in all other components. The challenge is to assign marks and conflate grades in such a way that generic skills are given sufficient weighting at the pass/fail level without distorting the awarding of higher grades, which should reflect higher order and discipline specific performance.

One answer is to make passing the assessment of literacy skills (or other core skills or knowledge) a low-weighted requirement, but one that must be passed in order to pass the subject (see Appendix B).

Another option is to use particular allocation of marks, combined with transparent processes, to separate the effect of those tasks that measure essential skills or knowledge, such as literacy, from those that evaluate exceptional higher order cognitive abilities. Core competencies, including literate writing, are treated as zero order tasks that must be performed to a high standard in order to pass the subject. Application of the content of the subject through analysis, synthesis and evaluation are tested through separate assessment items that will only be marked if a student has already gained a specified number of marks, bringing them at least close to a bare pass. The total mark for these items should not add up to more than the pass/credit border. The higher order evaluation tasks are marked using the full range marks from 0, which are then added to the base mark in order to discriminate across the PS to HD range of grades (see Appendix C).

Conclusion

As a zero order skill, literate writing must not take on too much importance for those who already have it, but universities must ensure that all graduates do have it. This requires including literacy in summative assessment in such a way as to signal its importance to students and to ensure that students with poor written literacy skills are blocked before they graduate. This paper therefore proposes that diagnostic formative assessment and voluntary learning opportunities to promote literate writing be linked with summative assessment and that written literacy be integrated into course curricula by being embedded in discipline subjects.

If these proposals are accepted, new problems arise. Assessing literate writing in the context of discipline based subjects challenges assessors to effectively and usefully combine an evaluation of demonstrated literacy awareness with that of discipline specific performance in assigning grades for a task or a subject. Three key questions remain unresolved.
1. Should literacy be incorporated into the assessment of discipline based tasks or should it be assessed through distinct assessment tasks?

2. If literacy is assessed within discipline based tasks, should it be integrated into prescribed standards or should it be identified as a separate criterion?
3. How can literacy be included in discipline based summative assessment, in such a way as to ensure that it affects pass/fail outcomes, without excess affect on achievement of higher grades?

This paper has suggested three possible ways forward:

1. Changing the base from which marks are awarded on each task from zero to some mid-point such as 50% (pass/fail) or 65% (fail/credit) of the total marks available and using a marking scheme that can transparently deduct marks for zero-order tasks while rewarding higher order cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Abridged Students' Essay Appraisal and Feedback Sheet

NB Marking commences from a base of 65% of the marks assigned to this essay.

In the following areas you have gained bonus marks: **[Please note this is only a sample of the four criteria included in the actual feedback sheet]**	**Excellent + 5%**	**Good +3%**	**Fair + 1%**	**N/A**
Extensive research, including specialist works.				
Critical discussion of sources. [√ S]				

In the following areas you have lost marks: **[Please note this is only a sample of the 28 criteria included in the actual feedback sheet]**	**N/A**	**Minor problem -0.5%**	**Seriously deficient -2%**	**Fatal flaw -4%**
Poor punctuation. [× P]				
Poor spelling. [× Sp]				
No references/ incorrect referencing style. [× R]				
Too long/short.				

2. Evaluating literacy using a low-weighted distinct task, with the provision that passing this component is a necessary requirement (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Extract from subject outline for POL 101 Australian Government and Politics

Multiple Choice Exam (20%)
NOTE it is compulsory to pass this part of the exam in order to pass the subject; a pass mark will require at least 75% correct answers.

3. Using careful and transparent allocation of marks to separate the effect on the final grade of those tasks that measure essential skills or knowledge from those that evaluate exceptional higher order cognitive abilities (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Extracts from subject outline for JST 107 Communication Processes

To pass this subject you must:
- gain a total of at least 45 marks (out of 65) in the combination of class exercises, portfolio and the end of semester multiple choice paper, [all tests of essential knowledge and skills]
- score at least 80% correct answers in the end of semester multiple choice paper and
- gain a total of at least 50 marks out of a possible 100.

Please note that the second part of the exam [based on higher order skills of analysis and application] will only be marked if you have already achieved at least 45 marks (out of a potential 65) on all previously assessed items. It will be marked using the full range of marks from 0 to 35 out of 35. As you will have already acquired at least 45 marks in the subject, a mark of 5 out of 35 in the written paper will be sufficient to pass the subject.

References

Baillie, C. & Toohey, S. (1997). The 'power test'. *Assessment and evaluation in higher education*, 22(1), 33-48.

Biggs, J. (1999). What the student does: teaching for enhanced learning. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 18(1), 55-76.

Beasley, C.J. & Pearson, C.A.L. (1999). Facilitating the learning of transitional students: strategies for success for all students. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18(3), 303-321.

Boud, D. (1995) Assessment and learning: Contradictory or complementary?. In P. Knight, (Ed.), *Assessment for learning in higher education* (pp 35-48). London: Kogan Page.

Brooker, R. & Smith, D. (1996). Assessing tertiary students in an education faculty: Rhetoric and reality. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 15 (2), 163-176.

Brown, S. (1999). Institutional strategies for assessment. In S. Brown & A. Glassner (Ed.), *Assessment matters in higher education* (pp. 3-13). Ballmoor, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Brown, S. & Knight, P. (1994) *Assessing learners in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

Carlson, T., Macdonald, D., Gorely, T., Hanrahan, S. & Burgess-Limerick, R. (2000). Implementing criterion-referenced assessment within a multi-disciplinary university department. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 19(1), 103-116.

Clifford, V.A. (1999). The development of autonomous learners in a university setting. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 118(1), 115-128

Coley, M. (1999) 'The English language entry requirements of Australian universities for students of non-English speaking background' in *Higher Education Research and Development,* 18 (1), 7-18.

Dary Erwin, T. (1999). Assessment and evaluation: A systems approach for their utilization. In S. Brown & A. Glassner (Ed.), *Assessment matters in higher education* (pp. 28-40). Ballmoor, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Gibbs, G. (1999). Using assessment strategically to change the way students learn. In S. Brown & A. Glassner (Ed.), *Assessment matters in higher education* (pp. 41-53). Ballmoor, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Hadrill, R. (1995). The NCVQ model of assessment at higher levels. In P. Knight, ed., *Assessment for learning in higher education* (pp. 167-180), London: Kogan Page.

Holder, G.M., Jones, J., Robinson, R.A. & Krass, I. (1999). Academic literacy skills and progression rates amongst pharmacy students. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 18 (1), 19-30.

Jones, J. (2001). A diagnostic assessment of the academic writing of first year students: the value of collaborative research. *HERDSA news,* 23 (3), 33-35.

Jones, J. & Grant, B. (1991) *Writing, setting and marking essays*. Auckland: Higher Education Research Office, University of Auckland.

Meyer, J.H.F. & Boulton-Lewis, G.M. (1999). On the operationalisation of conceptions of learning in higher education and their association with students' knowledge and experiences of their learning. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18(3), 289-302.

Miller, A.H., Imrie, B.W. & Cox, K. (1998). *Student assessment in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

Palomba, C.A. & Banta, T.W. (1999). *Assessment essentials*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Radloff, A. & De La Harpe, B. (2001). Expanding what and how we assess: Going beyond the content. In Kulski, M. & Herrmann, A., ed., *New horizons in university teaching and learning: Responding to change* (pp 137-148), Perth: Centre for Educational Advancement, Curtin University of Technology.

Reeves, T.C. & Laffey, J.M. (1999). Design, assessment, and evaluation of a problem-based learning environment in undergraduate engineering. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 18(2), 219-232.

Rhodes, G. & Tallantyre, F. (1999). Assessment of key skills. In S. Brown & A. Glassner (Ed.), *Assessment matters in higher education* (pp. 106-121). Ballmoor, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Ritter, L. & Wilson, G. (2001) *Assessment handbook 2001*, Bathurst: Charles Sturt University.

Storch, N & Tapper, J. (2000) The focus of teacher and student concerns in discipline-specific writing by university students. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19(3), 337-355.