MAKING EXPECTATIONS EXPLICIT

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Developing written and oral communication skills are an important part of the first year university experience. Subject convenors have clear expectations from their students but do they clearly communicate these requirements? It is important during the first year of a course to set the tone and standards for later studies. Despite the fact that different disciplines may have differing writing and oral presentation requirements, with a little thought and effort students can be given guidelines which will provide them with a blueprint for future success. This can be achieved and reinforced in a variety of ways without overloading the student at any one time. This paper will describe the rationale for providing thorough instructions for assignments and case studies and how these are communicated to first year students enrolled in a core business subject.

Introduction

Teaching and guiding first year university students can be both exciting and challenging. First year university is usually when a student first encounters the 'academic' approach to learning and begins to establish independent study patterns. In many tertiary institutions much time and energy, and manyresources are being spent on efforts to generate more effective student learning, especially during the transitional first year of study; yet, there are still many students who have difficulty interpreting and completing assigned assessment tasks. This paper uses Schramm's model of communication to explore ways of designing assessment tasks, particularly assignments, case studies and business reports that are readily understood by the student cohort.

What do communication models tell us about the problem?

People who play cricket find the rules of the game straightforward, but people who are not familiar with cricket may find a description of the game quite confusing and will interpret the rules in a variety of ways. Veronesi (2000) uses this example when trying to illustrate how people can interpret the same message differently. But why do people interpret the same set of words differently? In order to explain this one can turn to the theory of communication. Although there is no such thing as a best theory, each theory and model has value in a specific setting and it is up to the user to select the best perspective for a particular situation. Models are useful as they offer ways of analysing the communication situation and anticipating problems that may be avoided or mitigated through design strategies.

The basis of many models of communication is the one developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949. It was developed with the technical side of communication in mind and considered the flow of information through an electronic system. This model, however, did not consider the meaning of the message, which is included in Schramm's model (1954 source 'Communication theory and models'). This model (Figure 1) begins with a sender who has a message to transmit. This message is translated or encoded and sent to a receiver who must decode the message, thus developing an interpretation of the message. Interfering with the basic communication model is the element of noise which takes the form of random and competing messages that may interfere with the intended communication. The final element of Schramm's communication loop is that of feedback, which is transmitted by the receiver back to the sender. This complex model shows the various elements that are present when

assessment tasks are being set and communicated. The message that the student (receiver) receives is unlikely to be the same as the message that the sender (lecturer) initiated as there are many elements along the way that can affect the way the message is received and interpreted.
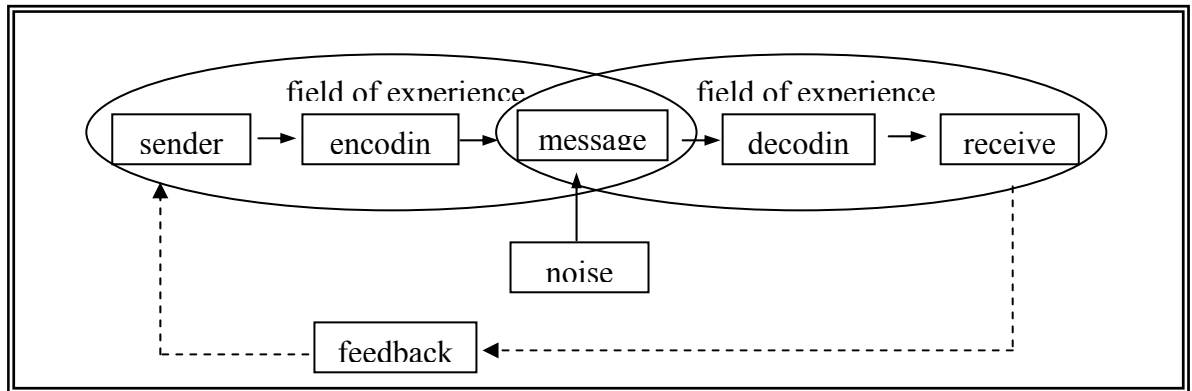

Figure 1: Schramm's model of communication
Source: 'Communication theory and models'

The Sender and the Message

The communication process model highlights the key factors in effective communication. Senders must know their audience and what response they want. Thus it is important that the lecturers who set the tasks send clear messages to the students.

Encoding

In education the message is commonly represented by words, but words have different meanings depending on one's previous knowledge, culture and experiences. Problems occur when a sender transmits a message which is encoded in a way that is unfamiliar to the recipient. It is the task of the designer of the message to ensure that the material that is presented is partially in the field of experience of the learner. The other part may be outside this field, in order to provide a learning experience. Therefore the designer has to know what knowledge and experiences the learners already have so that the new knowledge can add to this ('Communication theory and models').

For a message to be effective, the sender's encoding process must be consistent with the receiver's decoding process. Thus the best messages are essentially encoded in signs that are familiar to the receiver. The more the sender's field of experience overlaps with that of the receiver the more effective the message is likely to be. This requirement puts a burden on communicators from one field of experience who want to communicate effectively with an audience that has a different field of experience. They must encode their messages in a way that takes into account how the audience usually decodes the messages. Given the diversity of cultural, educational backgrounds and experiences of the student body, this is indeed a difficult task.

The sender of the message must also transmit the message through efficient media that reach the audience. Assessment tasks are usually communicated in written and verbal forms. Thus at least two types of media are employed to disseminate the message.

Noise

The sender's task is to get his or her message through to the receiver. The audience may not receive the intended message for several reasons – poorly encoded message, differing fields of experience and noise. The noise factor can take many forms - people might distort the message and hear what they want to hear. Receivers often add things to the message that are not there or do not notice other things that are there. Thus, the communicator's task is to strive for message simplicity, clarity and repetition to get the important points across to the audience.

Feedback

Often in the communication process the sender does not receive feedback from the recipient. But when a lecturer sets an assessment task, the feedback appears in several forms. These include questions asked prior to submission of the assessment, the submitted piece of work and regular subject evaluations. Thus the sender can determine whether the message was received as originally intended.

Unfortunately not all lecturers take the time to consider the valuable feedback provided by their students. Student enquiry can highlight sources of confusion in assessment instructions and also misconceptions. Academics could use this information to clarify criteria by supplementing written instructions with verbal information during classes.

Submitted pieces of work do not always meet the lecturer's required or expected standard. Some students do not spend adequate time on task and thus produce inferior submissions. In the author's opinion there are several other causes for inferior submissions. An assignment that is not plainly documented and explained will mean that students will be unclear of the requirements. Not all academics are approachable so it is possible that misconceptions will not be identified until students have submitted their reports and assignments.

Some academics are prepared to provide students with the opportunity to resubmit assessment tasks, which allows students to correct mistakes, while others are philosophically opposed to the concept of resubmission, saying it is easier to give students a bare pass. However no one learns from either of these processes – neither the instructor nor the student. Misinterpretations can be minimised by providing clear instructions, reinforcing requirements and/or providing model solutions.

Finally the lecturer will often receive feedback on assessment guidelines as part of regular subject evaluations. How many teachers actually take these forms seriously? There are many criticisms of the subject evaluation process from poorly designed questionnaires, to poor response rates and slow processing of questionnaires. Rather than being critical of the forms and the process, one should focus on the information provided by the evaluations. However, in reality most academics appear to file the evaluation summaries without making any adjustment to their teaching and assessment practice.

The originator of the task is not the only one who receives feedback on the assigned task. When students approach LAS advisors then the feedback is not being provided directly to the source of the message. This feedback has the potential to provide the missing link between clear instructions and ambiguous assessment directives.

What does the literature tell us about the problem?

Studies that have examined student writing from subjects representing a range of disciplines have shown that there is a significant difference in the writing requirements between different disciplines including differences in the discourse patterns adopted and the linguistic features used. In addition to this, not all players within a discipline have similar expectations and in

fact many times conflicting instructions are provided to students (Vardi, 2000, Craigie, 1998 and Radloff & de la Harpe, 2000). Through literature reviews Vardi (2000) has found that literary practices at university are not clearly agreed upon or even universal in their nature; rather they are contested, resulting in an unclear and confusing path for many students. Interviews with lecturers have revealed that while they 'know good writing when they see it' they have difficulty in explaining why a piece of writing is poor (Lea & Street, 1998).

The reason expectations for essay writing vary so greatly is due to the interaction of four factors: firstly the reason for setting the task, secondly the thinking of the discipline, third the lecturer's beliefs about good writing in relation to learning objectives and finally the need to assess understanding (Vardi, 2000). As these factors vary so lecturers' expectations can vary. This means that each task can potentially result in a unique set of expectations that makes it extremely difficult for students to clearly determine what is expected of them. This can be challenging for first year students. Thus the students need to be able to predict for each written task what the lecturer wants. Helping students requires an awareness by all players in the teaching and learning process of the various expectations and requirements in the writing tasks of their own particular context. The challenge for all staff then becomes finding ways to make these explicit.

Chanock (1995) looked at the ways academics communicated their expectations to students. She stated that there are three kinds of teachers. First, there are those who take the time to consider "what students need to know about the approach of their discipline and explain these things" openly. Then there are "the teachers who are so immersed in their discipline that its ways are 'transparent' to them, appearing natural or universal" (Russell, 1991) making it difficult for them to explicitly state their expectations. Finally there are those teachers who are aware of the culture and nature of their disciplines "but believe that students can and should learn how to participate in it by 'osmosis'". These teachers feel that if they demonstrate the art of their discipline students copy their style and thus learn by doing.

This is an interesting view and exemplifies the notion of the student as an apprentice which is discussed by Spinks (2000). The use of the metaphor of the undergraduate writer as an apprentice in the craft of mature academic writing implies a two-way responsibility relationship with academic mentors. Subject convenors and class teachers have a responsibility to frame the discourse for their students, through specific instruction and modeling as well as through marker feedback. Students have a responsibility to follow the instruction, to learn from the models and to be prepared to take risks and 'get their feet wet' in the intellectual contexts of the discipline (Spinks, 2000).

Most students are faced with a multi-faceted task: learning new content, learning new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing that new knowledge and learning new ways of writing their knowledge. For many students the last of these new ways poses one of their major problems. They are told that analysis, interpretation and evaluation are important aspects of good academic writing practice, but what academic markers mean by such terms is not always clear, nor is it clear whether the meanings are constant across disciplines (Spinks, 2000; Vardi, 2000). Despite some reservations about the apprenticeship metaphor within academia it remains a useful conceptual framework for discussing best practice in the communicative relationship between teachers and their first year students.

Black and Wiliam (1998) recognise that the essential and necessary role of the teacher is to act as a mediator between a body of knowledge and skills to be learned, and the learner. The knowledge base is inanimate, and in some instances is not rigidly fixed but still malleable. The learner is, however, a cognizant being, situated in a context largely constructed by others. The role of the teacher could broadly be described as working to reduce (but not necessarily eliminate) the rate of error production in trial and error learning, and thereby to make learning more efficient. Teachers can do this effectively only if they know thoroughly both sides of the operation, and how to build bridges between the two. This view of teaching applies when the teacher is both responsible for, and accountable to, the learner, and accepts that responsibility. Black and Wiliam (1998) concur with the findings of Chanock (1995) that, although teachers

bring a deep knowledge of criteria and standards appropriate to the assessment task, these criteria and standards may exist in an unarticulated form (which makes them difficult to share with learners).

Devising assessment tasks represents in many instances creative and integrative activity of a high order (Sadler 1998). Learners often have little on which to base expectations about what should be delivered as they have little access to the performances of others, historic or current. Teachers, on the other hand, can and often do make adjustments to their expectations about how students should perform at a task after students have made their attempts. These adjustments are often made on the run, more or less intuitively, sometimes to correct for deficiencies in assessment task specifications, but mostly for the putative 'benefit' of the learners (Sadler, 1998).

The studies cited above provide an insight into the differing philosophies of academics and the difficulties that some academics have developing clear assessment guidelines that are interpreted consistently by the student cohort.

What is being done to make expectations more explicit

We often hear of learning support staff who spend considerable time assisting students who have difficulties interpreting assignment instructions. Students are unclear as to what is expected of them and how they should approach the assigned task. It is heartening to see several people working on projects to develop the professional and academic skills of students as well as academic staff. Carmichael, Driscoll and Farrell (2000) from the University of Western Sydney have developed a booklet for students containing 'model' assignments, which have been successful in terms of critical analysis or practice with annotations from the students who wrote the assignments and comments from the markers. The project team was a cross faculty group comprising academics and learning advisors. They conclude that sharing ideas regarding critical practice provides opportunity for enhancement of learning and develops a sense of collegiality.

Alex Radloffe and Barbara de la Harpe (2000) have used funding provided by CUTSD to develop a book to help lecturers across the disciplines to develop their students' writing skills (Curtin University of Technology). This book recognises the complex nature of writing and includes simple and practical strategies that can be used to help writers manage the writing task. In addition this resource assists lecturers to help their students develop writing skills. In their abstract Radloffe and de la Harpe argue that writing is best developed by the discipline lecturer in the context of subject learning. However, many lecturers do not believe that they have the knowledge and skills to do so. In response to this problem, Radloffe and de la Harpe (2000) developed a writing resource to assist lecturers to improve their students' writing skills.

Similarly, Cullity (2000) from the Australian Catholic University is developing a teaching resource to assist staff to set appropriate, interesting and unambiguous assessment tasks to support students' learning. Percy (2000) from the University of Wollongong argues that the role of learning advisor is moving from a focus on students to a focus on teaching and learning. This is achieved by integrating literacy skills instruction into subject curricula and training staff in providing explicit feedback to students. Collaboration between learning advisers and academic staff is essential for the success of this shift.

Learning skills advisers aiding academics

Usually language and academic skills advisers endeavor to assist the receiver of the message, the students. However the problem does not always lie at this end of the communication process. Thus it may be prudent to focus on the elements at the beginning of the process, that is the sender of the message, the encoding of the message and the message itself. This requires interdisciplinary collaboration which is evident in several universities around Australia. By working together the LAS advisors and the academics bring together different expertise and may find a solution to the problem of students who have difficulty understanding and

completing assessment tasks. The LAS advisors will better understand the kinds of thinking and responses expected by the academics and will be able to assist in integration of content and process.

Chanock (1995) says that "three kinds of expertise are needed to help students improve their academic writing: expertise in the discipline, expertise in language and an understanding of how the discipline interacts with language". The subject teacher is responsible for imparting discipline specific knowledge to the students. Chanock indicates that in addition to the subject teacher it is helpful to have the assistance of someone who is an expert in the use of language and discourse styles.

Learning skills advisers possess the language expertise but often work outside the disciplines and thus some believe that they may mislead students if they try to focus on the content of an essay or report rather than simply on its 'expression'. It is unlikely to find LAS advisers that have sufficient expertise in all the disciplines to be able to advise students about what is wanted in each. Whilst this may be seen as a weakness it is also strength. I believe that any report or assignment should make sense to any reader despite his area of expertise. If a piece of writing is not clear to the LAS adviser it will not be clear to other readers either. It is imperative and expected that tertiary courses teach students communication skills. In business one must be able to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds; thus anyone who picks up a business report should be able to understand the content despite his/her fields of experience. I concur with Chanock (1995) who believes that a combination of disciplinary and linguistic expertise is desirable.

Many academics require and would welcome literacy support. Academics often seek help of outside experts. For example, librarians are invited to aid in the research process, in finding resources for teaching and in preparing resources for students. The aid of technicians is sought for help with computer usage and design of on-line learning materials. Similarly, there should be interdisciplinary collaboration between academics and language skills advisors since they are the teaching, learning, languages and academic skills experts. Many academics do not have a background in education but are highly educated in their chosen field of expertise, particularly in the schools such as Business, Information Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and the like. Academics should be calling upon the expertise of LAS advisors to assist in the writing and formulation of assessment tasks. However content can be left to the academics. Figure 2 represents the current situation in many universities, whereby the lecturers assign a task to the student, who will occasionally seek assistance from the LAS advisor prior to submitting a piece of assessment. The learning support staff become aware of the sources of confusion and ambiguity faced by the student cohort but do not have an open channel of communication with the academics; thus, the cycle is incomplete, providing little opportunity for future improvements.
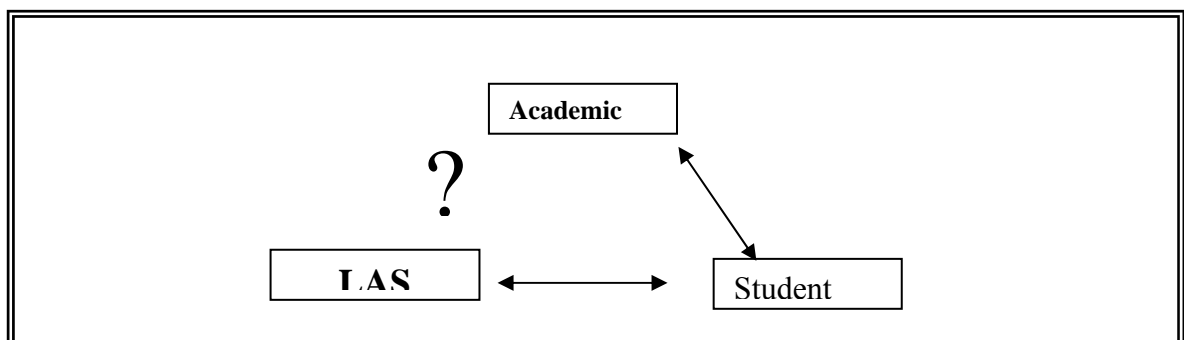

Figure 2. The incomplete cycle.

What we do at the School of Business, Swinburne University of Technology

A first year Marketing subject at Swinburne University of Technology is studied by students from a variety of courses as diverse as Business, Engineering, Information Systems and

Multimedia. In this subject the convenors and lecturers go to considerable lengths to provide both written and verbal instructions for the various assessment tasks that are set. There are four assessment tasks which include tutorial participation, oral and written presentation of a case study, an industry analysis presented as a business report and an examination. Written information on assessment requirements is contained in the subject workbook and also available via the subject web site. Hints on preparation of case studies, writing business reports and presenting oral presentations are provided in the workbook as well as notes on using the Harvard referencing system. These notes have taken several authors and several years to compile.

Additional activities are also undertaken to provide a blueprint for successful completion of this subject. These include:

- thorough coverage of requirements during the first lecture, and reiteration in tutorials throughout the semester
- links on the subject website that connect assessment tasks to relevant sections of the subject workbook
- assessment forms and marking guides are included in the workbook, so students know what criteria are being assessed (see Appendix)
- a library skills session and library web page developed specifically for the industry overview, providing students with links to relevant web sites
- an industry speaker to reinforce literature searches and answer specific questions
- past assignments circulated during tutorials
- students are directed to learning support staff
- lecture and exam techniques are presented by learning support staff.

Although students are guided and provided with clear instruction, some students still find the assessment tasks challenging.

Conclusions

Why is all this necessary now, when we managed without it in the past? Mass education, the information age, time poor students who receive little financial support from the government, forcing many to work, are just the beginning. At Swinburne University of Technology there has been a push from university management to reduce teaching contact time, so lecturers and tutors tend to focus on content delivery rather than spend precious time on process (Di Virgilio & Evans, unpublished). Due to the increasing pressures on academic staff there has been a gradual reduction in the number of pieces of written work submitted. Tests and exams that provide little opportunity for students to develop the critical communication skills demanded by industry have replaced assignments, reports and essays. Universities are pushing for a research focus. Students are expected to possess research skills which are difficult to develop and consolidate in the current undergraduate environment.

There are three stakeholders involved in the issue of providing clear guidelines - the academics, the students and the LAS advisers. From the perspective of the academics it is critical to be effective yet efficient teachers. More time spent planning up front will make savings in the long term. A little time spent on carefully designing and clearly explaining assessment tasks offers savings on two fronts. Firstly, less time will be spent answering student enquiries. Secondly, due to the clear instruction students will better understand what is expected/required from them, and thus will submit reports and papers of higher quality, which are more stimulating to assess and require less time for writing corrections and more time for writing constructive comments (Sadler, 1998).

From the learning support staff perspective, again time spent up front planning and working with academics to provide unambiguous instructions will result in fewer frustrations and enquiries and allow more time to focus on other activities such as helping students to improve their learning and writing skills. Finally the students benefit as they understand the expectations of the lecturer and know how to approach the assessment task. Hopefully this

will mean that less time is wasted trying to interpret the task and more time researching, analysing, synthesizing and developing communication skills vital for the graduates of the future.

If academics can provide explicit, unambiguous and detailed guidelines during the first year of tertiary studies, discuss requirements prior to submissions and after grading, students will have an opportunity to understand what is expected, what they have done well and what requires attention. This knowledge will serve them well in the future. Fewer instructions will need to be provided in subsequent years, as the students have a model from which to work. However, this requires considerable work on the part of the instructor and potentially the learning support staff. Firstly they have to understand the objectives of the assessment tasks in the first year, as well as the requirements for subjects in later years. This then needs to be translated into clear and detailed instructions which will guide students to submitting reports, assignments and essays in the appropriate form meeting the expected standards.

In order to encourage effective learning we need to place more emphasis on designing assessment tasks that facilitate these outcomes. Different disciplines have significant differences in their report/essay/assignment writing requirements; however the techniques discussed are quite generic and applicable across a variety of discipline areas. The lecturer as message sender must work towards making expectations explicit and should employ the assistance of those who are experts in the fields of language and education, the LAS advisers. The suggestions posed in this paper can not guarantee that all students will be engaged, but those students that choose to listen and follow the explicit guidelines provided for them will produce better submissions and will have acquired some of the generic skills expected of graduates.

'I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow', Woodrow Wilson. US president

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