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GETTING YOUR STUDENTS TO BE MORE ACADEMICALLY LITERATE

**An intervention in Psychology 348:
Lessons learnt from 2013 - 2015**

Anneliese de Wet



Department of Psychology

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Departement Sielkunde



Background: general



- Worldwide experience in recent years: poor writing ability of learners/students
- Students at Stellenbosch University certainly no exception
- Certain responsibility to send out articulate and well-rounded individuals into the labour market
- The SU's Strategy for Teaching and Learning sets out certain *Graduate Attributes* that give voice to this responsibility:
 - *An Enquiring Mind*
 - *An Engaged Citizen*
 - *A Dynamic Professional*
 - *A Well-rounded Individual*
- All of these attributes require the ability to communicate well in an academic and professional environment
- Academic literacy = Ability to communicate



Background: module



- Poor academic writing: Psychology 348 - 2012
- Underlying issue? Deficit in academic literacy skills
- Psychology 348 module aim: Critical discussion of principles behind psychologists' contributions to human health, development and individual and collective well-being, specifically in health and mental health context in contemporary SA
- Psychology 348 is more writing intensive than many of the other psychology undergraduate modules - essay-type questions in tests and exams and a comprehensive assignment as part of the assessment
- Intervention aim: Prepare students better for assignment by improving their academic writing in order to, ultimately, increase proportion of students who pass Psychology 348
- The objective was to provide module specific support, as opposed to generic writing support available through other avenues
- Supported by Teaching Development Grant administered by our Vice-Dean



Method



- Academic literacy = Thinking + Reading + Writing
- Module specific content
- Experiential learning – class and homework exercises, i.e. “learning through doing”
- Integrated approach: IT supported & traditional assessment methods
- Continuous evaluation
- Tutors: 2013 & 2014/2015
- Smaller groups: 2014/2015
- Weekly feedback on exercises
- Consultation outside lectures / tutorials
- Compulsory
- Followed a step-by-step approach to the assignment over 7 weeks:
 - Information literacy (2)
 - Planning (1)
 - Writing (2)
 - Referencing (1)

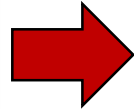


Comparison: 2013 - 2015



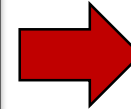
2013:

- ✓ 3rd & 4th term
- ✓ Stellenbosch & Tygerberg campuses
- Academic literacy skills (ALS) test: marks & individual feedback
- ✓ Assignment mark 30% of class mark
- ✓ Compare ALS test results with final assignment results
- ✓ All lectures in large groups, once a week with tutor support
- ✓ Faculty librarian - training in information literacy



2014:

- ✓ 3rd term only
- ✓ Stellenbosch & Tygerberg campuses
- ALS test: only general feedback given
- ✓ Assignment mark 50% (20% ↑) of class mark
- ✓ Compared assignment results with previous year
- ✓ 3 weekly lectures in large groups, thereafter 4 weekly tut groups
- ✓ Faculty librarian - training in information literacy



2015:

- ✓ 3rd term only
- ✓ Stellenbosch campus only
- ✓ Academic Writing Competence exercise: general feedback given
- ✓ Assignment mark 50% of class mark
- ✓ Compared assignment results with previous year
- ✓ 3 weekly lectures in large groups, thereafter 4 weekly tut groups
- ✓ Faculty librarian - training in information literacy



Results



- 2013:
 - The marks for the main assignment was significantly affected by the literacy skills test marks:
 - $F(1,458) = 120.458, p < .001$
- 2014:
 - There was a significant difference between the means of the two class groups for the assignment. The mean for the 2014 class ($M = 57.93$; $SD = 19.65$) was significantly higher than the mean for the 2013 class ($M = 54.13$; $SD = 12.92$), with $t(932) = 3.59, p < .001$.
 - Cohen's d was calculated, because of the large sample sizes and found to be .23, which indicated a small to medium effect size.
- 2015:
 - The 8 % increase in the pass rate for the assignment indicated a significant positive difference between the assignment marks for 2014 and 2015 with $p < .001$.
 - Cohen's d was once again calculated, because of the large sample sizes. Cohen's d was .24, which again indicated a small to medium effect size.



- Tutor feedback - 2013:
 - *I think the Academic literacy course was useful to a number of students. Even though some of them were not interested in the beginning I think towards the end of the semester they had found the classes useful. There were a number of students who were attentive and interested in the class who were committed to achieving high marks. I think the class would be **more beneficial** if it were **split up into smaller groups**. The students could then be more interactive and the class would be more like a workshop than a lecture. I think students find it easier to ask questions and give comments when there are fewer people in the class. A smaller class will also make space for less interruptions.*
- Tutor feedback - 2014:
 - *The class setup (**small groups with a tutor**) compared to last year (one large class) was **more beneficial** in terms of the students learning the skills needed for writing. The students were **more positive** about the module and there were quite a few who were actually **interested** in the module.*

[Emphasis added]



Lessons learnt



- Insights:
 - Department:
 - Need for intervention
 - Concurrent intervention in first year (in 2014 & 2015)
 - Experiential nature crucial
 - Tutors all psychology postgraduates
 - Multidisciplinary approach (librarian/IT – knowledge transfer, assessment & Turnitin)
 - Discipline / Module specific support (as opposed to purely generic support) necessary
 - Is it solely the lack of literacy skills that affects the literacy of students?
 - Quotes from students:
 - “It **encouraged me** to start my essay ahead of time and I received **useful info** with regards to what not to do in my essay.”
 - “The Academic Writing Competence programme was **very helpful** for Psychology 348, especially since it **ran parallel with** our **specific projects** for the module.”
 - “Prep for class **helped me prepare** for the assignment and class on **references was helpful** with how to use APA.”



Lessons learnt



- Challenges:
 - Resources
 - Timing
 - More feedback
 - Level of content / Level of complexity of assignment compared to earlier modules
 - Students' attitudes
 - Academic literacy as an add-on
 - Drive towards literacy in the Faculty
 - Improvement: statistically – enough?
- Quotes from students:
 - “...**very bad time** – 4 on a Friday!”
 - “It is definitely something that every university student should do at some point in the course. I, however, feel it **should have been covered in first or second year**, rather than just before our very last undergrad assignment.”

[Emphasis added]



Future



- Approach going forward
- Funding for future interventions
- Explore more blended learning options
- Extend to other undergraduate Psychology modules
- More widespread:
 - Emphasis on,
 - Support for,
 - Responsibility for, and
 - Commitment toLiteracy within departments and faculties needed