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They Do Better Than Us!: A Case Study of Course Combinations and Their Impact on English Assessment Results

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Students undertaking the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) at Griffith University are required to undertake two teaching discipline areas of specialisation. Students majoring in English will therefore also study one of the following discipline strands: Drama, Computer Education, SOSE (Study of Society and the Environment), Health and Physical Education, Art, Music, or LOTE. English student concerns over the advantage that some course combinations may have over others prompted a study of three hundred and twenty-six students in a first year English course over three years. Concerns were mostly about the effect of drama skills on oral presentations and computer skills on researching and presenting written assignments in the English course, particularly as hypertext documents. This study included a collection of student perceptions contained in a written survey response about their other discipline strengths that they saw as impacting on their English assessment. Student marks were also reviewed in relation to the survey data findings and results considered regarding the course combinations. This study highlights the need for assessment items to be generated from the course teaching content and learning evidence so as not to disadvantage those lacking other specialisation knowledge.

Introduction

Teachers, whether at a school or tertiary level, are encouraged to be active reflective researchers of their own teaching practices and their students' learning experiences. Overall and Sangster (2003, p. 7) suggest that assessment is integral to a cycle of teaching as it "informs the next planning" occasion presenting an ongoing forward spiral comprising "teaching – assessing (recording) – planning – teaching – assessing". Well planned assessment items in a course not only evaluate the learning taking place within the course but are a fundamental part of the learning process. Tudor, Kim and Shannon (2000) state that "Ideally assessment processes should be valid and consistent while being reliable, sufficient, authentic, relevant and flexible" (p. xi) in tertiary education. Evaluation of classroom practice is essential in aiming to be an effective teacher which is best achieved by "refer[ing] regularly to visible, quantifiable and tangible measures" (Hay McBer, 2000, 1.3.9).

At Griffith University, students undertaking the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) program are required to undertake two teaching discipline areas of specialisation. English students will therefore also study one of the following discipline strands: Drama,

Computer Education, SOSE (Study of Society and the Environment), Health and Physical Education, Art, Music, or LOTE. The program is structured so that in the first three semesters students enrol in two courses per discipline area per semester. There are no common or foundation academic courses in the BEd. program although the Learning Assistance Unit of Griffith University provides generic workshops and electronic resources in Research Skills, Reading Effectively, Note Taking and Note Making, Critical Thinking, Academic Writing, Editing, Referencing, Exam Preparation, Group Work, Oral Presentations, Time Management, and General Study Skills.

Course design and implementation is considered within discipline strands with complementary course content and assessment item requirements. Although Course Convenors consult about these matters, at this time there is no consultation across discipline strands.

The majority of students undertaking these English courses do so in a conventional order although there are no pre-requisites. However, students from other degree programs may also be enrolled in English (Secondary) courses as part of a double degree or as a means of transferring studies at some time in the future. As well, students may be repeating courses or be undertaking them out of phase. In order to be equitable for all students, no matter their previous or concurrent studies, the assessment of these courses must aim to assess what is taught in the course with little expectation of other skills and knowledge.

Course case study—Introducing readers to literary texts (1044CLS)

In the English strand students undertake four courses in first year. *Introducing Readers to Literary Texts (1044cls)* is a first year second semester English course, following *Contexts for Media Literacies (1041cls)* and *Introduction to Literature for Children and Young Adults (1043cls)* in first semester, and running concurrent to *Dramatic Form (1111vta)*. This course typically has an enrolment of between 95 and 129 students each year.

Through *Introducing Readers to Literary Texts (1044cls)* it is expected that students will attain knowledge of: a range of general critical literary theories and their application; the ways in which literary texts are presented for educational purposes; processes and strategies to introduce and involve reluctant readers with literary texts. It is also expected that they will be able to demonstrate effective written and oral English communication skills, including "an explicit knowledge of the grammar and conventional usage of Standard Australian English, and how it is used appropriately and effectively in a range of contexts" as stated in the *English: Years 1 to 10 Syllabus* (QSA, 2003, p. 1). This as an important criteria as the basis of a sound foundation in the discipline of English is good reading, writing, oral and presentation skills in order to "create coherent and cohesive texts" (QSA, 2003, p. 1). Knowledge about content is lost if it is not able to be adequately communicated to others. Demonstration of these skills is a requirement for attaining a Pass in each assessment item in this course. Assignment levels of achievement are conditional upon demonstrating an appropriate standard of writing and presentation.

The course assessment comprises three items: an oral presentation promoting a reading resource accompanied by a brochure (25%), a short analytical essay (25%), and a

long analytical essay (50%). For each assessment item a rubric of variations of quality was provided which followed the design suggested by Mayberry and Hartle (2003, p. 102) as it listed "specific ways in which the students may meet each criterion" using only "three to four categories of criteria" per rubric and was "short and to the point". Students are given a rubric as an aid in their preparation of an assignment as "Rubrics help students increase their level of learning and tend to produce better quality projects [assignments]" (Mayberry & Hartle, 2003, p. 103).

Assignments in this course are expected to communicate appropriate content presented by key generic tertiary skills such as academic essay writing or class presentations which are supported by general word processing and organizational skills. Through this course students are provided with guidance on *Self-Management Skills*, *Information Skills* and *Adaptability & Learning Skills*, and *Written Communication* by a the teacher-guided process of the preparation, discussion and writing of the assignments. There are also opportunities to engage in *Interpersonal Skills* in classroom discussions and practice in *Oral Communication* and *Teamwork* in designing a brochure and presenting a literary text to the class. These are specific generic "characteristics that the University seeks to engender in its graduates" (Griffith University, 2004a)

This foundation of key generic skills is of concern in current assessment design. In the selection of the marking criteria for this course particular attention was given to equity in construct validity defined by Light and Cox (2001, p. 242) as:

How far overall grade is related to psychological constructs underlying ability in the subject – this might be an estimate of how far your conception of ability in the subject is related to the grade – are students with high grade invariably those you consider to be the best, say, mathematicians, sociologists or physicians.

At the end of the course students receive a grade of High Distinction (HD), Distinction (D), Credit (C), Pass (P), Pass Conceded (PC), or Fail (F) based on attainment of criteria stated for each grade level which are based on the university standards but are specific to the course content and program level and type. In any year the grades attained by a cohort of students in English follow a pattern of normal distribution.

Because students bring to this course a range of prior knowledge and skills attained in a variety of other courses, those undertaking the course in 2000 gave voice informally to concerns over perceived advantages that some students may hold with regard to the types of assessment items. Drama students, for instance were seen to have an advantage in giving creative and confident oral presentations, art students in producing impressive compositions and graphics for the brochure, and computer education students in electronic and internet research and word processing skills.

As this appeared a reasonable concern it merited investigation especially since the university is "recognising and responding to the changing nature of student lives and priorities" by encouraging assessment practices which are fair and equitable but which "do not in any way compromise on the integrity and rigour of academic requirements" (Griffith University, 2004b, The imperative to renew assessment practices).

Data collection

Data set 1 – Confirmation of research problem

The data gathering instrument was an end of semester questionnaire given to students in *Introducing Readers to Literary Texts (1044cls)* in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 with open-ended questions. Students were asked to identify their other area of teaching or of study and to list what they considered the main learning characteristics and skills needed to succeed in this area. They were then asked to identify the learning characteristics and skills they felt were needed to succeed in their four English courses in first year. Lastly they were asked to reflect upon how the skills and knowledge from their other teaching area or study may have impacted upon the degree of success in English. From the total number of students enrolled, of which up to 20% failed to complete the course and therefore were not in attendance, responses received were 61% (58 of 95 enrolled students) in 2001, 42% (54 of 129 enrolled students) in 2002, 37% (38 of 102 enrolled students) in 2003, 58% (52 of 89 enrolled students) in 2004. This totals 202 responses from students or 49% of the total number of 415 students enrolled over the four year period.

Studies of Society and Environment, and English (85 respondents), were both seen by many as being underpinned by "critical learning, research, analysis & evaluation skills" which would impact positively in the English written assignments. The effective reading of large amounts of literature with an open mind was also seen as common to the two courses, as "both require diligent reading and understanding of literature ... integral to each other ... many links & similarities ... based on one another". However there were also students who saw little viable connection between their courses.

Drama students (47 respondents) stated that there were similar skills needed for Drama Education courses and English citing such skills as communication (listening and verbal), group co-operation, social skills, and leadership. Commonalities in content area were also identified as of positive impact in undertaking this combination of courses. They also stated quite strongly that the creativity, enthusiasm, passion, commitment and confidence that drama engenders would be of great benefit in succeeding in this English course as the "confidence gained from participation in drama courses will help in oral presentations".

Physical Education students (21 respondents) focused on the practical content of their courses based around sport and fitness and "scientific knowledge —bio-mechanics, anatomy" stating that they saw no connection between the skills needed to succeed in Physical Education courses and those required for English. However, a few also acknowledged that both courses required good communication skills and demonstration of effective teaching and learning processes.

Students undertaking courses in Language and Linguistics (19 respondents) stated that as both were language based "understanding one helps to understand the other", in particular with grammatical structure and comprehension of the theory of language. Skills such as effective listening, communicating, applying and revising, were also seen as important to both. However a few students felt that there was little in common between the courses.

Music and English areas of specialization (5 respondents) were seen as having little in common apart from encouraging creativity in activities for the written tasks and in the presentations. They were seen as requiring two quite different skills – "practical performance" and "understanding of theory and practical application".

Students engaged in Art and English studies (11 respondents) emphasized that researching, analytical, and writing skills were important in both courses. Although they did not mention practical artistic ability as useful for the visual aid that is part of the English course assessment they did comment on the powerful connection between "understanding visual language in conjunction with written texts of language".

Students taking Computer Education as their other area of teaching or study (4 respondents) emphasised the impact that course content knowledge would have in their "ability to interpret and analyse data" being able to "use multimedia in researching organizing and producing assignments" in their English course. As well they felt that they would be more aware of recent techniques in "producing professional looking assignments".

It is clear that students do perceive that the impact of their other area of study on attaining good results in English as differing depending on the course combination with some seen as having distinct advantages. Drama and computing students are very positive about crossover skills whilst Physical Education and Music students saw little crossover value. Students in Language and Linguistics and Art perceived a range of connections from "none at all" to "some".

Data set 2 – Compilation and comparison of student results

As the aim is to explore whether there is a differences between students' grades due to their course combinations this study was carried out using "Causal or experimental research[which] is concerned with finding cause and effect. The research question is usually asked using the key words "difference between" in the syntax" (Shenandoah Valley Governor's School, n.d., p. 2).

The combination of teaching or study areas in this study is the variable, that is "anything that varies, changes, or has differences" and is identifiable as an independent variable as it is "thought to be the cause or bring about change in other variables" (O'Connor, 2004, p. 1).

Assessment results for students enrolled in *Introducing Readers to Literary Texts (1044cls)* were collected and students identified and grouped by their other area of teaching or study. The collective results were averaged per course combination over the three year period and comparisons made.

In the years 2001–2003 the total number of students enrolled in this course was 326. As this paper is being produced mid-semester the results for the 2004 cohort are not available for inclusion. As the focus is on achievement in the course only students who were in course combinations that were enrolled in each of the three years and who had completed the course by submitting all assignments were included. These totalled 251 (76.99% of total number of student enrolled) with course combinations with English comprising SOSE 94 students, Drama 67 students, Physical Education 31 students, Language and Linguistics 28 students, Music 15 students, Art 11 students, Computer Education 5 students.

Students who were not included in the data were those who:

had one-off course combinations—4 students who completed the course by submitting every assignment (1 science student in 2002; 3 primary students 2002) (1.23% of total number of student enrolled)

completed the course by submitting every assignment but whose course combinations were not able to be identified—1 student in 2003 (0.31% of total number of student enrolled)

did not complete the course as they did not submit all assignments, including those students who did not attend the course at all but who did not officially withdraw—70 (21.47%).

Findings

Comparative analysis of the data shows two distinct clusters:

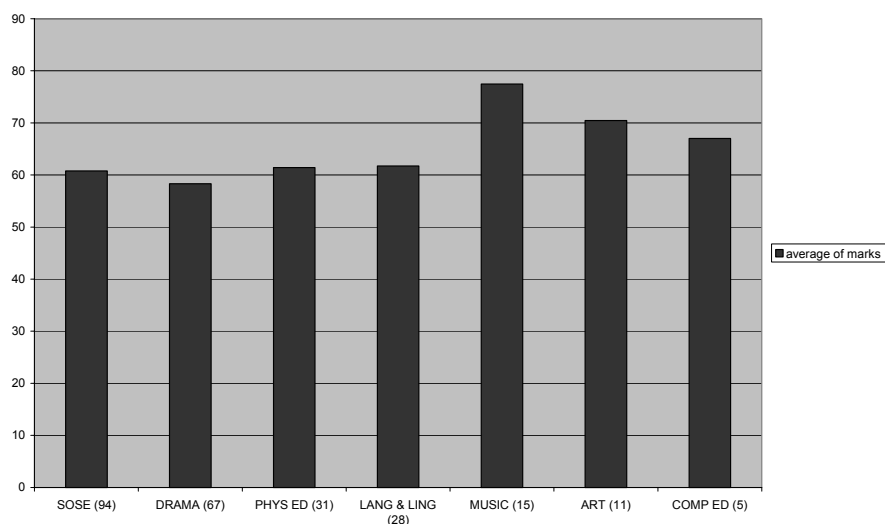


Figure 1.

2001–2003 students' *English (1044cls)* results grouped by other discipline area in descending order of student numbers.

Category 1 — an average of 60.5% (High Pass) with deviation of $\pm 2\%$. These are course combinations with students enrolled every year and totalling between 28 and 94 over 3 years who completed the course by submitting every assignment—220 students undertaking SOSE, Drama, Physical Education, Language and Linguistic (87.65% of total number of student included in data).

Category 2 — an average of 71.6% (Mid Credit) with a deviation of ± 5.8 . These are course combinations with students enrolled every year and totalling between 5 and 15

over 3 years who completed the course by submitting every assignment—31 students undertaking Music, Art, and Computer Education (12.35% of total number of student included in data).

Analysis of the student numbers who did not complete the course by submitting each assignment shows an average of 22.31% for SOSE, 19.28% for Drama, 14.29% for Physical Education, and 28.21% for Language and Linguistics. The latter has some explanation in that many of the students studying Language and Linguistics are from a Non-English Speaking Background who undertake English courses believing them to be focused on teaching English acquisition rather than a study of the English discipline. No explanation is apparent for the lower number for Physical Education students.

Over the three year period, 2001 to 2003, students in Music (2, 9, 4), Art (8, 1, 2), and Computer Education (3, 1, 1) have on average achieved at a higher level but as numbers per year are small the relevance of this data is questionable. As numbers of students in these course combinations who did not complete the course by submitting each assignment were only one, at the most, per offering (Music—1 student in 2001, 1 student in 2002; Art—1 student in 2001; Computer Education—1 student in 2002) they do not present useful findings.

Conclusion

The results would seem to indicate that there is little difference in the average marks attained by the different course combinations with the larger numbers of students with non-completions in the range of 14 to 23%. The specific skills and learning that are covered in the other area of teaching or study (SOSE, Drama, Physical Education, Language and Linguistics) do not have an undue impact on success in the English course *Introducing Readers to Literary Texts (1044cls)*, although student perceptions may differ. There are, of course, other considerations regarding course combination which could influence achievement in these courses. Various discipline areas have distinct characteristics in their teaching and learning. Both Music and Drama Education, for example, require many practice hours in individual and group work. Studies of Society and Environment Education, on the other hand, require a heavy time commitment in reading and researching. Regardless of the foregoing, given these findings it can be inferred that the course assessment of *Introducing Readers to Literary Texts (1044cls)* is fair and equitable and that they should be used to reassure students that course combination and other factors do not have a measurable effect. To confirm this conclusion a study needs to be extended over time and submitted to statistical review.

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