Support or spoon feeding? Research skills training for first year marketing students in a large class

Sarah Lambert
Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR)
University of Wollongong

Venkata Yanamandram
Marketing Discipline, Faculty of Commerce
University of Wollongong

This paper describes the work done by the authors to develop and evaluate a new worksheet and quiz assessment developed to explicitly teach the skills required by marketing students to complete their studies and to be successful professional marketers. While concerns were raised in the teaching faculty that such interventions might amount to spoon feeding, the authors felt that there was sufficient evidence to suggest that such an activity was an effective learning support, especially in such a large first year class. Student survey results indicate that for many students the activity successfully taught a repeatable process of how to find information that would be helpful for current and future research and assignment needs. The authors conclude that the activity was a success and will deploy it again with students, although as an optional rather than mandatory activity.

Keywords: Research skills, marketing, large classes, first year students, online resources

Introduction and context

MARK101: Marketing Principles is a core subject in a Bachelor of Commerce course. The subject serves as a foundation for further studies in business by developing an overview of where the marketing function fits within the larger organisation. Given that a large class of first year marketing students (over 1100 students per year) carry different expectations and research skills, it is not unusual to see a failure rate of 20% or more in an assessable component such as a major marketing report worth 20% of the total subject marks. Many of the marketing theories and models discussed in the subject are the result of academic research with regard to consumers and their decision making behaviour and hence the role of research cannot be emphasised enough. While teaching staff accentuate this importance, many students invariably do not take it seriously in their early days of joining a university.

The need for research

"Why do professors campus-wide complain about the quality of their students' end products, while at the same time students express equal frustration that they 'cannot find anything' on topics that in fact are widely addressed in the literature?" (Jenson, 2004). As Jenson noted recently, today's students struggle when using the electronic databases and indexes to which their library subscribes. Students of the information age have spent time using computers but little or no time in an actual library. They have never or rarely worked with paper based periodicals or journals and each computer catalogue citation looks as confusing as the next. Differences between journals and popular magazines, articles and abstracts, and annotations and advertisements are hard to discern when it is all on the web (Jenson, 2004). Even for those students who attend library workshops, instruction can only be generic and their searching is often limited to hypothetical research scenarios.

Research has shown that an effective way of teaching research skills is by integrating the instruction into the curriculum (Ellis & Percy, 2000; McLoughlin & Luca, 2001). It has been proven that students have a more active approach to learning research skills when they know it will help them find resources that they can use for other assessments in the subject (Ellis & Percy, 2000). It has also been shown that library instruction of this kind is most effective when offered as early as possible in each student's undergraduate career (Ellis & Percy, 2000; Minkel, 1999). Methods of teaching research skills to students and assessing those skills for a large class (such as for over 300 students) without overburdening academics' precious

time has been made feasible because of developments in information technology. Information and communication technologies have the capacity to support a wide range of learning goals and can now be integrated into teaching approaches of higher educational institutions (McLoughlin & Luca, 2001). Through computer facilitated learning, students can access online resources and bulletin boards to support their own learning, for example in retrieval and management of data. However, if instructions are generic, students may not be able to transfer these skills into their own professional disciplines (Hicks et. al., 1999). The integration of generic competencies into contexualised, disciplinary areas through educational technology offer learners a context in which to anchor their learning (McLoughlin & Luca, 2001; Shaffer & Resnick, 1999).

New assessment

A curriculum integrated research skills task (consisting of a worksheet and online quiz) was designed by the marketing discipline in liaison with the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR). This method of curriculum integrated research and citation skills teaching had been found to be successful by other researchers (Ellis & Percy, 2000). The task required students to locate a particular journal article from (1) an online database, (2) a magazine website and (3) a TV website that would assist them to undertake their major marketing assignment successfully. The worksheet takes students through locating particular articles step by step and asks them to record bibliographic information of the resources found. The online quiz tests that bibliographic information, ensuring that they did in fact find the correct items. This type of an instruction is commonly termed as scaffolding (Gutzdial, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding is attributed to the kinds of supports that learners receive within a learning environment as they develop new skills or levels of understanding (Halttunen, 2003). Scaffolding enables learners to perform activities that they were unable to perform without this support (Halttunen, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). A learning outcome for students is that they would become familiar with the concept of search terms and procedures enabling them to find relevant articles for their major assignment from varied sources such as databases, magazines, websites etc without staff support and instruction. This gradual withdrawing of support is termed as fading, which is an important element of scaffolding (Halttunen, 2003).

Pros and cons

When the planned new assessment was discussed with other teaching staff in the marketing discipline meeting, some concerns were raised that we were making the task too easy; in other words, spoon feeding them. Others indicated that library staff should teach these skills. However, we felt that it would be more motivating and therefore effective for the students to learn their research skills in the context of what they need to find for their assignments. Also, as other researchers have noted, library staff "cannot be expected to know exactly what each faculty member' assignments entail, nor what each expects of students' final products"(Jenson, 2004). This coupled with the issue of having such a large class, where even in the tutorial one on one help is very limited – firmed our resolve to put in place an assessed activity which would explicitly teach the research skills needed by students. The university aims to produce information literate graduates and this is enshrined in the university's policies, practices and marketing, in particular the "Attributes of a Wollongong Graduate". One of these attributes includes, "A basic understanding of information literacy and specific skills in acquiring, organising and presenting information, particularly through computer based activity" (University of Wollongong, 2004).

Evaluating the intervention

An anonymous paper based survey was completed by approximately half of the 325 enrolled students to find out if the students felt that the various supports provided for the assessment activities were worthwhile. There were 10 questions in total, this paper will report on 5 of these, which focussed on the worksheet/quiz intervention, and how it supported the major assignment. There was 1 yes/no question asking if they had attended a library tutorial related to the assignment. The remaining 4 questions were Likert scale responses (strongly agree, somewhat agree, undecided, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree) to a statement plus an open ended follow up question, asking the respondents who disagreed to explain their views. In addition, overall failure rates were compared to the previous session (where no such worksheet/quiz was offered to students).

Survey results and implications

There were 183 completed and usable questionnaires, representing 56% of the total students in MARK101. Out of the surveyed students, 28.4% attended the library tutorial organised to assist in completion of the worksheet/quiz. Anecdotally, this would be similar or slightly higher than normal attendance to these optional, out of class time library based lessons. Figure 1 shows these results alongside the percentages for undecided or disagree responses. For reporting purposes we have aggregated the "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" responses into "disagree", and the "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" into "agree" responses. About 75% of students agreed with the first three survey statements: Question 1: Worksheet / quiz helped me to undertake research for the major assignment; Question 2: Time spent on worksheet / quiz was worthwhile; Question 3: Since undertaking worksheet/quiz I have been able to find other relevant articles from the same sources to use in my major assignment.
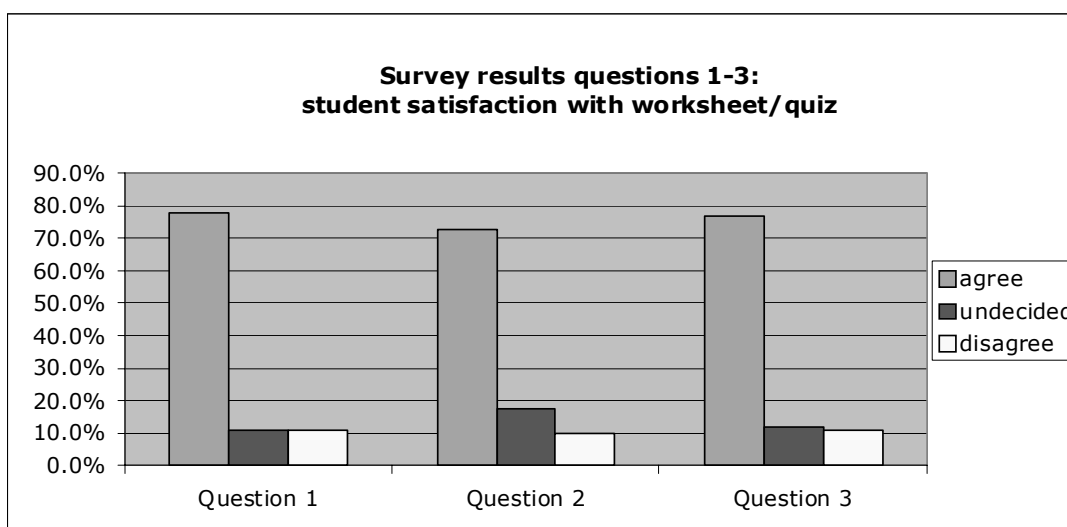

Figure 1: Results of the first three questions

For the approximately 25% of students who disagreed with Questions 1 and 2, a common reason given was that the located resources were 'off topic' eg "I did not find that I re-used the web sites/journals because I knew they did not contain information I saw relevant to my business". Another reason was that they had already undertaken a similar exercise. Some students admitted that they did not try to understand the technique, but just did it mechanically eg. "Just breezed through it by following exact instructions not taking anything in". For those students who disagreed with Question 3, the most common reason given was again that the sources were off topic or not of interest. Others reasoned that one activity was not enough practice to gain confidence using the same sources for finding other material. Question 4 asked if the students had been able to locate relevant articles form OTHER online sources since undertaking the worksheet/quiz. This was important, as it tests skills transferability to something not explicitly taught in a step by step way. Although the number of respondents was lower (N=102 valid records) the level of agreement was higher – 81.4%. Only 3.8% disagreed. There were similar numbers of undecided students (11.8%) to the first three questions. Comments included: "I agree because it showed me how to conduct an effective search for information" and "Agree; Expanded academic index and other online databases". One of the 19% of students who did not make the leap to independent searching said, "It did not really teach me to look up other sources, I just followed the guidelines". The open ended questions highlighted the big difference in existing research skills levels between students in MARK101. As the following quotes illustrate, some claimed to already know how to use library databases and find useful information for their assignments at the Library, "There was no real reason to have a quiz. It should have been up to the students if they felt they needed the help".

A measurable and positive outcome of this exercise was that the major assignment failure rate halved – from 22% to 11%, in addition to 75% of the students finding this support instruction useful. For those who believed it did not help, we rationalised that our intention was to scaffold, not spoon feed. This is where higher education students are to take more responsibility for their own learning and understand the search techniques to find relevant articles for their work.

The future and conclusion

At the time of writing, 750 students were enrolled in MARK101 for second session 2004. Taking into account the varied skills of the student population, we will offer this worksheet/quiz activity again, but as optional and self assessment only. A decision would be made as to whether the activity should be optional or mandatory after comparing assignment results with those of this session. We note that the University's compulsory Information Literacy Introductory Programs (ILIP) which must be completed successfully by all students in their first semester of study are currently being revised and strengthened. It will be important to monitor these changes to make sure there is no duplication, and that our activity continues to extend and builds on the ILIP work. The contribution of this manuscript is the demonstration of how the application of a recent type of teaching - the online self paced worksheet and quiz activity – can be applied to an activity that supports developing research skills in large classes, and is a legitimate form of teaching a repeatable, transferable skills. The results of the evaluation validate the usefulness of explicit teaching of information literacy skills to students – in particular, research and citation skills – as a way to assist current and future studies. This helps us allay the fears about spoon feeding (with its negative connotations of making a particular task easy).

References

Ellis, C. and Percy, A. (2001). Building online essay writing support tools. In L. Richardson and J. Lidstone (Eds), *Flexible Learning for a Flexible Society*: Proceedings ASET-HERDSA 2000 Conference, 239-250. Toowoomba, 2-5 July. ASET and HERDSA. http://www.aset.org.au/confs/aset-herdsa2000/procs/ellis-c.html

Gutzdial, M. (1994). Software-realized scaffolding to facilitate programming for science learning. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 4(1), 1-44.

Halttunen, K. (2003). Scaffolding performance in IR instruction: Exploring learning experiences and performance in two learning environments. *Journal of Information Science*, 29(5), 375-390.

Hicks, M., Reid, I. and George, R. (1999). Enhancing online teaching: Designing responsive learning environments. *Cornerstones 1999. Proceedings HERDSA Conference*. Melbourne, Victoria. [verified 15 Oct 2004] http://herdsa.org.au/branches/vic/Cornerstones/pdf/Hicks.PDF

Jenson, J.D. (2004). It's the Information Age, so where's the Information? *College Teaching*, 52(3), 107-112.

McLoughlin, C. and Luca, J. (2001). Assessment methodologies in transition: Changing practices in web-based learning. In L. Richardson and J. Lidstone (Eds), *Flexible Learning for a Flexible Society: Proceedings ASET-HERDSA 2000 Conference*, 516-526. Toowoomba, Qld, 2-5 July. ASET and HERDSA. http://www.aset.org.au/confs/aset-herdsa2000/procs/mcloughlin1.html

Minkel, W. (1999). Hunting season: Try a scavenger hunt – it's a sneaky way to teach library skills. *School Library Journal*, 45(10).

Shaffer, D.W. and Resnick, M. (1999). Thick authenticity: New media and authentic learning. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 10(2), 195-215.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society:The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

University of Wollongong (2004). Developing the Attributes of a Wollongong Graduate. http://www.uow.edu.au/about/teaching/attributes/ [viewed 23 July 2004, verified 15 Oct 2004]

Sarah Lambert, Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), University of Wollongong, AUSTRALIA. Sarah_lambert@uow.edu.au
Venkata Yanamandram, Marketing Discipline, Faculty of Commerce, University of Wollongong, AUSTRALIA. venkaty@uow.edu.au

Please cite as: Lambert, S. & Yanamandram, V. (2004). Support or spoon feeding? Research skills training for first year marketing students in a large class. In R. Atkinson, C. McBeath, D. Jonas-Dwyer & R. Phillips (Eds), *Beyond the comfort zone: Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference* (pp.516-519). Perth, 5-8 December. http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth04/procs/lambert.html