

## Coordinators Leading Advancement of Sessional Staff (CLASS) Project

### UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG OVERVIEW OF ACTION LEARNING INITIATIVES

November 2010

#### Ms Lidia Bilbatua:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Lecture Spanish Studies, Language Centre, Arts

**Project Title:** Action Assessment Marking Program

**Project Details:** this project aimed to explore ways to minimise the variability in marking practices in two Spanish learning language subjects. In autumn session I am coordinating a subject taught by 6 tutors including myself in which we assess 8 written assessments per student. The action plan involved applying different strategies with clear marking criteria to reduce variability in marking and achieve fair and impartial results. These strategies were applied in the Spring session as a trial (as we were only 3 tutors) with the intention to implement them in Autumn 2011 with the complete team.

#### **Major Project Achievements:**

- To Refine the marking criteria for each assessment.
- To create a culture of collaboration and team communication among tutors and coordinator. All queries and doubts are shared in meetings and by email
- To find strategies to minimise the variability of marking assessments in collaboration with sessional staff

#### **Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:**

- The collaboration with staff provided very beneficial insights into this project.
- Each assessment had specific criteria for marking provided by the Subject coordinator, but the meetings with tutors provided very valuable additional information to refine that criteria.
- After applying the new criteria and the practice of collaboration and inclusiveness among staff, the variability in marking assessments was reduced.

#### **Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:**

- Getting together. Commitments and availability among sessional staff vary considerably.
- To create the above-mentioned culture of collaboration and facilitate communication among staff. The participants embraced this challenge with interest and participated in this teamwork 'forum' with enthusiasm.
- To meet deadlines in marking assessments and agreement on meeting times.
- The challenges presented by this pilot project were small (-only 3 people involved-) compared to the challenge to be faced in the next season with 6 tutors involved.

#### Dr Amy Chan:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, Faculty of Health & Behavioural Sciences

**Project Title:** Empowering tutors to help students in their academic writing development.

**Project Details:** This project explored how Turnitin (a text-matching on-line application) could be used as a self-learning tool, for tutors to provide support for students to increase their awareness of how to avoid poor academic writing practice (e.g. excessive use of direct quotes, superficial paraphrasing of information from published sources). This project also sought to examine the impact of this proactive approach to reducing student plagiarism on tutors' development as university teachers.

#### **Major Project Achievements:**

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- Gathered data on tutors' baseline perceptions and experiences with regards to student plagiarism
- Incorporated an in-class introduction to Turnitin, for students to use as a self-learning tool to seek feedback on their academic writing
- Obtained end-of-semester feedback from tutors on their perceived usefulness of the Turnitin setup, as a tool to create opportunities for them to discuss with students issues relevant to good academic writing practice and student plagiarism, and for them to appreciate factors contributing toward academic plagiarism in undergraduate students

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project

- Adoption rate of Turnitin among the target student cohort was satisfactory. Seventy-two percent of students enrolled in the subject used the "Turnitin Playpan" created for the subject at least once during the semester (as indicated by the number of active accounts created in the Turnitin Playpan), to obtain feedback on the originality of drafts of their written work. Some students also appeared to have used the tool to seek self-feedback on written drafts which they produced for assignments for other subjects too!
- Feedback from sessional tutors indicated that they found that it was fairly easy to convey to students the intended use of Turnitin within the present context: that Turnitin can be used as a self-learning tool for students to obtain feedback as they gain experience with writing critical literature reviews (as opposed to a tool for catching academic plagiarists).
- The implementation of the project also prompted tutors to gain a more in-depth understanding of some potential reasons underlying undergraduate students' academic plagiarism (e.g., "The suggested use of Turnitin ... opened my eyes to other ways in which students may plagiarise, or more specifically, how poor integration and understanding of material may inadvertently cause students to commit plagiarism" - Tutor 1).
- Feedback from tutors has also helped to identify ways in which sessional tutors can further play in helping students develop their academic writing skills and acknowledgement practice. Examples include: (i) encouraging students to submit sections of their essay/lab report to Turnitin several times before the submission due date to seek self-feedback (this will potentially encourage students to devote more time to their academic research and writing tasks for major written assignments); and (ii) use Turnitin originality reports as a "talking point" to continue discussing the do's and don'ts of academic writing in the weeks prior to submission.

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project

- The Turnitin application underwent a major upgrade during Spring Semester 2010. During the upgrade period, quite a few students appeared to be unable to obtain an appropriate originality report on their submitted drafts. Given that this is a commercial on-line application over which the University of Wollongong has no control, the best my subject's teaching staff could do was to encourage students to persevere, and to submit their work to the application again at a later time.

### Dr Tracey Kuit:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Lecturer, School of Biological Sciences

**Project Title:** Enhancing student experiences in large biology subjects through authentic learning and group work

**Project Details:** This project aimed to develop first year biology (Biol103) demonstrator's skills in (i) fostering group work in large classes and (ii) assessing student posters and oral seminars. The aim was for the demonstrators to assist the students develop a sense of community in the subject, achieve deeper learning of the subject content and enhance their skills in effective communication, through student group work projects centred on authentic learning tasks (posters and seminars).

### Major Project Achievements:

- Demonstrator's felt their skills were enhanced by participation in the project. They relished the opportunity to guide the students through the group work project and to see the strengths of students outside of the normal laboratory classes. Demonstrators are normally only involved in the practical aspects of the subject but their involvement in the project allowed the demonstrators to gain an

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insight into the theory being taught in the subject. This made for a more rounded experience for the sessional staff. The staff also noted that the resources provided adequately prepared them to assess the student posters and seminars.

- Initial student feedback has been very positive and the majority felt that the group work project was worthwhile in establishing a sense of community in the subject and achieving a deeper learning of the content. Further investigations of student evaluations are underway.
- The subject coordinators Dr Kuit and Dr Fildes were able to witness first hand the sessional staff skill development. As they were teaching smaller groups hands-on the coordinators were also able to establish closer relationships with students, which is often difficult as the subject coordinator(s) of a subject with 500 students.

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

- Overwhelmingly we learnt that first year students are capable of taking a theoretical topic, conducting research and presenting posters and oral seminars of a high standard.
- Including the sessional staff in all aspects of the project was invaluable. Staff were involved in the design of the project and the marking scheme for the posters and seminars. This also ensured uniformity in marking and a sense of ownership of the success of the project
- Having the subject coordinator involved in the hands-on teaching with the sessional staff ensured conveyance of all necessary information to the sessional staff. This was important for equity of the project experience for all students and skill development of the sessional staff by learning from an experienced staff member. This also ensured a team teaching approach and alleviated any apprehension by the sessional staff
- A lesson learnt is to be well prepared for evaluating and recording all assessment items. As with any subject of 500 students, accurate recording of all student contributions to the group work projects requires well established processes. We learnt a lot from this first trial and have implemented streamlined strategies for the future.

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:

- Training of sessional staff – staff were chosen that had experience with the subject and with leading student groups. They were also chosen based on dedication to the project and student learning. Inevitable turnover of staff will be a factor for the ongoing conduction of the student group work project. However resources developed will help in training future staff.
- Availability of sessional staff for meetings – not all staff involved worked on campus outside of class time. Meetings were planned three times during the session and flexibility for meeting times was important. All communication was also conveyed via email to all staff members routinely throughout the session. For the first meeting about planning the project, all staff were present, and this was invaluable in identifying the aims of the project and the role of the staff. Additionally having the same staff involved in the week-to-week laboratory classes ensured sufficient opportunities for communication between the subject coordinators and the casual staff throughout the session.
- Budget restraints meant paying staff at a demonstrating rate and also meant that Dr Kuit and Dr Fildes had to prepare everything for the sessional staff. However resources have now been prepared and will be reviewed annually.
- Staff's limited knowledge of subject theoretical knowledge – staff were chosen that had experience with the subject but it did mean that staff had to conduct some research of their own. All staff also had access to the subject eLearning site to aid in class preparation.

**Additional Comments:** This work would not have been possible without the dedication of Dr Karen Fildes who works in a job-share arrangement with Dr Kuit. Karen helped design and steer all aspects of this project. Thank you also to the technical staff involved in Biol103 for assisting in the preparation of the classes. The success of this project is due to the enthusiasm and dedication shown by all sessional staff involved in the project and also by the enthusiastic first year students in Biol103, 2010.

My involvement in this group work project, although involving a lot of hard work, has made this one of the most enjoyable and rewarding teaching sessions in my rather short career. Let's hope there are more to come

**Ms Rebekkah Middleton:**

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Lecturer, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Indigenous Health (SNMIH)

**Project Title:** 'Innovation' in tutorials

**Project Details:** This project aimed to develop new ways of delivering content in lectures and tutorials that actively engaged students. A new subject was developed for third year students nearing graduation. The project looked at engaging students in active learning to challenge their creativity and learning. A crucial part of the project was engaging casual tutors in regular meetings to ensure they were clear in what was expected of the students and how they could best facilitate a new model of learning for third year nursing students ready to graduate.

**Major Project Achievements:**

- Active learning in the classroom anecdotally was successful. Formal evaluation is pending. Tutors report active engagement by students in activities and in discussion and debriefing following activities, for example, *Understood clearly the value of 'creative learning' just unsure where to start... then they saw my tragic pipe-cleaner sculpture and realised anything was ok!!!!* (Tutor).
- Face to face meetings were held with all tutors prior to session commencement to outline the model of learning and address any questions. Following this, informal individual meetings were held with Tutors at Wollongong regularly in the first few weeks of session to discuss any issues arising from the material or the facilitation model. Regular phone calls and emails were made to the tutors at Bega and Shoalhaven Campuses. Final meetings were held at the end of session to allow overall feedback for the session. A recent email from a tutor demonstrated the level of support they felt they received – *I thought the tutor workbook provided a lot of guidance and support, and overall I felt really supported by you in teaching this subject. Thank you for the opportunity to be part of it* (Tutor). This reinforced the perceived confidence in delivering new material (and in a different model) that I thought was happening. By making time to meet with, or speak with via phone, all tutors regularly in the initial part of session particularly, tutors have all reported feeling comfortable with the material and the delivery after having the opportunity to ask questions or raise issues or concerns with me.
- Students have emailed me and have personally spoken to me about their learning throughout session using this innovative learning. This feedback began early in session, e.g. *Just wanted to send you a quick email to say how excited [I am] about this subject!! I wasn't too sure how it would integrate into the course, but having just finished listening to your lecture, I totally get it....am really looking forward to the coming weeks of tutorials - the creative learning style last week was excellent* (Student). This type of feedback continued throughout the session.

**Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:**

- Overall I consider the project was a success, as evidenced by feedback.
- The introduction of some alternate delivery modes of lecture material was implemented. I would have liked to have implemented a greater variety of modes of content delivery, but due to time constraints did not fully achieve this. This is something I will continue to develop for the future.
- Key lessons learned were that organisation is essential and time management critical so that adequate lead in time with tutors and ongoing support can be readily given. Another key lesson I learned was that creativity is another tool that can draw out learning in students and so should not be shied away from.

**Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:**

- Key challenges were to build a team of tutors who held the same values as myself and were not afraid to try something new. The team I chose to be a part of this project and implementation of a new subject was an important element of the success of the project.
- For me, the key challenge was to be brave and have the courage to try something different.

Dr Glennys O'Brien:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Director of First Year Studies, Chemistry, Science

**Project Title:** Developing Demonstrators Questioning Skills with specific emphasis on mental models of molecular structure.

**Project Details:** This project was developed to help the first year chemistry demonstrators increase their confidence in engaging students individually in the lab with open ended questions, specifically to help students enhance their internal models or representations of the molecular scale. This is part of both developing staff training and developing students writing in lab classes.

### Major Project Achievements:

- **Details of process:** In two particular practical classes, demonstrators were asked to specifically question students in pairs regarding some molecular scale aspect of the experiment. The students' activity was to respond with sketching / drawing molecular representations of the chemical structures involved and to discuss these with the demonstrator. The sketches were made in the specifically designated part of each student's lab manual for that practical called journal notes. This area of the lab manual is being developed to support students lab writing, distinguishing writing for learning science and writing for learning science practice. It is also part of developing student skills of mental molecular modelling and molecular scale representation
- **Support materials:** Demonstrators were provided with support materials which outlined (1) the teaching and learning aspects of this CLASS project, (2) proposed lab question activity, (3) background molecular theory, (4) possible model drawings / sketches students may do, (5) key points to cover, (6) possible use of colour in sketches, (7) possible leading questions, (8) follow on questions. The coordinator spoke with demonstrators before the practical, ideally demonstrators practised the questioning, but there was frequently insufficient time to do this in any depth before the practical
- **Outcomes:** Student response via a Likert scale question in end of session subject survey: The question: *"Drawing and highlighting molecular structures in journal notes helped my learning."* Responses (n=360); strongly agree: 26%, agree 41%, uncertain 24%, disagree 7%, strongly disagree 2% Demonstrator commentary from an informal anonymous written survey: Questions: *Drawing molecular structures (Chromatography, Aspirin labs), I did have enough time to discuss molecular structures with my students, I found students engaged more when I questioned them regarding the molecular structures, I need more practice in questioning students...* Demonstrators responded (n=15) mostly that the outcomes were positive, with the main difficulties being shortage of time, weaker students struggling with concepts, and the demonstrators preferring more practice to do this.
- **Major achievement:** Demonstrators responded that the exercise was helpful and useful, but time constraints indicate that it is important to carefully structure lab activities to allow space for adding in this activity. As part of major developments in both demonstrator / tutor training and in student writing in labs, this has been a very worthwhile exercise to try out some activities and assess their usefulness from the perspective of the lab staff and the students

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

- Students responses were generally favourable, although possibly demonstrator dependent as the best three demonstrators (as indicated from students survey) had the best student responses.
- However the spread of data does not lead to the conclusion that demonstrators who rated poorly in other areas were particularly unable to assist student learning in this activity.
- While two thirds of students found the exercise useful, about a quarter were uncertain as to whether this helped their learning. This may indicate a better lead in or introduction is required, or more practice for the demonstrators beforehand.
- Demonstrators indicated that the time constraints of the exercise by adding to lab activities must be taken into account. This is a really important outcome in terms of practicalities of allowing time for students writing in labs to be more than just the results, calculations and lab template report for submission

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- Demonstrators quickly found that students could be directed to begin the exercise by drawing some molecular structures in preparation for the discussion. These structures had been drawn elsewhere by the student in the prelab exercise and so a version could be quickly redrawn in the journal notes. Thus when the demonstrator came to discuss polarity or bond breaking of those structures, the students had them drawn ready to begin. As a result of noting this timesaver, the structuring of journal notes and entering prelab material directly into them as part of prelab activities will better set up such inlab discussions between staff and student.

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:

- Our key challenges involve making time available: Making time to get the demonstrators to practice before the lab class began. The demonstrators were given plenty of support material, but timing for practicing was always short. A more generic exercise developing questioning will need to be made part of pre-session demonstrator training. Making time available during the practical class to have this form of questioning and discussion with students. Initially it was proposed that demonstrators questioned students individually. However each demonstrator has up to 16 students, making individual discussion impossible in the time available. In both the practical's students were in fact working in pairs (not always the case), thus questioning was conducted with pairs of students. This was less desirable, however the demonstrators were still able to see the details of what each student drew and question them accordingly

### Dr Greg Peoples:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Lecturer / School of Health Sciences / HBS

**Project Title:** Internship teaching in human anatomy – a valuable experience for all?

**Project Details:** This project explored the value and importance of an internship training year for potential casual tutors and demonstrators in human anatomy at 100level. The internship teachers are more commonly referred to as 'volunteers'. Volunteers are invited on a yearly basis, from a pool of high achieving 1st year anatomy students. The successful volunteers are allocated to a laboratory or tutorial class lead by a minimum two experience casual teachers.

To explore the value of the internship teacher in human anatomy, a small questionnaire was given to both current and past volunteers (see attached), a current volunteer and current experienced teacher were interviewed, and student responses to laboratory feedback were reviewed to gain insight from the students.

### Major Project Achievements:

On all accounts the internship teacher experienced was reported to be valuable; the outcomes can be categorised as follows:

- According to current volunteers
  - 9/10 rated the overall experience as 'extremely valuable'
  - 50% rated the commitment as substantial. This was interesting, in that the time spent going to meetings, revising work and then attending the class was not easy, but was not a deterrent overall.
  - 100% reported that their own knowledge and understanding of the subject has dramatically increased as a direct result of 'teaching the content'.
  - 7/10 volunteers also reported that the experience would also indirectly aid them with future personal applications for either work or postgraduate study.
  - The model could be improved by allowing greater access to the laboratory for class preparation.
- According to current experienced demonstrators
  - 7/10 indicated that having the volunteer teacher in the class room allowed for greater time to carry out lead demonstrator duties. It essentially reduced the pressures around running a large first year laboratory class.

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- 5/10 experienced casual teachers reported that the experience has already aided them with future personal applications for either work or postgraduate study (medicine).
- The model could be improved by allowing greater access to the laboratory for class preparation.
- According to current students (using laboratory class feedback forms)
  - The volunteer demonstrators were very good at providing tips and strategies for learning. These included examples based upon how they prepared for the assessments. This allowed for re-assurance in preparation.
  - The volunteer demonstrators were always 'enthusiastic' and 'willing' to help, guide and explain class activities.
  - More volunteers would be great!
  - Provided inspiration of what is possible in a very short period of time – role models (in a peer type of way).

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

- This is the first time that the internship teaching programme in human anatomy has been reflected upon in a way that is documented and recorded. It is obvious that the programme is working well, valued by all involved and will continue to grow.
- On this basis, it is also important that the programme is also developed and also continues to strive for further improvements.

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:

- This project has not had any significant challenges. By its nature the internship teaching has been in place and the project relied more upon reflecting, reviewing and reporting.

**Additional Comments:** It is conceivable that this type of internship teaching programme can be modelled and adjusted to fit a broad range of large, 100-level subjects in tertiary education. It is important that any implementation of this style of teacher development needs to grow its own identity and by doing so will become an accepted and natural part of the teacher training scheme for casual employees.

It is also worth noting, that when co-ordinating a subject with keen volunteers, that they are monitored for the amount of time that they are 'donating' their time. Sometimes they can get a little too excited about the role and potentially over-commit. It is recommended that a volunteer do no more than 3hrs maximum in one teaching week (including the meeting).

### Dr Christian Ritz:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Senior Lecturer, School of Electrical, Computer and Telecommunications Engineering/Informatics

**Project Title:** Developing and monitoring assessment practices amongst the teaching team

**Project Details:** This project explored marking of assessment tasks by sessional staff for the subject ECTE171. It focused on developing guidelines for sessional staff employed as laboratory demonstrators to help with assigning laboratory demonstrator marks

### Major Project Achievements:

- Documented guidelines for assessing laboratory demonstrations by students. This included simple marking rubrics that could be used as a guide for the demonstrator. It also included marking rubrics that were designed to clarify the assessment objectives.

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

- Successes: Feedback obtained from a simple set of questions emailed to the sessional demonstrators (see additional comments) indicated the project successfully clarified the assessment criteria. Comments stated that providing the guidelines is "...helpful for all the demonstrators of this

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subject to have a standard to make all the marks consistent” and “I can easily give marks to students based on those standards”.

- Successes: Increased variation of laboratory marks. While the average mark for demonstrations was approximately the same as for 2009, the standard deviation increased. This indicates more variation in the marks, which is a desired outcome as it may indicate improved assessment of each student
- Lessons learnt: The challenge is in providing guidelines that are not too onerous or difficult for the sessional staff to understand and apply

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:

- Availability of the sessional staff. The demonstrator's employment hours only included minimal time for meetings. Staff employed as markers do not have hours assigned for meeting with the subject coordinator. These were overcome through the use of emailing guides and instructions and the willingness of these staff to dedicate their own time to a few meetings.
- Ability to monitor individual performance. This is an ongoing issue in laboratories, whereby students tend to work together in class. Hence, individual assessment of laboratory notebooks is not completely reliable

**Additional Comments:** Feedback from sessional staff was obtained using the following set of questions:

1. Did you find the set of guidelines useful for helping you understand how to assign demonstrator marks? (Yes or No)
2. If you found the guidelines useful, what specifically helped you the most?
3. If you didn't find them useful, how could they be improved?
4. Is there anything else related to assigning marks as the laboratory demonstrator for ECTE171 that you could suggest would be helpful?

### Dr Venkata Yanamandram:

**Position, Department/Faculty:** Senior Lecturer, School of Management & Marketing, Faculty of Commerce

**Project Title:** Developing a Marking Rubric To Improve Learning

**Project Details:** This project explores the development of a scoring scheme to guide the analysis of the processes of students' work. I coordinate a large subject that consists of many tutors and the subject requires a judgment of quality when evaluating students' activities. The development of a marking rubric helps the students to recognise and match markers' expectations and encourages student autonomy by promoting deep learning.

### Major Project Achievements:

- Marking rubric developed.
- By engaging tutors in the development of a rubric, tutors had a better awareness of where I come from in terms of expectations and outcomes
- Students had a better appreciation for my expectations and knew how I and my teaching team would be marking their reports

### Successes and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project:

- Tutors have more respect for me as it made their 'marking lives' less painful.

### Key challenges faced in the implementation of the project:

- Committing time was a major challenge as it occurred in the middle of the session; however, if I had not done that then, I would have probably not done it any other time. It also took several drafts before an acceptable rubric was developed.