Editors’ Note and Acknowledgements

We are delighted to present the Proceedings of the 43rd Australian Psychological Society’s (APS) Annual Conference, 23 - 27 September, 2008, and thank all contributors for the high caliber papers which were submitted. The contributions cover a very wide range of topics in psychology and it is pleasing to note the diversity of Australian psychological research which is reflected in this publication.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many members who agreed to act as reviewers for the Proceedings submissions. All papers were subject to an independent, peer review process by two reviewers and, where necessary, by a third reviewer. We truly appreciate the heavy load that many reviewers shouldered to get the reviews completed in a rigorous and timely fashion and for this we offer our sincere thanks.

These Proceedings are published in 2008 and are available for purchase at the 43rd APS Annual Conference in Hobart and from the National Office in Melbourne.

A special thank you needs to be recorded here to Laura Warren and Joanne Howard who assisted with the administration, production and editing of this publication.

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Critical Reading and Writing (CRW) in First-year Psychology: Mass Screening and Targeted Assistance

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Abstract

Many beginning students struggle with their university study because their high-school experience did not yield the basic or academic literacy skills essential to tertiary learning activities. A diagnostic program was designed to identify and assist students in developing psychology-specific academic literacy skills in the large Introductory Psychology 1A course at UNSW. In an early lecture period, all students were required to make a written response to a text passage (CRW test). This test required them to take and argue a position. Trained assessors marked their responses according to a number of criteria that ranged from spelling and grammar to the logic of their argument (the position taken was irrelevant). The bottom-scoring 59 students were then contacted and offered special tutorials to assist them with writing their laboratory report. Following these, a second CRW test was offered to the assisted group of students as well as to a control group of students (a second chance to make up percentage points). Students who participated in the tutorials showed improvement on some, but not all, assessment criteria. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of discipline vs. non-discipline-specific assessment criteria, and in terms of a cost-benefit analysis of the exercise.

Introduction

The most vital challenges for students in their first year of study are to grasp the expectations of university, and to experience a sense of belonging (McInnis, James, & McNaught, 1995). Effective transition also requires students to develop the skills that they will need to engage successfully in university study. The usual large first-year class context does not easily lend itself to develop such skills, and the immense diversity of the student population increases the complexity of teaching.

In attempting to assist first-year students in their transition, we targeted the development of essential academic literacy skills that are “assumed knowledge” in all beginning students, but which are sometimes lacking given the heterogeneous academic and personal backgrounds of students in large introductory classes (Starfield, Trahn, & Scoufis, 2004). In particular, a significant minority of students fails the initial written assessment in the first-year psychology course. These
students fail to demonstrate the minimum entry-level requirements in the skill areas of critical reading and writing, and are at risk of failing any course that requires such skills (Wade, 1995).

The objectives of this enabling program were to identify the students who are at risk of failing writing assignments through a Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students (MASUS) approach (Bonanno & Jones, 1997). This approach provides an opportunity to identify areas needing improvement, especially in critical reading and writing skills in discipline specific programs. Thus, the aim was to bolster academic literacy skills, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. It was expected that the enabling program participants would show a significant gain in their critical reading and writing capacity.

Method
The performance of 77 students (mean age 20.40, SD = 3.74; 36 male and 41 females, with approximately equal gender composition in each group) from the 2006 Psychology 1A cohort were examined in this study. We devised an assessment exercise and a marking scheme that involved critical reading and writing on a relevant topic in psychology. Essentially, students were asked to respond to a particular passage (i.e., contrasting nature-nurture interpretations of teenagers’ antisocial behaviour). The responses were marked by a trained group of assessors according to specific criteria (e.g., use of source material, structure and development of answer, control of academic writing, grammar, and presentation). The application of this exercise (pre-program) in a lecture session during the third week of semester led to the identification of 59 at-risk students out of 816 students. We encouraged those students, through assessment consequences, to participate in a specially designed 5-week tutorial program in report writing integrating critical reading and writing skills in psychology. This focus was based on the next individual writing activity in the course. The at-risk students were also required to undertake a second CRW test (post-program, using a similar question format with different content).

Of the 59 at-risk students, 28 participated in one of two available one-hour tutorial classes (Tutorial Group) from Week 6 to 10, where they received a highly structured and active learning program. This program first interrogated their initial CRW test responses, and then supported their writing of the major written assignment in the course. This assignment was a partial-research report (title, abstract, introduction, method and references). Twelve students could not attend at the set tutorial times due to timetable clashes. These students were emailed the materials created for the Tutorial Group, and were asked to undertake some related exercises (Email Group). Thus, these students were not as comprehensively supported as those in the Tutorial Group. Nineteen at-risk students did not respond to the request (No-Support Group). Eighteen students who had not failed the test volunteered to undertake the CRW re-test in exchange for course credit (Control Group). Missing data precludes precision, but the indication was that, on average, 75% of the at-risk students were non-English speaking students, in comparison to 27% of the Control group, and 35% of the entire Psychology 1A course (preliminary analyses indicated significant differences).

In a quasi-experimental design, the different groups constituted the pre-existing grouping variable. The dependent variable of improved critical reading and writing was indexed by (a) relative gains across the CRW test and re-test, (b) half-research report mark, and (c) final exam performance. We also report additional evaluative and motivational data as indices of the students’ satisfaction with the program.

Results and Discussion
CRW Tests As can be seen in Figure 1, the pre-program mean CRW test score of the Control Group was above the pass level (6), but below the pass level for the at-risk groups (by definition). There appeared to be less group differentiation for the post-program CRW test scores, with all at-risk groups appearing to improve, while the Control Group appears to show a decrease in performance. This overall pattern was supported by a main effect for group, F(3,73) = 29.82, p < .01, and a significant Group x CRW Test interaction, F(3,73) = 10.25, p < .01. Pair-wise, Pre vs Post CRW comparisons revealed that all at-risk groups improved (No-support: t(1)=3.52; Email: t(1)= 2.26; Tutorial: t(1)= 2.13; all p < .05), while the Control Group showed a decrease in performance (t(1)=3.51, p < .05). There was a significant group effect for post-program CRW performance, with Tukey tests revealing that, contrary to expectation, there were no differences amongst the at-risk groups in the post-program scores, indicating that the Tutorial Group did not perform better than the Email Group, and the Email Group did not perform better than the No-Support Group. On the basis of these data alone, one would have to conclude that the program had no impact on the critical reading and writing ability of the at-risk students. It should be noted that the CRW re-test was worth 2.5% of the final grade for at-risk students, and the control students gained 0.8% for research participation credit; these differences in assessment weighting may have translated into differences in motivation to do well on this re-test.
Research Reports  Figure 2 indicates the expected differences amongst the at-risk groups. The group effect was significant, $F(3,73) = 4.27, p<.05$, and Tukey tests revealed that those students who participated in the tutorials (Tutorial Group) performed significantly better than those at-risk students who did not receive any assistance (No-Support), but not significantly better than those who received just the email support (Email). Thus, it could be argued that some kind of targeted assistance appears to be having an impact on at-risk students’ grades on a major piece of assessment (worth 20% of final course grade).

Final Examination  Figure 3 indicates the expected pattern of findings for the at-risk students—that is, it was expected that receiving some academic support during session would have a positive effect on the performance of at-risk students for the final exam. There was a significant group main effect, $F(3, 73) = 4.28, p<.01$, and Tukey tests revealed that both No-Support and Email groups performed significantly worse than the Control Group; however, the Tutorial Group performance was not significantly different from that of the Control Group. This pattern of findings suggests that the face-to-face class contact received during the tutorials improved academic skills which generalized to the exam, and/or had a motivating effect on these at-risk students.

Other Indicators  The possibility that the final exam grade was influenced by increased motivation in the Tutorial Group was investigated by examination of the number of hours of research participation engaged in by the students (5 hours are compulsory, 5 hours optional for extra course credit, for a total of 8% of the final course grade). There was a significant group main effect, $F(3,73) = 3.36, p<.01$, and Tukey tests revealed that both Email and Tutorial groups performed significantly better than the No-Support Group.
students gave very high ratings of the program. Finally, it should be noted that the percentage of Tutorial students enrolling in the follow-on course, Psychology 1B, in the second session of the year, was 21% for No-Support, 42% for Email, 43% for Tutorial, and 61% for Control Groups, and a Chi-square analysis, $\chi^2 = 6.37$, $p < .05$, indicated that the difference lay in the lower enrolment level of the No-Support Group.

**Conclusions**

One overwhelming outcome of the program has been the increased awareness of, demand for, and involvement in courses offered by the Learning Centre not only by the identified students, but also by those whose reading and writing skills met the basic level of competency. A further consequence of this program was that better ways of teaching report writing were identified during the special tutorials that were then integrated into the following year’s mainstream teaching in first-year psychology.

It should be noted that the Learning Centre staff observed a significant improvement in the structure, development of argument and clarity of written expression with the Tutorial students’ written assignment, despite the lack of strong differences between the Tutorial and other at-risk groups on some of the indicators. The fact that the Email group appeared to significantly benefit by the lesser form of support suggests that the design of future support programs should take this into account as a less costly form of support, although there may be less generalisation of academic achievement to other assessment forms, such as the final examination (see Krause, 2005). This study, like all quasi-experimental studies, suffered from the potential for confounding variables and consequent alternative explanations (e.g. the poor performance of the No-Support students may have been associated more directly with other factors such as high levels of personal life stress). Moreover, the underlying mechanisms for the differential improvement of the Tutorial Group need investigation. For example, given the high percentage of non-native English students in the at-risk groups, improvement in psychology-contextualized English language may have mediated that effect. In addition, there were small numbers in some comparison groups. Nevertheless, these findings are promising, and support the potential worth of further MASUS testing with improved follow-up support programs for at-risk students.

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**References**


