

THE KOSCIUSZKO EXPERIENCE: A TRANSITION IN WRITING. DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS IN GEOGRAPHY

Julie Kesby, Paul Tranter, and Jacky Croke

School of Physical, Environmental and Mathematical Sciences (PEMS), UNSW@ADFA
Rosemary James, Natural Resource Management Consulting Pty Ltd

What's in this case study for you?

This case study examines various methods of developing students' tertiary written communication skills. It explores the transition that students need to make in their writing skills from their secondary school writing experiences to academic writing in geography.

The case study provides:

- an outline of how writing skills can be embedded into a curriculum when there is usually limited time in a course to devote to writing skills
- an overview of how the MASUS (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) diagnostic tool can be used to assess written work and provide feedback to students and as a student self-assessment tool
- an examination of the relationship of writing exercises to a course theme and field trip, thereby creating opportunities for authentic writing experiences.

Issues in student learning

- Students require opportunities to value and develop their written communication skills in a disciplinary context. Hay and Delaney (1998) indicate the importance of being able to communicate effectively as a valuable attribute of a university graduate and that this "ability is also vital in fulfilling geography discipline objectives".
- Students require explicit teaching of skills in their first year of university. Chalkley and Harwood (1998, p.6) note that "skills were often not actually taught or made explicit" with students expected "to pick them up".
- Students need to establish good academic writing practices and habits early in their first year of university. Students should be taught ethical principles, including correct methods of acknowledging sources and referencing methods (for example, the Harvard style for geographic research).
- Students often do not appreciate the variety of information sources used by geographers. As Jenkins (1998, p.24) notes, "students often arrive from school or college with a view of knowledge being fixed, written and codified in textbooks".
- Students are not always aware of academic expectations for written work. Students require

progressive feedback to understand academic staff expectations and time to reflect on the development of their written communication skills.

- Students need to develop information literacy skills and understand the use of keywords in library research.
- Students need opportunities for writing in authentic contexts.
- Students need to appreciate the elements involved in fieldwork. Students require opportunities for experiential learning through a focus on the real world.

Strategy

Background

This project aimed to assist students in their transition from secondary school to university by developing their written communication skills in their first session of studying geography at UNSW@ADFA. The first-year geography course taught at UNSW@ADFA in session 1, 2003 was Geography 1B (*Geographies of Contemporary Australia*) with 133 students. This course consisted of four sections:

1. Australia's High Country: a case study
2. Australia's physical landscape: processes and problems
3. Society and environment
4. The geography of Canberra and the ACT: a case study.

The writing experiences used in this project were linked to the theme of Australia's "High Country". The "High Country" theme was chosen for several reasons:

- It was the first course theme taught in the course, and it therefore provided an early opportunity to begin writing tasks for students.
- The theme was the focus of a major section of the course *Geographies of Contemporary Australia* and, as a result, the project was clearly embedded within the course.
- The writing experiences provided a link with the field trip to the "High Country" held early in the first semester.
- Finally, the "High Country" theme provided an authentic context for the written exercises and opportunities for students to understand and make use of the variety of sources used by geographers.

The project employed Rosemary James, a Natural Resource Management Specialist and Evaluator with over 20 years of experience in natural resource management in Australia and overseas. Rosemary's experience as an active researcher in natural resource management issues specifically related to Kosciuszko National Park was especially useful for conducting the role-play, the academic marking of the Discussion paper, and all the MASUS marking. It is important to note that Rosemary's background, role, and involvement was explicitly stated to students at the beginning of the first tutorial. Rosemary's involvement in the class tutorials in weeks 3 and 4 also provided an authentic context to the teaching of writing skills.

How was the project designed to address issues in student learning?

It is important to note that a staged/incremental/scaffolded approach was adopted in the teaching of the writing skills. Students were guided throughout the writing process with much of the content provided for the early writing activities so that students did not get lost in the research phase.

Providing the content allowed students to concentrate on the writing process.

"I liked the staged thing to start off with [others agree] because we're just introduced pretty much to university – to the way it runs and everything, so I think the staged approach is good. And then after that obviously it's a progression".

[Focus Group response, September 2003]

Was it possible to focus on your writing skills because the content was provided?

"I think it's good that they provided it, because you didn't have to worry about the information too much and you could concentrate on your writing – then I think there's a point where you've got to take charge...".

[Focus Group response, September 2003]

Project stages

Multiple opportunities were provided for students to practice their writing, and writing skills were embedded into the curriculum. To achieve this, there were various stages to the project, as outlined below.

Week 3

- A short writing exercise was held in class.
This exercise asked students to discuss in approximately 250–300 words and 30 minutes the following topic: "Brumbies should be removed from Kosciuszko National Park". To obtain a basic level of information, students watched a short (26-minute) ABC video, *Southern Exposure (Volume 1: Brumby Runners)* and read two short newspaper articles on brumbies and wild horses.
- Students used the MASUS criteria to self-assess their writing skills.
Students were encouraged to evaluate and chart their own development with self-assessments using the MASUS criteria in weeks 3, 7, and 14. This charting encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning.
- A role-play took place on high-country land-management issues (for example, grazing and fire).
- Rosemary James used the modified MASUS criteria to assess the short writing exercise.
It should be noted that there was no academic assessment for this exercise. It therefore provided students with an opportunity to see how their writing was going without pressure.

- The goals of the exercises in the tutorial in week 3 were for students to:
 - acknowledge different stakeholder perspectives
 - understand the impact of these perspectives on the selection and presentation of information
 - recognise sources of bias and inaccuracy.

Week 4

- The tutorial included instruction on various aspects of academic writing. Topics covered included the content of a discussion paper and an academic essay, the Harvard referencing system, and the writing process (for example, key stages in writing an essay: mind-mapping, finding information, bibliographic databases, fast writing, and editing your work).
- Students were provided with individual MASUS feedback on the short writing exercise; this feedback also included a discussion of generic writing difficulties. A mock short writing answer was supplied, which required major editing. Students were asked to edit this for the “Mars bar” award.
- A weekend field trip to Kosciuszko was held at the end of weeks 4 and 5.

“... the Brumby one [was] done in class”.

“We watched a video, yeah”.

“And we had half an hour or something to write it in – I thought that was pretty good actually. I mean I thought mine was pretty bad, but then I got feedback and then it said that it was all right for half an hour”.

“The non-assessable tasks served as a good trial run – gave you an opportunity to see how you were going without the pressure”.

Week 6

The discussion paper – a writing exercise of 800 words on the theme of environmental impacts of increased recreation and tourism within Kosciuszko National Park – was due in week

6. By providing students with materials on the topic in week 4, we minimised the opportunity for students to plagiarise, and we also ensured that students had been supplied with reputable articles as their source material. Students still needed to select relevant information from within the articles to answer the question. The discussion paper was marked for academic assessment and also marked using MASUS, with students receiving the MASUS feedback prior to the essay due date.

Week 7

- More emphasis was placed on development of information literacy skills and steps involved in researching a topic in the tutorial in Week 7. This was because a computer classroom was available and because, as part of the staged approach, staff wanted students to concentrate on developing their writing skills and not be overwhelmed by the research phase. This tutorial focused on essay preparation, task, and keywords; it also reinforced the requirements of the Harvard referencing system. Students completed a worksheet, which contributed five per cent to the final essay mark.
- Students undertook another self-assessment of their writing skills using the modified MASUS criteria.

Week 12

- The major essay was due in this week. Essays were checked for plagiarism.

Week 14

- Students undertook the final self-assessment of their writing skills using the modified MASUS criteria.

Session 2, 2003

- A student evaluation questionnaire was mailed out to students.
- Stephanie Wilson from the UNSW Learning and Teaching Unit conducted student focus groups in September.

Feedback from the MASUS diagnostic tool

The project adapted the MASUS (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) diagnostic tool to the particular needs of geographic writing. Sue Starfield from the UNSW Learning Centre suggested the MASUS diagnostic tool in early discussions of the project, and Janet Jones (University of Sydney) and Janet Skillon (University of Wollongong) also provided some advice about the use of MASUS in their respective institutions.

In explaining MASUS feedback to students, we emphasised the following key points:

- Transition into a university environment may be difficult, particularly in regard to developing academic writing skills.
- MASUS enables us to evaluate student needs for additional assistance with academic writing.
- MASUS feedback is targeted, highlighting particular issues and key areas for future development.
- MASUS feedback will be used to focus assistance to the class and, if necessary, individuals (however, individual assistance was limited at ADFA).
- MASUS offers an excellent method of establishing good academic writing skills early in the course.

The five main criteria used in the MASUS are:

- A – use of source material
- B – structure and development of text
- C – control of academic style
- D – grammatical correctness
- E – qualities of presentation.

The MASUS subcriteria used in this study were prepared by Rosemary James, Julie Kesby, and Paul Tranter and modified those developed by Bonanno and Jones (1997).

The MASUS feedback was provided to students so that they had time to reflect on the feedback before the next writing task. So that students had further information on written communication, various sources were made available on noticeboards, classroom handouts, and on the course WebCT site. Students made use of these resources to assist with the writing of the discussion paper and essay.

MASUS self-assessment

It is important to note that the MASUS self-assessment indicated the stage of students' development of writing skills (in other words, it was not a self-assessment of a piece of writing). It was acknowledged that development of their writing skills could be influenced by other academic courses and programs and that students need to take some responsibility for their own development of writing skills. The students did not always take charting this progress as a serious exercise.

Discussion

Benefits

- Students gained important written communication skills in their first year of university, which will assist them throughout their careers.
- Skills were embedded within the curriculum and related to course themes and the field trip. This created authentic writing experiences.
- Students were encouraged to think of writing as a process.
- Students received progressive feedback on their writing skills.
- Nonassessable tasks served as a good trial run and gave students an opportunity to see how they were going without pressure.
- Students were able to learn referencing skills and understand how to avoid plagiarism.
- Students were encouraged to chart their own progress and take responsibility for learning. Students were given time to reflect.
- Feedback was a timely process in addition to academic marking requirements. Staff availability and commitment were required to sustain such activities. MASUS proved to be a very effective diagnostic tool. Both students and staff found the MASUS instrument easy to use.

"I found the ones I did myself – I palmed it off. The staff one was useful but I didn't think marking myself was. I mean I'm not going to hand in something that I think is rubbish so..."

"Only if you were actually serious about filling it out... you could follow your own progress, but it's only useful if you actually wanted to – if you were honest about it. So you either wanted to do it... otherwise it was pointless having it"

[So do you think that some people didn't necessarily see the self-assessment tool as a learning tool?]

[Students agreed that some people didn't use the tool because of laziness.]

[Did you make use of the MASUS feedback criteria as a checklist before submitting your written work?]

[About half indicated that they did.]

Problems encountered

- It was difficult to implement the project when the timing of the award was so close to the beginning of session 1, 2003.
- Time constraints and timetabling issues with a large class for computing facilities created tight scheduling for the project. Other time problems were encountered with catch-up tutorials for public holidays, because we could not force students to attend.
- On entry to university, students have very different skills and writing experiences, and it was sometimes difficult to pitch tutorials so they were not too simplistic – for example, some students were more familiar with Harvard referencing styles than other students were.
- Staff had different expectations about the skills that need to be covered in a first-year geography program. This sometimes created tensions. In the future, this means that there is a need to prioritise skills taught in first-year programs.
- Some students in the course were not first-year students. Some of these students felt that this experience was not relevant to them. (The MASUS assessments, however, indicated that these students could also benefit from more assistance with academic writing.)

“Any difficulties were addressed because you get feedback as the course progressed rather than getting to the end and realising you were on the wrong track the whole time”.

“We [Navy NOYO’s] don’t do MCP [Military Communication Program] and I only had one other course that taught academic writing skills. I found the writing workshops useful but the feedback was the best factor in me improving my writing skills”.

(Student responses to Questionnaire)

References

- Bonanno, H. & Jones, J. 1997, *The MASUS Procedure: Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students*, Learning Centre, University of Sydney.
- Chalkley, B. & Harwood, J. 1998, *Transferable Skills and Work-Based Learning in Geography*, Geography Discipline Network (GDN), Gloucestershire, UK.
- Crone, J. 2001, *Southern Exposure (Volume 1: Brumby Runners)*, Beyond Productions and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, NSW.
- Hay, I. & Delaney, J. 1998, Peer writing groups in Geographical Education [abstract], *Resource Database: Case Studies of Interesting Teaching, Learning and Assessment Practices in Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences in Higher Education*, viewed 4 February 2003, URL: <http://www.chelt.ac.uk/gdn/abstracts/a84.htm>
- Jenkins, A. 1998 *Curriculum Design in Geography*, Geography Discipline Network (GDN), Gloucestershire, UK.

Acknowledgements

The project team wishes to give special thanks to:

- Sue Starfield, Director of The Learning Centre, for her support and advice throughout the project and particularly for suggesting the use of the MASUS tool and assisting with refining the student evaluation questionnaire
- Stephanie Wilson, Project Development Coordinator in the Learning and Teaching Unit, for conducting the two focus groups, assisting with refining the student evaluation questionnaire, and cheerfully supporting us throughout the project
- Michele Scoufis, Director of the Learning and Teaching Unit, for her enthusiastic support throughout this project
- Wanda Jackson, Educational Designer at UNSW@ADFA, for her advice in the early stages of the project and for talking through the student evaluation process, particularly the questionnaire
- Paula Newitt, formerly at UNSW@ADFA and now at the Australian National University, awardee of a First Year Learning and Teaching Grant in 2002, who encouraged the submission of the application
- colleagues within the School of Geography and Oceanography and PEMS, UNSW@ADFA for their encouragement during the various stages of the project in a rather stressful year of restructuring
- finally, the students of Geography 1B for session 1, 2003, for their participation in the project and their willingness to be involved in the focus groups in Session 2, 2003.

More information

For more information on any aspect of this case study, please contact:

Ms Julie Kesby:	j.kesby@adfa.edu.au
Dr Paul Tranter:	p.tranter@adfa.edu.au
Dr Jacky Croke:	j.croke@adfa.edu.au