

A friendly destination: Normalising first-year science student help-seeking through an academic literacy Targeted Learning Session. A Practice Report

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Abstract

A high priority for tertiary institutions in New Zealand, and globally, is for first year students to have a positive experience of higher education. However, a commonly reported issue is student reluctance to access learning support, even when needed (Hoyne & McNaught, 2013). Previous research addressed this issue with a large number of Arts students through introducing Targeted Learning Sessions in which teaching staff and learning support services combined to offer assistance in one place (Cameron, George & Henley, 2012). Our study replicates and develops their successful session with a smaller number of Medical Imaging students. The students reported appreciating timely help from a range of staff on content, structure and information discovery. Staff enjoyed greater interaction with students and the professional collaborative environment. Our findings also highlighted future practical improvements. This study extends previous research, increasing understanding and demonstrating the wider application of Targeted Learning Sessions in normalising help-seeking.

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Introduction

There is a gap between skills learned at school and those needed in higher education (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). It has been noted that students without academic confidence tend to drop out (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). Academic success is important, not only for students but also for academic institutions. Recently, universities and other academic institutions have been measured on their ability to ensure student “destination”, “experience”, and “engagement” (Macken & Bishop, 2009, p. 11). Kift (2008) recommended that in order to support students, staff in academic institutions need to “work together towards more holistic and sustainable, institute-wide, approaches that transcend the silos of academic, administrative and support areas” (p. 2).

This Practice Report describes the trial of a Targeted Learning Session aimed at increasing the participation of first year Medical Imaging (MI) students in accessing academic and information literacy support. The context was an institute of technology in New Zealand. Our aim was to replicate and develop, in our context, the successful Targeted Learning Session held for first year Arts degree students as reported by Cameron et al. (2012). Their sessions targeted a particular assignment and provided access to a number of teaching and learning support staff in one open plan space. This method normalised accessing support and allowed students to seek help specific to their assessment. In our context, we have noticed a reluctance of MI students to seek help from academic support services. Hoyne and McNaught (2013) noted that health science students who most needed help were least likely to seek it. They found a partnership between teaching staff and learning advisors

resulted in lower failure rates. Winograd and Rust (2014) recommended academic support services need to be a “friendly destination” (p. 35). In line with these studies, our research investigated whether a Targeted Learning Session would achieve positive responses and outcomes for MI students and staff.

Medical imaging students and academic support

There is very little documented evidence relating to supporting MI students in the academic environment. However, a study by Gqweta (2012) indicated that final year MI students attributed poor academic success to five key areas including “inadequate and poor preparation, lack or absence of independent study, difficulty in understanding learning material and misinterpretation of assessment questions” (p. 216). MI student cohorts in our institution are often quite diverse. For example, in 2014, the cohort ages ranged from school leaver to mature student (25+), prior education ranged from certificate to postgraduate degree, and ethnicity included eight groups. Diversity has also been noted in other MI programs (Spuur, Falconi, Cowling, Bowman & Maroney, 2012).

Diversity can have implications for student success and retention. For example, a study by Williams and Decker (2009) in the UK found that mature MI students have particular worries and concerns in relation to higher education in terms of writing academic assignments and the feeling that their academic skills were outdated. Williams and Decker also noted that the students were reluctant to seek help due to a fear of looking “silly” in front of their peers. This is a similar type of stigma to that which commonly influences whether

people will seek help for mental health concerns (Corrigan, 2004; Vogel, Wade & Haake, 2006). Therefore, seeking help within a group environment could avoid individuals feeling stigmatised for help-seeking.

Unlike the Arts students in the investigation conducted by Cameron et al. (2012), our MI students study all academic courses as one class, so the need to belong is particularly important. Winograd and Rust (2014) pointed out that belonging is an important factor in student academic achievement. There is potential for various sources of stigma in help-seeking in our MI students as they could be mature students, from minority groups, or they may fear being stigmatised as having low academic ability if they seek academic literacy help in a programme they had to compete to enrol in. To seek help may feel like no longer belonging to the competent group. Therefore, normalising academic help-seeking may be an important factor in facilitating our MI students to engage with academic support.

Methodology and our Targeted Learning Session

The course lecturer, learning advisors and library staff collaborated to run the session. These staff met to ensure mutual awareness of the assessment criteria, aims of the session, and steps needed to make the session happen. Before the session, learning centre and library staff conducted more formal classes teaching key skills such as essay writing, time management, information searching and referencing. Our session was arranged nine days prior to the submission date of the assignment as recommended by Cameron et al. (2012) so that it was not offered too early when students had not started work and so that

students would have enough time to respond to feedback.

Student preparation started two weeks prior to the session, when the course lecturer promoted the session in class and ascertained planned student attendance through an online poll. In line with Cameron et al. (2012), we planned to have staff at various “stations” in the room. (Our stations were small tables spaced along three walls in a square classroom for the student learning centre, librarians and course teacher, respectively). We also followed Cameron et al.’s recommendation to have a positive meet and greet person located at the door to provide a smooth orientation to students and an ongoing welcome to students who came later. The session was also free flowing and students were able to come and go at any time within the session and visit any station as desired. To facilitate student station choice, we also created a set of potential student questions that would guide them to the appropriate station.

To measure the success of our Targeted Learning Session, we needed students and staff members involved to reflect on the value and benefits they experienced. Student feedback came from short evaluation questionnaires (made up of open questions and a four-point satisfaction scale) they completed at the end of the session. The validity of using student self-report mechanisms to measure the success of educational initiatives has been debated for many years. Such results can be impacted by Thorndike’s “halo effect” and so, positively over-inflated (Herzog & Bowman, 2011). To obtain more genuine responses, we informed students that completion of the questionnaire would have no impact on their grades. Staff feedback came from each staff member writing a critical reflection on

what worked and what did not. Loughran (2002) stated that reflection about teaching is essential to learning about teaching. He concluded that reflective practice can include teacher anecdotes from experience that help develop and express professional knowledge.

Outcomes

Benefits

Twenty students (56% of the whole class) attended the session. Of this number, 18 completed the questionnaire, and 16 consented to having their evaluations used in this study. The results showed these students agreed that the targeted session met their needs and expectations. The overall satisfaction rating was 3.6 out of 4. Students reported the most helpful aspects of the session were a particular staff member or department, particular skills they learned, content, the setup of the session, and being able to listen to others. The following comments illustrate satisfaction with our approach:

At the start being put forward to the different sections. It allowed for questions and clarification of my queries. Also listening to others [sic] questions helped my [sic] realise [sic] things I had not thought of. (Student 10)

Having different people available for specific aspects of the assignment. (Student 17)

Clarifying structure of essay. Talking to [the subject librarian] about looking for journal articles specific to my essay. It was good having different people scattered around the room for specific questions. (Student 18)

These comments show satisfaction with the key elements of our approach – i.e. having a variety of people available and the

choice to move between stations as needed. They also showed the value of listening to others' questions to facilitate deepening one's own thinking.

Misinterpretation of assignment questions was mentioned by Gqweta (2012) as a factor in lack of academic success for MI students. Some of our students mentioned the session helped them to understand what was required. The following quotes illustrate this:

Talking to [course teacher] and now knowing what direction I have to do [sic] for my reflection. (Student 11)

Checking that I was on track. (Student 4)

Overall, these comments suggest that, similar to the Arts students in the report by Cameron et al. (2012), the MI students also engaged with a Targeted Learning Session.

Positive outcomes for the course lecturer, learning centre staff and the librarians also arose from our reflections. The course lecturer noticed that she only received three enquiry emails leading up to the assignment in comparison with a typical number of 20 in previous years. Her students achieved similar grades for this assignment to students from the previous year. This is positive because it was their first written assignment, whereas in previous years it was the fourth assignment. All students who attended the targeted session passed the assessment. Higher levels of engagement were cited by Macken and Bishop (2009) as one of the key measures of university performance. The learning centre staff observed that more students accessed learning centre support in this one session than within the learning centre in the entire previous year (2012). Library staff noted that some students refined and built on information literacy skills they had learnt in the earlier

in-class workshop. In addition, it was also noted that some students who had missed the prior session accessed this support during the Targeted Learning Session. Kift (2008) mentioned the importance of breaking down academic and support service “silos” (p. 2). We found the stronger professional interactions deepened our understanding of each other’s roles and the student needs from different perspectives. This gave us greater insight into how we could collectively support student success. Overall, student and staff feedback showed that this Targeted Learning Session had many positive outcomes.

Improvements

Feedback from students and staff reflections suggested future improvements in the areas of managing student expectations, staff preparation, and room preparation. With regard to managing student expectations, some students in the session asked for full drafts of their work to be read; however, time restrictions prevented this and the purpose of the session was to ask questions rather than to have drafts read. Therefore a future improvement may be for the course lecturer to ensure the students understand this.

Some students expressed a wish for more guidance on assignment structure or content. One student commented:

Thought it was really good but maybe [course lecturer] could explain her expectations of essay structure to [learning centre] so [learning centre] is aware what structure would be best. (Student 3)

This indicated a gap in the understanding of assignment structure requirements between the course lecturer and learning advisors. Such gaps can occur when staff work in isolation or in “silos” as Kift (2008)

described them. Even though we did meet to discuss assessment requirements in advance, different assumptions were made regarding possible assignment structures. Therefore an improvement in staff preparation would be for staff to work together to discover preconceptions and ensure uniformity of message to the students. Some students also wanted more guidance on assignment content. This was more problematic as in our context there was only one course lecturer. Therefore, an improvement could be to facilitate an additional content only session soon after the Targeted Learning Session.

The main improvements suggested for room preparation focused on furniture spacing and provision. The initial room layout proved problematic as a cluster of students started at the closest desk to the greeting area, perhaps thinking they needed to visit each station in order. Therefore, a suggested room layout is to have more space around the greeting desk with an array of stations placed far enough away so that students can make a conscious decision about where to start rather than possibly defaulting to the nearest table. In addition, we also suggest wider spacing between stations so there is less distraction from nearby conversations. Regarding furniture provision, we observed that although the session ran for two hours, most of the students came early and numbers dropped off after 90 minutes. Therefore an improvement could be to provide some individual worktables. For example, having other tables set aside within the same room for students to stay and work. They could then re-engage with the enquiry stations if questions arose, and the room would not feel like it was becoming empty. We were concerned that an emptying room may make remaining students feel uncomfortable.

Loughran (2002) stated that teacher knowledge grows through documenting concrete examples from which practitioners can learn. Our Practice Report documents that a Targeted Learning Session was effective in terms of engagement and positive outcomes for staff and science students. We acknowledge that our research is based on a small number of first-year students. In addition, our students have relatively strong educational backgrounds as they had to compete to get into the MI programme. Accordingly, our findings may not be directly applicable to other contexts, but they offer a further example that adds important considerations to the development of Targeted Learning Sessions as a collaborative learning support model that creates a friendly destination for students.

Conclusion

This project has been a successful replication and development of the work described by Cameron et al. (2012). Although they engaged with a large number of Arts students, we found a Targeted Learning Session was also effective with a small group of MI students. We found that students appreciated a greater level of access to support services, and our efforts to normalise help-seeking. In addition, the collaborative process increased levels of professional connection and satisfaction among staff. Furthermore, we gained useful insight for further improvements to the session. We encourage others to adopt and develop Targeted Learning Sessions in their context, and to report their experiences.

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