

Valuing individual consultations as input into other modes of teaching

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While Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers evaluate our work in a variety of ways, an emphasis on quantifying outcomes may mean that the value of individual teaching is seriously underestimated. This is because a large part of its value, in its institutional context, is as *input* into the development of other modes of teaching. Individual consultations (ICs) allow us to understand students' good reasons for bad writing, on the basis of which we can design sympathetic, richer, and more relevant learning experiences for larger groups of students. This article discusses the reasons why ICs as input are likely to be under-reported and, from the author's ICs, records a variety of insights gained into student problems at the levels of word choice, sentence structure, paragraphing, and referencing. It suggests that many of these problems stem from students' lack of awareness of the discipline cultures that generate the questions, tasks, and literacy practices which puzzle them. The article refers to pedagogy and curriculum the author has developed to address these problems, and concludes by urging ALL advisers to highlight the contribution of ICs to their other modes of teaching when evaluating their work.

Key Words: individual consultation, one-to-one, evaluation, discipline cultures.

1. Introduction

While Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers evaluate our work in a variety of ways, an emphasis on quantifying outcomes may mean that the value of individual teaching is seriously underestimated because a large part of its value is as *input* into the development of other modes of teaching. Elsewhere, I have discussed the difficulties of measuring the effects of one-to-one teaching on individual students' learning, and suggested ways in which its value might be demonstrated nonetheless (Chanock, 2002). Here, I would like to focus on another aspect of its value, not only for individuals but for the institution as a whole – that is, its function in informing our design of classes and curriculum for larger groups of students. The near-invisibility of this function, I will argue, is partly owing to our not reporting it; and if we wish to maintain our individual teaching in the face of economic rationalization, we will need to give more attention to this crucial relationship between individual and group teaching.

Routines of evaluation have developed rapidly in universities in response to the imposition, via government management of the higher education sector, of a culture of “quality assurance” adopted from the business world. The language of business, with its instrumental and market-oriented frame of reference, was initially distasteful to many academics who anticipated tensions between treating students as customers and challenging them as developing minds. None-

theless, the idea that universities should be accountable to the community has become widely accepted (though what that should mean is certainly open to interpretation) (Rhoden & McLean, 2002, p. 234). Two principles in particular have shaped the development of evaluative procedures: quantification of output (for example, research and student course completions), and the importance of students as stakeholders in education (whether viewed as customers in their own right and/or as human resources for the community). In Australia, these principles together have produced the Course Experience Questionnaire (McInnis *et al.*, 2001), a nationally administered instrument which has been used to rank universities and currently to determine additional government funding from the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund. Further, the universities' own Student Evaluation of Teaching questionnaires must be completed by students as they leave each subject during their degree, to inform teaching staff of what worked well and what may be in need of improvement (for an example, see The University of Newcastle, http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/cpr/university_surveys/set.html; for a broader discussion, see Santhanam *et al.*, 2000). As this type of questionnaire is not well suited to evaluating individual sessions, ALL advisers must be resourceful in developing more appropriate questionnaires, or other kinds of documentation (e.g., Chanock, 2002).

To critique this cultural shift from the point of view of ALL advisers would be a very large and complex task. Its implications for our practice have been mixed: with a welcome institutional focus on student learning comes a challenge to quantify our part in it. This may result in metrics for reporting our effectiveness (McLean & Perez, 1997; Rhoden & McLean, 2002), and/or in ways of explaining why other ways of valuing are more appropriate (Devlin, 1997; Chanock, 1997). Cartwright and Noone (2002), for example, recommend an approach to evaluation that "tries to describe, interpret, inform and illuminate, rather than to measure and predict" (p. 5). Either way, ALL advisers may feel the exercise is beneficial. "We believe," write Webb, Zhang, and Sillitoe (2002):

[that] as a consequence of adopting an 'evaluation mindset', our understandings of student learning needs have been enhanced and our programs are more effective. Further, it is evident to us that the approach has led to students and staff ascribing more credibility to what we do and it has increased our confidence as professionals (p. 120).

The "evaluation mindset" may indeed offer opportunities to foster institutional appreciation of one-to-one teaching, but there is little evidence of this as yet (for a valuable discussion of ambivalence and misinformation around ICs, see Woodward-Kron, forthcoming). In this article, I wish to focus on one of the benefits that has not received much attention in the literature, and may be neglected also in ALL units' reporting to managers within our institutions. This is the benefit of insights gained from listening to students one-to-one, which then inform advisers' thinking about the kinds of classes and materials needed to raise awareness *more widely* of the problems and misconceptions that come to light during individual consultations. Attempts to measure the effectiveness of ALL programs by counting numbers of students seen, numbers of classes taught, and quantities of materials produced, can undermine institutional support for one-to-one teaching if these insights are omitted. As pressure mounts on universities' budgets, it is natural that they look for economies of scale, and where administrators see classes as an alternative to individual consultations, it seems logical to require ALL advisers to say their piece once to a group of students, rather than over and over to each new student who consults us. This is consistent with what Brackley and Palmer (2002) call "a bureaucratic logic of accounting Central to [which] is an economic model of teaching and learning that primarily seeks to reduce wastage" (p. 101; see also Crozier, 2005).

However, in a useful analysis of the real costs of false economies of scale, May (2006) reports that when ICs were discontinued in her institution, "We no longer see students; therefore we no longer have their version of their problems". Indeed, individual sessions are not wasteful compared with classes, for these are not alternative, but linked, modes of teaching. If classes are to be effective, they must address the reasons why students are doing less than their best work, and I will argue that we can discover these reasons fully only by listening to students. Some of

this listening, moreover, has to happen in the context of close work on texts that individual students have written for their subjects. This is because often it is only in the course of discussing the details of a text that unhelpful assumptions that students bring to their writing, as well as communication glitches between lecturers and students, are discovered. Such discussions provide, as Pardoe (2000) puts it, “the opportunity to try to understand the *origins* of the unsuccessful aspects of students’ texts” (p. 125). When we find that some assumptions and communication failures are common, we can design classes or curriculum to deal with them; but without this input from individual teaching, many of the needs that classes can address would simply remain undiscovered.

2. Under-reporting in the literature

This idea is by no means new. It was precisely the focus of twenty-eight papers published in the Proceedings of the 1996 National Language and Academic Skills Conference (Chanock, Burley & Davies, 1997) on the theme “What do we learn from teaching one-to-one that informs our work with larger numbers?” This was not followed, however, by further publications exploring the relationships between individual and group teaching, probably not because there are no such relationships, but because we take them for granted to such an extent that they “go without saying”. For example, if we look at the contributions to the useful collection titled *Academic skills advising: Evaluating for program improvement and accountability* (Webb & McLean, 2002), we find authors reporting a range of sources on which they based their needs analyses, but these do not include the background of one-to-one teaching.

Webb, Zhang and Sillitoe (2002, pp. 108-109), in recounting how they developed study guides for Economics students, mention a needs analysis based on “close consultation with students and colleagues in the Department of Applied Economics and the SLU [Student Learning Unit]”; selection of topics “typically featured in academics skills texts and workshop programs”; consultation of the subject texts; and contributions and feedback from subject lecturers. Murphy and Stewart (2002) designed a program in response to the “subject lecturer’s perception ... that the first-year students ... had difficulties in accessing the culture of the discipline of law because of its procedures, specialized language and requirement to synthesise an argument” (p. 59). Ellis, Haigh and Holford (2002) used a diagnostic writing exercise to gauge the weaknesses of science students for whom they designed integrated writing instruction and practice. Taylor and Galligan (2002, p. 136), similarly, used a “Mathematical Readiness Test” to sort students into modules to “refresh their knowledge”, and a needs assessment based on “economics lecturers’ perspectives, and ... an analysis including set texts, study books, introductory books and assessment tasks” and questionnaires to “ascertain the needs of students’ in various aspects of numeracy” (p. 142).

“Lecturers’ perspectives” are clearly a common source of input on the needs of students, especially when designing collaborative projects. Thus, Samuelowicz and Chase (2002) responded to their Agriculture Department’s concerns “that are familiar to all academic advisers: the student’s inability to answer the question, formulate an argument, and use evidence to support it; the students not studying throughout the semester, or not relating what they are learning to the real world; and the like” (p. 168). They devised lectures on “approaches to learning ... problem solving ... [and] assignment writing ... and concentrated on topic analysis, forming an argument and structuring the supporting evidence” (p. 168).

These articles all report interesting and effective programs, designed in collaboration with lecturers in the disciplines, to meet needs either evident from the subject materials or perceived by the lecturers. This creates an impression that decisions about what students needed to know were very “top-down”; but is it likely that the ways in which the authors chose to address these needs were uninformed by their experience of talking with individual students about their difficulties? In fact, an intriguing hint of something of this kind of input appears in Brackley and Palmer’s (2002) account of a collaboration between a lecturer and an ALL adviser to integrate skills development into a Masters course for mental health nurses.

The academic skills adviser in this project was being visited by a large number of students doing professional Master's degrees who were seeking to improve their writing. Often there was a difference between the lecturer's feedback on students' work and what was actually required to improve students' writing skills. The gap between this feedback and what students might need to do had profound effects on some students who, as articulate professionals in their own field, felt incompetent and could not see what they needed to do to improve their work. The academic skills adviser became involved because of excessive demands on his time, both in working individually with students and in meeting requests from lecturers to conduct one-off study skills sessions in their classes (p. 94).

While the last sentence suggests that individual consultations are wasteful compared with group programs, the second sentence raises questions about this assumption. How did the authors know that "there was a difference between the lecturer's feedback and what was actually required to improve students' writing skills"? This would seem to be the kind of knowledge that could only come from talking with students and looking closely at their work for their subjects.

Of course, it is not possible to conjure up what is *not* said in other people's writing, but it is arguable that insights from individual consultations may not be discussed much in the literature because they belong to what has been called (rather disparagingly) "practitioners' lore" (see North, 1984) – the things, that is, that advisers learn incidentally in the course of conversation, rather than collecting them by methods recognized as research (such as surveys, interviews, or focus groups). In 1990, when she and North retired from editing *The Writing Center Journal*, Brannon alluded to the difficulty of authorizing such lore as knowledge:

I think we need a way of thinking about the local knowledge that we construct ... and how we think about teaching, which seems to be locally contingent and anecdotal, but very powerful The question then becomes how do we take that and represent it in such a way that it can be useful to other centers (Brannon, North, Kinkead & Harris, 1990, p. 6).

North concurred that, in editing the Journal, "we didn't read enough manuscripts like that, and along the way we didn't encourage enough manuscripts like that from other people" (Brannon, North, Kinkead & Harris, 1990, p. 5); and he attributed this neglect to the priority of establishing writing centre scholarship as academically credible. We should be wary of perpetuating this problem by undervaluing what we learn in the course of individual consultations. Otherwise, we are likely to share the frustration we hear from students who tell us, when asked to reference certain insights in their work, "but I just know these things – I've learned them on the job!" (see, for example, Jessup 2001).

A further difficulty with harnessing "lore" is that it is cumulative, and advisers are unlikely to recognise a pattern the first few times it is encountered. For example, I recently discovered that a student believed her discipline was using Turnitin in order to prevent students from consulting sources on the internet. This perception may turn out to be more widespread, and I will need to document it each time I hear it from a student. Otherwise, by the time I know that something is a shared concern, I may have failed to document it several times.

3. Kinds of insights accessible through individual teaching

As is apparent from the articles touched on above, advisers have a range of sources from which to learn what students need to be told about university study. These include advisers' own reflections on their experiences as learners and as writers; "how-to-study" books; subject guides and tasks; lecturers' concerns about their students' unsatisfactory performance in particular areas; students' assignments; and students themselves. The first three sources tell us what students should be doing, and the next two tell us what they are not doing (that they should be); but I find it is only by talking with students one-to-one about specific pieces of writing in

response to specific assignments that I learn *why* they do what they do, and why they don't do what they don't. This process is well illustrated in Ivanic's (1998) accounts of conversations with students at the University of Lancaster about their work-in-progress for their subjects. Only through such conversations could Ivanic learn, as she says, about "aspects of the text which cannot be known from its surface features alone" (p. 192). These ranged from unexpected reasons for using – or not using – quotation marks to signal quotations, to dissonance stemming from tensions in students' attitudes towards the academic identities they may, or may not, feel called upon to adopt.

If managers think that advisers can guide students effectively in a "top-down" fashion, it may be because they share the assumption, which Ann Johns (1997) has found to be widespread among lecturers, that there is a single set of academic values:

good writing, effective reading, careful listening and note-taking, and sound critical thinking ... Most faculty believe quite sincerely that literacy instructors can teach students some generalized approaches to each of these academic values, which will serve the students in every context and disciplinary culture (p. 34).

When communicating with our colleagues in the disciplines, and with the managers we report to, I think we need to problematise the assumption that writing well is a matter of conforming to "generalised" rules and conventions, and that students write poorly because they are ignorant of these, or else ignore them. According to this logic, if only we supply the rules and monitor the students' practice, they should improve. That they do not improve with remedial approaches is well-recognised among ALL advisers, and is not surprising (see Rose, 1983). Advisers' recommendations have to make sense to students if they are to integrate them into their schemata for studying, and that sense must start from the meanings that students have already made.

Through years of individual consultations, I have learned where gaps lie between many students' understandings and the ones they need to acquire. I have found, moreover, that poor writing is often the result of trying to conform to known rules of good writing which are inadequate to the situation. One example is the "dawn of time" introduction, in which the writer begins an essay with some version of "Since the dawn of time, humankind has wondered about ...". Tutors tend to dismiss this as "waffle", but the student knows that essays should begin with some justification of the importance of the topic; and when a topic is important only in the context of a discipline, students who are not attuned to the discipline can have a hard time seeing any justification for it. They therefore make a valiant attempt to "invoke" (Ede & Lunsford, 1984) an audience of interested members of the public, however improbable. Pardoe (2000) concurs that:

Like many other researchers, I often find that apparent problems in student writing do not simply represent a *lack* of skills, knowledge or understanding by students. Unsuccessful texts are often the result of students drawing on familiar ways of learning and writing that have served them well elsewhere, in their previous education, or in other areas of their lives (p. 125).

At the level of word choice, I have learned that students often misuse "reporting verbs": "Bloggs thinks/believes/speculates/supposes/proposes/professes/claims/points out/discusses/argues/contends/(and even) enforces". They do this, not in order to make a particular kind of claim about Bloggs's stance, but because they think it is boring to always write "Bloggs says/writes/states ...", and they are trying to vary their expression. The same impulse accounts for the misuse of conjunctions, such as "however" for "furthermore". Both of these categories of words are considered crucial by the tutors who mark the work: "reporting" verbs carry the interplay of ideas within the discipline, while conjunctions structure the development of argument. When students misuse these, it is not because they are ignoring what they have been told about good writing, but because they are trying to do what they have been told is important: to vary their choice of words to keep their writing lively and interesting. This is not something that I could

have guessed, however, without hearing it over and over from students as I question them about particular word choices in the essays they show me.

Similarly, at the level of the sentence, I have learned that students write run-on sentences (comma splices) not because they do not know what a sentence is, but because they know that a sentence “expresses a complete idea”, so they press on until their idea is complete. At a paragraph level, they write paragraphs with internal divisions – visually, a sort of sub-paragraph – not because they do not know that a paragraph should develop a single point or topic, but because they want to show that they are aware that their focus, emphasis, or level of generality has shifted *to some degree* but they are still talking about the same point. Now, in one of my open lectures to students, I use this discovery as a way into teaching paragraph construction (Chanock, 1997). Talking with individual students gives me more respect for, as well as more insight into, their dilemmas and decisions, as it reveals not ignorance or inattention to generic ideas of good writing, but a struggle to conform to them when they are inappropriate.

Individual consultations can shed light not only on problems with the mechanics of writing, but also on problems with understanding its purposes. Most fundamentally, I have learned how important it is for students to know that many subjects in the BA are designed to involve them in the construction of knowledge. That many do not know this is shown by their puzzlement at the kinds of assignments that try to position them as apprentice members of the discipline. Why, they wonder, do they have to explicate primary sources when experts have already done that, and found out whatever there was to know about these? Why reinvent the wheel? And when they are asked to identify the differences between scholars’ writings on the same topic – for example, in my Faculty, a first-year Politics question asks students to compare two scholars’ definitions of a “nation” – they often cannot see much difference, if any, because these are not disagreements about facts – what happened – but about the meaning of facts for the discipline. When asked which definition of the nation is “more useful”, they cannot see how this is a question – useful for what? Academics think of theories as useful (or not) in helping to gain insight into a phenomenon, but for many subjects this is a kind of utility *within the discipline*, where “problems” are questions that need to be understood, for the most part, rather than bad situations that need to be resolved (see, e.g., Willis, 1999, Ch. 2).

Discipline blindness is evident, too, when students are asked for their opinions. Outside of university, “opinion” usually means “what you like” or “where you stand on a contentious matter”, and students often give their personal or their civic opinion (again, about what should be done to fix a bad situation) instead of a reasoned argument about the meaning of evidence in the discipline. Problems with referencing, likewise, suggest discipline blindness when students are reluctant to reference their work in case, as they tell me, it “looks like I didn’t have any ideas of my own”. They do not realise that their ideas are supposed to be about other scholars’ ideas, which means that they cannot express their own ideas without referring to sources. Meyer (1988) has pointed out that the words which cause most trouble in the transition to university are the ones that have a different meaning in academic usage from their more common meaning, such as “opinion” or “argument”. Conversations with students enable us to see the misunderstandings around these words as related to the invisibility – at least at first – of disciplinary cultures. These problems, too, I have addressed in resources for students, both in open lectures with the series title, “Writing Better Essays” (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/supportunits/hasu.html#workshops>), and in a document my Faculty has posted on the web for lecturers to refer their students to. This document – “Using sources in your writing” (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/supportunits/hasu.html#handouts>) – was intended, and is being used, to mediate the legalistic approach of other university documents designed to deter plagiarism.

4. “Input” into ALL advisers’ output

Without reading students’ assignments, I would not know what questions to ask; then, without individual consultations, I would not get the answers; and without this input, I would not be able to target relevant problems in classes and materials for larger numbers. For example, where

many “how to study” books advise students to analyse their essay topics by identifying the key words, my aim is to go further and advise them to understand their topics by asking themselves how each topic relates to the project of constructing knowledge within the discipline that generated the question. This line of questioning informs not only my ICs, but my “Writing Better Essays” lectures (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/supportunits/hasu.html#workshops>), and my “guest lectures” in discipline subjects whose coordinators ask me to talk to their classes about reading and writing for their subject. Since 1995, I have used such insights from ICs to design curriculum used in first-year subjects in the disciplines across my Faculty. Using a kit I have provided, discipline tutors take twenty minutes of each of their first five tutorials to focus on the construction of knowledge within disciplines; the use of primary sources; the structure of academic argument; writing from sources; and critical thinking. This program has been published as an appendix to my HERDSA Guide (Chanock, 2004), which allowed me to share with discipline staff a range of insights gained from teaching one-to-one. These classes and publications are the sorts of things that evaluations typically report; but often without mentioning the critical input from individual consultations.

5. Conclusion

Individual consultations are only one source of knowledge about our students’ learning. I would argue, however, that what we learn from ICs is what makes ALL group teaching richer, more pointed, and more persuasive than it would otherwise be, because it starts from students’ own understandings and respectfully acknowledges their thinking. There is very often a good reason for a bad piece of writing, and advisers can make more sense to students by starting from that reason (“in my experience, people often do this because ... / are reluctant to do this because...”), rather than repeating advice that has not helped students before. Individual consultations are crucial for discovering those good reasons, and when we report an effective workshop or a fruitful collaboration, I argue that we owe it to ourselves, our institutions and our students, to articulate and report where the insights originated that led to the “work with larger numbers”.

[*Editor’s note added 20 March 2007:* In support of the arguments of this paper, note that in 2006 the author received from Australia’s Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, an inaugural Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning “For transforming insights gained from work with individual students into an innovative, integrated program of academic skills development across a diverse Arts Faculty.” (<http://www.dest.gov.au/Ministers/Media/Bishop/2006/07/B002100706.asp>)]

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