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Helping university students to 'read' scholarly journal articles: the benefits of a structured and collaborative approach

Abstract
Academics often treat students' discipline-specific literacy as unproblematic. In doing so they may underestimate the difficulties for university students as they move between subjects of study that may involve different disciplines, language genres and academic practices. This paper describes an initiative aimed at supporting students in reading academic articles in preparation for completing an essay for an assessment task. This initiative involved a structured and collaborative two-week tutorial exercise that provided students with practice in using a framework to extract the main ideas from academic readings. Students were surveyed after this exercise, and their reflections of its value are described in this paper. The findings of this study will inform further stages of the project which aim to develop and investigate practical ways to develop student's academic literacy across several business disciplines.

Keywords
academic literacy, reading skills, discipline-specific learning

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Introduction

"Kellie" is enrolled in a Bachelor of Commerce degree at a large Australian university. She is majoring in human-resource management (HRM) and is in her second year of study. One of the subjects she is currently studying requires her to write an essay for which she must draw on the research literature about strategic HRM. Kellie is used to writing essays as part of her assessment requirements across different units, but is concerned about finding the right literature and understanding it well enough to use it in her essay. A major challenge is the need to highlight the practical nature of the information from the literature. Her classmate "Mai" has an additional challenge. While Kellie is a domestic (local Australian) student, Mai is an international, full fee-paying student who comes from other country where English is not her first language of communication and study. Mai decided to enrol in the HRM unit because a friend was also enrolled in it. Mai has experience in writing essays in her native language but she struggles with reading and writing in English. After a few weeks of studying this HRM unit, she is still confused by the terminology and wishes she had chosen a different major, like accounting.

Classrooms in Australian universities, particularly within business schools and faculties, are full of students like Kellie and Mai who may be faced with various literacy challenges. These challenges may include the acquisition of basic language skills in the case of international students (Moloney 2004; McLoughlin 1995); the development of general "tertiary literacy" (Ballard & Clanchy 1988) or "academic literacy" (Mateos et al. 2007); socialisation into particular academic discourses (Alexander et al. 2009; Street 2004) and development of professional literacy (Pinder 2007). Learning is complex for all students as they switch between different language genres and academic practices (Benzie 2010) when moving from one discipline, class or assessment task to another (Mateos et al. 2007).

Academics tend to assume that language proficiency is developed elsewhere in the university (Benzie 2010) and to trust that discipline-specific and professional literacy will develop from mere exposure to the discipline knowledge. The practice proposed in this paper makes the reverse assumption: that discipline-specific literacy needs to be taught and not assumed by academics. The particular initiative described in this article was aimed at supporting students in reading academic articles in the HRM discipline to prepare them for completing an essay for assessment.

Reading and learning in the discipline

In the management and HRM disciplines it is common practice to expect students to read scholarly academic journal articles as part of either stand-alone activities or in preparation for a written assessment task. The scholarly literature provides a foundation for students who may wish to pursue research in HR and provides important knowledge they will need as future HR professionals. The activity of reading internalises and applies academic literature as part of a student’s apprenticeship into the academic discourse of the discipline (Duff 2007).

However, students (international students in particular) face considerable challenges in reading English-language academic articles in the discipline. Reading is not just about a student’s text-processing skills, nor is just decoding textual material to extract its meaning. Instead, it is an "active, complex process of making meaning in which a reader draws information from several sources and concurrently constructs a representation of a text's message" (McLoughlin 1995, p29). Students also need to integrate their prior knowledge to construct new meaning and knowledge from text (McLoughlin 1995). This is particularly problematic for international students, whose prior knowledge must be interpreted through a different cultural lens (Astika 2000). Further, these

students may have to "disengage themselves from the rules that govern thinking and language" in their native culture (McLoughlin 1995, p29) if they are to operate effectively in an Australian university classroom.

In addition to decoding textual materials, students need to understand the form and structure of academic articles and adapt their reading strategies for different learning tasks and disciplines (Mateos et al. 2007). Disciplines also have their own specialised vocabulary and "register" (or formality) that present challenges for students new to the discipline (Green 2009). For example, in the management/HR disciplines, students are required to understand and engage in a social-scientific debate much more so than they might in accounting and finance. Reading in preparation for essay-writing requires students to find, organise and synthesise information from various sources. Clearly, students must have a certain level of literacy to communicate their understanding of the readings, and adequately represent their perspectives and opinions in written form.

Both reading and writing can be difficult for students (Rachal et al. 2007), especially those who are studying courses in their second language (Moloney 2004). As a consequence, native and non-native speakers alike may require some intervention from discipline teachers to ensure that they learn how to read journal articles and synthesise the new knowledge they provide into their own writing.

Supporting students in reading academic journal articles

It is not enough to simply tell students to "go and read" (Railton & Watson 2005). Fortunately, the teaching and learning literature provides considerable guidance to discipline teachers in how to support and develop students' reading skills. This guidance falls into four main categories: a) providing the rationale for the task (e.g. Finlay & Faulkner 2010); b) providing students with a starting point for their reading (e.g. Rachal et al. 2007); c) providing relevance cues to direct their reading (e.g. McCrudden & Schraw 2010); and d) encouraging collaboration among learners (e.g. Finlay & Faulkner 2010).

First, the evidence from the literature suggests that the rationale for the reading must be made explicit. Research indicates that it is very hard to get students to read academic journal articles without an explicit, compelling purpose (Finlay & Faulkner 2010; Mateos et al. 2007). Therefore, the reading task should be consistent with the goals of the subject of study and the assessment criteria. That is, there should be a constructive alignment (Biggs 1999) between these factors to foster authenticity to the task and the discipline (Astika 2000). While "authenticity" is a highly contested term, Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003) have emphasised, based upon their extensive literature review, that learning activities are authentic when they are seamlessly integrated with assessment and engage students to examine the task from different perspectives. Through the proposed exercise, we aim to foster students' authentic learning of reading academic journal articles, which can also be applied to other discipline areas (Herrington et al. 2003).

Second, it is important to provide students with a starting point to access the necessary readings for the task. Rachal et al. (2007) reported that 49 percent of students in their survey had difficulty finding the information they needed for their essay. This difficulty is compounded when students are novices in a discipline and, in the case of professional disciplines such as HRM, have difficulty in distinguishing the "scholarly" academic literature from the professional or trade literature. Accordingly, it is important to provide students with an entry point into the discipline literature by

directing them to the appropriate databases, providing keywords to use in searching and providing them with sample readings.

Third, assuming the task is authentic to students and that they are provided with guidance in what type of literature to read, teachers can further support students’ learning by giving them explicit instructions and criteria to meet the task's objectives. McCrudden and Schraw (2010) describe this type of support as "relevance instructions". These instructions may include advice about what content to focus on as part of the reading, and how to decode the text or directions about the main features of the reading. Relevance instructions are important, as they direct students’ reading skills, attention and time to improve their efficiency in using text resources (McCrudden & Schraw 2010). Relevance instructions may include both pre- and post-reading advice or performance tasks.

Finally, collaborative approaches through group work can be useful for getting students to read more widely and critically, and to construct meaning from texts (Finlay & Faulkner 2010). Collaborative approaches recognise the social nature of learning and knowledge acquisition (Palincsar 1998). They are authentic because collaboration is necessary in "real world" settings (Herrington et al. 2003). Collaboration is central to the development of disciplines or "learning communities" (Lave & Wenger 1991), wherein students develop experience of the discourse, norms and practices of the community. Collaboration requires students to take a more active role in explaining their thinking, discussing areas of disagreement and cooperating to find solutions to differences of opinions or to complex problems (Finlay & Faulkner 2010). This heightened activity from students can lead to greater learning as students adopt and internalise the ideas of others and engage in deeper cognitive processing in the course of explaining their thinking to their peers (Palincsar 1998).

There may be further advantages for learning when groups include culturally diverse students with different skills, experiences and orientations. However, the instructor needs to employ explicit strategies to provide opportunities for students to learn from each other and collaborate so that they can construct their understanding of knowledge in the discipline. Further, group work can inhibit group sense-making if the contributions of some individuals or some sub-groups are discounted or dismissed (Palincsar 1998). Therefore, it is important that the teacher monitors the group process to maintain the optimal conditions for learning.

These ideas for supporting students in reading for academic purposes informed the practice examined in this paper. The problem addressed is how best to support students in their reading of academic articles in preparation for completing an essay for assessment. The following section describes this practice, its broader context and the method used to evaluate student’s experience of the support they received.

Context and practice: a strategic HRM undergraduate class

Strategic HRM is a core subject in a major offered as part of a Bachelor of Commerce at a large Australian university. It is offered once a year as a 12-week course for students enrolled both on- and off-campus. Off-campus students are those who study on-line and do not attend the university for face-to-face classes. For on-campus students, the unit is taught via a two-hour weekly lecture and a one-hour weekly tutorial. A total of 250 students were enrolled in the subject in 2010. These students were a mix of Australian domestic and international full-fee-paying students. Most were

completing an HRM specialisation, some of these in combination with other specialisations such as management, marketing, psychology and finance.

The formal assessment for the unit included a requirement that each student complete an essay that formed 20 per cent of their final grade. The essay required students to respond to a widely contested question in the current HRM discourse: whether HRM serves people or profit. Specifically, students were asked to write an academic essay based on their critical analysis of the following statement:

"Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is central to organisations' strategic management process, as SHRM deals with people rather than profit."

Students were given several recent HRM articles relating to employee wellbeing in the Australian context, and its significance for people or profit. The articles were selected carefully by the subject teaching team for their readability and relevance to the topic. The readings used typical HRM terms and discourse.

The activity described in this paper was designed to help students begin their assignment task by providing them with guidance about how to read and extract information from a journal article. The journal-reading activity for their essay writing was designed to address four of the unit aims:

- analyse the growing importance of Strategic Human Resource Management in relation to competitive pressures facing organisations;
- collect, integrate and critically analyse information from academic sources using standard research techniques, and construct an original, logical written discussion that demonstrates an understanding of the information collected;
- work with others on nominated activities in a cooperative and effective manner; and
- communicate and work effectively with people from different cultures within Australia and the world.

The activity was designed as a two-step collaborative process. In the first week of the activity (Week 4 of a 12-week subject), the teacher introduced the activity by explaining its aims and process. Students were informed that its objectives were to help them:

1) identify key themes from academic journals;

2) understand how the key themes can be applied to HR functions (e.g. recruitment and selection; performance appraisals); and

3) understand how to integrate theories and practices in completing the essay.

For on-campus students, teachers randomly divided students into groups of six, and each group was given a different academic journal article to read. Off-campus students were asked to select one of three articles provided on the electronic learning system. The students, however, were required to respond to the article individually, rather than as part of a group. In both cases, the

teacher selected the articles bearing in mind need to ensure they were relevant to the essay topic and represented the type of literature students were required to use to write the essay.

Students were also given some "relevance instructions" (McCrudden & Schraw 2010) in the form of a framework that asked them to read the article (individually) to extract the following information: (1) year; (2) author/s; (3) journal/book; (4) title; (5) main focus of paper; (6) three major authors cited and their contribution; and (7) main implications for managers (e.g. practical implication for HR managers). On-campus students were asked to read the article and individually fill in the framework prior to the next week’s tutorial. Off-campus students were asked to post their completed framework to an online discussion forum. The framework provided a focus for the students and was aimed at increasing the efficiency with which they used their time and academic resources (McCrudden & Schraw 2010).

In the second week of the activity, each group of on-campus students was given 20 minutes to discuss the themes they had identified. Off-campus students were encouraged to do likewise in their online forum, but they were not assigned to small groups for this purpose. Students were asked to focus their discussion on the themes they had each identified from the readings. The teacher instructed them to share their individual understanding of the article and agree on a response for each of the items in the framework. For on-campus students, at the end of group interactions one spokesperson was nominated from each group to share what they had learned with the whole class.

Finally, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire so that we could understand how they had experienced the task, and the benefits (if any) they had received from the exercise. The questionnaire, administered with the approval of the University’s Human Ethics Committee, included some demographic questions and a series of closed (yes/no) and open-ended questions. The questions asked students about the following matters:

- the usefulness of the exercise for identifying the major focus and key themes of the reading and the key contributions of the main authors;
- its usefulness for writing the essay assignment and understanding the application of ideas to HR practices;
- its usefulness in helping them understand the application of ideas to HR practices;
- other activities or resources that would help them read and understand articles;
- whether they would like this type of activity to be repeated; and
- factors that helped or hindered them in reading, understanding and learning from academic journal articles.

Forty students completed the questionnaires. Of these, 22 students were domestic and 18 were international. Although 10 off-campus students posted their completed framework, only three off-campus students returned the completed questionnaires. Sixty-five percent of the students who returned questionnaires were female. Approximately half of the students were in their second year and the remaining half in their final year of their three-year degree. Students’ open-ended responses were independently coded into themes by two researchers. The agreement between the two coders across the questions was 94.3 percent.

Findings and Discussion

The students were uniformly positive about the activity, with all of them agreeing that the activity was useful in helping them identify key themes and find information for their essays. Four key themes emerged from the analysis of students' responses to the questionnaire: 1) benefits of the framework; 2) group interaction; 3) short- versus long-term perspective on learning; and 4) control beliefs.

Benefits of the framework.

Students found that the framework helped them focus on reading the journal article and identify the key themes and other authors' contributions. For example, one student commented:

> *Journals can be overwhelming, and the authors [that] people cited can be confusing. It was a good outline to identifying the main points.* (second-year domestic student)

As indicated by this comment, many students find reading academic journal articles a complex process in its own right (Rachal et al. 2007; McLoughlin 1995). Responses from many of the students pointed to the efficiency gains they experienced from using the framework. This was evident by the use of terms by students in their comments such as: "quickly", "speed-up", "clear", and/or "easier" to explain their experience. One student's response is an example:

> *It allowed me to quickly identify issues relating to the questions in the framework. Rather than reading over and over trying to identify key themes, I had a clear idea of what I was looking for, so I was quickly able to identify key HR themes…. I found this bit particular useful, as referencing is quite tricky and time-consuming. Using the matrix/framework allowed me to easily identify and note which author said what.* (final-year domestic student)

In other words, the framework did serve its purpose as a "relevance instruction" that efficiently directed students' attention to the information they needed to extract from each reading (McCrudden & Schraw 2010). Students appeared to appreciate the connection between the activity and their assessment task (the essay). A strong theme that emerged was that it gave them a good "starting point" to prepare for the major essay, as evidenced by the following comments:

> *Having a starting point for an essay/research makes the task less daunting, and I think will help more students avoid leaving things to the last minute.* (second-year international student)

> *I quite liked the fact [that] we are doing some preparation for the major assignment. I feel as though I am able to use this structure when completing my assignment.* (second-year domestic student)

These responses indicate how constructive alignment (Biggs 1999) between in-class activities and assessment tasks increases their authenticity for students (Herrington et al. 2003; Astika 2000).

Group interaction

An important aspect of the activity was that students had a chance to analyse the article using the framework first as individuals and then as a group. Although not asked specifically about their perception of the group process, many students made positive

comments about the value of group interaction in helping them learn about the content of journal articles. In particular, the group work was valued because it validated the views of some students, as indicated by the comments:

> *Thought it was good to work in groups to see if other group members had the same idea.* (second-year domestic student)
>
> *Liked it – forced me to read and think about the article, then check answers with the group.* (second-year domestic student)
>
> *Discussing about articles brings out new perspectives and different viewpoints....* (final-year international student)

Still other students pointed to how the group work not only provided validation, but increased their understanding:

> *Before, I was not clear, but after doing group discussion and listening to the other groups, I understand*. (final-year international student)
>
> *Read more – enriched our knowledge through brainstorming*. (second-year international student)

Thus, students discovered for themselves the value of group discussion. Self-discovery can lead to more effective learning than when the justification for group work is imposed on students (Railton & Watson 2005). There is also strong support in the literature for the value of dialogue for deepening students' understanding (Palincsar 1998; Biggs 1999; Laurillard 2002; Findlay & Faulkner 2010).

However, for students to benefit from the group work in this study, they had to have prepared by reading the article and doing their own analysis. As part of the exercise, students had an opportunity to talk about the same article within their small groups, and then each group had a chance to report to the larger class about their article. From the response of one student, it seems that this second part of the process may not have been that useful to students who had not read the same article:

> *I enjoy sharing ideas, so do it again; [it] would be good. But when all groups share at the end I found [it] to be of little use because I had not read the article, so [I could] not follow*. (second-year domestic student)

While the majority of students were positive about the group experience, there were a few dissenters, as indicated by this comment:

> *I'm sorry, I'm not really liking this activity... (sometimes I'm kinda shy to talk, because they are cleverer than me, and my English [is] not really good. I feel weird). I'm sorry and it's also because I hate reading*. (international student)

This student's reservations may be due to both personality and language factors. However, it points to some particular barriers international students face in completing reading tasks and participating in discussion when English is not their first language (Moloney 2004). There is also considerable

"assumed knowledge" when teachers design group-work activities (Benzie 2010). All students may benefit from being taught explicitly how to participate in group work.

Short- versus long-term perspective on learning

The questionnaire responses suggest that some students saw the value of the activity only in terms of their immediate assessment task, while others saw longer-term benefits. A short-term focus is evidenced in the following two comments:

> *Because this can be one of the references in my assignment essay*. (first-year international student)

> *Gave me a step-by-step process of analysing any article that can be used in my assignment*. (second-year domestic student)

A less-typical response was from a mature-aged student who was able to see the longer-term benefits of the framework:

> *I'm thinking of applying this method to the remaining four units of my degree. I think it is a great idea and wish I had thought of it in my early years of study. It allowed me to quickly identify issues relating to the questions in the framework. Rather than reading over and over trying to identify key themes, I had a clear idea of what I was looking for, so I was quickly able to identify key HR themes.* (second-year domestic student)

Steps in the framework required students to separately identify themes and methods as well as the implications for practitioners for the research reported in each journal reading. This same student appeared to appreciate the benefits of this for her professional practice, further commenting:

> *I was surprised actually. I have worked in government for almost 15 years, and have always been critical of HR policies of management. Now I can see real methods and ideas which I'm hopefully going to be able to integrate into my workplace when I complete this unit.*

However, the circumstances of this student were different to most of her peers, in that her ability to situate her learning within the discipline was enhanced by her familiarity with the HRM profession. By contrast, many of her classmates were full-time students, and consequently were yet to benefit from being socialised into the particular discipline discourse (Alexander et al. 2009; Street 2004).

Control beliefs

Despite some students reporting positive responses about the learning framework and the benefits of the exercise, when asked about the factors that helped or hindered them more generally in reading journal articles, the same students expressed some contrasting views and preferences. That is, responses to this more general question seem to indicate that students differed in their underlying "control beliefs" (Ajzen 2002); in particular, their attribution of responsibility for their reading and learning outcomes (Holschuh et al. 2001). For example, some students identified external barriers to their learning such as the length of articles, their vocabulary, complexity and uninteresting content. Exemplifying this view, one student commented on the

> *...long and boring texts; irrelevant texts; reading on its own gets dull…. Variation is a must....* (second-year domestic student)

Other students mentioned barriers to their learning, including time constraints, family and personal pressures and part-time work.

However, some students identified a different set of barriers that related to their own performance and behaviour, citing factors such as procrastination, laziness or lack of motivation. Students’ control beliefs are important. If students identify the barriers to their success as being internal and controllable (such as motivation), they are more likely to change their behaviour and thereby experience greater success in the future. Conversely, if they attribute the barriers to uncontrollable and external factors (e.g., the choice of readings made by their teacher), they may be less likely to adapt their behaviour (Holschuh et al. 2001).

Consistent with their control beliefs, some students' comments revealed a preference for more passive and instructional experiences rather than group discussions:

> *I prefer listening to [the] tutor and discussing theories.* (second-year international student)

> *[I am happy that the] teacher summarises for us at the end of the class.* (male, second-year, domestic student)

These comments may reflect "learned dependency" (Yorke 2003) and a concern for performance rather learning (Railton & Watson 2005). Academics cannot assume that students (as either individuals or groups) wish to take responsibility for their own learning. Autonomy may have to be taught as part of the curriculum rather than being an assumed skill of all students (Railton & Watson 2005).

Conclusions

This paper described and evaluated an exercise that was aimed at exploring ways to best support students in developing their academic literacy skills in one discipline. The exercise was part of a process where students were immersed in the discourse of HRM by being asked to write an essay on a hotly contested issue in the discipline. They were asked to read and draw on academic journal articles that demonstrated the language and discourse in the literature on the particular topic. They were involved in discussions with peers about the readings in which they had a chance to practice their use of HRM language. Finally, they were provided with feedback through the marking process of how well they had used the language of HRM and participated in the appropriate discourse.

Students' endorsement of the particular exercise described in the paper appeared to be based on three key factors: a close alignment between the practice and the unit goals and assessment task; the use of a framework that provided students with guidance on how to read and draw meaning from academic journal articles in their discipline; and the use of peer collaboration that allowed students an opportunity to validate, test and refine their understanding of their reading materials.

The findings revealed that both domestic and international students were positive overall about the value of the exercise. It confirmed the importance of discipline-specific reading and writing tasks

for students in constructing and transferring knowledge in their university studies, and the value of relevance instructions to help them focus their attention and read efficiently (McCrudden & Schraw 2010).

However, qualitative analysis of student's open-ended responses revealed some differences in their perceptions of the usefulness of their learning beyond the immediate task; and in the responsibility students accepted for their own learning. Further, some students felt that the length and complexity of the readings posed high barriers to their learning. These views were mostly associated with international students, who may struggle with understanding specialist terminology in addition to the language of instruction. Teachers – including discipline specialists – may need to support these students in the development of their academic literacy skills through the provision of structured learning activities (Mohoney 2004). It should also be noted that both international and domestic students may be "time-poor" and sensitive to how long it takes them to read journal articles. In these circumstances it is important that teachers engage students in a dialogue about the value of the readings for their learning and future careers, and that teachers design teaching activities and assessment tasks that students perceive and accept as authentic (Herrington et al. 2003).

The findings also support the importance of peer collaboration. However, for all students to feel comfortable with group work, teachers may need to more actively encourage a climate of trust and acceptance. This is particularly true for international students, who may lack confidence in their ability to express themselves clearly in the language of instruction. Further, teachers cannot assume that all students wish to, or are ready to, accept more-autonomous learning practices. Students need to be explicitly engaged in a dialogue about learning practices, and the benefits and relevance of different approaches for their learning.

The premise of this paper was that discipline teachers are responsible for more than just the transmission of discipline knowledge: they must actively develop students' discipline and professional literacy. This study's findings suggest that teachers need also to develop classroom climates that actively promote peer collaboration and guide students toward accepting more autonomy in their learning.

This paper presented findings about a specific learning activity in one discipline and one subject of study. Future research is required across various subjects before generalisations can be made about how best to assist students in their reading of academic journal articles. Further, the research method did not allow for examination of the initiative's impact on students' reading habits and academic performance. For instance, did Kellie perceive an improvement in her ability to understand the practical implications of the literature? Did Mai master the terminology and improve her performance on the final exam? For both Kellie and Mai, there is also the question of the learning preferences each brought to their study of the HRM unit. How did these learning preferences shape their experience of the exercise and assessment task, and did these preferences change in any substantial way during the unit of study? Given the relatively small number of students involved in the exercise and questionnaire responses, this study did not unpack differences between the experience of different cohorts, including domestic and international students, on- and off-campus students, and students in different majors. Pre- and post-testing of both student performance and learning preferences would be useful to establish the value of such interventions designed to assist students in developing their academic and professional literacy.

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