

I'm not sure what to do! Learning experiences in the humanities and social sciences

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This article reports on a focus group study of student experience in a large humanities and social science faculty in Australia. The study had two purposes: the first was to examine student study/work/life balance issues, and the second purpose was to investigate their experiences of study, workloads and assessment. This article reports on the second aspect of the study – student experiences of study and assessment in the humanities and social science disciplines. Three issues are examined; students experienced a lack of clarity about expected workloads and work practices; they felt they received inadequate guidance on effective strategies for reading and expected amounts of reading; and they were uncertain about their capacities to identify the focus of various assessment tasks and uncertain whether they had the necessary skills to successfully complete the assigned tasks. In each of these three areas, students expressed a desire for clearer information about what to do and how to do it. Although this focus on assignments and outcomes suggests that these current day students approach learning pragmatically, the students revealed willingness to learn how to study better. In addition, they talked of looking for deeper learning experiences than they were currently achieving.

Introduction

This article reports on focus group research into student experiences of study workloads. It was part of a larger study concerned with student experience more generally. The study explored two aspects of student experience in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. The first aspect was student study/work/life balance issues where we were seeking information on how students managed study, paid work and care obligations (for discussion of these findings from the study, see Mitchell, Maher & Brown, 2008; Maher, Mitchell & Brown, 2009). The second area of investigation was study experience, workload and assessments. This article reports specifically on this second aspect of student study experience in a large humanities and social sciences faculty in Australia. It reports on three themes raised by students as important in their study experience; 1) a lack of clarity about expected workloads and practices; 2) a lack of guidance on appropriate amounts of reading and strategies to successfully complete necessary reading; and 3) worries about correctly identifying the purpose of assigned assessment tasks and whether they had the necessary skills to successfully complete those assessment tasks. Overall, these students revealed uncertainty about how to manage workloads and expected reading and about how to complete assessments, but they expressed considerable desire to learn how to do these things more effectively. They were willing to acquire more targeted reading and study skills to assist them with these tasks.

Background

In recent decades, scholars examining higher education in the humanities and social sciences have identified some key issues which are important to student learning and which impact on students' capacities to engage successfully with the demands of higher education. There are several themes which are relevant to our study findings: mismatched expectations about requirements and workloads; questions about reading practices, and the effective completion of assessment tasks. The mismatched expectations of students and their higher education teachers about reasonable workloads and activities have been identified as affecting student learning in Western education systems (James, 2001; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Turnbull, Nettlebeck, Ward, LeCoutuer, Sarris, Strehlan, Crisp, Palmer & Schneider, 2006). These studies point out that students may struggle to understand the study requirements and the type of learning necessary in the higher education environment. These studies also suggest that lecturers and tutors may not fully understand student perspectives on or expectations of the university experience (James, 2001) which can contribute to confusion and ineffective communication. This may have particular effects in 'reading' which is generally central to learning in the humanities and social sciences. Stokes and Martin (2008) examined reading lists, and indicated that student use and tutor expectations are often mismatched; tutors included many references and expected students to read some yet students were not easily able to identify how much reading was necessary and which readings were central and/or crucial. Green (2006) suggests students struggle to manage the amount of unstructured learning, such as reading which is required in humanities and social sciences and suggests that the complexity and breadth of the requirements "causes uncertainty" (2006, p.278). A third important research focus in the literature has been on how to explain and integrate assessment requirements effectively for students. Defining the key objectives in assessment tasks and identifying relevant skills (such as correct referencing practice) has been identified as difficult for many students. Studies suggest that the construction, communication and reception of assessment tasks are complex and that both teachers and students need assistance to navigate these exchanges successfully (Clerehan, 2003; Gibbs & Simpson 2004; Emerson, Rees & McKay, 2005). Each of these areas was identified by the students in our study as impacting on their study experience.

This project was conducted at one of the largest humanities and social sciences faculties in Australia, the Faculty of Arts at Monash University in 2007. The Faculty operates over five campuses, four in Victoria and one overseas. There are more than fifty major areas of study available to students in Arts; diversity in offerings is an identified strength of the Faculty. Learning and teaching are supported by the web-based Blackboard system but this operates in the main as a support for face-to-face classroom teaching. An additional support offered within the Faculty for student learning is the language and learning unit, which offers resources and short courses to support student study, research and writing skills. There is also a central library based unit which provides research and writing skills support and assistance to students. These supports have developed in recognition of the on-going need to improve student learning and increase the avenues of support for student skill development. This recognition of the on-going need to support student learning was one of the motivating

factors behind this research and our desire to explore student experience in the areas of study workloads, reading practice and assessment. We were interested in exploring how students understand their study requirements, what barriers and problems they experienced in achieving good outcomes in study and assessment tasks and what strategies students adopted to assist them to manage workload and tasks. In the following section, we outline the study methodology.

Methodology

Focus groups were chosen as a method for data collection because they offered the opportunity to gather insights from a larger sample of students than individual interviews would have allowed. Morgan defines focus groups as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (1996, p.130). Hamel suggests that focus groups allow for "open discussion of topics under considerations and [the production of] an immediate analysis by collating the viewpoints of the participants" (2001, p.242). More importantly, as Morgan argues, focus group data is enriched by the "fact that participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other" (1996, p.139) which offers the opportunity to gain diverse and more complex insights into the topics under discussion. This was particularly useful in this context where students are studying in the same institutional context but were enrolled in different study areas and were experiencing the learning and assessment activities in quite different ways. In the following analysis, we do not want to suggest that all students experienced the same constraints or faced the same issues, but in the three themes which emerged most strongly in the data (expected workloads, reading requirements and clarity and focus in assessment), there was a considerable degree of consensus across all focus groups around key issues and challenges. Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee and informed consent was sought and obtained from each focus group participant. Each student was given a brief questionnaire where some key demographic details (university year level, years of study, paid work hours, care responsibilities) were collected. Twelve focus groups were conducted in all with 54 students participating from the Victorian metropolitan and regional campuses of the University (the Malaysian campus where the Faculty of Arts also teaches was not included). Participants were recruited using a number of methods including posters in relevant public areas around the university and bulk emails sent to groups of students outlining the study. Students were invited to express interest by contacting a researcher, after which details of the study were generally forwarded with an explanatory statement prior to the focus group commencing.

The students who participated were aged from eighteen to sixty, with twenty eight participants aged between eighteen and twenty four. They ranged from first to final year of undergraduate study; most studied full time with a small number of part time students participating. Many of these students undertook significant amounts of paid employment to support their studies; this need to manage these competing responsibilities was central to their study experience. Only a small number of international students participated, which limits the applicability of these findings to students learning in English as a second language. The questions asked were very

open: tell us about your study experiences; what are the factors you most struggle with? what are your strategies for successfully getting your work done? Each focus group session was taped and fully transcribed. Transcripts were reviewed by the research team and an initial set of key themes were identified. These themes were then used to organise and code data. This method was adopted after Cameron (2001), where the participants' responses are used to determine interpretative categories. In this paper, we have focused on student expectations, reading requirements and issues with assessment tasks; in each of these areas, we found that students expressed considerable confusion about requirements and a desire for clearer communication and more structured assistance and direction. In each theme reported below, we have presented indicative quotes from students. Where names are used, pseudonyms have been adopted.

What am I meant to do here?

Expectations about study requirements and appropriate or adequate workloads at university were marked by confusion and the students indicated that they did not really have clear perceptions about what was expected of them and what was required for successful study. Students struggled to identify what tutors and lecturers wanted, to work out how to balance competing study requirements and how to best use the types of learning resources that were made available. Although the first year students expressed particular concerns about these issues, students at all year levels indicated they were not certain about how they could most effectively succeed in their Arts course. While they expressed willingness and desire to do what was expected, they often felt unable to seek clarification of exactly what that was.

I just didn't really feel I could approach the [lecturers about what I should do] because they go on about stuff and I'm sitting there going, "I have no idea what you're talking about".

I don't know. In high school I was never taught much about what uni life was going to be like probably because they didn't expect any of us to end up there. Yeah, so I was kind of just thrown into the balance and jumped from high school where you didn't really have so much expectation and pressure on you, to the uni life where it's completely different and I never got really any training on how to manage time or [any other aspects of study].

In my first year here, [I thought] "well I'm kind of here in this big place but I'm not connected to it – I kind of come here and go to the lectures and I go home and I do my assessment tasks and I submit them and they come back". But in those early stages I [didn't get] an enormous amount of support or feedback and I would actually say that that is the most important thing as a student to know if you're on the right track.

Even when they felt more settled into the expectations of university, there were ongoing uncertainties about study habits and often about the requirements of particular units.

[I worry about] bad habits or not really knowing the best way to study. Even if you've got your system for yourself and it's sort of how you've been used to studying the

whole time, you ... always compare to how other people do it and think "They must be doing it right, then I'm doing it wrong" and ... get anxious.

But then [there are] the expectations of each individual class beyond [the general ones]. ... [You have to work out] how it actually plays out week by week.

Our findings here accord with those of other studies; student expectations of university study and life often don't match their actual experiences which creates confusion and uncertainty about what to do (Green, 2006; Turnbull, et al, 2006). Much of this research has shown that matching expectations and perceptions is important to student achievement and engagement (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes, 2005; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) argue that students must develop identities as learners in the university context in order to be successful, that they need assistance to understand what learning is and how to successfully engage with the necessary tasks. Our students reported confusion around the 'expected' amount of work and what was actually possible, due to the competing demands they face. Most students felt that they lacked a good strategic process for identifying the critical parts of their academic workload and how to complete it. Many indicated they continue to struggle with this task, even after first year where the experience of confusion and uncertainty is most intense. Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) suggest increased emphasis on negotiated learning outcomes (where these outcomes are the focus of explicit dialogues between students and teachers) will produce better outcomes for all students and this seemed applicable here as students expressed a strong desire for more communication about what was really expected of them. As Michael reflected, this process of working out what's important and what to do is crucial to effective learning.

I think that one of the most important things to do as far as study goes is to get rid of the periphery, get rid of the rubbish. ... Every week [work out] what is it that they're trying to say to you? What is the most important thing? Get rid of the rubbish. There's so much. You could go and read for a million years and never find out what they are actually asking you. To me that is the most important thing every week ... [understanding] what is the core of what they're trying to say to us every week?

What and how much should I be reading?

Issues of workload for these students were particularly related to the expectations around reading. Green (2006) argues that assumptions students will be able to integrate the reading requirements, the skills and the new conceptualisations to meet university expectations are misplaced. His findings indicate these are complex, unstructured tasks that are difficult for students. Overall, the students in our study indicated that they were uncertain about what and how much they actually needed to read. As Stokes and Martin (2008) say, reading lists are central to higher educational learning _ this is so especially in humanities and social sciences _ but currently attract little direct scholarly attention. Their study found considerable variation in tutor design of reading lists and disparity between tutor expectations and student response. Our students described their decision making processes about how to manage their reading loads which included identifying essential readings and reducing their commitment to the rest in the following ways.

And I find the biggest challenge is getting through adequate enough reading, because I find there [is] just a copious amount of reading, I think that's the biggest challenge ... keeping up with the reading. Not so much the workload, but the reading so that you've got a good understanding and not just a basic understanding of what's going on.

I find you can generally keep up with all the readings as long as you only read the prescribed text or the study guide, not the ones that they list as essential reading. They've got 6 to 12 other books and you have to read a chapter from all them. I think that's crazy, to read that amount of literature if you're not going to use it in an assignment or anything.

I gave up [reading everything] years ago. I just read what I need for the assignment and the rest I just ignore because there is no way. I don't know anyone who does it all and who can keep up with the work

I know in first year I did every single word of every single reading and I said to a third year and second year, "How do you do it? I just can't handle it all". She said "You pick and choose. You get to know which readings to do and which you don't need to do. So if there [are] four readings for a subject you probably do two, pick the most important". I still do that even though I'm post grad. You don't have time for it all.

Some did try to complete all readings, but this was a constant struggle.

I'm doing politics and we've got probably 3 or 4 further readings for every subject and every tute we'll go into the readings and what was there and if you haven't done them you're stuffed, you just don't know what's going on. So some subjects, readings are compulsory and you have to find time to do them or you may as well not do the subject.

You've got to do it and if you don't do the readings and you don't contribute that week, you just take a week off. I mean I did about three weeks ago, the same thing. I've been catching up ever since and I'm just now getting up to speed again. It's hopeless.

Students did feel that lecturers and tutors set too much reading and sometimes did not set readings that linked closely enough to the learning objectives and tasks.

It's too much and they're too long. I mean, they take an hour each reading to do and you just don't have time to sit there and read and then you realise when you get to class that they don't even really refer to what you're reading and that's frustrating.

Some students thought lecturers did not really expect all reading, or perhaps even any reading, to be done.

"Make sure you keep up with the readings" [they say] and everyone [nods], and we all know that it's not going to happen. You don't even talk about it. You tell someone "I haven't done the readings for four weeks now", [but] ... they don't want to know that you're not exactly doing what you are meant to do.

As these quotes indicate, the 'real' reading requirements were somewhat ambiguous for students. Most students tried to identify what readings were necessary and important and to complete that portion of the reading, leaving aside the rest. But they often expressed discomfort and frustration in these decisions and strategies. Our findings here were similar to those of Stokes and Martin who reported that students "demonstrated strong signs of instrumentalism with regard to use of reading lists" (2008, p.119), where 'main', 'key' and 'essential' readings were the focus of student attention, even though tutors repeatedly discussed the importance of broader reading. Marland (2003) suggests there may be a need for 'higher reading skills' lessons (2003, p.205), which are specifically focused on how to complete extensive academic reading. Our student respondents certainly expressed desires for more open and direct communication between lecturers and students about what reading to do and how much was really necessary for their courses of study.

How can I get this task done?

The issues of uncertainty that students raised about workloads and work practices and reading were present in their discussions of assessment tasks. Most students outlined their struggles to identify what needed to be done in assessment tasks and their worries about how to get it done effectively. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggest that students who are able to pick up 'cues' (found in verbal instruction and discussion as well as in written material) about what is essential in assessment are more successful than students who cannot understand or don't hear these cues. Heikkilä and Lonka (2006) also describe this type of strategic response to cues as part of successful study outcomes. Lea and Street (1998) argue that the production of competent academic work will require the capacity to integrate the skills, knowledge and context for each assignment. Their research found that students approached this challenge of integration in many different ways and that students "were consciously aware of switching between diverse writing requirements and knew that their task was to unpack what kind of writing any particular assignment might require" (Lea & Street, 1998, p.163). "Some saw it as a kind of game, trying to work out the rules, not only for a field of study, a particular course or particular assignment, but frequently for an individual tutor" (Lea & Street, 1998, p.165). Others felt constrained and pressured by the process. Similar findings emerged in our study with some students feeling they were able to manage assessment much more easily than others. Some felt they had the critical skills to evaluate what was required, work out how to do it and really focus on getting it done.

What do they want you to do? All right, if they just want you to do a short essay or a major essay, like they do in Arts: that's fine, but what is it that they want you to do in that? Every Arts subject is asking you ... a different question.

You have to get rid of all the outside influences and if you only do that for half an hour or an hour, it's much better doing it that way than spending two hours looking at it, freaking out because your mind is all over the place. It's very hard to get to that state if you're in an environment where you are pulled between, like Daryl was just saying, you're pulled between all these different forces all the time. It's very hard to

sort of centre yourself. That's how I do it. I'll say, okay, I've got three hours here. Nothing else is going [on].

Many students however identified this process of discernment and focus as a real problem.

The other day I had a question. I had this, it was the most obscure - I looked and I thought "What am I supposed to do?" The question didn't give me any clue, so I went and made an appointment with my lecturer and got him to explain the whole thing, but even though I'd gotten onto it early, I had just [spent] so much time figuring it out and that I left it to the last minute again.

Some students at second year level and beyond indicated that they felt inhibited in seeking clarification around tasks and activities, as they felt they should know what to do.

Sometimes I just don't get something or with the essays I ... want to go and ask them, but I don't want to show that I don't get it because I'm supposed to be good. I'm supposed to ... understand ... it all. There's so much competition and everything. So I email [the lecturer] instead. I find I [can ask] if don't have to do the face to face thing.

With honours it would be good if there was a bit more guidance. ... I have my supervisor and I have my course work subject but ... writing a thesis is a very different format to ... writing a 2500 word essay. I am not used to writing something that long and [I don't understand] what's expected. I just assume it's another essay and you just write longer. I would like a bit more guidance about how to actually go about writing it.

There was considerable discussion of specific instructions for essay writing and a particular focus on issues of referencing. Clerehan found that there is a danger in assuming "disembodied 'skills' programs" (2003, p.77) can be readily transferred by students from one task to another. Students in this study did struggle when general resources were offered without clear instructions about how to apply and integrate them. Matthew, a first year student, said,

... with the big essay that I've got to do, it just seems that it's been assumed that we all know how to write a first year university essay. ... We just weren't given [any] verbal instruction. [The lecturer] said "There's all these resources, just go and check it all out." So there are pages and pages of information on how to write this specific psychology essay.

Phoebe said,

In every single subject, [they say] "Okay, you have to get the referencing right because if you don't get it right you can get kicked out of Monash. It is plagiarism." ... I went and I downloaded the referencing bit of the key manual to get the style of referencing and it was still wrong, but then they wouldn't actually tell me what was wrong with my referencing.

This reflects findings and research in other studies where the context in which skills are taught and acquired has been identified as important. Emerson, Rees and McKay

(2005) have argued that specifically integrating research and referencing skills into curriculum will assist students with referencing skills and may also reduce inadvertent incidences of plagiarism (see also Breen & Maasen, 2005). Marland (2003) canvasses different methods for teaching specific skills sets and suggests these are often most effective when integrated into the curriculum. Christie, et al. (2008) argue that narrowly defined transferable skills are best utilised by students when they are embedded in the study process. All these studies suggest that a specific skills focus in the curriculum is important and effective in assisting the student and there was a surprising degree of consensus about the importance of such activities expressed by the students in this study. Even when skills activities were 'boring', students were able to recognise their usefulness. These comments were made by students at all levels.

Last year we actually had compulsory library lessons so you would go in there and you would learn how to use the university library because obviously most of us are coming straight out of high school ... and it was a completely different system. And we found that, as boring as it was, the first time you went up there by yourself you knew exactly what to do, you knew where to find things.

Maybe they could work [essay writing and skills] into the course ... You could work it into your first year ... into a couple of the core subjects ... [which] all the Arts students are going to be doing.

There's ... writing skills and workshops and stuff; just to reiterate, make [them] compulsory.

There was also considerable discussion of the potential value of integrating time management skills and classes into the curriculum; students recognised that effectively using time was critical to all successful outcomes.

The great irony is that we don't have time to learn how to use time management.

When I was in first year, I went to the time management session that they had and basically ... they give you a table ... that's got times and days and you fill it in and that was basically the advice they offered, "Make yourself a timetable and stick to it" ... For time management to work, we need better ways of explaining to us how we're supposed to manage our time and what things are effective...

They always offer like essay writing classes and things like that but [make] actual time management classes compulsory for every first year. I mean, it probably would have saved me heaps of trouble if I'd learned that.

For the successful completion of assessment, these students recognised that they needed to work out what was required in each assignment and that they needed to have the necessary skills to complete in the time available. Most students in this study considered they lacked adequate strategies for these intersecting tasks and there was considerable desire expressed to have more direct discussion about what was required in assessment. As Lea, et al. contend, "engaging the student in the learning and teaching process is simply good educational practice" (2003, p.324) and is likely to produce better outcomes for students and teachers. Overall, in each of these areas canvassed here, students were remarkably consistent in their desire for clearer and

more direct communication about exactly what is required and how to do it. The key barrier they identified to successful study was their confusion and uncertainty about the amount of work, the amount of reading and the crucial elements of assessment tasks.

Conclusion

Before I went to Uni (sic) I heard all these stories about all you do is dream and have fun [Sarah, second year.]

Students studying in the humanities and social sciences are working with complex and diverse materials and ideas and they face complex study and assessment requirements. They are required to understand key objectives, to have the skills to read and interpret necessary resources and to produce effective responses in their assessment tasks. Most students in our study said they experienced some uncertainty in all of these activities. They found that expectations of what needed to be done, especially in regard to reading requirements, were often confusing; they struggled to identify key objectives in their assessment and indicated that they felt they lacked some of requisite skills to complete those tasks. They expressed strong support for more direction about how to read and how to learn and were positive about the integration of broader skills like referencing and time management into their subject learning. One of the most interesting paradoxes in this study was that students expressed considerable instrumentalism in their approach to study, but they indicated that they didn't feel entirely comfortable with or satisfied by the compromises they adopted. Students described decisions to cut down reading, focus on key aspects of the unit rather than all themes and generally do what was strictly required, but expressed uncertainty and ambivalence about these decisions. These findings of student pragmatism reflect broader discussions in the higher education sector about the instrumental or pragmatic student learner. In contemporary Australian universities and elsewhere, there are suggestions that the number of 'instrumental' or pragmatic learners (students who focus only on assessment and task with the objective of successfully completing their degree) may be increasing (James, 2001; Massingham & Herrington, 2006). James (2001) in the Australian context has suggested that many university staff feel that students are only interested in learning which is directly tied to assessable outcomes (see also McInnis, 2004).

But student pragmatism did seem to co-exist with a richer understanding of learning and the desire for deeper and fuller communication about learning. Even though these students felt they lacked clear guidelines and strategies for successful study, they were able to identify the importance of referencing and research skills and time management necessary for the effective completion of assessment tasks and successful study. This indicates an understanding of the complexity of the learning tasks which face them. In addition, as the two comments below show, many students were keen to have a broad and rich learning experience, beyond narrow assessment outcomes.

I end up having a good knowledge of the two topics I am working on but the rest [is limited] ... I don't think it is really affecting my performance because that is based on the assignments and I do the best I can for those ones but overall *the experience that you expected to get out of here* I don't think most students are able to achieve that.
(our emphasis)

I find that university is very goal oriented and it tends to emphasise what is coming at the end rather than the whole journey of study and I think that hinders the process of study. My perception is that ... the whole journey of study [is important] not [just] the end. The degree is not relevant if you haven't learnt.

Our recommendations from this study to our Faculty focused on the importance of talking directly to students about what they should read and why, and more shared dialogue about what we hope to achieve in our assessment tasks and in our units more generally. These students were clear about the value of including more exercises that directly identify and apply the skills we want them to acquire. These findings can be linked to student pragmatism and their focus on what they needed to know and do to be successful. But the findings also indicated that these students were willing to enter a fuller and more complex dialogue about learning, which offers an important shared objective for students and their teachers. Direct talking about skills, readings and assessment tasks might facilitate shared reflection on other broader aspects of learning.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by a Learning and Teaching Grant from the Faculty of Arts. We thank the students in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University who participated in this study. Dr Kate Brown was a member of the research team who conducted the project.

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