

Assessment experience of first-year university students: dealing with the unfamiliar

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First-year university students have to go through a transition from learning dependence to learning autonomy once they have successfully outperformed fellow students from their high schools in public examinations. However, the transition period provides an excellent opportunity for students to reflect on their conceptions of learning and assessment, and how the first-year experience may allow individuals to prepare for university study and develop key skills for their future careers. A pilot study was conducted to explore assessment activities, and academic and personal development, with first-year students from three universities in Hong Kong. Thirty focus group interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2010. The main foci of the study are the examination of critical factors that lead to high engagement and enriched learning experiences in assessment activities in the first year in university. Interviewees were invited to describe the major differences in the written assessment activities that they had in high school and in university. This includes exploring the nature, format and setting of written tasks set in public examinations in high school and the requirement to do written assignments in university. This paper aims to identify the gap in academic challenge experienced during the transition by examining the experience of academic writing reported by local Hong Kong students in the interviews.

Keywords: first-year experience, assessment, higher education

Introduction

First-year students attending universities may be perceived as champions because they have had successive rounds of leading academic performance in internal and public examinations in high school. Throughout those years, they have been drilled with skills and tips for handling various types of examination question. However, student success at this stage cannot be an indicator of their commitment in university study (Hurdato et al. 2007). The journey to university study may first be perceived as a departure by former school teachers and classmates, but students experience a number of problems when they transit from high school to university study, such as the failure to undergo suitable orientation regarding academic expectations and social integration (Tinto 1993). Furthermore, they often rely on their existing skill sets when they have ventured

into an unfamiliar journey: university study (Kuo, Hagie and Miller 2004). Because an assessment-driven culture has been perpetuated throughout the years of schooling, they may perceive university study as yet another series of 'assessment hoops' instead of a process for learning (Green 2006: 276).

Despite a variety of freshmen orientation events being organized by student development centres, and at subject and programme levels, first-year students may not be aware of the academic adjustment they need to make. Becoming more sophisticated learners includes (1) basic study skills such as taking notes, reading extensively, researching diverse sources of information and producing succinct essay writing; (2) high-level intellectual skills such as critically reviewing sources of evidence, analysing and synthesizing information from different perspectives, and reflecting with respect to discipline-specific domains; (3) communication skills both in person and through different media; (4) personal development, such as the ability to conduct self-regulated learning and self-reflection on actions; and (5) social integration with peers, senior students and academics (Booth 2001, Kuo, Hagie and Miller 2004, Hurdato et al. 2007, White 2007). A successful transition during the first-year experience can have a great impact on the remaining university experience. This pilot study will explore factors contributing to better freshman preparedness for academic performance, and to examine types of institutional support service that they would like to see in universities in Hong Kong.

Research methods

This is a phenomenological study that aims to explore the assessment experiences of first-year students. Students from three universities in Hong Kong were invited (the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University) between May 2009 and May 2010. Invitations were sent to students who had completed their first year in study in the three institutions. Students representing a mixture of disciplines participated in the interviews on a voluntary basis. Mixed qualitative methods were used in the study: focus group and individual interviews. Focus group interviews with three or more participants were organized for those educated locally and those from mainland China. Using a focus group in this study offered a chance to explore a collective data that attribute to groups with different cultural and educational experiences, and rich conversations through the interactional dynamics of group members can be facilitated by the interviewer (Murdoch, Poland and Salter 2010). However, as far fewer overseas undergraduates are studying full time in Hong Kong, individual interviews were arranged for students in this group. Although there were exchange students studying in universities in Hong Kong, they were not included in the samples for this study. The interviews were conducted in English, which is the second language for both the local and mainland students, but they could choose to speak in their first language if they encountered difficulty in expression. Each interview lasted around sixty minutes and was digitally recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were run to discuss (1) the experiences of assessment that interviewees had when preparing for internal and public examinations in high school; (2) experiences in preparing for different assessment activities in the first year in university; (3) the types of feedback experienced in university; (4) key skills to develop further for studying in subsequent years in university; and (5) support services provided by the

institution. Interviews were transcribed and coded with NVivo8, a program that allows themes and sub-themes to be categorized so that comparisons can be made between categories and to look for similarities, differences, and consistency of meaning between different groups: local students, mainland Chinese students and overseas students.

Findings

The thirty interviews conducted involved fifty-two local students, forty-four mainland Chinese students and six overseas students. The undergraduate programmes that they were studying included different disciplines: arts and humanities, business, health sciences, science, and engineering. The study will lead to a series of findings, and this paper examines the experiences of academic writing expressed by the local Hong Kong students in fourteen focus group interviews.

Assessment experiences in high school

The A-level curriculum is not designed to prepare school students for higher education. It is merely a means of selection for higher education (Birnie 1999). School students are encouraged to work individually, and discussion is not often arranged between classmates. Such students perceive school experiences as being driven by assessment:

“Most of our work is done for the examination.”

“Examination and test would help us to learn more.”

“Examinations in Hong Kong are about the good grade. We never focus on our personal growth, I thought. We were driven to [get] good grades and get in a good university. Therefore we went out and searched for the best and worked with the best.”

Acquiring proficiency in literacy is a key skill when students build a foundation of knowledge on their subjects, whether they are streamed in arts, science or business in high school. Many school teachers inculcate a reading culture, and students generally choose readings prescribed by their teachers; they are also encouraged to read newspapers and search for additional information on the internet. However, an assessment culture permeates the learning process. Students do it to prepare for an assignment or examination:

“I definitely read the textbooks to learn more about...things relating to the assignment questions. And I searched on the internet because the textbooks were not covering all materials we wrote.”

“For biology, we were asked to have newspaper cuttings. And we read and collected articles in the newspapers for writing assignments.”

“The examination was mainly focusing on current affairs. I had the habit of reading newspapers.”

“For geography, we were given case studies from newspapers. It helped us to know more about current affairs. The purpose of doing this was broadening our views and touching more information. For liberal studies, the writing was pretty much based on our common sense. Therefore, it was essential for us to absorb knowledge from news or other sources. The readings would help us to manage the examination later.”

Despite being in streamed disciplines, they are required to write short essay questions in public examinations. Generally, writing in high school is more about structured presentation with a clear introduction, a logical flow of the main points and a sound conclusion, according to a number of interviewees. Much energy has been channeled to prepare for public examinations in a competitive learning environment; students spend time rehearsing the examination process, such as doing past papers and timed short essay writing:

“I was an art stream student in my secondary school. I used to write newspaper reviews every week for the English lesson. I wrote an essay each week to practise the format. I would write an essay before the exam in order to reduce the pressure of time and feeling at the exam. I wrote down some vocabularies and phrasal words which I could use during the exam. For geography and history, I read lots of good examples from students who got good grades from past public exams. Marks are allocated on points not the whole essay or number of words. Therefore, as I reviewed past exam questions, I would drop down the main points and did mind mapping. It was about 1,000 words for subjects like history and geography.”

“When I was in Form 4 and 7, I had an extra class with English outside school. The tutors provided us [with] essay samples, and we learned. We were encouraged to remember those sentence structures. I would apply [it] to the essay that I wrote. We were taught to organize all paragraphs and sentence structure that help us to make the essay different and outstanding.”

“I studied geography, economics and liberal studies. I write about two to three pages [for] each question I answer, more than 1,000 words altogether. For geography, the tutorial centre and teacher provided a lot of materials that we read to prepare for the essay writing. For liberal studies, it required me to have critical thinking on political issues and environmental issues; marks are to be awarded if ideas and arguments are supported by good examples. That I had not done well.”

“As I studied a science course, I did not have to do much essay writing for such subjects, like mathematics. We worked on the equations and solutions. I usually wrote essays for the subjects of Chinese and English only. It was preparation for examination. There were about 600 words for an English essay. For use of English, I attended the tutorial and followed their model formats. I remembered the key phrases for the examination. For biology, it required about a few hundred words to answer a question. We often went through the points but not the skills in writing.”

“I studied business and commerce. Business teachers would look into our ideas. If our ideas were brilliant and making sense, they would give us higher grades. I don't think they really care much [about] our English as long as they understand what we are

writing. For the exam paper, there were four questions to answer. I wrote about three pages in English [for]each question, probably more than 1,000 words.”

“I was a business student taking accounting, economics and statistics, so I didn't have a lot of essay writing in my high school. My work really depended on everyday practices and exercises, such as doing calculations and problems before reading books on the subjects, not only for the examination. Indeed, I don't know how to write essays in university.”

To summarize, school students in Hong Kong are used to studying in subject streams and have experience of searching for information on the internet. Studying in different streams, they are exposed to different genres and learn a variety of writing styles needed for subjects across the curriculum in high school. Certainly, students pay attention to the marking criteria and formats, whether structure, construction of logical arguments or points depending on the marking system for a given subject. School graduates with different streams are accustomed to writings from a few hundred to around 1,000 words without making references to sources in timed public examinations. They have been attuned to a premium on memory rather than critical evaluation of what they learned (Naish and Rawling, 1990).

Assessment experiences in the first year of university study

Freshmen will attend a number of orientations organized by student unions and departments. They are expected to reframe a new learning culture as they start university life, although the majority of them have some ‘deep-rooted images of learning’ (Durkin and Main 2002: 27). Apart from attending a variety of courses, ranging from discipline-specific to interdisciplinary, there are a number of different practices in university study. Independent learning is certainly a significant skill that freshmen are required to master, having been guided closely by school teachers (Smith and Hopkins 2005). Furthermore, they are required to do a lot more reading than in high school. Reading quickly and efficiently and reading widely and for synthesis are the key skills required in university study (Ellis 2008, Green 2006). Students are expected to read from more sources:

“In my semester, the lecturer in politics has been requiring us to have at least five different sources for the projects. These sources are media, newspapers, journals, books as well as websites.”

“As we do the assignments, we are required to use the sources of journals, articles, newspapers, lecture notes that I could relate the theories to. But we are not encouraged to find the information from Wikipedia, which lacks supportive evidence. I would sort out books from the library, and most of the cases we are asked to use more journals.”

Types of assessment in university are more diverse, and there can be a mixture of assessment tasks within one course. Moreover, the requirements for doing assignments are different, depending on the offering department:

“I am studying engineering and doing mathematics and computer programming, whose works are very different. I needed to write essays of around 1,500 words only

for the course offered by General Education. The amount of words is double the one in high school.”

“I am majoring in finance. When I write, it is usually in the group project. It is a group report.”

“The workload is much greater than the one in high school. As I am studying a double degree programme, I have projects for business administration and engineering. I am required to take courses from both faculties. Their projects are totally different. For engineering, they are mostly computer programming. I am usually responsible for the logical part. I develop the whole structure and schedule for the part. We use our strengths doing part of a project and learn through others’ work. For business administration, I am experiencing more to develop new ideas with other students. I also have interviews with business leaders. And these interviews contribute a lot to projects.”

Doing essay writing requires some form of research in a topic, with good support from relevant citations. Apart from sourcing relevant reliable references, techniques in academic writing are also different:

“My biggest challenge is that I am required to put references. During my school [days], I write what I like. Even though I may not have enough examples for my points, I could elaborate and write it very convincingly. In university, people are always looking for evidence and references. If my writing lacks references and quotes to back up my points, it may affect my grade. I have to maintain a good balance between evidence and my ideas. If I am trying to include too many references, my writing becomes less original. At the same time, I could not just present my own ideas. It has been difficult for me during my first year in university.”

“About the referencing, we were required to provide the source of references and the links when we copied from a journal or news magazine. It was very troublesome. In high school, we simply copied and pasted into our essay. Now we are required to change the sentence structure and deliver the same meaning of messages in our own words.”

The conventions of academic writing are certainly different from those in high school. As these students perceived learning as hoops of assessment in high school, the assessment experience in university has broadened their perspective in learning. They are expected to take an active approach to learning and exercise a critical viewpoint and reflect on their work (Ballinger 2003). Assessment is no longer drills or rehearsing some form of model answer. Instead, this is time for taking on intellectual challenges:

“During high school, the presentation is simply the PowerPoint and outlines. In university, the presentation is held like a mini-seminar. We need to prepare a lot more content, analyse the data, leading the discussion among the classmates. Videos, role plays or some games are required here. It is totally a step up [in] level.”

“In university, even though we do the same past papers as reference, it requires us to have critical thinking. That is not guaranteeing a good result or perfect[ion] from practising.”

“The core assessment here is through the learning. Lecturers could talk about the theory briefly until you do your projects, [but] you understand more in depth through searching and reading more materials. Thereafter the assessment is kind of the learning process. Doing them, more materials I searched and I read through. I found out I could really learn a lot through doing the presentations and essays.”

“In high school, we memorized all materials. However, in university it encourages us lots of critical thinking. And our argument is supported by the information I searched through. The more information to support my points, the stronger my points are. And for what reasons my points are valid. It helps my thinking.”

Conclusion

Improving the success of student transition to higher education and maximising their ongoing development are the primary goals in universities (Green 2006). Academic and social integration are the major challenges for first-year university students (Tinto 1993). This paper focuses on one aspect of the intellectual challenge faced by students venturing from high school to the first year of university study. Given diverse experiences from different streams in high school, first-year students need to integrate appropriate skills in information research when preparing to be lifelong learners in university (Samson and Granath 2004). More importantly, assessment may be perceived as hoops to jump through, but this can equally be a critical environment in which students can develop confidence and become more sophisticated learners.

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