Teaching quality and tutorial delivery: experience of a second year marketing unit

Abstract
The higher education sector, the world over, is faced with the challenging task of servicing an increasingly diverse international student community in the globally competitive education market. The rising expectation of students of education outcomes, varied learning styles and orientations of the student population have brought challenges such as providing a high quality educational environment with changes in curricula and pedagogy (Coldrake, 2001) to negotiate the cultural and linguistic diversity and the resulting expectations of students. The ‘quality’ of teaching and learning is high on the agenda among the key issues that had emerged from policy developments to meet these challenges.

Using the SPQ2F instrument (Biggs, 2003) and depth interviews, this paper investigates the study approaches of students enrolled in a second year marketing unit in an Australian university focusing on the learning contexts in which learning occurs. The findings indicate that there are no significant differences in study approaches of students and that the study approaches differ according the learning context. The paper concludes that student perceptions on learning contexts assist in the development of teaching strategies that lead to quality outcomes, higher student satisfaction and providing universities a competitive edge in marketing its services to prospective students.

1. Introduction

The theory and practice of learning styles and approaches have generated enormous interest and controversy among educational researchers and practitioners for over two decades. This has resulted in a large body of literature including learning style models on how students learn and are taught (or should be taught) and how far the social, cultural and educational backgrounds of students impact on their own learning. Most of the research on learning styles and approaches has been in the areas of higher education and professional learning (Coffield et al, 2004).

Australian higher education sector has undergone significant reforms and changes and the ‘quality’ of teaching and learning is high on the agenda among the key issues that had emerged from these policy developments. While universities and teachers have responded to the challenge of improving the quality of the learning environment of students with various internal reforms, strategies and practices, the task represents a major task requiring continuous adjustment to the increasing internationalisation of higher education characterised by the greater diversity of the student population and changing demands of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. A key source of the diversity besides the multicultural make up of the local Australian
students is the intake of international students representing 18% of the Australia's tertiary enrolments during 2002/2003 – highest among all other international education service providers in the world (UNESCO, 2005). The migration trends, greater access to higher education (Ramsden, 1999), particularly the diversification of access to disenfranchised groups and new ‘clients’ such as working adults, older learners and learners at a distance (Middlehurst, 2004) have contributed to this diversity.

A major outcome of this development is the differences in the cultural backgrounds (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001), which reflect in different learning styles and academic capabilities influenced by prior learning backgrounds (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) and exposure to a variety of teaching styles (Biggs, 1995). The critical issue therefore is how universities should address these differences in designing curricula and modes of delivery to improve the 'quality' of teaching and learning. Some researchers argue that while progress has been made in this area of curriculum design, universities must continue to modify the methods of teaching to accommodate different learning styles of students (Purdie, 2000). In this context, understanding how students learn is essential with continuous inquiry into teaching in order to assess, evaluate and clarify aims of teaching as part of the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990). How can you teach students if you do not know how they learn? What model of learning one should use to improve the practice of teaching? How can teachers encourage students to develop more effective learning strategies? These are some of the issues that should be raised with such inquiries. Although it is acknowledged that the quality enhancement through continuing improvement of teaching is an institutional responsibility in terms of a whole delivery system which goes beyond the teaching of individual teachers (Biggs, 2003) the role of the individual teachers in this process is a critical one.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of the learning context and learning approaches of students in a second year marketing unit in developing teaching strategies to produce better student learning outcomes which are critical to the competitive position of the university. For the purpose of this study tutorial classes were used as the learning environment, and teaching strategies such as tutorial discussions, group work and assessment processes were associated with the learning contexts. The paper will cover the nature and the process of the investigation and an appraisal of its findings before outlining the implications and future directions for further enhancement of the teaching practice.

2. Background

The marketing unit, a foundation subject in an undergraduate commerce degree, is offered each year in multiple campuses both as on campus (semester 2) and off campus (semester 1) modes and attracts around 400 students in each semester. The delivery of the unit is similar in both on campus and off campus modes with the use of an E-learning system (WebCT equivalent) as the primary communication and learning environment for both modes. With the increasing emphasis on the online environment for pragmatic reasons (as well as part of the university and departmental policy) for the delivery of the unit and for all assessment tasks except the final exam, the poor attendance at lectures and tutorials has become a major issue with the on campus mode. Most of the students enrolled as on-campus students work either full
time or part-time and prefer to minimise their attendance at lectures and tutorials (which is non compulsory to complete the unit) and hence depend on the material supplied through study guides and via the E-learning system. This would inevitably have implications on managing a large unit apart from its impact on students learning, teaching strategies, learning contexts and the uniformity of assessment. Less face to face contact for a majority of students, even in tutorials, have reduced opportunities for the application of different learning contexts which cannot be delivered successfully to students who opt for the online environment for all their learning resources.

Currently tutorial classes each week are focussed on discussions on topics and concepts covered in the lecture of the previous week, discussion on chapter end questions and selected case studies. Students are able to access the suggested answers to tutorial questions discussed in each tutorial and to engage in a discussion via the E-learning system discussion area.

3. Aims and objectives of the study

The aim of the investigation is to assess the student perceptions on the structure and delivery of tutorial classes conducted as part of teaching in the unit with a view to identifying opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of the learning contexts to offer a better learning environment to students.

The research questions associated with the study are:

1. Are there differences in the approaches to study among students investigated?
2. What are the common themes explicit in the perceptions of students in regard to the learning context?
3. What opportunities are available for further improvement in the delivery of tutorials?

The research objectives are influenced by the research questions which are outlined below.

1. Determine the current approaches to learning of the students attending the tutorial classes;
2. Evaluate students’ perceptions on the learning contexts at tutorial classes such as tutorial discussions, group work and assessment processes;
3. Identify opportunities for enhancing quality of student learning

The research was conducted during September and October 2005 using the Biggs (1987a, 1987b and 2003) Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) instrument which emphasises the context in which learning occurs, followed by series of depth interviews.

3. Literature review

Some of the literature suggests that planning courses and teaching methods require a strong alignment with different learning approaches of students which relates to changes in curricula and how they are delivered (Smith, 2002). Some others, however,
do not advocate what is known as the “matching theory” in education. Several different learning approaches and styles have been identified in the literature although there appears to be a consensus that students in higher education show a limited number of different approaches to learning, albeit with some cultural variations (Kalantzis and Cope, 2000; Richardson, 1990). In one of the earliest contributions in the area, Marton and Saljo (1976) identified “two levels of processing” of the material to be learned, namely under-surface- and deep-level learning. Kolb (1976; 1984) classified students into four groups of learners - divergers, convergers, assimilators and accommodators. Honey and Mumford (1982) also identified four groups of learners - activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. Vermunt (1996, 1998) suggested that learning styles are also related to culture and social environment, meaning that program structure or curriculum design may not be able to be global in nature. Kalantzis and Cope (2000, p47) stated that the “curriculum experience needs to include explicit strategies to negotiate differences”.

It is unlikely that an educational program caters to each student’s individual learning style or approach, but there may be opportunities for some degree of *congruent customization*, whereby a variety of teaching styles are used to address variation in learning approaches (De Vita, 2001). This requires a high degree of integration across subjects within a degree where coordinated program development caters for heterogeneous student groups. In this context, the investigation of how cultural background influences the development of individual learning style preferences and how educational institutions utilise this information to diversify delivery methods become relevant (De Vita, 2001). A good understanding of how students learn is important not only in terms of improving the teaching quality but also to dispel the misconceptions surrounding some non traditional and international students. Research conducted by Sillitoe et al (2002) indicates that cultural stereotyping of students’ approaches to learning has produced unsustainable positions regarding Asian students when they are labelled as shallow learners, non analytical, conservative and who demonstrate surface approach to learning with tendency towards regurgitation of teaching. Their findings indicate that Asian students possess analytical skill; however the culture shock and confusion with regard to the learning environment produce a cautious respect for what is taught.

Three broad learning approaches (deep, surface and achieving) with two other subscales – motivation and strategy were conceptualised by the SPQ, but the theoretical basis was that the students’ approach to learning is not a stable trait and is subject to change with the learning situation and the learning context (Zeegers, 2002). Research therefore indicates that students learn differently in different situations and the approaches to learning (surface or deep) varies according the academic task. Ramsden (1992) further confirms that the context of learning and learning orientations influence the learning outcomes of students.

The surface approach is the intention to achieve short-term memorisation of the material so that it may be reproduced, for example in an assessment while the deep approach is defined as the intention to establishing mastery of the material and integration of it into the learner’s existing knowledge base (Cuthbert, 2005). However, as Ramsden (2003) points out a learning approach cannot be considered as a characteristic of an individual person and something that can be inferred from observing student’s behaviour. It is also incorrect to associate ‘low ability’ with
Research has proved that students are capable of both deep and surface approaches and it should be viewed in the relational point of view. Therefore the intention to adopt a surface (reproduce information) or a deep approach (seek meaning) is seen as a consequence of how students interpreted the context of learning i.e. the learning approach adopted by a student can vary with demands of the tasks. Nonetheless, there is consensus among educational researchers that deep approach to learning leads to better outcomes and it should be the focus of tertiary education (Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 2003). As shown in figure 1, students’ approach to learning and learning outcomes are interconnected with their previous experiences, content to be learned, and the methods of teaching and assessment associated with the content, and therefore it is through establishing points of interventions within these connections that the quality of students can be enhanced (Ramsden, 2003). These may be achieved by changing the curricula, teaching methods and assessment methods. The success of this intervention however will be dependent on the institutions ability to change policies and practices related to rewarding reproductive approaches while providing inducements for meaningful learning (Ramsden, 2003).

Biggs 3P model of learning emphasises the interrelationships and interactions between three phases – presage, process and product factors of learning. Presage relates to student experiences before learning takes place, process accounts for strategies while learning is taking place and product focuses on outcomes after learning has taken place. SPQ 3P model which comprised 42 scale items in 6 sub-scales has been used in several research projects including cross cultural studies (Zhang, 2000) with consistent results confirming its scale reliabilities.

The model however was subject to criticism for not representing the changed educational environment since 1970’s when it was first developed. Zeegers (2001) and Richardson (1990) proposed revisions with reductions in the scale items. In 2001, Biggs himself decided that the original model needs further refinements to accommodate the new developments in the university educational sector following his collaborative research with Kember and Leung (Biggs et al, 2001). This resulted in a 2 factor, 2 sub-scale model representing only deep and surface with achieving motive and strategy sub-scales. The revised model with only 20 items was rationalised on the basis of practicality in terms of quicker and easier administration by regular teachers to monitor teaching context, apart from the need for adaptation for the new educational environment. In encouraging the use of the revised model for inquiry into teaching practice, Biggs et al (2001, p. 145) indicate that the new model “will be an ideal tool for teachers to use in evaluating and researching their own classrooms” with a view to promoting deep approaches to learning.

**Methodology**

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in the present study and it was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, a revised R-SPQ-2F questionnaire was administered in tutorial classes to obtain an insight into the learning approaches of students attending the classes. The selection of students was based on convenience sampling and only students volunteering for the study was included in the sample. The sample comprised of a total of 28 students. Students were asked to rate each of the question on a Likert scale of 1-5, higher rating indicating a positive inclination...
towards a particular study approach. Indices were constructed for each of the study approach domains (Deep Approach, Surface Approach, Deep Motive, Surface Motive, Deep Strategy, Surface Strategy) followed by T tests of means and cross tabulations on Gender, Load (Full/Part time), Mode (On/Off campus) and Work (whether working or not) and ANOVA on the type of students (International or Local). The data was analysed using SPSS.

The second stage comprised of depth interviews with seven students who were randomly selected to gather data related to a range of issues connected with the learning contexts. Each interview lasted for a period between 45 minutes to 1 hour. In-depth interviews assist in uncovering deeper insights into the respondent’s feelings on an issue and were considered appropriate for this study in extracting students’ personal views, and experiences in relation to their learning in the unit.

**Results**

Results based on the quantitative analysis indicated that there were no significant differences among students in regard to the study approach domains except for minor variation related to specific questions. In view of this, the results reported are confined to the two main study approaches – Deep and Surface.

Overall the average indices for each student on each of the study approaches was lower than 3 except for some questions. For example higher indices (>3) were reported on questions belonging to the domain of deep approach. Though not conclusive, it would indicate that students appear to show a tendency towards a deep study approach.

The 2 tailed tests of means on group variables representing students’ characteristics also indicated no significant differences, except in the case of a few selected questions as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Tests of means (2 tailed): Significance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group variable</th>
<th>Deep Approach</th>
<th>Surface Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td><strong>.054</strong> (I make a point of looking at most of the suggested readings that go with the lectures)</td>
<td><strong>.011</strong> (I find it is not helpful to study topics in depth. It is a waste of time, when you all need is passing acquaintance with topics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td><strong>.038</strong> (I find most topics interesting and often spend extra time tyring to obtain more information about them)</td>
<td><strong>.008</strong> (I do not find my subject very interesting so I keep my work to the minimum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>.009</strong> (I find it is not helpful to study topics in depth. It is a waste of time, when you all need is passing acquaintance with topics)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Load</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td><strong>.054</strong> I find most topics interesting and often spend extra time tyring to obtain more information about them</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similarly, ANOVA tests on the type of student were also not significant, except in the case of a few questions as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: ANOVA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group variable</th>
<th>Deep Approach</th>
<th>Surface Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International/Domestic</td>
<td><strong>.05</strong> (I come to most classes with questions in mind that I want answering)</td>
<td><strong>.012</strong> (My aim is to pass the subject while doing as little work as possible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>.043</strong> (I make a point of looking at most of the suggest readings that go with the lectures)</td>
<td><strong>.024</strong> (I generally restrict my study to what is specifically set as I think it is unnecessary to do anything extra), <strong>.049</strong> (I see no point in learning material which is not likely to be in the examination)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above results were not surprising as several other studies have also reported no significant differences among students in regard to the study approach domains (Biggs, 2003)

The analysis of the depth interviews revealed a number of key themes and messages based on student perceptions on their study approaches and the learning contexts in the tutorial class environment. These findings provide opportunities for review and further development of teaching in tutorials. Presented below are some of the key themes and messages.

1. Majority of the students (6 out of 7) felt that the unit was interesting and useful for their current and future studies as well as for their future careers.
2. Except for one student, all other students agreed that the work load of the unit is reasonable, though two students felt that the load can be increased with an additional practical assignment.
3. There was consensus of the opinion that tutorials were helpful in their learning. Some felt that the time allocated (50 minutes) is inadequate and should be increased while some others suggested that tutorials should be conducted in collaboration with the lectures. The importance of tutorials to student learning was explicit.
4. There were mixed reactions to the tutorial tasks. Students attending lectures regularly did not consider the presentation of a summary of the previous lecture was necessary as opposed to those students who do not attend lectures regularly.
5. Majority of the students who attend tutorials regularly come prepared for tutorials.
6. All students agreed that poor attendance in tutorials have an impact on their overall effectiveness, as interactions are important for learning.
7. While there was acknowledgement of E-learning system as a central learning environment, many viewed the system negatively given its record of
downtimes and slow execution of tasks. Most important message was that the failure of the university to provide any introductory training to students on the technical process of managing the website.

8. Students displayed varied study approaches towards tutorial tasks, online tests and the final exam. Some demonstrated very deep learning approaches sustained throughout the semester. It was clear that every student seem to adopt different tactics depending on the nature of learning exercise. For example, all students agreed that some form of memorising is done in preparation of online tests and the exam, however understanding of the material and concepts were considered more important to learning.

9. All students felt that the missing element in assessments is a written assignment to enable students to apply theory to practice.

Conclusions and Implications

The study was focussed on identifying the learning approaches of students and analysing student perceptions on the learning contexts in a second year marketing unit. The first stage of the inquiry was directed at examining the study approaches of student with the administration of a revised SPQ2 instrument designed by Biggs (2003). Second stage was a qualitative inquiry based on depth interviews of selected students to capture their perceptions on various learning contexts.

The quantitative results indicated that there were no significant differences on study approaches among students barring few exceptions. There was high awareness and appreciation of the value of tutorials and the tasks involved in tutorials. However, students expressed reservations on some assessment tasks and the functionality of e-learning system as a central learning environment.

The outcomes of the study consolidated the importance of revisions already underway with the unit in regard to a new assessment by way of a project whereby students are able to apply theory into practice. The feedback also supported the enhancement of the study material and progressive assessments. These include:

1. the introduction of a CD-Rom encompassing the study guide and video clips which will be used as part of the assessments. This would be more useful to off-campus students.
2. increase of the number of online tests from two to four thus allowing students to revise study material more regularly
3. the introduction of tutorial workshops in e-learning system with the ability to vary the content
4. the inclusion of a project as a piece of assessment.

Although the assessment of student satisfaction was not part of the study, the improvements on the quality of delivery of the unit based on student feedback will have a major influence on increasing the level of satisfaction of students. The enhancements in the learning context and the environment will provide opportunities for universities to be more attractive study destinations for students.
Limitations and future research

While this inquiry has its merits in terms of identifying differences in study approaches of students and students’ perceptions on learning contexts in a tutorial environment and their impact on their learning, the small sample size and heavy focus on the unit investigated has an effect on the replicability and generalisation of its findings to all learning contexts. The small sample size also had an effect on the opportunities available for more rigorous statistical analysis. Nevertheless, the qualitative investigation supported the aims and objectives of the inquiry with clear directions in regard to any possible revisions on the delivery of the unit.

Future research should ideally focus on cultural effects on learning approaches and how far learning contexts influence greater adaptation of learning styles of students.
References


