

**A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO AN ACCELERATION
PROGRAMME:
AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE**

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Abstract

Acceleration was a course first offered in 2005 through the Vega School of Brand Leadership, a division of The Independent Institute of Education, in South Africa to undergraduate marketing and advertising students who were identified as weak writers or at risk of failing their first year of study. This paper describes the pilot process in Durban of a change in delivery for the Acceleration Programme (AP) in Semester 1, 2010, and compares the results of AP students with those of others in their year. Analysis showed the AP group performed best which prompted further analysis and comparison of marks within the first-year cohort. Qualitative data were collected from students and lecturers to deepen understanding of the AP process and to assist future decisions about the programme.

Introduction

The Acceleration Programme (AP), originally designed in 2005, was a supplementary course for undergraduate marketing and advertising students at the Vega School of Brand Leadership, a division of The Independent Institute of Education (hereinafter referred to as 'Vega'), in South Africa, who were at risk of failing their first year of study. This paper describes the pilot of a new AP, revised in 2010, according to coursework demands and students' needs.

Originally students followed a structured, TEFL-oriented manual, designed for EL2 speakers. In the new programme they were coached to write assignments using a developmental, process approach. Average assignment and examination marks for those who regularly attended the AP exceeded the average year mark. Students recommended for the AP but who did not attend averaged somewhat lower, while borderline students not invited to attend the AP averaged the lowest of all groups.

The original structured course did not suit all needs and as non-compulsory meant some selected students attended sporadically and others never. It was debated in 2010 how to select students, how to determine their needs and what form the programme should take. As a result an incentive was offered to regular attenders. They could submit a draft of a selected coursework assignment to the AP lecturer for comment. This draft was reviewed and returned without a mark, but comments focused on constructive individual feedback to help students develop their writing and polish their essays. To give depth to the quantitative data, lecturers were interviewed and focus group discussions were held with Acceleration students. The ensuing data are discussed in the paper.

Background

The AP course was originally designed to support Vega students at risk of failure who were mainly speakers of English as an additional language, disadvantaged by their schooling in township or rural schools, and described by Hosking, Mhlauli and Berhe (2008: 5) as being 'at a linguistic disadvantage'.

In the first two years that AP operated, most Durban students fitted the expected profile of black L2 English speakers. A course was designed, informed by teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) principles and a manual was produced that was used on all Vega campuses. Material focused mainly on basic English grammar and structure, with an introduction to reading techniques and academic writing principles, such as planning and editing. It only touched on more sophisticated skills of critical judgement and argumentation. In effect, the AP course was generic and like many of its kind, carried little synergy with the students' disciplinary coursework tasks (Jacobs, 2005: 475).

It did not ultimately suit the needs of students, nor did it provide an easy link to their required assignments, especially when the nature of the students in Durban changed considerably, and most black students selected to attend the course were from ex-model C schools, and spoke and wrote English as fluently as their EL1 peers. It became obvious that poor academic literacy was the problem, the needs were for academic writing skills rather than language and much in the course and manual was not appropriate for such students. Increasingly lecturers designed and followed their own strategy, using the material from the coursework manual as a resource when needed.

The original AP was informed by the underlying assumption from Apartheid and early post-Apartheid years that student problems were largely due to them being speakers of languages other than English (Boughey, 2002). Access or bridging courses tended to focus on what Boughey (2008:15) described as grammatical 'surface features' of English, not context specific to the discourse of academic English. Christie (1985) cited by Boughey (2008) drew the distinction between the understanding of language first as a means of communication, resulting in courses that focus on language, as was the case with the original Vega AP, rather than the integration of language and sense as part of making meaning, with language then viewed as a tool to: 'make sense and order of our experiences of the world around us' (Boughey, 2008: 15). Hence the rules and conventions of language, important for academic success, are integrated in the focus on making meaning and expressing ideas. Emig (1977) had proposed the process approach to writing that informed the revised

AP, where a student should be coached in their writing as a means of deepening their learning, and where the academic writing process might be viewed as an heuristic to learning itself (Emig, 1977: 122). This process approach which supported students primarily in making meaning through their writing had become lost in many South Africa academic writing courses, when their purpose of induction into academic writing became secondary to focus on the correct structural standards of English (Boughey, 2008).

Baruthram & McKenna (2006: 496) point to the many different conventions of teaching Academic Literacy (AL), ranging from the rules and conventions that govern language to ways of understanding the context and strategies for understanding, discussing, organising and producing texts. The successful drafting process they described with students from Durban University of Technology went beyond delivering a course in AL and relied strongly on 'lecturers skills to respond to students' writing' (ibid) and to help students find the meanings they want to make. They point out that this required an understanding that meaning is constructed through language and rules that constrain language go far beyond those of spelling and grammar. This places the lecturer in the position of writing coach and mentor, which in turn leads the language and structure of their writing to improve.

Since its inception, the Vega AP was fraught with debates on how to select students, how to determine their real needs, how to promote attendance without making the course compulsory, and what direction and form the course should take. Since attendance was not compulsory, some selected students never attended AP and others attended only sporadically. This is not unusual (Yeld 1986, Palozzo 1987, Foggin 1991). The course was run prior to assignments and examinations at the end of the term, and some students, not having had feedback through marks, did not believe that they needed the AP. Other students, academically stronger and not identified as needing AP, wanted to attend the course.

Early in 2010 it was decided to offer an incentive to AP students who regularly attended. They could submit a draft of their Critical Studies assignment to the

AP lecturer, who would comment on meaning primarily but also technical issues such as structure, coherence, presentation, referencing and sense-making. From this they could revise the assignment before handing it in to their Critical Studies lecturer. The support was more akin to coaching and mentoring individuals and groups of students rather than lecturing per se. It required a particularly informal and participatory approach that relied on an empathetic student-lecturer interaction and relationship. The process resulted in assignments that, according to the course lecturers, showed more thoughtful understanding of the subject matter and were also more technically polished. This was also reflected in the high marks discussed in this article that were subsequently achieved by AP students.

The 2010 AP process

Students selected for AP were identified as the weakest in their cohort, most at risk of dropping out or failing the first year of study. However it was difficult to convince them that AP was a supportive resource rather than an extra demand on them particularly as the AP had not been obviously linked to their mainstream coursework and examination requirements. When they were working under pressure, during tests and around assignment deadlines, AP attendance fell away, usually by those students with the weakest focus and poorest time management skills. AP lecturers on all Vega campuses complained about the irrelevance of some prescribed content, and because AP was not compulsory, the poor attendance at lectures. All believed the AP should be more closely linked to skills required for specific coursework tasks rather than a general course to improve academic literacy and writing skills.

In Semester 1, 2010, it was decided that the AP should work more closely with the Critical Studies and Brand Strategy modules since both required extended, theory-based writing tasks. Students were coached through the stages of writing their assignments. Individual mentoring took place while assignments were being drafted. Students were encouraged to give drafts of assignments to the AP lecturer for review before revising, editing and finally submitting them to the course lecturer. Accordingly the AP lecturer consulted course lecturers to understand their requirements and to determine what help students needed

most to present a good assignment in their subject.

From the understanding that making meaning was the primary objective and using their assignments as a starting point, students were briefly and incidentally introduced to the building blocks of planning and writing, principles of 'Plain English', and their objective to communicate clearly and coherently with a reader. As part of the development process students were directed and guided to read their course material more effectively, so that they were grounded in the content required for assignments, as described by Hendricks & Quinn (2000: 456):

To gain some insight in how to use the voices of others and to integrate their own voices into their writing.

This had the added effect of moving students away from the negative focus on referencing and avoiding plagiarism towards the understanding that their own knowledge construction relied on the work of expert predecessors and was part of a broader stream of understanding.

Since the course started several weeks into the semester, theory was put into practice immediately. The development process commenced with students interpreting as a group what the lecturer required, then brainstorming potential content and planning the form of the essays in pairs or small groups. They were required to focus intensely on the work at hand. Through critiquing and supporting each other and learning revising and editing skills, they were ultimately helped to review critically their own work. In effect students were coached using a developmental approach, where they were immersed in the process of assignment writing as described by Emig (1977) in order to develop the academic literacy required for this level of study.

Methodology

The research for this paper was not pre-planned. However, curiosity about the

results of AP students compared to their peers drove the process, advanced by the discovery that most AP students had achieved a reasonable mark and some, a very good result for their first Critical Studies assignment. Marks were collected from other groups of first-year students and averages were calculated in an attempt to quantify the situation. Then students and lecturers were interviewed to try to understand the nature of the success and reasons for it. Steps in the research process included:

Students' marks were collected for the Critical Theory assignment in Semester 1, 2010, and the average mark was calculated for the group.

An average was taken of the entire set of marks for the full 2010 first-year cohort.

Marks were averaged for those students recommended to follow AP who did not attend the course.

Marks were averaged for borderline students who had not been asked to attend AP.

Marks for each group were compared with those of the year cohort as a whole.

Students and lecturers were interviewed to triangulate quantitative data and explain the differences between groups and why some AP students were able to produce such good assignments.

The immediacy of information, simplicity of the research task and accessibility of data allowed both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The small numbers of students suggested basic statistical analysis of their marks. Each set was scrutinised for exceptional outlying marks, as well as for other indicators of trends such as clustering, or the mode for the range of marks. The findings are presented below.

Findings

Twelve of the 20 students initially selected attended AP regularly and so were given the opportunity to hand in a draft of their Critical Studies assignment to the AP lecturer. Assignments were returned to students without a mark. As agreed with course lecturers no judgement was made about the content, but comments were made on structure, presentation, sense-making and referencing. Since the same lecturer marked all the assignments, an underlying assumption was of adequate internal validity and reliability.

The average final assignment mark for the 12 regular AP attendees (Table 1) was compared with the average mark from the eight selected students who did not attend the course (Table 2). AP attendees scored an average of 54.2%, which was higher by 2.7% than the non-attendees' average of 51.5%.

Table 1:

Critical Studies assignment marks for regular AP attendees

Student	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	N=12
Mark	76	65	58	56	55	54	52	51	50	47	44	42	Av=54.2%

Table 2:

Critical Studies assignment marks for non-attendees of AP

Student	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	N=8
Mark	70	58	55	51	50	47	42	38	Av=51.5%

From the 38 students identified as needing AP, 20 deemed most in need were selected for the course. Marks from those selected for AP were compared with the other 18, identified but not selected (Table 3). Their average was 50.72% which was lower than AP attendees by 3.48%, but also lower than AP selected non-attendees by 0.78%

Table 3:

Critical Studies assignment marks for students identified as borderline but not recommended for AP

Student	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	N=18
Mark	75	64	63	62	56	51	51	51	50	50	48	48	47	44	42	41	40	30	Av=50.72

Finally, the average mark from the entire cohort of 89 students gave a further benchmark against which AP attendees could be measured. AP attendees scored 54.2%, which was 0.47% higher than the year average of 53.73% (Table 4).

Table 4:

Average marks for Critical Studies assignment

Category of student	Number	Average mark	Difference from Year average
All students in year cohort	N=88	53.73%	
Regular Acceleration attendees	N=12	54.2%	+0.47%
Acceleration non-attendees	N=8	51.5%	-2.23%
Borderline but not recommended for AP	N=18	50.72%	-3.01%

The differences in average marks between the year cohort and other groups are shown in Table 4 above. Borderline students not selected for AP actually showed an average mark lower than AP non-attendees by 0.78%, although rationally it should have been slightly higher. Also scores for this group were clustered in the 40-49 band whereas marks for other groups were clustered in the 50-59 band. Lecturers conjectured that students selected for AP and who did not attend regularly were made aware of their borderline status, and because of this tried harder to obtain a higher mark. Those not selected were not aware of their borderline status and so did not feel the extra pressure to prove their competence. However, this plausible conjecture was not tested.

An independent researcher held a focus group interview with six students who attended AP regularly. All believed AP helped them improve academically and gave them basic skills for using language that they had either forgotten or were not taught at school. According to students:

I'd been out of school for a while so rusty and had forgotten how to write essays ... I needed the basics we learnt about ... I liked the small group... very supportive and felt free to talk about difficulties ... it helped because I passed everything.

It helped with academic writing and what it means ... for example style and referencing

Acceleration taught me to reduce the blabber and get to the point ... so we learned how to say things in a shorter way ... to trim down our writing

I learned to break down questions ... to look at questions in more detail to understand what is being asked ... and paragraphing ... I used to mix everything up but learned how to organise information better.

All students judged the course as relevant to their needs because it dealt directly with assignments. All believed the small supportive group to be effective and responded well to the practical approach. They appreciated being able to surface problems which could be discussed and addressed together, such as interpreting their lecturers' requirements and practical guidance for responding to an assignment brief.

The Brand Strategy and Critical Studies lecturers were also interviewed for their perspective on the effectiveness of AP. The Brand Strategy lecturer had been least involved with AP. However, he felt it would be useful to work together with the AP lecturer during the rest of the year and for AP students to be supported when preparing their assignments for his module.

The Critical Studies lecturer was most knowledgeable because AP students submitted a draft of her assignment to the AP lecturer for review. She perceived a distinct qualitative difference between those who attended AP and those who did not:

Students who attended Acceleration had a better ability to structure their essays, their grammar and spelling were better and they seemed to have a better grasp of the brief ... that (others) found difficult to get their heads around.

When asked how else AP assisted them, she described their ability to approach and break down questions into something that was more understandable to them. She also described the knock-on effect she had noted:

They also developed a skill to approach the questions in a logical, calm manner and to structure the essay in a similar way ... this I could see further reflected in their exams.

DISCUSSION

This research was not conducted in previous years, and therefore the new approach to AP cannot be compared to earlier ones. However, this does not detract from the positive outcome of the pilot course. The results are encouraging. The main change was that instead of following a generic, manual driven course, the lecturer supported the process of assignment writing by coaching students to perform a specific task. The approach was needs driven, determined by a specific assignment brief, and students who attended the course regularly could submit a draft of their assignment to the AP lecturer for review and comment before final submission to their Critical Studies lecturer.

The strategy used was coaching and mentoring rather than lecturing per se, and as Baruthram & McKenna (2006) point out, this relies to a large extent on the lecturer for its success. A similar coaching process is currently used in many tertiary institutions, since most have moved away from the common generic approach designed to assist students disadvantaged by language and education. Baruthram & McKenna (2006: 496-497) call the approach:

As writer-respondent intervention ... which moves from a remedial focus... to a drafting-responding focus (that) allows for feedback to be given during the process of writing, that is, in the draft stages (and) students are motivated to use feedback because they begin to see the process as a way of improving their mark.

They describe how feedback given at the end of the final assignment is often ignored or misunderstood. The attitude of students to AP is important in that some respond immediately, whereas others do not engage with the process and struggle to see its significance, seeming arrogant or taking it lightly. This is indicative of their lack of understanding of the more professional way of operating required at tertiary level, and for such students the non-compulsory nature of AP allowed them to easily opt out.

A main challenge was to convince students initially to attend the course and then to keep them engaged and attending, despite the pressure of other deadlines and tests. Although the incentive offered was a new approach with a very effective outcome for most of the 12 students who followed the process, attendance was still sporadic with some often arriving late to the lecture. Of the initial 20, eight students did not attend sufficiently to follow the drafting process.

This was reflected in their comparatively lower marks for the Critical Studies assignment. While the differences in percentages for these groups were small, they are a significant indicator of the improvement achieved by regular attendees, especially since their average mark was higher for the year as a whole, notwithstanding that students selected for AP initially showed the weakest writing skills in the cohort, and were deemed to be at most risk of failure within the first-year group. This makes their achievement all the more impressive.

A further factor to be considered is the transfer of skills learned through AP to other academic tasks such as time management, reading techniques, multiple drafting, editing for content, style and correctness of language, and examination

performance, all of which were mentioned by lecturers and students as outcomes from attending AP (Hosking et al, 2008: 7).

The success of the new AP approach can be attributed to three factors: collaborating with other lecturers, coaching students as they wrote their assignments, and commenting on their work with a formative intent. These are common sense approaches for any course intended to improve academic literacy, and indeed where success is the prime objective. However, few lecturers are able to use this approach because large numbers in their groups mean they would spend many hours reading and providing feedback to students. The work is extremely labour intensive, particularly when, as advocated by Baruthram & McKenna (2006: 505), students are allowed to submit multiple drafts of their work. Nevertheless, as Van der Slik & Weideman (2008: 370) point out there is an ultimate cost-effectiveness of such an approach, due to:

The saving that it would bring about for the Higher Education system, as well as for individual institutions and for parents in cases where interventions increase throughput rates.

Certainly borderline students were rescued from failure or from dropping out of the course. While several first-year Vega students did drop out during or after their first semester, none were AP attendees.

While comprehensive developmental marking is perhaps too labour intensive to be offered by a lecturer to 100 or more students, it was possible in the smaller AP group. The process provided a powerful learning experience for students who came to understand the necessity of drafting and editing to make their meaning clear and learned the skills and effort required as undergraduate students to achieve high marks.

Conclusion

For Vega, the developmental approach to AP was a pilot project and therefore embryonic, and though effective in many ways, it still needs further research and development before it can be formalised as an institutional strategy. In reality it is one approach among many in South Africa, and indeed internationally, that is being employed to help bridge the gap between school and university, and to provide a safety net for students who are at risk of failure.

The step away from the previous generic, manual-driven course is in line with developments in other universities, and therefore strategies used elsewhere should be examined further to help determine the optimum form for AP. Certainly the process used in the pilot AP approach was effective and productive.

An approach that suggests itself from this pilot could be a shorter, more intensive core course for basic writing and academic literacy skills, strongly linked to assignment preparation. This could be supported by appointment slots for more intensive, individual coaching rather than the type of writing support, drop-in centres established in some universities.

A strategy must be developed to ensure attendance by those students who are identified as vulnerable to failure. So far the approach has been to avoid stigma and any semblance of punishment for AP students, which was one reason for avoiding making attendance compulsory. However, by their nature, a portion of AP students resist engagement with their studies generally. For them the AP course, by demonstrating and modelling effective ways to operate as an undergraduate student, and building in opportunities for success, could engender a more mature attitude to their coursework and assignments. It is perhaps overly idealistic to expect such students to apply themselves to AP through their own volition, and, therefore, in addition to supplying an incentive for attendance, a repercussion for non-attendance should perhaps be adopted.

This small piece of research and the reflections it generated indicate that

consideration of a more strategic approach to AP would not only better prepare students at risk of not meeting the requirements of tertiary- level study, but also benefit the institution by reducing the attrition and failure rate for first-year students.

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