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Is BUdi a good mate? Investigating the impact of a collaborative support model on the student assessment experience.

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Abstract

Support for academic and information literacies are often perceived as sitting outside the faculty and can be disassociated from each other in terms of delivery and student engagement. A collaborative model has been operating in the Business faculty at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) since 2008 that aims to redress this issue by bringing together support for library research, academic writing and faculty guidance into a shared consultative space. This session describes the operation of this collaborative consultative service, BUdi (Business drop-in). Focus groups, online surveys and interviews with coordinators have been conducted to evaluate the impact of BUdi. The value of such a support service and findings that have emerged from evaluations performed to date will be discussed.

Session outline

Ice breaker – Paired discussion (5 mins): How can assessment support be offered to first year students in a collaborative way?
Presenter (10 minutes): Outline of the BUdi initiative and the evaluative data gathered to date.
Small group discussion (10 mins): Consider:
1. The potential and value of this initiative in relation to first year and transitioning students.
2. Compare this initiative with current practice at own institutions and discuss potential adaptions.
Presenter leads whole group discussion (5 mins): Draws together ideas from participants
Facilitation Questions:
What points of interest and other benefits or potential insights have been raised about the BUdi initiative?
What similar initiatives or related practices exist within other institutions or are known of nationally.

Introduction

The widening of participation in Higher Education and focus on retention has facilitated debate about the best way to provide support to commencing students. As most students do not arrive at university as independent learners, it is important that support systems are in place to assist and scaffold students in skill development that encourage a deeper approach to their learning (Ramsden, 1992). Whole of the institution approaches to first year transition, engagement and support advocate that it is critical that there is a move beyond the separateness of academic, administrative and support services to create cross-institutional interactions that provide first year students with access to timely support (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). In addition, studies suggest that first year students are more likely to withdraw if they feel they lack the necessary academic preparation and perceive their learning environment to be unsupportive and unengaging (Wilcoxson et al., 2011). Students may experience assessment as a whole, however they typically seek support in an atomistic way and writing and library research are often seen as sitting outside the
faculty (Peacock, 2008). In response to holistic pedagogy and recent first year discourse, a collaborative approach to support provision has been initiated at USC, which aims to redress this disconnection. BUdi (Business drop-in) brings together assessment support for research, writing and content into one informal location that students can voluntarily access on a weekly basis to gain feedback and guidance on assessment tasks.

Background

The Business Librarian and Academic Skills Adviser formed a partnership in 2008 to design and embed team-taught skills presentations into the first year foundation Business courses. This intervention was promoted by a shared observation that many students did not grasp the crucial interdependent relationship between the skill of researching and the skill of writing. These integrated skills presentations were customised to specific assessment tasks and co-taught in the lectures of first year Business courses. Students were surveyed before and after the team-taught skills presentation to gauge their individual perceptions about their research and writing skills in response to the skills presentation. Survey results (N= 651) showed that student awareness about the process required to write the set assessment task were improved and that the presentations made students feel more confident to start (Einfalt, & Turley, 2009a). Follow-up interviews with course co-ordinators about the intervention raised interest about the noted benefits from this partnership as observed in the collaborative drop-in service provided for assessment support, BUdi. Faculty academics were encouraged to promote the BUdi service in course delivery as a place where students could bring their developing assessment tasks for skill guidance from the Librarian and Skills Adviser and for content support from academics in attendance. This intervention paved the way for a new approach to student support: the three-way collaborative model (Einfalt, & Turley, 2009b).

Description of BUdi

BUdi is a voluntary, informal drop-in service available to students for a two hour period, once a week. BUdi is promoted during the embedded team-taught skills presentations delivered by the Librarian and Academic Skills Adviser in the lectures. As a result, students are able to see a ‘face’ and identify the research or writing support that they can gain follow up support on in a BUdi consultation. The space used for BUdi utilises a long central board room like table where students can be directed to different experts and advisers, identified by signage, as required. Generally, students arrive at BUdi with a clear intention, for example, to look over a draft or to make sure they are “on the right track”. The faculty teacher may engage a group of students in joint discussion, especially in the planning stage of the assessment task. However, as time progresses, students are more likely to seek out skills support and research support in addition to content clarification. Students often bring laptops and are actively engaged in writing assessment drafts whilst at Budi. An attending faculty academic may direct students to an Adviser or Librarian for clarification or skill development. Having a ‘greeter’ (usually an administrative staff member) to direct arriving students is a valuable addition at BUdi as it enables new and unsure students to be directed to sit near a group in the same subject area and suggestions can be made as to the best expert to engage with. As students return to BUdi, after their first visit, they seem more comfortable to take a seat and work on their assessment whilst waiting to see an expert. These students are often more likely to engage in peer-to-peer interaction without facilitation by a staff member. Peak attendance has been recorded in the weeks when core first year assignments are due. However, from mid-semester there is a steady rate of students attending regularly for a variety of subjects, all of which can be addressed in one BUdi session. Due to the

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collaborative approach and structure of BUdi, students are able to compare and contrast their work with other students, give guidance, see assessment samples, ask questions about tasks and be referred on to alternative support when required.

Profile of Budi.

From a total of 26 student attendees in 2008, BUdi attendance has grown rapidly and 2011 experienced a record growth to 614 students. By recording the demographic details of students attending BUdi, a general profile of users has been gained. First year students account for 90% of attendees and 34% have English as an additional language. Approximately 50% of students are under 22 years of age. Male students consistently comprise around 40% of BUdi’s clients, which exceeds the male to female ratio on campus (34:66). In addition, BUdi has been attended by a number of students with disabilities.

Evaluating BUdi.

To evaluate the benefits of BUdi, interviews were conducted with seven faculty teachers and co-ordinators taking first year courses in 2009 and 2011. A focus group of student users (N=10) was conducted in 2010 and an anonymous online survey to students was administered in 2010 and 2011. Assessment results for the core course were also analysed from 2009 to 2011. The online surveys conducted in 2010 and 2011 (N=88) gathered comments and likert responses on a range of questions in relation to the perceived impact BUdi had on the student’s assessment experience. These surveys indicated that 40% of these students had attended BUdi more than three times and that 70 % would use it again. Of interest, 25% of respondents to the online survey had not accessed any other form of support other than BUdi. This profile indicates that BUdi is more attractive to students who do not traditionally engage with university support services. Comments from the focus group and survey responses have identified some common themes in relation to students’ perceptions about BUdi.

Understanding the process required for a good assessment product

One intention of providing support in a collaborative manner to students was to raise student awareness about their individual research and writing skill levels and understand that these skills are interconnected in a process. To this end, questions were posed in the focus groups and survey to explore student perception about their understanding of the skill process required to produce, improve and polish their assessment products. Comments indicated that attending BUdi had influenced students to become more self-reflective about their work, “it encouraged me to change my assignment and work further on it to get a HD...even though I was disappointed as I thought all the hard work had been done”. Students commented that the feedback gained from consultation at BUdi, “also helped in understanding why things have to go through the processes they do...has allowed me to approach topics differently than before”.

Peer-to-peer learning and student connections

Students reported that at BUdi they had the opportunity to benefit from other students and even make connections in some cases. Many students indicated they gained from “listening in” to advice provided to their peers: “listening to other students’ questions and answers, is a tremendous help... as I observed I got to understand how they could help me with my assessment”. Students suggested that they benefited from the shared group space provided at BUdi as often advice being offered to others was useful to them as well. “People ask
questions that you haven’t thought of yet, and so I find that valuable too…that when you get to that point, you’ve already got the answer”.

Students reported on enjoying the opportunity to share ideas and at times suggested that they had gained inspiration from other students: “I was able to find a girl that was standing next to me who was able to help me with my work and my questions, and I was able to help her out too”. Another common theme from feedback is that there was a sense of being “in the same boat”, which was of comfort to anxious students and this made them “feel less isolated”, and in some cases, led to the “setting up networks”.

A safe and non-threatening space.

Several respondents suggested that they were more confident to approach experts in a less threatening environment where others were “doing the same thing”. Some student comments suggested that they were unsure and apprehensive but felt more confident to approach staff in the BUdi space: “It is a little more personal and I don’t feel like I’m invading my tutor’s time when it is drop-in” and “I wasn’t sure how to ask for advice or whether the question was really significant to make an appointment about”. Students also indicated that they liked the “informal” nature of BUdi and that the drop in concept encouraged them to use it in the first place. “It’s a daunting process walking into the room as a 19 year old. I was very uneasy about attending but went anyway”.

In addition to reducing anxiety about the assessment task for many of the first year students, comments from students also reported that BUdi gave them a sense of being less isolated and had helped build confidence and even perseverance in some instances: “As a first year student it took a lot of stress off my shoulders, worrying if my assignments were done right in the right order”. One student, who admitted she considered dropping out in the first weeks of semester, also commented that BUdi’s “personal approach gave me a sense of belonging and connectiveness (sic), that there were academic staff who cared about the individual students and their need to achieve”. Another theme that has emerged is that BUdi make students feel secure as it represents a type of “safety net”, even when they no longer feel a need to attend. A return to study student commented that “I really struggled with managing my learning again but the BUdi program meant that when I felt a little lost, I could check in, give myself a nudge back in the right direction and keep going! Now in my third year, I find it much easier to stay on track but every now and again it’s good to know I have BUdi to give me clarity”.

Assessment results (ANOVA test).

The majority of students who attend BUdi (56%) come for assessment support in the first year core business course (COR 110). We ran a one-way ANOVA of the dataset assessment results from COR110 students in 2009, 2010, and 2011 and found significant differences in the performance of students who had attended BUdi (mean score of 78.2) and those who had not (mean score of 64) F (1,450) = 95.77, p=0.00. This suggests that attending BUdi had a positive impact on the overall performance of the COR 110 students who engage with this service.

Summary

The evaluation of BUdi suggests that it provides an improved assessment experience for students as they benefit from concurrent access to a variety of skill experts and content
teachers. Students also report that they enjoy the chance to work with their peers whilst they engage in the assessment process. These findings are supported by recent studies into commencing student expectations (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke da Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011). The BUdi initiative has received positive attention at the institutional level and has been replicated in other faculty programs at USC (Heath, Psychology, Arts and Social Sciences). Further research is planned to explore the impact of this initiative on student well-being and socialisation as part of the university experience. Staff also report on gaining professionally from this collaborative model. The model has clearly developed better collegial relationships between support staff and the Business faculty since its inception in 2008. By further exploring the benefits of providing collaborative academic support services, it is envisaged that stronger foundations can be formed to promote the development of sustainable practices, supportive, interdisciplinary environments and to create a holistic community for students and staff to engage with.

References


