

Increasing the relevance of academic skills for students in the creative arts

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Abstract

Creative arts students at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic have traditionally been relatively resistant to adhering to academic standards, particularly in writing academic essays and reports. Some of the students' arguments against academic constraints in the creative arts include comments indicating that these constraints stifle their creativity and have no relevance to their industry. Additionally, there seems to be an "impending sense of doom" (student) when faced with writing tasks, especially essays. In order to combat this perception, and to create a strategy for enhancing individual motivation, a collaborative team teaching initiative was trialled in Tioriori – Certificate of Music Production and Performance – at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic. The collaboration took place between an academic staff member who is a Learning Advisor in Kahurangi Student Services and a new part-time teacher who is also the director of Island Films with 25 years of industry experience in music video production. The teaching took place on a revised module: Whakaaroaro – Communication for the Creative Arts. The two teachers wrote the overall objectives, assessments and course outline. The aim was to provide a relevant, fun module in communication that had clear industry-relevant outcomes for the students, whilst embedding a firm foundation of academic skills and standards in order to increase student retention and success in the academic areas of the creative arts.

Background

Students' academic essay writing skills have been an area of concern for the Music Production and Performance teaching team at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic in Tauranga. According to Group Leader, Mary Stewart, these students have not, in previous years, paid much attention to cultivating their academic writing skills, as they questioned the relevance of essay writing skills to the development of their music and music careers (M. Stewart, personal communication, October 19, 2010). In 2009, an initiative was developed to improve the students' academic writing skills in a core communications module (Whakaaroaro – Communication for the Creative Arts) in the Certificate of Music Production and Design (Tioriori), the first year of a two year diploma. The initiative included collaboration between two teachers: an industry

¹ Cooper, B., & Maxwell, S. (2010). Increasing the relevance of academic skills for students in the creative arts. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevillano & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp.9- 17). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

expert with 25 years of international experience in music video production (Simon Maxwell), and an academic Learning Advisor (Berni Cooper). The two teachers rewrote the module's objectives, outline, lesson plans and assessments to embed academic essay writing skills in practical, relevant industry skill requirements. The delivery took place in Term three of the year and comprised eight lessons. The essay writing was interspersed with communication content and oral presentation practice. This collaboration between a Learning Advisor and a content teacher, to embed academic skills development, has shown positive outcomes on student success and retention in other studies in New Zealand, such as Te Tari Āwhina, the Learning Development Centre's successful initiative with Bachelor of Health Science students at the Auckland University of Technology (Naeem & Day, 2009).

Team teaching

Successful collaboration provides benefits for both students and tutors. It has been used in areas when material from two diverse topic areas needs to be combined. Many examples can be found in literature; for example, Schlosberg and Sisk (2000), a political theorist and an ecologist, respectively, team-taught an interdisciplinary course at Northern Arizona University to focus on the impacts of science on policy and vice versa. Another team, Helms, Alvis and Willis (2005), combined management perspectives and accounting viewpoints on an MBA programme at the University of Tennessee. There are many examples of successful collaboration between Learning Advisors and classroom tutors (Brackley & Palmer, 2002; Heke, 2008; Naeem & Day, 2009; Te Moana, 2009).

Many of the students who enrol in Music Production and Performance are experienced performing musicians whose knowledge of the industry may meet or exceed that of their tutors. Game and Metcalfe (2009) found that more than one teacher in the front of the class diffuses the position of the knowing tutor and can open opportunities for students to join the team as teachers and learners. Other benefits to students from team teaching have included: improved teacher-student relationships, improved learning outcomes, higher achievement levels, greater retention rates, improved interpersonal skills, stimulated creative thinking, and critical thinking skills (Alvis & Willis, 2005; Heke, 2008; Helms, 2005; Letterman & Dugan, 2004; Te Moana, 2009).

Team teaching can also promote diversity, particularly if the two tutors/lecturers are different genders and/or from different cultures (Heke, 2008; Letterman & Dugan, 2004). Letterman and Dugan found that students were intrigued by the dynamic interactions between two lecturers and that lively debate between them energised student participation and interest. Teachers benefit from team-teaching as the combination can produce a synergy in the classroom, making the teaching more enjoyable, as well as beneficial, for the students. The mix of teaching skills and styles can also provide learning opportunities for the tutors and can lead to a more robust faculty (Helms et al., 2005). Another potential benefit apparent in the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic partnership was that the classroom tutor was a new tutor with extensive

industry experience but little experience of the academic world. The team-teaching experience could therefore presume to provide a mentoring vehicle as well.

Planning the initiative

Working together, the authors wrote the course objectives, outline, lesson plans, and assessments. In conjunction with the Group Leader Creative Arts and the Programme Coordinator of Music Production and Performance, we brainstormed the barriers that the music students encountered in the past on their academic journey. We identified that many of the barriers to academic success were attitudinal: the students, and also the Programme Coordinator, did not perceive the relevance of academic writing in a music qualification; and many of the students did not feel confident in their ability to write academically. As a result of both of these factors the students did not possess motivation to master these skills. The following hypothesis was developed: an increase in perceived relevance, confidence and motivation could increase the quality of academic essay writing. The following model summarises the purpose of the initiative:

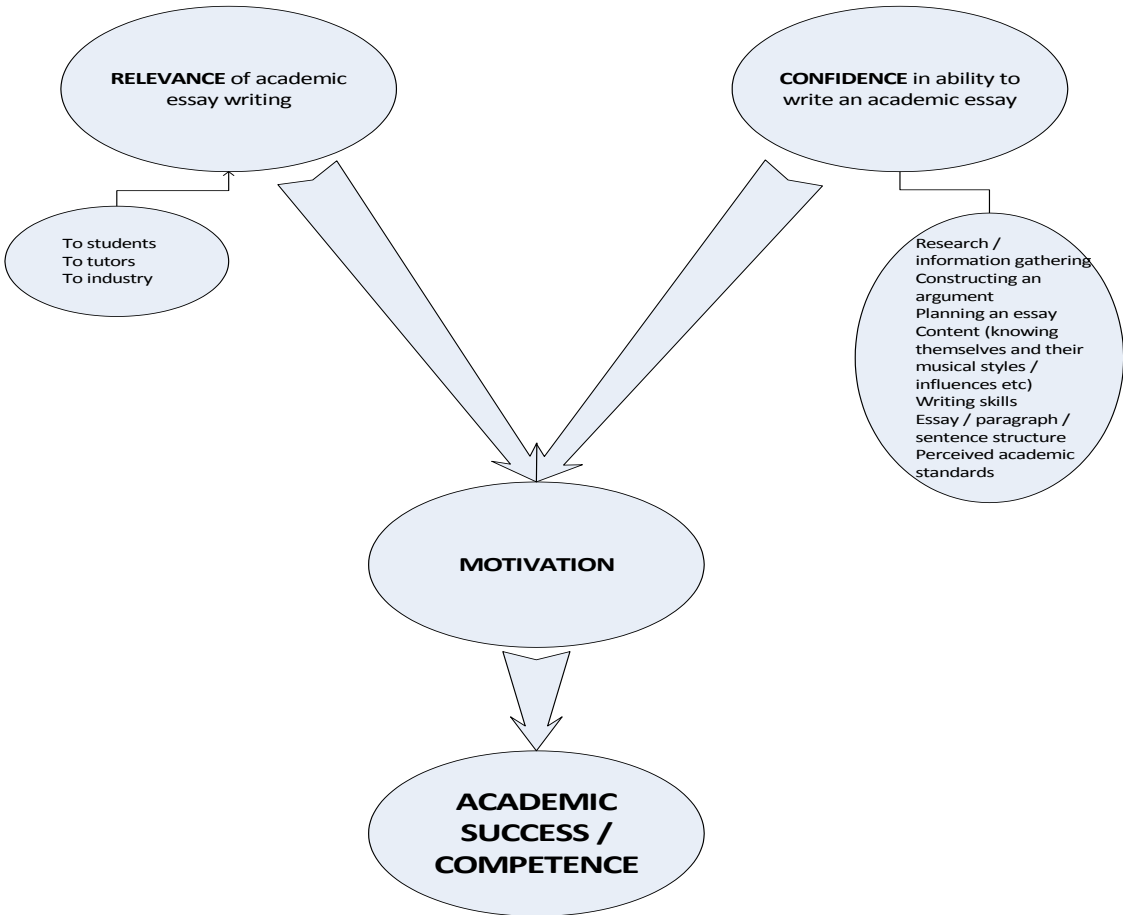


Figure 1. Tutors’ assessment of factors leading to academic success for students enrolled in Tioriori - Certificate of Music Production and Performance

Redesigning the programme

In order to provide industry relevance to learning academic essay writing skills and to communicate this relevance to the students, we wrote three course objectives: 1) to improve/enhance students' communication skills to enable them to present themselves effectively to gain employment in the music industry; 2) to develop critical thinking and research skills by researching music festivals, showing how students' musical talents synthesise with these festivals; and 3) to hone writing skills by presenting these findings in a formal written format.

The previous essay assessment had been theory based. We re-wrote the assessment with the following aims:

- Students would gain knowledge about music festivals, particularly music festivals at which they may be able to play in the future. This knowledge would include: when and where the music festival was held; how to gain entrance to play at the music festival; the festival's main demographic; the genre of the festival; who the important contacts/festival organisers were.
- Students would relate these festivals to their own music. Students would gain knowledge through self reflection and analysis of their music. This information would also be useful in terms of writing a biography later on in their programmes and would also provide the foundation of a musician's curriculum vitae. The students were to identify the following aspects of their music: the genre; main demographic/target audience; history/development of the band/artist; and previous gigs/album releases.
- In identifying the above and presenting it as a formal academic essay, the students would develop their research, synthesis and academic essay writing skills.

Essay writing workshops

It is advantageous for students to be provided "the opportunity to learn about academic skills in the context of the demands of a specific paper (practising literature searches, reading and note-taking of relevant articles for the purposes of writing a compulsory assessment) [as it] contextualises these skills [and] offers personal contact with TLAs [Tertiary Learning Advisors]" (Naeem & Day, 2009, p. 27). Thus, the essay writing workshops we ran were based around the essay assessment. In order to increase the students' ability and their confidence in their ability, the process of writing an essay was broken down into smaller steps. Each step was first practised in class, and completed at home by the students. Three formative assignments were set, based on these exercises, so that we could monitor the students' progress and make recommendations on an individual basis to ensure they were mastering each step before continuing on to the next step in a scaffolding process. The first two formative assignments were based around the exploration and analysis of the students' own music and music festival research. The final formative assessment was an essay draft.

The teaching sessions were run as student-centred interactive workshops in line with adult learning theory, facilitated by both of the collaborating tutors. The Learning

Advisor demonstrated the academic skill and the content expert translated it into industry jargon and usefulness, often with a story of how he had used the particular skill in reality, in his industry. These stories often contained famous names and added real interest, and often humour, to the workshops. When the content expert demonstrated a skill, the Learning Advisor subsequently broke it into academic requirements. The interplay between the two tutors meant that the students were often entertained, gained multiple perspectives and also felt part of the class and engaged with the tutors and other students. Many of the essay writing activities related directly back to the students' music. One example was a workshop activity designed to encourage the students to think critically about their own musical influences and genre. In this activity the students selected a piece of music which described their life, or had an influence on their life, or was influential at a certain period in their lives. They also needed to explain the reason. The tutors played snippets of the music randomly and the class had to guess whose piece of music had been played and why. The owner of the music explained his/her motivation to the class. This activity then led to the first formative assessment as students applied these skills to their own music.

Evaluating the initiative's impact

The Certificate of Music Production and Performance, 2009 class consisted of 19 students: three female and 16 male students ranging in age from 17 to 53. Five students identified themselves as Māori, two as British and the rest as European New Zealanders. One student did not attend any sessions and withdrew from the Certificate altogether.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire was circulated in the class following the submission of the academic essay. The students were advised that completing the questionnaire was voluntary. The purpose of the study was communicated to the students from the beginning of the course. Twelve questionnaires were completed.

Students' self-rated feelings of confidence in essay writing improved from the beginning of the course, to the end of the eight lessons. Four students reported no change in their confidence, although these students reported feeling confident in their essay writing abilities to begin with (ratings of 8, 9, 9 and 10, where 10 is very confident) (Figure 2). The largest increase in confidence was a difference of five points on the scale. The average increase in confidence was 1.5 points on the scale. In response to the question "What about the course so far has surprised you the most?", three students expressed surprise regarding the essay writing process, commenting: "I done an essay", "I started off not wanting to do the essay, felt it was a waste of time. In the end I actually enjoyed it", and "...it's easier to write essays and communicate than I thought [sic]".

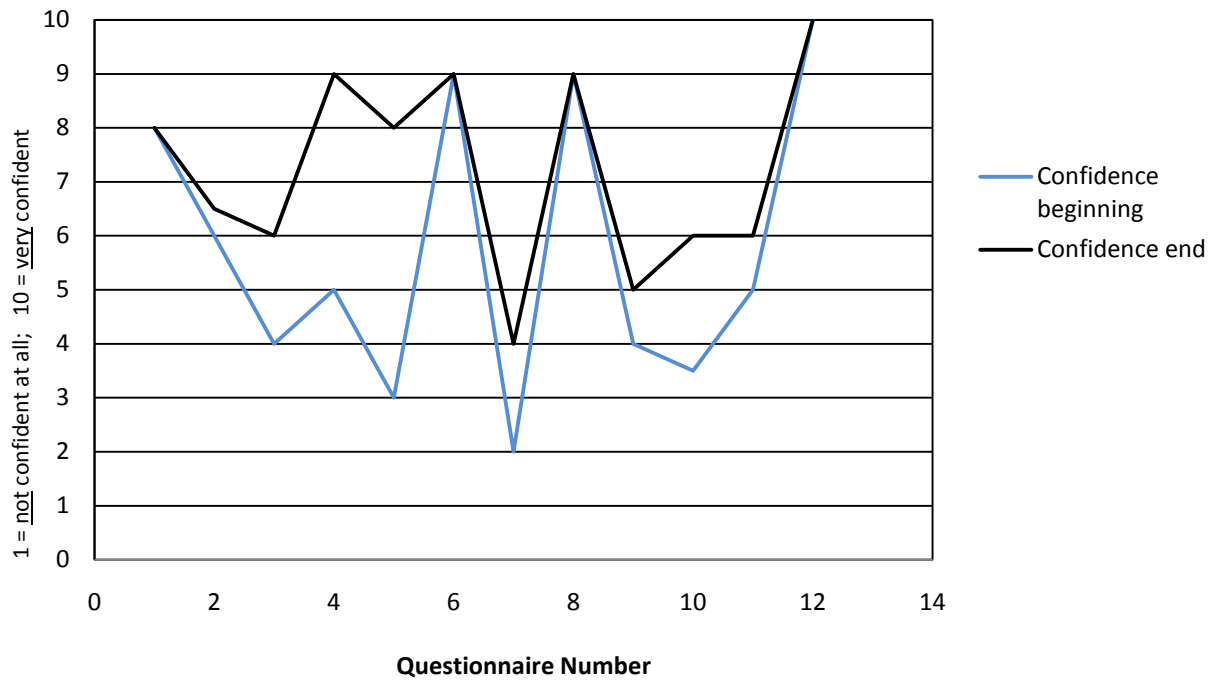


Figure 2. Students' self-rated confidence scales about their essay writing skills at the beginning of the course compared with their perceived confidence at the end of the eight lessons on essay writing. 10 is very confident, 1 is not confident at all.

Half the respondents questioned the relevance of writing an academic essay. However, in response to the question "what about the course so far has surprised you the most?" two people expressed surprise at the relevance they perceived in the end.

Attendance was generally poor; only two students attended every class (eight classes) and one student only attended the first class. Reasons cited for poor attendance included lack of perceived relevance, overseas travel, illness, the time of day (9am), work commitments and boredom.

Essay assessment

Sixteen essays were received; two students withdrew from the course. The grades ranged from two failures to five A plusses. The majority of the grades were high (nine students; 69% of essays marked). The average grade was 75.2% (see Figure 3).

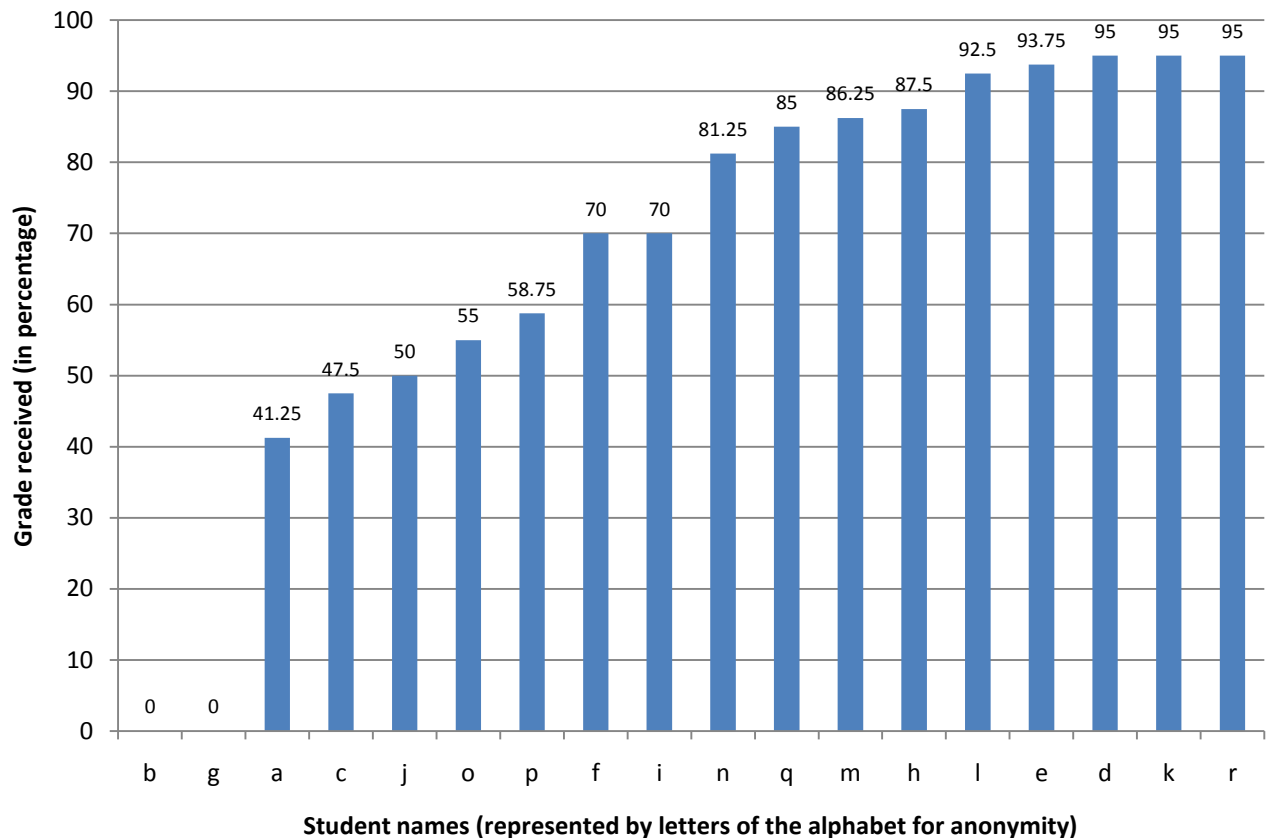


Figure 3: Students' grades in the essay assessment

Observations

Informal interviews were held with the group leader for Creative Arts and the Programme Coordinator for Music Production and Performance. Informal interviews were held with students throughout the term, and after the essay was submitted. Feedback was sought continuously and reflection between the two tutors, as well as with the Group Leader and Programme Coordinator was ongoing.

The Group Leader and Programme Coordinator reported on remarkable outcomes in comparison with previous years. The Programme Coordinator (L. Wing, personal communication, December 15, 2010) noted the following:

- improved results for students;
- support is available when students need it most and is in context;
- the Learning Advisor has worked with more students in our course than in previous years and has created relationships with students that have enabled students to achieve at a higher level and feel comfortable in asking for help;
- students do not always seek support on their own and the two tutors were able to monitor progress and students' learning needs on a regular basis;
- support for new staff member in team teaching of this course.

The Group Leader added that all the essays had a basic flow, logical ordering, synthesised information and argument development which few essays had featured in previous years. She continued to note that there were positive shifts in the students' thinking (as shown in questionnaire comments above) (M. Stewart, personal communication, October 19, 2010). The feedback that the Group Leader and Programme Coordinator received from the students was positive and they reportedly enjoyed the course.

The learning

The team-teaching initiative between an industry expert and an academic Learning Advisor proved to be relatively successful on Tioriori – Certificate of Music Production and Performance in 2009. The team-teaching allowed a better mix of academic skills and relevant, practical industry requirements. The students enjoyed the team-teaching scenario: as one student reported on a questionnaire, “having good input from Simon in terms of the way the music industry works and how to approach people. Berni helps put thoughts into structured sentences.” These findings may be generalisable to other students in the creative arts who have also been relatively resistant to developing their academic skills rather than enhancing their ‘art’. This includes students doing a Diploma of Art, a Diploma of Graphic Design, or a Diploma of Fashion. However, as attendance was particularly poor in this study, the study may first need to be replicated with another student cohort in the same programme of study. The findings may also have an impact on Learning Advisors' practice: the results may provide more evidence that collaboration between the classroom tutor and Learning Advisor and embedding academic skills in a programme is advantageous to the students' learning and their success and retention.

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