

Integrating Reading and Writing as a Strategy to Increase University of Fort Hare's Social Work Students' Literacies

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KEYWORDS Throughputs integrating reading and writing peer assessment action research

ABSTRACT The article aims to validate and explore, through action research whether peer assessment tasks entailing integration of reading and writing leads to improvement of literacy gaps and possible increased learning. The research adopted a quantitative paradigm and a mini survey design that tested the hypothesis whether the year 2012 SWP 210 students' literacies (through integrating writing and reading) can be improved through classroom peer assessments tasks. A questionnaire was used as a research instrument to capture the perceptions, attitudes and thinking of 24 students on whether integrating writing with reading helps to bridge their literacy gaps. Findings indicate that peer assessment tasks increases reading, revising and increased learning; the tasks help to bridge/cross learners' literacy gaps; and facilitates integration of reading and writing to enhance learning and possibly increase learners' throughputs. The study, therefore, validated the hypothesis that the year 2012 SWP 210 students' literacies can be improved through classroom peer assessments tasks. The researcher calls on all the teachers in his social work department to adopt action research and use peer assessments of students to improve literacy gaps and increase their learning; urges the UFH administration to enforce that all the lecturers take PGDHET to equip themselves with action research skills.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Institutions of higher learning in South Africa are being attacked by government and private sector over producing half-baked graduates who are not competitive enough to meet market expectations (Subotzky, 2000). Jansen and Christie indicate that among other factors, lack of restructuring the curriculum, or inadequate reinforcing it to be outcome based, remains one of the hugest challenges in institutions of learning making students to perform poorly (Jansen and Christie, 1999). The use of the traditional conventional methods of teaching and assessments has also been pinned by some other scholars as possibly contributing to graduates who are not competitive enough to match the country's market needs and demands (Subotzky, 2000; Kraak, 2000). This could be contributed by the oppressive mode of pedagogy manifest in the traditional mode of education (Freire, 1971). With the effects of modernization and globalization, the traditional teacher focused rote learning has also not helped the learners develop reflexive and critical skills to face the dynamism of learning (Subotzky, 2000; Trevithick, 2005). One such problem emanates from low motivation of their learning especially due to myriad literacy gaps making their throughputs go down (Lea & Street, 1998).

Subjective information and this researcher's observation and experience suggest that many UFH students' performance is brought down by inadequate mastery of educational concepts due to poor literacy levels among other factors (Lea & Street, 1998). This is especially notable to students from low economic backgrounds whose secondary level education did not expose or prepare them with adequate literacy levels to face tertiary educational levels (Lea & Street, 1998). This phenomenon could possibly explain why a significant number of University of Fort Hare students are experiencing notable poor performance levels (Act, 2003). Some courses have been reported to experience a lot of failures. For example, a report in the last Social Science Faculty Board meeting held on 23rd February 2012 decried such failure rates (FSS Board Meeting, 2012). Such failures make students either drop out completely, repeat many times and therefore take long to complete their courses; or make them uncompetitive and therefore diminishing chances of taking higher degrees such as Master's or other higher certificates. This low literacy levels making students unmotivated has had disastrous effects in the way students conceptualize learning. For example they have adopted survival learning approaches such as plagiarism and paying other established

scholars to do their assignments on their behalf (Beute, Van Aswgen & Winberg, 2008). It is therefore important that the lecturers consider introducing viable interventions that would possibly increase students' literacy levels and subject such students to a research endeavour like a mini survey that will capture their perceptions over such a strategy. Such strategies, therefore, will validate or invalidate the place of peer assessments tasks as a vehicle of increasing students literacy levels, motivation and possibly throughputs. This also renders credence to introducing classroom tasks that will be peer reviewed by the student themselves, then their perceptions pertaining to the tasks captured through action research. This, then, places the importance and niche of increased action research as a vehicle of solving classroom problems (Reason, 2001; McNiff, 2002, 2005; Koshy, 2010).

Problem Statement

There is increased concern by the lecturers as well as the University of Fort Hare (UFH) administration over the increasing number of students in many departments and faculties who are either averagely passing, making them uncompetitive to do a higher degree like Masters; or passing marginally forcing them to sit for supplementary examination, repeat, or making them drop out completely after exhausting the grace period one can take in a particular level. For example in the Social Science Faculty Board meeting held on 23rd February, 2012, it was reported that close to 30 students who were scheduled to move to second year had to repeat some papers in social work (FSS Board Meeting, 2012). Although there could be other problems underpinning this stalemate, this researcher hypothesizes the possibilities of weaker literacies making learning and understanding of various courses generally difficult. This researcher, therefore, considers interventions to increase literacy levels among students critical. Such interventions include introducing literacy- based peer assessment tasks that will possibly strengthen integration of reading and writing to increase literacies; and also as a way of motivating students to possibly increase their throughputs. Undertaking an action research to assess and validate students' perceptions of such peer assessment tasks would probably give way to institutionalizing or emphasizing such peer assessments in all the courses in the department/or the whole University fraternity.

Study Rationale

The study's broad objective was, through an action research, to investigate the role of classroom peer assessments tasks in motivating students' integration of writing and reading to increase their literacies, learning and throughputs. This article, however, intends to validate the following hypothesis:

Positive hypothesis

- The year 2012 SWP 210 students' literacies (through integrating writing and reading) can be improved through classroom peer assessments tasks.

Null Hypothesis

- The year 2012 SWP 210 students literacies (through integrating writing and reading) cannot be improved through classroom peer assessment tasks

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The action research used a quantitative paradigm which is a world view aspect of research in which the phenomenon under an investigation is viewed quantitatively or figuratively. The quantitative paradigm pursues research from a quantitative perspective as opposed to a qualitative one. It is the magnitude of the responses and therefore the frequencies that determine the validity of reality of a phenomenon being investigated (Rubin & Babbie, 2008; Neuman, 2007).

RESEARCH DESIGN

A mini survey design was used to investigate the perceptions of the 2012 SWP 210 students on the impact of peer assessment tasks as a strategy of integrating student's reading and writing to increase literacy levels; or to close learning literacy gaps. This is to possibly increase learning and possibly increase their throughputs. A mini survey is a design that captures the respondents' opinions, thinking, attitudes etc in order to assess how much the responses validate the proposed hypothesis. The outcomes of a survey, usually effected

through the medium of a questionnaire with predetermined questions, are usually represented quantitatively and attracts statistical analysis (Neuman, 2007; Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

Methods of Data collection and Instruments

The research data collection process was cross sectional, meaning that data collection was a once-off process. The process of data collection involved undertaking two classroom peer assessment tasks per week in the two months of March and April 2012, and then a mini survey conducted through the administration of a questionnaire as a research instrument. The researcher considered it pertinent to involve and engage students in doing small exercises taking only about 10 minutes of their lesson. After every lesson, he would give a small task that the whole class and himself, would have to deliberate on before starting the next following lesson. This means that students had to continuously revise what they did in order to tackle the assignment tasks competently. The task usually involved the components of the lesson that had been taught and served the purpose of revision as a way of reinforcing learning. It also involved integrating reading and writing as a way of increasing their learning outcomes. These tasks were then peer- assessed by students exchanging their assignments with one another.

Questionnaire method is considered fast and less ambiguous compared with other data collection process such as interviews. The only challenge is when data is to be collected from people who are less educated. The choices embedded in the close ended questions, also, to some scholars impede the respondent to critically and reflectively engage in making independent perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Rubin & Babbie, 2008; Neuman, 2007).

Sampling Selection methodologies, Population Under study and Study Domain

Sampling methodologies and techniques

This action research applied probability type of sampling methodology. In probability method, all the samples stand the same chance of being selected. The answers that accrues from such a study are therefore replicable to other settings, are considered objective and with

minimal bias, and higher result reliability and validity (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Specifically, the research used systematic sampling technique. This is where the desired percentage of the sample from the sampling frame is divided by the percentage and the sample size is arrived at. In this case, the student population in the class that formed the sampling frame was 240. Since the researcher wanted 10 % of that population, a tenth constituted 24 students. Then he was to pick each 24th student or Kth student to be involved in the study (Neuman, 2007). The researcher was able to have all the 24 students respond to a questionnaire.

Study Domain and Population under study

This researcher's second year social work students taking SWP 210 (Personal Growth and Development) formed the study population and the class setting was the study domain. The study population did not respect the issue of gender and age. They were not considered very relevant in influencing the results. Again, through observation method as well as this researcher's subjective opinion, many students in the class were apparently around twenty years of age.

Ethical and Legal Requirements

The research followed all the possible requisite legal and ethical protocols. The researcher had to get a letter to get involved in data collection from the manager of Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC). This is because the data collection process was to facilitate finishing one of the Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching and learning which was managed and conducted by TLC staff. The researcher had in the process of introducing the aim and purpose of his proposed research had to show the students the authority letter. He then gave them consent forms to sign as a sign of informed consent to participate in research. The research was to enable the researcher finish the course, *HET, 503: Nature of Learning and Training*.

The researcher succinctly understood that it is within the human rights of the potential samples to be involved in research be briefed about the research and get to understand its goals and objectives (Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2007). He also informed them that each potential respondent needed to be treated well and humanely and that in case one was uncomfortable with any question, he/she was free to ask, and in the eventuality one felt

uncomfortable, he/she was within his/her human rights to abandon the exercise (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). On the possible benefit of the research to the research respondents, the whole University and the community at large, the researcher explained that the course was to add value to the researcher's teaching prowess for possible benefit to the students he was teaching, and could possibly enhance his scholarship of teaching as well as serve as a boost to his own personal career development. The research was also meant to increase this researcher's research prowess, especially action research which is one of the niche areas that the University staffs have abandoned to the detriment of solving student problems (UFH, 2008; Reason, 2001; McNiff, 2005; Koshy, 2010).

Time frame

The peer assessment tasks were carried for a period of two months, March and April, 2012, and a questionnaire administered in May 2012.

Data Analysis, Interpretation and Findings

Since this research undertaking employed quantitative paradigm and a mini survey, content thematic analysis was found suitable to effectuate analysis. This analysis respected the themes and also the quantification process of opinions, thinking, attitudes etc. In this context, the quantification of the perceptions of the students on a particular thematic area was used to validate the outcomes of the investigations. Such outcomes, pitted against the specific objectives as well as positive and null hypothesis, justified and validated their propositions, or refuted them altogether (Creswell, 2007; Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

The following table (Table A) gives a summary of the data collected, followed by the thematic presentation of the findings.

No	Themes	Frequency							
		Greatl y	%	A little	%	Not at all	%	Total	%
1	Those who perceive that peer assessment tasks increases students' learning through integrating reading and writing	18	75	5	21	1	4	24	100
2	Those who perceive that peer assessments tasks bridge students' literacy gaps (spellings, grammer etc)	20	83	4	17	0	0	24	100
3	Those who perceive that peer assessments tasks enhances student reading, revision capacity and possibly their learning	23	96	1	4	0	0	24	100

Integrating reading and writing enhances students learning

Research findings indicated that 75% of the research respondents indicated that classroom peer assessment tasks offers students an opportunity to integrate reading and writing that result in increased learning. It is a fact that peer assessments saw many students having to work an extra mile of reading and writing, with the literacy gaps being increasingly filled or narrowed through students correcting the mistakes of their fellow peers, and then validated by the lecturer. This learning has the impact of students closing many of the literacy gaps such as sentence and tense construction, spellings, etc. that impede their learning. This, the researcher contemplates, also makes the learning process smooth and motivates the students to own their learning process. This is likely to result in increased throughputs. Contrastingly, 25% of the students that thought that these peer assessments contribute a little (21%); while some never saw any contribution at all (4%) in offering students' learning through integrating learning with reading. From the researcher's perspective, this could be the views represented by those students who either took too long to conceptualize and own the process or cases of absenteeism. The fact that the peer assessment tasks were introduced two months ago could explain that the process had not been adequately understood by all; or has not taken deep roots to mature in the students' minds. The cases of students who do not frequently come to class but had the opportunity to be selected to answer the questionnaire could also explain this perception.

Peer assessments are strategies to bridge/close learners' literacy gaps

Research findings indicate that 83% of the students perceived that classroom peer assessment tasks were a very good initiative to help students close/bridge most of their literacy gaps. This statistic indicates a very high degree of acknowledgement and ownership of the peer assessment as a vehicle of improving students' literacy gaps such as summarizing, writing in prose, knowing how to extract needed information from the books without plagiarism, or lifting the content as it is. The fact that many students own the fact that they are very poor in language communication and in writing generally heralds that very soon, and with increased application of these tasks, these literacy gaps can be diminished or done away with, altogether. However, the 17% of the students who thought that peer assessments contributed

only marginally in closing literacy gaps can be understood from the viewpoint that these tasks are newly introduced and had not embraced total ownership of the process. Equally, issues of the fact that the rate of absenteeism is high in UFH could also explain the fact some of the respondents may have not understood, or adequately participated in these classroom peer assessments tasks.

Peer assessment increases reading, revising and learning

Ninety-six per cent of the student research respondents indicated their confidence that peer assessment tasks were an opportunity for student increasing their reading and revising, as well as their learning generally. Only 4% or only one person felt that the assessments did not offer the opportunity for increased reading, revision and increased learning. This result is an overwhelming piece of good news to the researcher because one of the glaring learning gaps among the students in this research domain class is that they were not adequately motivated to read and research, with many of them relying only on the notes they receive from their lecturer. This is also an exciting piece of news because the researcher is now convinced that if these results could be implemented and owned by the lecturers, the issue of peer assessment tasks could be taken seriously as a way of closing many of the literacy gaps that impede students learning.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This researcher, can, now confidently own the assertion and hypothesis that integrating reading and writing definitely increases students' learning and therefore gives him confidence that his 2012 SWP class will eventually close most of the literacy gaps if the peer assessment tasks were to be done frequently. The results are in agreement with the advice that Gibbs (1999) gives to the educators that they should use assessments strategically to change the way students learn. For example, this researcher needs to be informed by these results to strengthen his classroom student peer assessments. This is because peer assessments are believed to bolster students' confidence, assertiveness, reflexive and critical skills to optimize their learning (Subotzky, 2000; Trevithick, 2005). It is therefore critical that such peer assessments are carried out through action research in order to pin down the problems bedevilling teaching at UFH (Reason, 2001; Koshy, 2010).

It is also good at this juncture to use this researcher's observation and experience to point out that action research to facilitate assessment such as peer assessments is critically missing in UFH teaching practice and that lecturers need to undergo a paradigm shift and start adopting it as a plausible intervention to investigate the myriad problems affecting students, and possibly seek plausible solutions (McNiff, 2002, 2005). Gibb's (1995) contention, therefore, challenging lecturers to be informed by action research to direct their teaching is therefore applicable to the context of UFH. But ensuring successful implementation of such action research calls for the goodwill of the UFH administrators to ensure implementation and effectuation of the contents of 2008 UFH teaching and evaluation policy. The policy succinctly calls for various assessment strategies to be used in the classroom environment in order to solve the prevailing problems (UFH, 2008; Gibbs, 1999). This is critical because, from this researcher's observation and experience, the UFH lecturers rarely use these assessment strategies, nor adequately conduct evaluation research to investigate the magnitude of the problems they discover in the class with the aim of addressing them. These could be gaps that could explain, among other factors, the performance lapses that the University continues to experience (FSS, 2012).

The research findings also supports the contention by Boud, Cohen & Samson (1999) that peer learning and assessments assist students meet a variety of learning outcomes, and have the impact of strengthening student collaboration among themselves, taking responsibility for their own learning, and deepen their understanding of their course content. This is because peer assessments demand increased reading and revision and commitment to what is already taught. The research findings also supports research findings by Boughey and Rensburg (1994) who found that infusing reading and writing skills into different courses had an impact of not only increasing literacies and language proficiency among the students, but also brought more learning into particular courses. This researcher, then, believes that these assessment tasks will have a critical impact in improving the throughputs of his 2012SWP students. Emig (1977) emphasizes the importance of writing as an important process of achieving learning. She contends that when students read and write, they process information in a physical form that involves the hand, the eyes, and the brain in both simultaneous and recurring processes. As they write, look at what they write, and think about what they write, they discover relationships, they interpret meaning for themselves. This means that

integrating reading and writing triggers and activates a cognitive process of learning (Piaget, 1990).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Putting in place classroom interventions that increase literacy levels and assessing such an impact through action research in the institutions of higher learning, including UFH cannot be overemphasized (Schmidt, Rotgans, & Yew, 2011). The result of this action research is an empirical validation of the critical role that action research through conducting classroom peer assessment research can play as a vehicle of closing literacy gaps that impede learning and diminishes chances of increased throughputs at UFH. This is because of the myriad literacy based problems many faculties at UFH are facing, making it critical and pertinent that problem solving action research is initiated. From the findings of this action research, it is glaringly clear that action research can offer a turning point to addressing the myriad classroom challenges such as literacy based ones. This is with the hope of optimizing learning and possibly reducing the failure rate; as well as increasing students' throughputs.

The research outcome has proved beyond doubt that integrating reading and writing is an important strategy to increasing learning through addressing the literacy gaps that impede smooth learning process by the students. This research , therefore, has fully addressed the objective embedded in the study rationale that seeks to explore the impact of integrating students' writing with reading in order to increase their learning literacies; and assessing the impact of peer assessment tasks in increasing learning and throughputs.

Pitting the research outcome against both the positive and null hypothesis reveals that the research fully justifies and validates the positive hypothesis that students' integration of reading and writing and throughput improvement can be raised through classroom peer assessment tasks. On the other hand, the research also nullifies the null hypothesis that the year 2012 SWP 210 students' integration of reading and writing and possible increase in throughputs cannot be improved by classroom peer assessments tasks.

It is from this researcher's feeling that there is a wide gap of assessments in the department of social work. It is therefore recommended that the departmental heads and deans after reading

this report work towards ensuring that all the lecturers conduct action research to empirically identify the problems within their teaching practice in an endeavour to seek solutions. Action research engagement, therefore, is topical, urgent, timely, and long overdue. It is incumbent upon all the lecturers to especially work round the clock and identify how to close as many literacy gaps as possible in order to enhance students' learning. This is also likely to promise increased throughputs. This also highlights the issue of skills and competence among the lecturers to undertake action research. It is high time that the University policies on acquisition of skills through taking PGDHET are enforced (UFH, 2008). Lecturers should take advantage of the fact that the course is free of charge.

Finally, the researcher hopes to share these research findings with the rest of the UFH staff and other scholars through writing an educational relevant journal. This, he believes, is the essence of scholarship of teaching and learning that Barbara Cambridge (Cambridge, 2001) and R.M Felder (Felder, 2000) exhort members of the teaching fraternity to embrace.

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