

The Fault is not in Students: But in the Programmes and the Teaching Odl Institutions Provide: A Case of Abet Assignments

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ABSTRACT This paper examined over a thousand assignments from ABET students to determine why they scored poorly in essay questions which allowed them space to express themselves to the best of their ability. From the assignments it was clear that students lacked the requisite skills for structuring their essays according to accepted conventional standard of scholarship. They lacked the skills of presenting their answers in terms of appropriate headings and sub-heading, but preferred to simply write long paragraphs that did not speak to each other and to one another because the contents or arguments of each paragraph stood alone like an island. Paragraphs of an essay must flow systematically and logically in conveying a common point of view that articulates an answer to a given question. It is common course that the Department of ABET views assignments as the only existing medium through which lecturers chance to teach the students. Lecturers in an ODL institution do not have the opportunity to meet their students face-to-face. Thus, it was while trying to teach my students through marking each assignment thoroughly when I realized that the majority of them lacked the essential skills to answer the essay questions as expected. I then became interested in finding out what the problem was. My findings are as follow: students failed to write down questions in words before answering them; they fail to write an introduction, sub-headings, a conclusion, a bibliography and a table of contents. This observation made me to go through Modules/Study Guides that were provided

students to determine where the fault was. I was shocked to find that all the modules did not teach the students how to assignments, hence the title of the paper.

INTRODUCTION

The discovery that our Abet students in their majority could not write a well-structured assignment with an introduction, sub-headings, conclusion and a bibliography motivated me to find-out whether the modules they are provided with addressed the issue of how to write an acceptable assignment. In order to adequately understand and also be well informed with the problem of adult learners lacking the required skill to write an assignment as expected at the university level, I decided to examine a few old modules and the ones which are in operation to find out how they dealt with how assignments were to be written. Assignments are important because they indicate the ability of student to communicate effectively with words. Apart from studying the contents of the modules mentioned hereunder I also went through books on Curriculum and Didactics from such authorities as (Van Der Stoep 1984, Louw 1994, Kruger, Oberholzer, Van Schalkwyk and Whittle 1983, Nowlan 1990, Carl 1995, Nieman and Monyai 2006, and Van Schoor, Mill and Potgieter 2005) and found very little to nothing on how students are supposed to be taught to write an assignment. Almost all the books consulted deal with: why use objectives when writing a module or textbook, what is the difference between aims and objectives, how to construct various kinds of questions for testing students' understanding, how to deal with students' questions and finally how to assess and also give feedback on students' assignments.

Briefly, the instinct of curiosity aroused interest in me which propelled me to want to scrutinized the various modules offered to the ABET adult learners. Finally, I decided to through modules that were written in 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2008 and 2010. All the modules I examined I found that the following aspects were brilliantly and excellently articulated and they are:

- The purpose of the module;
- The learning outcomes for the module;
- The study units in the module;
- The study guide material and readings;
- Sources of additional information;
- Tutorial support;

- Assignments and assessment; and
- Study expectations.

Without laboring the point in this introduction, it is enough to state that on the aspect of how to write an assignment; in all the modules; were conspicuously silent except to talk only briefly about the need to have an introduction, body and conclusion in an assignment. On the contrary, there are elaborate notes that discuss at length about how assessment should be carried out; that they should give feedback that is timely, positive, encouraging and constructive. In brief, the paper argues that there are gaps that need to be attended to in order to address the students' lack of skills in writing an acceptable assignment. This issue will be dealt with substantially under the section on recommendations.

The extant position regarding the programmes that the Department of ABET offers to the first year higher certificate are the following ten modules:

- ABT 1511- Developing Academic Skills for Studying ABET;
- ABT 1512- Contextual Studies;
- ABT 1513- Exploring Adult Learning;
- ABT 1514- Exploring Different Approaches to Teach Adults;
- ABT 1515- Planning and Administering ABET Classes and Projects;
- ABT 1516- Introduction to Assessment in ABET;
- ABT 1517- Teaching Literacy to Adults;
- ABT 1518- Teaching Numeracy to Adults;
- ABT 1519- Teaching Adults Basic Education; and
- ABT 1520- Building A Portfolio of ABET Practice.

While those of the second year higher certificate are the following ten modules:

- ABT 2611- Lifelong Learning;
- ABT 2612- The Social Context of Literacy and Adult Basic Education;
- ABT 2613- Programme and Course Planning in ABET;
- ABT 2614- Teaching and Facilitation in ABET;
- ABT 2615- Issues in ABET Assessment;
- ABT 2616- Leading and Managing ABET;
- ABT 2617- Working in Challenging ABET Environment;
- ABT 2618- Researching ABET;

- ABT 2619- Teaching A Learning Area in Adult Basic Education; and
- ABT 2611- ABET Teaching Practice.

By just the looking at the titles of the different modules, nothing is offered on how to write an acceptable assignment, yet assignments are the only vehicle and medium through which the Department of ABET teaches its students because the opportunity of coming into conduct with them is very slim or totally non-existent. While this paper has identified the non-existence of a module addressing students' lack of skills in writing assignments as a problem, it is important that an appropriate answer for it be found. For a scientific study of how students answer an assignment is not merely of interest to the lecturers only, but it is also important to the course designers and the students themselves. Assignments and how to write them properly and scholarly is the only key to the achievement of success in the field of education.

The purpose of the paper

The purpose of a conference paper should primarily to generate debate about an important and challenging lacuna in the field of education. It is also to stimulate our minds and spur them in the direction of seeking solutions to existing problems. Furthermore, it should provide a platform exchange of opinions and afford conference the scope to sharpen, deepen, broaden and expand the horizon of our understanding of the education profession.

Finally, it is hoped that the programme providers, lecturers, students and all concerned will benefit from the findings and recommendations of this paper. Therefore, purpose is not to belittle, discredit or to condemn but to point out a problem that needs a solution, a solution that will empower students to write assignment that are well-structured and scholarly presented. Van Schoor, Mill and Potgieter (2005:52) instructively posit the view that “writing assignments is an important part of distant learning. The learning process, as well as the success in the examination at the end of the semester/year, hinges on the assignments you submit during the academic semester/year”.

The problem of this paper

As stated already in both the abstract and introduction, the problem identified in this paper pivot around how the majority of students in the Department of ABET at Unisa answers essay questions that form the bedrock of their mode of tuition. Assignments are a sign of the efforts the students apply to their studies. It is therefore unacceptable that the majority of students fail to: write down the question they are answering, because they are found to just write what comes to

their minds and this is shocking indeed. Sometime they write down only the number of the question without the words and go on to give any answer they think of. Alternatively, they rewrite the question and make it easy for themselves. In other words, they simply go on to answer a non-existing question.

In many cases, they give an answer without a table of contents, without an introduction, without sub-headings, without a conclusion and without a bibliography. In an assignment a student is given ample time to go to the library to do research around the topic by consulting many sources which must appear in the bibliography as evidence of the fact that the student has dedicated time, effort and resources towards the compilation of the assignment. The student is expected to then write down in words the question she/he is answering so that as he/she is writing the question he/she can have time to analyse it and also come to grips with what the question demands of him/her. After writing down the question, it is logical that the student writes down an introduction that tells us what issues he/she is going to discuss.

The entire discussion should be classified according appropriate sub-headings to avoid inconsistency, confusion and insufficient attention that need to be given to point or idea. In other words, the principle of one idea one paragraph or one paragraph one idea and one idea one sub-heading should be adhered to. At the end, a conclusion is essential that wraps up everything. This should be followed by a bibliography. In summing up, it is important that students are made abundantly clear that each of the above has an allocated mark to it.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE PAPER

The paper used the quantitative approach because “quantitative analysis involves collecting data that can exist in a range of magnitudes and therefore can be measured in some way” (Brendon-Jones & Slack 2008:1). The case study design was utilised as the centre piece because the aim was to focus on the assignments from a thousand students in Unisa’s Department of ABET. According to Groenewald (1989:8) “the idiographic approach typically addresses itself to the study of one case or event at a time. The phenomenon is perceived in such a manner that the researcher tries to understand the pattern of relationship between the components which comprise the object of study”.

A case study is a thorough examination of a single event and in this paper it is a lack of skills needed to write assignments. Therefore, this paper is about addressing the problem students

experience in writing assignments. I opted to use the quantitative model because its structure is transparent, obvious and easy to understand. Furthermore, it allows for the exploration of alternative options as the interpretation of its results is objective, straightforward and is likely to bring about an optimal solution to a problem.

The conceptual framework undergirding the paper

The concepts that play a crucial role in this paper are those of; **a table of contents, the analysis of the question, writing the question down in words as given, having an introduction, having sub-headings, having a conclusion and a bibliography.** Each of these aspects is allocated a specific mark according to its weighting. Thus, if a student leaves out the question to be answered but writes an answer then he/she loses out on the mark allocated. Similarly, if an introduction is left out the student forfeits the marks allocated to it and so on. In other words, it is unacceptable to exclude a module which should specifically address the issue of how to write an acceptable assignment and still expect student to do well in their assignments. It is logical to provide programmes of study that are both comprehensive and holistic. The various programmes that are offered to a student should work together like parts of a system which Kaufman (1972:1) defines as “the sum total of parts working independently and working together to achieve required results or outcomes, based on needs”. Clearly, there is a great need for a module that addresses the problem faced by students when writing assignments.

To this end, Kaufman (1972:2) advises that “planning and the tools of a system approach focus on the learner and assure that each one’s ambitions, capabilities, fears, hopes, and aspirations are considered and maintained”. In this regard, the writing of the assignments should be made an important aspect of the students’ programme of study because their aspirations depend on them passing the assignments which are meant to hone and sharpen their writing skills which are critical in the achievement of good results in the final examinations. While not much has been researched and written on how assignments should be structured and presented, we however know that “underachievement is generally associated with poverty, low parental education level (particular that of the mother), single parent families and poor language skills in the medium used for teaching at school” (Booyse, Dedman, Du Toit, Landsberg and Van Wyk, 1994:22).

To kick start the argument, in a situation where a university uses the concept College, or School, or Department or Faculty to designate its various specialising disciplines it is incumbent for each discipline so established to have an own aim/purpose. From the aim/purpose it must derive

curricular programmes/syllabi it will use to teach its students. A syllabus for a course/subject should contain “the goals which must be achieved through the presentation of the subject; and the themes of the learning content which must be studied in order to attain the goals” (Louw 1994:32). Practically, the programme/syllabus themes are further refined into study units each with goals that are also refined into objectives which learners must achieve. Guidelines are also suggested for lecturers as to which methods and approaches to use to achieve maximum outcomes. Finally, guidelines are also suggested of how students should tackle an assignment and how lecturers should assess an assignment. This description of affairs, clearly indicate that a module with the theme ‘how to write assignments’ is critical for empowering students so they can achieve better outcomes than is the situation at present.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

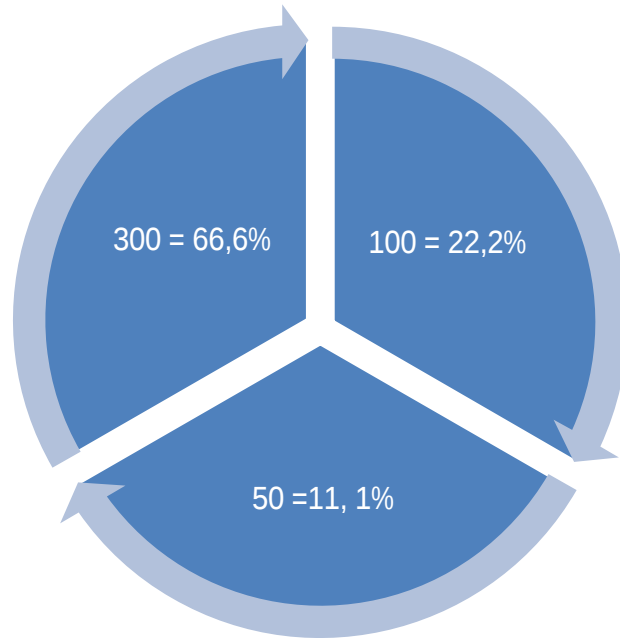
I have been marker for over five years and during this period I marked thousands of assignments. As markers we had been exposed to many meetings whose aim was to train us in how to mark the assignments. We were trained to mark assignments as though we were actually teaching our students because that was the only way of interacting with the students. Instead, of marking the content of the assignments I found myself having to teach the students how to structure and present a decent assignment. This was happening in most cases; hence, I decided to find out what the real problem was. To do this, I concentrated on a thousand assignments from ABET 1515, ABET 1517 and ABET 2619. From ABET 1515 I marked 450 assignments, and from ABET 1517 300 assignment and from ABET 2619 150.

(1a) In the first scenario; of the 450 assignments from ABET 1515 300 had four or more of the following problems, namely, they lacked: 1. the question was not written down, 2. lacked a table of contents, and 3. had no introduction, 4. no sub-headings, 5. did not have a conclusion, 6. and had no bibliography.

(2a) while in the second scenario; 100 assignments had two or three of the following problems, they lacked: 1. an introduction, 2. sub-headings 3. A conclusion and 4. A bibliography.

(3a) in the third scenario; only 50 had one or two of the following problems, namely, they lacked: 1. a table of contents, 2. sub-headings and or conclusion.

(1a) A graphical representation of the 450 assignments

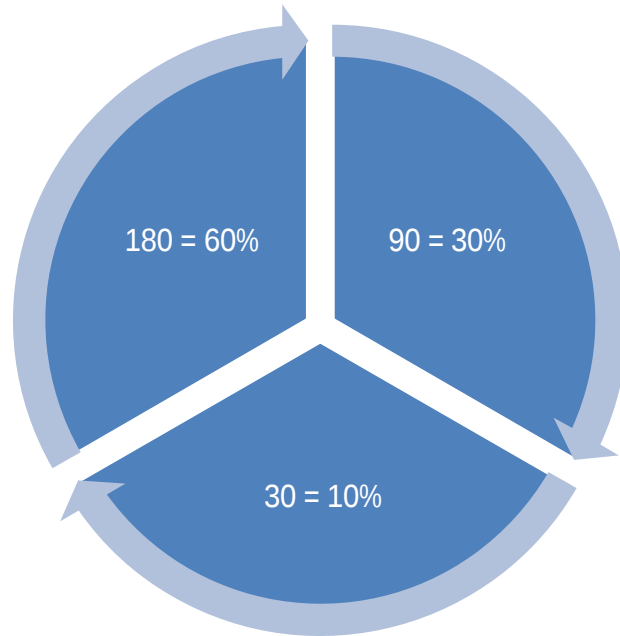


(1b) In the first scenario; of the 300 assignments from ABET1517 180 had four or more of the following problems: 1. the question was not written down, 2. lacked a table of contents, and 3. had no introduction, 4. no sub-headings, 5. did not have a conclusion, 6. and had no bibliography.

(2b) In the second scenario; 90 assignments had two or three of the following problems, namely, a lack of: 1. an introduction, 2. sub-headings 3. A conclusion and 4. A bibliography.

(3b) finally, the third scenario of 30 assignments had one or two of the following problems, namely, a lack of: 1. a table of contents, 2. sub-headings and or conclusion.

(2b) A graphical representation of 300 assignments

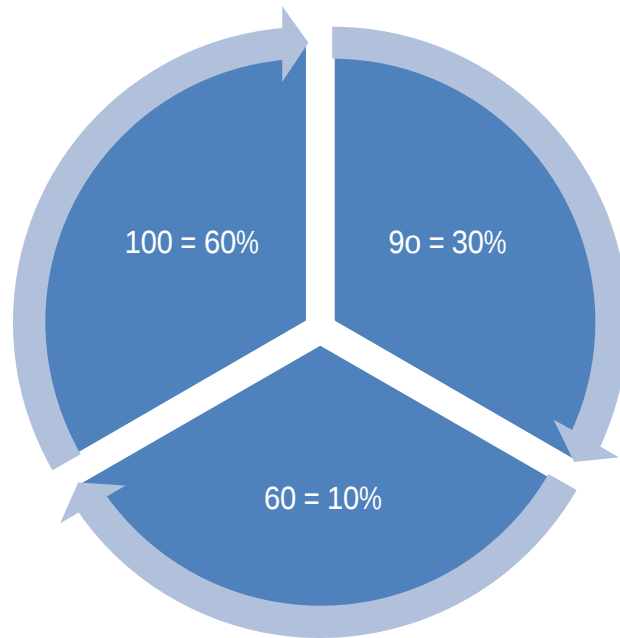


(1C) In the first scenario, the 250 assignments from ABET2619 100 had four or more of the following problems, namely, they lacked: 1. the question was not written down, 2. lacked a table of contents, and 3. had no introduction, 4. no sub-headings, 5. did not have a conclusion, 6. and had no bibliography.

(2C) while in the second scenario, 90 assignments had two or three of the following problems, namely, they lacked: 1. an introduction, 2. sub-headings 3. A conclusion and 4. A bibliography.

(3C) finally, in the third scenario 60 had one or two of the following problems, namely, they lacked: 1. a table of contents 2. Sub-headings or a conclusion.

(3c) A graphical representation 250 assignments



From the examination of the above three modules the following findings were made: ABT 1515 nothing on how to write the assignments is discussed. The worst thing even prescribed books are not required. The same is the case with ABET 1517 and ABET2619.

From the old modules, namely, ABET Course Codes ABET02-F, ABET 12-H and ABET 102-C Module 2 on Adult Learning; ABET Course Codes 01-E, ABET 11-G and ABET 101B Module on Contextual Studies; ABET Course Code ABET 04-H and ABET 201-E Manual 1 on Teaching adults English; A Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training with a Course Code ADOB-12-D Module on Introduction to Business and another Diploma Course called ABET 204-H Module on Introduction to Business.

The findings are the same in all modules and they indicate that there is no section that addresses the issue of how to write an assignment.

THE CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings the following conclusions can be made:

- The students lack skills of analysing a given question. It is important to start by analysing a given question in order to understand fully what it requires before answering it. It is assumed that every question is that is given to the student is supposed to have an answer that must be found in the study materials/module/prescribed sources and the recommended sources. By analysing the question the student is able to figure out which chapters of the study material

possess the answer to the given question. Therefore, she or he will more-or-less be in a position to figure out which areas of the study material to study for the assignment.

➤ The students make the obvious mistake of not writing down the question as it is given. It is important for an assignment to have a written question at the top of the page and the question should be written verbatim as it is given to avoid paraphrasing it because in doing so students tend to change the question to suit themselves.

➤ The students lack skills of writing well-structured and scholarly presented assignments. Their assignments do not have an introduction because they were not taught its significance and that it carries mark. They do not know that sub-headings are important because they direct and guide the flow of thoughts. One sub-heading one idea and one idea one paragraph at the most. Finally, a conclusion carries marks and so is the bibliography which stands as a proof of the fact that the student took pains to read for the assignment.

➤ From the nature of these problems it is abundantly clear that there is need for a module that would address the problems students face when writing assignments.

From the above conclusions, the following themes can be derived that can be used to construct a module to address the skills students need to write assignments, and they are:

➤ A theme is needed which will provide students with the skill of analysing a question to understand what knowledge, skill, values and attitude it is demanding. This approach can assist students to think before they write an answer;

➤ A theme which will provide students with the skills of how to construct a table of contents with different points/ideas and sub-headings is needed. This approach will force the student to focus;

➤ A theme on the importance of writing down the question before answering it is needed. This skill will help the students to commit the question to memory and the question will make the student to think about what to research in the library; and

➤ A theme of the value and importance of having an introduction, sub-headings, conclusion and bibliography in writing an assignment is important as it will teach students how to write an assignment.

It is therefore recommended as follows:

- That a module on the above themes be written by experienced researchers who understand the critical role the above-mentioned themes play in the writing of assignments or in scholarship;
- That a module so designed be provided/offered as a strategy to address the lacking skills the students have demonstrated in their assignments;
- That such a module is offered throughout the period of study of a student because such a skill can become handy even at the time of writing a research report, an article, a portfolio and even a book.

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