

Integrating Reading and Writing as a Strategy to Increase Students' Literacies in One of the Formerly Disadvantaged Universities in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The paper aims to validate and explore, through action research, whether peer assessment tasks entailing integration of reading and writing lead 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 (Personal Growth and Development) 210 students' literacies (through integrating writing and reading) in one of the formerly disadvantaged universities can be improved through classroom peer assessments tasks. A questionnaire was used as a research instrument to capture the perceptions, attitudes and the thinking of 24 students on whether integrating writing with reading helps bridge their literacy gaps. Findings indicate that peer assessment tasks increase reading, revision and increased learning, the tasks help bridge or close 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 that integrates reading and writing. The researcher calls on all the teachers in the studied university to adopt action research and use peer assessments of students to improve literacy gaps and increase their learning, and urges the administration of the studied university to enforce that all the lecturers take a postgraduate diploma in higher education and training (PGDHET) to equip themselves with action research skills.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning in South Africa are being attacked by the government and private sector for overproducing half-baked graduates who are not competitive enough to meet market expectations (Kang'ethe 2013). Jansen and Christie indicate that among other factors, the lack of restructuring the curriculum, or inadequacy in reinforcing it to be outcome based, remains one of the biggest challenges in the institutions of learning, making students 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 (Kang'ethe 2013). This could be contributed to 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 (Lea and Street 1998).

Subjective information and this researcher's observation and experience suggest that many students' performance in the studied university is brought down by inadequate mastery of educational concepts due to poor literacy levels among other factors (Lea and Street 1998). This is especially notable in students from poor economic backgrounds whose secondary level education did not expose or prepare them with adequate literacy levels to face tertiary educational levels (Lea and Street 1998). This phenomenon could possibly explain why a significant number of students are demonstrating notably poor performance levels (Noel et al. 1985). 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 in researched university decried such failure rates (FSS Board Meeting 2012). Such failures make students either drop out completely, repeat the courses several 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 that unmotivated students 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 et al. 2008). It is therefore important that the lecturers consider introducing viable interventions that would possibly increase the students' literacy levels and subject such students to a research endeavor 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 of integrating reading and writing 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 (McNiff 2002, 2005; Koshy 2010).

Problem Statement

There is increased concern by the lecturers as well as the studied university's 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 examinations, repeat, or making them drop out completely after exhausting the grace period one can take in a particular level. For example, in one of the Faculty Board meetings held on 23rd February 2012 that this researcher attended, it was reported that close to 30 students who were scheduled to move on to second year had to repeat some papers in one of the modules (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 critically. Such interventions include introducing peer assessment tasks that will possibly strengthen integration of reading and writing to increase literacies, and also as a way of motivating stu-

dents to possibly increase their throughputs. Undertaking an action research to assess and validate the 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 the students' integration of writing and reading to increase their literacies, learning and throughputs. This paper, however, intends to validate the following hypothesis.

Positive Hypothesis

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

Null Hypothesis

The year 2012 SWP 210 students' literacies cannot be improved through integrating writing and reading, facilitated through peer assessment tasks.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

The action research used a quantitative paradigm, which is a worldview 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 and 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 a student's reading and writing to increase literacy levels, or to close

learning literacy gaps. This is to possibly increase learning and their throughputs. A mini survey is a design that captures the respondents' opinions, thinking, and attitudes, in order to assess how much the responses validate the proposed hypothesis. The outcomes of a survey, usually affected through the medium of a questionnaire with predetermined questions, are represented quantitatively and attract statistical analysis (Neuman 2007; Rubin and 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 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 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. Integration of reading and writing was achieved, in that any reading assignment had to ask some questions that students had to answer through writing, whose efficacy and correctness was assessable through peer assessment. The peers corrected the understanding and the all aspects of grammar such as spellings.

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

Sampling Selection Methodologies, Population Under Study and Study Domain

Sampling Methodologies and Techniques

This action research applied the probability type of sampling methodology. In the 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 reflect higher result reliability and validity (Rubin and Babbie 2008). Specifically, the research used a 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 ten percent 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 the 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 old.

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 university's manager of Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC). This is because the data collection process was to facilitate finishing one of the Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching (PGDHET) and learning, which was managed and conducted by the TLC staff. The researcher, 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 to 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 and 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 benefits 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 were not faring well to the detriment of solving student problems (UFH 2008; McNiff 2005; Koshy 2010).

Time Frame

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

FINDINGS

Since this research was undertaking employed quantitative paradigm and a mini survey, the content thematic analysis was found suitable to effectuate analysis. This analysis respected the themes and also the quantification process of opinions, thinking and attitudes. 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 and Babbie 2008).

Integrating Reading and Writing Enhances Students' Learning

Research findings indicated that seventy-five percent of the research respondents indicated that classroom peer assessment tasks offer students with 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 in reading and writing, with the literacy gaps being increasingly

Table 1: Quantitative data on integration of reading and writing

S. No.	Themes	Frequency							
		Greatly	%	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, grammar 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

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, and spellings 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, twenty-five percent of the students that thought that these peer assessments contributed a little (21%), while some never saw any contribution at all (4%) in offering to students' learning through integrating learning with reading. From the researcher's perspective, this could be the view 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 (Table 1).

Peer Assessments are Strategies to Bridge or Close Learners' Literacy Gaps

Research findings indicate that eighty-three of the students perceived that classroom peer assessment tasks were a very good initiative to help students close or 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 the students' literacy gaps in 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 seventeen percent 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, Revision and Learning

Ninety-six percent 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 four percent or 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

This researcher can now confidently own the assertion and hypothesis that integrating reading and writing definitely increases the 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 entailing integration of reading and writing were to be done frequently. The results are in agreement with the advice that (Gibbs and Simpson 2004) 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 the students' confidence, assertiveness, reflexive and critical skills to optimize their learning (Kang'ethe 2013, 2014; Trevithick 2005). It is therefore critical that action researches involving peer assessments of the integration of read-

ing and writing are frequently carried out in order to pin down the problems bedeviling teaching at the researched university (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 and Simpson 2004)) contention, therefore, challenge to lecturers to be informed by action research to direct their teaching is therefore applicable to the context of the researched university. But ensuring successful implementation of such action research calls for the goodwill of the institutions of higher learning administrators to ensure implementation and effectuation of the their teaching and evaluation policies (UFH 2008). For this researcher's university, the policy succinctly calls for various assessment strategies to be used in the classroom environment in order to solve the prevailing problems (UFH 2008; Kang'ethe 2013, 2014). This is critical because, from this researcher's observation and experience, the lecturers of the researched university 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 learning lapses that most formerly disadvantaged universities continue to experience (FSS 2012).

The research findings also support the contention by Boud et al. (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 support those 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 and interpret meaning for themselves. This means that integrating reading and writing triggers and activates a cognitive process of learning (Piaget 1990).

CONCLUSION

Indubitably, putting in place classroom interventions that increase literacy levels such as integrating reading and writing is a formidable intervention to increase literacy levels and learning in the institutions of higher learning. This is because most learning of students is constrained by various literacy gaps such as poor writing capacities that make communication as well as learning a daunting task. It is incumbent upon institutions of higher learning that they invest in action research especially those that will ensure the students' literacy gaps are extinguished completely. This would likely help bolster the students' learning and possibly an increase in throughput. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions of higher learning should enforce and persuade the instructors to be involved in various aspects of action research. This is to ensure as many learning gaps such as literacy gaps are addressed timeously. It is therefore recommended that the departmental heads and deans of especially the formerly disadvantaged

universities 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 endeavor 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.

- ♦ Institutions of higher education should widen the scope of research on how integration of reading and writing can be strengthened. This is because it is a tested strategy of increasing learning and possible throughput.
- ♦ It is also high time that the institutions of higher learning enforce policies on acquisition of skills through taking PGDHET. Instructors should take advantage of the fact that the courses in many formerly disadvantaged universities are offered free of charge.

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