

The Fault is not in Students: But in the Programmes and the Teaching Open Distance Learning Institutions Provide: A Case of Adult Basic Education and Training Students

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ABSTRACT The aim of the paper was to find out why students of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) are, in their majority, unable to construct an acceptable essay assignment. The researchers examined over a thousand assignments to determine why students scored poorly in essay questions which, otherwise, allow them space to express themselves to the best of their ability. The paper used the qualitative approach to unravel the matter. The content analysis method served as the bedrock of the research approach. From the examined assignments it was found out that students failed to write down the followings: the given questions in words; an introduction, headings, sub-headings, conclusion, bibliography and a table of contents. This observation made the researchers to assess many modules to determine where the fault was. Shockingly, all the evaluated modules and books consulted did not teach the students how to write essay assignments.

INTRODUCTION

The discovery that ABET students, in their majority; could not write a well-structured essay assignment with a title (question), an introduction, headings, sub-headings, a conclusion and a bibliography/references motivated the researchers to undertake a study to determine what the problem was. The main aim was to establish whether the modules students were provided with addressed the issue of how to write an acceptable assignment. To contextualize the matter, “the word ‘essay’ originally meant ‘to test’ or ‘try out’”. The academic essay; however, now has more usual meaning of a short piece of analytical writing on a given subject” (www.library.dmu.ac.uk). Writing an acceptable (academic) essay involves time management in order to meet the deadline, gathering relevant information from appropriate sources, organizing and structuring your thoughts and communicating such thoughts in a logical and systematic manner. However, “some students’ essays amount to catalogues of factual material or summaries of other people’s thoughts, attitudes, philosophies or viewpoints” (<http://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/essay-writing.html>). Students do this without adding their views or making their own voices heard in the essay assignment they are writing.

Thus, in order to adequately understand the nature of the problem faced by adult learners (students) when writing an essay assignment at the expected university level, the researchers decided to examine a few modules whose lifespan was between 1 year and 10 years to see if they offered assignment writing skills. Assignments are important because they indicate the ability of a student to argue and communicate effectively using the written word. Apart from assessing the contents of the modules mentioned hereunder the researchers also went through old and new books on Curriculum and Didactics to find out how all these resources covered the assignment writing skills and techniques meant to assist the students to tackle assignments. The following authorities were canvassed (Van Der Stoep 1984; Louw 1994; Kruger et al. 1983; Nowlan 1990; Carl 1995; Nieman and Monyai 2006; Van Schoor et al. 2005). Surprisingly, the modules and the books have very little or nothing on how to write a decent and appealing essay.

Bowker (2007) instructively argues that “academic writing skills are acquired through practice under the guidance of a supervisor. These skills are thus accumulative and accrue with time as your academic career grows and develops through research activities”. In other words, essay writing skills should be taught in one form

or the other because no one is born with them. However, the abovementioned modules and books overlooked the assignment writing skills and only dealt with the following issues, namely: why use objectives when writing a module or textbook. Secondly, what are the difference between aims and objectives; thirdly, how to construct various kinds of questions for testing students' understanding; fourthly, how to deal with students' questions; and finally how to assess and also give feedback on students' assignments. In short, the modules and the books failed to provide the students with the skills of assignment writing. Instead, the modules and books only concentrated on the lecturers needs while overlooking those of the students. In a nutshell, the above lacuna acted as a trigger to write this paper because "one of the most important skills you will learn and develop during your university years is writing, in particular essay writing. It is important to realise that this skill has to be learnt and practiced, and that therefore you should apply yourselves from the very beginning, as you will be writing essays for which you will be graded from the early weeks to the very end of your degree programme" (<http://www2.ulg.ac.be/facphl/uer/d-german/remed/guide.hlm>).

Essay writing is a complicated matter and must be taught with the utmost patience and tolerance as it involves form, style, relevance, objectivity and the presentation of an assignment that is coherent, logical and concise. In this regard, Gumbo et al. (2015: 14) posit the view that "the academic writing enterprise demands that you read about, think about, argue about and write about great ideas". The skills of assignment writing cannot be picked up in any haphazard manner but require that they are systematically taught in a planned and structured manner.

The Prevailing Situation

To problematize the issue, assignment writing is a formal and not an informal way of writing because "when writing to communicate, students move from the informal and more discovery-based writing to more formal, demanding and public expectations of particular discourse and rhetorical conventions. Learning the conventions for specific fields of study, developing different methods for analysis and argument, as

well as fine tuning the details of grammar, documentation and mechanics to the mode of writing as communication" (http://www.hws.edu/academics/ctl/writes_assignments.aspx). In ODL institutions assignments are seen first as a mode of teaching and second as a mode of assessment. This is precisely because ODL students study mainly by correspondence and rarely come into conduct with their lecturers.

This paper strongly argues that: the study materials offered to the ODL students doing adult basic education and training programmes should also address the issue of assignment writing. Writing an assignment involves many complex skills such as the analytic skill which should be used to analyse a given question. Thus, it is advisable to analyse all the parts of a question to see whether it has sub-questions or not. Another important skill is of being able to write a draft structure that contains the key headings with bullets indicating all key points you wish to articulate in a logical and systematic order. Lastly, each heading or subheading should contain sufficient evidence to support your claim/s. All these skills should be taught as they do not come automatically to students. To this end, "it is vital that your assignments reflect that you have a clear understanding of a particular topic which has been gained from multiple sources and that you are able to identify weaknesses and strengthens objectively" (<http://www.peoples-uni.org/content/tips-writing-assignments>). Thus, to write a decent and acceptable essay assignment is a demanding task that needs to be systematically and deliberately catered for through a specific module that is made available to students.

Therefore, to assess the programmes provided the adult students in ABET, the researchers decided to go through a sample of modules that were written in 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2008 and 2010. Maree (2012: 78) posits that "sampling is used to select a portion of the population for study". The abovementioned modules were purposively selected as they were conveniently available and rich in the information sought after. All the modules examined had the following aspects which 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 as-

assessment; and study expectations. Without laboring the point in this matter, it is enough to state that the aspect of how to write an assignment was conspicuously absent except scant reference about the need to have an introduction, body and conclusion. On the contrary, there are elaborate notes that discuss at length about how assessment should be carried out; that feedback should be timeously given and it should be positive, encouraging and constructive. This 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 essay assignment. This issue will be dealt with substantially under the section on recommendations.

The present position (in 2014) regarding the programmes offered by the Department of ABET is that the first year higher certificate students are to do the following ten modules: 1. ABT 1511- Developing Academic Skills for Studying ABET; 2. ABT 1512- Contextual Studies; 3. ABT 1513- Exploring Adult Learning; 4. ABT 1514- Exploring Different Approaches to Teach Adults; 5. ABT 1515- Planning and Administering ABET Classes and Projects; 6. ABT 1516- Introduction to Assessment in ABET; 7. ABT 1517- Teaching Literacy to Adults; 8. ABT 1518- Teaching Numeracy to Adults; 9. ABT 1519- Teaching Adults Basic Education; and 10. ABT 1520- Building A Portfolio of ABET Practice.

While those of the second year higher certificate are to do the following ten modules: 1. ABT 2611- Lifelong Learning; 2. ABT 2612- The Social Context of Literacy and Adult Basic Education; 3. ABT 2613- Programme and Course Planning in ABET; 4. ABT 2614- Teaching and Facilitation in ABET; 5. ABT 2615- Issues in ABET Assessment; 6. ABT 2616- Leading and Managing ABET; 7. ABT 2617- Working in Challenging ABET Environment; 8. ABT 2618- Researching ABET; 9. ABT 2619- Teaching A Learning Area in Adult Basic Education; and 10. ABT 2611- ABET Teaching Practice.

By just looking at the titles of the different modules, nothing is mentioned on the topic of how to write an acceptable essay assignment, yet assignments are the only vehicle and medium through which the Department of ABET teaches its students. The Department uses assignments to teach because the opportunity of students coming into contact with their lecturers is very slim or not there in open distance learning (ODL) institutions. This paper has iden-

tified the non-existence of a module that addresses the students' assignment writing skills as an oversight that needs to be rectified. Again, this paper offers scientific evidence of the fact that ABET students struggle to write an assignment that is of acceptable academic standard. The problem of lacking skills in assignment writing is a challenge that needs a solution. Assignments and how to write them properly and scholarly is the only key to the achievement of success in the field of education.

Purpose of the Paper

With the submission of this paper, the researchers strongly argue that the purpose of a paper should primarily be to generate debate about an important and challenging lacuna in the field of education. A paper should also stimulate minds and spur them in the direction of seeking solutions to existing educational problems. Furthermore, a paper should provide a platform for exchanging opinions and afford a scope to sharpen, deepen, broaden and expand the horizon of human 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, the 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 assignments that are well-structured and scholarly presented. Van Schoor et al. (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". Writing is one scholarly way to communicate or put across your ideas, thought, opinions and views in a persuasive and convincing manner.

Problem Statement

As stated already in both the abstract and introduction, the problem identified in this paper pivots around a lack of essay writing skills by the majority of students in the Department of ABET. The essay writing skill forms the bedrock of the mode of tuition in the ODL institu-

tions because assignments are a dominant strategy to determine the level of effort the student has put into mastering the subject. To this end, Battaglia (2016) argues that “even before students are accepted to universities, they have to be able to write essays as part of their applications. Once accepted, they continue to write essays in courses across the humanities. Essays are assigned by instructors as a method for measuring critical thinking skills, understanding of course material, and writing skills” (<http://writingcentre.ioe.ac.uk/guides/essays>). It is therefore unacceptable that the majority of students fail to: write down the question they are answering, because they are fond to just write what comes to their minds and this is shocking indeed. Some students 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 incumbent on the student to write down an introduction that tells the reader what issues are to be discussed.

The entire assignment should be structured and presented according appropriate sub-headings to avoid inconsistency, confusion and insufficient attention to individual ideas or aspects. 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 or list of references. In summing up, it is important that students are made abundantly clear that each of the above has an allocated mark to it.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As stated in the abstract that a thousand assignments were selected for evaluation to determine whether essay assignment writing skills were taught the ABET students. Having evaluated the modules used in the first and second year programmes of ABET certificates, the researchers assessed a thousand assignments to find out what the real problem was. Maree (2012: 50) states that “qualitative research attempts to collect rich descriptive data in respect of a particular phenomenon or context with the intention of developing an understanding of what is being observed or studied”. The selection was done as follows: 450 assignments were taken from ABET 1515, while 350 assignments were taken from ABET 1517 and lastly 200 assignments were taken from ABET 2619. 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 and Slack 2008:1). The case study design was utilised as the centre piece because the aim was to focus on assessing a thousand assignments from the students in 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 researchers try 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 was the issue of ABET students lacking the skills of assignment writing. Therefore, the aim of this paper was about finding out whether the modules provided ABET students catered for the skills of assignment writing or not. The researchers 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 likely to bring about an optimal solution to a problem.

Conceptual Framework Undergirding the Paper

In is worth noting that “the building blocks of a theory are models, concepts, constructs and

propositions" Ngulube, Mathipa and Gumbo (2015: 45). The paper aims to make propositions in the form of recommendations as to how to address the issue of assignment writing. Therefore, the concepts that played a crucial role in this paper regarding assignment writing are: 1. writing the question down in words as given; 2. analysing all the parts of the question to have a better understanding of what it is about; 3. having an introduction to clearly indicate what you are going to discuss; 4. having sub-headings that focuses your paragraphs to a single idea at a time; 5. having a conclusion that rounds up everything neatly; 6. having a bibliography and finally, having a table of contents. 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 a serious omission not to offer a module which should specifically address the issue of how to write an acceptable essay assignment, but expect students to do well in their assignments. Logically, it is expected that students should be provided programmes of study that are both comprehensive, holistic and do not leave out important skills like of assignment writing.

Shockingly, the various programmes offered students do not work together like parts 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 passing the assignments. Assignments are meant to hone and sharpen the students' writing skills as these are critical in the achievement of good results in the final examinations. The idea that not much has been researched and written on how assignments should be structured and presented has moti-

vated the researchers to conduct this research project. On the contrary, much has been researched on underachievement. Through various research undertakings it is now known that: "underachievement is generally associated with poverty, low parental education level (particularly that of the mothers), single parent families and poor language skills in the medium used for teaching at school" (Booyse et al. 1994: 22). The same cannot be said with regard to the issue of ABET students lacking assignment writing skills. In this regard, this paper is very apt and also ground breaking.

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 in the department of ABET.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researchers have been markers of ABET students' assignments for over five years and during this period they marked thousands of assignments. As markers the researchers have been exposed to many meetings whose aim was to train them in how to mark essay assignments. The researchers were trained to mark essay assignments as though they were actually teaching students in a face to face situation because that was the only way of interacting with the students in an ODL situation. Instead, of mark-

ing the content of the assignments the researchers found themselves having to teach the students how to structure and present a decent assignment.

This problem came to the surface in most cases; hence, the decision to find out what the real problem was. To do this, the researchers as already stated concentrated on a thousand assignments based on the following modules: ABET 1515 and from it 450 assignments were marked. ABET 1517 and from it 350 assignments were marked. Finally, ABET 2619 and from it 200 assignments were marked. Below are the three scenarios and what they have indicated as problematic aspects in as far as essay writing skills are concerned.

In the First Scenario: 450 marked assignments from ABET 1515 had four or more of the following problems, namely, they lacked: 1. the question to be answered as it was not written down; 2. had no a table of contents; 3. had no introduction; 4. had no sub-headings; 5. had no conclusion; and 6. had no bibliography.

This scenario is a typical antithesis of the view or argument that in "...essay writing, you should be writing with a purpose, and not writing something for the sake of writing it" (<http://www.medhopeful.com/archive/essay-writing-the-importance-of-writing-with-a-purpose/>). An essay assignment without a clear purpose driving it loses its flow in term of ideas and paragraphs as its sentences are incoherent and make no sense.

In the Second Scenario: 350 assignments of ABET 1517 which were marked had two or three of the following problems, they lacked: 1. an introduction; 2. sub-headings; 3. a conclusion; and 4. a bibliography.

Again, this scenario clearly shows that the students lacked the understanding that they should write out the full question and not be tempted to abbreviate it as this may lead to con-

fusion and get them to write something completely different and irrelevant. The question should be clearly displayed so that it can keep you focused. Hence, "you need a good reason for everything you write. Every time you want to include a significant component in your essay, you need to ask yourself: why am I including this? Does it support my overall theme? Is this the right place to include it? Does it make sense for me to have this here? Am I including this because I have good reasons to and it strengths my essay" (<http://www.medhopeful.com/archive/essay-writing-the-importance-of-writing-with-a-purpose/>). These questions appear not to be known to the students of ABET because their study programmes do not make mention of them. Thus the aim of this paper is to recommend that a module be dedicated to their delivery.

In the Third Scenario: 200 assignments of ABET 2619 which were marked had one or two of the following problems, namely, they lacked: 1. a table of contents; 2. sub-headings; and 3. a conclusion.

A well written essay assignment is a well-structured and properly organised piece of work that gives the impression that the students had spent time, efforts and care to construct. It must answer the given question, be written in an objective style, have appropriate evidence to back up arguments and views it contains and it must have coherent argument that flows from paragraph to paragraph. To this end, "an essay should be the development of argument, interpretation and analysis through extended and flowing narrative" (<http://www2.ulg.ac.be/facphl/uer/d-german/remed/guide.hlm>). See Table 1 that captures the above scenarios in dramatic manner.

From the examination of the above three modules the following findings were made:

Table 1: Information on three modules

<i>Modules</i>	<i>Number of assignments</i>	<i>Problematic areas</i>
1. ABET 1515	450 Assignments marked $450 \times 100 \div 1000 = 45\%$	The question to be answered as it was not written down; had no a table of contents; had no introduction; had no sub-headings; had no conclusion; and had no bibliography.
2. ABET 1517	350 Assignments marked $350 \times 100 \div 1000 = 35\%$	An introduction; sub-headings; a conclusion; and a bibliography.
350 ABET 2619	200 Assignments marked $200 \times 100 \div 1000 = 20\%$	A table of contents; sub-headings; and a conclusion.

The module ABT 1515 has absolutely nothing on how to write the assignments. This module is for the first year students as already pointed above. The worst thing is that this module is the only material the students are expected to read for the course. In other words, prescribed or recommended books are not given or required. This is a terrible situation in that it does not inspire the students to become curious to know more. It limits the desire and curiosity to search for knowledge.

The module ABET1517 is also having the same limitations like ABET 1515 in that it is the only material students have to study for the whole courses without prescribed or recommended books. This is still the case with module ABET2619. Without committing an oversight, the following modules were also assessed and found to follow the same format, structure and prescriptions and the modules are: 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.

CONCLUSION

From the above findings the following conclusions can be made:

The first finding is that: students lack skills of analysing a given question.

By analysing all parts of the question the student would be able to figure out what to answer. This approach would enable the student to more or less figure out which chapters of the study material possess the answer to the given question. Therefore, the student would be in a position to figure out which other sources are relevant to use in the assignment. Finally, the student can even consult the library to look for relevant sources to boost the essay.

The second finding is that: students make the silly mistake of not writing down the question as it is given.

Students tend to paraphrase a given question and in so doing write down what they think they have understood while they miss the gist

of what is asked. Some students just write down the question number and the answer.

The third finding is that: 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. Students should be taught that: one sub-heading one idea and one idea three paragraphs 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 fourth finding is that: students lack knowledge of the role a bibliography or a reference list plays in an essay.

The role of primary sources is that they contain real evidences that can support the views of the student more than secondary sources whose role is only supplementary.

Finally, the fifth finding is that: students do not appreciate the important role played by style and content in essay writing.

Style shows and also demonstrates the students high level of understanding and discipline when tackling a given question and subject from where it was derived.

On the issue of contents, the students must demonstrate the fact that they understood the question. The contents must indicate that the students have read extensively and intensively around the question. In the contents, the students' voice must come out clearly to the surface and supported by evidence, ideas of other scholars or case studies.

From the conclusions, the following themes emerged that can be used to construct a module to address the skills students need to write assignments, and they are: 1. a theme on the skill of analysing a question; 2. Such a theme is necessary when designing a module that addresses the skill of essay writing; 3. a theme on how to construct a table of contents is needed to address the skill of essay writing because a table of contents tells the reader what is contained in the essay; 4. 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 because this will help them to focus; 5. a theme of the value and

importance of having an introduction, sub-headings, conclusion and bibliography in writing an assignment is needed because it is important as it will teach students how to write an assignment; and 6. in the final analysis, a module is needed to offer, throughout the period of study, students' skills to become adept and articulate in writing an essay.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation is that: the students should be taught the importance of first analysing a given question in order to understand fully what it requires before answering it. Students must be taught how to write down the question in full. Thereafter, be taught how to analyse the question by focusing of the key words and finding their meaning. Every good question is supposed to have an answer and the answer must be in the study materials and prescribed or recommended sources.

The second recommendation is that: students should be taught the importance of writing down the question in full at the top of the page. In other words, the question should be written verbatim as it is given to avoid paraphrasing it because in doing so students tend to change the question and answer what suits themselves.

The third recommendation is that: a new module should be designed that offers students the skills of writing or constructing an introduction, headings, sub-headings, paragraphs, conclusion and bibliography.

The fourth recommendation is that: students should be taught what the differences between primary and secondary sources are, and what role each plays in essay assignment.

The fifth recommendation is that: students should be taught about the role of style and structure in essay writing.

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