Enhancing Student Engagement in Large, Non-Disciplinary First Year Survey Courses

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Large first year survey units pose unique challenges to both teachers and learners. Survey units are designed to deliver non-disciplinary specific knowledge about a given subject to a wide audience of learners. However, first year students in these units often find that they are unable to identify the architecture of such units, and are hence uncertain of what they need to take from the course. Employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, this article highlights the unique challenges of teaching large survey courses, identifies the causes of anxiety and disengagement amongst learners in such units, and reports on a range of innovative practices that were designed to assuage apprehension and engage first years enrolled in survey courses. It demonstrates how integrating assessment techniques that provide developmental and skills-based feedback, tasks that signpost their performance, and encouraging students to move beyond a surface learning approach can enhance the engagement of the students across large first year survey courses towards the unit material.

Large first year survey units pose unique challenges to both teachers and learners. Survey units are designed to deliver non-disciplinary specific knowledge about a given subject to a wide audience of learners. But first year students in these units often find that they are unable to identify the architecture of such units, and are hence uncertain of what they need to take from the course. Furthermore, with great numbers of students enrolled and high student/staff ratios, it is easy for first years in such courses to feel isolated and demoralised. However, there is a great deal that teachers can do to alleviate student anxieties in large first year survey units.

This article is the outcome of a research project that was directed at identifying the learning needs and experiences of first year students in large first year units in Australian universities. Employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, it highlights the unique challenges of teaching large survey courses, identifies the causes of anxiety and disengagement amongst learners in these units, and reports on a range of innovative practices that were designed to assuage apprehension and engage first-years enrolled in survey courses. The authors of this paper approached the development of innovative teaching practices through the assumption that the most successful solutions to these problems would be premised on enhancing levels of student engagement, and so the approaches detailed in this study represent a refinement of existing pedagogy about engaging students in their first year at university.

The objective of this study was to evaluate how our teaching practices can enhance student engagement, as measured through assessment results, submission rates and unit evaluations. In particular, we aimed to address student disengagement by introducing assessment tasks that addressed diversities in learning styles so as to encourage students to engage more deeply with academic and intellectual skills. This research project, and this article, attempts to explore how we, as university educators, can help first year students adjust to university teaching styles and to engage with the course content.

Method

The research for this article was conducted at two of Monash University's largest campuses, Clayton and Caulfield, where a combined total of around seven hundred and fifty students are enrolled each year in INT1010, the case study used in this project. The School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies at Monash University administers and teaches into the International Studies sequence within the institution's Faculty of Arts. Central to the sequence is a first year survey course that is compulsory for all students who major in International Studies, INT1010 (Contemporary Worlds One). INT1010 is at its heart an introduction to world history after 1945, but is meant to provide grounding for students looking to pursue studies across a range of disciplines. Apart from the International Studies major, the unit contributes towards majors in Political Science, History, Communications, Journalism, Sociology, and Anthropology. It also draws in significant numbers of students from non-Humanities degrees, most notably from the areas of Business and Economics.

This study was based on several sources of data. Apart from the assessment results for 2008 and 2009, the most significant corpus of data was a set of collated student responses to a questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed in tutorials to those students who had both completed INT1010 and who wished to be involved in the study. The survey asked students to give

details of their high school experience in both history and international studies; their self-assessed level of knowledge of the subject matter prior to starting INT1010; their assessment of the lectures, the tutorials and the readings. It also contained a reflexive question on their own learning style, which asked them to complete this sentence: "I learnt best in Contemporary Worlds I when . . . " This survey was completed by 198 students, 70 (35%) from the Clayton Campus and 128 (65%) from the Caulfield Campus. From these surveys, focus groups were convened of those students who indicated on the questionnaire that they were willing to participate. Twenty students answered a set series of questions about the structure of the course, the tutorials and the reading material.

At the end of every semester, students at Monash University complete a multiple choice survey for each unit that they are enrolled in. The evaluation is completely anonymous and the results are correlated by the university and then sent to the coordinator of the unit. The evaluations contained the same fourteen questions in both 2008 and 2009. The responses to these questions were mined for evidence on how students felt about the clarity of the course objectives, the learning resources provided, how stimulating they found the unit and their overall satisfaction with the quality of the unit. For the 2008 unit evaluation, 599 students (69%) completed the evaluation. In 2009, 428 students (38.98%) submitted an evaluation. The discrepancy in response rates had to with the medium of the survey itself. In 2008, students filled out a paper survey in the final class, whereas in 2009 they were invited (as part of a university initiative) to complete surveys online.

Differentiating the two years of teaching INT1010 was a substantial revamp of the program that was conducted in 2008, and designed specifically to meet student learning needs and enhance engagement. Specifically, the content focus was streamlined to focus on world history post-1945, whereas the pre-2009 course looked at the twentieth century in its entirety. This allowed for a greater emphasis on a smaller number of themes, such as communism, nationalism and the end of empire and the economic rise of developmental states. In addition, the focus of the assessment was on continuity between the two written tasks, and a building of skills rather than two relatively mutually exclusive tasks. We believe that a comparison of the data and of what the students had to say about how they learnt and the anxieties that they had about the design of each iteration of the course provides valuable insight into teaching practices in large first year survey units.

Student Engagement

Making a successful transition between vastly different models of learning and lifestyle is a critical component in achieving a range of positive student outcomes at university, chief among them completion and achievement (Leach & Zepke, 2009). And one key factor that helps ensure that successful transition between high school and university occurs is student engagement.

Student engagement can be broadly understood as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes" (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 493). As van der Meer and Scott (2009) observe, the concept of student engagement has gained much traction in pedagogy in more recent years, and its importance is increasingly enshrined in higher education policies at institutional and national levels. At its core, the notion of enhancing student engagement hinges on institutions and staff actively creating conditions to encourage and facilitate student involvement, and ensuring that there are ample opportunities for students to interact with staff and peers to benchmark their learning so as to reaffirm their sense of self-belief and avoid feeling left behind (Davis & Murrell, 1993).

The diversity and size of the learning body is a key source of student anxiety and disengagement. INT1010 is taught at five of Monash University's campuses across Australia, Malaysia, and South Africa, and hence students enrolled in the course come from a broad spectrum of academic and cultural backgrounds. Adding another layer of diversity is the size of the student cohort, which totaled over a thousand in 2009 (close to 800 in Australia, nearly 300 in South Africa, and 100 in Malaysia). Such numbers mean that the staff/student ratio tends to hover at an average of 70:1. Research by Krause and Coates (2008) has shown how such high staff/student ratios can be incredibly detrimental to students' learning experience and the sense of connection that they feel with both staff and peers.

Because INT1010 is such a large unit and has a non-disciplinary focus, the student cohort is made up of students of a variety of ages and levels of knowledge with regards to the subject matter. While most students are school leavers, there are a number of mature age students returning to study. Likewise, the knowledge base of the students varies considerably. Twenty-six percent of students reported never having studied twentieth century history before, while 74% had studied "history" (here encompassing a wide range of periods not always relevant to twentieth century world history), International Studies, or both in high school.

The unit consists of a two-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial every week. The course texts include a textbook of twentieth century history and a course-book that contains a mixture of primary (or contemporary) documents, journal articles, and book chapters from selected texts.

Table 1
Sample Scores and Marking Comments from INT1010, 2008

Student (pseudonym)	Grade	Marker's comment (extract)
Teddy Chew	C (50-59)	. . . a self-contradictory undertone in your argument
Mary Lowe	B- (60-64)	. . . a tangled thread of several (albeit very interesting) facts without a clear focus
Ira Sims	C+ (55-59)	. . . try not to use dictionary definitions as evidence
Allie Light	N (40-44)	. . . a complete absence of research
Natalie Driver	C+ (55-59)	. . . try not to contradict yourself as you present your argument
William Cray	B- (60-64)	. . . convoluted. Express your ideas in a more directive and coherent manner
Brady Nielsen	C+ (55-59)	. . . not easy to identify what your argument actually is
John Downs	B (65-69)	. . . argument was revealed only at the end
Rob Sanders	C+ (55-59)	. . . argument not backed by evidence
Sarah Biggins	B+ (70-74)	. . . make sure your argument is sustained through the essay

Learning Styles and Student Disengagement

One of the main causes of disengagement both within large first year university courses in general and in INT1010 in particular is an incompatibility between the expected learning styles of first year students and those of the university educators. There is a need for students to rapidly adjust from a method of learning where they are often told what they need to know to one where they must direct their own learning. This has been widely documented in the educational literature and is not only restricted to Australian universities, or to the teaching of history (Booth, 2005; Burch, 2008; Herington & Weaven, 2008; Huntly & Donovan, 2009; Leamnson, 1999).

The phrase "learning style" indicates the way that a student tends to approach the cognitive processing of information. The literature mainly distinguishes between two types: surface learning and deep learning. The "surface" learning style is characterized by students reading and listening for facts and attempting to memorize or learn them to reproduce them in assessment tasks, while the "deep" learning approach involves focusing on the meaning and conclusions reached in a text or a lecture, and seeking to integrate these into a more holistic view of the topic (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006; Ramsden, 2003).

These issues sometimes stem from a lack of time and energy on the part of the students, most of whom work at least part-time and have a full-time study load. However, we believe that another possible cause for this lack of engagement is a deficit in self-learning skills. Students do not understand how to read an article or a textbook and find the information we hope they garner from it. Many do not know how to read a journal article and decipher an author's opinion from fact. And many do not understand how to write a university-quality essay that sustains an argument and presents evidence to substantiate their opinions, rather than simply summarizing the facts.

The evidence for this can be found in the qualitative feedback given to students for their research essays. In 2008, the mean score for student essays in INT1010 was 60.55%. Out of 100 student essays selected at random, nearly two-thirds had been marked down due to weak arguments or a lack of research-based evidence, as we can see from the sample listed in Table 1.

The data from 2008 points to a fundamental issue common internationally among first year university students: while a section of students naturally gravitate towards a deep learning style, most students do not. They are often not encouraged nor have the need to graduate to deep learning styles in high school, as systems in countries such as Australia and Britain are geared towards following formulas and applying models, even in essay writing. Students are given a very concise outline of what is examinable, and are encouraged to learn this. Definitions and formulae are preferred over a deeper understanding of concepts.

In addition, the mode of teaching employed in high schools largely follows a teacher-as-expert paradigm. It is thus common for students to view the lecture as the primary source of learning at university (Booth, 2005). Indeed, our own surveys of almost 200 students who took INT1010 showed that almost 20% felt they learnt best when they attended the lectures. Both Booth (2005), as well as Burch (2008), found that newer cohorts of students – at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level – were entering courses with the belief that the information they needed to know would be told directly to them, and that lectures would be the primary mode of learning. Such a passive mode of learning supports students in their adherence to a surface model rather than necessitating them to develop a more complex appreciation for learning.

When considering the different sources of learning first year students can engage with – lectures, tutorial discussion and completing readings – the lecture is the most passive mode of learning. It requires little preparation or effort on the part of the student, even for those who are most efficacious in their study habits and who take notes. The lecturer gives them the information directly. Tutorial discussion is much less passive, requiring students to talk about the information they have learnt. However, tutorials can be passive if the student does not actively participate in the discussion, allowing the student, again, to be witness to the information being shared without contributing or thinking themselves. Set readings are intended by course coordinators to be the main source of information. Well-meaning lecturers often hope that students will use the readings to flesh out the ideas and facts they have gained from the lecture, and be exposed to a variety of scholars' opinions. Unfortunately, many students view these readings as a supplement to the lecture material. Thus, while lecturers would prefer student learning to be self-directed, in the form of reading and analyzing texts and documents, students prefer the passive mode of the lecture.

This was largely reflected in the survey we conducted of our first year students. When asked to comment as to how the tutor could enhance the student's learning in tutorials, a common response was to have the tutor give the class a summary of what they were supposed to be "taking away" from the lesson. Other students requested less required reading but more discussion in tutorials. These responses indicate a clear desire from students for tutorials to be more about gathering the information needed for assessment tasks, be they essays or exams, rather than a chance to explore their own understandings of the reading material. Questions in the survey about the texts revealed that students preferred straight-forward textbooks as opposed to journal articles and primary documents. Many students commented that they found the primary sources were either difficult to read, boring or that they were unclear about what they were supposed to be gleaning from them. For example, one student wrote:

> I thought that whilst they [the readings provided in the course-book] were interesting, some of the readings weren't very useful and that instead of certain speeches it would have been better to have other historical accounts of events to give a more rounded picture.

While this student's opinion is not that of the majority – there were many students calling for a list of "optional" readings so that they could read more broadly on topics that interested them – it does demonstrate the mindset of many first year students that it is more useful to be supplied with a historical account that summarizes the event for them rather than a collection of primary documents that requires the student to analyze the event for themselves.

This student also identifies the key characteristic of a text that first year students are looking for in reading materials: utility. While she concedes that these articles are interesting, they are not *useful* to her. It is hard to imagine that they were not useful in educating her about the events, given she is referring specifically to speeches of political leaders discussing key events of the Cold War, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is more likely they were not necessary in order to follow the lecture content and they were not helpful in the assessment tasks. Therefore, they were considered redundant.

Similarly, many other students felt, when reflecting on the textbook used for this subject, that this was a more useful learning tool than the course-book, as the articles and documents contained in it were "just random guys' opinions," and therefore not helpful in providing an understanding of the historical events. In contrast, another student commented that the textbook was an unnecessary expense as it "only gave background, which could have been looked up on Wikipedia or Google." Another student wrote that she was "not always sure what was necessary to know within [the] readings." These are clear examples of a surface learning approach where the student wants to be told what a particular article or book's purpose is for her own learning; what is it supposed to be teaching her, rather than what she can learn from it. Others state that they "learn best through discussion" rather than reading, or that it would be "more useful to have more lecture time than reading time." These students are clearly not making the connection between what they read and how this affects their ability to both synthesize lecture material and to contribute to the discussion. Comments of such a nature reflect a lack of general study skills within the first year cohort, and demonstrate the necessity of teaching students *how* to study and how to read texts in humanities subjects. It is not clear to some of these students what it is they should be gleaning from the reading material. While they are used to high school textbooks that tell them the facts, university-level study requires that they engage analytically with the material and respond to it.

These students are all essentially talking about the same problem – an inability to take an active role in their own learning. They are unable to read an article or a document and analyze it for what it says about the historical event. They need – or want – to be told outright. The student who stated that the background information given in the textbook was unnecessary – while at least demonstrating ability to research topics themselves – displays a lack of ability to distinguish

between credible and unreliable sources. Their opinions also reflect dissonance in how university lecturers and tutors conceptualize history – as a discourse that is continually changing – and how students perceive it – as the study of facts about the past (Booth, 2005). First year students can often become confused by the continual push to explore primary material and different viewpoints, when a textbook can present a summary of the facts without all the trouble.

All of this is, of course, to be expected in first year university students, and it is the role of universities to broaden students' learning approaches and to encourage them to think analytically, and thus we cannot expect these qualities to already exist in all first year students. The problem is that many universities tend to employ a "sink or swim" technique of teaching, and that assessment modes such as end-of-semester examinations often allow students to believe that surface level learning is the best way to approach their studies, particularly in large first year classes such as INT1010. And while more and more universities are including courses that teach study and research skills, or embedding such skills into their existing courses (Star & McDonald, 2007), we need to recognize that it is not simply a matter of teaching students how to use databases, but to approach learning itself from the students' perspective.

It should be emphasized that the approach of many of these students is not one of laziness, of necessarily wanting to be handed the answers on a silver platter so that they do not have to do the work necessary to find the answers for themselves. This is a common reaction by teachers, who feel that their students are apathetic to their own learning. It is, rather, a perception on the part of students that learners should be passive, not active (Star & McDonald, 2007). While the idea of the expert facilitating rather than directing student learning is an old one in teaching pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1978), many contemporary educators have found that the high school learning environment mimics that of the teacher-as-expert rather than the teacher-as-facilitator of knowledge (Booth, 2005; Star & McDonald, 2007). It is more of a case of the student not knowing how to take the driver's seat in their own learning, rather than an unwillingness to do so.

Developing New Learning Styles
Through Assessment

The challenge in broad first year units is to encourage students to step away from the need to be told what to learn and what is important to know towards a more analytical, self-directed learning approach. Students need to be taught specifically how to adjust from a passive surface learning style to a more active deep learning style.

What our research has shown is that a useful way to support this is to use the approach students feel comfortable with to encourage independent thought. Because students feel more comfortable being told what to do, we designed the course so that we were taking advantage of their passive approach to tell them how to write essays again. By designing assessment tasks that teach them how to complete other assessment tasks more successfully, students are taught study and research skills and encouraged to begin engaging in independent learning.

Taylor (2008) writes that assessment is one of the most effective ways to encourage positive engagement with university study and to develop academic writing and research skills. Because students in undergraduate courses place assessment as the central measure of their performance, they tend to be strategic learners; that is, they focus on what tasks contribute towards their overall mark in the subject (Star & McDonald, 2007). They will put more effort into large assessment tasks than into general background reading to aid classroom discussion, as it is the assessment that contributes to their overall grades. Thus, we argue that the best way to teach students to develop a deep learning style, and to encourage them to engage in the subject is via assessment.

Assessment tasks should, according to Taylor (2008), be developed according to a three-step approach that allows for both the development of skills (formative assessment) and for the assessment of learning (summative assessment). Her model for assessment calls for three different phases: assessments for transition, development and achievement. Transition tasks should be low in weight and occur in the first few weeks of the semester. Development assignments are also low weight but allow for significant amounts of feedback to the student. Finally, achievement assessment provides little feedback but has a higher contribution to the final grade and occurs late in the semester. According to Taylor's (2008) model, development tasks allow students to gain feedback from their tutors and to develop assessment skills (formative assessment), while achievement tasks allow them to demonstrate what they have learnt and provide a means for the student and the lecturer to assess their performance (summative assessment). She argues that university units must cater towards both types of assessment in order for it to have the maximum value for students.

This model of assessment removes all the assumptions about students' skills. Lukeman (1992) argues that it is not that students do not know how to write essays, it is that they do not know how to write academic essays, where it is necessary to not only put forward opinions, but to support their stance with evidence. Part of the problem for new students is a lack

of understanding about terms such as "argument" and "evidence" within an academic environment. Many first year students see essay writing as an exercise in summarizing the topic, avoiding putting forth any solid opinion but instead outlining both sides of the argument. Lukeman thus recommends helping students to comprehend the language used frequently by lecturers and tutors with the assumption students are applying the same meaning.

Lupton (2008) writes of the need to not only consider the students' essay-writing skills, but also their information literacy. That is, considering how students "seek, locate, evaluate, select and organize information. It also involves using information to analyze, synthesize, create new knowledge, communicate, make decisions and problem solve" (Lupton, 2008, p. 399). So while university teachers can assume that students know how to write an essay, we cannot assume that their level of information literacy is consistent with each other or with the standard of academic level essays. Students may feel it is appropriate to locate and summarize facts in order to construct an essay, but do not know how to analyze or evaluate source material very well.

Star and McDonald (2007) and Taylor (2008) both describe the need for university teachers to utilize graduated assessment tasks that address both the development and presentation of writing and researching skills. This method involves structuring assessment in order to teach specific disciplinary and writing skills gradually, building up to more self-directed forms of assessment across the first semester or year.

The development of research and writing skills is a significant part of the process of transitioning from a surface-based learning style to a deeper approach. The skills required of deep learning – analysis, critical thinking and integration – cannot be achieved without first developing these skills. The criteria assessed in essays, such as good research, critical understanding of source material and the construction of a solid argument, are necessary in order to engage in deep level thinking, and therefore the two go hand in hand. At the first year level, it is most desirable to further these skills and encourage more active thinking through assessment.

It is this technique that we applied in our study. The students across INT1010 completed two written assignments. The first assignment, due in the forth week of the semester, consisted of an essay outline and an annotated bibliography, was designed to be developmental in nature. Students were required to select an essay topic, do some preliminary research and present an outline of their argument. They were also instructed to include a bibliography listing at least five references and to describe briefly how and why these sources were useful. This task proved beneficial for students in several ways. Firstly, it forced students to begin thinking about their major essay early in the semester. Secondly, it allowed the students to get direct feedback from their tutor on the direction of their argument, as well as their research techniques. This meant that any student who did not have a firm grasp on the question they were writing on, or who, as Lukeman (1992) describes, did not fully understand the concepts involved in academic writing, would have the opportunity to work on these issues and to seek help from the tutor or the Faculty skills programs if necessary. This exercise allowed the tutor to encourage good research practices and to give assistance to those who needed it in constructing a valid academic argument.

The second written assignment was an achievement task (as was the end of semester exam). This assessment was the major essay that was begun in the first assignment. It was due in week nine, two weeks after the first assignment was returned. This allowed students to apply the feedback they received from the first assignment to their essay and to improve their argument and their research accordingly.

Comparing students' performance after the revised assessment tasks were introduced in 2009 makes for striking commentary on the effectiveness of Taylor's hypothesis of enhancing student engagement through formative and transitory assessment tasks.

The data collated in Table 2 shows two notable trends. Firstly, there is a clear increase in 2009 in the mean scores students received for each of their assessments compared to the 2008 figures. But more importantly, it is obvious that the emphasis on the importance of developing key learning skills and gently guiding students from a surface-based to a deeper learning style has had tangible results. Not only are the mean scores of both assignments higher in 2009 than in 2008 (and in the case of assignment two, significantly so), the means also indicate that the quality of students' work had improved from their first assessment task in 2009 to their second. In short, the careful and assisted build-up to their achievement task had resulted in better essays all around.

In addition to the two written assignments, the unit also used *signposting* assessment in the form of three in-class quizzes across the course of the semester that allowed students to gauge their knowledge while also encouraging them to engage with the course material. These tests were low in weight (totaling 5% of the total grade) but gave students an opportunity to revise what they had read and to test their own understanding. The first quiz involved a map exercise, conducted early on in the semester to familiarize students with political geography. Two further tests were conducted at five-week intervals. These were short multiple-choice tests

Table 2
Comparison of Mean Scores for Assessment Tasks, 2008 vs. 2009

Year	Mean score written assignment 1	Mean score written assignment 2	Number of students enrolled (all campuses)
2008	64.31	60.55	976
2009	66.88	68.45	1045

related to the assigned reading for each week, and the quizzes were designed to test students' understanding of the prescribed reading material.

Qualitative evidence from focus group sessions and the surveys conducted for this study revealed a close link between the effective use of signposting assessment and student engagement. Several students stated the usefulness of these quizzes as a learning tool, noting in particular that the frequency of the tests throughout the semester provided them with a "checkpoint" to assess how well they were doing in the unit. Others commented that by testing the students' knowledge of the assigned readings, we were encouraging more students to complete them by creating a broad learning structure made up of digestible sections of world history.

The effect of the signposting assessment is easy to underestimate. By creating identifiable milestones and highlights in the course, students became less intimidated by the sheer breadth of the survey course. This led to increased levels of student engagement in tutorials in particular, as more students found themselves confident in offering contributions to tutorial discussions, and demonstrates not only the ability of assessment to aid in the development of skills as a way to engage students, but also as a way to encourage students to develop study habits that are expected at university level – such as completing set readings in order to participate in class discussions – but that are not necessarily natural to first year students used to classroom-based, passive learning models.

Student attrition at the first year of university is one of the most powerful indicators of student disengagement. Most universities keep such data closely confidential, and so it is impossible for us to map out the exact figures of attrition in INT1010, let alone across courses, faculties, and universities. However, there is data that is both useful and available which can be used to indicate levels of attrition: rates of submission. The failure to submit assignments is a common occurrence in large first year survey units, and overwhelmingly when students do not submit their work at all, the broader reason can be traced to disengagement. Table 3 shows the collated submission rates for the two major written assessment tasks among students enrolled in INT1010 in 2008 and 2009.

Not only did a greater proportion of students successfully submit their written assignments after the changes to INT1010 were implemented in 2009, but there was also a noticeably tighter clustering of the submission rates for assessment one and assessment two that year, compared to 2008.

Finally, at the end of each semester students are invited to take part in an anonymous unit evaluations conducted by the university. The surveys are designed to generate quantitative data about the effectiveness of teaching in individual units, as well as the general levels of student satisfaction with the quality and structure of a given course. The evaluation scores based on student feedback again reinforce a positive trend favoring the changes to teaching and learning outlined earlier in this paper. Five of the relevant categories for evaluation have been selected, and are presented in Table 4.

Besides the significant increases in each category, of particular note are the students' responses to the question "In this unit I was encouraged to participate actively", which saw a remarkable increase of 0.17 in the mean. It is clear from the data that the changes had dramatically increased students' sense of engagement with the unit.

Conclusion

The use of formative, summative and signposted assessment techniques allowed us to combine the development of writing and research skills with tests of achievement within the unit. We have argued that by integrating assessment techniques that provide both developmental and skills-based feedback as well as tasks that signpost their performance and encouraging students to move beyond a surface learning approach enhanced the engagement of the students across the course towards the unit material. These skills are applicable to all disciplines at university level, and such assessment techniques can easily be utilized within other areas of study. The philosophy of structuring assessment around the acquisition of skills could be applied in any subject where the students' skill base is not at university level or where students are struggling to engage with the material. We have demonstrated that incorporating an understanding of how first year students learn into developing the assessment tasks allows us to help the students to acquire deeper learning skills, to apply them to their everyday learning and to

Table 3
Submission Rate of Written Assessment

Year	Written assessment 1 submission rate	Written assessment 2 submission rate	Number of students enrolled (all campuses)
2008	79.30%	74.60%	976
2009	85.10%	84.40%	1045

Table 4
Mean Scores from Unit Evaluation Reports, 2008 and 2009

Year	The learning objectives were made clear to me	The organization and progression of the topics in this unit made sense to me	The assessment tasks helped me develop relevant knowledge and skills	In this unit I was encouraged to participate actively	Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit
2008 (*n* = 599)	4.09	4.04	4.04	4.07	3.99
2009 (*n* = 428)	4.19	4.18	4.16	4.24	4.17

Note. Scale of 1-5, 1 being the worst and 5 being the best

their assessment tasks, as well as allowing them to develop a better understanding of the area of study.

By comparing qualitative and quantitative data between two iterations of a large first year survey course, INT1010, it is clear that the implementation of these teaching techniques reveal to us many things about ourselves as educators, and our students as learners. We have seen how first year university students in such courses can be guided away from surface learning to deeper learning styles, and how students can be gently coaxed into looking beyond utility when assessing readings and text. We have also seen how course designers of large first year survey units can accommodate the principles of student engagement in assessment design. By recognizing the importance of formative assessment in first year teaching, and by signposting the architecture of the learning material, the most pressing causes of student disengagement inherent to first year learners in survey units can be greatly alleviated.

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