



# Who am I writing for? Potential and problems of writer roles in assessment tasks

Jan Pinder

Monash University

[jan.pinder@celts.monash.edu.au](mailto:jan.pinder@celts.monash.edu.au)

**Abstract:** *Assessment tasks are a potential means to integrate the development of graduate attributes within the disciplines, since they can provide students with the opportunity to adopt a range of academic and professional identities, and to apply what they have learnt in ways that will prepare them for their future professional roles. Taking as a starting point the framework for the analysis of assessment tasks outlined by Tim Moore and Brett Hough, in this paper I look at current practice in a number of Business and Economics disciplines, firstly to see what range of tasks and possible roles are drawn on, and secondly to identify some implications for LAS advisers in dealing with such tasks. I have analysed a sample of 20 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year assignment tasks in Business and Economics subjects, looking at authorship, role/status, genre, mode, discipline and audience. In this paper I focus on those tasks that assigned an expert/professional role to the student and discuss some potential problems related to the contextualisation of the question, the framing of the instructions, and the possibility of conflict between the authorial stances of professional and student. For LAS advisers working with tasks of this sort, it is important to know what knowledge the student needs to carry out the task and where that knowledge comes from; they are also uniquely positioned to give*

*feedback to faculty teaching staff on students' representations of the tasks.*

***Key words:*** *assessment, assignment tasks, graduate attributes*

## **Introduction**

Universities are being called on increasingly to prepare students more explicitly for the world of employment, and the notion of graduate attributes has proved to be a useful way of thinking about this. How to develop these attributes in practice, however, continues to be a challenge for university teachers. One way is by designing assignment tasks that call on students to apply disciplinary knowledge in ways that are congruent with the professional roles they are likely to take up. Kate Chanock (2004) remarks that it is easier to integrate graduate attributes—which are often derived from employers' requirements—into vocationally-oriented courses that contain an element of professional training. In these courses role-play and simulation are commonly used techniques. In business courses, relating the theory that is taught to situations that will be encountered in the workplace has a long history, starting with the development of the case study method at Harvard Business School in the early twentieth century (Stewart, 1991). While the extent to which the classroom can simulate a professional context has been questioned, (Freedman *et al.*, 1994) assignment types whose major function is 'to socialize students into the business world' by making them assume business roles, write for business audiences, and adopt business communication styles (Zhu, 2004) are a feature of most courses offered in business faculties.

The experience of LAS advisers suggests that for students, the interpretation and carrying out of such assignments is not unproblematic. The contextualisation of the task, specification of writer role and audience, and the implications of these for content and form leave plenty of room for the 'gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing' referred to by Lea and Street (1998, p. 159). This paper looks at a sample of such

assessment tasks from some Business and Economics subjects in a large Australian university in an attempt firstly to understand how they are constructed, and secondly to pinpoint some of the potential problems in communicating expectations.

## **The study**

The research I describe here was to be part of a planned set of studies of assignment questions across several faculties aiming to see which of the range of available genres are chosen by lecturers, and how often the identity they call for the student writer to adopt reflects a professional role the student is likely to assume in later employment. It represents an initial, pilot study, only looking at the text of the assignment instructions, not at student productions, and at this stage does not attempt to investigate student or lecturer understandings of the instructions, although this would clearly be a desirable avenue for future research. In this paper I am only concerned with the part of the sample that did assign a professional role.

The original sample consisted of a total of 20 assignment questions from 10 subjects, provided by six lecturers from the Faculty of Business and Economics who responded to a direct request by email for samples of assignment questions from second and third year subjects.

The framework used to analyse the tasks was adapted from a model developed by fellow LAS adviser Tim Moore and Brett Hough. Grounded in genre theory, it was conceived as a tool to help academics to develop variety in assessment tasks in a way related to roles students may fulfil in their future professional lives. This model derives a set of analytical categories from the conventional essay task (where an individual student in a particular discipline writes an essay for the lecturer): authorship (whether individual or collaborative); role (academic, professional and other identities); genre (possible types of 'communicative events' associated with these identities); mode (written or spoken); audience (academic, professional, public etc.). This framework can then be used by the lecturer to generate sets of instantiations of each category that are relevant to the particular discipline and to the possible future pathways of the students. (For example in History, the roles

generated might include historian, journalist, biographer, museum curator, etc.)(Moore & Hough, 2005)

For the purpose of this research I have used this generative framework as an analytical tool, creating a grid on which I plotted the features of each assignment. After this preliminary analysis I selected the questions that assign a professional role to the student. These results are presented in Table 1. Two of the assignments (4 and 5) do not go quite this far—they evoke a professional situation without explicitly placing the student in the role—but I have included them because they step beyond decontextualised demonstration of knowledge. I then examined the way the instructions for these assignments were framed: how they presented the role and its context to the student, how explicit they were, and what assumptions they made about student knowledge about the role.

Assignment code	Authorship	Role	Genre	Mode	Discipline	Audience
1	Individual	Professional (unspecified) Writer of article	Journal article	Written	Accounting (financial modelling)	Readers of <i>Australian CPA</i>
2	Individual	Professional—international manager of an Australian business	Report	Written	Management (international business)	CEO
3	Individual	Professional—HR manager of a homewares retail firm	Report	Written	Management (human resources)	CEO
4	Individual	Student, but knowledge linked to a professional role	Short-answer questions including calculations	Written	Data analysis	Lecturer
5	Individual	Student, but knowledge linked to a professional role	Short-answer questions including calculations	Written	Data analysis	Lecturer
6	Group	Professional—Fund manager trainee	Business report	Written	Accounting (investments and portfolio management)	Supervisor of fund management department? Investors?
7	Individual	Professional—contracted to large international organisation	Formal business report	Written	Management	Lecturer
8	Group	Professional—members of a research and advice company	Report	Written	Management (Tourism)	Consultancy company? Not clear
9	Individual	Professional—member of a research and advice company	Report	Written	Management (Tourism)	Not clear
10	Individual	Professional—member of a research and advice company	Report	Written	Management (Tourism)	Stakeholders? Not clear
11	Group	Professional—members of a research and advice company	Presentation Written summary	Spoken Written	Management (Tourism)	Stakeholders

*Table 1: Analysis of assignment instructions*

What emerged from the analysis of the task instructions for these assignments was a variety of ways of presenting the elements of role, audience and genre to the student, along a continuum from explicit instructions regarding each element to description of a scenario in which one or more of the elements were implied.

## **Role**

In a number of assignments the role to be adopted was foregrounded. Three of the assignments (2, 3 and 6) presented a professional role explicitly at the beginning of the instructions, e.g. “You are the manager of...”. Two of these specified the audience; the third, which involved a much more complex task than the other two, with a number of parts, was less explicit about the audience for the final product. Two other assignments (1 and 7) were framed in a similar way, but did not assign a named role to the student; the role was in some way embodied in the task: “You have been contracted to...” “You have been approached to write an article...”.

In one group of assignments (8 – 11) the role was not foregrounded at all, but embedded in the context: this was a subject in which the whole course (Tourism management) was geared towards the production of four assignments. The students were presented with a scenario, in the course of which they were told they work for a ‘research and advice company’ contracted by a local council and tourism authority. While the project itself was a classroom exercise, the project area was real, and the stakeholders, with whom the students had contact, actual representatives of the local tourism bodies.

Another set of assignments (4 and 5) were interesting because they incorporated a role at one remove. These were discrete problems in business data analysis and, very much in the style of ‘word problems’ in school mathematics textbooks, they presented a scenario with actors and then asked the student to solve the problem, without however identifying the student with the actors in the scenario. For example, the student is told that auditors of a bank want to compare certain sets of values, and is instructed to explain how they might proceed. What is being required of the student is demonstration of knowledge, but a demonstration that is related to a real-world context.

In all of the instructions the academic context of the assignment was also very present, through information about marking criteria, submission procedures, and disciplinary matters such as warnings about plagiarism.

## **Genre**

None of the assignments relied on the student's knowledge of what genre(s) might be an appropriate to the designated role and audience: the genre to be produced was always specified, sometimes with detailed instructions on content and/or formatting. These genres were generally congruent with the role and audience where stated: for example, a business report for a CEO, an oral presentation of research findings for project stakeholders, a journal article for readers of a particular journal. However, some of those solicited could not be described as professional genres: short-answer questions (4 and 5), tutorial presentation with written summary (12).

## **Audience**

Six assignments indicated an audience, either by directly naming the audience or the person who had commissioned the report (2, 3, 7, 11), by or by implication (1, 6). Assignments 8 - 11 were part of a contextualised project in which the student/author was a member of a 'research and advice company', but while assignment 11 was specifically directed towards the major stakeholders of the project, the audience of the other three was not explicitly stated.

The characteristics of the audience which might have a bearing on the way the assignment was written were not elaborated, although sometimes indications were given. In assignment 2, the students were told: 'the CEO wants to see a report which is extremely well written and backed up by wide and relevant research, both current and historical'. One of the instructions for assignment 1 was: 'Your article must use *appropriate language* and spreadsheet examples for the intended "readership"' (my emphasis), but it was left to the students to work out who exactly that readership was and what language would be appropriate.

## **Discussion**

Looking at these assignment questions from the point of view of an LAS adviser who might meet them for the first time in the course of a consultation with a student, a number of questions arise about what is being asked of the student, how those requirements are communicated, what knowledge the student needs to carry out the task and what the sources of that knowledge are.

## **Purpose**

One source of difficulty is the inevitable dual nature of assignments like this. While on the one hand requiring the student writer to adopt a professional role, and produce a text that at least has the form of a business genre, with the communicative purpose that the genre and role entail, they are clearly at the same time requiring the student to display knowledge acquired during the course in a way governed by academic conventions. Negotiating this dual role can be difficult for the student. In their comparative study of student and professional discourse in the field of financial analysis, Freedman, Adam and Smart concluded that it is the institutional context that determines the rhetorical purpose of writing, so writing done in a university course will always have the primary rhetorical purpose of knowledge display (Freedman et al., 1994).

This would suggest that for an assignment to be at all effective in focusing the student on aspects of professional practice and thinking, the institutional context should not be allowed to intrude too much. In the assignments considered here, it is often very much to the fore. Some of the instructions direct students to the lectures where relevant concepts have been discussed and many set out the number and type of information sources to use (for instance a minimum of five refereed journal articles). The academic institutional context is further made present by accompanying material on formatting and disciplinary matters. In one of them (Assignment 6) this accompanying material is quite voluminous and risks overshadowing the scenario completely, making it difficult to focus on the actual instructions. In this assignment instruction package, the extent and detail of the procedural matter and warnings about penalties for late submission and plagiarism tend to create a disjunction between the role specified by the task (trainee fund manager in an investment company) and the role of student undergoing a test, needing to comply with conditions that bear no relation to the circumstances set out in the scenario.

Some of the assignments tried to manage this disjunction by incorporating the disciplinary requirements into the scenario: Assignments 8–11 have a number of administrative procedures that are designed to ensure that students complete all tasks, which are described as stages in the contract. Failure to carry them out results in getting no mark for the assignment, and this is presented as cancellation of the



contract. Assignment 2 found an ingenious way of connecting the requirements of knowledge demonstration to the scenario, saying that the report should constitute ‘a solid justification for the recommendation . . . , which would convince the CEO that you are a well-informed business manager, whose services and ideas are extremely valuable’, thus invoking a secondary communicative purpose of much professional writing—impressing one’s superiors. If the role of such assignments is indeed, as Zhu (2004) has said, to socialize students into the business world, then this kind of linking is likely to make them effective.

### **Knowledge**

One area of difficulty for students with this kind of assignment, as LAS advisors know, is with the knowledge of the role, genre and audience (as opposed to the subject knowledge that is to be demonstrated) needed to carry out the task successfully. Ideally, such knowledge is transmitted in class, whether by explicit instructions or by modelling (Freedman & Adam, 1996). This was clearly the case of Assignments 8-11, which were part of a project simulation which included meetings with stakeholders. The project was also supported by classes on report writing and project management. In the LAS context however, when all one has access to is a student and an assignment question, it is often difficult to know whether this has been the case or not. Many of the assignment questions in this study made the generic features of the required product very explicit, for example with instructions on how to write a formal business report. However, several of them appeared to assume that the student would know enough about the designated role or audience to make appropriate choices about content or style. This was particularly true in the case of Assignment 1, where the students were instructed to use language appropriate to the readership of a particular journal, but it was apparently left to them to work out who exactly that readership was and what language would be appropriate.

Such assumptions of knowledge about particular groups, or about kinds of workplace culture, can be a particular problem for overseas students. Even when this knowledge is not assumed, but is be provided through other channels, it may be more implied than stated, and students’ ability to pick up inferences is dependent on their cultural knowledge and prior experience. Here

further research on student understandings of assignment questions triangulated with lecturer assessments of the students' products would be useful.

## Conclusion

This preliminary examination of instructions for assignments that require students to adopt a professional role has pinpointed some potential difficulties for students, and suggests some paths for further research into this kind of assignment.

One area of difficulty that should not be underestimated is balancing of the sometimes conflicting demands of the professional and student roles, and if this kind of assignment is to provide a pedagogical tool for the development of graduate attributes the way these demands are integrated needs to be paid close attention. The reading of this small sample of task instructions also suggests that assumed knowledge about the communicative demands generated by certain types of audience or workplace situation could be a problem for some students.

Both of these observations, however, need to be tested by further research, ideally looking at both student and lecturer understandings of the task and its purpose, as well as student productions and lecturer assessments.

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