Teaching to the discipline: Academic literacies and the devolving of English language support

Neil Murray
Simon Fraser University – April 2019
A case study

- The University of South Australia, 2009 – 2012
- A response to DEEWR (via AUQA) – GPPs
- Senior Consultancy role (secondment)
Conceptualising ‘proficiency’

What is proficiency?
- General proficiency
- English for general academic purposes
- Academic literacy
- Professional communication skills
- Study skills???
What are academic literacies: 4 quotations

The academic literacies model ...

... sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159).
As they become members of their university and, more specifically, their disciplinary communities of practice, students are learning to:

... participate in a variety of socially constituted traditions of meaning-making that are valued in cultures of which they are a part. These traditions include not just concepts and associated vocabulary, but also rhetorical structures, the patterns of action, that are part of any tradition of meaning-making. They include characteristic ways of reaching consensus and expressing disagreement, of formulating arguments, of providing evidence, as well as characteristic genres for organizing thought and conversational action. In mastering such traditions, students learn not only to operate with them, but also how to change them

(Rex & McEachen 1999, p. 69).
Re contextualised social practice:

First, student writing is always embedded within relationships around teaching and learning and these relationships influence, not least, the extent to which students come to write successfully in higher education. Second, the conventions governing exactly what constitutes ‘appropriate academic writing’ are social to the extent that these have developed within specific academic and disciplinary communities over time. Third, student academic writing is a social practice in that the writers, students, are learning not only to communicate in particular ways, but are learning how to ‘be’ particular kinds of people: that is, to write ‘as academics’, ‘as geographers’, ‘as social scientists’. This academic writing is also about personal and social identity. (Curry & Lillis 2003, p. 11)
Success on an academic course also involves becoming integrated into a new academic culture, with all its hidden expectations of written and spoken language. Such knowledge cannot necessarily be acquired before a student arrives in the UK, because published language learning materials, aiming to cater for as wide an audience as possible, are unable to cater to the precise needs of a student following a particular course in a particular institution.

(Cownie & Addison 1996, p. 221)
Preparing an OHS business case

Writing nursing handover notes

Taking notes in clinical placements

Writing a business report

Writing an aviation case study essay

Report writing for social work placement

Writing case records
Why embed academic literacies?

- Academic literacies as fundamental to conversancy in the disciplines and membership of their communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
- Increasingly diverse student population
  - Large increase in international student population (1.3m 1990 – 4.3m 2011; annual growth approx. 6%, OECD)
  - Widening participation agenda
- Few assumptions can be made about the knowledge/skills with which students come to their studies (e.g. language skills as measured by IELTS etc)
What does embedding ALs mean?

- ALs = Core part of the curriculum not a bolt-on activity / optional extra
- Taught by academic content faculty
- Taught as needed and recycled as necessary
- Recognises that language cannot sensibly be assessed independently of content
- Alternative: Credit bearing/NCB, taught by EAP tutors (logistical re failure on CB)
Traditional perceptions of AL support

- “Unfortunately, academic literacy support is not always accorded high priority ... in many institutions ... learning development is seen as a ‘quick fix’ student service, rather than as a more pedagogically grounded approach which focusses on developing academic literacies.” (McWilliams & Allan, 2014)

- Turner (2011, p.29) refers to the status of language development work done by student learning centres and their location as being “on the periphery of higher education”.
Embedding ALs is a demanding process and requires a change of culture – esp. academics imparting of ALs. But ...

...students need to have not only ‘content’ knowledge, but to know discipline-specific ways of creating, transforming and reporting discipline knowledge, which cannot be taught, except together with the ‘content’ itself. (Curnow & Liddicoat 2008, p. 2)
Collaboration at 2 levels

A. Institutional buy-in for the idea
B. Implementation of the idea
A. Innovation requiring institutional buy-in and a change of culture

Success = product of at least 3 dimensions:
1. Personal
2. Political
3. Organisational
The personal dimension

Change agents need to:

- have charisma – force of personality, self-belief, conviction
- have commitment, perseverance, tenacity, empathy (emotional intelligence - Goleman)
- Be open to feedback adjustments while maintaining the essential integrity of the innovation
- Credibility: good knowledge of the innovation, the context of its implementation, its rationale and implications for users/implementers
They need these qualities because they will face resistance...

- Scepticism re follow-through
- Fear of the unknown
- Lack of information
- Threat to power base
- Fear of failure
- Reluctance to experiment
- Reluctance to let go

Adapted from Plant (cited in Newton & Tarrant, 1992)
The political dimension

Change agents need to:

- be politically astute (systems, processes, agendas)
- have good negotiation skills (explicit and implicit!)
- be well connected and have academic/managerial seniority
- have a track record of success with innovation (curriculum change)
- understand the university’s leadership – its strategy, aspirations, modus operandi – and demonstrate the idea’s relevance
- be able to shape the idea and its presentation accordingly
- offer a realistic assessment of risks and benefits → reduced scale pilot. Show it’s sustainable and that benefits far outweigh risks
- provide options
- ensure it’s a collective endeavour responding to a common + commonly felt issue
- minimize disciplinary jargon while demonstrating relevant knowledge
The organisational dimension (1)

- Project management team with clear lines of responsibility + coordinated action
- Representative Advisory Group with all key stakeholders
- Divisional Operational Group
The organisational dimension (2)

Divisional Operational Group:

- Head of Language and Literacy
- Dean of Teaching and Learning for the Division
- Academic Developer assigned to the Division
- 2-3 Programme Directors from within the Division
- Language and Learning Coordinator for the Division
The organisational dimension (3)

Sharing learning across groups
The critical factor is...

Institutional buy-in at the top!

“Institutional recognition of the important role and unique contribution that literacy specialists provide is a key contributing factor to the effective provision of embedded, literacy initiatives.” (McWilliams & Allan 2014, p.3)
B. The process: challenges post buy-in

1. Making sure academics understand ‘ALs’
2. Making explicit implicit staff knowledge of the academic literacies of their disciplines
   Procedural knowledge → Declarative
3. Mapping the ALs onto the curriculum and assessment practices
4. Providing professional development and resources for academic staff
1. Do academic staff understand ‘AL’?

Understanding as prerequisite to identification and implementation
Percy & Skillen (2000, p. 244) speak of...

discipline staffs’ inability to clearly articulate their tacit knowledge of the discourse and conventions of their discipline and to provide students with developmental and timely feedback.
Embedding: an example

The assessment [of the Applied Linguistics major] requires students to engage strongly with academic research articles (the majority of course readings, as textbooks are not used); they are expected not only to read and understand the content, but also to focus on such things as how the content is conveyed and the way in which the argumentation was structured. In coming to understand applied linguistics, students need to have not only ‘content’ knowledge, but to know discipline-specific ways of creating, transforming and reporting discipline knowledge, which cannot be taught, except together with the ‘content’ itself. (Curnow & Liddicoat 2008, p. 2).
3. Mapping onto the curriculum and assessment practices

- Determine which practices stds are expected to have mastered by end of programme
- Distribute them across *core courses* where they most naturally arise via process of scaffolding → recycling
Collaborate to...

- specify the learning outcomes expected of students across all core courses of their degree programme
- understand those learning outcomes in terms of the particular literacy practices they entail
- ascertain how those literacy practices will be used post-graduation, in academic or employment contexts
- consider how the relevant literacies identified inter-relate →
- organise ALs within the curriculum and across different courses in a logically sequenced manner
Example: Applied Linguistics major

Academic literacy within applied linguistics is ‘the capacity of students to be consumers and producers of language-focused research’.

This means…
...each of the following should be the focus of a separate assessment task:

- Critical reading of research
- Analysis of research writing
- Synthesis of research from multiple sources
- Constructing an argument using the research of others
- Analysing language data
- Constructing an argument from language examples
- Understanding the process of research development
- Designing and implementing research projects
- Communicating research findings
4. Providing professional development

- English language tutors model AL lessons in person/via podcasts
- EL tutors observe during transition phase and provide feedback
- EL tutors/academic developers provide ongoing support via staff and student workshops + development of online materials developed in consultation/collaboration with academics
- Academics upskill in terms of technological literacy (creating online resources, downloading applications and materials, moderating/engaging in blogs and forums, creating podcasts etc.)
CHALLENGES (1)

- Insufficient understanding of the project
- Perceived inseparability of ALs and study skills and/or generic English for academic purposes → ALs teachable outside of the curriculum
  To what extent is this deliberate??
- Tendency to draw on previous, divergent conceptions of ALs (constraining)
- Reluctance to engage with a process → shift away academics’ comfort zone
- Political motivations both at an individual and departmental level
CHALLENGES (2)

- Lack of belief in the efficacy of embedding
- Staff feeling they were content not language specialists
- Course Coordinators feeling overwhelmed by other course commitments and having neither time nor expertise to focus on yet another ‘additional’ initiative
- Some academic believing they were already teaching certain academic literacies
- Skepticism (previous efforts and failures – an already burdened curriculum)
- Compliance
Support of English language tutors (1)

- Workshops organised on a faculty basis
- Feedback on assignments
- 1:1 sessions/clinics where feasible
- Online provision ...
Decentralising provision: Why devolve AL to faculties/departments?

- Integrate with faculties – understand local context → easier to influence and support staff and students
- Develop productive relationships with academic and professional staff
- Build discipline knowledge → more effectively support students through tailored materials → student engagement
Better understanding/appreciation of the work of EL teachers

Emphasize the intimate relationship between language and discipline

Consultation, sharing of ideas, creative initiatives, experiences and strategies, and collaboration in professional development activities can happen across faculty teams
Thank you!
References


