

In-Course Language Support: Working
Towards Best Practice

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Abstract

In Australian universities, student demographics over the past decade have changed markedly. The main shift is an increase in the number of students who have English as an additional language or are the first in their family to enter higher education. As student populations diversify, many universities are recognising that language and academic support programs require different emphases. For years, the fundamentals of learning support revolved around centrally run workshops and individual consultations but recently, a number of universities have moved towards contextualised in-course support. This paper looks at a similar shift. In 2010, learning support at Edith Cowan University moved from a centralised model to being faculty based. The Faculty of Business and Law established a new Academic Skills Centre to service its diverse student population. Aiming to offer best practice, several methods have been adopted, the most successful of which is the integration of academic skills and English language support within targeted units in the School of Management.

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This paper looks at a similar shift. In 2010, learning support at Edith Cowan University moved from a centralised model to being faculty based. The Faculty of Business and Law established a new Academic Skills Centre to service its diverse student population. Aiming to offer best practice, several methods have been adopted, the most successful of which is the integration of academic skills and English language support within targeted units in the School of Management.

Introduction

There has been much press regarding the readiness, or lack thereof, of international graduates for employment in Australia (Barthel, 2007; Birrell, 2006a; Elson-Green, 2007; Ewart, 2007; Johnson, 2008). Criticism hit a peak in 2006, due largely to three reports regarding the perceived lack of English language competency of accounting graduates (Birrell, 2006a; Birrell, 2006b; Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson, 2006). The Australian Government responded with a set of English language principles for international students (Australian Universities Quality Agency [AUQA], 2009); principles which are now being revised and expanded to include all students (Trounson, 2010) and, following discussion, expected to be released as Standards (AUQA, 2010). The Australian Government's review into higher education, commonly termed the Bradley Review, also asked providers to place greater emphasis on "the preparation of international students for the world of work and particularly for working in Australia" (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 103). International students, however, were not the only cohort under consideration by the government. The Bradley Review also recommended greater participation by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Such a move would increase enrolments from students who are the first in their family to participate in higher education.

In the last decade, the student demographic within the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) has changed rapidly. As is the case elsewhere, the number of international students has increased along with the number of domestic students who have English as an additional language (EAL), to the point where almost 50% of the

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Faculty's students have EAL. The Faculty has long welcomed mature age students and those who are the first in their family to enter a tertiary institution. The diversity of the student population has generated debate within the Faculty as to how best to support the various cohorts and a Literacy and Numeracy Project (the Literacy Project) commenced at the beginning of 2009. One of its aims was to evaluate levels of English language skills and, before long, it was clear that the most pressing issue was English language proficiency (Harris, 2010).

This paper looks at an approach specifically designed to address that issue - the integration of academic skills and English language support within targeted units in the School of Management. Current trends in learning support are analysed to show why the Faculty adopted this approach, a brief description of the major aspect – embedding support within a core unit - highlights key points, and other significant developments are included.

The Changing Nature of Learning Support

In past decades, much of the learning support offered by Australian universities was aimed at improving the skills of students who were regarded, rightly or wrongly, as having a reasonable understanding of tertiary requirements. Most of this support was in the form of generalised workshops and individual consultations. In more recent years, the growing number of EAL students changed that assumption but not necessarily the way in which learning support was offered. It is now widely accepted that generalised workshops fail to attract those who most need the support (see, for example, Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007, pp. 9-10) as content is often dissociated from discipline content (see, for example, Wingate, 2006). Little, if any, transference of skills eventuates, an issue being addressed in the national Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project (ABDC & ALTC, 2010).

In looking for best practice, providing contextualised learning opportunities has gained support. Bronwyn James, President of the Australian Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL), asserted that “the language and communication practices that define the discipline need to be taught alongside and integrated within the context of a course” (James, 2010). Recent research emphasises this approach as will be seen throughout this paper. It tends to be discussed in terms of providing ‘embedded support’ but that nomenclature appears to cover a range of integrated measures. Three distinct approaches are noted in literature. The first is to embed English language support in key units, with language specialists working alongside discipline based academics. Embedded, in this sense, means a collaborative approach where skills are embedded within classroom teaching. The second is to stream tutorials for selected students and add skills to specific classes conducted solely by language specialists. The third is to run voluntary classes or workshops for designated students outside of lecture time.

A project at Macquarie University that links the Masters in Accounting (CPA Extension) course with its English language centre epitomises best practice in embedding academic and language support (Evans, Tindale, Cable & Hamil Mead, 2009; Macquarie University, 2009; see also Dale, Cable & Day, 2006). This project was initiated in 2002 and communications skills are now embedded in ten subjects (Evans, et al., 2009, p. 600). It is clearly resource intensive, with English language specialists embedding skills in the majority of the course, conducting extra voluntary workshops (Evans et al., pp. 601-2; Dale, et al., 2006, p. 7), and seeing students who require or request individual support (Evans et al., p. 602). To advance to this point, and to ensure sustainability and a “high level of student and staff engagement”, staff from the English language centre adopted a “bottom-up approach” (Evans et al., p. 602). This is significant. For academics, participation is voluntary so, once

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involved, they have a sense of ownership. Communication skills are included in students' study in a seamless manner and lecturers have gained additional confidence in teaching diverse groups.

Other methods to incorporate skills include assessing students early in a unit or course and streaming tutorials or classes. The University of Technology Sydney ran a project beginning in 2005 that integrated academic and communications skills within both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, mainly through streamed tutorials and targeted workshops (University of Technology Sydney, ELLSA Centre, 2009). At a recent AALL gathering in Sydney, one of the LAs from UTS involved in this project indicated that streaming is an issue, a subject too complex to address in this paper. The University of Western Australia conducted extra tutorials for engineering students where English language assistance was added (Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008). The University of Wollongong brought together writing specialists and academics from within specific disciplines to develop academic literacy in contextualised settings (Purser, Skillen & Deane, 2008).

Many studies documenting the embedding of academic and language skills report the provision of voluntary workshops. The University of Canberra embedded reading skills for selected students in a program entitled Unit Support Programme (Kennelly, Maldoni & Davies, 2010; Maldoni, Kennelly & Davies, 2009). Workshops, "designed to run parallel" (Kennelly et al., p. 65) to a core unit, were held for targeted students identified through diagnostic testing and other means. Activities were directly related to assessment tasks and unit content, yet Kennelly et al. note that "those students who were identified as most at risk ... did not attend" (Kennelly et al., p. 67). The University of Queensland offered pharmacy students extension courses in oral communications skills but attendance statistics reveal a similar situation (McKauge, et al., 2009, pp. 290-1). Case studies support these critical findings – those who most need academic and language support do not attend voluntary sessions (see also, Baik & Grieg, 2007, pp. 408 & 41; Song, 2005, p. 425). The University of Canberra study suggests voluntary workshops can increase in popularity with both staff and students if given time to develop. They reported a "development of momentum across the entire teaching team ... and raised awareness among faculty-based academic staff [who see] literacy teaching and resource development as part of their regular work" (Kennelly, et al., 2010, p. 64). This option may well suit many institutions where there are fewer learning advisors and large class sizes. Further trials may show continued growth as staff and students speak of the benefits.

These three forms of integrating learning skills share the commonality of language specialists working closely with discipline based academics. The research cited suggests that the most successful projects are those where team teaching takes place in the classroom using discipline based materials.

Integrating Skills within Targeted units in the School of Management Context

In 2009, ECU had a Learning Centre that was predominantly centralised. Learning Advisors (LAs) spent most of their time conducting generalised workshops and assisting students on an individual basis. While some LAs had Account Manager responsibility for a faculty, the time allocation to actually service the Faculty was extremely limited. In FBL, the designated LA had around 10 hours per semester in which to make connections with academic staff and contribute to class activities. As a result, few opportunities to establish meaningful staff interactions occurred and visits to classes usually amounted to advertising what was on offer.

As early findings of the Literacy Project became available, academics in the MBA courses discussed various approaches and a decision was taken to trial the embedding of academic and language support in a core unit within the international MBA (MBAI) course; an undertaking funded by the School of Management. This brought the LA into the Faculty on a more consistent basis. She met regularly with the three academics involved in the unit, discussed tasks and processes, and team taught in their classes. Results show that academic honesty increased and the overall failure rate was reduced (Walker, Redmond, Morris, Ashton, & Millstead, 2009). While this trial was continuing, recommendations of the Literacy Project were being finalised, one of which was the establishment of a Faculty based Academic Skills Centre. Its approval further enhanced the prospects for a successful approach to integrating academic and language skills.

Embedding within the MBAI course

The Faculty of Business and Law opened its Academic Skills Centre (ASC) in the second week of semester 1, 2010. The learning advisor (LA) who had been the Faculty's Account Manager was a successful applicant and, as a result, she continued to work closely with academics involved in MBA courses. Even before the ASC opened, a decision was made to continue embedding skills in a core unit of the MBAI. The choice of unit was deliberate as it targeted students in their first semester at ECU. In a review of literature analysing international students' transition to an English speaking university, Andrade (2006, pp. 135; 146-7) concluded that adjustment problems for international students mainly focussed on language issues. Not surprisingly, the main difficulties were in understanding lecturers in the initial semesters. As a result, despite having only two LAs to service the Faculty, and acknowledging that such an approach is regarded as resource intensive, embedding skills in one unit in the MBAI was a priority. It was viewed as a way of making contact with at least 100 newly enrolled students, the vast majority of whom had EAL.

Embedding in the MBAI course has evolved over three semesters. In short, the LA embeds academic and language skills in the weekly lecture schedule and links those skills directly to assessment tasks. The use of the word 'embedding' is deliberate. Embedding within a unit is not a matter of simply attending classes and adding some learning support. Both the lecturer and LA are actively involved, each supporting the other. A team approach is stressed which ensures a degree of consistency and shows students that academic skills are part of the learning process. The team teaching is described by one lecturer who has been involved in all three semesters as "its major strength". She added, "we meet up to three times a week and constantly evaluate new assessment tasks".

The time spent attending meetings and teaching is measurable. The LA meets with the academics involved in teaching the unit on a regular basis, attends up to three different classes per week, sets and marks work, and meets with students outside of class time if necessary. Not so measurable is the hidden preparation as the LA needs to understand unit content, most of which is new, and prepare each week's input. Changes are often made at late notice due to staff transition from semester to semester. All this is difficult to enumerate as shown by a brief example. The LA was asked to weave together the work of various authors on a specific topic and use the exercise to teach a range of academic and language skills. This was a multi-faceted task. Time was spent searching the library system and ten suitable articles were selected. Relevant sections along with quotations were recorded on a concept map. One section was then broken down to develop a paragraph incorporating an assortment of in-text referencing techniques. This all occurred prior to the class.

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Preparation also includes ensuring creative delivery as students need to be actively engaged in the learning process. The LA's focus is 'doing rather than seeing'. This allows both monitoring of, and interaction with, students. It also leads to set tasks that require marking so that detailed feedback can be given the following week.

In the example given above, the LA guided the students through the process of research and the preparation of a concept map. Skills included reading and research, streamlining a broad focus, and effective use of the Library's database. English language skills were developed by working through the paragraph, noting the topic sentence, how research is included and aspects of in-text referencing. All this was completed using contextual materials. The LA prepares class materials as if she were a student, and stresses to students that the content is new to her as well. Indeed, according to one of the lecturers involved throughout the three semesters, the LA's "adaptability and her preparedness to come to grips [with new material] and do whatever fits the group" are beneficial to the students. Another lecturer commented that this way of both preparing and presenting material "shows the students that what I'm asking them to do is actually quite reasonable and do-able!"

Working with the School of Management

Relationship building is critical both in and beyond the embedding program. When the LA moved from the centralised learning support centre to the Faculty ASC, she was a natural choice to take on the liaison role with the School of Management. In the initial trial in 2009, she developed an excellent relationship with the discipline academics associated with the unit. This year, as she met more teaching staff through attendance at school meetings, orientation sessions for new staff and sharing office space, she was asked to participate in other units. Relationship building is largely overlooked as being critical to the success of this approach to learning support. "Part of the success is due to Jo's personal characteristics; her focus, her commitment, her flexibility, and part of it is her capacity to meld with the lecturer", one colleague stressed.

Huijser, Kimmins and Galligan point to the "positioning of learning advisors 'on the margins' of universities" (2008, p. A-23) as a main barrier to embedding academic skills. In FBL, they are positioned in the middle of teaching areas so there is potential for constant communication with students and academic staff. In fact, one of the main ways relationships have developed is due to an open office area for academics while on the campus where postgraduate classes take place. Largely unpopular with staff, this area assists networking through physical proximity. In this case, as working relationships developed, the LA's opinions were sought on assessment tasks and how best to deal with specific issues. The bottom-up approach, noted by the Macquarie University team as being crucial to its success (Evans et al., p. 602), occurred naturally as academics sought assistance, listened to colleagues discussing the embedding project, and invited the LA into their classes. There has been a significant rise in the number of requests for in-class academic skill support - from 2 to 12 in just one semester - but more importantly, requests show increasing appreciation of how academic and language skills can be more effectively included in class activities. In semester 1, invitations were invariably for short sessions highlighting an academic skill. By second semester, instead of being viewed as someone who can 'fix language' or issues of academic integrity in 15 minutes, the LA has been asked to address specific academic skills in context. Academics have offered the LA up to 90 minutes of in-class time to work with students. In just one semester, requests have moved from generic in nature to being closely connected to course content.

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At the same time, the ASC offered general workshops that concentrated on academic skills as well as English language workshops. Wingate (2006) describes the popular approach of providing general workshops and courses as a 'bolt-on' approach and suggests that students fail to see content as relevant. This has been clear through the ASC's offerings this year. Data collected this year shows that 161 students attended at least one academic skills workshop and another 56 participated in at least one language class. During the same period, over 200 students received 10-15 hours of support in their core MBAI unit and at least 600 students received 60-90 minutes of embedded support. Only 22 students [of a possible 220] attended targeted sessions in a first year unit. Similar to the findings noted earlier, analysing the course averages of students attending voluntary workshops indicates that those students regarded as most at risk of failing do not attend voluntary sessions.

Embedding within a unit clearly targets the greatest number of students. In Wingate's view, the embedded approach "is regarded as highly effective in developing student learning for university and beyond" (2006, p. 467). She suggests that academic staff should be encouraged to develop and integrate such skills into their lectures. One of the recommendations of the Literacy Project was up-skilling of academic staff in dealing with the diverse student cohort. This embedding project has made inroads, with several academics commenting that they have reviewed assessment tasks and processes as a result of working with the LA. One critiqued her entire unit as a result.

I set about redesigning my MBAI unit. The first thing I did was eliminate exams ... [so I could] steer students into a more strategic, analytical and enquiry approach to learning. I have based the discussions around case studies and short, sharp questions for debate. The exams have been replaced by in-class assessments based on a case study they get a week prior to the assessment. The other assessment piece is a group assignment.

The group assignment is carefully thought through and based on sound pedagogy. In the trial offering contextualised workshops around class schedules, despite poor student attendance, some lecturers have also changed assessment tasks. In adopting embedded learning support, Huijser et al. question whether it could lead to "doing away with learning advisors" (2008, p. A-25). If academics are skilled in these processes, such that language and academic skills are seamlessly included in units, this would surely be a positive outcome. In reality, such an outcome - that all academics include learning support - seems improbable. However, there are academic staff competent in this area and, if offered guidance as seen above, can effectively embed learning skills. "Raised awareness amongst faculty based academics of the nature of discourse and learning to write within the discipline" (Purser, et al., 2008, p. 6) is regarded as a measure of success. On this measure, the embedding and subsequent in-class work have to be regarded as successful and, considering the Academic Skills Centre is only in its second semester, shows the potential of integrating such skills. When concluding that this approach is 'highly effective', Wingate added that "its implementation is difficult" (2006, p. 467). The experiences here, albeit on a far smaller scale, refute that assertion.

Best Practice

Unit evaluations completed at the conclusion of semester 1, 2010, were overwhelmingly positive, with many students praising the additional assistance. Only one student included a

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negative comment, saying “it felt like I was in an English class”. This semester, the tasks were more interwoven and, of the 43 students who completed a standard feedback report, 40 responded positively to the LA’s presence and approach in the class. In both semesters in 2010, the student’s few negative responses highlight that, in this model, learning support comes to the student. As seen, lack of attendance at voluntary classes is a significant factor. Of course, learning support within the classroom does not equate to full attendance and there are always students who, although physically present, may be disengaged. Not surprisingly, these are invariably the weaker students. However, the fact that a LA has been in the class and students know her by name has led to some students seeking further support. Darroch and Rainsbury found that students offered support (in their case mathematical assistance) were more likely to visit an academic skills centre when they knew the staff (2009, p. 565).

This leads to a vexed question. In-course support is regarded as resource intensive, especially when taking into consideration both preparation and teaching. Once students meet the LA in the various classes, some request individual appointments. At this stage, the LA makes time to see them but her schedule has little space for these consultations. Language specialists associated with the Macquarie model (Evans et al., p. 602) continue to provide one-to-one opportunities but the inclusion of individual consultations is a contentious issue. Many universities are limiting attendance or curtailing them completely. In critiquing an embedded approach, Huijser, Kimmins & Galligan (2008) warn of the need for caution, suggesting such an approach could lead to the end of individual consultations and even to the demise of LAs. Others point to the significant role that individual consultations play in students’ learning (Chanock, 2007; for overview, see Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2009).

The ASC has, to a large extent, moved away from individual consultations but appointments are still offered to students regarded as ‘at risk’. When these students are required to attend individual consultation due to poor performance or asked to see a LA as a result of a lecturer’s concern, statistics reveal that they often fail to attend. If they do, they invariably present themselves without any preparation. Conversely, students who seek individual assistance as a result of this embedding process are more likely to be prepared and take more responsibility for their work. Their motivation for attending is different as are the outcomes.

The Macquarie model, the initiative at the University of Canberra and similar undertakings prove what can be achieved if a program is given both time to develop and ongoing resources. The reality of the FBL embedding program is far removed from the ideal, with one LA embedding skills on a [mostly] weekly basis in one core unit and spending up to 90 minutes in one-of sessions in other classes. However, it demonstrates what can be achieved in a short time. Data from 2009 indicated improvement in academic honesty and associated skills (see Walker, et al., 2009) and in 2010 staff involved have noted improvement of academic writing skills. A decision was made not to pre-test students so data is limited and further studies are needed to evaluate overall academic improvement.

Conclusion

There is growing research that the integration of academic and language skills into specifically targeted units is best practice in learning support. There are many reasons offered: a move towards contextualised learning support to address lack of, or perceived lack of, relevance of general workshops; limited attendance at voluntary sessions, even when material is contextualised; increasing numbers of EAL students in universities; and the up-skilling of academic staff throughout the embedding process. A principal and oft-repeated criticism is that this approach is resource intensive. The work of one LA outlined here

indicates how much can be achieved. Embedding in the core unit in 2009 provided the initial stimulus. According to academics engaged in this approach, the development of further initiatives across the School resulted from crucial yet largely overlooked factors: the personality of the LA, the importance of building relationships, the need for flexibility, the importance of team teaching and being open to change. These factors have been critical yet are rarely reported due to the difficulty of measuring them. There is clearly more research that could be completed of both a quantitative and qualitative nature.

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