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Embedding academic socialisation within a language support program: An Australian case study

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Abstract

This paper describes discipline-specific transition support utilised to follow-up the Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA) recently introduced at Edith Cowan University as one strategy to address declining rates of English language proficiency. Transition support was embedded within a first year core unit and emphasis was placed on assisting students to develop spoken and written communicative competencies by scaffolding assessment tasks and providing other academic supports that used contextualised examples. While general satisfaction with the academic support offered during the course was high, the program achieved limited success in encouraging at-risk students to seek support. Further investigation into methods of encouraging student participation is required, along with research into strategies for extending effective academic socialisation support into the online learning environment.

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Introduction

Improving English language proficiency has increasingly become a priority for universities both in Australia and overseas. In Australia, the impetus for doing so comes from the Federal Government's push to widen participation in tertiary education, and an increased awareness of the role of English language ability in employment outcomes (Arkoudis et al., 2009). Research indicates English language proficiency support should be integrated into a wider program of academic socialisation and literacies development, particularly during the first year of study. This paper presents a case study in which English language and academic literacies development was embedded into a first year *Population Health* unit in the Bachelor of Health Science course at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia.

Background

The demographic of universities has radically changed in recent decades, and such a shift brings with it challenges at both an institutional and pedagogical level. One goal of the Australian Government's higher education reform agenda is to increase the participation of students from low socio economic backgrounds (Australian Government, 2009; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). At the same time, there has been increasing numbers of international student enrolments (Australian Government) leading to concern over rising rates of plagiarism and lower standards of English competency (Bretag, 2007; Dunworth, 2010). These factors have resulted in higher numbers of students requiring support to succeed at university study.

An important element within the push towards more extensive academic English

language support is the Post-Entry English Language Assessment (PELA) which, after a trial period, was administered for the first time within all undergraduate courses at ECU in 2012 (ECU 2012a). The PELA at ECU targets students in their first year of study, emphasising "a focus on English literacy awareness and development for all students" (ECU, 2012b, p. 23). One of the crucial considerations surrounding implementation of the PELA is the form of follow-up support universities should offer, as it involves wider problems of participation that transcend the Australian higher education context. Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth, and Harris (2011) found that in the trial of PELA at ECU, less than 50% of students who were subsequently recognised as "at-risk" chose to seek out support services.

As well as the associated logistical concerns in encouraging student participation, more complex problems may also emerge from applying English skills learnt in a generic context to specific disciplinary content. Baik and Greig (2009) argue the very nature of English usage at the university level is highly context-specific, which means any language support offered external to the disciplines may provide students with general skills which they will then struggle to apply in their specific course.

The concept of socialisation envisages learning as a process of enculturation into a discourse community in which students must develop the ability to engage with content according to set norms and conventions (Starfield, 2001). Not only do students need to familiarise themselves with the type of English commonly found within their discipline, but also they must become accustomed to an entirely new culture with all its accompanying expectations. According to Duff (2010),

academic discourse is “a site of internal and interpersonal struggle for many people” (p. 170) and so support for students must acknowledge the deeply personal aspect of studying in a particular discipline, and recognise that even basic skills like reading and writing are in essence “contextualized social practices” (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009, p. 399). The authors seek to demonstrate one way in which post-PELA English support can be provided within a disciplinary based academic socialisation program embedded into a first year Health Sciences unit at ECU.

Case Study

Introduction and rationale

The socialisation program was structured to provide repeated opportunities for students to actively practice both written and oral communication skills through collaboration between discipline staff and learning advisers. As Duff (2010) notes, discourse socialisation revolves around “social processes, negotiation, and interaction” (p. 171), thus the support offered in this unit aimed to create a dialogic space in which students could critically reflect on their own learning experience, share this experience with other students and academic staff, and receive out-of-class generic assistance where necessary (see also Lillis, 2003). The dialogue within the unit was, therefore, centered on providing a thorough socialisation of students into the disciplinary discourse community, and facilitating the development of the skills required to engage with the diverse range of literacies they will encounter during their studies.

The *Population Health* unit was chosen for various reasons. First, it is a core unit that

all students undertaking the Bachelor of Health Sciences must complete. As a result, the unit attracts a consistent level of student enrolment (during the semester in which this study was conducted, 111 students were enrolled) and the majority of students complete the unit in their first year of study. It has been claimed that success at university is largely determined by students’ experiences during their first year of study (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Upcraft, Gardener, & Barefoot, 2005) and when seeking to confront the challenge of retaining first year students, it is important to integrate what Kift (2009) calls a “coherent, integrated, intentional, supportive, and inclusive first year curriculum design” (p. 15). The unit therefore provided an ideal opportunity to test the effectiveness of implementing academic socialisation support at the very beginning of students’ transition into higher education.

The socialisation program was taught in collaboration between discipline staff and learning advisers, a team approach that has been utilised in various forms in the past (Baik & Greig, 2009; Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010; Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010; 7; Scouller, Bonanno, Smith, & Krass, 2008). The structure of the collaboration between learning advisers and academic staff within the unit closely resembled that laid out in the Integrated Development of English Language and Academic Literacy and Learning (IDEALL) approach (Percy, James, Stirling, & Walker, 2004; Percy & Skillen, 2000; Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1998) which entails learning development staff and academics within the discipline collaborating in order to provide students with generic and discipline-specific support during class time. The in-class collaboration between the learning adviser and the lecturer therefore focused on the following elements: general study skills

utilising contextualised examples; the socialisation process through promotion of self-reflective interaction; the scaffolding of the literacy component of assessment tasks through socialisation techniques; and lastly, follow-up of at-risk students to encourage participation in support measures.

General and embedded study skills development

A range of general activities were implemented to assist students with their transition to university and to develop general study skills. First, students assessed as borderline on the PELA were referred to academic skills workshops. These workshops covered general study and writing skills. In addition, a weekly 45 minute academic skills session, facilitated by a learning adviser, was embedded into the *Population Health* curriculum. The texts and activities used by the learning adviser all related to *Population Health* unit content.

Socialisation through communication

Alongside general study skills development, the support program was based around a broad communicative focus which sought to encompass the multiple and varied aspects involved in academic socialisation. Such an approach can be positioned within the constructivist school of learning theory, which posits that the learning environment must provide students with adequate time to reflect and participate in active knowledge construction through dialogue within communities of discourse and practice (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). This theoretical stance is echoed by Zepke and Leach (2010) who place learning that is “active, collaborative and fosters learning

relationships” (p. 171) among ten proposed strategies to increase student engagement. Such a focus on social relationships becomes even more relevant when dealing with students in the first year of tertiary study. According to James et al. (2010), there is an increasing need to ensure that first year students are given the chance to interact more closely with academic staff, and a recent report on supporting students from low SES backgrounds recommends creating “a sense of belonging” for students, as well as “collaborative learning opportunities and peer-to-peer contact inside and outside the curriculum” (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012, p. 3). This component of the program was therefore designed to facilitate socialisation into both oral and written modes of communication contextualised within the *Population Health* unit content.

The socialisation process began through the implementation of various strategies aimed at assisting students’ transition to university and fostering a sense of belonging. During the first four weeks of semester, students were provided with in-class opportunities to identify their dominant learning style; complete an audit of their academic skills; discuss their reasons for being at university; document which factors might be barriers to achieving their study goals; and identify university-level support systems. This process was designed to encourage students to begin critically reflecting on their learning and the influence their own background has on their success at university, and to establish an informal dialogue between students and staff. Most of these activities were undertaken in pairs or small groups to facilitate students being able to meet and interact with other students. This inter-student interaction was also encouraged via the

implementation of informal mentoring on a weekly basis, whereby first year students were grouped with students in second or third year and asked to engage in various activities (see Lizzio & Wilson, n.d.). These activities were informal in nature and largely involved discussions between the first year student and their mentor centred on either preparation for assessment or revision. Through such discussions, the first year students began to develop social networks within the class environment.

The academic advice students received was also complemented by regular opportunities to give feedback on the course throughout the semester. This form of feedback is perhaps one way of facilitating the ongoing dialogue between academic staff and students that Crisp et al. (2009) argue is required in order to close the gap between first year students' expectations and the cultural conventions they encounter during their study. Bi-weekly informal anonymous written feedback was collected from students throughout the semester.

The role online learning technologies play in the learning process is a crucial consideration when providing socialisation support (Crook, 2005) and several measures were implemented in the *Population Health* unit to encourage communication both in the online and in-class environments. The on-campus classes were supported with online resources, and students were provided with a tour of the Blackboard (Learning Management System) site during the first class. Students were asked to access the Blackboard site before the next class and post an introductory message on a discussion board. Students were also provided with exemplars of the professional standards and etiquette required for email communication.

Supporting assessment

Academic socialisation and literacy development were also incorporated into all three assessment points in the *Population Health* unit and were structured to provide a progressive form of cumulative assessment that scaffolded student learning (Taylor, 2008). The first assignment therefore consisted of an early, low-stakes online quiz about academic referencing conventions. This assessment was designed to familiarise students with the online learning environment; provide early feedback on progress to students; relieve student anxiety; and as a trigger for support intervention—students who received less than 90% (10 students) were contacted by the unit coordinator via email. This first assessment alerted students to the importance of avoiding plagiarism by correctly citing references, but its main purpose was to allow students to reflectively identify areas of weakness and open channels of dialogue with academic staff.

The second assessment was designed to maintain the engagement generated by the transition-related assessment and further develop students' academic skills and unit content knowledge (Taylor, 2008). It required students to locate scholarly journal articles on a population health topic and write an academic essay containing correctly cited in-text and end-text references. As this was a first year unit, students were asked to demonstrate lower rather than higher order cognitive skills—for example, to describe rather than to analyse (Forehand, 2005)—in order to ensure that expectations were adjusted to account for students' level of familiarity with academic learning.

General skills support was also integrated into the second assessment task for the

unit through collaboration between academic staff and library staff. Research has indicated that students entering university study are often underprepared when it comes to basic information literacy (Mittermeyer, 2005; Price, Becker, Clark, & Collins, 2011). Given this need to assist students in sourcing relevant academic information, the Faculty librarian ran an in-class workshop to provide students with an initiation into basic information literacy practices, scaffold the use of scholarly sources in their writing, and allow them to locate appropriate references for their second assessment.

Socialisation into academic culture was also emphasised throughout the assessment process, as students were encouraged to participate in discussions based on contextualised examples. Such a literacies-based approach is similar to the collaborative writing technique outlined by Humphrey and Macnaught (2011) which aims to give students an opportunity to explore how example texts are constructed. Students were therefore provided with in-class opportunities to discuss and deconstruct an exemplar essay, and were able to download an essay template along with the marking rubric.

In addition to such contextualised support surrounding aspects of writing, a focus was also placed on developing oral communicative capacities while offering further opportunities to develop social relationships. Past studies have indicated that requiring students to engage in peer evaluation of written tasks is an effective way of breaking down the barrier of stigmatisation surrounding their reception of lecturers' feedback (Reese-Durham, 2005) and developing literacy skills (Murray, 2012). In one of the academic skills sessions, students were provided with an opportunity to grade a peer's

paper using the rubric provided. While less than 30% of students enrolled in the unit attended the session, those who did reported they found the exercise to be useful. Students were able to submit their paper to a *Turnitin* site prior to the due date and were educated on how to use the similarity index. Students also had the option of submitting a draft of their paper to an academic staff member who provided feedback prior to the due date. Although only 27% took up the opportunity to obtain formative feedback, those who did participate reported they found the exercise to be beneficial.

The process of literacies scaffolding was completed by the third and final assessment task, which comprised an achievement-related assessment (Taylor, 2008) taking the form of a two-hour multiple choice exam worth 40% of the final grade. To familiarise them with the structure of the exam, students were given a sample question and then in pairs were asked to create two exam questions using the same template. The student-generated questions were collated, checked for relevance and accuracy and then made available on the Blackboard site as a set of practice questions for revision purposes.

Follow-up of at-risk students

The program was also designed to provide additional support to those students identified as at-risk. At the completion of the semester, students who did not pass the second assignment and had not withdrawn from the unit (14 students) received an email from the unit coordinator. The students were encouraged to attend a series of academic writing workshops covering a diverse range of general study and writing skills, and were also advised to make an appointment to see a learning adviser who

offered them the opportunity to meet on an individual basis to discuss their feedback and develop learning strategies. Students who scored between 50-55% for the essay (37 students) also received a similarly-worded email recommending they seek help with their essay writing skills. At the time of writing, only eight out of these 51 at-risk students had sought individual assistance from a learning adviser, and only two had attended an academic skills workshop.

Given this lack of student participation, additional follow-up measures were put in place to encourage further dialogue. Students who fell into both of these categories received a follow-up email to determine the reasons why they may not have chosen to receive support. At the time of writing, only seven students had responded. Their responses all emphasised the need to develop measures to assist students in their balancing of work and study commitments, especially for those undertaking online study.

End-of-semester student feedback

Student response to the program was generally positive, and indicated it had succeeded in providing a broad socialisation experience. End-of-semester feedback collected via the ECU Unit and Teaching Evaluation Instrument (UTEI) revealed an 80% overall satisfaction rate among students enrolled in the *Population Health* unit (ECU, 2012c) and 89% reported having a clear understanding of what was required in the unit. The majority of respondents (79.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that the unit had improved their general communication and writing skills, and 84% agreed or strongly agreed that the assessments in the unit had adequately evaluated their learning.

Conclusions

The challenges involved in supporting students who require assistance with their transition into the tertiary academic environment are only likely to intensify over the coming years, as universities seek to meet new regulatory standards both in Australia and overseas. This paper demonstrates that embedding a program of academic socialisation into the curriculum is an ideal means of exposing a wide range of students to support measures, as well as delivering contextualised language support that takes into account the social complexities of initiation into academic discourse communities.

Although the program was a success, several limitations of the trial can be noted. More accurate data must be gathered to assess the effectiveness of the support program. Although students' academic results are only one marker of success, future studies should include longitudinal quantitative analyses to measure student performance and assess the impact of the program. Another way to obtain quantitative data and simultaneously promote student reflection could be to administer an 'adaptation to university' survey.

The issue of encouraging student participation in academic support measures is a complex and ongoing problem, especially where at-risk students are concerned. As noted earlier, few of the enrolled students took up the opportunity to receive peer feedback, and few of the students who received an email outlining support options responded. Time constraints appear to be foremost in students' minds as they face the challenge of negotiating commitments both within and outside of their university studies. In such a high-pressure environment,

students must prioritise, and often it is the activities that do not lead to immediate measurable benefit that are sacrificed first. An academic culture which privileges success and fails to adequately stress the importance of broader graduate outcomes also plays a large role in this student mindset, so it is essential for institutional discourse and priorities to remain closely attuned to the needs of programs and structures that are directly involved in student support. Integrating and valuing language support in a more explicit and transparent manner across the university would assist the efforts of support staff and ensure that students are given the encouragement they need to take responsibility for their own academic skills development. In addition, by further exploring student attitudes towards academic support and the factors motivating those few who do accept extra assistance, programs could be tailored and marketed more appropriately. For example, taking note of student needs and expectations when it comes to delivering out-of-class workshops could assist support staff in designing more accessible and convenient delivery formats. Another possibility is to link academic skills sessions to assessment—for example, assigning a grade to the peer feedback component of assignments—which would provide students with an immediate pay-off while also promoting longer-term academic development.

Although the program sought to cater for online students, another limitation that needs to be addressed is the quality of support that is provided for students who may irregularly, or never, visit the campus. Learning advisers are able to provide a range of long-distance support options, but the absence of interaction with staff and peers in the classroom is problematic when seeking to provide a thorough academic

socialisation experience. Despite the limitations they bring with them, online technologies can be utilised to incorporate a social dimension which can be further exploited in order to work towards a viable academic socialisation model for the future.

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