A collaborative approach to embedding academic literacies in first year grant projects

Neela Griffiths, Adam Aitken, Kathy Egea
Institute for Interactive Media and Learning
University of Technology Sydney

Abstract

This paper describes the collaborative approach that Academic Language and Learning developers are using as part of a university's First Year Experience project. This project draws on the idea of a third generation approach which utilises a bottom-up and top-down institutional framework. Intrinsic to this framework at UTS is a small grant scheme devised to support academics in designing curricula which facilitate first year students' transition. However, smooth transition can be affected by the academic and linguistic capital of the increasingly diverse student population. This has provided the opportunity for ALL developers to become active participants in the small grant scheme and to work collaboratively with academics on the seamless integration of domain specific academic literacy. Two case studies of FYE grants illustrate the parameters and benefits of such an approach and how it may enable a discursive space to support sustainable practice.

Introduction

This paper describes one of the roles that Academic Language and Learning (ALL) developers at the University of Technology, Sydney play in the university's First Year Experience (FYE) project. ALL developers at UTS are allocated to faculties where they work collaboratively with discipline academics on integrating domain specific and contextualised academic language and literacy skills. The university wide FYE project draws on the idea of a third generation approach (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010) which utilises a bottom-up and top-down institutional framework. Intrinsic to this framework at UTS is a small grant scheme, which has been successfully implemented since 2011 (Egea & McKenzie, 2012; Egea, McKenzie & Griffiths, 2013) and provides academics with both the incentive and the support to design curriculum-based activities. This scheme has lead to opportunities for the ALL developers' to broaden their role to include active participation in the small grant applications and projects with academics, a role which reflects and builds on the collaborative approach.

If 'the intentional design of learning, teaching and assessment approaches forms an integral part of any successful transition pedagogy' (Kift, 2009, p. 9) then the seamless integration of academic language and literacy skills should be part of that intentional design in order to develop 'discipline knowledge and learning skills which are contextualised and embedded through the curriculum' (Kift et al., 2010, p. 11). This pedagogy is arguably more effective when seamlessly embedded and taught by subject experts in a domain specific context (Wingate, 2006, p. 458; Wingate, Andon & Cogo, 2011). By drawing more attention to, and unpacking the language academics use (especially in relation to assessment processes and criteria) embedding academic literacy teaching is more likely to raise student awareness of

what academics expect of them, and increase their understandings about purposes of courses (Haggis, 2006, p. 525).

> The question in relation to learning then changes from being 'what is wrong with this student' to 'what are the features of the curriculum, or of processes of interaction around the curriculum, which are preventing some students from being able to access this subject?' (Haggis, 2006, p. 526)

In the light of the massification of the higher education system Haggis' question is even more pertinent. The UTS student population's diverse needs and range of academic and linguistic capital present challenges for the design of Transition Pedagogy. Moreover, there is a growing realisation that 'bolt-on' generic skills approaches which seek to address 'deficiencies' in students skills by separation of skills teaching from subject content are insufficient in both meeting student needs and lowering the risk of disengagement (Haggis, 2006, p. 523; Wingate, 2007, p. 392). Positioning student engagement as central to curricula design (Ramsden, 2003) requires a reconceptualisation of the best practice frameworks for instituting more discipline specific academic language and literacy (Wingate, 2007; Kift, 2009).

While a collaborative space for shared understanding on learning is desirable, collaborative projects are sensitive to the barriers to curricula development (Thies, 2012). These relate to academics' motivation, preparedness and willingness to teach academic language and literacy skills, and the constraints they face with access to funding to develop resources. The FYE project at UTS aims to reconcile top down and bottom up approaches to curriculum reform, and 'articulate what academics believe in' and why they do, 'what they want to share with students, and what they want their students to do' (Haggis, 2006, p. 533). They encourage a '*collective enquiry into the nature of specific disciplines* (Haggis, 2006, p. 531, author's emphasis).

One goal of the ALL team is to change academics' perceptions of what a 21st century student is (Haggis, 2006, p. 526). This has been achieved with the ALL group's active participation in the FYE grant application process and through membership of grant project teams. Work on a wide range of grant types includes: scaffolded critical reading guides and exemplars for written and spoken texts; co-designed screencasts and flipped learning materials; provision of tutor induction and marking moderation support; and explicit language interventions.

Case studies

This paper describes two FYE grants which exemplify this collaborative process, one in the Faculty of Science and the other in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building (DAB). Both projects were designed to embed academic literacies into core first year subjects. The first project was conducted in 2013 in Physical Modelling (PM), a first year (FY) physics service-teaching subject for engineering students; the second project is designed to embed design writing literacies in a FY subject in design history, and will be implemented in 2014. In the UTS context, the projects described here have increased engagement by integrating both student centred and peer centred learning activities with traditional teacher-centred content focused instruction. In both subjects, the priority was to improve the transition experience by making explicit the tacit knowledge and expectations of the disciplines.

The ALL developers on these grants assisted the lecturers in understanding the principles in FYE transition and engagement pedagogy. This assistance extended to direct involvement in writing application proposals for project funding, and in both cases the developers were nominated to work with the discipline specialists as part of the curriculum design team. These case studies exemplify the collaborative approach used.

Case study 1 – Physics for engineers

In 2013, the ALL developer allocated to the science faculty and a physics lecturer received a UTS FYE grant to design and implement a series of language-focussed interventions for a compulsory first-year Physics subject for Engineering students. This student cohort is educationally, culturally and linguistically diverse, and their unfamiliarity with the domain specific academic discourse (physics) affects their acculturation and content knowledge acquisition in the subject, thus affecting their smooth transition into first year. One primary objective of the grant was to ensure that all learning materials used 'clear, accessible language when teaching and supporting students who may be unfamiliar with academic discourse' (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012). This involved the review and rewrite, where applicable, of the language used in the lectures, the lab book and online materials and the provision of additional support through reading materials.

Furthermore, due to the problematic nature of the language of 'force' in physics, the linguistic modification of the Force Concept Inventory (FCI) was included in the intervention. (Concept inventories are commonly used in science education to check students' understanding of the concepts they are studying). Steps in the modification included: an independent appraisal of the FCI with the intention of identifying linguistically or culturally problematic questions (more than half the questions in the original version were considered potentially challenging for the students); and, the creation of a version which would be more accessible to the student body through the identification of a number of common threads of possible difficulty (Schulte & Griffiths, 2013).

Preliminary results on the impact of the intervention have been positive. For example, students given the modified version of the FCI performed better than those in a control group given the original. In the Spring 2013 semester the student cohort performed significantly better in their 'force' assignment in preparation for the mid-semester exam than in previous semesters. Students were asked for feedback on the additional reading materials and positive responses were received. The introduction of an individualised feedback tool also rated very highly with 95% of respondees finding it helpful to very helpful.

Case study 2 – Design History

Researching Design History (RDH) is an interdisciplinary subject in the Design, Architecture and Building Faculty. It provides a knowledge base for thinking and writing about design in a social and ideological context. Students learn how to engage with design criticism, write formal and semiotic analysis of designed objects, and to contextualise design trends within historical time frames. With emphasis on multi-modal writing and the core academic skill of argumentation and synthesis of multiple source materials, the course demands a high level of information literacy compared to other practical design subjects.

In this grant project, the ALL developer (DAB) will collaborate to improve student writing and research skills in response to a) a perception of the Dean of Faculty, tutors, and

lecturers that the students are lagging in this area; b) student feedback showing that RDH is perceived to be irrelevant to students' perception of what the identity and core skills of a designer is, and the function of design research writing in specialist design practice (architect, graphic artist etc.) is unclear to them. Generic writing skills courses will not necessarily increase student motivation and cognitive engagement, as these courses are not credit-bearing, and are not taught by design experts (Wingate et al., 2011). Furthermore most of the students already have high ATARS and do not need many of the lower level grammar and sentence construction skills that these generic courses usually focus on.

In 2013, the ALL developer and the subject coordinator worked on new assignment briefs for the Spring 2013 subject. Tutor feedback on the results from that cohort will provide input for on-going revision. In 2014, when funding for the project begins, the ALL developer will work with a tutor developing new resources that scaffold and model design writing in ways that show writing to be integrated with design thinking and practice. Scaffolded writing activities and exemplars of students' written assignments will draw attention to techniques of paraphrasing, using sources, attribution of both written text and images, and identifying and structuring arguments. Where relevant, and using many of the existing curriculum resources (weekly readings for example), genre-based critical reading tasks will be used to model formal and semiotic analysis, a critical genre of design writing with a methodology that is not currently modelled in an explicit way. Creating a synergy between the RDH tutors' expertise with design writing and research and the ALL developer's academic literacy expertise, is key to the developmental plan for when and how to scaffold writing and research skills for students, and to create better understanding of academic literacy among the design tutors and lecturers, i.e. to make the discourse more explicit to the insiders who use it (Jacobs, 2005). In this way, techniques of writing provide a starting point in understanding the construction of design discourse, and it is hoped that students will be more willing to take a critical perspective 'when they are able to understand and control disciplinary discourses' (Wingate, 2012, p. 26).

Conclusion

This collaborative approach to embedding domain specific academic literacies into curriculum renewal has begun a process that has created '[s]ustainable discursive spaces where dialogue, collaboration and the development of a critical consciousness can take place in an ongoing debate' (Jacobs, 2005, p. 485). It has also created more than a piece-meal approach to teaching and learning. Evaluation of the grants will inform third generational initiatives in other subjects and provide a reference point for how to enable embedded learning in upcoming projects, in ways which respond to the future and are not merely treated by students and teachers as 'add-on' options.

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How the session will run

The session will alternate between an overview presentation and discussion. The timing may vary depending on the participants, but the proposed outline is:

- 10 mins: presentation of key ideas, focusing on a more developed analysis of the collaborative approach to embedding academic literacy in the UTS small grant scheme
- 5 mins: questions for clarification from participants
- 10 mins: small group discussion of the questions below (or others preferred by participants)
- 5 mins: Debrief discussions and summing up

Questions for discussion

Does your institution have an Academic Language and Learning Group? If so, what is its role in first year transition and how effective is it? If not, how are the ALL needs of FY students assessed and responded to?

How open to collaborative approaches are discipline specific academics at your institution?