

One on one to thousands: Expanding the conversations of the ALL practitioner

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Perceptions of academic language and learning (ALL) practitioners being “pinned to the margins” (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007) have been subject to challenges as ALL research and practices have strengthened the field, and as practices have become increasingly developmental, flexible and integrated. However, longstanding misconceptions of the nature of ALL work have not been easy to overcome, and integrated and embedded forms of ALL practice have not always been easy to implement. This paper introduces the Electronic Just-in-Time Session, a form of integrated and developmental learning support which has experienced initial success in terms of student uptake and feedback in the Faculty of Business and Economics of the University of Melbourne. Short conversations are filmed and linked to the Learning Management System pages of specific subjects. The short films can augment subject content by featuring conversations between learning advisers and subject coordinators, lecturers, tutors and library staff. Sessions are ideally suited for academic skills support that is highly tailored for particular subjects. However, sessions may also focus on content or on generic skills and can feature related resources. This paper presents an overview of this initiative before discussing how the success of the format can be attributed to the sessions being typically content-rich, assessment-task specific, user-friendly, flexible, non-didactic, non-remedial, and built on multiple sources of expertise.

Key Words: academic language and learning, discipline-specific learning support, e-learning.

1. E-learning and the ALL practitioner

E-learning is becoming a key element of the student experience in Australian universities (Forsyth, Pizzica, Laxton, & Mahony, 2010; Ellis, Ginns, & Piggott, 2009). A quick scan of the *Australian Journal of Educational Technology* or the proceedings of annual Ascilite conferences reveals a wealth of innovative e-learning research and practices in Australian tertiary institutions. However, as yet, a comprehensive picture of ways academic language and learning (ALL) advisers are incorporating e-learning into their practice does not exist; only brief references to e-learning appear in existing ALL benchmarking reports and discussion papers (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Ransom & Grieg, 2007; Barthel, 2010). Nevertheless, considerable engagement of ALL practitioners with e-learning is apparent. A small sample of ALL-related e-learning initiatives includes: Victoria University’s SNAPVU (Social Learning for Academic Purposes) platform which uses Web 2.0 technologies and principles for academic skills development and peer learning support; the Australian National University’s SkillSoup series of podcasts on academic skills and learning; the University of Melbourne’s AIRport (Academic Interactive Resources portal) which supports discipline-specific and generic skills development and student transition; and the University of New South Wales’ RSS feeds and use of Delicious

tags for academic skills development. ALL engagement with e-learning is further indicated by postings on the Unilearn and Peer Assisted Study Scheme mailing lists, and by the existence of academic publications (e.g. Kirkwood, 2010; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009) and events such as the 2011 Learning Technologies for ALL Forum.

For the ALL adviser, the growth of social media, of mobile communication devices, and the fields of “e-learning” and “mobile-“ or “m-learning” scholarship can hardly be ignored. However, the primary challenge for the adviser, just as for the discipline lecturer, is not in the need to “keep up” with students by adopting the technologies assumed to be central to their studies and wider lives. Indeed, empirical evidence does not always support assumptions that incoming university students are a homogenous group of sophisticated users of Web 2.0, that they uniformly seek integration of Web 2.0 technologies with their studies, and that the university should automatically respond in kind (Kennedy, Judd, & Dalgarno, 2010).

What is of critical importance is the need for e-learning to be linked soundly with pedagogy. “Neither the discipline-embedded nor the e-learning approach to developing academic literacy are new”, note Wingate and Dreiss (2009), “however a combination of both seems to be rare” (p. 14). Speaking specifically of video-based e-learning, Kaufman and Mohan (2009) add, “Even in places where faculty blaze trails to put screen assets in front of students, and the resources are significant to support them, video assets are far from integrated systematically into pedagogy” (p. 6).

This paper presents an innovation in technology-supported academic language and learning practice that was developed by the author and has been piloted in the Faculty of Business and Economics of the University of Melbourne. The paper introduces the innovation before discussing its value and applicability with reference to literature associated with academic language and learning as well as data on student engagement and use of technology. Ultimately, the paper contends that the innovation provides academic language and learning advisers not only with a platform for large-scale developmental and discipline-specific learning support, but also for engaging discipline-based academics in dialogue that can support ongoing developments in teaching and learning cultures.

2. The “electronic Just in Time session”

Electronic Just in Time sessions (e-JITs) are short filmed conversations which are uploaded onto Learning Management System (LMS) pages of particular subjects to augment existing subject content. These conversations may be between any combination of people, such as learning advisers, subject coordinators, lecturers, head tutors, tutors and library staff. A detailed description of the collaborative process by which e-JITs may be produced is provided in the Appendix.

It is possible for the e-JIT to focus on content rather than skills (e.g. “Debits and Credits: Common Challenges” or “The Accounting Process”). It is also possible for the e-JIT to address generic skills (e.g. “Structuring an Essay” or “Going beyond Google”). However, the format lends itself especially well to academic skills support that is highly tailored for particular subjects (e.g. “Structuring the Team Assignment for Organisational Behaviour” or “Using Supersearch to Find Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles for the Team Assignment”). While some sessions may be linked to assessment tasks unlikely to be repeated in further iterations of the subject, other e-JITs may be prepared with the understanding they will be repeated over many semesters. Flexible access of e-JITs is afforded by the fact that e-JITs which address one broad topic (a particular assignment, for example) can be uploaded onto the subject page in discrete sections (for example, on task analysis, structuring the assignment, teamwork and referencing).

The creation of an e-JIT does not require extensive technological resources or skills. A point-and-shoot approach to filming is entirely satisfactory although a slow zoom towards a participant or a pan from one speaker to another may also feature. Editing is kept to a minimum by means of the participants’ shared prior understanding of the overall content and structure of the conversation to be filmed. Ultimately, in an e-JIT, the polish of the video is of less

consequence than the authenticity of the conversation and the usefulness of the content. One variation could simply feature audio recordings of conversations rather than filmed recordings.

The linking of sessions to the LMS may pose some limitations. As noted by Kirkwood (2010), the LMS is at core an institution-centric rather than student-centric platform. Despite developments to LMSs, many do not support the kinds of personalisation, sharing, collaboration and social networking that many students desire (McLoughlin, 2008, as cited in Armstrong & Franklin, 2008). However, benefits of linking sessions to subject LMS sites lie in the familiarity of the LMS for academics and students alike and the capacity for close integration of sessions with subjects.

Regardless of the kind of LMS used, e-JITs can feature more than a central filmed conversation. Sessions, for example, can integrate Captivate-based footage of computer screens (to guide students' access of research databases, for example) and PowerPoint-style slides (that may, for example, present language for integrating citations). In addition, links can be provided for further resources or support services, and a degree of interaction may be accommodated by means of LMS discussion boards or associated wikis.

3. The value of the Electronic Just in Time Session

3.1. Student usage

Within two days of the first two e-JITs being uploaded onto the LMS site of the subject Accounting Reports and Analysis, a major first-year undergraduate subject, the sessions had received over 500 hits. By the end of the semester, one of the videos had been viewed 2,457 times, with 523 students (over 50% of the cohort) having viewed the video more than once.

As well as being associated with their accessibility and their integration within subjects, the popularity of Electronic Just in Time Sessions mirrors the increasing prominence of the web, and in particular, online video, in the lives of students. In 2009, first year students at Australian universities spent 6.5 hours online for study purposes and 9 hours per week for recreation, up from 4.2 hours and 4 hours respectively in 2004 (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Such figures are likely to increase, especially as smart-phones, tablet computers, and other web-connected devices become more popular. The presence of online video in the lives of students is likewise increasing rapidly. While in 2007, 8 hours of video were uploaded to YouTube every minute, this had jumped to 35 hours per minute by the end of 2010 and 48 hours by mid-2011 ("48 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute", 2011). Anecdotal evidence gained from discussions with staff of Australian universities suggests widespread student familiarity with lectures being recorded and uploaded as either audio or audio-visual resources. It is not unlikely that students will become similarly comfortable with integrated and developmental learning support services of the kind presented in this paper.

3.2. Flexibility of delivery and content

Challenges and opportunities for ALL centres associated with growth and diversification within Australian universities have long been explored in ALL literature (e.g., Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001; Percy & Skillen, 2000; Chanock, 2000). Developments of particular significance for the field in 2011-2012 include the removal of quotas for student places in 2012 and the passing of federal legislation to increase enrolments of students from a broader range of backgrounds (Evans, 2011), as recommended in the Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008).

One area for continuing reflection posed by such changes is the ongoing accessibility and equity of some existing forms of adjunct ALL support. A workshop, for example, may be offered in a particular room at a specific time in the week (perhaps unrelated to the due dates of assignments). Scheduling is likely to be inconvenient for a number of students, especially those with major outside commitments. The nature of a workshop's timing can also affect students' engagement with its content; a one-hour session on writing an essay may include content that is likely to be of pressing relevance for students only days or even weeks later. In a session held

two weeks before an assignment due date, for example, participants may be more receptive to advice on question analysis and the development of a search strategy than on referencing and editing the assignment.

The asynchronous e-JIT, by contrast, is accessed at any time and as often as needed. e-JITs can also be viewed at almost any location by means of mobile technologies such as smart-phones, laptops and tablet PCs. While growth in the up-take of many learning support services is typically accompanied by increased administrative work, the e-JIT offers opportunity for growth that is unlikely to lead to major room bookings and staffing issues.

Flexibility is also afforded in the provision of information of distinct relevance for individual students. Even the most comprehensive lecture about approaching an assessment task will contain information of limited relevance for some students; not all will appreciate information about Harvard referencing or ways to proofread, for instance. Segments of e-JITs, by contrast, may be skipped, skimmed, scrutinised, paused, played in any order, studied in relation to other resources, and replayed to the extent that suits the individual. Subsequent analysis of patterns of usage by the learning adviser can then inform the content and structure of future e-JITs. The possibility also exists for this analysis to be fed back to the subject coordinator.

3.3. Capacity to effect pedagogical change

The roles academic language and learning advisers can have in promoting the development of teaching and learning practices and cultures are formally presented in the Position Statement of the Association for Academic Language and Learning (2010) as two of five principles to guide ALL practice:

2. that we collaborate with institutional colleagues on student learning goals, curricula, teaching and assessment, in order to improve the teaching and learning culture within higher and further education institutions;
5. that in our role we are integral to the process of improving the quality of learning and teaching in higher and further education institutions.

As Chanock (2007) notes, advisers can contribute insights based on encounters with students of varied disciplines, levels of higher education and cultures. Early papers on embedded approaches developed by the University of Wollongong's Learning Development Unit note the capacity of the ALL adviser to support pedagogical change at a systemic level where the "curriculum is the 'bridge'" (Percy & Skillen, 2000, p. 3).

In practice, however, learning advisers can still find themselves in a more marginal role, facing limited opportunities to improve subject design, teaching and assessment. Lecturer misconceptions about the roles of ALL advisers and their unfamiliarity with theoretical foundations associated with ALL practice can inhibit lecturers from engaging in discussions with advisers about teaching and learning in their discipline (Chanock, 2007; Velautham & Picard, 2009). Ongoing improvements to teaching and learning can be particularly challenging to facilitate when support options are situated outside of disciplines and subjects. Even targeted sessions that focus on skills and language linked with specific assessment tasks may afford only limited opportunity for the adviser to share insights regarding pedagogy and foster positive change within subjects, as lecturers may remain largely disinclined to co-develop sessions. As such, there is a risk that even targeted sessions may do little to counter a content/skills gulf whereby the lecturer is charged with providing the "content" in the limited time available, and the learning adviser with helping foster the "skills" in optional external sessions (Huijser, Kimmins, & Galligan, 2008).

The conversational model of the e-JIT and the collaboration between the adviser and discipline-based academic required before filming allow advisers to share insights gained through involvement with their community of practice and close contact with students. As major contributors to scholarship of teaching and learning in Australia, advisers can raise awareness of this scholarship in such opportunities. This may in turn support broader engagement with the field (Chanock, 2007).

3.4. Incorporation of multiple sources of expertise

The conversations that sit at the heart of e-JITs typically draw upon multiple sources of expertise. By bringing the learning adviser, and potentially library staff or tutors, into dialogue about student learning, exchange of ideas becomes possible. Creative synergies can occur when people from different fields meet to pursue the common goal of increasing student learning in a subject.

The 2009 First Year Experience Survey documents that only 62% of first year students in Australia report that “staff are good at explaining things” (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010, p. 58). It is also noted by Boud (2010, p. 2) that “activities and standards require disciplinary and contextual interpretation if they are to be understood, yet discussion of processes and reference points for determining standards are relatively rare.” A lecturer might know what good writing looks like but might struggle to express exactly what constitutes good writing. A tutor might have insights to share into how students are managing with lectures, readings and team activities. Along with the tutor, the learning adviser might bring empathy and understanding of the student experience as well as awareness of students’ academic concerns. Furthermore, library staff can use the e-JIT format to provide a human face to the library and offer practical assistance to build research skills.

3.5. Relevance and authority

The perceived value of an academic language and learning session may be undermined by a learning adviser being from outside the discipline even if the session is customised for a particular subject; the learning adviser risks being seen as someone who doesn’t fully understand the field. Further, it is not impossible for the actual value of a session to be compromised by a learning adviser’s relative unfamiliarity with the subject content and conventions, and of the students’ existing skills and knowledge. This may lead to difficulties in pitching the session at the right level in terms of cognitive complexity, skills and language.

In a filmed conversation, however, the learning adviser assumes the role of facilitator, rather than a teacher or “expert”. The involvement of the adviser as “outsider” may actually increase the chance for implicit conventions to be made explicit, and for content and tasks that appear confusing to be made clear through the discussion. A conversation can breathe life into the task and clarify its rationale. As Ramsden notes, when students “see writing the essay as a learning experience in its own right, careful attention is given to the audience, style and discourse structure” (2003, p. 55).

3.6. Developmental Support

e-JITs are unlikely to be perceived as external to a subject, given that they can be integrated to a greater extent than many support options. Correspondingly, well-prepared and well-produced e-JITs are likely to be perceived as developmental rather than remedial. While further evaluation is planned, the large number of hits the pilot e-JITs received indicates their broad appeal for a diverse student cohort. The e-JIT is not a “deficit model” approach that caters for “surface-learning” approaches (Biggs, 2003). Rather, it is a model underpinned by the observation that, “good teaching is getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously. Good teaching narrows the gap” (Biggs, 2003, p. 5).

3.7. Discipline-specific support

e-JITs, as noted earlier, support discipline-specific development of skills. By doing so, they recognise the “signature pedagogies” of different disciplines (Schulman, 2005); the fact, for example, that “good writing” in Actuarial Studies may be quite distinct from “good writing” in Marketing. As Chanock (2007) notes, an adviser is typically sensitive to the overlap between what is “correct” and what is “appropriate” (for a discipline, a subject or a task). Advisers, she continues, “are quickly sucked beneath the surface of their students’ texts and immersed in the intellectual matrix of each discipline, to grapple with questions of ‘-ography’ (i.e. of writing in and for a discourse community)” (p. 274). “What is lacking”, she adds, however, “is regular

institutional means of bringing us into the same conversations, to share what we know on the basis of mutual respect” (p. 274). The dialogue between the adviser and the lecturer that can take place in an e-JIT allows for a visible exploration and unpacking of tasks and conventions that can draw students’ attention to the ways in which language and skills are often inseparable from the ways in which knowledge is ascertained or constructed in a field.

3.8. Non-didactic support

The conversation is not a didactic mode of content provision. Participants in e-JITs typically talk with each other, not directly to camera. While lectures and workshops may be adapted to incorporate elements that are conversational, the centrality of conversations in e-JITs means they can help model and legitimise the kinds of dialogue that are possible between students and academics.

As documented in the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement Report, based on over 30,000 responses from students enrolled in higher education in Australasia, “Many Australasian students do not ever discuss their grades, ideas from classes or career plans with their teachers – 32.2 per cent, 46.7 per cent and 52.6 per cent respectively” (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2010, pp. 22-23). The report adds that this is an area in which significant improvements could be made (ACER, 2010, pp. 23-24). Reporting on the first year experience in Australian universities, James et al. note that “student-teaching interaction appears impersonal and distant for many students” (2010, p. 72). Given the changes to student-staff ratios over the past two decades, Hamish Coates of the Australian Council for Educational Research stresses “We have to innovate and teach smarter” (cited in Lane, 2010, p. 1). One tactic, Lane (2010, p. 1) adds, “might be more information online, backed up by intensive use of small group learning”.

Students watching a learning adviser in conversation with their lecturer can see the lecturer give constructive answers to questions they themselves could ask. They may see a task appear clearer and more interesting. They may even see glimmers of humour or passion on the part of their lecturer that they could have missed as they took notes; glimmers that might stimulate curiosity in the task and passion for their field of enquiry.

4. Conclusion

The Electronic Just-in-Time Session model has been developed as a form of learning support that enables academic language and learning advisers opportunity to extend the reach of conversations that lie at the heart of many other forms of ALL practice. The sessions do not require considerable investments in time, money or technical skill, and they are grounded in an integrated approach to ALL practice that has long been pursued in Australian higher education institutions. Further evaluations of the effectiveness of e-JITs are required. These are currently being developed to take into account participant perspectives as well as benefits for students. Based on the pilot, however, this paper has argued that the format has much to recommend it as one that facilitates the seamless integration of learning support that is developmental, content-rich, appealing, flexible, and discipline-specific.

Appendix A. The process of creating electronic Just in Time sessions

Please note, this not intended to be prescriptive, but rather descriptive of a process that may be followed.

a. Pre-Production

Conversations, email exchanges and other preparations take place between the learning adviser and academic(s) in roughly the following manner.

1. Discussions cover issues students may face in relation to an upcoming assessment task, an aspect of the subject, or the subject at large. These discussions could lead to the exchange of notes that include a range of questions students may be expected to ask.

2. Questions could then be created that could be asked in the filmed conversations as a means to address the possible issues and student questions.
3. Answers to the questions could be noted in point form.
4. Trial conversations may then be held to help ensure filmed conversations are comprehensive and fluent and can be shot in one take to reduce editing.
5. Complementary resources could be developed or selected (e.g. screen shots or links to resources and services).
6. A venue would be booked and the filming equipment prepared.
7. A meeting could be held with the person responsible for filming the session who would have already been cc'd into relevant communications.

b. Production

1. The room is set up prior to the shoot.
2. Participants meet and run through conversations.
3. Filming takes place, with time allocated for multiple takes if necessary.

c. Post-production

1. Editing occurs (on simple digital-editing software) as well as other post-production work that may be required (e.g. creation of title slides, adding of links and integration of screen shots).
2. Sessions are uploaded on the subject's LMS pages.
3. Sessions are promoted to students by the academics.
4. Statistics on the number of hits (including repeat hits) are tracked.
5. Evaluations are carried out, either within other broader subject evaluations or on a standalone basis.

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