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The evolving nature of support: A new horizon

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Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers have seen a myriad of support mechanisms develop in recent times as a way of responding to the needs of our local and international student cohorts. Certain forms of learning support have taken precedence over others; however, there is no one method which promotes and maintains the progression of academic development at universities. In fact, what becomes evident is the belief that learning development seems to be in its infancy with ad hoc arrangements and reactive workshops "filling the gaps" existing amongst our student body. For academic support to gain significance and be of benefit to students, it needs to permeate discipline-specific courses and provide the underlying foundations upon which course assessments are based. Thus, academic development needs to be reflected in the course objectives and learning outcomes of discipline-specific classes. This article examines why it is important to incorporate academic support as a broader picture and how this holistic approach may benefit all students in discipline-specific classes. It considers the advantages of including Learning Advisers (LA) in the discussion of reviewing course outlines and how the perspective of both the LA and Discipline-Specific Lecturer (DSL) can cultivate the development of academic skills, aligning the course objectives to their prospective assignments in a way that will promote lifelong learning. It suggests that this form of collaboration should be encouraged by ALL advisers as it plays a pivotal role in the direction and advancement of academic development and the quality of education students receive.

Key Words: course objectives, learning outcomes, discipline-specific courses.

1. Introduction

With the Australian education sector growing due to an increasing number of local and international students opting for a tertiary education, coupled with the government initiative to support prospective students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (DEEWR, 2011), it comes as no surprise that the area of academic support is a primary concern for institutions, lecturers and students alike. Upon entering the profession of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers or Learning Advisers (LAs) several years ago, it became apparent that the role was introduced to the university context as a remedial arrangement and as a quick-fix solution for "struggling" students or those deemed "at risk". What soon followed at the host university were experiments, where trial and error mechanisms for support prevailed and discussions at various levels took place, i.e., with heads of school, deans of teaching and learning and individual lecturers. LAs were to support international and domestic students coming from various educational backgrounds and competencies to undertake tertiary studies, although how this was best done seemed unclear and problematic.

For many institutions, and much to the relief of Discipline-Specific Lecturers (DSLs), the LAs were to instantaneously assume responsibility for the "weaker" students who were unable to

cope with the academic demands of higher education. Adjunct support workshops, often outside of lecture time because they are seen as being independent from the learning taking place within discipline-specific classes (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010), and individual consultations were on the rise. This fuelled the existing rumour among DSLs and further perpetuated by other university bodies (such as Education Services for Overseas Students, student counsellors and program officers) that the primary role of the LA is to "fix" students (Chanock, 2007). It has not been easy to communicate and exhibit the significance of enhancing academic skills to DSLs and students, particularly when both presuppose that LAs are to provide support by editing and proofreading students' work (Woodrow, 2006; Bartlett, 2009). Indeed, the struggle at the host university has been to substantiate the advantages of integrating academic skills within the courses taught by DSLs in order to equip students with lifelong skills that could be adapted throughout their studies and later in their careers.

Adjunct support workshops, separate from context specific material, rarely provide the opportunity to develop complex academic skills (Shackleford & Blickem, 2007), with a high percentage of students failing to attend support workshops available at the institution. Many of these students fail to see the relevance of attending these workshops, and place their priorities elsewhere (Benson, Hewitt, Devos, Crosling, & Heagney, 2009; Stratilas, 2011). This is further exacerbated by many DSLs who assume that students will innately adopt the skills required to undertake their studies (Andrade, 2006; Carroll & Appleton, 2007) and dedicate little, if any, time in class to discuss the necessary approach to tasks and assessments. Lack of clarity and instruction required to complete an assessment can frustrate students (Chung, Kelliher, & Smith, 2006), both local and international, although rarely do they seek the advice of their DSL or the LA. In fact, Dawson and Hacket (2006) support this claim further, because as

> International and local students, both traditional and non-traditional, come from different learning backgrounds, the lecturer cannot assume the same level or knowledge or preparedness in all students and so must articulate very clearly and in detail what students are required to do in the early tasks they are given. Then because learning is a cumulative process, lecturers need to guide students stage by stage, ensuring that each stage has been adequately learnt before the next stage is introduced. (p. 3)

On occasion though, some DSLs indicate that assisting students academically is beyond the scope of their role and they may struggle to address the challenges posed by their student cohort (Bretag, 2007; Arkoudis & Tran, 2010).

To provide a productive learning environment where students are supported throughout their academic maturation, collaboration between the LA and the DSL must co-exist (Bartram, 2008). Promoting and supporting the development of academic skills within the course-specific context develops an explicit connection for the students, making it easy for them to understand, translate and later adapt certain skills as they see fit. The DSL may well be the content specialist, but the LA is able to decipher the seemingly foreign academic code for students and clearly lay out the necessary steps to fulfil the course requirements (Cantwell, Scevak, & Parkes, 2010). With this integrated approach, all students enrolled in the course are exposed to the skills and the level of achievement expected with the aid of two professionals – a content specialist and an academic specialist, both of whom present the learning process in unison.

2. The pitfalls of peripheral support

Within the current context, academic support has been targeted towards course-specific needs (i.e., groupwork skills, report writing and so forth) with one LA present to assist students within the Faculty of Business and Law at the University of Newcastle, Sydney. Workshops, individual consultations, video snippets, discussion boards, online resources and course-specific sessions are provided for students enrolled in postgraduate courses within this faculty, and comprise English language as well as academic skills, with attendance being voluntary. However, despite efforts to encourage students to attend and utilise the support mechanisms which are currently in place, course-specific workshops targeting assessment tasks secure the highest attendance rate, and individual consultations also often address queries surrounding assessment tasks. It is no

secret that student enrolment in courses is determined by the form of assessment the subject adopts and the leniency of the lecturer. It is not uncommon that "the first thing students look at when handed their course outlines is the section that provides details about how they will be assessed" (Cantwell, Scevak, & Parkes, 2010, p. 21).

For the most part, the direction of individual consultations and support workshops is guided by the students, who are often centred on the assessment tasks they are required to complete within their courses. Within the workshop, when the LA's focus shifts to encourage students to acquire the necessary academic skills that could be applied to their next assessment tasks, many students are quick to leave the sessions, particularly once their specific queries have been answered. Their behaviour and attitude towards learning and support can be seen by these actions: clearly, they seek a short, quick answer rather than a focus on long-term approaches that would encourage autonomous and critical learning. This quick-fix solution is further exacerbated by students who approach the LA requesting editing and proofreading of their assessments and once again fail to address their core weaknesses.

In addition, students who do attend the workshops tend to be those who are already highly motivated and who are able to dedicate time and energy to improve their skills and enhance their learning experience. When they are perceived as adjunct forms of support developed in minimal collaboration with the DSL, these workshops are often a low priority for most students. Time-poor students often miss out on the support that is made available and are left to their own devices. Upon graduating, it becomes evident that students exposed to academic and communication skills are more likely to be strong candidates for employment, as opposed to those who have not had this experience (Jackling, 2007).

3. The project

With a plethora of changes currently affecting accounting courses and visa requirements, the Master of Professional Accounting (MPA) program at the host university has been under review by a team of DSLs currently teaching the program. Following an interview midway through the study, the LA was invited by the project leader (and also senior lecturer in the program) to participate in the study. Because the LA had direct contact with students, she was in a position to discuss the necessary academic skills that graduating postgraduate accounting students are expected to have attained, as well as the difficulties these students face. From the LA's perspective, these discussions presented an ideal opportunity to encourage the implementation of assessments that developed the necessary academic skills in line with the course objectives. The "backward design process" (Cantwell, Scevak, & Parkes, 2010, p. 23) was followed to ensure students obtained the educational skills and content knowledge required in their profession as part of the graduate attributes.

The lecturers within the program and part of the project team presented their insights regarding the content that was mandatory and required assessing, while the LA discussed the academic skills required to complete the assignment. The aim was to equip our postgraduate students with the graduate attributes and lifelong skills that would armour them for their careers in the accounting industry. It is vital that our graduating students acquire the ability to communicate competently in all modes and gain the appropriate critical thinking skills required for employment. Collaboration between the DSLs and the LA allowed for a holistic approach where assessments are closely aligned to the course objectives of the MPA program and to the graduate attributes set by the university. This approach likewise ensured that the MPA course met the requirements of the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) agency and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia (ICA) and expectations were transparently communicated to students.

The team began by conducting interviews with all lecturers who had taught and were currently teaching in the MPA program (as well as those on other campuses) to gain feedback regarding the course and the assessments. Support staff were likewise interviewed, as were voluntary groups of students enrolled in the course. Lecturers who were interviewed voiced their

disapproval of the lack of cohesion between subjects within the MPA program and mismatches between course materials with current workplace practices.

Issues that emerged from the student interviews were related to a lack of practical hands-on experience and assessments that were closely aligned to real-life situations which may have provided a deeper understanding of the accounting profession. This consolidated the initial thoughts of the team, who acknowledged the need to provide practical and relevant learning experiences within the MPA program. It became apparent that oral and written communication skills were likewise omitted and assessments relied heavily upon the students' numerical ability. As a result, one of the tasks involved evenly distributing communication skills amongst the MPA courses to enable students to become confident in communicating within their profession and to encourage English competency.

3.1. Assessments

Members within the project team agreed to adopt a scaffolded approach to the assessment tasks within the MPA program to ensure students were gradually progressing through their educational journey. In its current state, postgraduate students enrolled in the MPA program are expected to face a certain degree of difficulty designed to challenge and extend their learning as they progress towards graduation. Application of theoretical concepts to practical situations would later be followed by hypotheses and recommendations based on analytical data. Each term students are expected to build upon previous knowledge of particular academic skills, extending this a little further when completing assignment tasks.

The difficulties with this approach, however, are the limitations DSLs have in supporting academic skills within the course. With the assistance of the LA, students are provided with the crucial academic link between the course content and the specific academic skill which is likely to achieve the desired outcome as indicated in the learning objectives. In discussing this, the DSLs considered the content that is to be covered in each of the MPA subjects and, together with the LA, allocated appropriate modes of assessment (written or oral, group or individual) based on feasibility. By introducing the assessments that are reflective of the profession, a three-step process is being considered (foundational, intermediate and proficient level), although this process is yet to be finalised by the project team.

To begin with, the accounting standards (taken from the Australian Accounting Standards Board) provided the foundation for the faculty's graduate attributes. These influenced the learning goals and objectives within the MPA program that were streamlined by the team into attainable and transparent steps for both academics and students.

The underlying learning goals focus on:
- communication and interaction (within the learning environment and beyond);
- leadership and teamwork (to encourage active participation in groupwork);
- applied knowledge and skill base;
- inquiry and innovation (through the use of reflection and critical thinking);
- social and global perspective (i.e., the ability to use judgement for problem-solving skills).

With consideration given to the above-mentioned goals, the next step was to align the appropriate mode of communication to a specific subject within the MPA program depending on the content. For example, in Economics, it may be more beneficial for students to submit a written group report as a form of assessment, as this would simulate tasks required in the profession. To add a further dimension to assessments, first term postgraduate students would be introduced to a particular assessment task, such as oral presentation, with little emphasis on communication and more on content. As the student progressed through the program, the weighting would gradually shift from presenting relevant content towards effective communication until, in the final term, marks were equally distributed. The marking criteria would likewise be modified to reflect this, although it would extend from the basic template used in the first term, becoming progressively more complex to reflect development in this area. The rubrics for written and oral communication assessments were beyond the scope of the

project team, although a uniform approach was taken as this was deemed important for providing constructive and informative feedback for students.

At present, the DSLs engaged in the project together with the LA are restructuring assessment tasks, taking into consideration the marking criteria as derived from the faculty rubrics and the course objectives. The aim for this is to ensure that students are explicitly informed of their performance through concise and transparent information regarding their specific strengths and weaknesses. Once the marking criteria are confirmed, the following phase will be to consider the academic steps students will undertake in order to complete a specific task and incorporate this into the course outline. For first term students, the focus and instruction will be given in greater detail on a weekly basis, becoming less specific as students move through their study program.

DSLs teaching in the MPA program have the option of including sessions run by the LA within the allocated lecture time in order to integrate the academic skills component into the course. Alternatively, those who are confident in implementing the academic steps individually within their new course are encouraged to do so, although training and assistance will be available should this be required.

4. Benefits of this approach

LAs bring specific knowledge and experience to the discussion of teaching and learning because on a daily basis they are approached by students who share similar concerns and aspirations. In contrast, some DSLs may have limited comprehension of the necessary academic steps regarding the completed product (in terms of assessments and/or course objectives), but they are the content experts within their field and offer valuable insights and the relevant context in supporting students to acquire certain skills. The discipline-specific context provides the platform for students to connect progression and academic maturation. Therefore, collaboration between the DSL and LA ensures that students are supported within their classes and the connection between studying and learning is seamless.

With this approach, students are also given comprehensive feedback with specific comments to target their strengths and weaknesses in order to encourage and improve academic achievement. Content-related objectives and academic skills are assessed, providing students with specific information to understand which areas require attention or which areas they excel in. Transparent objectives and criteria indicate the underlying reasons why students undertake specific assignments, and they are able to appreciate the relevance of these tasks which directly relate to their working environment. By developing their skills and knowledge base, they are better prepared for the workforce (Mylett & Gluck, 2004) and increase their opportunities to be confident and competent graduates.

With DSLs acknowledging the importance of integrating academic skills into their course, and working together with the LA, students themselves are more likely to appreciate and accept the tertiary education experience that equips them for the workforce. LAs are likewise accepted as professionals and the development of academic progression is seen as an integral part of university studies. LAs have long supported a more integrated and embedded approach to academic skills development, although "what is lacking is regular institutional means of bringing us into the same conversations, to share what we know on a basis of mutual respect" (Chanock, 2007, p. 274). Once DSLs comprehend and value the input LAs can share regarding discipline-specific courses and student support, only then can productive learning environments prosper.

Acknowledgements

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