

Teaching subject literacies through blended learning: Reflections on a collaboration between academic learning staff and teachers in the disciplines

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For ALL practitioners helping students to write more effectively for their disciplines, the trend towards online teaching and learning carries both threats and possibilities. It can distance us from our students, but it can also sidestep the inhibitions and inconvenience, and perceptions of irrelevance, that keep many students from consulting us. By collaborating with discipline teachers within their subjects, we can reach many more students and show that what we offer is relevant and appropriate for all of them, rather than remedial. Moreover, this kind of collaboration can bridge the gap between discipline teachers' knowledge about content and ALL teachers' knowledge about language and discourse (Elton, 2010), and prevent ALL staff being sidelined, and ALL expertise lost, by "doing away with study skills" (Wingate, 2006). It raises subject teachers' awareness of their students' difficulties, and equips them with strategies to address these. The challenges for ALL staff are to get entrée into discipline subjects; to familiarise ourselves sufficiently with the focus, scope, structure and approach of each subject to which we contribute; and to ensure that this approach complements, rather than replaces, other valuable modes of teaching. This paper discusses these challenges in the context of my involvement with a large first-year, first-semester sociology subject taught by blended learning across five campuses. Because the work was done in the weeks before teaching began, it proved possible to implement the collaboration at no cost to the Faculty, and no loss of capacity for individual teaching; and it did not entail additional technical training.

Key words: embedding, collaboration, academic literacies, online or blended teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

For Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners whose role is to help students to write more effectively for their discipline subjects, the trend towards online teaching and learning carries both threats and possibilities. It can create a distance between us and the students with whom we work. However, it can also sidestep the inhibitions and inconvenience, and perceptions of irrelevance, that keep many students from consulting us in person, as well as the constraints of time and resources that prevent us from seeing as many as we would like. By collaborating with discipline teachers within their subjects, we can reach much larger numbers of students and make it clear, from the first, that what we offer is relevant and appropriate for all of them. If successful, this kind of collaboration between ALL staff and discipline subjects can bridge the gap between discipline teachers' knowledge about content and ALL teachers'

knowledge about language (Elton, 2010), and prevent ALL staff being sidelined, and ALL expertise lost, by “doing away with study skills” (Wingate, 2006). It raises subject teachers’ awareness of their students’ difficulties, and equips them with strategies to address these. The challenges for ALL staff are to get access to discipline subjects for this purpose; to learn the technologies used to participate in subjects online; and to find time to carry out the preparation required to familiarise ourselves with the focus, scope, structure and approach of each subject to which we contribute. This article discusses these challenges in the context of my involvement with a large first-year, first-semester sociology subject taught by blended learning across five campuses of a large Australian university. It proved possible to deal with them at no cost to the Faculty, and without additional technical training.

However, I do not think that online provision should be uncritically embraced as a solution to problems of relevance, scale, and equity in teaching ALL. It is important at the same time to consider what such an approach *cannot* do, for even as we find ways to address development of students’ academic literacies online, we are wise to resist the displacement of other, face-to-face approaches. I will argue that teaching subject literacies online is useful, and even economical – but also, that it should remain just one strand in the weave of ways that we work with students and staff (cf. Wingate & Dreiss, 2009).

2. One strand among many

Indeed, it may be best to start this discussion where many reservations about going online originate. For many of us, individual teaching is the most effective way to help students with their writing; working closely together at the same table engenders a kind of intellectual and personal chemistry that seems the antithesis of teaching and learning online. Information can be “delivered”, but learning must often be struggled for, and may be lost if the trend towards online or blended delivery means that individual teaching is no longer possible. This is not a groundless concern, for as course delivery moves online, the role of ALL staff can be expected to change in ways that are not yet clear. As students are able to access more components of their course without coming to the campus, more of those who would benefit from face-to-face attendance at workshops or individual consultations may forego these opportunities. At the same time, institutions are attracted by economies of scale achieved by shifting resources from teaching to creation of online resources. This may, ironically, be done in the name of equity because students can access such resources at times and places that suit them. However, equity is compromised if students are denied opportunities for individual consultations that are crucial to their understanding. Rust (2009) is right to worry about the “possibilities of deskilling the support that is actually provided with an increased (over) reliance by management on the (even cheaper) promise of e-learning, 'independent' learning etc. In short, the ‘Why don’t you just develop some support packages and put them on the web?’ scenario” (p. 2).

I will suggest that online teaching need not mean the end of working face-to-face with students, and may even promote that work. However, it is crucial, in any move to develop academic literacies online, to maintain established modes of teaching that work well: to ensure, that is, that changes are made for educational, not simply economic reasons. If time must be taken from any other ALL activity, it should arguably come from generic workshops rather than from individual teaching.

3. Intersections with theory of online learning

Theory in the area of online learning is generally concerned with the innovative use of technological affordances to expand the reach of learning – to encompass information, methods and activities, and opportunities for the social construction of knowledge that were not available in traditional educational settings (e.g., Bower, Hedberg, & Kuswara, 2010; for exemplars, see Learning Designs, 2003). Much recent attention has been given to “creating and sustaining a community of inquiry beyond the classroom” (Garrison and Vaughan 2008, p. 10), with students interacting online as well as face to face. The primary focus of my project was not social in this (important) local sense, however, but in the sense of introducing students to the ways in which

the literacies of their subject embody the purposes of the much wider community of enquiry within which that subject sits. Theorists of online learning stress the importance of technological solutions continuing to draw on the insights of learning theory (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013), a salient one being that learning is situated (Hung & Chen, 2010; Mayes & de Freitas, 2013); and university learning is situated not just in subjects, but in the purposes and practices of the disciplines to which they belong. Mediating students' encounters with the written discourses of their subjects is perhaps especially pertinent in the study of humanities and social sciences whose disciplines remain text-based for the most part, whether taught in a classroom or online.

In the literature of online learning support, projects that informed my own include initiatives recounted by Wingate and Dreiss (2009) and by Mort and Drury (2012), for all of whom "situated learning" is key to students' learning. As Mort and Drury (2012) put it, "online resources for developing student writing need to be contextualised in a discipline and aligned with assessment tasks while, at the same time, providing scaffolded examples and exercises to reveal the structure and language of discipline genres" (p. A2). This is in line with current thinking about best practice in the development of academic literacies, in any mode of teaching.

4. Generic vs. discipline-embedded ALL instruction

While managers often favour generic provision, a conviction has taken hold among ALL practitioners in Australia, the UK and elsewhere during the last decade that academic literacies should be taught in the discipline subjects where they are used, rather than by generic instruction outside those subjects (Wingate, 2011, p. 27). Both research and experience of teaching have shown important differences in the epistemologies, purposes and values of different discipline areas, from which flow differences in the text structures and language choices seen in their writing (Baik & Greig 2002; Bazerman, 1981; Durkin & Main, 2002; Elton, 2010; Gimenez, 2011; Jones, 2009; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Magyar, McAvoy, & Forstner, 2011; Moore, 2004; Reid & Parker, 2002; Wingate, 2007). Examples go back to 1981, when Bazerman showed that such manoeuvres as establishing the writer's authority, or framing the problem to be discussed, are done quite differently in molecular biology, literary studies, and social science. While there are things we can say about Anglophone academic writing at the most general level – the writer establishes authority and frames a problem – these are not very helpful because as soon as we show a genuine example, it is likely to mislead students in at least some of the disciplines represented in the mixed-discipline class. In particular, critique and argument are done so differently in different disciplines that teaching students "how to argue" can create more problems than it solves. This is a risk, not only in offering generic workshops, but also in offering generic advice on academic writing online.

For these reasons, it is widely considered "best practice" to shift responsibility for developing academic literacies to discipline teachers, with instruction integrated into the curriculum of their subjects (Baik & Greig, 2009; Gibbs, 2009; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Hyland, 2000; Jones, 2009; Mitchell, 2010; Monroe, 2003; Skillen, 2006; Star & Hammer, 2008; Thies, 2012; Wingate, 2007, 2011; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). As Monroe (2003, Staffing section, para. 1) puts it,

Since writing in higher education takes place within local disciplinary and institutional contexts, and since effective writing ... involves acculturating students into the always provisional, historically situated knowledges and practices of particular fields, responsibility for writing at all levels of the curriculum properly belongs to the faculty hired to teach these fields.

In spite of this view, however, instruction is still found mainly in dedicated courses or workshops outside the disciplines, presenting generic versions of academic writing (Baik & Greig, 2009; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Ivanic & Lea, 2006; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). A number of reasons have been proposed for discipline teachers' reluctance to add "skills" to their teaching load. Bailey (2010) suggests a lack of confidence, which Donahue (2010) puts down to a lack of training. Because of "the necessity for teaching staff ... to adopt changed teaching practices" (Star & Hammer, 2008, p. 245), institutions would have to organise and fund professional development for them (Wingate, 2006, p. 459). Although Monroe (2003, Who

owns writing section, para.1) is justified in describing discipline teachers as “the ultimate arbiters and authorities, latently if not manifestly, over what counts as effective writing in their respective fields”, it is the “latent” or “tacit” nature of this knowledge that has been identified by others as an obstacle to integrating academic literacies teaching into disciplines (Elton, 2010; Jacobs, 2005; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011; see also Jacobs, 2005). Perhaps the most intractable concern, however, is that focussing on skills will take time and attention away from content (Wingate, 2007). For all these reasons, Wingate (2007) urges, “initiatives are needed that raise lecturers’ awareness of what kind of support is needed, and provide them with support methods that are in their view reasonable in terms of time investment and workload” (p. 396); and such initiatives are likely to require collaboration with staff outside the disciplines as well (Howard & Schneider, 2013).

5. Opportunities for collaboration

Such collaborations have, in fact, been increasing, from early examples such as Skillen et al.’s work at the University of Wollongong in the 1990s (Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1998; Percy & Skillen, 2000), and Jones, Bonnanno, and Scouller’s (2001) at the University of Sydney, to a range of initiatives over the last decade (e.g. Al-Mahmoud & Gruba, 2007; Brooman-Jones, Cunningham, Hanna, & Wilson, 2011; Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Mead, 2009; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Kazlaukas, Gimel, Thornton, Thomas, & Davis, 2007; Magyar, McAvoy, & Forstner, 2011; Mitchell & Evison, 2006; Purser, Skillen, Deane, Donohue, & Peake, 2008; Thies, 2012; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011; Chanock, Horton, Reedman, & Stephenson, 2012; for a project that included librarians’ input on information literacy, and was delivered online across Faculties, see Kokkin & Mahar, 2011). Although ALL provision has, for most of its (brief) history, been situated on the margins of academic structures in our universities (Huijser, Kimmins, & Gallagher, 2008), recent developments have created opportunities for collaborations with the disciplines. One of these is the push from outside the universities to include the development of graduate attributes (/ skills / capabilities) in the curricula of undergraduate degrees (Hager, Holland, & Becket, 2002; Skillen, 2006). Purser et al. (2008) note that “[a]t policy level, [the view that academic literacy needs to be explicitly taught] is voiced in relation to agenda issues of equity, retention, quality assurance and/or employability and conceptualised within a framework of generic ‘skills’, ‘competencies’ and broad ranging ‘graduate attributes’” (pp. 1-2; see also Buzzi, Grimes, & Rolls, 2012; Howard & Schneider, 2013; Jones, 2001; Rust, 2009).

At my university, a whole-of-institution plan has been adopted to develop curricula in all courses that teach and assess the “graduate capabilities” of inquiry/research, problem-solving, critical thinking, writing, speaking, and team work (Design for Learning, 2009). This places considerable demands on discipline lecturers, at the same time as staffing numbers are being reduced and they are expected to “do more with less”. In these circumstances, some subject coordinators are very open to offers of help with the challenge of developing their students’ “capabilities”. If this can be done online, moreover, then concerns about skills and content competing for time are alleviated.

Until this year, I had not sought to work online in any discipline subjects. This was partly because I believe that teaching is most effective face-to-face, enabling students to struggle usefully with new ideas and methods, and lecturers to learn, in the process, what is difficult for students to understand and how to mediate these difficulties. It was also, partly, because I was not confident with the technology. However, in view of the urgent need to re-think approaches to teaching with reduced staffing levels, I decided to “get a grip”, and approached the coordinator of our largest first year, first semester subject (Sociology) with a proposal to design and embed resources into her subject to scaffold students’ learning of subject literacies. She accepted with enthusiasm, opened the Learning Management System (LMS) page for her subject, and in a few minutes showed me how to click for “edit”, again for a space to type into, and again to attach a file from my computer. The LMS used by our institution is Moodle, which accommodates a site for each subject with spaces for instruction, discussion, readings, assignment rubrics, and more. Any authorised user can place comments and documents on the site without learning special codes or complex procedures.

6. Form and rationale of the resource

The core of this collaboration is a series of ten weekly segments embedded in the subject's online environment, the LMS. When students open each week's space, they find the lecture slides and recordings, the readings and activities for that week, and my "[Author's] How & Why" segment, usually in the form of a paragraph introducing an attached file of no more than a page in length. Each segment addresses one of the challenges of writing their next piece for assessment. It identifies a particular aspect of writing that experience tells me many students will not know how to do in the way that the subject expects. It introduces a strategy for focussing one's effort so that the work is manageable and the product fit-for-purpose. And it models that product, using material from the readings for that week. Each segment is "just in time" in addressing problems at the stage of the semester when they are likely to arise. At the same time, all weeks are visible from the start of the semester, so that students who wish to plan ahead have all the strategies available.

Unlike the various collaborations recounted in the sources I have referred to above, this project required almost no time or effort from the subject coordinator and not a great deal from me. We met for an hour, initially, to talk about what I could offer and how she could facilitate that, and then I spent a few days familiarising myself with the subject's concerns and materials and writing my segments of advice for students. Although this was intensive work, it did not interfere with other teaching commitments as it took place in the period before the start of the semester. I needed, from the coordinator, a copy of the subject's Learning Guide (a document for students that sets out the focus, scope, and objectives of the subject); the lecture topics and timetable; the work to be done for tutorials week by week; the "essential" and "further" readings for the tutorials and assignments; and the assignment topics and instructions. I also needed a copy of the textbook, and access (through the LMS) to the readings available online in the library. Then, as I wrote each segment, I posted it on the site for the coordinator to read and approve or amend, which took her only a few minutes to do; in every case, she found the segment appropriate and useful, but would sometimes suggest a change of wording to fit with the language she would use in her teaching of a topic. Brief though these consultations were, it is important, as Wingate and Dreiss (2009, p. A21) have pointed out, that subject tutors are familiar with the materials created by learning advisors, so that learning support is integral rather than "extra".

The decision to make this resource text-based, rather than presented in some other mode(s), was based on several considerations. It was easy, quick, and cheap to create; but more importantly, it drew on what others have learned about what students most appreciate in materials designed for their guidance, that is, relevance to their assessment tasks (see Kokkin & Mahar, 2011, p. 124 for a survey of this literature); explicit analysis of key features of the texts they are asked to read; and models of what acceptable student writing might look like (and these should not be so excellent as to be intimidating!) (see, e.g., Mort & Drury, 2012, p. A8; Wingate, 2011; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). As Wingate (2011, p. 32) says, the production of such examples "requires a linguist/writing expert who needs to co-operate with subject experts for the provision of suitable discipline-specific texts", but in our collaboration in Sociology, this was not an onerous undertaking. It would have required more time if I had included analysis of the structural, interpersonal, and linguistic features of key journal articles, as I do in other subjects to which I contribute; but as the main text in this subject was a textbook, such an analysis was not among the things that students would most need (or appreciate).

My choice of topics was based, essentially, on what I know to be students' main "stuck places", as Huijser, Kimmins, and Galligan (2008) memorably put it. When students consult me individually about their work for subjects, it is usually because they do not understand what a particular essay question requires (cf. Magyar, McAvoy, & Forstner, 2011; Thies, 2012, p. A20); or because they are not aware of how the week-by-week design of the subject feeds into the assignment tasks; or because they cannot get their introduction right, and cannot move on until they do; or because they are having difficulty understanding why, where, and how to use their reading in their writing (what needs to be referenced, whether to quote or paraphrase, how to integrate quotation into their own sentences, and what that looks like); or because they are

overwhelmed by the amount of reading and do not know how to read strategically or take notes selectively for a purpose. Later, when their work is returned with marking comments, they come to get their errors explained, as the comments are in terms they do not understand (“awk”, “no verb”, “new sentence”, “apostrophe”, “tense”, “?”, etc.) or come in the form of crossings-out or substitutions in which they cannot discern any patterns. Problems with cohesion also emerge, which students may not know how to improve. As Huijser, Kimmins, and Galligan (2008) point out, it is our work with students one-to-one that reveals what is difficult in particular subjects and at particular stages in their development of academic literacies; and it was this experience that led me to address the topics below. The introductory segment is included here to give an indication of the tone of the resource, and the segment for Week 3 is in an Appendix to this article, to show how the advice is made specific to the subject.

7. Contents of the segments

As shown in the “Kate’s ‘How & Why’” excerpt below, the resource begins in the space for Week One, with a blurb that introduces me by name. It was a deliberate decision to include me in this way, rather than incorporating my advice anonymously, as it has been found that students’ engagement in learning online is helped by establishing the “social presence” of members of the learning community (see, e.g., Oztok & Brett, 2011), so that they experience one another as real people online, as well as in the classroom (see also Appendix A).

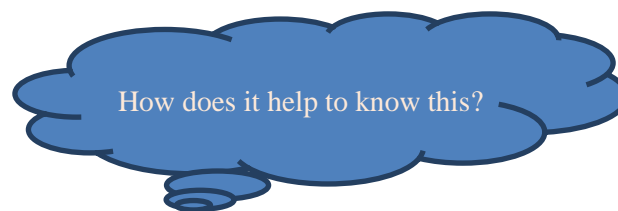
Kate’s “How & Why”

Hi, I’m Kate Chanock – an “Academic Language and Learning” adviser with your Faculty – and your lecturer’s given me this space in your LMS to share some strategies that can make a difference between feeling overwhelmed by what your subjects ask of you, or feeling confident to cope. When I’ve got a suggestion for you, you’ll see it in this space.

This is followed by advice on using the subject learning guide to:

Plan your work before it gets on top of you

Most first year subjects are designed to introduce you to some concepts that belong to a particular way of looking at the world (as a sociologist, or a historian, or an archaeologist, etc.). The lectures explain these concepts, the readings apply them to specific information, and your assignments ask you to show that you understand them by applying them yourself.



You can do yourself a huge favour THIS WEEK if you look at the learning guide and the assignments in each of your subjects to see:

- What tutorial questions does the subject ask, week by week?
- What questions do the assignments ask, down the track?
- Which assignment questions match up to which week’s tutorial questions and readings?

Once you have an assignment in mind, you’ll be able to *notice* when the lectures, readings, and tutorial discussions help you to answer it, and *make notes that you can use in thinking about, and drafting, your assignment*.

This way, you’ll have done a lot of the work ahead of the last minute.

In subsequent weeks, students are offered segments on the following topics, using examples from the texts they are reading that week, and modelling sentences or paragraphs that would be appropriate in one of the upcoming assignments.

- **Using your readings in your writing**
- Planning your reflective essay: a strategy for making notes
- **Take only the notes you need!**
- What does “evidence” look like in academic essays?
- Edit your expression
- Writing essay introductions
- How to make your essay “flow”
- How to revise your essay draft
- How to check that your essay is ready to submit

By modelling approaches to some of the problems that typically inhibit students from getting their work done on time, such as coping with the reading load, framing an introduction, incorporating and attributing evidence, or achieving “flow”, these segments render such problems both normal and (we hope) surmountable.

8. One thing led to another

Almost as soon as I produced the online segments, the coordinator asked me to become involved in the subject in other ways: participating in an early lecture to walk students through the process of breaking down the first essay topic and taking useful notes; and offering workshops co-taught with one of the subject tutors at two points in the semester when students would be struggling with writing their two main assignments. Again, these were not demanding to prepare for, as I based them on the procedures I had shown online; but they provided an opportunity for students to ask questions in person, and were well attended. For the tutor who taught these workshops with me, the experience provided professional development of which she later wrote, in an evaluation: “Kate has been an absolute god-send to the SOC1SAC staff and students this semester. Her expertise and knowledge have served as invaluable tools for the students. Her workshops were extremely well received and the 'how and why' material was also excellent. ... Kate’s guidance ... was most especially appreciated by me as a 'beginner' ... tutor.”

My involvement did not, moreover, stop there. Among the most important and lasting benefits of the collaboration was the opportunity it afforded for me to feed back to the subject coordinator what I learned about students’ particular confusions and difficulties in handling the work for the subject. It is a common source of frustration, among ALL advisers, that we learn things from students that need to be addressed in the design and teaching of a subject, rather than “fixed” with each individual student as they encounter the same problem. Huijser, Kimmins, and Galligan (2008) are eloquent on this issue:

In most cases, students come to us in the Learning Centre with specific assessment items. In many cases, they have serious problems understanding what they are expected to do, and in some case we have considerable difficulty ourselves trying to ascertain the exact requirements of some pieces of assessment. In addition, we have at times severe reservations about whether particular assessment items are appropriate for the expected performance level of students in certain courses. The question in such cases becomes: how do we feed such evaluations back into course development processes, and in particular into assessment design. (p. A31)

During my involvement with the Sociology subject, I raised problems as I became aware of them, with the result that the coordinator added clarifications where necessary; and at the end of the semester, she asked me to attend the de-briefing meeting with her tutors where they discuss what worked well, what did not, and how the subject could be improved for the next time it is offered. At this meeting, I suggested some major changes to the assessment tasks and to the way that students could approach them. In particular, I suggested replacing the difficult and commonly puzzling first assignment, which is often not done well, with a more engaging small-group research project in which students could get to know each other early, engage actively

with sociological methods, and spend time together on task without their tutors present (a way of making up for shifting much of the teaching of this subject online). I also recommended some culling and re-combining of topic choices for the major essay, with much clearer wording and explicit guidance in the use of relevant theory. These suggestions were received with enthusiasm, and I was asked to remain involved in planning the subject. I have also been asked to participate in the planning of another subject in Sociology, in which the same coordinator teaches, and to produce learning materials for its online component.

Others involved in collaborations with discipline teachers have observed, similarly, that it is not only the students who learn from the materials developed, but the discipline staff as well, who benefit from seeing their latent or tacit knowledge about the discourse of their subject area explicitly articulated in terms that their students can understand (Mort & Drury, 2012, p. A2; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011, p. 74). As this gives them confidence in the ability of the ALL staff to help students with mastering their subject literacies, they are likely to seek further and more varied – at times more critical – kinds of collaboration. Frohman (2012) has reported, in her account of moving from generic to Faculty-based support, that

As the academic staff became more aware of my role and support I could offer, I was invited to become more involved. I was asked to review the clarity of assessment tasks and criteria sheets, develop workshop materials to scaffold academic literacies, and provide individual interventions for at-risk students. (p. A56)

Similarly, one benefit of Thies's (2012) collaboration with subject staff in Health Sciences was that "the team worked together to ensure that both the assessment tasks and the assessment criteria were worded in such a way that was clear, concise, and accessible to the students" (p. A20).

9. Effectiveness of the collaboration

Purser et al. (2008, p. 6) have suggested that "success can be measured in various ways – including of course deeper learning and better writing from students – but also raised awareness amongst faculty-based academics of the nature of discourse and learning to write within their disciplines". In this sense, my collaboration can be considered a success, and the very limited student feedback that we could obtain suggests that it was also worthwhile for many students in the subject. Because of a management decision that students were, at the time, "over-surveyed", we had to be content with adding a question to an end-of-semester evaluation filled out by one lecture class on one campus out of the five across which the subject was taught. The 116 replies received give a good picture of that group's "quick and dirty" evaluation, therefore, but cannot be considered indicative of the whole cohort. The students were asked whether they had used the "Kate's How & Why" and if not, why not; and if they had used it, how helpful they had found it.

Of the 52 students who had not used it, 20 had not thought they needed any advice on skills; 1 thought it was not relevant; 10 gave no reason, or "don't know", or "I am lazy"; 10 could not spare the time; and 9 had not known that it existed (which suggests a worrying disengagement from the LMS, on which the resource was prominently displayed). One student wrote "No – The amount of information on the LMS overwhelms me, so it's hard to keep up with everything. I am not the biggest fan of everything being online. I prefer hard copies of things." Another wrote, "I prefer to get the help of more direct sources I can talk to and explain my confusion." Of the 64 who did use the "How & Why", 3 did not comment on its usefulness; 3 did not find it helpful; 10 found it "somewhat useful, or useful occasionally"; 26 found it "good", 21 "very good", and 1 "awesome". The resource was informally described as good or very good, therefore, by 75% of students who used it. The only endorsement of more than two words was "very helpful. Would be great if all subjects had this."

It was not possible, in this subject, to meaningfully compare the students' performance with that of previous cohorts, as the subject was undergoing change. However, staff feedback on my similar contribution to the second (more stable) sociology subject for which I was invited to develop scaffolding does compare cohorts' performance. After using my scaffolding in that

subject, one lecturer “noticed a significant difference in the quality of the essays this year” which she attributed to the activity I had created, while the subject coordinator affirmed that “the learning support materials ... provided for our subject in the first assessment tasks ... have clearly helped the students and we are very pleased with the learning outcomes”.

10. Discussion

Although this was a modest, “foot-in-the-door” project, it is for that reason that I think it worth sharing with the ALL community. As efforts to embed development of academic literacies gain ground, colleagues will wonder whether initiatives of the limited kind I have described can be worthwhile. Thies (2012) has argued that piecemeal embedding is not sustainable, because so much time is required to build relationships; and as these relationships were so important in the project she reports, staff changes could and did bring an end to it. For these reasons, Thies believes “there is a need for a whole-of-institution approach, which supports professional development for course coordinators and academic staff who are expected to teach academic literacies, and for structures which encourage collaboration and the sharing of exemplar curricula” (2012, p. A25). This is certainly desirable, but does it mean that smaller-scale efforts are wasted, in the absence of systemic support for embedded development of academic literacies? Frohman (2012, p. A56) has implemented, over time, a range of different strategies each treated as a pilot, hoping that management will turn effective pilots into policy. But even if that hope is disappointed, each strategy has proved valuable in itself, and increased her ability to influence teaching within her Faculty. Similarly, Harris and Ashton (2011) report, in connection to their embedding project, that

As working relationships with teaching staff developed, the [Learning Adviser’s] opinions were sought on a range of issues including the appropriateness of assessment tasks and how best to scaffold them, as well as how to address language-specific problems and reduce plagiarism. The bottom-up approach ... occurred naturally as academics sought assistance, listened to colleagues discussing the embedding project, and invited the LA into their classes. (p. A79)

It was, moreover, cost-effective, for although embedding took time to achieve, it was equivalent to the time previously spent in providing generic or adjunct workshops that were poorly attended, whereas the embedded program supported hundreds of students. It is also worth remembering that, because embedded materials are offered to all students in a subject, with their lecturer’s recommendation, they are not associated with remedial support; instead, they recognise that, as Wingate and Tribble (2011) have stressed, “all students, whether they are native or non-native speakers of English, or ‘non-traditional’ or ‘traditional’ students, are novices when dealing with academic discourse in the disciplines” (p. 484; cf. Hill, Tinker, & Catterall, 2010; Skillen, 2006). For all these reasons, I think that “bottom-up” approaches are worthwhile in themselves, regardless of whether they achieve systemic traction; and one kind that seems likely to find a welcome with discipline lecturers – because it does not require them to take time from content or from face-to-face teaching – is provision of online resources for developing subject literacies.

What this mode of “delivery” of advice cannot do, however, is to draw out individual students’ (mis)understandings of an assignment question, or latent grasp of the material, or ability to recognise where their writing does not make sense. Some of this can be done by guided group work in a workshop, such as the ones we offered before each assignment was due in order to clarify expectations and get participants started on their writing. Some, however, must be done in the safe environment of an individual consultation, focussed only on that student’s difficulties and knowledge, and working at the student’s own pace. Our program does not replace individual consultations, and indeed students seek individual help sometimes because the advice online alerts them to a problem they were unaware of and to the possibility of getting help with it (cf. Harris & Ashton, 2012, p. A78). There were students in the sociology subject who booked consultations with me, having “met” me in their LMS or in the workshops. However, the

numbers were not problematic, and the meetings were useful in clarifying their understanding of the work.

11. Conclusion

This initiative in teaching writing online was modest, but it did not suffer from some other weaknesses that afflict more ambitious, systemic attempts at embedding, particularly the costs of teaching and preparation time. This kind of approach does require the ALL specialist to familiarise him/herself with the subject curriculum and select suitable texts with which to illustrate salient points of advice, but this can be done largely in the weeks before the semester when individual teaching demands are light. Ideally, time can be redirected from preparing and teaching generic workshops to preparing subject-specific materials. The demands on subject lecturers are negligible, as the necessary consultations about the subject and the logistics of collaboration can be done in an hour or two. The benefits, however, can be considerable, in alerting subject teachers to the reasons for students' common difficulties, and modelling ways that they can usefully address these.

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Appendix A: Kate’s How & Why, Week 3

Planning your reflective essay: a strategy for making notes

In your reflective essay, you are asked to give an account of your socialisation, relating your own experience to what you’ve read about this concept. Everybody’s life story is different, but each of us is shaped by our belonging to some broad social categories of socio-economic class, ethnic or cultural background, and gender. For example, I’m a middle-class, anglo (white) woman. How did I learn what it means to be middle-class, or anglo, or a woman? In other (sociological) words, how did I get **socialised** into this identity? Like most other people, I paid attention to the models all around me in my family, schools, peer groups, and the media. I imitated some things, resisted others, and I’m still developing – but always within that social world of common assumptions and different opportunities.

This essay is short, but there’s a lot to think about. A planning grid can help you to get started by identifying what has to be discussed, and how those different things relate to one another. For this assignment, here’s one possible way of organising your material.

Social category	How the reading explains this concept	My position	Where did I learn what this involved?	How did this work to shape my social identity?
Class				
Ethnic/cultural group				
Gender				

If I begin to fill this in, the row that deals with class might look like this:

Social category	How the reading explains this concept	My position	Where did I learn what this involved?	How did this work to shape my social identity?
Class	Economic position (van Krieken et al 2000, p. 15)	Middle class	Family school	Adequate income, secure work, comfortable lifestyle Prepared all students to go to uni, get good jobs
Ethnic/cultural group				
Gender				

Those notes are brief, but later they could be developed into a paragraph like this:

Everybody is born into a social class, which van Krieken et al. (2000, p. 15) define as “the position of a group of people in a hierarchy of economic inequality” made up of upper, middle, and working classes. My family was middle-class, as my father had secure employment as a university professor, and we could always afford a comfortable, affluent lifestyle. One of the things my parents could buy was private education for me and my brothers. Like our parents, our schools expected that we would continue into higher education and get professional jobs in our turn, and each of us fulfilled those expectations.

Can you make use of this grid, or devise an alternative? What if you put “agents of socialisation” in the left-hand column? What kind of paragraphs would this result in?

Agents of socialisation	How the reading explains this influence	How did this shape my understanding of my gender, cultural group, and class?
Family		
School		
Peer group		