

Scenarios for collaboration: Idiosyncratic and ad hoc

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Academic Language and Learning (ALL) work involves collaborations between ALL lecturers and discipline lecturers. Charged with working alongside discipline lecturers to embed academic language and learning within the curriculum, ALL lecturers are faced with negotiating our place within these shared spaces. We identify important factors that shape the success of these collaborations. This includes uncertainties about how much time and information we are given to prepare and teach into the courses, the extent to which our suggestions and comments on the ways content is delivered, or assessments conducted, are welcomed or can be accommodated, and the extent to which we are included in the day to day communications and running of the course. In this paper we reflect on three collaborative teaching experiences involving first-year students. The literature describes different forms of collaborative approaches. Using these as a starting point, we extend our understanding of these practices by identifying and elaborating what we have found to be key dimensions of ALL lecturers and discipline lecturers working together. Personalities, experiences, and individual philosophies of learning of both discipline and ALL lecturers along with practical considerations come into play and contribute to what sometimes feels like an idiosyncratic and ad hoc approach to our work.

Key Words: Academic Literacy; academic skills development, embedded learning, team teaching, language and learning, curriculum, collaboration.

1. Introduction

Academic Language and Learning Lecturers (ALLs) are charged with working alongside discipline lecturers (DLs) to embed academic language and learning within the curriculum. Part of this embedding involves the collaborative work of team teaching. It has been acknowledged that it is often difficult to undertake this kind of collaboration in higher education contexts (Wingate, 2006). We believe that this is partly because as ALLs we are faced with negotiating our place in shared spaces, both within and outside the teaching space. Our motivation for this exploration stems from the observation that at times our professional judgment and confidence have been challenged during our team teaching efforts working with the discipline lecturers, despite our combined experience of more than five decades in the field of ALL in a range of higher education contexts, both nationally and internationally. By exploring our experiences of collaborative team teaching contexts, we examine what sometimes has appeared to be ad-hoc and idiosyncratic ways of working together.

Our approach to making sense of our team teaching collaborations is based on reflective practice drawing upon the work of Schön (2009), Etherington (2004), and further informed by Loughran's (2010) review of the literature on reflection and collaborative inquiry. Reflective

practice according to Schön (2009) can be seen as a form of problem setting, an interactive process whereby “we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them” (p. 40). Our approach consisted of several stages: first we discussed and compared our experiences in meetings held at six weekly intervals. The meetings were audio recorded, transcribed, and the key ideas revisited at the next meeting to identify any patterns or themes in our practice. At meetings we reflected on our roles as ALLLs and what we did in the team-teaching process at the intersection of our professional roles in relation to our colleagues and our students. Our reflections are a method for illuminating the experiences we had and our reactions to them. Between our meetings we also read relevant literature on collaborative practices and compared the experiences of others to our own. This process of reflection required us to step back, ponder, and make explicit meaning of our team teaching scenarios. What follows is the result of our group and individual reflections informed by ideas and concepts present in the literature. Key areas that emerged from our reflections may assist other ALLLs working with DLs in similar situations in their handling of the complexity of collaboration, in particular, team teaching, so that they might maximise its potential benefits for student learning. We limited involvement in this reflective cycle to only the ALLLs and not the DLs because we wanted to explore our own responses and compare them separate from those of the DLs. The exploration of DL perspectives can be part of future reflections on this collaboration.

2. Dimensions of collaborative practice

A common feature in the literature related to collaborative practice has been the way in which metaphors expressing difficulties or challenges have been used to describe and gain insight into the experience. For example, Zapf, Jerome, and Williams (2011, p. 41) in their review of the process of team teaching note it has been likened to a music “jam session”, “dancing”, or even “a high wire act”. Similarly, Frohman (2012, p. A52) used the metaphor of an “amorphous mass” to describe the interrelationship between institutional policy, practical considerations, her personal teaching philosophy, and the often unidentifiable way in which these factors “either supported or acted as barriers to the collaboration” (p. A52). In our own collegial discussions, metaphors representing our experiences included “untangling the various threads”, “keeping all balls in the air”, “running into a wall”, or “having our hands tied behind our backs”. This suggests that collaboration in teaching contexts is not straightforward. It can be a complex process often involving the management of a number of activities at the one time and can be accompanied by feelings of frustration. Our impressions of this complexity, and at times, lack of a sense of order or planning, leads us to feel that our collaborations with DLs are shaped by a complex array of factors that appear to be ad hoc or idiosyncratic.

Despite these challenges, there is potential value in collaboration between ALLLs and DLs. One of these is the potential for close alignment with the content and activities of units of study. This type of embedding of academic language and learning makes it “contextualised, relevant and discipline-specific” (Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1999, p. 5). This is in contrast to activities such as generic skills workshops or orientation programs which may be provided “to fill a gap in students’ needs or fix a perceived learning problem” (Frohman, 2012, p. A47) and which are likened to a “bolt-on approach that is remedial, not inclusive, and divorced from subject knowledge” (Wingate, 2006, p. 467). A number of other studies look at the dimensions of ALLL-DL collaboration in various forms (e.g. Brooman-Jones, Cunningham, Hanna, & Wilson, 2011; Dudley-Evans, 2001; Frohman, 2012; Stratilas, 2011). Several describe elements in common with situations like our own, namely, first year programs with large cohorts of students, many of whom have entered university with relatively low levels of academic achievement as measured by their entry scores (Brooman-Jones et al., 2011; Frohman, 2012). An example of one form of ALLL-DL collaboration is that described by Stratilas (2011) in relation to the benefits of the involvement of Learning Advisors (ALLLs) in reviews of course outlines and the alignment of course objectives to assignments. There are examples of successful collaboration to support student transition and learning which are based outside the discipline content classrooms involving three-way efforts of course coordinators, ALLLs and library staff (e.g. Einfalt & Turley, 2009, 2013; Kokkinn & Mahar, 2011). A more widespread

version of collaboration (involving a range of professional groups including ALLLs) is advocated in the so called “third generation” approaches and strategies to the orientation and engagement of first year students, as part of transition pedagogies described by Wilson (2009) and Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010).

Team teaching is a form of collaboration that has been described in a number of studies. Zapf et al. (2011) argue that bringing together lecturers from different disciplines in front of social work students at the University of Calgary created opportunities for the lecturers to “learn from colleagues, to respond to others’ material, and to have them challenge one’s own” and that this enabled them to develop “as teachers and as professionals” (p. 49). Rather than having one “master of knowledge” providing answers to a specific problem, multiple lecturers are able to bring multiple perspectives, thus enabling students to engage with a diversity of thinking in their construction of knowledge. Zapf et al. (2011) stress the importance of mutual respect and intellectual equity between the different lecturers involved. Finkel and Arney (1995) believe that for team teaching to work, participants need to appraise and make use of difference on all levels of the teaching experience. These differences include gender, age, culture, experience, worldviews, and priorities in organising teaching content. By feeling safe as intellectually equal partners and embracing difference, it is believed that team teachers can model meaningful interaction in front of students. More specifically, team teaching between ALLLs and DLs has been documented in a number of studies (Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Hamil Mead, 2009; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Kerridge, Kyle, & Marks-Maran, 2009; Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008). Kerridge et al. (2009) reflect upon the student experience stemming from a team teaching activity in a higher education nursing module in the UK. Here, an ALLL and a DL interact in front of the class to discuss “specific topics from divergent perspectives, and then engage . . . the students in this discussion” (p. 49). In this context, Kerridge et al. (2009) propose that knowledge is perceived by students as a constructed, contested, and changing phenomenon.

Other factors such as the support of high-level stakeholders and evaluation are also seen as key to the success of collaborative activities involving ALLLs and DLs. In a study of collaborative efforts across academic programs within the Faculty of Health at the Queensland University of Technology, Frohman, (2012) found that the support of high-level stakeholders, such as the Faculty Assistant Dean of Teaching and Learning, was invaluable for the success of her programs and initiatives. Similarly, the communication of regular and ongoing evaluation to a range of stakeholders was seen as a way to validate and promote these modes of collaboration.

Through the method of reflecting upon our practice, the key dimensions of collaboration we identified and will focus on are: building rapport with DLs, approaches to teaching and learning, and the negotiation of our roles. We continue our discussion around these themes.

2.1. Building rapport

Common sense suggests that it is important for ALLLs and DLs to establish positive and productive working relationships. Our experience suggests that a positive relationship makes working together more pleasant. However, to what extent is good rapport paramount to the success of any collaborative effort? Good rapport may not be the only dimension that needs consideration. For example, one of the authors reflects that:

I get on well with my team teacher. We enjoy each other’s company. However, we have quite different approaches to teaching that we haven’t really had time to synchronise or align in a single semester. I think we need to explore ways to team teach that draw on the strengths of our different approaches and that ultimately, enhance our students’ learning experiences.

This reflection suggests that the relationship may be positive but it can take time to build the kind of rapport that allows both DL and ALLL to maximise the benefits of their different approaches to teaching. A study by the City University of Hong Kong (1998) indicates that these kinds of collaborative relationships in teaching may take as long as three years to develop. Relationship building can be facilitated by factors such as co-location. Brooman-Jones et al. (2011), in a case study involving the embedding of academic literacy skills in a business

diploma at University of Technology Sydney, found that the sharing of an office by an academic literacy coordinator and a DL facilitated their “close working relationships and regular conversations” (p. A7).

A reoccurring theme in our discussions is the perceived need to “tread softly” when first commencing team teaching. We felt we needed to hold back and to not always express our opinions as candidly as DLs might. This is done to preserve or facilitate the development of rapport before proactively engaging with the DL. This requires professional judgement, along with highly reflective and critical skills on our part. There can sometimes be a tension between developing a relationship for the future and meeting the needs of the current cohort of students as illustrated in the following reflections by two of the authors:

At times the relationship seemed to have a greater priority, I felt I needed to secure it – stabilise the relationship to develop mutual confidence in this way of working before suggesting alternatives which may have been perceived as challenging or overly assertive.

and:

Yes, I felt in a very similar way at the beginning of the semester. Later on in all experiences I became a little bit bolder and made my comments without thinking too much about the relationship. I wanted us to have more of a dialogue in class.

Our experiences indicate that certain personal characteristics seem to be desirable for the success of collaborative work, especially team teaching. For example, participants need to have excellent teamwork skills, and be interested in, and comfortable with, sharing the experience of preparation and teaching with another person. This requires time and patience. An honest and open approach to communication with the team teaching partner is desirable in collaborative relationships. However, in light of our comments above about the need to “tread softly”, that honesty may be tempered by the need to allow a sound foundation for the relationship to develop.

Establishing rapport is influenced by the decisions about who might be involved in the teaching collaboration. Staff may be allocated or expressions of interest called for. Zapf et al. (2011, p. 44) argue that for a teaching team to work, it “appears unproductive to assign faculty members to collaborative teaching teams”. Rather than being told they must work with a colleague, it is suggested that teachers should volunteer to work with colleagues they already know and feel comfortable working with. This is not always possible and is different to most of our experiences. Our teaching teams were formed on the basis of who was available rather than who knew each other and as a result we found we each spent much of the first semester working to establish rapport and a sound foundation for our relationships. How we went about this varied depending on a number of factors, such as personalities and approaches (of both ALLLs and DLs), course structures, and the influence and level of support provided by the broader curriculum and faculty structures.

2.2. Approaches to teaching and learning

Differences in underlying philosophies and conceptions of teaching and learning held by the ALLLs and DLs influence the ways collaboration between them takes place. They appear to lie at the heart of many of the confusions and frustrations experienced. An example of how ALLL approaches to learning differed from DL approaches was evident when DLs suggested that academic programs already provided adequate academic language and learning resources and it was just a matter of the students making use of them. In one instance, these resources were in the form of links to websites and lengthy documents that many students found challenging to access and understand. As ALLLs we felt that our backgrounds in education and experiences as teachers in different contexts have taught us to be comfortable with the notion that learning does not happen just because something has been resourced. Our experience also tells us that directing students to a website on academic writing, for example, is unlikely to lead to learning without some impetus for students to engage with its content in some meaningful way. During

our reflections we discussed our understandings of the incremental nature of learning as well as the need for opportunities for learners to practice, get things wrong, receive formative feedback and have a second, and even a third go at getting something right. In our collaborations with the DLs there were instances that suggested that some DLs did not share our views of the kinds of support that should be provided to students. For example, one DL responded to the suggested strategy of providing students with some models of writing that demonstrated features being assessed (such as incorporation of ideas from readings with appropriate in-text referencing), saying “but that would be spoon feeding them. They need to learn that for themselves”. What we felt was explicit teaching was regarded by this DL as working against the creation of independent learners. Examples of these kinds of philosophical and practical differences in our approaches to teaching and learning emerged from our reflections.

A further difference occurs at the programming level. Class activities and assessments strongly reflect different notions of teaching and learning. An illustration of this is in the following reflection:

At times I felt that there were few places where I could make an impact in the unit, and those which I did identify were fleeting within the structure of the unit so there was not really an opportunity to look at anything in depth. I felt that my usual approach to working with students was also constrained by the large number of activities, the type of activities and the frequent assessment tasks. As a newcomer to the unit it appeared that there was a lack of priority or importance assigned to these numerous tasks which meant it was difficult to work out where to place my time and effort. ... I found that the tutor’s view of what was important amongst the activities differed to mine. The tutor had a focus on the assessment activities – whilst I had a focus on the development of skills to approach these activities and to apply those skills to other subjects.

While some of the differences in our approaches to teaching and learning were more salient and easy to identify, sometimes we find we can be less aware of, or take for granted situations when our approaches are similar and we are “in sync” with our discipline colleagues. This fact is seen in the comment:

[i]t is easy to speak about issues of learning with my colleagues in Education. We speak the same language – use the same terminology. For example, I can speak about ‘scaffolding’, ‘incremental learning’ or ‘independent study strategies’ and it feels that we are more or less on the same page. Also, the idea of two teachers in the one classroom isn’t so foreign to them, particularly if they have come from working in schools.

Approaches to teaching and learning were also developed through the process of collaboration between the ALLL and DL. The example that follows in many ways parallels the experiences of Zapf et al. (2011) where two lecturers with different fields of expertise come together. This example from one of our reflections illustrates how, having established good rapport, one of the authors was able to work alongside the DL and contribute a different perspective on the materials being discussed in a way that engaged the students with the reading materials.

About four weeks into team teaching, my colleague and I noticed that most students were not engaging with their assigned readings. We had to come up with a new way of engaging students with the readings. The lecturer and I modelled a conversation about one of the readings in front of the students, talking to one another about what had struck us in the readings. Each of us took a paragraph and analysed it in terms of key concepts, language and underlying values. We pointed out techniques the writers had used to make their points. We discussed the etymology and connotations of key phrases. All the while, the students watched and listened. We then moved to discuss another paragraph and invited students to become part of the conversation. Finally we said, ‘Okay, you saw what we were trying to do here in front of you with the text you had to read for today. What if you now tried to do the

same in your small groups?’ The discussions the students had about the readings were wonderful. It was exciting to feel the energy in the room. I think that the relationship between the lecturer and myself was strongest in those moments, perhaps as the relationship with the students was equally strong.

Zapf et al. (2011, p. 40) describe this as an “inquiry-centred” approach where the students are first perceived “as auditors then as full participants in the collegial conversation in the construction of knowledge” (p. 40). A form of dialogic pedagogy can be seen here. Game and Metcalfe (2009) observe that “[w]hen there are no longer individual sources of energy and knowledge, the dialogue involves everyone as learner and everyone as teacher” (p. 46). This kind of collaborative practice helps us to explore teaching techniques and inspires new ways of thinking about problems.

Finally, there is a need for anyone involved in team teaching collaborations to be ready to change her/his approaches to teaching. Any shared teaching space requires the lecturers to establish a comfortable fit with their co-lecturers and this means we each need to think about and adapt the roles we take on.

2.3. Negotiating roles

Bringing together the two separate fields of discipline knowledge and knowledge about student language and learning requires both the ALLL and DL to rethink their roles inside and outside the classroom. What has been described in the literature as the need for “knitting together knowledge and language teaching” or making “different parts of our practice mesh together” (Daddow, Moraitis, & Carr, 2013, p. 59) are, in our experiences, complex processes dependent on the successful merging of two bodies of scholarship. A plethora of management and psychological studies has been published on teams and team effectiveness in organisational settings, however, studies on the conditions that affect the successful implementation of teacher teams in higher education are still scarce.

A team can broadly be defined as “a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems” (Cohen & Bailey, 1997, p. 241). However, in a higher education context these characteristics may not be so easily attained, for example “many solo lecturers fear the prospect of team teaching because they imagine the other as judge of their vulnerabilities” (Game & Metcalfe, 2009, p. 49). Indeed, we have found that although teamwork between ALLL and DLs is essential to our collaborative efforts, it does not necessarily mean that we share responsibility for outcomes, nor are our teams perceived as an “intact social entity” (Cohen & Bailey, 1997, p. 241).

One of our reflections demonstrates an exploration of the different and evolving roles the ALLL adopted in relation to her positioning in the class and her changing levels of comfort with the knowledge or content of the discipline. We find these feelings of confusion to be a challenge which we each need to resolve. Similar reports can be found in the literature (Frohman, 2012; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011).

The roles I tried to negotiate were those of lecturer, language and learning specialist and student. Since I was attending the lectures like the students, I felt I also had to play the role of the ‘good student’. I remember that I was fairly nervous because the first three weeks of team teaching in the tutorials was intense. I was intimidated by the complexity and pace of the program. I felt I had to keep up with the lecturer and be ahead of my students. I spent many hours reading and preparing. I observed the lecturer closely in the first tutorial discussion, teasing out the important themes from the morning’s lecture. Then it was my turn. The first time I led this activity I didn’t feel confident enough to respond to all the students’ questions. At one point I turned to and invited my team teaching colleague to offer additional comments. This resulted in the DL taking over the activity which we had

agreed that I would lead. This happened a couple of times in the first weeks of our collaboration until I raised this in our planning meeting. We decided that in the next week the lecturer would sit at the back of the class and take notes while I was having the conversation with the students. This time all went well. I elicited many ideas and thoughts from the students and reflected on them without feeling dependent on the lecturer. I felt equal but different without the earlier pressure of having to become the content expert.

As Zapf et al. (2011, p. 45) observe, there is “no consensus in the literature on the issue of leadership within teaching teams”. It has been argued that task equity and role (Ginther, Phillips, & Grineski, 2007) should be negotiated immediately in the teaching team so as to discourage students from aligning with the “perceived dominant faculty, against the subordinate” (p. 207). We found that feeling equal with the discipline expert in front of the students was very important when negotiating our professional role in front of the DL and the students. One of us observed:

The lecturer tried very hard to facilitate my occupying the shared teaching space in the classroom. In our weekly meetings we carefully planned our activities so that each of us could take the lead on an equal number of activities in the classroom. And we switched roles throughout the semester. When the lecturer did the administrative side at the start of classes in one week, I would do this the other week. When the lecturer facilitated the discussion of the lecture content in one week, I did it the next week. Thereby we alternated roles evenly and signalled to the students that what each of us had to communicate was equally important independent of our respective field of expertise.

However, the ALLL was also aware of the fact that students might find her responses to their comments and questions confusing if they differed from the DL’s feedback. One student actually articulated this very well by saying to the ALLL: “First I found it pretty confusing when you would say something different to what [lecturer’s name] had said in response to my comment. But then I thought it is quite funny that I can think of this in two different ways.” We feel that this kind of close dialogue with the students is necessary to gain their trust while not trying to assume the identity or role of the discipline lecturer. The student’s quote above also illustrates that she was ready to “go beyond [her] preconceived ideas, expectations” of having a sole authority in the classroom (Game & Metcalfe, 2009, p. 49). These kinds of episodes make us more confident about our roles in the team taught classroom.

We found the negotiation of a mentoring role in the ALLL and DL relationship can work in several ways as the semester and the relationship develops. The DL may act as a mentor, or in the case of the following reflection, the ALLL may take that role:

The tutor and I communicated weekly about the lesson plans and learning activities, and the tutor observed my interactions with the students. Mid way in the semester the tutor sought my guidance in the development and implementation of several new activities. Our teaching styles were converging through an informal and almost implicit mentoring experience. This opened the door to more explicit mentoring in both approaches to pedagogy and broader professional issues.

We all encountered instances where DLs were more or less explicitly asking for help with designing their learning activities, suggesting a different type of collaboration with ALLLs than would be had with their discipline peers. The reflections in this section demonstrate the variety of professional roles that need to be negotiated by the ALLL within each team teaching scenario. They demonstrate that we experience our roles in the ALLL-DL relationship as equal but different. We found that we needed to be flexible to switch between different identities, such as teacher, student, mentor and mentee to enhance our collaborations and achieve the best possible learning outcomes for our students.

3. Conclusion

The three themes recurring throughout our discussions about our collaborations have been the need to develop rapport with our DL colleagues, managing the differing approaches to teaching and learning, as well as the need to renegotiate our roles. There is no single formula for how collaboration works. Both parties need to be flexible, and “keep a number of balls in the air” to ensure that the collaboration continues in a successful way. As ALLs we sometimes need to hold back on our ideas in order to facilitate the collaborative relationship. We need to keep that up until a safe space, where we might influence change, can be negotiated. Understanding these processes and knowing that collaborations of this kind may vary from situation to situation or on the surface appear ad hoc or idiosyncratic, helps us to manage our feelings of frustration, or of “running into a wall”. Documenting our experiences through the reflective activities we have undertaken helps us to better understand how our different collaborative efforts, and in particular those that include team teaching, are evolving.

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