

Collaborating to embed the teaching and assessment of literacy in Education: A targeted unit approach

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This paper discusses collaborations at an Australian university between lecturers from the Centre for University Teaching and Learning (CUTL) and lecturers in the School of Education. These collaborations focus on embedding the teaching and assessment of literacy in the undergraduate teacher education curriculum. The paper describes collaborative practices and outcomes intended to make literacy more explicit in teaching, learning and assessment in two compulsory Education units: a new transitional first year unit and an established foundational second year unit. Central to these collaborations is the strategy of embedding literacy through targeted units – core, compulsory units that mark a major step in students’ progress through the course. The targeted unit approach signals a change in the CUTL focus from working with at-risk students adjacent to their studies, to embedding and integrating academic language and learning (ALL) knowledge and capacities within the curriculum. This strategy reflects the broad shift in ALL practice from adjunct support of some students to an integrated curriculum that benefits all students. The underlying rationale for this practice is the inter-relationship of curriculum content and the skills and capacities required to successfully engage with it. The targeted unit approach focuses on integration with curriculum through a focus on the place and function of core units within courses of study. The implications for collaboration between disciplinary lecturers and ALL practitioners to embed literacy are discussed in terms of literacy in assessment, and a sustainable, targeted approach to the development of literacy across the curriculum.

Key Words: teacher education, curriculum, assessment, course.

1. Introduction

The development of increasingly sophisticated understandings of teaching and learning in higher education in general, and of student diversity and literacy in particular, has led to a growing need for collaboration between academic language and learning (ALL) practitioners and disciplinary lecturers to embed the teaching, learning and assessment of literacy in the curriculum. This paper discusses collaboration between academic language and learning lecturers and disciplinary lecturers in two targeted units in a Bachelor of Education degree. Inherent in these ongoing collaborations is a shared view of the benefits of collaboration, together with a strong desire to collaborate to maximise students’ development of literacy.

The collaborations were initiated through broader developments in both the disciplinary and ALL contexts. From the disciplinary perspective, the approach was connected to national accreditation requirements to ensure graduate standards around literacy. From the ALL perspective, and in keeping with current practice in higher education, the approach was connected to the repositioning of our department from a student learning centre where students come for resources, workshops and individual sessions, to a teaching and learning centre with greater outreach across the university, including embedding and integrating the teaching, learning and assessment of literacy and academic skills into unit and course curricula. The targeted unit approach builds on the work of Harris and Ashton (2011) who discuss the effectiveness of collaboration between ALL practitioners and disciplinary lecturers through specifically targeted core discipline units aimed at reaching the greatest number of students in need. However, rather than a focus on 'at-risk' students (a concept that reflects deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010)), or poorly performing units (Frohman, 2012), our approach is focused on those units that mark a major step in students' progress through a program of study.

Therefore, the collaborations are based on the strategy of targeted units – core, compulsory units – whose content is central to sequential and developmental learning within the course. Collaboration in the first year unit occurred primarily over one year, and focussed on teamwork between disciplinary lecturers and ALL lecturers to create a new unit. ALL input focussed on the scaffolding and modelling of assignments and the integration of academic and generic literacy into assessment. Collaboration in the already established second year unit is now entering its fourth year. The main outcomes of this collaboration are the development of co-curricular resources, and a focus on literacy through assessment and within the discipline of Education.

Following a brief discussion of the development of literacy in higher education and the application of collaboration and embedding to this, the paper reviews the collaborative activities undertaken in the two units. The main insights that have emerged from the collaboration as a whole are then discussed in terms of literacy in assessment, and a targeted approach to the development of literacy across the curriculum.

2. Developing literacy in higher education

The relationship between literacy and the development of content knowledge and expertise has long been recognised. As early as 1986, Bizzell argued that language, discourse forms, and ways of thinking are necessarily inter-related. Literacy is fundamental to the ability to participate in a discourse community (Northedge, 2003) and, therefore, inseparable from learning in higher education (Devereux & Wilson, 2008, p. 124). Chanock (2007) argues that the separation of literacy from content "makes sense only if you regard the text as a vehicle for the writer's thoughts, and separable from the thoughts themselves" (p. 273). Writing, reading, researching and thinking in the university context are essentially linked to one another, and are developed and refined over time. As Percy (2014) points out, the tradition of a separation between literacy and content learning in higher education is "more an accident of history than the result of sound pedagogical decision-making" (p. 2).

Despite these understandings, the perspective that often underlies conceptualisations of literacy in higher education is a student deficit perspective (Devereux & Wilson, 2008; Hathaway, 2015; Lea & Street, 1998, 1999; Thies, 2012; Wingate & Tribble, 2012), in which literacy is viewed as an essential general skill that some students lack. Lea and Street (2006, p. 368) argue that this perspective still underlies the dominant 'study skills' model of student writing and literacy. According to Valencia (2010, p. xiv), deficit thinking is ultimately about power, with the 'blame' located in the individual rather than in the system. The deficit perspective aligns neatly with the growth of social inclusion in higher education, resulting in the position that expanding education to non-traditional students necessarily brings with it literacy deficits, a separation of academic language and learning from disciplinary content, and the need for remedial ALL support (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014, p. 12). In a deficit perspective, and in contrast to the view of literacy as active knowledge-making, literacy is approached as a set of de-contextualised skills that can be 'added-on' as extra-curricula activities, as required.

The alternative view that has gained increasing recognition is that literacy and content are inherently integrated and that literacy in higher education is best developed in the context of disciplinary studies (Arkoudis, 2014). The development of literacy cannot be assumed to occur outside of curricula, but must be scaffolded in connection with content-based learning. Jacobs (2008) stresses the need to induct novice students through modelling by members of discourse communities, while Devereux and Wilson (2008) highlight the importance of scaffolding “the literacy practices of the university... [and the] university course” (p. 126). However, while disciplinary lecturers themselves typically have high levels of academic literacy, they may not have the skills or understanding required to scaffold students’ development of academic literacy (Barrie, 2007; Briguglio, 2014, p. 18).

Collaboration between disciplinary lecturers and ALL practitioners has emerged as an effective way of embedding the development of literacy within disciplinary curricula (Arkoudis, 2014; Chanock, Horton, Reedman, & Stephenson, 2012; Jacobs, 2008; Percy, 2014). Such collaboration can occur on many levels: within units, courses, or as institution-wide strategies (Barrett-Lennard, Chalmers, & Longnecker, 2011). Harris and Ashton (2011, p. 80) identify a continuum of collaboration from adjunct, ‘bolt-on’ forms such as additional literacy workshops to more integrated and embedded collaboration involving curriculum development to embed the learning, teaching and assessment of literacy in core units. Similarly, Wingate and Tribble (2012) note various degrees of collaboration and embedding between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) specialists and disciplinary lecturers, moving from writing being taught by EAP specialists using unit texts, to jointly planned writing instruction and team-teaching, to disciplinary lecturers teaching writing. The highest levels of embedding and support are achieved when disciplinary lecturers are actively involved in integrating language development into their units and courses, and provide ongoing and embedded support (Briguglio, 2014, p. 42).

One of the challenges for collaboration between disciplinary lecturers and ALL practitioners is to initiate forms of embedding that reach the greatest number of students in a sustainable way. Rather than focusing on embedding literacy in isolated units, a more effective approach is one that integrates literacy development with the academic development inherent to any program of study at a tertiary level (Percy, 2014, p. 7; Thies et al., 2014).

3. A targeted unit approach

The targeted unit approach presented in this paper focuses on core units at different stages of a degree program and aims to embed the development of literacy into teaching and assessment activities in a way that responds to the challenges students encounter in these units. The approach necessarily includes an implicit recognition of each unit within the context of the course as a whole. In this way, the approach aims to develop students’ skills and capacities incrementally, with strategic support provided in targeted units across course levels.

The two units targeted in the collaborations described in the following sections were selected for their strategic importance in the course. Over the four-year Education degree, there are transitional challenges in the first year; greater conceptual, academic and organisational challenges in the middle years; and the perseverance and management challenges of combining university study with professional placements in the final year. Within the University’s new curriculum, in which each school-based degree includes a core, compulsory, first year Transition unit, the new Education Transition unit was designed to provide an introduction to the skills and attitudes required for pre-service teacher education and was therefore an obvious target for collaboration. The second year unit was targeted because of its function of introducing students to complex educational concepts and learning processes that are also the foundation of subsequent programming units within the course. Importantly, this unit consistently achieves high ratings from students with regard to unit quality and student satisfaction. Neither unit, nor their student cohorts, have been targeted as ‘at-risk’, rather the units have been targeted in terms of their function within the Education program.

Before describing the collaborations in these units in more detail, it is useful to outline literacy requirements in Education. The national approach to accreditation of teacher education pro-

grams, proposed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) in 2011, includes new accreditation requirements that either entrants' and/or graduates' "levels of personal literacy and numeracy should be broadly equivalent to those of the top 30 per cent of the population" (AITSL, 2011, p. 12). The recently released Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group report (TEMAG, 2014) recommends "higher education providers use the national literacy and numeracy test to demonstrate that all pre-service teachers are within the top 30 per cent of the population in personal literacy and numeracy" (p. 17). The onus is on teacher education providers to support the literacy and numeracy development of their students, and to have documented approaches for accreditation requirements. Importantly, 60% of university entrants are not admitted on the basis of their Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR), which is the "final year secondary student ranking that locates a student's overall achievement as a percentile ranking within each state/territory" (AITSL, 2013, p. 4), and over 70% of teacher education entrants are non-ATAR entrants (AITSL, 2013, p. 8). In addition, a Bachelor of Education is a level 7 degree within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). At this level, course learning outcomes include high level thinking and communication skills, including the ability to "review critically, analyse, consolidate and synthesise knowledge", and to "present a clear, coherent and independent exposition of knowledge and ideas" (AQF, 2013, p. 16). Ensuring that students are able to meet these academic and professional standards was a large part of the rationale for the collaborations described below.

4. Collaboration in the creation of a new first year unit: review and major outcomes

The first year transition unit was targeted as a new unit designed to transition incoming students into the thinking and academic practices of the School of Education, and as the first in a series of compulsory, progressive and discipline-specific research units run in each year of the course. The unit has an enrolment of between 400 and 500 students each year, including off-campus students.

The two ALL lecturers were part of a collaborative team led by the School's Associate Dean Learning and Teaching (ADLT), which included Education lecturers from across the Education program and the two Education First Year Advisors. The input of the ALL lecturers focussed primarily on modelling the major assignments as part of unit curriculum, collaborating with the ADLT on integrated assessment, and embedding the teaching and assessment of literacy. In addition, one ALL lecturer collaborated with Education librarians concerning specific input into the curriculum regarding information literacy and library research skills. The result of these collaborations is that key concepts and academic practices are introduced, practiced and developed in an integrated manner through lectures, tutorials and assessments.

4.1. Modelling assignments as part of the curriculum

The unit's assignments are comprised of short weekly pieces of reflective writing, an annotated bibliography, and an essay. The annotated bibliography feeds into the essay, and both are scaffolded through guided research. ALL lecturers had particular influence in developing the annotated bibliography proforma, with sections for summary, critique and reflection, and including attention to referencing, quoting and paraphrasing practices and conventions. Furthermore, the unit assignments were modelled by ALL and Library staff, working in collaboration. In lecture format, the Education librarians modelled literature search strategies and relevant information literacy skills, and ALL lecturers modelled critical reading, writing an annotated bibliography, and the processes of writing an essay. Throughout the unit, tutorial activities reflected the focus of each lecture and gave students opportunities to discuss and practice the concepts and skills modelled in lectures.

4.2. Integrated assessment

The two ALL lecturers also collaborated with the ADLT to develop marking rubrics for the assessments that reflected the unit's attention to the development of both literacy and discipline-specific skills and practices. In the essay assessment rubric, the two categories of content and

ideas, and use of literature, were awarded one third of the marks each, and the two categories of essay structure and writing style one sixth of the marks each. Explanations of each category were provided (see examples in Table 1), as were clear descriptors for five distinct levels of quality in each.

Table 1. Essay marking rubric examples.

Essay structure	Overall structure (introduction, body and conclusion); use of paragraphs and topic sentences; flow and coherence of whole text
Writing style	Academic tone, sentence structure & variety, grammar, vocabulary, spelling

As with the rubrics developed in the second year unit (see below), these rubrics were intended to be used by and to inform both tutors and students about literacy development through increased consistency of terms, meanings and application.

4.3. Embedded teaching

A particular feature of this collaboration was the inclusion of embedded teaching, with one ALL lecturer teaching the unit in one tutorial group over the semester. While this was initially a resource intensive activity, it has proved to be a valuable use of resources in terms of being able to make minor adjustments to the curriculum, tutorial activities and unit resources in the light of direct experience, in turn ensuring the longer term viability and sustainability of the effectiveness of the ALL input into this collaboration.

5. Collaboration in an established second year unit: Review and major outcomes

The established second year educational psychology unit was also targeted because of its function in the whole course. The unit represents an increased level of skill and content complexity for students and is the foundation of subsequent programming units. It has had an enrolment of between 300 and 400 students each year, including off-campus students. Students are encouraged to integrate theory and research with practice, in order to develop understandings about how research about learning and motivation will influence their own teaching practice. Consequently, what Devereux and Wilson (2008, p. 124) refer to as the “nexus between literacy and learning” is particularly apparent: the learning tasks require students to use high level thinking skills, synthesise and evaluate information from many sources, and integrate content with their own belief systems. In addition to co-curricular workshops and materials, collaboration in the unit has also led to the development of co-curricular resources and a rubric for assessing literacy development.

5.1. The development of co-curricular resources

The development of resources for the unit has evolved over the collaboration. In response to a request from the disciplinary lecturer in 2011, one of the ALL lecturers organised workshops on language, structure, paraphrasing and referencing specific to the assessment requirements. In 2012, the ALL lecturers added the workshops ‘Preparing your assignment for submission’, and ‘Writing essays in exams’, based on actual assignment/essay/exam questions, and with some application of strategies to students’ assignment drafts. In 2013, the unit coordinator and ALL lecturers worked together to highlight specific places in the curriculum where additional materials could be incorporated. These resulted in a series of dedicated ‘voice-over-text’ recorded workshops on the topics of reading a chapter, starting assignments, editing and proof reading assignments, referencing, and sentence structure. Each involved discussion and modelling, and all but the workshop on sentence structure were focused directly on unit materials and assignments. In 2014, the unit coordinator and ALL lecturers collaborated in planning relevant ALL workshops and activities for each of the unit’s eleven topics. The new workshops included: getting organised; effective note-making; writing the essay; reflecting on your progress; the per-

sonal, professional and academic ‘voices’ in assignment two; applying feedback; using sources; and preparing for exams. Importantly, students have time allocated each week to select from these resources, as well as other materials designed to support and extend content, as part of the unit study load.

5.2. The assessment of literacy

In 2014, the unit coordinator and ALL lecturers collaborated on designing a literacy assessment rubric. The rubric focussed on five specific criteria of academic writing: task fulfilment and organisation; genre and style; coherence; vocabulary; and sentence structure, grammar and punctuation. A detailed description accompanied each criteria (see Table 2). Clear descriptors of three distinct levels of quality in each criteria were also provided to tutors and students.

Table 2. Academic writing criteria.

Task fulfilment and organization	Address all parts of the task as outlined in the unit information guide; and present a well-organised response to the task with well-supported ideas.
Genre and style	Employ language styles appropriate for the genre (i.e. academic essay, personal reflection, ...) and for intended audience and purpose; and use information from a range of other sources and cite these accurately.
Coherence	Demonstrate clear, smoothly flowing writing; demonstrate effective paragraphing with logically sequenced information and ideas; and use a wide range of cohesive ties such as connectors and linking words to show the relationships between ideas
Vocabulary	Demonstrate a wide range of vocabulary, appropriate for purpose and audience; demonstrate use of vocabulary appropriate for unit content area; and demonstrate a high degree of accuracy with spelling.
Sentence structure, grammar and punctuation	Demonstrate a high degree of grammatical accuracy; use a variety of sentence structures, appropriate for genre and purpose; and demonstrate a high degree of accuracy with punctuation

In the first assignment, the five literacy criteria were equally divided in terms of marks, and together formed one third of the assessment. In the second assignment, task fulfilment was removed (the three distinct parts of the assignment were marked separately) and the remaining four literacy criteria formed one-fifth of the overall assessment. The aim of the rubric is to make particular aspects of literacy explicit to students, to facilitate tutor feedback, and to direct students to specific resources. The latter was achieved by having links to relevant resources alongside particular criteria.

5.3. Recognition of the particular literacy needs of Education students

The collaboration has led to an increasing awareness of the complexity of educational discourse in general, and of the different literacies required to complete characteristic Education assignments. For example, in the second assignment, students are required to use a range of writing styles, or what Northedge (2003) identifies as voices. The assignment includes a philosophy of teaching and learning which requires a personal voice, a lesson plan to illustrate the philosophy which requires a professional voice, and a rationale to explain how the lesson illustrates the philosophy and supports research regarding effective teaching and learning which requires an academic voice. This more nuanced understanding suggests the need for more explicit instruction on the various genres and registers involved in teacher education (Devereux & Wilson, 2008; Macken-Horarik, Devereux, Trimmingham-Jack, & Wilson, 2006).

6. Discussion

Reflection on these issues has led to deeper understandings and awareness about collaboration between ALL practitioners and disciplinary lecturers, and about the nature of embedding the teaching and assessment of literacy in the curriculum. Importantly, the collaborations have become more meaningful and effective over time, and have moved towards greater integration of literacy with unit curriculum. Chanock, Horton, Reedman, and Stephenson (2012) similarly report the potential for increased integration as the advantages of embedding literacy in curriculum become apparent. Likewise, Harris and Ashton (2011) report an expansion of their program in response to their own growth in understanding of and ability to embed literacy in curriculum. Over time, the collaborations have facilitated a co-development of understanding about the nature of literacy in the context of a university-level Education program. The following are two key principles that have emerged.

6.1. Embedding literacy in assessment

One insight emerging from the collaborations is that all literacy development activities need to be linked to assessment. Assessment drives learning to a significant degree, and is recognized as a key focus for collaboration between disciplinary lecturers and ALL practitioners (Devereux & Wilson, 2008; Harris & Ashton, 2011). As Thies, Wallis, Turner, and Wishart (2014, p. 51) point out, it is important that “students can see a clear correlation between the literacies being scaffolded and completion of specific assessment tasks.” It is also necessary for the assessment of oral and written communication skills to be core business in university teaching and learning, alongside assessment of disciplinary knowledge (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014). In fact, one of the major challenges for collaboration around literacy is to determine how literacy is to be assessed and what literacy is ‘worth’ within particular assessments. Addressing this challenge involves both the implicit relationship between literacy and learning, as well as an explicit reflection of literacy standards. In the context of teacher education, such assessments also need to take into account the accreditation requirements of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (AITSL, 2014) in terms of content, and the requirements of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) in terms of literacy.

As such, the assessment of literacy was a key component of both collaborations. As well as the need to incorporate literacy within assessment criteria, the collaborations also highlighted the need for consistency in the provision of feedback, both at the course and unit levels. Towards this end, common literacy assessment rubrics, such as first and second year literacy assessment rubrics, both incorporating ‘structure’, ‘style’, ‘coherence’, ‘vocabulary’, ‘sentence structure’ and ‘grammar’, can assist in providing shared language and criteria for the progressive development of literacy across courses. Ensuring consistency at the level of targeted units can also then act as a model for other units.

6.2. Careful selection of target units

A final insight is that the kind of targeted approach described in this paper is necessarily part of and dependent on a broader strategy of embedding the teaching and assessment of literacy at the course level. A major rationale for the approach is that core, compulsory units play a key role in developing course content and skills over time. Therefore, targeted units need to be carefully selected to ensure progressive and sequential development of literacy, as well as sustainable use of resources.

As part of a sustainable institutional strategy, the project will target the Transition units in all Schools as the starting point for further embedding of the teaching and assessment of literacy across degrees. Within the broader strategy, these targeted units will play a crucial role in modelling the embedding of the teaching and assessment of literacy, and introduce tools such as literacy rubrics to provide a common language to inform discussion of literacy for both students and staff. In this way, targeted units can provide the cornerstones for more comprehensive and inclusive embedding of literacy in the curriculum.

7. Conclusion

The collaborations described in this paper were based on the strategy of embedding the teaching and assessment of literacy in targeted units, in this case two core, compulsory Education units that mark a major step in students' progress through their course. These collaborations reflect developments in both the disciplinary and ALL contexts. As a discipline, Education is required to meet particular accreditation standards that include its graduates having specified levels of literacy and numeracy.

As a cross-disciplinary practice, ALL is moving away from extra-curricula activities based on a deficit model of student capacity to collaboration with disciplinary lecturers focussed on embedding literacy development for all students within the curriculum. This move brings a number of challenges, including the need to gain greater understanding of the nexus between content, literacy, and academic skills, in other words, the inter-relationship of curriculum content and the skills and capacities required to successfully engage with it; the need to align literacy support with curricular activities and assessments; and the need to integrate literacy development at the course level. By focussing on core units, the targeted unit approach presented in the paper provides one strategy to meet these challenges.

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