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Teaching academic writing at the University of Wollongong

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Abstract

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Keywords

teaching, wollongong, academic, writing, university

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CHAPTER 5.

TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

By **Emily Purser**

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Initiatives for the development of literacy at the University of Wollongong are growing within an Australian national commitment to increase overall tertiary enrollment, provide access to students from less-advantaged groups, and enroll more international students. While this essay describes successful programs within the Academic Services Division at Wollongong built to support student literacy, especially academic writing, it primarily emphasizes the work of a problem-solving task force on English language proficiency aimed at building consensus for a collaborative, cross-disciplinary paradigm of literacy growth that moves away from the traditional idea of separable services. The essay profiles a new initiative in the Master of Science program that exemplifies uses of technology to make literacy growth integral to every aspect of student learning and success, including the design of mainstream courses. This initiative and others like it depend on the collaboration of language teachers and researchers with teachers in the target disciplines.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Wollongong is a mid-sized Australian university, organised into nine faculties and various graduate schools and research institutes, with a population of approximately 23,000 students and 1,000 teaching academics at its main campus, and growing numbers at its various satellite education centres and offshore operations. In its relatively short history, the institution has made a good name for itself, and is very comfortably positioned in annual national “ratings” competitions that attract federal funding rewards for teaching and research. The institution’s official story can be read through its website, but for

the teaching of academic writing, and how specific programs for any aspect of language development are conceived and funded here, various specific contextual factors need to be outlined.

One important factor influencing programmed development of students' literacy is the university's overall educational mission statement on graduate qualities, which to be meaningful, has to be related to curricular design and teaching. It expresses the institution's sense of standards, and indicates five types of ability that students are expected to achieve, including effective communication. Another important influence on programming for literacy development is the institution's planning around recruitment. Perceptions of how best to help students stay, engage, and succeed in their studies depend very much on the profile and specific needs of incoming students. Other perhaps less well recognised, but equally important, influences on how literacy development needs are understood and responded to are policies and established practices in teaching and assessment across the disciplines, and what teaching academics generally do or do not know about the linguistic nature of academic work.

This chapter discusses implications of all these factors in relation to the practicalities of developing students' capacity to do academic work. It reports on some good educational experiences resulting from collaborative curriculum design and co-teaching, and responds to frequently asked questions about whether, when, where, how and by whom various aspects of "language" might need to be taught in the context of higher education.

POSITIONING OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION

UOW expects its students to become informed, independent yet co-operative, highly articulate and ethical problem-solvers (see <http://www.uow.edu.au/student/qualities/index.html>). This conception of the overall learning outcomes of any degree program at the university is also explicitly linked to grant and award incentives, to help teachers develop their own capacity and career around innovative, and where appropriate, collaborative, curriculum design and pedagogy. Creating a very visible profile for oneself as a teacher whose practice realises national goals and provides the sorts of measurable outcomes upon which good institutional ratings and funding currently depend is rewarded. Not that teaching is as valued as research, but it can play an important role in career development here, and increasing numbers of teachers participate each year in the complex and time consuming business of institutionally managed self promotion (see UOW Focus on Teaching—Octal awards webpage). Such emphasis on the development of teachers' capacity is crucial to the development of students'

capacity in all aspects of tertiary level literacy, including writing. The matter of how students learn to communicate effectively, through all the various forms relevant to the production of new knowledge, needs to be seen as core business for all faculties, it is argued in this chapter.

LANGUAGE AS “SEPARABLE” FROM CONTENT VS. A COLLABORATIVE MODEL

But while written communication may be a crucial dimension of academic work, discussing it (let alone teaching it), is not easy when “language” is conceived as separable from the “content” being taught and learned in the disciplines. So the chapter looks also at the benefits of viewing teaching, learning, and assessment practices as language development work, and as the most appropriate site for the application of expertise in language education. While the collaborative practices described may question some established assumptions and traditions, they are proving very effective and seem to warrant publicity.

Educators across the disciplines are not generally in the habit of thinking about themselves as actual or potential teachers of English language. The very notion strikes many as a ludicrous imposition on, or confusion of, their role and purpose in higher education. It can also strike a note of strange for many language teachers, who might feel their roles or job security challenged. But serious questioning around which aspects of the medium of instruction (English language) need explicit, programmed attention at tertiary level should involve serious analysis of the types of comprehension and performance problems that actually occur in real educational scenarios, and for that it helps to have people with expertise in educational linguistics as participant observers. It is less than ideal when the expertise of language researchers and teachers is confined to the margins of academic curricula, rather than closely associated with (or as is sometimes appropriate, positioned firmly within) the processes of their development and delivery. Such argumentation is quite strong at UOW anyway, where discussion of everything to do with language education has intensified recently, in response to moves at the national level.

The relative ease or difficulty that students experience, as they learn to be good thinkers, speakers, and writers in academic contexts, depends on how the teaching here relates to their previous experience. Whether the difference between their university experience here and their past is slight and exciting or an intimidating chasm has to do with both the recruitment directions taken by senior executive and the institution’s marketing arm (in response to a complex range of external forces) and the ability and willingness of curriculum developers and teachers to adapt practices accordingly.

MEANS AND MEANING OF SUPPORT FOR CHANGING COHORTS

The federal government in Australia, as in many countries, wants to quite dramatically increase the overall number of citizens educated at tertiary level within the next two decades, and to increase the proportion of tertiary students coming from “low” socio-economic backgrounds and other traditionally disadvantaged social groups (DEEWR, 2008). At the same time, universities are required to attract a very substantial proportion of their funding from other sources. Philanthropic donations might develop into something of an income stream for some of the older universities with wealthy alumni (Allen Consulting, 2007, p. 7), but for the most part, the main source of non-government revenue is tuition fees on international students (Deloitte Access Economics, 2011, p. 6). And their education needs to be high quality, lest the international marketing of higher education become unsustainable (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010, pp. 1-2; Gillard, 2009). In the university’s current planning cycle, the intention is to increase the overall number of students, and the proportion from specified equity categories, as well as to maintain or increase the number of international students (UOW Strategic Plan, 2011, pp. 6, 10, 17). New markets for our education are constantly being sought, and any falling numbers in one area (such as postgraduate coursework programs) are to be met with higher recruitment into undergraduate and research degree programs.

Such student recruitment goals have implications for retention and performance, recognition of which is reflected in forms of support being provided for students’ development of academic literacy. But “support” still tends to be understood in limited terms. It is assumed to have more to do with additional programs and resources than with mainstream curricula and pedagogy across the disciplines. A proverbial elephant in the room at many curriculum review meetings, most discussion of such connections occurs in private conversations and in academic publications shared amongst a small number of scholars who are already in the habit of formulating such questions. The challenge remains to get adequate and appropriate support for the literacy development of current and future students into the design of mainstream disciplinary learning experiences. The situation is ripe for wider debate that includes those for whom it actually matters most.

The national quality auditing agency (AUQA) visited UOW in 2011 with two agreed questions: how do we support student transition into tertiary level education, and how do we support our international students? (imPAQT newsletter, 2010). Audits like this generate extensive documentation of current institutional practices, and in our case, urgent need was felt to come up

with a coherent and visible statement of overall institutional “strategy” for supporting development of academic literacy, and responding appropriately to the various English language development needs of incoming university students. Funds were allocated in 2010 for a strategic project investigating English Language Proficiency at UOW, which is framed to check how the institution does or does not yet well implement the Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency in Australian Universities, endorsed by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2009). The investigation behind that document began with a focus on international students using English as an additional language, but became a more general set of guidelines seen as relevant to all students.

THE DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

The slippage between “English language” and “academic literacy” throughout this discussion of support for diversifying student populations is deliberately aiming to draw attention to common ground and theoretical problems. It is often assumed in discussions across the institution that separate discourses and sources of funding around notions of social inclusion and internationalisation relate necessarily to different sub-groups of students and separate educational programs. These assumptions tend not to be challenged when “language” is understood to refer only to vocabulary and rules of syntax, spelling, and punctuation. Such narrow definition of language goes hand in hand with the view that the conceptual “content” of a discipline is non-linguistic and disembodied (put “into” language, but existing independently of any specific socio-linguistic processes through which people come to know and negotiate meaning), and with the conception of language education as error correction and training in “generic skills,” which might be taught outside the mainstream curriculum by “service” staff. When, on the other hand, language is understood to operate on multiple inter-related levels simultaneously, and to be the substance and instantiation of complex social contexts, fields of knowledge, subjectivities, and the ongoing reconstruction and negotiation of meaning, the very notion that “content” might be something other than language breaks down. When language education is conceived as examining the normal teaching and learning of an academic discipline from the perspective of language development processes, the relationship between those who best understand a discipline and those who best understand how language works and develops becomes quite different—and dramatically more useful to students’ learning.

DISCUSSIONS AND HOPED-FOR RESULTS OF THE STRATEGIC PROJECT FOR STUDENT LITERACY

However broadly or narrowly we define language and literacy in this context, we at least now have a shared picture of our students' need for, and our provision of, teaching programs for the development of students' academic "literacy": in preparation for, alongside, and as part of the various academic disciplines being taught and learned at UOW. The strategic project formed around questions of English Language Proficiency at UOW was perhaps the first time that the various practices constituting our formal programming for the development of students' academic literacy have been discussed and described together. Discussion has been informative as participants have compared how different providers of language education operate, considered how the roles of language educators are institutionalized (and for what purposes their programs are designed), and heard various views on academic literacy and existing development programs from both language educators and the faculties. But throwing a spotlight onto questions of students' preparedness for academic work at tertiary level, and how we help them develop capacity while doing it, as English, is also political. A long felt sense of competition between providers of language education is no longer quietly latent, as the message was given that senior executive will fund whichever "model" wins the argument. Suddenly language educators sense they have to defend their practices and fight for their professional lives and income streams.

The development of students' academic literacy is not, however, simply a matter of economics, and models and programs are not theoretically neutral—they represent particular ways of thinking about language. While there is some shared philosophical ground, there are also interesting conflicts of belief and interest, and very different types and levels of experience shaping views. Another complicating factor is that the report of these deliberations being drafted appears similar to ones emerging in other universities, rather than to be representing the words and agreements of the committee here. We live in hope that the process is just messy rather than undemocratic, and expect to reach, if not agreement on the meaning of literacy and the role of language in academic learning, at least a workable compromise on the wording of any institutional strategy that is to appear online for the world to see.

QUESTIONS ARISING

Meanwhile, to those who think most seriously about it, it is clear there can be no simple or one-size-fits-all solution to the complex range of issues and

questions that emerge around academic literacy, and of what language needs to be taught if students are to most effectively learn their chosen disciplines. The situation on the ground at this institution is and will no doubt remain more like a continuum of positions, hanging between two deeply dug-in poles of belief, jostled by voices blowing from various institutionalized roles and different histories in the teaching of English language. Language is everyone's business, and the more we talk about it, from any position, the better.

But key questions have emerged for this writer as a result of these high level institutional discussions, and shape the selective reporting of language teaching practices in this chapter, such as: Can a "free market" like ours, where various approaches to language education and learning support simply co-exist, supply the type and amount of literacy development demanded? Is it best to allow students and faculties to buy, try, and vote with their feet, or to centrally command? Should not programming decisions be based on reliable evidence of what provides students best support for learning the disciplines they come here to study—in terms of measurable learning outcomes within the students' target discipline itself? Within which model of practice are language education providers most likely to gather and report relevant evidence? Within which model of course design and delivery would academic writing instruction be most likely based on research into the linguistic reality of the disciplines taught and learned at UOW—a course provided for a fee by an Arts or Education faculty, or a project-based program tied to funding released on condition that data be gathered and outcomes reported to the institution? Are courses provided for a fee likely to be motivated by the students' actual needs, or by the provider's need to market their wares *prêt-à-porter*? Where are the target disciplines in the relationship between those selling and buying courses in language education? Whose interests are being served when educational policy and governance practice does not require mainstream courses in the disciplines to be designed in ways that are evidently most effective for the given students?

Perhaps the most important question to emerge out of the ongoing discussion of English language proficiency at UOW is how we model the qualities we want students to develop—how our own teaching, research, and governance practices reveal us as being well-informed, independent yet co-operative, highly articulate and ethical problem-solvers, whose work helps students develop appropriate academic knowledge and practice. The ethical dimension of language education here is not insignificant. About 30% of the operational budget of the institution is funded by the fees of international students, so we owe them a very great deal, and need to get their educational experience right. We also like to think that education has something important to do with the future of this nation and its people.

Collaboration in this problem-solving task force on English language proficiency at UOW has at least resulted in some broad assessment of risks and a good statement of principles and responsibilities, which officially represents the development of students' linguistic capacity as a responsibility to be shared by the whole university—students, all teaching academics, and systems. And as the written report morphs into something articulate enough for its harshest critics to accept, active participants in the process have at least become informed of the situation and the complexity of responding to it appropriately. The next section of this essay focuses on what this line of thinking means for academic literacy development in the disciplines, explaining programming choices that are proving particularly good for student learning.

THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC WRITING IN MAINSTREAM CURRICULA ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

Before zooming in on specific programs and practices developed with and for a particular discipline, it might help to quickly see the range of choices available to students at UOW for learning “about” academic writing and developing capacity to write academically: There are programs offered by a commercial college on campus as preparation to studies at the university proper (see UOW College website). There are some credit-bearing courses in academic writing provided by the Arts faculty on campus, which can be taken as electives within some degree programs (see ELL program webpage). And there are various options provided by a centrally-funded unit within the Academic Services Division (ASD) without charge to students. The ASD exists to support teaching academics and their students across the disciplines; the programs and services offered by its Learning Development unit range from introductory level extra-curricular workshops on specific aspects of common academic genres, to individual consultations about any aspect of academic work (and it is usually their writing that students want to talk about), to team-teaching arrangements in the disciplines and very varied and extensive curriculum development projects.

The more complex projects tend to be supported by additional funds allocated by senior executive, or by federal government grants, for specific strategic purposes, such as development of programs, scholarly discussion and publication of reports around first-year experience and transition, social inclusion, appropriate support for indigenous students, career development/work integrated learning, internationalization of curricula, and English language proficiency (see UOW's Teaching and Learning strategic projects site and its Focus on Learning website). It is through these sorts of collaborative teaching activi-

ties and curriculum development projects, focused as they are on the realities of learning and teaching academic disciplines here and now, and drawing as they do on very experienced informants that best practices in teaching academic writing tend to emerge.

USEFUL COLLABORATIONS WITH COLLEAGUES IN THE DISCIPLINES

Students also have various online options related to academic literacy, from the fairly generic resources for students (see UniLearning), to a wide range of subject-integrated blogs (on-campus access only) hosting scores of links to online language development resources and providing ongoing feedback. While there are and may always be situations where some form of add-on literacy development program based on some notion of “skills” is appropriate, increasing are the situations in higher education where it is recognized that a better approach to academic literacy (and oracy) development is to treat students’ mainstream courses as opportunities for intelligent collaboration between those with expertise in the discipline and those with serious knowledge and experience in the design of language education that supports disciplinary learning. Much time and effort of the central Learning Development unit at UOW is devoted to engineering useful collaboration with colleagues in the disciplines, because while very many teaching academics are highly attuned to and interested in removing obstacles to student learning, they often find it difficult to make the changes that make the difference for students’ development of literacy and learning. It is complex, and it is not possible to focus equally on research and teaching all of the time. UOW requires academics to prioritise (within limits) on an annual basis amongst the four elements of their core business (research, teaching, governance and professional association and/or community engagement), and provides various forms of academic support for the curriculum and teaching practice development activities prioritized, including its Academic Services Division.

Though not everyone is currently “singing from the same song sheet” on this matter or any other, there is growing consensus here as in the UK (see Ryan, 2011 and the Higher Education Academy’s Teaching International Students project) that when the teaching of academic writing becomes a whole-of-institution approach, learning outcomes for students are bound to be better than when “writing” is conceived, and its teaching programmed, around notions of separable “skills” divorced from the dialogue, reading, thinking, and practice (educational and professional) that constitute an academic discipline. When a major issue with serious consequence for everyone is at stake, an inter-disciplin-

ary approach is not only possible and probably more intelligent, it is a must. Whether the social issue is climate change or the standards of literacy and oracy across the disciplines through which we formally come to understand anything in academia, the sum total of outcomes is greater when collaboration between all stakeholders is well engineered and funded than when we develop and apply our expertise in silos.

As in any type of teamwork, the critical factor is professional management and funding. What we increasingly find at UOW is that big improvements are made for students when our activity around teaching academic communications is collaborative and focused on the design of mainstream assessment tasks, resources, and pedagogy within and for the students' target discipline. When two or a few informed and experienced heads work together, the development work is easier, quicker, more interesting, and satisfying for all concerned, and more fruitful, in terms of student learning outcomes. So this seems a model of practice providing lasting and exponentially multiplying returns from the initial investment.

LANGUAGE-FOCUSED LEARNING DESIGN: AN EXAMPLE FROM SCIENCE

Post-graduate coursework and research programs currently attract the greatest proportion of the international students at UOW, and so are a major focus of attention for some of UOW's Learning Development academics. Detail is given in other publications (e.g., Purser, 2011; Kupetz, in press), but one case of a purpose-built subject for post-graduate international students will illustrate points made throughout this chapter. In 2010, coinciding and aligned with the English Language Proficiency project, a project was internally funded to help document the development of learning designs for subjects delivered to international students. Based on principles developed in the AUTC learning designs project (2003) that describe learning sequences in terms of tasks, resources, and supports, the tasks in this case are engineered specifically to expand students' linguistic repertoire. The questions being asked in designing learning for language development in the disciplines are:

1. What types of assignment and learning activities help students notice disciplinary language and develop the academic literacy and oracy expected at UOW?
2. What kinds of learning material most help students complete such tasks?
3. What types of interaction best help students engage in learning, use resources effectively, and complete tasks successfully?

The pedagogical plans and resources are adaptable to a range of similar education scenarios at UOW or beyond. A subject developed for the beginning of the Master of Science program illustrates how the teaching of the target discipline is being approached from a language development perspective—an approach now shaping the design of other subjects at UOW.

Rather than the usual logic of course delivery, the approach being taken here is to foreground the students' learning activity, and to indicate visually throughout a website how the various informational resources are to be used to complete tasks, and what support will be given by teachers and peers. What is normally understood as course "content" is here presented as informational resources, to be drawn on in the guided process of completing specific tasks. Academic literacy, oracy and self-management are clearly fore-grounded as the major learning outcomes of the subject, and not treated as either "generic" or achievable outside the context of the teaching and learning of the target discipline. The whole science subject is presented to students as sets of inter-related processes of information searching, critical reading, text re-construction, and critical reflection on academic language and learning across their curriculum.

Each module within the eLearning site guides students through a sequence of necessary steps, scaffolding their awareness and control over the language involved and leading to greater communicative capacity and independence in organizing and completing the sorts of tasks routinely required throughout students' degree program.

Within each of these stages, students experience extensive modeling and guidance through annotated sample texts, process demonstration videos, integrated group discussion, regular feedback on drafts, and ongoing reflection on emerging practice. Students speaking voices are recorded and posted for group feedback and comparison against a model. A very wide range of lexicogrammatical possibilities in paraphrasing and summarising are demonstrated, discussed, and tested through the process of translating a published journal article into a visually supported spoken presentation and a poster.

In focusing on spoken presentation, students also develop understanding of good collaborative practice, by selecting one of the journal articles sourced for their literature review and, positioning themselves as a mock research team, translating the dense written text into a succinct visually-supported talk, in which each group member has equal time to speak.

Throughout the subject, students are guided to carefully observe and reflect on learning and academic language across the curriculum. The eLearning site in subjects like these is fundamental rather than ancillary, as it visualizes the design and guides the learning experience, freeing classroom time for intensive interaction, dialogue, trial and error, feedback and peer support. This is vital in

the context, as the building of strong social networks in the students' first two months at UOW has proven a key element in how this type of subject makes a difference to the subsequent learning experience of the students throughout their chosen course of study (Purser, in Kupetz, in press). The designs emerging are quite easily adaptable across different Learning Management Systems, social networking technologies, and contexts.

CONCLUSION

This profile essay has described a context wherein learning is usually assessed through some form of prose writing, but where students may not “hit the ground running” when they encounter the realities of academic writing in the disciplines. It is an environment where a great deal of explicit teaching of academic writing occurs, but rarely in so-labeled classes. UOW recognizes the demands of academic literacy across the disciplines, and several staff here have developed good reputation nationally and internationally for their practice and leadership in teaching and research on academic literacy. But with current anticipation of ever more students finding academic discourse and practice per se quite new and strange, and a very significant proportion of students finding the doing of academic work *as English* to be new and challenging, it makes less and less sense to increasing numbers of teachers across the disciplines to address the literacy development needs of students in separate classes teaching so-called generic academic and language “skills.” We might eventually stop regarding students' writing as evidence of *their* deficiencies altogether, and come to really understand how the teaching of academic disciplines can limit or liberate the linguistic repertoire of students entering a course of study.

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