2007

Providing language and academic skills support in a multi-media and distributed learning environment

Jeannette Stirling  
*University of Wollongong, jstirl@uow.edu.au*

L. Celeste Rossetto  
*University of Wollongong, celeste@uow.edu.au*

Publication Details  
Providing language and academic skills support in a multi-media and distributed learning environment

Abstract
[extract] This paper examines the role of the language and academic skills (LAS) lecturer in a multi-media and geographically distributed learning environment at the University of Wollongong. By this we mean providing language and academic skills support where subjects comprising various degree programs are taught simultaneously across a range of networked satellite campuses including, at times, the central campus: hence the idea of a ‘distributed learning environment’. Subject delivery to this network of campuses is variously achieved through the use of multi-media teaching and learning technologies such as videoconferencing, web-based resources, online discussion spaces, pod-cast lectures, and face-to-face tutorials. We argue that the language and academic skills support role, which has become evermore complex in the twenty-first century Australian university system, demands further review when enacted in the learning environment sketched above.

Keywords
skills, learning, providing, language, media, academic, environment, distributed, multi, support

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

This conference paper is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/asdpapers/262
Providing language and academic skills support in a multi-media and distributed learning environment
Jeannette Stirling and Celeste Rossetto
University of Wollongong

Introduction

This paper examines the role of the language and academic skills (LAS) lecturer in a multi-media and geographically distributed learning environment at the University of Wollongong. By this we mean providing language and academic skills support where subjects comprising various degree programs are taught simultaneously across a range of networked satellite campuses including, at times, the central campus: hence the idea of a ‘distributed learning environment’. Subject delivery to this network of campuses is variously achieved through the use of multi-media teaching and learning technologies such as videoconferencing, web-based resources, online discussion spaces, pod-cast lectures, and face-to-face tutorials. We argue that the language and academic skills support role, which has become evermore complex in the twenty-first century Australian university system, demands further review when enacted in the learning environment sketched above.

In reviewing how the language and academic skills lecturer operates in this type of teaching and learning culture, we draw on a model of practice developed by Learning Development at the University of Wollongong in 2004 (see Figure 1). This model is dubbed ‘the reflexive model’ and was intended to clarify the diverse and sometimes fragmented aspects of language and academic skills advising in today’s university system. Specifically:

[T]he model was designed to provide a framework for representing the complexity of our practice in an inclusive way, to facilitate communication and reflexivity between practices, and most importantly, to highlight the role Learning Development lecturers are able to play in organisational learning as it relates to the quality enhancement of student learning. (Percy and Stirling, 2005, p148)

1 The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution made by Joanne Dearlove to the ‘Frameworks and Policies’ section of this research paper.
This diagrammatic model of language and academic skills advisory practice identifies our core business at Wollongong University as “facilitating student learning and their development of tertiary literacies”. To achieve this facilitation, LAS lecturers at the central Wollongong campus work directly with students through workshop programs and individual consultations coordinated by the Learning Resource Centre. We also collaborate extensively with Faculty academics to integrate relevant tertiary literacy support into specific subject areas or degree pathways. This sort of collaborative and integrated work is particularly important at transition points in a program of study and in subjects that attract a high number of international students. Furthermore, and as the diagram indicates, we work in a range of Faculty working parties and education committees. Like most academic units these days, our practice is located within the frameworks of various institutional and policy agendas. Percy and Stirling argue of the reflexive model that:

It allows for shifts in knowledge and practice that do not lose sight of what has been, historically, a foundation stone for the LAS field. By situating ‘student learning’ at the centre, at least for these authors, this model recuperates Ballard’s (1994, p17) insistence that ‘it is our common focus on the student as a complex learner that underpins our varied practices and differentiates us from other teaching, administrative and professional staff within our institutions. (Percy and Stirling, 2005, p149)
While the model itself will undoubtedly change as our frames of practice continue to adapt to student learning needs and future institutional policies, it nevertheless provides a valuable starting point to the examination of language and academic skills advising at regional campuses.

**Learning Context**

In 2000 the University of Wollongong established three satellite campuses in regional southern New South Wales. By 2003 two more campuses had been added to the network. The more remote campuses were intended to provide university access for those who, because of geographical distance and/or other factors, might not have otherwise contemplated a university degree. In the early years of operation these campuses provided opportunities for students to work towards a Bachelor of Arts, Business Administration, or Commerce degree. More recently, however, curricula at some of the campuses have been expanded to allow students to obtain the degrees of Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Mathematics Education, Bachelor of Science Education, Masters of Business Administration, Graduate Diploma of Education, and the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS).

Despite commonalities, each campus in the University of Wollongong regional network has developed a discrete learning culture. In part, the discernible differences between the campuses can be traced back to geographical location: the most geographically distant is located in a rural community in southern New South Wales, the most urban on the southern borders of Sydney. Students enrolled at the rural campuses tend to have to deal with issues not encountered by their more urban counterparts. For example, the multi-media technologies used by the University will – at least in theory – allow a degree of flexible learning. However, as well as the available technologies at each campus, this model of flexible learning assumes that students will also be able to access online materials in their own time from home computer systems. Of course many rural areas do not yet have the kind of broadband capabilities that make this aspect of their study a practical reality and, indeed, it was found with one of the versions of webCT rolled out in 2006 that learning sites could not be accessed via dial-up. Although the problem was quickly rectified when identified, it was perhaps indicative of the kind of extra stresses that rural students may encounter when they first come into a multi-media learning environment. The University has responded to the identified technological needs of rural students by providing 24 hour access to network campus facilities seven days a week. Nevertheless, LAS lecturers at the rural campuses quite often find themselves having to supplement learning advice with emotional support as students struggle with these technological complexities.

There are also differences between campuses in staffing levels and degree choices. All of the campuses in the network have only a very small number of permanent staff. All have a campus manager or coordinator, and in the case of one campus in the network, this manager is the only
permanent university staff on site. Some have a part-time administrative assistant. Only one has a receptionist and technical support staff. All campuses have access to librarian support and in all cases share library facilities with the institution of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Other factors marking the differences between campuses include the selection of degree programs delivered to each campus (this varies from site to site) and whether or not a campus has an exclusively undergraduate student cohort or a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate programs. At some of the campuses, for example, the past three years or so have seen a growing number of students enrol in study for Honours in Arts and postgraduate programs in Commerce. One campus in the network launched a Graduate School of Medicine in 2007.

Radical changes in the profile of Australian higher education students over the past decades have been well documented (see, for example, Williams et al., 1993; McLean et al., 1995; McInnis and James, 1995; Marginson, 2000). These changes have given rise to the so-called ‘non-traditional’ student: a student who, by definition, will require some sort of supplementary support to facilitate successful transition into the mainstream of academic study (for more detailed discussion of the ‘non-traditional student’ see Bock and Gassin, 1982; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Stirling and Percy, 2005). In some ways, the regional campuses that provide the focus for this discussion can be said to function as microcosmic representations of this larger picture.

Typically, in the early years of operation, the regional campuses attracted mature-aged students (Lefoe et al., 2001; Lefoe et al., 2002). Often these students come to university after years away from formal study. They are often also the first in their families to attempt university scholarship (Lefoe et al., 2002). However, in the last three years or so there has been an increase of school leavers enrolling at the regional campuses. Sometimes this is because they want to pursue a university degree without moving away from their communities and families; sometimes it is because their UAI score does not permit enrolment at the larger campuses and they use the year at the regional centre as an alternative approach to the preferred degree pathway. For multiple reasons, many of these students will require access to a comprehensive and relevant learning support program to facilitate successful transition into academic study.

At the undergraduate level, on-site teaching of subjects at the regional campuses is generally undertaken by casual sessional staff and this has ramifications for the LAS role. Sessionally employed academic staff can change from semester to semester, from year to year. Quite often the LAS lecturer will be the most consistent academic presence on campus throughout a student’s study program and this means that we are often the first port of call when there are questions about learning with the technologies on campus or understanding subject content. At times we are also called upon to facilitate communication between students and new, sometimes
inexperienced, teaching staff. Nevertheless, the focus for the LAS lecturer remains the facilitation of student learning and the development of tertiary literacy capabilities. Although the reflexive model portrays a conceptual diagram of the diverse ways in which we support the development of learning in the structure and culture of a large campus, we have found that this process is further complicated when working in a geographically distributed learning environment. For our practice to be relevant in these contexts, it has been imperative to clearly identify and be responsive to the needs of each particular cohort of students at the various campuses in the regional network.

The following sections reflect on how LAS lecturers working at the regional campuses facilitate “student learning and their development of tertiary literacies” through direct work with first year undergraduate students; through collaboration with campus managers, library staff, sessional teachers, and TAFE staff; through working within the frameworks of particular institutional and policy frameworks at discrete locations.

**Multi-media learning / multi-media literacies**

In a 2002 case study of the Wollongong model of multi-media and distributed learning, Geraldine Lefoe et al. made a number of valuable recommendations about the necessity of a networked student support system involving Learning Development, the library, and the Centre for Education, Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR). These recommendations were based on a relatively small number of students across three sites: for example, the student profile in the case study included only 29 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts degree (Lefoe et al., 2002, p42). Although the recommendations made in 2002 still have value, time and changing circumstances have compromised their application. As of 2007 there are 165 students enrolled in the first year core subject for the Bachelor of Arts degree alone. These students are enrolled across four sites. Across the five sites in the network in 2007 there are 904 first year students enrolled in six undergraduate degree programs. In 2006 the University rolled out a new version of the web technology used by several of the first year subjects taught at the regional campuses. In 2007 another new version of the technology replaced the 2006 version.

The combination of significantly increased first year student numbers and the introduction of new web technologies in two consecutive years has had significant consequences for the University’s capacity to provide the kind of support recommended in the 2002 case study. To a degree, the increased support now required at the regional campuses has fallen to Learning Development and library staff. In part, the increased demand for Learning Development support derives from the pressure on sessional academic staff to keep up with the changing technologies (for discussion of the implications of new technology for academic workloads see Clegg et al., 2003; Fox and MacKeogh, 2003; Tastle et al., 2005; Carr-Chellman, 2006). Professional
development of this kind is not usually part of the casual contract workload nor is it always readily available at the regional campuses. This often means that tutors themselves are struggling to come to terms with the new technologies as they are also guiding students through those early stages of multi-media learning.

Commencing students at the regional campuses receive an introduction to the multi-media technologies at their respective campuses during Orientation week via a series of workshops run by technical staff. At some campuses senior and technologically experienced students are charged with providing ongoing support through those early weeks of the first semester as beginning students work to become familiar with the multi-media environment. As we have indicated above, only one of the campuses in the network has technical support staff on site (from which they also coordinate technical support to the other campuses in the network) and so this peer support in those early weeks of academic life is invaluable. However, becoming familiar with the technical aspects of their multi-media learning environment is only part of the challenge for first year students; they will also be expected to develop proficient online writing and communication capabilities. Just as academic essay and report writing conform to particular generic conventions, so too do some forms of online communication expected from students in particular subjects.

The primary tertiary literacy model informing LAS practice at Wollongong’s central campus involves working with undergraduate students directly through the Learning Resource Centre and indirectly through the development of integrated resources within Faculty programs to develop capabilities in academic reading and writing, critical analysis, effective acknowledgement practices, presentation techniques, and so on. These aspects of tertiary literacy support are also central to LAS work at the regional campuses. LAS lecturers at each campus develop and teach generic tertiary literacy workshop programs to assist student understanding of academic essay and report writing genres, referencing conventions, presentation techniques, and study strategies: in other words, those academic capabilities understood as typically constituting tertiary literacies. LAS lecturers also provide individual consultations for students at each campus. When required, we work with subject tutors to deliver in-class integrated tertiary literacy resources developed by subject coordinators in conjunction with Learning Development and disseminated throughout a subject’s distributed learning environment.

The necessity of this sort of relevant, sustained and flexible learning support has been identified as a key factor for successful student transition into a distributed learning environment (Lefoe et al., 2002, p46). In their case study of student perspectives on the distributed learning environment at the University of Wollongong, Lefoe et al. also identify pedagogical,
technological and administrative issues as “major themes” to be engaged by Universities delivering this kind of model (2002, p43). It is at the nexus of the pedagogical and technological that LAS practice at the regional campuses experiences a significant demand beyond the model of tertiary literacy support required at the central campus.

The implications of a multi-media learning environment for tertiary literacies are not explicitly dealt with in the literature and this is where future research needs to occur. Certainly, over the past three years or so, students enrolled at regional campuses have increasingly looked to LAS lecturers at their respective campuses for advice on how to communicate effectively in an online learning environment. While some students bring experience of communicating in online chat rooms or through blogs to their university work, this is not necessarily a communication style that will serve them well in the more formal space of an online academic debate or discussion. There are also students who come to this aspect of their learning with no experience of the online environment at all.

Along with effective essay and report writing techniques, the development of online communication strategies - whether for online assessed writing tasks or academically appropriate emails - must be recognised as constituting part of the twenty-first century tertiary literacy model. Over the past three years or so, LAS lecturers at the regional campuses have come to field a growing number of requests from students to help them become more proficient in participating in assessed online discussion forums. Presentations skills are still required for in-class tutorial work but so too are skills in engaging with fellow students at a distance using the videoconferencing format. It is not uncommon to hear students worrying about asking a question in the videoconference context lest they be personally criticised by a student at another site. Feedback (2006) from students enrolled at the largest regional campus in the network indicates a need for opportunities beyond the in-class videoconference context to model more appropriate question / response strategies. Perhaps we also need to begin rethinking how these students read online: how they understand what constitutes authorship; and how this understanding compares with conventions deriving from paper-based study. Students do seem to eventually meet the challenges of learning in a multi-media and distributed learning environment, however, providing the kind of LAS support most useful to them in that first year of study demands that we develop a tertiary literacy model and practices relevant to their learning needs.

**Collaboration: teaching / learning spaces and partnerships**

Just as the concepts of tertiary literacy underpinning Learning Development practices at the central campus require adaptation for multi-media and distributed learning environments, so too do our collaborative practices and teaching / learning relationships. Collaborative relationships
at the regional campuses tend to be far more multi-layered than the ‘reflexive model’ suggests. The most notable differences occur in the work that we do to help students negotiate the day-to-day realities of developing a sense of belonging to a university learning community in the shared and multi-functional spaces of the regional campuses and the various teaching and learning support relationships that we build with library staff, campus managers, and sessional teachers. As we have argued above, because the bulk of on-site teaching of undergraduate subjects at these campuses is undertaken by casual sessional academic staff, the LAS lecturer will often be the most consistent on-site academic presence throughout a student’s study program. This condition of our practice creates a uniquely pivotal position in the learning and teaching communities located across the network.

The multi-functional and shared teaching / learning spaces typical of the campuses in our regional network not only have an impact on how some teaching sessions function but will also have consequences for how students perceive themselves in relation to learning (Jamieson et al., 2000). For example, university students may be engaged in a scheduled and subject-specific research class in a computer laboratory or library facility at the same time as students from other degree programs, the TAFE facility, or one of the local secondary schools, are using the space for independent work. Finding ways to negotiate these shared spaces presents challenges for both students and teaching staff alike. On the one hand, this condition of learning can provide students with an opportunity to receive information and ideas that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. On the other hand, if not managed well, it can be distracting for all involved. It can also have a fragmenting effect on student identity and learning styles.

Those of us providing learning support at the regional campuses are constantly looking for ways to use these shared multi-functional spaces in productive ways when teaching workshop programs or speaking more informally with students about the various aspects of university study. By adapting our teaching practices to accommodate the possibility of the ‘I was just sitting here checking my email and heard you mention essay writing’ interloper, we are able to expand the scope of learning development sessions to respond to the needs of the single extra curious onlooker or, conversely, adapt to an open forum about whatever learning needs are exercising student concerns at the time.

The vagaries of spatial collaboration notwithstanding, there are other possibilities for innovation at the regional campuses that are not necessarily readily available in a larger setting. The funding structure relevant to providing Learning Development support to the campuses allows for only limited presence in any given week of the academic term. Two of the campuses are restricted to five hours of LAS support per week; one to ten hours per week; and the other two campuses in the network one and two days respectively. Because of the limited time spent on
the campuses, we have attempted to find a range of strategies to provide sustainable support even when we are not physically on site. In part, we expand learning support beyond our physical presence at the campuses by utilising the available multi-media technologies to provide online and email consultations for students. In 2004 we launched an online learning support webCT site (*Triple A: Academic Assignment Assistance*) which includes a range of downloadable resources as well as discussion spaces where students can post questions and receive feedback from LAS lecturers. We have also identified the benefits of developing a rich network of collegial relationships with both academic and auxiliary staff at the campuses.

Not least among these collaborative relationships is with the library staff. The regional librarians are available every day that a campus is open and students will often avail themselves of this service beyond the usual limits of larger facilities. Librarians are frequently recruited as the repositories of student anxiety about a range of academic capabilities and in the early stages of their academic lives most students will conflate information literacy (a support service offered by the library) and tertiary literacy. This conflation creates expectations that library staff can provide support for all learning needs. LAS lecturers work closely with regional campus library staff to ensure that students are streamed to wards those support resources most appropriate to their identified needs and to provide a comprehensive response to learning. We also work closely with the campus managers to further enhance this comprehensive support.

As part of our regional practice we strive to build mutually beneficial relationships with sessional teaching staff so that the delivery of learning resources provides yet another impetus for collaboration through team teaching. As a corollary of this type of collegial relationship, sessional teachers have become more aware of the focus of LAS advising. Consequently, they will often consult with the LAS lecturer about how to provide more effective in-class tertiary literacy support for students. As these relationships have evolved, sessional teachers will now also consult with LAS lecturers about students at risk of failing as well as encourage students to attend tertiary literacy workshop programs and consultation sessions to improve academic performance in specific areas. Ultimately, students benefit from this approach because the campus teaching and learning community becomes more cohesive through ongoing professional and academic collaboration between staff.

In the hybrid teaching and learning spaces of these small campuses, at a distance from the central campus, students quite often struggle to develop their identity as university learners. It is here, perhaps, that the pivotal role of the LAS lecturer can be seen to make its most significant contribution to the learning environment of the smaller campuses. We argue that the strategies outlined above can be a major factor in the development of dynamic learning communities (Dawson et al., 2006) at the regional campuses. Learning communities in the educational
context involve a sharing of knowledge; facilitating the acquisition of knowledge; and the production of knowledge (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). In our practice this involves communication through social conversations with students and colleagues at the respective campuses as well as through academic consultation and learning support among and between LAS lecturers, sessional teachers, students, and auxiliary staff within a campus and across regional sites. A range of literature details the efficacy of learning within a social context (Radloff, 2006; Apelgren, 2003; Taylor et al., 2003; Smith, 2001). Drawing a line from this literature, we suggest that the regional campus LAS lecturer can also provide a valuable bridge between student participation in the cultural diversity of the regional campus in a rural area and the university environment of an urban or centralised setting.

As each campus becomes more established and develops its own identity, the difficulties particular to the regional network do not disappear as such. Rather, they are counterbalanced by a range of advantages that become more obvious as these campuses continue to evolve into discrete learning communities. Each campus is slowly becoming a learning community which is defined not only by its geographical location but also by individual processes of learning support based on the needs of an ever-changing student cohort within the context of specific locations. Kilpatrick et al. (2003) provide two definitions of what constitutes a learning community. The first is based on the social capital of members who share locations and are learning to be part of the campus community; the second focuses on how deeper learning occurs within the context of the curriculum. We suggest that LAS lecturers working at the regional campuses are in a unique position to adapt our models of practice to accord with this idea and play a key role in the process.

The regional campuses are in the process of becoming more than merely marginalised versions of the central campus. The smaller class sizes are beneficial to learning because they provide students with an opportunity for lively debate not only with subject teachers, but also with their peers. Peer mentoring is a crucial part of the learning process and can only occur in a social and non-threatening environment both inside and outside the classroom. Whilst students discuss, argue and analyse in a group, they write individual papers based on their own learning which has benefited from the group interaction. By continuing to develop innovative and flexible approaches to supporting “student learning and their development of tertiary literacies”, the LAS lecturer’s role in this context becomes a significant factor in the development of an optimal model of deep learning.

Frameworks and Policies

The ‘reflexive model’ of Learning Development practice indicates how LAS lecturers at the central campus work in a range of faculty working parties and education committees to
contribute to the learning and teaching economy of the university. The way that we work within these wider systems and the implications this has for LAS practice are located within the frameworks of various institutional and policy agendas. Again, this is an aspect of the language and academic skills support role that is subject to variation in the context of the distributed learning environment where we also work at the micro level with individual campuses in the regional network.

Involvement in the university’s learning frameworks and policy initiatives at the micro level acquires a new complexity when, as with one of the campuses in the network, the notion of a distributed learning environment extends across institutional boundaries: in this instance, across a co-located TAFE and university learning facility. Under this cross-institutional arrangement, students can concurrently enrol in a TAFE Diploma and a Bachelor of Business Administration (Hospitality). They begin this dual diploma / degree process by studying a full time program of subjects at TAFE with the inclusion of a single university subject. The number of university subjects that a student can take per semester is increased as the diploma / degree progresses and advanced standing is granted by the university for successfully completed TAFE diploma subjects. Through a combination of advanced standing and elective trade-offs students complete both their TAFE diploma and a university degree in three years. This type of study pathway has the benefit of a vocational approach to learning and work as well as equipping students with the theoretical wherewithal to understand their work and the workplace.

Whilst this diploma / degree acquisition has undoubted advantages, the approach is not without complications for the student’s experience of university learning. The LAS lecturer needs to consider the simultaneous learning environments in which these students are situated in order to provide ongoing learning support that will enhance a student’s chance of success in the higher education arena. Quite often these students are reluctant to access university learning support because their initial social learning environment is affiliated with TAFE. This means that they can have difficulty in differentiating between institutional expectations. Whereas TAFE learning involves a more pragmatic approach to learning, university requires a higher order of thinking: critical analysis of theoretical concepts is the norm. Bloom’s revised taxonomy is useful to differentiate between the two types of learning environments in which these students operate (Pintrich, 2002). TAFE learning develops the factual, conceptual and procedural categories of knowledge, whereas higher education institutions rely more heavily on what Paul Pintrich refers to as the ‘metacognitive’ category. He defines this category as the use of known learning strategies and the ability to understand when and how they can be applied (Pintrich, 2002). TAFE students are usually acculturated to one strategy: there is an expectation of a teacher-centred classroom with most or all learning materials being supplied. Their expectation is that
university will be the same. However, at university there is more emphasis on individuals taking responsibility for their own learning. This mode of learning demands that students are able to extract pertinent ideas and concepts related to a discipline from a range of sources – some supplied, some acquired through independent research – as well as formulate and construct logical arguments to showcase their knowledge of subject content in the most successful way. The sheer magnitude of such a task often overwhelms TAFE students who have not acquired the necessary academic skills to perform well in this environment. Consequently, the role of the LAS lecturer at this campus has expanded to address the unique issues presented by the dual TAFE / university study pathway.

Students commence their TAFE studies earlier than their university studies by nearly a month and they spend most of their time on the TAFE campus interacting with TAFE staff, using TAFE facilities, and conducting their post-school studies in ways that suit their TAFE subjects. Understandably, the students tend to identify primarily as TAFE students in the first instance and to seek assistance, even with their university work, from TAFE staff who are more familiar to them and often more readily available than the LAS lecturer or other university staff. This group of students is small, usually numbering around 30 per intake, and their shared study experience tends to bond them together, making them a rather insular group in university classes. The particularities of this study experience has also tended to lengthen their period of transition to university studies as they cope with the extra learning load of two separate learning cultures.

Pintrich (2002) argues that there is an identified need to explicitly teach those metacognitive skills essential to effective university learning in a contextualised setting. Therefore, the LAS lecturer’s involvement in the first university subject that these students take as part of their dual program is crucial because it provides the first explicit teaching they receive in relation to a university model of tertiary literacies. The TAFE’s early inclusion in the Orientation program provided by the university also elucidates for students the different contexts they need to traverse in their learning pathways. We argue that cross-institutional liaison at this campus is a vital component in helping students negotiate the differences between the learning cultures.

Because this particular regional campus has such a pronounced cross-institutional focus, it is also the only one in the network where the LAS lecturer is a member of the steering committee. As a result, the LAS lecturer has been able to initiate further structured opportunities that support the development of a learning community through input into the committee’s agendas and activities. For example, the LAS lecturer has been able to garner support for the introduction of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). This program is an important forum for interactions that support student-to-student learning by validating and valuing the knowledge
and experience of more senior students. Another initiative is the introduction of formal Orientation workshop programs where university staff, TAFE staff, and students discuss ‘typical’ first year scenarios. Feedback suggests that this latter strategy has proved effective in clarifying and highlighting students’ expectations of university life. By working within the frameworks of the individual campuses in this way, it becomes possible not only to facilitate “student learning and their development of tertiary literacies” in all the ways we have described above, but to also directly influence local policy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The University of Wollongong’s Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 2005-2007 identifies “support for student learning” as the second of its key objectives. More specifically, the Plan identifies the need to “Cater for diversity within student learning through equity initiatives” (p3). LAS lecturers working at the various campuses in Wollongong University’s regional network have sought to work creatively with the diversity of student learning apparent across and between the various campus environments. Moreover, we have sought to develop and refine our understanding of the practical and contextual implications of this diversity and to continually explore strategies to realise in multiple and innovative ways the objectives of the Strategic Plan. Rather than assuming that all campus communities are the same, we argue that although they share certain traits based on geographical distance, size, types of students, and so on, the learning culture of each community warrants discrete analysis so that support and equity initiatives remain pertinent to each location. Deploying a range of approaches, LAS lecturers have developed a readiness to explore any idea that emerges from conversations with interested stakeholders, be they students, library staff, TAFE staff, community members, or central campus academics, to ensure the relevancy of our practice.

In setting up the network of campuses that comprise the learning and teaching environment discussed in this paper, Wollongong University developed a clear vision of how to meet the projected needs of students working in this context. As we have argued, these recommendations are not only valuable for this type of learning experience – they are essential. In the opinion of the authors of this paper, the problem confronting the University over the next few years will be how to substantially reclaim these recommendations as realities. But further to this, the University needs to also develop strategies that will allow us to adapt and sustain the comprehensive and flexible support recommended by Lefoe et al. as implemented policy that meets the pedagogical, technological and administrative needs of an increased and ever more diverse student cohort. The implications of multi-media learning technologies for tertiary literacies also demand further research: as we argue above, it is at this nexus of the pedagogical and technological that LAS practice at the regional campuses experiences a significant demand
beyond the model of tertiary literacy support required at the central campus. As higher education in the twenty-first century continues to evolve, universities need to meet the challenges that diverse student cohorts, multi-location campuses and rapid technological changes can bring to learning. LAS lecturers working across the University of Wollongong’s regional network strive to accommodate these variables and adapt the framework of our core business to support student learning such that these smaller campuses become vibrant learning communities in their own right where students develop skills and knowledge that ensure the quality of their degree experience.
References:


