Developing Academic Literacy in Context

Emily Purser University of Wollongong

Jan Skillen University of Wollongong

Mary Deane Coventry University

James Donohue Open University

Kelly Peake Queen Mary, University of London

Abstract

Where, when and how (indeed whether) academic writing should be taught to university students, who are not necessarily aiming to study ‹language› per se, has long been a concern in higher education. While students need to develop high level communication skills, in genres often quite specific to higher education, in order that their learning can be assessed, teaching them academic writing during the course of their disciplinary studies raises a number of pedagogical, organisational and research issues. This paper reports on a collaboration between a group of academics in different geographic and institutional locations, who share a dream of improving student learning through curriculum-integrated teaching of writing. Their project has attempted to apply a model of ‹learning development› practice that works well in one arena to a range of new contexts, in order to test its efficacy and transferability. Results indicate that the pedagogical strategies tried (e. g. collaborative, inter-disciplinary design of learning tasks, resources and assessment processes based on analysis of contextually-specific literacy demands) prove ‹true› in various situations, enabling positive changes – in student learning, in the design of curricula, in teachers' professional development and in general perceptions of the role of language in learning.

It is becoming customary in introducing discussions of academic writing in higher education to note that students, on entering a new field and environment, cannot be assumed to already know all they need to know about the academic language and learning their success will depend on. Where assessment of conceptual learning in the disciplines is already based primarily on extensive academic writing (such as in Australian and UK higher education), consensus seems to be growing across the Teaching/Learning literature that ‹writing› not only needs to be explicitly taught, but that such teaching should occur within the disciplines, and even within the regular ‹content›-focused courses [e. g. Skillen 1998, Radloff and dela Harpe 2001, Tindale 2005, Wingate 2006, Lea 2004, 2008] [1]. The view that academic literacy needs to be explicitly taught tends to emerge within many faculties in relation to changed student cohort size, demographics and linguistic diversity, and academics' frustrating attempts to evaluate student learning on the basis of ‹problematic› writing, and to be conceptualised within a framework of individualised ‹deficiencies› and needs for ‹remedial› help and learning ‹support› [Haggis 2006]. At policy level, it is voiced in relation to agenda issues of equity,

---

1 Unlike debate in the US, which tends to focus on the need to include opportunities for writing per se into undergraduate curricula of the disciplines – see Russell (2002)

retention, quality assurance and/or employability, and conceptualised within a framework of generic ‹skills›, ‹competencies› and broad ranging ‹graduate qualities›. Perhaps the need for explicit instruction in academic literacy is most frequently and acutely felt by specialists in the teaching of academic language and the general development of learning in universities, as their work, and institutional positioning, often affords unique insights into the relationships between learning, teaching and assessment, curriculum development, educational policy and institutional governance. It is in the context of a generally increasing level of interest in discussions of academic writing that the main motivation behind the project reported in this paper can be understood – a strongly felt need for critical comparisons of writing pedagogy across HE. It seems that while general levels of in-principle agreement about the need for universities to give students explicit instruction in all aspects of academic language and learning may be rising amongst many senior managers, faculty-based and centralised (or marginalised) educational support academics, serious questions of when, where, by whom and exactly how to best do so remain topics of debate and much needed research.

The DALiC project

The DALiC[2] project is a comparative curriculum development exercise begun in 2006, involving a group of academic literacy specialists in the UK, the USA and Australia. It was initiated to demonstrate how an established model of practice in teaching/developing academic literacy works, to apply it in a range of other institutions, and to facilitate a gradual furthering of evidence that will be useful to many others in this field, particularly those endeavouring to integrate literacy instruction into disciplinary curricula. Like most exercises in comparative education, this project has a reformist agenda, aiming to ‹find what works› within the specific cultural contexts of each project participant's workplace and appropriately «inform educational practice and policy» [Broadfoot 2000, p. 366]. At the University of Wollongong, Australia, writing specialists work in close partnership with disciplinary academics to integrate into mainstream content courses[3] opportunities for

_____
2 Developing Academic Literacy in Context
3 The words ‹course› and ‹subject› are used synonymously throughout to refer to a semester-based teaching/learning session – generally occurring over 10 to 14 weeks. ‹Course› seems to be the more common term used in the UK, while ‹subject› is used at UOW.

students to develop their writing and learning. The approach centres around analysis of a specific subject's language and literacy demands, and production of explicit assessment criteria and instructional materials tailored to those particular demands. It is implemented in strategically identified courses across degree programs, and endorsed at institutional level. The project set out to identify whether, how, and how well, the approach could work in other contexts, and has involved three UK institutions collaborating with Wollongong to develop similar integration strategies. At Queen Mary, University of London, two courses in Geography were collaboratively revised to include explicit (team) teaching of the genre by which student learning was to be assessed (modeling, as well as a guided process of drafting, feedback and redrafting), and resources to illustrate and explain marking criteria and process. At Coventry University, the collaboration between academics in the faculty and in the Centre for Academic Writing focused on analysing the key learning task in a Physiotherapy course and developing resources to clarify expectation to students and to guide and standardize assessment. At the Open University (a distance education environment where the distributed nature of the teaching and learning creates particular opportunities and challenges for cross-disciplinary collaboration and direct contact with students), the focus was to critically examine the design of a new language-focused communication skills course for first year students in Business Studies. Overall the project facilitated useful and timely discussion of Australian, UK and US approaches to embedding the teaching of academic literacy into curricula, and the implications of such collaborations for literacy development in higher education. In reporting and reflecting on the various pedagogical, organizational and research issues that emerged from the initial attempts to adapt the UOW model to suit three different contexts, various questions emerged for further research and discussion – about the nature and uses of feedback on student writing, the motivation of vocationally-oriented students to pay close attention to language and literacy practices, and the nature and extent of language development that can be achieved through curriculum-integrated or ‹embedded› literacy instruction.

Background

The model of academic literacy development explored through the DALiC project emerged in Australian HE [e. g.

Skillen and Mahony 1997], and has been in operation at the University of Wollongong for a decade [Skillen et al 1998, 1999]. In short, it is a vision of the relationships between teaching and learning practices, curriculum development, different areas of academic work and institutional governance. More than an approach to developing any particular learning resource, course or curriculum, it is about how to identify and target specific needs, influence perceptions of students' learning needs, gain institutional support and negotiate with faculties to and make specific changes in teaching and learning practices so that student learning is better understood and supported. It is a model of practice that is designed to help implement a learning-centred educational policy and ensure that teaching aligns with stated learning objectives, teaching strategies, learning resources and assessment practices. It is a model that encourages targeted conversations between faculties and learning support units, and encourages collaboration between differently focused and positioned academics, across a range of governance and teaching situations, to identify where literacy integration might be most effective, and co-design instruction to suit specific contexts, needs and interests. The teaching of academic writing, in the view of curriculum-integrated literacy instruction informing this model, is one aspect of the general development of learning. In practice informed by this model, specialists in the teaching of academic language and learning aim to work with discipline academics within the faculties to ensure that students within a core course actually get adequate opportunity within their normal course of study to recognise and understand the specific types of text that make up their discipline, and develop their own practice as participants in their chosen ‹discourse community›. The focus is thus not only on the problems of individual students, but also on collaboration with aculties to understand and address problems through institutional changes. Informed by this model[4], UOW employs c. 13 academic staff, including specialists in the teaching of academic language and learning, within a centrally located ‹Learning Development› unit. LD staff work closely with faculties to develop discipline/subject-specific learning resources as well as teaching and assessment strategies, to integrate these into targeted areas of established curricula, and to help ensure that assessment methods generally align well with learning objectives and teaching strategies in specific subjects/courses. It is both the institutionally sanctioned balance of their work, and the specific nature of their curriculum-integrated teaching, that marks the approach taken at UOW as rather different from many other tertiary literacy programs around the English-speaking world. Benefits of this approach being tested through the DALiC project (e. g. to learning outcomes, success rates and retention statistics) at Queen Mary, Coventry and the Open University are evidenced in the exemplary publications used as a basis for preliminary discussion within and development of the project – Hampton et al [2003] and Skillen et al [1999].

Implementing the DALiC approach in different contexts

Queen Mary's Thinking Writing program[5] is already similar to UOW practice in some ways, in that contact with many departments has already been established across the campus, and the program focuses on developing learning through writing. For the DALiC project, Kelly Peake worked with Geography on a second year course. The specific aim of the collaboration was to improve students' writing of a genre new to them, called a ‹briefing paper›, which is to translate specialist knowledge about hazards for the lay reader (maintaining informational complexity, but avoiding technicality). According to what the Geography staff said they wanted from a briefing paper, marking criteria were developed based on the MASUS instrument[6] (which discussions in Wollongong had introduced to the UK teams), and a marking sheet was devised that could also be used for feedback. As per UOW practice, a booklet was also produced to walk the markers through the criteria with annotated examples, and clearly illustrating to students what problems typically occur in student writing and what would be considered an improvement (samples of ‹weak› and ‹strong› text being annotated with comments from the language specialist indicating why specific elements were considered a strength

4 The current model of practice at UOW describes Learning Development work as involving 50% teaching (mainly within disciplines), 25% governance and 25% research (on its core teaching practices). It has developed over the past decade from a previous model, whereby most teaching of academic literacy occurred outside of curricula – as per many HE institutions in the English-speaking world – through voluntary small group workshops and individual consultations. Emphasis of current practice is on ensuring that all students are taught how to write in the specific ways required in particular subjects and disciplines.

5 Established by Sally Mitchell in 2001
6 Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students © University of Sydney, 1993.
   ‹http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/04/case19.html›

or weakness in the writing). Marking criteria were explained through a jointly run classroom workshop session as well as individual meetings with the lecturer and the learning developer – all of which occurred within the normal delivery of the subject. The focus of the collaboration was on formative assessment – students were able to redraft their work three times, and receive various kinds of feedback. While not quite the first time collaboration with a faculty had moved beyond advising into team teaching, the distinctively new element to this collaboration was the emphasis on assessment criteria and on linguistic detail of the target genre.

Staff were very positive about the team teaching and discussion with another academic from outside their discipline, as it gave them opportunity to seriously consider what they were doing and articulate what they wanted from students. Student feedback from the intervention was also very positive, with 80% appreciating explicit marking criteria, being able to redraft their work, and the quality of feedback given. Students found the booklet and annotated examples useful, though the marking sheet itself received rather mixed appraisal, many students failing to recognize it as a form of feedback – leading the team to question what students understand feedback to be, and how they use it. Students also indicated that while the resources helped them distinguish between good and bad writing, they did not necessarily enable novice writers to produce work to the standard they recognized as desirable. Throughout the staged writing and rewriting process, students' work demonstrated three types of change. Most commonly, very strategic changes were made based on the specific criteria set out on the marking sheet (e.g. students added a conclusion or sources of information missing from their first draft, or replaced maps and illustrations with more appropriate ones). While the clearly notable tendency to improve content in relation to criteria-driven feedback led to significantly improved marks and happier markers, it also left an uneasy feeling with the writing specialists that the students' writing was not being guided towards qualitative improvement overall. Another frequent and problematic response to feedback was to simply ignore suggestions about language – students tended to make little or no change to problematic wording, even when corrections were overtly suggested, leaving the language specialists wondering about how students interpret feedback. Less common, but still significant,

were instances of marked improvement in student writing that did not relate to the marking criteria actually given, leaving staff wondering on what basis they had been able to develop deeper understanding of what was actually wanted, and indeed having to re-evaluate what their marking criteria really were in practice, and how best to articulate them to everyone. But while the collaboration achieved various successes, it also raised issues and questions requiring further investigation: about the uses and usefulness of the marking criteria; about whether and how students can be enabled to improve the quality of their writing through the sorts of modelling and feedback possible through curriculum-embedded literacy instruction; and about students' perceptions of and relationship with feedback (seems rather more complex than initially imagined); about the perception of ‹good› writing from different professional perspectives (disciplinary and language specialists') and our capacity to negotiate curriculum development to meet the double agenda of developing disciplinary knowledge and communicative skill; and about the relative value and positioning of writing within various courses. Overall, while the collaboration caused this team to question the degree to which language can be meaningfully engaged or developed in/through a course focused on another topic, it has strengthened relationships between writing staff and the Department, and has led to a collaborative curriculum review that will be carried out over the next two years.

Coventry University was enthusiastic in its support for explicit teaching about academic literacy, and opened a Centre for Academic Writing in 2004. From the Centre, Academic Writing lecturer Mary Deane collaborated with Physiotherapy to adapt and trial aspects of the model in a 2nd year course/subject. Because no time was available for face-to-face team teaching in this professional subject (which included three work placements), the particular interest of the Coventry team in this instance was the provision of feedback, and the types of resources that would best enable Physiotherapy academics to articulate expectations of professional, reflective writing and provide constructive, standardized feedback on students' reflective writing. Formative assessment strategies, based on *MASUS*, had been previously developed at first year level, and the aim of this collaboration was to increase collaboration with the discipline and create opportunities for further literacy development through the degree program. The assessment task (a critical reflection on practice

in context) was designed by the faculty lecturer, while the collaboration focused on developing explanatory material for students and a marking guide (‹pack›) for teachers. Resources produced included annotated samples of authentic writing, FAQs, and feedback sheets with sample motivational comments. Staff generally (73%) rated the marking pack very highly, which others found the annotated examples of student writing rather challenging – the level of detail modelled (especially when focused on academic writing) intimidated many respondents. Since this collaboration, a working party on reflective writing has been established to examine the assessment of reflective writing in each discipline across the institution, run a conference on the topic, and produce guidelines. The main question arising from the collaboration was how subject specialists and writing specialists can collaborate to provide standardised motivational feedback on students' writing.

At the Open University the development of academic language/literacy has long been recognized as important and necessary. In this distance education environment, students have enjoyed explicit academic literacy support throughout the various programs available, and the OU has been at the forefront of curriculum-embedded study skills provision. The area targeted for the collaboration with UOW was a new course on the language of business studies, by means of which the Open ELT department[7] aimed to enhance the development of business students' literacy skills. The intervention engineered here is not quite in the model usually practised at UOW or the other UK partner institutions where the aim is to embed academic literacy instruction within existing courses, rather than create a space for a separate course focused on the language of a discipline per se. This collaboration is an interesting variation on the theme, however, in that the chair of the course development team, Jim Donohue, shares extensive ground theoretically, and sympathy for the general literacy development goals articulated in the UOW model. While this is a separate course for the enhancement of language communication in business studies, the new course aims to be very closely connected to the language and literacy requirements of an existing ‹content› subject. This strategy can be seen as an initial step towards the goal of curriculum-embedded literacy development as understood in the UOW model, within the constraints of what is institutionally and interpersonally possible at this stage at the OU (and such approaches have been strategically used at UOW also). Obviously, an entire course/subject devoted to the language and communications of a discipline will offer students dramatically more opportunities to work on their language skills (the new course will involve students in 6-9 hours of language-focused work a week over 20 weeks) – but the question of real interest will be whether this will make a dramatically greater developmental difference to their communicative competencies and most importantly to their general learning in their other Business courses.

Given the sorts of motivational issues that arise when we attempt to direct students' attention to language, the main challenges for instructional designers on this project have been engagement strategies for learning resources and authenticity – how to represent business studies authentically while attempting to achieve learning outcomes other than conceptual understanding of Business, and how to highlight the nature of literacy in business studies without losing the intrinsically more motivating focus (for the given students) on Business practices. Authenticity of context was created by basing the new learning resources on the ‹content› material and the student writing from other courses in the same curriculum. To integrate the distinct disciplines of Business and Language studies, the Bernsteinian notion of a necessary subordinating idea was adopted – e. g. the key genres students need to understand and produce (case study, report, essay) are modelled through an analogy suited to the students given interests in business studies: the case study was explained in terms of a familiar transformation process model, whereby textual production was construed in terms of input and output, which students are most likely to be able to relate to and feel motivated by, being a view of the world that is familiar from their chosen field of study. A few questions arose for this team also: whether students in their first year of business studies (when this course is designed to be taken) will have sufficient background knowledge of the field to understand the model texts being planned for the explication and analysis of specific genres used in business studies; how texts can be modified, and activities sequenced so as to engage learners, maintain interest and relevance while avoiding literacy challenges beyond students' capacity; how to manage potentially very diverse levels of academic literacy and language proficiency in a single cohort, using the same materials;

---

7   This is a small team of English Language Teaching specialists recently created to develop ELT at the OU.

whether it is possible to give balanced attention to both textual organization/ logic and lexico-grammatical knowledge in such a course; and what sort of meta-language to use in order to get students to notice, analyse and manipulate specific aspects of language without being alienated by linguistic technicality. The central question remains to be further investigated: how can students be motivated to give close attention to texts and literacy practices using this model of literacy in context that we're trying to use?

Main outcomes and implications
It is hard to standardize practices in this kind of work, and to gather adequate convincing evidence to determine what ‹best› practice might be. But however variable and complex practice might appear, participants in this project have found the effort very worthwhile. The goal of ‹integration› may seem to some a ‹new› way of thinking in higher education, in terms of teaching roles and the type of ‹learning› that needs to be facilitated by university curricula. Nevertheless, interest in research on the teaching of writing continues to rise across the HE sector, along with professionalisation of curriculum development work and inter-disciplinary ‹literacy› projects. The *DALiC* project has helped the UOW participants articulate and communicate their practices and rationale, and thereby help others explore the potential for similar collaborative, integration practice in their contexts. As more teaching academics within the disciplines consider heading in the general direction of designing instruction for learning and literacy development, such joint projects will help clarify what can be achieved and how.

At Queen Mary, outcomes so far have convinced the Geography Department to implement elements of the approach into a larger first year core subject (*Ideas and Practice*), as well as continuing the current integration of teaching in the 2nd year subject. Teaching outcomes, development in assessment practices and the general raising of language awareness, have strengthened relationships between writing staff and the Department and led to writing staff becoming part of curriculum review. This is an important contribution to the work of the *Thinking Writing* initiative, and institutional thinking that reflects growing recognition of the link between discipline literacy, learning and assessment. At Coventry, one of the main implications of successfully implementing the UOW model in one situation is that it is now seen as transferable across the campus. Already

context-based literacy teaching has been implemented in the School of Art and Design and the *sigma* Centre for Excellence in Mathematics and Statistics Support. It is hoped that it will increasingly be taken up by staff in other disciplines and embedded within syllabi, which will lead to the re-development of curricula and the enhancement of more students' learning. It has also had a positive impact at the level of policy-making and funding allocation. At the Open University, the dialogue and collaboration provided by *DALiC* has had a significant impact on OU's initiatives in teaching academic literacy and in developing language and literacy policy. The OU has a long tradition of providing higher education for non-traditional students and has always prioritised the development of study skills in its course design. The *DALiC* collaboration began at a time when the OU had just begun designing a more language-focused provision of such study skills development allowing for an impact on the nature of the design and, perhaps, contributing to a UK distance university's implementation of a *DALiC* approach to language and learning. As Jim Donohue notes, the «*DALiC* model of language, literacy and learning development has been both inspirational and practically valuable to the OU in our development of the *Professional Communication for Business Studies* course and in the complex debates about institutional responses to learners of English as an additional language… and a language policy at the OU» and that «on-going dialogue with partners in the *DALiC* project have provided an affirming and empowering influence on our contribution in this area».

Success can be measured in various ways – including of course deeper learning and better writing from students – but also raised awareness amongst faculty-based academics of the nature of discourse and learning to write within their discipline. To us, one of the strongest indicators of a collaboration that works is the faculty academic (of which there are now many at UOW) who now talks as we do, and assumes ‹literacy› teaching and resource development as part of their regular work. The key implications of the *DALiC* project for UOW is that basic practices we have found to work in our context also seem to be working elsewhere, and interest in this general approach is growing stronger. The more participation and mutual exchange we can engineer over coming years, the greater basis we will all have for proper benchmarking and identification of best practice in various aspects of the teaching of academic writing and learning development in Higher

Education. The initial collaboration with various other institutions has led to plans to apply for larger scale and reciprocal funding to support ongoing research and further colloquia between UOW, QM and Cornell, and an expanding number of UK and US universities.

References

Broadfoot, Patricia (2000). «Comparative Education for the 21st Century: retrospect and prospect.» *Comparative Education* 36(3): 357–371.

Haggis, Tamsin (2006). «Pedagogies for diversity: Retaining critical challenge amid fears of ‹dumbing down›.» *Studies in Higher Education* 31(5): 521–35.

Hampton, Gregory et al. (2003). «Integrating Tertiary Literacy into the Curriculum: Effects on Performance and Retention.» *Uniserve Science Symposium: Improving Learning Outcomes*, University of Sydney.

Lea, Mary (2004). «Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design.» *Studies in Higher Education* 29(6): 739–756.

Lea, M (2008). «Academic literacies in theory and practice.» *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. Eds. Brian Street and Nancy Hornberger, Springer Science + Business Media LLC. 2**:** 227–238.

Radloff, Alex and de la Harpe, Barbara (2001). «Helping students develop their writing skills – a resource for lecturers.» *Flexible Learning for a Flexible Society, Proceedings of ASET-HERDSA 2000 Conference.* Toowoomba, Qld,. ASET and HERDSA.

Russell, David (2002). *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*. Carbondale, Southern Illinois UP.

Skillen, Janice and Mahony, Mary Jane (1997). «Literacy and Learning Development in Higher Education: an issue of institutional change.» *Higher Education in New Times*, AARE.

Skillen, Janice et al. (1998). «The IDEAL Approach to Learning Development: A Model for Fostering Improved Learning Outcomes for Students.» AARE.

Skillen, J. et al. (1999). «Integrating the instruction of generic and discipline-specific skills into the curriculum: a case study.» *Cornerstones: What do we value in Higher Education?,* HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia).

Tindale, Jennifer; Evans, Elaine; Cable, Dawn and Mead, Suzanne (2005). «Are our accounting programs preparing graduates for professional accounting work?.» *Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference.* Sydney, National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research* and the Department of Accounting and Finance, Macquarie University.

Wingate, U (2006). «Doing away with ‹study skills›.» *Teaching in Higher Education* 11(4): 457–469.