

Creating the productive middle ground: enhancing first year student learning

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Deakin University's recent review of language and learning services has recommended that academic skills advisers work more closely with discipline specialists to facilitate the development of courses, which integrate academic skills development and content. What can inform these approaches and how can we use first year students' perceptions of their learning to gain a better understanding of their learning needs? At the University's 2006 Teaching and Learning Conference the academic skills team used the profiles of typical learners to encourage discussion on how to develop innovative ways of working together within the University to embed academic literacy in the curriculum. While describing the formal review process, we also seek to highlight the importance of informal networking and student input in bringing about systemic change.

Introduction

Effective academic integration is a marker of study success for first year students. Academic integration refers to the extent to which students understand the values and practices of their institutions. More specifically, it refers to students' ability to integrate into their faculty, to understand the language of their discipline and the philosophical stances which underpin their area of study. Integration into the new environment is difficult for a number of students, and as McInnis (2000) points out many newly commencing first year students lack the requisite skills for university learning. Academic skills support is often pivotal to facilitating academic integration, but the ideal balance between individual support, generic workshops and systemic integration into the teaching in faculties can be difficult to achieve. Generic academic skills classes can assist in developing fundamental skills, but as students are increasingly time-poor, they are less likely to attend these classes, which they may not see as directly relating to their course of study. Thus, language and learning development which is embedded in the context of the discipline will be more effective.

Peel (1999 cited in Pargetter, McInnis, & James, 1999) suggests that information sharing between teaching areas within institutions should be encouraged, especially as regards promoting good teaching practice and successful innovations. He makes a number of detailed suggestions regarding first year pedagogy, including the need to develop course designs which foster an adjustment to tertiary-style independent learning. Several recommendations in a recent Deakin report, the 'Review of language and learning support for all Deakin students' focus on an extended role for academic skills advisers in the implementation of learning skill modules to be incorporated into the delivery of first year courses.

This presentation will outline two different approaches to curriculum change, and the possible implementation of learning skills modules. One is directed by the University Executive, and could be described as a ‘top down’ approach, while a contrasting ‘bottom up’ approach refers to change through more informal networking. How can these two approaches complement each other? How can we find a productive middle ground? The aims of the session are:

- to highlight the multiple and changing roles of language and learning advisers
- to present two different mechanisms or ‘levers’ for change to first year curriculum,
- to facilitate discussion of collaborative approaches to the development of first year students’ academic literacy.

The current role of academic skills advisers

The role of language and academic skills practitioners is an on-going debate (Bartlett 2005). However, there is agreement that they have multiple roles and are frequently required to move seamlessly between these roles, within a short time frame. Their main responsibility within Deakin is to support learning and teaching, and as such to work closely with both students and discipline specialists. As part of the Division of Student Life, which provides support services to students, such as medical services, careers counselling and personal counselling, the focus has been on service delivery in order to meet student demands. Unfortunately this means that there is sometimes a misperception of the role as one of a remedial English teacher or as an ad hoc ‘fix up’ service (Croswell & Barlett, 2001). At the Deakin 2006 Teaching and Learning Conference the academic skills team invited discussion on possible perceptions of academic skills advisers as a:

- ‘tour guide’ and cultural interpreter
- the student’s ‘critical friend’ and learning partner
- diagnostician and language teacher
- learning and research partner.

How do these different roles manifest themselves in our everyday programs? The orientation period is a key time when academic skill advisers interact with new first year students as cultural interpreters. In orientation courses and classes they make explicit the ways the university operates, both academically and administratively, while also providing spaces for students to discuss their experiences in small groups, share their hopes and make contact with fellow students. Orientation courses also include the processes and skills that first year students will need in their academic work, such as essay writing, researching and referencing. These activities cushion first year students’ entry into the institution and assist in enabling them to succeed.

Acting as cultural interpreters, academic skills advisers offer students opportunities to clarify their understandings of academic literacy, through attending weekly classes, and by interacting with advisers either face-to-face or through the academic skills website. The interpreting role then evolves into the role of ‘critical friend’, when for example students ask what a tutor meant by their comments on an assignment or request feedback on a draft of an essay. These interactions involve the establishment of trust, a non-threatening environment and the use of diagnostic skills to best encourage students’ intellectual development. Academic skills advisers at Deakin also plan and deliver classes which include academic literacy within specific disciplines; for example research and referencing or essay writing. However these initiatives frequently rely on the development of an on-going relationship between staff members, and are sometimes seen as merely an ‘add on’ to the course.

Implementation of the recommendations of the recent language and learning review suggests a designated role for academic skills advisers, and a more focused and collaborative approach to curriculum development

Review of language and learning support for all Deakin students

Devising programs that ensure effective provision of academic support often involves a balance between the provision of individual support and more systemic approaches. Individual support can often inform the design of effective programs (Chanock, 2007) but may be seen as an ineffective use of time. The 'Review of language and learning support for all Deakin students' (2006) was prepared in response to the University's 2006 Operational Plan to "develop and implement plans for improving the adequacy of language and learning support for all students on each campus" (Deakin University, Operational Plan, 2006).

The recommendations are now University policy and they cover four broad areas

- students' learning skills
- language classes
- staff development
- first year student transition

This paper focuses on one recommendation in the enhancing student learning skills section, which describes a collaborative process for mapping self directed learning skills currently being developed in first year units (subjects). It is anticipated that this mapping process will identify the need for the development of a range of skills modules including referencing, academic writing, library and research skills, oral presentations and table and diagram skills. The content of each module will be discipline specific. Academic skills advisers, faculties and the Deakin Institute of Teaching and Learning have responsibility for planning and delivering these modules, including modules for off-campus students.

Teaching and Learning Conference – focussing on student profiles

With a small anticipated increase in staff resources in academic skills services, it will be necessary to adopt innovative approaches to plan and implement learning skills modules as suggested in Deakin's language and learning review report. It will also be important to further develop existing collaborative programs. With these aims in mind, academic skills advisers ran a workshop at the 2006 Deakin Teaching and Learning Conference. The presentation entitled 'Academic skills: enhancing student learning' was aimed at progressing a University wide dialogue around first year students' learning needs. The participants formed groups to discuss the profile of a specific first year student in order to identify his/her learning needs. At the conclusion of the session participants were asked to consider and record how they might work in partnerships with academic skills advisers in order to enhance the delivery of their academic program. The feedback provided by participants in the Teaching and Learning Conference will be presented for discussion during the presentation. Since the Conference the feedback has resulted in the planning of some joint initiatives, and academic skills advisers have also been able to build on the informal networking opportunities that the Conference provided.

'Nuts and bolts' presentation

One of the challenges for language and academic skills practitioners is to further develop effective partnerships in order to enhance first year student learning. Academic skills advisers

at Deakin have trialled different ways of working with students and colleagues, and these will be outlined in this presentation as an introduction to the exploration of contemporary approaches at other institutions. It is anticipated that questions for discussion in this session will include:

How do we foster partnerships which facilitate the development of first year students' academic literacy?

How do we use students' perceptions of their learning experiences to inform pedagogy?

How do we shape and respond to university review processes?

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