Crediting academic skills: The design and implementation of a first year academic skills subject.

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Abstract

Should academic skills be taught for credit in first year? Where and how do academic skills fit into the first year curriculum? The expected widening of participation and ongoing internationalisation of Australian universities has renewed the urgency of these perennial questions. In this session we report on an academic skills subject for credit developed by the Faculty of Arts at Monash University, in order to facilitate a discussion about problems and approaches to developing academic literacy among an increasingly diverse student cohort. Participants currently delivering credit programs, or considering development of a similar subject, will be invited to share experiences, insights and questions. The presenters will relate the discussion to academic literacy and composition pedagogy in Australian and international contexts, as well as drawing on current academic literacy research, (including perspectives from situated learning theory, functional linguistics, and enquiry based learning theory), to identify strategies and best practice approaches.

Introduction

With the anticipated widening of participation in higher education following the Bradley review (DEEWR, 2008), discussion of strategies for managing transition and **supporting the participation of under-represented social groups** is increasingly important. Across the sector there has been considerable discussion about how best to prepare a **diverse** student cohort with the necessary skills to engage with and succeed in tertiary study. At the same time, there has been an ongoing debate about the nature of 'generic skills' (and their post – graduation equivalents, graduate attributes) and how these might best be taught (see Star and Hammer, 2008). This debate has its roots in the first major moves toward mass higher education in the 1980s (see Taylor et al. 1988). This debate has also focused in particular on the issue of whether skills can be taught in isolation from content, and if not, where and how they might be placed within the **curriculum.** This paper will describe a **first year** program in the Arts Faculty at Monash to teach academic skills as a credit bearing unit. We have drawn on situated learning theory (see Gee, 2004; 2008) as well as transition pedagogy to develop academic skills. In our program we sought to embody the principles outlined by Kift and Nelson (2005):

> Designing coherent, cumulative units to engage students in their learning experience is a fundamental tenet of transition pedagogy. Incorporating this principle into individual course and curriculum design provides

further opportunity to scaffold specific discipline knowledge and generic skills vertically and horizontally throughout a discrete program of study.

With this in mind, we have also had a particular focus on increasing **social inclusion** in the curriculum. Our approach was informed, as such, by discussion of the causes and implications of 'exclusion' from academic practices and culture (see Graff, 2002 and Channock, 2004). This session will invite participants into an interactive discussion of the various issues involved in the development of academic skills in first year, with a particular focus on issues of awarding 'credit' for skills.

Outline and format of Session

1. **Credit for skills? Introduction and opening discussion (10 minutes)**

We will begin with an invitation to participants to share their own experience of developing academic skills, especially as a credit subject, and their views on problems and 'best practice', prompting discussion around the following question:

> *KEY QUESTION:*
> *What are the pros and cons of teaching academic skills for credit?*

We will give, in turn, a brief account of the discussions within the Arts Academic Language and Learning Unit (AALLU) and between AALLU and our wider Faculty about the academic literacy needs of international and local and Non-English and English speaking background students, which led for both pragmatic and pedagogical reasons, to the creation of 'LLA1010 - Words Work', an academic skills development 'subject' for first year students. The theoretical discussion of these issues has a long history, but an early and still relevant text to begin with can be found in *Literacy by Degrees* (Taylor et al., 1988). Alternative models of academic literacy development (integration into existing curriculum in different disciplines, adjunct and additional workshop and seminar series not for credit, and individual consultations) will provide a further focus for debate. (For a useful summary of the generic skills debate see Star and Hammer, 2008).

2. **Academic skills: Who needs them? (10 minutes)**

The development process for *Words Work* has been conducted in the context of an increasingly diverse first-year cohort, with an awareness of the perception of a gap between student experience and background and tertiary expectations, and looking forward to further expected changes following the Bradley review (such as widening participation in Tertiary study; increased internationalisation of cohort and curriculum). We want to explore further with participants the academic literacy needs of first year students, (see Taylor et al, 1988; Graff, 2002; and Channock, 2004) and some of the practical and equity issues raised by the credit model. We will address the following questions.

> *KEY QUESTIONS:*
> *What sorts of needs are tertiary educators experiencing already?*
> *How might these needs change over the next few years?*

Crediting skills: The design and implementation of a first year academic skills subject - Nuts and Bolts session proposal – Johnson, Piscioneri and Hlavac.

If academic skills are taught for credit, should it be for all students, or only selected cohorts?

In the course of discussion, we will reflect on our own approaches to identifying student literacy needs, and the issues involved in targeting particular cohorts. A particular outcome of this discussion may also be to identify differences and similarities between regions and institutions. As part of the discussion we will inform participants about our own experience delivering the subject in first semester 2010, with reference to student profiles and feedback.

3. Skills for credit: the nuts and bolts (10 minutes)

Whether for pragmatic or pedagogical reasons a credit bearing approach to developing academic literacy is implemented, a variety of practical and theoretical issues to do with curriculum, content, and assessment are raised (see Hattie et al., 1996). We will outline the approach we have taken with *Words Work*, including details of content and assessment, reflections on student performance, and feedback on our first semester of teaching the subject. This section of the session will have a Q and A format to ensure that participants can focus on the aspects of our experience that relate to their own situation and allow for the session to develop 'transferable' knowledge. We don't presume that our own approach represents best practice; instead we propose to lead the discussion toward the following question:

KEY QUESTION: Given the opportunity, how would you, ideally, teach and assess academic skills for credit?

Outcomes and impact of session:

The overall goal of this session is to provide participants with awareness of innovative approaches (in the Australian context, at least) to developing academic skills across the curriculum, but particularly in first year units. Staff, and policy developers at many universities will be weighing up the benefits and costs of various models of skills development. As a contribution to this process, we anticipate that participants in this session will have:

- Increased awareness of academic literacy issues;
- Increased awareness of debate around teaching academic skills for credit;
- Increased knowledge of academic literacy practice in other institutions, and other regions;
- Knowledge of significant research literature on academic literacy development and transition pedagogy;
- Awareness of practical issues involved in developing and delivering academic literacy for credit;
- Access to a network of academic and professional staff engaged in similar areas of tertiary curriculum development.

Crediting skills: The design and implementation of a first year academic skills subject - Nuts and Bolts session proposal – Johnson, Piscioneri and Hlavac.

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Crediting skills: The design and implementation of a first year academic skills subject - Nuts and Bolts session proposal – Johnson, Piscioneri and Hlavac.

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