

Communities of practice: collaboration between Business School discipline and Communication Skills staff in a core First-Year unit.

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Abstract

This session aims to showcase an innovative practice whereby two skill sets are aligned in order to improve the performance of undergraduate students as measured by standard assessments in a core first year unit in Curtin Business School at Curtin University in Western Australia. A pilot project aimed at improving student outcomes was jointly initiated by faculty and Communication Skills Centre staff. This took the form of a series of optional one-hour workshops aimed at highlighting and analysing the key aspects of the assessment tasks for Marketing 100. One workshop (with repeats) was provided for each assessment task. A comparison between the results of those students who attended the workshops and those who did not, showed very encouraging results.

Introduction

In recent years, the role of Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisors in universities has moved from the traditional 'remedial' approach (where students who were perceived as lacking in the necessary skills were provided with the required support), to a discipline or faculty-based approach. Developing academic discourse which entails communicating in the language of their disciplines is challenging for many students, regardless of their first language (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007), and this is particularly challenging for first year students, who are still in the process of becoming accustomed to the appropriate linguistic and communication skills required of them in a university environment (McInnis et al., 2000). However, there is no doubt that the growing numbers of students whose first language is other than English has highlighted the need to provide ongoing language support in particular, in order for them to meet the demands of their tertiary study. Many now believe that rather than being viewed as an adjunct field, language support must be embedded within the curriculum (Arkoudis, 2008), and that support programs should be focussed specifically on the content of core subjects (Baik & Greig, 2009), while maintaining key learning competencies. In order to promote a fruitful learning experience for students from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, LAS advisors need to promote close collaboration with academic colleagues (Briguglio, 2007). This supportive environment is crucial for first year students who are making the important transition to university life.

Context: Collaboration between discipline and academic support staff.

Documented here is a collaborative project between Communication Skills Centre (CSC) staff, alternatively known as LAS advisors, and faculty staff in the School of Marketing at Curtin Business School, Curtin University in Western Australia. The initiative for this partnership came about when academic staff in a core first-year unit (Marketing 100 – an

introduction to marketing principles), observed that many students were having difficulty with their first assignment for the unit; in particular, one component of the unit which involved creating a collage to visually represent the target market for a specified product. Faculty staff surmised that there was a need to closely analyse and clarify the assessment tasks in order to make them transparent and accessible to all students. They then contacted staff at the CSC, and together the two groups devised a one-hour workshop for each of the unit assignments. The aim of each workshop was to highlight key aspects of the assignment tasks. It is the collage component of the first assignment which proved most challenging, and that is the subject of this session.

The assignment: Target Market Report

The first assignment, worth 15% of the unit, required the students to demonstrate theoretical and applied knowledge relating to market segmentation and targeting. It was to be presented as a business report under specific subheadings, using quality English expression. The collage, a pivotal component of the assignment, was intended to reflect specific characteristics of that group, using a multidimensional segmentation approach, through which they considered geographic, demographic, psychographic and behavioural traits of the market. Images used in the collage could include photos, sketches, pictures and words from a range of sources, and had to be presented on an A4-size page with brief descriptions of the characteristics they represented.

In addition, the students had to write a one-and-a-half page explanation of the images in the collage, justifying their use of the images, colours and words that they had chosen. While this particular task posed problems for many students, it seemed to be the international students who encountered the most difficulty. It was thought that this may be due in part to their lack of local knowledge, or to the complexities of articulating abstract concepts using images in the manner required for the assessment.

Task – The collage

Working in groups of 3-4, participants in this session will be given sample collages deemed by faculty staff to be exemplary. The samples will include details of the product and the target market represented by the collage. Information regarding the relevant geographic, demographic, psychographic and behavioural variables will also be provided. This will form the basis of group discussion of the following key questions:

- What types of problems would most students face in creating a similar piece of work?
- Would any particular group of students be disadvantaged by not having local knowledge of the topic?
- ‘ We don’t know what they don’t know’. Explain.

Implications and discussion

Many first year students may be challenged by abstract concepts. Having to represent such concepts in a visual format compounds the difficulty for those whose first language is other than English. They may lack the language skills to communicate what they want to say, they do not always know what they want to say, and there may be a knowledge gap for those who have recently arrived in Australia because of their being new to certain cultural norms and local knowledge.

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There are further implications where Marketing 100 is run in offshore locations. Although the task has been adapted to suit local conditions and products, many students do not see the collage as an academic activity, and therefore have difficulty coming to terms with the nature of the task itself. During the course of this pilot project, the CSC advisors were able to assist discipline lecturers to create opportunities for the students to express the abstract concepts required for marketing. The workshops helped students to unpack tasks and to gain a better understanding of what was expected of them. They also facilitated the students in successfully completing those tasks. The workshops, run by CSC staff, were attended by faculty staff who provided supplementary information on content areas as required. The workshops, though optional, were strongly recommended by faculty staff. It was hoped that embedding the language and learning development in the context of the discipline in this way would promote a more effective learning environment. In addition, students viewed these workshops as being more relevant to their course of study, and therefore were more likely to attend than if they had been offered as generic academic skills workshops.

Conclusion

Specialists in the language support field have particular skills in assisting students to communicate how they want to express their ideas when making connections within the core content of first year units. This takes place via close liaison with faculty staff who are experienced in dealing with first year students. Student outcomes are thought to be optimised by aligning a professional skill set with a discipline skill set. This creates a synergy whereby both complement one another in achieving the common goal of providing an enriching learning experience for all students, and a seamless transition into university. Through workshops like these, first year students can be given the opportunity to develop collaborative skills, and ways of thinking and problem solving. Use of such an approach should ultimately enhance student performance and satisfaction in this important first year of tertiary study.

References

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Session outline

Whole group discussion ice breaker (5 mins):

Consider the role of Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Advisors in various institutions – in what way do they offer programs; are they seen as a discrete unit, or do they integrate with faculty; if so, to what extent?

Presenter (5 minutes):

Outline the origin and implementation of the workshop series. Explanation of the purpose and presentation of the collage component. Illustration of an exemplar and the instructions from the unit outline. Briefly document detail the collaborative planning required prior to the commencement of the workshop series.

Discussion in groups of 3-4 (10 mins):

Participants are each given an exemplar of a collage which has been considered exemplary by faculty staff. In groups, they are asked to consider the following:

- Look at the instructions in the unit outline.
- Look at the collage. Comment on the relationship between the images and the captions that accompany them. Are there any aspects of this that would pose particular difficulty for certain groups of students in terms of language (e.g. colloquial/idiomatic language) or content (e.g.local knowledge)?
- What information would be needed in order to clarify the requirements of this task? Are there ‘gaps’ to be filled? Are we making assumptions when presenting students with certain types of activities?

Presenter / Whole group discussion (10 mins)

Draw together ideas from participants regarding the issues that have arisen during the workshop, and comment on the implications of combining the skills LAS and faculty staff. In particular, take into consideration how this sort of collaboration could extend beyond the local experience; for example, how this could benefit those involved in offshore programs.

Biodata

Dr. Patricia Dooley

Patricia has been preparing international students for mainstream study at Curtin for over twenty years, mostly at pre-tertiary level in the department now known as Curtin English Language Centre. During that time, she has also had extensive involvement with language testing, particularly the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Patricia's Masters study (1998) investigated the predictive validity of IELTS as an indicator of future academic success; her doctoral study (2005) looked at issues of English proficiency for international students. Both were based on data collected at Curtin.

Patricia joined Curtin Business School in July 2009, where she is now working as an Academic and Language Skills advisor at the Communication Skills Centre. This involves providing support to students from a range of language and cultural backgrounds, and collaborating with faculty staff across the business school to assist where needed.