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The Implications of Literacy Teaching Models

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Abstract

First year students often experience a culture shock as certain literacy practices at the university level are different from their experiences in high schools. Some major challenges that students encounter include students' ability to maintain academic integrity practices in their studies, to comprehend complex academic texts to outline key ideas, and to communicate confidently and effectively in diverse academic genres. As these challenges are common, often universities offer activities to assist students' with their academic enculturation process. The three popular literacy teaching models currently in practice are the generic, embedded and literacies models. All the three models offer challenges in their effective practice. By evaluating the ethnographic data from the models used at UNSW Canberra Academic Language Learning Unit (ALL), this paper argues that in line with Lea and Street's (2006) discussion, literacies is the most effective approach for developing students' lifelong skills for effective communication, reading and critical thinking. Literary teaching should involve an advanced inquiry into writing practices in diverse disciplines helping students' identifying and practicing using language devices and rhetorical structures in academic genres.

Keywords: academic literacy, literacies model, in-built curriculum, written communication

1. Introduction

Although advanced written communication is an essential requirement for most white color occupations globally, many university curricula still do not necessarily identify 'literacy teaching' as a crucial need at university level. The reason for this is that literacy is known as being able to read and write. Other popular assumptions are that secondary schools prepare their students to face literacy challenges at university level, students continue to increase their skills in their exposure to university learning, and therefore, university graduates are capable of effective written communication. While these assumptions are true for some smart students, there are many silent sufferers who struggle in their entire journey of university learning and perhaps also after their graduation in the workplace without adequate skills for their professional writing.

As some universities have recognized writing as a deficit in student learning, they have initiated various support programmes in their first year to assist students to increase their academic literacy skills. Among such programmes, the three models, the generic, embedded and literacies (see section 2.1 for further details), are popularly used in Australian universities. However, all these approaches offer challenges in their effective practice in assisting students' learning advanced literacy. Despite the limitations and challenges, the author has found that the literacies approach (as suggested in Lea & Street 2006) is more useful in providing students with independent skills for writing with agency and power. The purpose of this paper is to juxtapose the three approaches in practice and analyze limitations from an ethnographical study that was conducted by the teachers themselves by keeping records of the initiated programmes including teaching activities, teacher observation and self-reflection reports and anonymous student evaluations. These were collected not necessarily for research purposes but for enhancing effective teaching practices.

Literacy is an advanced skill and all university students need to develop an increased understanding of skills and strategies to read in a variety of disciplines and language related skills to write effectively with a passion, scholarship and agency. Academic programmes should help students to identify epistemological and ontological nature of writing and ecologies of writing in their subjects (Lea & Street, 2006). Students should be able to transform their skills of writing in a range of fields and learn that writing involves depicting writer's individual agency and power (Gee, 2004). Our experience has shown that many students struggle to express their ideas coherently and cohesively.

Hence, literacy experts have a major role in this endeavor to help students to identify features of different genres, diverse academic practices in university disciplines, and language related choices and strategies that writers adopt in effective written communication. Experts (e.g. Street, 1984; Lea & Street 2006; Lillis, 2001; Lillis & Scott, 2007) argue that literacy programmes must expose students to write, get feed forward, feedback and practice writing genres with an understanding of how language is used in communication as a social practice. The purpose of this paper is to provide useful insights and implications from the three models adopted to enhance students skills for academic literacy in university.

2. Literacy and its stance in higher education

The plethora of research in literacy studies points out that institutionally literacy has been in a state of a deficit model where practitioners are involved in solving a problem in literacy rather than being considered as a resource that facilitates communication (Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007). The reason for this is that "writing is a 'high stake' activity in university education" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 9) and thus lecturers attempt to provide extra support for students to increase their skills for writing. However, success of such deficit approaches in literacy education has been questionable because students do not necessarily learn to write effectively.

Learning to write well with an understanding of a particular audience is an arduous task for anyone. Writing involves writer's effort to use language appropriately to the context. It involves writer's deliberate choices of language resources, socially constructed structures and rhetorical features (Gee, 2014). One would mistakenly take this as sheer grammatical competence, but it involves many other competencies such as the communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Some people tend to have inherent grammatical and communicative competencies, yet discourse and other sociolinguistic competencies need to be carefully developed. Writer's adaptation of appropriate rhetoric and other language and non-language resources makes writing more readable and inspiring. As Hyland (2004, p. 5) argues, "…every successful text must display the writer's awareness of both its readers and its consequences" because effective communication is desirable in academic texts. This paper critiques the two popularly used approaches (the generic and embedded models argue that the pedagogical process for literacy teaching has to be carefully planned to expose students to various sources to explore features of written communication in academia and ecological genres as well as epistemological and ontological patterns of academic discourse (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Gee, 2014).

Literacy skills in higher education impact on student performance as higher level literacy increases one's ability for critical thinking. As John Oxenham (1980, p. 51) rightly argues, "more literate people are the more willing they are to accept and work for improvement in their societies… they become more willing to reason for themselves, less willing to take an opinion on authority". Therefore, universities should pay attention to developing literacy skills. The knowledge of literacy practice is not static but keeps evolving. However, selecting an approach for literacy is not easy because of diverse perspectives and attitudes towards literacy at university. Experts from the field of linguistics advocate explicit literacy teaching. Literacy is a social practice (Street & Lefstein, 2007) and novice writers need to know about socially constructed issues and they also need to have increased the level of competencies to write to influence their readers making appropriate language choices and rhetoric. Devereux et al. (2006) have shown the difficulties of students acquiring academic literacy and importance of providing more challenging opportunities and necessary support to help students to improve their thinking and writing. There are numerous challenges of developing an effective programme to suit every learner. However, when students learn well about the ecologies of writing (Barton, 1994), they tend to develop lifelong skills to explore unfamiliar genres to develop transferable skills in writing and this will increase their confidence to write.

Literacy is not just a fixed entity. Learning literacy is cognitively demanding. Therefore, Lea and Street (2006) suggest the literacies model to expose students to structured writing programmes make to teach them about mechanisms and language-related aspects of writing. Lea and Street's literacies model shows that this approach is more useful than just introducing such principles in pre-sessional and embedded programmes. In the literacies approach, students receive opportunities for continuous practice and get close feedback on their writing to reflect their own writing. These programmes should not include 'recipes' or 'do lists', but students need to develop explorative skills to adopt devices suit to their own personal styles of communication.

This paper argues that literacy is not a soft skill that could be fixed in a short consultation. Moon (2014) reported preservice teacher graduates who were prepared to teach in secondary schools had deficiencies in their own literacy skills. Being literate is not necessarily being able to read and write, in a general sense, but it is more meaningful as the learner should have a sound understanding of emerging patterns and epistemologies of written communication. Effective written communication can be developing not only equipping students with language skills but also with sociolinguistic competencies. People also should be able to read numerous texts and understand explicit and implicit messages and socio-cultural and linguistic elements in genres to understand expert writers' complex arguments and cognitively demanding messages.

2.1 Literacy models in practice and their challenges

Three common models are used in Australian university contexts to enhance literacy skills of university entrants in their first year, including the generic model (also called study skills model), the embedded model (also called the integrated model) and the literacies model. There is no proper uniform system in universities to identity these measures and people tend to make decision based on their experience, perspectives and need-based problem solving skills. Sometimes these programmes are offered by language specialists and subject teachers also introduce these skills in their courses. If universities have their own writing centre that is envisaging student support in their literacy, they take main responsibility for development of their programmes. Many struggle to launch their programmes without much literacy policy to support them. These staffs are often marginalized from other academic staff as they take different role in developing student skills. Yet, they bring their own expertise to the community and continue to apply measures to improve student skills.

The generic model, as its name sounds, introduces writing as a generic skill by offering ad hoc short workshops to increase students' skills in writing and reading at universities. In this approach, we assume that writing is a generic skill and students can transfer these skills to other contexts unproblematically. These workshops are offered either as part of the pre-degree programmes or post entry programmes that may be optional based on students voluntary participation. These are just ad-hoc workshops that are for a short period to introduce key skills required for their learning. There are many practical problems launching these programmes while also avoiding clashes of regular timetables. Apart from many other practical problems, this model has been critiqued for its lack of effectiveness as writing varies from discipline to discipline and students do not necessarily have enough time to practice writing (McWilliams & Allan, 2014). On the other hand, programmes include only generic macro tasks such as how to write an academic essay or a report and lessons on selected common university writing tasks.

The embedded approach is the most widely supported model in Australian universities (Chanock, 2007: Devereux & Wilson, 2008; McWilliams & Allan, 2014). This model hypothesizes that literacy programmes should be embedded into the main-stream in collaboration with literacy staff and disciplinary staff (Ranawake & Wilson, 2016). This is also known as 'the embedded model' or 'the in-built curriculum' (Chanock, 2007: Devereux & Wilson, 2008; McWilliams & Allan, 2014). These programmes are currently used to help students with their set assessment tasks in courses. One of the biggest challenges that literacy experts experience in using this approach is the other academics' willingness and commitment to develop literacy related programmes for their students, perhaps because they have no time for it or they do not simply see the need for literacy support in their courses. McWilliams and Allan (2014) provide a model to enhance the practice of the embedded model; however, the challenges mentioned above can continue to exist, there is no policy or general consensus about the need for literacy in every course. Clashing and overlapping can be unavoidable and also, teaching literacy in every course is impractical and students may experience boredom and repetition which may negatively impact their learning of literacy.

Another practice is to offer undergraduate literacy credit courses or teaching literacy as for a semester or longer period for students who want to increase literacy skills. This is similar to the American Freshman model which provides an extended support service to increase student writing and reading skills. Literacy experts such and Lea and Street (2006) and their subsequent work suggests the effectiveness of this model compares to other models. They call this model 'literacies' not 'literacy' as the plural meaning is more suitable to emphasize that teaching includes diverse practices allow students to understand different styles of writing. These courses involve assessment similar to other academic disciplines and therefore, students take their learning seriously compared to other models. However, many other variables such as the expertise of the teacher and set curriculum measures would impact the successful implementation of this model. These courses need to be well structured to offer students with opportunities to develop their explorative skills in reading a variety of genres and writing a range of texts regularly and to get feedback from experts. Such programmes must help students understand ecologies of writing (different practices and individual styles of writing) and effective discourse and metadiscoursal aspects such as interactive and interactional language resources (Hyland, 2004) of written language and socially constructed structures and rhetorical patterns of writing (Gee, 2014; Lea & Street, 2006). As many literacy experts argue these courses seem to be the most effective (Lea & Street, 2006), but a few universities seem to invest time and monies in developing such programmes.

3. The ethnographic inquiry

This study is ethnographical in its nature. It involved participatory observation and careful monitoring of data teaching activities, staff reflective reports and student numbers in courses and course evaluations from 2012 -2015. The purpose of the data collection was not necessarily for research purposes but to increase effectiveness as practitioners in ALL teaching. Over the last three years, we, the Academic Language Learning Unit (ALL Unit), have recorded data undergraduate our programmes to understand the strengths and challenges of teaching literacy skills, as there are diverse practices and ongoing debates about our work. The records include anonymous student evaluation of workshops , post ALL teacher self-reflective reports , teacher worksheets, notes from informal discussions from disciplinary staff and other records such as workshop blurbs and student attendance in courses and programmes launched from 2012-2015 . This study did not require ethical clearance as it did not identify any risks involved in using secondary data. No staff and students were actively participated in the study. The records were maintained by the author and the ALL UNIT coordinator to generate an ALL work data repository. For the purpose of this paper, main issues were identified for further discussions.

3.1 The adoption of the generic model

Every year at the UG student orientation programme, ALL teachers introduce the ALL Unit and provide student with the list of workshops on academic integrity, citing well and knowing how, smart reading, essay writing and other related workshops. The workshops from 2012 - 2015 were scheduled at lunch time so that many students can join these workshops at their choice. The workshops were also advertised in the newsletter and emails were sent to staff to inform their students and stress the importance of the courses and to further motivate participation.

There were many practical issues noted in using this approach. Poor students' participation was one of the major challenges as only a few (10-20) students each semester participated in these courses. The main reason for this is students' were unaware of the usefulness of these activities and they seem to have 'know it all' attitudes to the skills taught. Another reason is that they are not mandatory unless students do not perform well in their literacy bench mark

test.

The ALL Unit was responsible for conducting the post entry literacy test for three years to identify students at risk of writing and reading and would struggle to work in their UG programmes. However, we have found that this test is not an effective measure to identify students' who have problems in their academic writing. We used the traffic light system (green, orange and red) to alert students about their existing skills. Green students often constitute about 30%-40% of the total the whole population and are those who do the test well and are ready to start. The orange students, of which are the majority are not too bad and they may seek help from ALL; but the red students are at risk, about 10% and they receive one to one support and also to see the support offered in the ALL Unit. However, students ultimately are responsible for making the decision to seek support services to increase these skills.

As students at risk received one to one support, some students did not take part in the generic workshops and hence the participation was quite low. The students who participated in the workshops were satisfied and almost 99% believed that the workshops increased their confidence in academic writing and reading. However, this number in any way cannot be equated to the student enrolment numbers each year. Teachers' self-reflective reports show the strengths of student learning but they frequently wrote about the frustration of time and energy invested on this work as many did not benefit from these programmes.

3.2 The adoption of the embedded model

In the last three years, ALL teachers used this approach in the first year geography, IT, history, and Foundation of Management (FOM) courses. However, embedding meaningfully and effectively occurred only in the business course (FOM) as the ALL unit staff had constant involvement in helping students to cope with reading, writing and analyzing a case study in the business course. The collaboration in this course was considerably high as the academic staff member was supportive and believed that literacy was important for his students. Thus, ALL unit staff was also involved in marking their first business essay. This essay was marked by the business teachers to evaluate business content and the ALL teachers to evaluate their academic communication skills. In other courses (geography, IT, history), ALL teachers offered workshops to help students to tackle their assignments tasks effectively in collaboration with the course conveners .

There were numerous challenges in effectively embedding literacy into disciplinary courses. The ALL staff involvement totally depended on the subject teachers willingness to collaborate with the ALL staff . They were also constrained by limited time for collaborative work, particularly to provide time for literacy teaching . They often asked ALL teachers to help them with their assignment by scaffolding and deconstructing the task. Teachers often got limited feedback on the effectiveness of their work in their disciplines. Often they received good feedback from staff; however, reliability was questionable as the staff often wanted to encourage and respect ALL teachers' work. Students' anonymous feedback was relatively positive but ALL teachers also found some students were not satisfied with the repetition of essay writing sessions in several courses. Some thought these workshops should not be compulsory for all students as some students have skills for writing and reading.

However, in the aforementioned business course, the convener wanted further improvement and provided his feedback on how ALL teachers travelled: the aspects he thought had worked and other aspects that ALL staff had to work on to increase effectiveness of the programme. Therefore, the ALL efforts were developmental and continued to be valued. Yet, students' feedback was similar to that in other courses where the majority thought that ALL workshops increased their skills and a few thought that they already had these skills.

3.3 The adoption of the literacies model

Following Lea and Street (2006) principles in their 'literacies model', the course consisted of 13 weeks of interactive workshops structured in such a way to increase students' skills for writing different genres, reflecting on their learning through regular feedback on their writing. It followed the hypothesis that writing can be improved only by writing and reflecting on one's writing with clear feedforward feedback and exposure to good writing models. Reading is integrated into the course to provide exposure in reading and to provide expert models for writing. Students engaged in at least 15 minute writing task every week and had an opportunity to receive peer feedback. The workshop for introducing concepts was for two hours followed by one hour tutorial class every week to extend their learning. The course introduced concepts such as academic culture, academic integrity, genres of academic and professional writing, critical thinking, deconstruction of student writing samples and construction of their own writing, academic arguments, writing conventions and grammar for writing and human communication and strategies for communication and agency and ecologies of writing.

One of the three assessments included student Reading Reaction Online Journal (weight 30 %) submitted on Moodle a blog page every two weeks (a short 400-500 written response to any academic article of their choice) assessed by tutors only with feed forward and feedback on their writing, critical thinking and developing reading. Only individual students had access to their feedback. No mark was assigned before the completion of all writings. The final mark was assigned based on students' ability to reflect on feedback and the level of improvement they had made throughout the course of their writing. The other assessment in week 5 was an article review (weight 25%) and the final formative assessment in week 10 was an argumentative essay (weight 30%). The student also had to take an examination which was worth 15% of the course.

The course was useful in the first year and students generally found writing interesting as they saw there was an opportunity for them to improve and the support was available and approachable. The learning was developmental and the majority was motivated to writing and they found this has helped them with other courses as well. The themes were self-selected and students found this helpful and inspiring. They found teacher feedback useful; care was taken to make the feedback constructive and feed forward only

Students learned only skills and there was no content or required knowledge and therefore, the course was different as compared to other courses. Marking was time consuming and costly. Students had assignments every two weeks and the course may be viewed as a course with too much assessments. The impact of the course would depend on the conveners' and tutors' commitment to review students work and provide effective feedback. There were numerous challenges with student numbers and limited staff. Universities do not necessarily see the value for a course such as this in other subjects such as hard sciences. The course may be wrongly perceived as humanities or a business course.

The course grew remarkably, and other courses were affected and there was staff criticism: students enroll in the course because of their perception that the course was easy. Some academic did not see the need for such a course as it overlapped with what they cover in their courses. There are also challenges posed with student identity (see Wilson, et al., 2015) issues where students were not quite motivated do extra learning. The student evaluation was highly positive when students numbers were low (38) but as the course size increased the author faced challenges of increasing student satisfaction as giving individual feedback and attention was difficult. However, some students' feedback demonstrated that they had the opportunity to increase their skills of writing through meaningful A similar course could also be offered in discipline contexts embedding subject matter knowledge. However, there was no university wide policy to assist literacy support in a more consistent way. The initiatives such as literacy bench mark testing were useful but measures to assist students were more useful as they could impact on providing quality learning experience to undergraduate learners.

4. Discussion

The ethnographic data suggest that the generic approach is the least effective out of the three models used with UG students, but the embedded and the literacies have a number of strength and a few challenges that can be negotiated. Some positives of the embedded are: students receive support in their own disciplines (Chanock, 2007); students get second opinions from their subject staff; information is often relevant and useful for their context (Ranawake and Wilson, 2016); and ALL staff increase their credibility and recognition and ALL staff do not have to be the subject specialist as this gap is fulfilled by the subject staff (McWilliams & Allan, 2014). Some challenges are: the level of collaboration can be limited to tackle assessment tasks, ALL staff do not see students' writing to identify their problems to address them and therefore, they work in the dark; there are numerous issues with time limitations and the skills covered.

The success of the embedded literacy support is entirely dependent upon disciplinary specific academics' willingness to work in collaboration with literacy staff and this decision is based upon their perceptions of the contribution of literacy support in their courses and their view about literacy experts' abilities to influence their students. As noted in the study, despite their motivation for collaboration, time can be the decisive factor. Effective synergy between the two parties involved is necessary to increase student opportunities to learn literacy.

As far as the literacies model is concerned, there are numerous strengths and opportunities for improvement (Lea & Street, 2006) despite the potential challenges confronted. In this course, students generally learn about the culture and ecologies of writing and they become analytical leaners. Writing is a unique field and it does not necessarily "reside in disciplinary and subject-based" contexts (Lea & Street, 2006, 370) and therefore, students can become exploratory and critical learners (Oxenham, 1980). When students see an exemplar, they can analyse the genre to identify features as disciplines that have different genres and subject based discourses (Swales, 1999) and no teacher can teach them all such discourses. Feedback and Assessment are major parts of learning (Sadler, 2010). The main strength in this approach is that they get constant feedback on their own writing and therefore, they learn to write to influence their audience. They have sufficient time for practice and act upon feedback which is desirable for learning.

In the literacies model, through reading in a variety of disciplines, students get to learn about the epistemology of writing and they can focus on the relationship between epistemology and act of writing (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). They get to practice writing and get feedback and no one can reproduce the same example as writing involves a great deal of skills. Students learn to transform with the help of specialist and like any other trainings. Training to write to influence different audience in different genres would help students to see the differences, similarities and hybridity of academic writing.

In the literacies model students receive constant focused practice to identify genres and hybrid genres. They get opportunities to identify discourse patterns, socially constructed structures, power embedded social practices and the role of language in discourse contexts to express power and identity (Gee, 2008). Through the process of reciprocal reading, and reflective writing and feed forward feedback, it promotes enhanced writing. This approach enhances agency and power in writing; demonstrating self, identity and writer's voice. It enables them to recognise and individualise academic identities and power enacted in genres, topics, argumentation, rhetoric and the role of language.

There are several limitations in this study as it is ethnographic in nature and more systematic approaches have to be

used for data collection. It is difficult to demonstrate causality of these programmes as various variables impact on student learning. However, this paper has juxtaposed the three approaches using data the ALL Unit gathered to provide implications and insights for literacy pedagogies.

5. Conclusion

As literacy goes beyond just being able read and write (Osalusi & Oluwagbohunmi, 2014), all university graduates should possess adequate independent skills for writing a variety of texts adopting effective communication strategies and appropriate language resources. Academic literacy is an expert field and students should practice and put conscious effort to understand what involves in "writing as a social practice" (Hyland, 2004). Students need to be able to develop transferable literacy skills to understand emerging genres and hybridity in genres of professional writing. Therefore, restructuring and dismantling or abandoning academic skills support services in universities need critical consideration. If the existing models do not work in some universities, they need to seek other measures and possible improvements to such programmes rather than embracing novel approaches, such as peer assisting models, that reach us in the form of old wine in new bottles. As suggested in this paper, literacies model is not without limitations but can be considered as a sufficient model to increase student learning.

The main strength of literacies model rests on the level of continuous literacy based individual feedback for students to reflect on their writing. It also provides constant writing practice in various genres and allows students to develop explorative skills to analyse good writing practices in different contexts and apply them in their own writing, to influence their audience. This model values the existence of individual styles of writing or ecologies of writing in academia, yet it provides good writing strategies for students to consider applying them in their own writing contexts. Students gain a good understanding of their need to "switch their writing styles and genres between one setting and another" and they develop "a repertoire of literacy practices appropriate to each setting" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 368). The model increases their confidence to participate in academic disciplines and hence literacy learning in this manner can have positive impact on their overall academic performance compared to the other two models discussed in this paper.

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