

COLLOQUIUM

Colloquium One: Dealing with the outside from the inside

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In this colloquium, we asked participants to consider their practices and the philosophies driving those practices within their particular institutional context. In particular, we wanted to draw out the ways in which those “ideal” philosophies and practices impacted and/or are impacted on by outside influences eg. graduate attributes documents, restructuring, cuts in funding, internationalisation of the curricula, quality assurance measures etc.

In order to attempt to draw out philosophies and practices in changing times, we structured a colloquium as a hypothetical. Panel members were asked to respond to a number of hypothetical scenarios. Each of these scenarios were designed to draw out issues which form and challenge our identities as language and learning practitioners.

In responding to these scenarios, we asked panel members to think about the following broader issue questions:

- Can we set agendas?
 - How do we respond to outside agendas?
 - When do we respond to outside agendas?
 - What characterises our responses: are we steadfast, mutable, pro-active, reactive, strategic, ethical?
 - Why and when do we respond in these ways?
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Scenario 1 (Caroline San Miguel, University of Technology Sydney)

In your work around campus, you see subject outlines with inappropriate assessment strategies, illogical sequencing of assessment tasks and no reference to the skills that students will require in the subject.

In this scenario I assume I have seen the subject outlines via students who are having problems with assessment tasks. My short term aim would be to support the students in completing the assessment tasks while at the same time establishing and building up a relationship between literacy academics and academic staff from within the faculty concerned. My longer term aim would be to collaborate with the faculty in developing clearer assessment tasks and building literacy support into subjects within the faculty.

Firstly I would organise a workshop for students completing the first assessment task, contacting the subject coordinator to:

- explain the role and purpose of the workshop,
- clarify the purpose and requirements of the assessment and draw on the coordinator's knowledge of potential problems students may face in meeting these requirements
- organise a convenient time for the workshop, preferably within the subject so it was available to all students and so the coordinator could attend

To build up the relationship with the coordinator, a follow up meeting from the workshop would be organised to:

- discuss the coordinator's, the students' and my evaluations of the workshop
 - offer further workshops after the assessment had been marked and request some sample student responses to the first assessment task to use in those workshops (with students' permission)
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This cycle could be repeated with any other assessment tasks in that subject. Further meetings with the coordinator would be arranged to:

- assess the value of the workshops by noting changes in the students' writing, collecting further student evaluations and asking for the coordinator's evaluation
- illustrate a variety of assessment tasks and ways of working collaboratively by showing samples of subject outlines where literacy is integrated
- discuss future possibilities of working within the subject

Integrating literacy into the disciplines requires collaborative relationships which draw on the disciplinary knowledge of faculty academics and our knowledge of academic literacies. Initiatives which begin at a grassroots level need to be proactively maintained and extended if they are to lead to successful collaborations. This maintenance work, however, often remains invisible. How can we make this work count both in terms of funding and in terms of workloads? What ways might there be of theorising this kind of work so we can better understand these processes and communicate it to each other and to the broader academic community?

Scenario 2 (Jan Skillen, University of Wollongong)

Your Unit or Centre has secured/been offered funding by the university to screen all incoming students in relation to their English language skills. The proviso is that students, once identified as not meeting an acceptable standard in English language, must attend and pass programs developed, taught and assessed by your Unit or Centre, before being allowed to progress in their degree program.

Learning Development at the University of Wollongong has a philosophy that sees students as deserving of systemic and developmental learning support during their entry into university and its disciplines and throughout their degree as the academic and disciplinary requirements they have to meet evolve from 1st year to postgraduate level. This philosophy is in recognition of the language and the learning leap that all students


have to make when entering the new context of tertiary study and the new disciplines they're moving into.

With this philosophy in mind, our aim is to assist ALL our students to develop the appropriate language and learning skills for the tertiary and disciplinary contexts of this university. To do this, we have three main strategies:

- contributing to the development of policy about language, literacy and learning at university, faculty and department level;
- embedding or integrating the teaching of language, literacy and learning skills into core content curricula at each year level in each of our degree programs;
- teaching skills outside curricula via individual consultations, paper and web-based resources, generic workshops; and
- working with other academic staff to ensure that they have a language to talk about language, literacy and learning.

Our response to the scenario above would align with our philosophy of embedding support within the curricula of core content subjects. We would have screening procedures for ALL incoming international students that would ideally be carried out within a core subject in each degree program. The aim of such procedures would be to provide a profile of the students' written English that would allow both them and us to take appropriate measures early enough in their degree programs for further development to occur.

The type of program we would see as most suitable would not involve courses for credit, but would instead involve the embedding of teaching about English into at least one core subject in each degree program, with the decision about the choice of subject/s made by both the learning developer and the department or faculty. It would consist of one tutorial a week in that core curriculum that would run parallel to the main lectures/tutorials and would use the readings, topics and assignments of that curriculum. The program would be developed collaboratively by the learning developer



and the relevant course coordinator but would be taught primarily by the learning developer. This embedding would allow students to develop discipline-specific as well as English skills and may help in concept development within the discipline as well, thus ensuring that students see the relevance of further development in English to their success in the curriculum. Assessment of the effectiveness of the strategy could be achieved by pre and post assessment of English skills on real assignments, set at the beginning and end of the course.

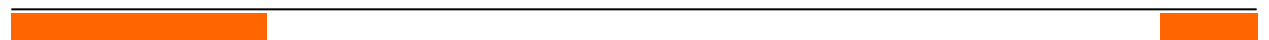
Scenario 3 (Margaret Hicks, University of South Australia)


Student demand for individual appointments is high. You do not have the staffing resources to meet these demands.

In reality everyone who has worked in the student learning support/development area has been faced or is facing this situation. In this area of work – demand on our services and especially services relating to individual appointments is always high. It doesn't matter how many individual appointments are offered – they are always filled. If a substantial proportion of learning adviser time is allocated to individual appointments and is increased due to demand the opportunities to provide other alternative services diminishes.

In 1999 – the role of study advisers at the University of South Australia was redefined and the number of positions was significantly reduced. Past practices in this area which had focused on individual appointments had to change. This was not only due to reduced staff resources but also to unmet student demand. At the University of South Australia we have developed a professional development model of student learning support. This model is characterized by:

- collaborating closely with teaching academics, professional development staff and learning advisers to change and integrate support into the curriculum
- focusing on the curriculum and assessment items in particular



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- developing resources and offering services for **all** students
 - aligning approaches with institutional priorities and directions
 - acknowledging explicitly that learning support is developmental
 - providing multiple ways that students can access support, services and resources


At the University of South Australia students are offered direct services through online workshops, learning guides (online), individual appointments, workshops, and drop-in times. Indirect services are offered through the collaborative work that learning advisers do with teaching staff. Working with the teaching staff member is pivotal. Rather than there being an emphasis on one type of delivery/service – it is about offering a combination of varied services which complement each other and emerge from the University’s strategic directions and priorities.

Scenario 4 (Kate Chanock, La Trobe University)

Your university is being reviewed in the next quality assurance round. What mechanisms do you / would you want to have in place to demonstrate the quality of your service?

The philosophy of my unit is that LAS advisers act as guides to the distinctive academic subculture(s) in which our students sojourn, interpreting their purposes and showing how these shape the literacy practices that students will encounter. The aim is increased control over, rather than more thorough submission to, these cultural practices. The work of interpretation is done in individual tutorials, lectures, workshops, and handouts; the implications for each student’s reading and writing are explored one-to-one. At the same time, it is our responsibility to try to engage tutors, too, in thinking about why they do what they do, and how to make this clearer to their students. Ideally, evaluation should focus on the effectiveness of our efforts to raise awareness on the part of both students and tutors, though this is not easy to demonstrate, still less to measure.








Because academic skills advising is different in many ways from teaching in the disciplines, it does not lend itself easily to institutional methods of evaluation designed to demonstrate the quality of teaching in degree programs. Nonetheless, if evaluation is to reflect credit on our programs and our institutions, we need to institute mechanisms that assess what we think is valuable in our work, in a form that is comprehensible and credible to outside evaluators. These will vary from program to program, but useful considerations for many may be:

- What is meaningful
- What is feasible
- What is credible
- What is fair

I think we should be steadfast in standing by what we perceive as our students' needs and what we have found to be the best ways of meeting these. At the same time, particularly if these methods are expensive and/or low-tech, we need to demonstrate a willingness to develop flexible alternatives. (Because I regard one-to-one teaching as essential, for example, I also address common problems through materials integrated into the disciplines, and demonstrate how each mode informs the other.) We need to be proactive in preparing (succinct) statements of how our programs support the work of the institution, and regular reports demonstrating that we carry out a constant cycle of planning, implementation, reflection, and revision. For credibility, this cycle should also call upon the mechanisms already authorized by the institution's quality assurance process. While these may not suit our purposes (e.g. course evaluation questionnaires do not fit one-to-one tutorials), adaptations can be negotiated that do suit our goals and values, but are recognizable to outside evaluators. We need to be clear about the reasons for what we do, AND able to articulate them in the language of quality assurance.

Our work is a powerful influence on students' success, but only one influence. We should develop mechanisms that affirm the kind of influence we think we have (e.g.





building confidence, demystifying expectations, developing strategies, helping to internalize a critical approach) but do not go too far (e.g. claiming improvement in marks or retention, which we can help but over which we can have no control).

