

STAFF AND STUDENT ROLES IN CENTRAL AND FACULTY-BASED LEARNING SUPPORT: CHANGING PARTNERSHIPS

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The changing face of universities today reflects their various responses to pressures both external and internal to the institution. External pressures include the exponential expansion of knowledge and the new technologies, the marketisation of education, combined with shrinking government funding and increased accountability. Within the university,




factors such as increasing student diversity and internationalisation, institutional devolution and restructuring along with decreased funding and a renewed focus on quality assurance in teaching have changed the way learning centres and their staff support students at a central level and within faculties. This paper will use case studies of the work of the Learning Centre at the University of Sydney to explore some of the challenges facing both forms of learning support and the responses we are making to these challenges. In the provision of central learning support our responses have included the evolution of a comprehensive and more flexible program and the increased refinement of skills development and learning pathways. The changing nature of Faculty requests for student learning support has meant a shift away from an 'ideal' model where learning development is embedded into the subject curriculum. This has resulted in a degree of compromise in the way in which we deliver learning support to Faculties and in the partnerships we create.

Keywords: *academic literacies, generic attributes, collaboration, higher education*

Introduction


The changing face of universities today in Australia and worldwide reflects their various responses to pressures both external and internal to the institution. External pressures include the exponential expansion of knowledge and the new technologies, the increased access to higher education, the marketisation of education as a 'commodity', and the push from the government and employment sectors for graduates equipped with 'generic attributes', all of which are taking place in a climate of shrinking government funding and increased accountability to government bodies. Within the university, factors such as the continuing trend in



student diversity and internationalisation, institutional devolution and restructuring, a renewed focus on quality assurance in teaching, along with a decrease in funding, are changing the ways learning centres and their staff support students at a central level and within faculties across Australia. In order to remain a viable force on campus, learning centres and their staff have had to adapt to these changes in their pedagogy and practices and to reexamine their institutional roles and also the partnerships they forge between student, faculty and the institution.

Although the external pressures may be universally felt and to some extent all universities in Australia share the same challenges, the ways in which institutions and their learning centres respond to these pressures and challenges will vary. Since it is not possible to address all issues arising from these challenges within the scope of this paper, we propose to critically reflect on aspects of our practice in order to draw out some of the key issues. We argue that a reflection on our role and the partnerships we create through the process of collaboration - between subject teacher, student and academic literacy teacher - is integral to an understanding of our practice. Taking the University of Sydney as an example, the paper outlines firstly, how the University has responded to some of the current external pressures and the impact of its response on the Learning Centre (LC). Secondly, we will explore the concept of collaboration in the provision of central and faculty-based learning support. In particular, we focus on the staff and student roles which emerge through the processes of collaboration and the changing nature of these partnerships. We are interested in exploring which partner in the process - the subject teacher, the student and the academic literacy teacher - is being privileged at different points of the collaboration.

Through an exploration of two case studies of our current work at the LC, we hope to show how each partner contributes in varying degrees to the partnership. The first case study will discuss aspects of the central workshop program, which provides students with generic skills support outside their degree course, to reflect on how we have responded to some of the challenges mentioned above. To illustrate the changing staff and student partnerships, the second case study will discuss a faculty-based program in which academic literacy support has been integrated into the students' course. Finally, it is intended that the reflections on each case study



will highlight the implications for our current practice (and survival) and point to the need for further research.


Background: The Learning Centre

The Learning Centre at the University of Sydney lies outside the College/Faculty structure and is located within the central administrative portfolio of Planning and Resources in the Registrar's Division, as a unit of Student Services, along with other services such as Counselling, Welfare and Disability and the Mathematics Learning Centre. Our Strategic Plan has been written to reflect the goals of the Student Services Plan, the Divisional Plan and in turn the University's Strategic Plan. Since its inception in 1991, the LC has offered a program of support in three modes: a Central Workshop Program, a Faculty Program and an Independent Learning Program. Development and research associated with each Program has helped to inform and enrich our practice and to redefine our institutional and teaching roles.

As elsewhere in Australia and worldwide, the Centre has lived (and survived) through a period of great change in higher education. Inevitably during that period, both external and internal factors have impacted on the Centre's approach to curriculum, on its status and position within the institution and on our own perceptions of our practice. To provide a context for the rest of the paper, three factors, the institutional responses to these factors and their impact on the Learning Centre can be isolated.

External and internal factors and their impact on the Learning Centre

First, the government and employment sector push for generic attributes and lifelong learning has led to institutional policies and curricula which focus on generic attributes. Different terminology exists both within Australia and overseas to describe these attributes and skills. Terms such as generic/core/key/transferable competencies, attributes or capabilities are used interchangeably. While the terms and their definitions vary considerably (Barrie & Jones 1999), the categories of skills and attributes typically relate to (1) the acquisition of a body of disciplinary




knowledge, (2) the critical understanding which comes from the communication, application and evaluation of a body of knowledge, (3) the commitment to ethical action and social responsibility, and (4) a capacity for employment and lifelong learning (Gibbs et al 1994; Nunan 1999).

The policy on 'Generic Attributes of Graduates of the University of Sydney', for example, states that among the desirable generic attributes students should have on graduation are 'knowledge skills' that enable the student 'to identify, access, organise and communicate knowledge in both written and oral English' and 'thinking skills' in which they should be able 'to exercise critical judgement' and 'be capable of rigorous and independent thinking' (Academic Board Policy, University of Sydney 1997). In addition, the University's policies related to teaching and learning mention the development of generic skills as a desirable learning outcome of subject curricula. Over the years the LC has responded to such policies by developing a Generic Skills curriculum framework which encompasses the Central Workshop Program and the Independent Learning Program and forms the basis for much of the Faculty Program. Aligning our Programs to institutional goals has helped to raise the Centre's profile within the university. In addition, maintaining links with key decision-making bodies on academic policies through membership of Committees such as the Teaching and Learning Committee, the First-Year Experience Group and the Academic Honesty Working Party are also vital in ensuring that our profile remains high.

The second factor is the increased access to higher education and the resulting diversity of the student population. For over a decade now the advent of 'mass' tertiary education and the increasing number of pathways to access it have meant a wider diversity of local students, as well as a growing number of international students. The diversity of our student population continues to have a major impact on our program delivery and our learning partnerships with students and faculty. There is thus a continuing challenge to adapt and diversify the curriculum in both the Central Program and the Faculty Program to ensure its relevance and to accommodate the needs of all parties.

The third factor is the Government agenda for quality assurance in universities with the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and the




impact of this on the University. Internal funding at the University has recently become linked to teaching performance in faculties as well as research performance. Policies of performance-based funding for teaching, performance indicators for 'scholarship in teaching', resulting in a formula-driven 'Scholarship Index' for teaching, and the Teaching Improvement Fund are all part of the University's Quality Assurance agenda. A brochure summarising the University's policies in this area has been produced by the Institute of Teaching and Learning and can be accessed online at <http://www.itl.edu.au/itl/TandL/images/brochure.PDF>. However, at present, institutional devolution and restructuring has meant that this funding flows directly to Colleges and Faculties, making it crucial for the LC in its central location to continue to work collaboratively across the institution. The challenge for us is how to respond creatively to the quality assurance agenda in our program delivery and to gain access to institutional funding.

Collaboration as a core component of our role

The concept of collaboration with faculty as a core component of the role of academic literacy teachers is not new and has been the subject of much discussion in the literature. From within the discipline of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), key figures like Swales in the US and Dudley-Evans and Tim Johns at the University of Birmingham in the UK have been strong advocates of the value and power of collaboration with subject teachers across the academy since the early 1980s. Recently, Dudley-Evans (2001) has reflected on the changes in the Birmingham approach to team teaching, which originated over 20 years ago within the EAP program. The team-teaching approach at that time involved language teachers working together with subject teachers to support international postgraduate students in two departments.


To describe the shift in practice and in participant roles of this approach, he has proposed a useful taxonomy of three levels of cooperation with subject staff. The first level is described as *cooperation* in which language teachers seek information from the discourse community in the department about subject staff expectations of communication in the discipline, about the course content and assessment tasks. The second level, *collaboration*, involves the language teacher and subject teacher



working together outside the classroom to devise specific activities ‘that run concurrently with the subject course’ to support students. The third level, *team teaching*, is where the language and the subject teachers co-teach in the same classroom. He advocates moving beyond ‘cooperation’ to the ‘higher’ levels to ‘develop collaborative and team-taught’ approaches to language and learning support (Dudley-Evans 2001, p. 226). In the discussion of participant roles in collaborative approaches he refers to the triangular model of Swales (1988) which depicts the interrelationships between the three participants: the subject teacher, the language teacher and the student. The role of the language teacher, he suggests, is to act as ‘an intermediary’ between the student and the subject teacher. He goes on to argue that a concern and respect for the interrelationships between the three parties and a clear definition of their roles is the key to success for collaborative teaching (Dudley-Evans 2001, p. 228). He concludes with two key issues for the team-teaching approach - the issue of taking a more ‘critical perspective’ of EAP and the issue of transferability of the approach to other contexts involving collaboration. Both issues are relevant to our current practice in Australia and would provide fascinating opportunities for research.

The various approaches to collaborative teaching prevalent in the US and elsewhere include Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Language-across-the Curriculum (LAC), Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) and team-teaching within EAP. In reviewing these approaches Johns (1997) takes the roles of content and literacy teachers a step further. She brings into the Swalesian triangular model of roles and their interrelationships, another ‘partner’ - the administration - and calls for literacy teachers to act as ‘mediators’ among students, faculty and administrators to collaboratively examine the interactions of the texts, roles and contexts (Johns 1997, p. xiii). This empowered view of the literacy teacher’s role and the strong partnerships which can emerge from taking such a view is a useful benchmark against which to reflect on our current practice.

Earlier echoes of an empowered view of the roles of learning centre staff, from a different theoretical and more local perspective, can be detected firstly in Candy’s discussion of the task of developing lifelong learning strategies in students and of integrating such strategies into undergraduate curricula. Here he identifies learning



centres as key "change agents" (Candy et al 1994, p. 164). From a more ethnographically-oriented and critical perspective, Lee et al (1995, p. 465) argue for a shift in the partnerships between literacy and subject teachers towards a concept of 'co-production' in which each party is engaged in the creation of new meanings, moving from an 'informant role' to become 'co-producers of new knowledge' about literacy practices within disciplines. Finally, Threadgold et al (1997, p. 291) discuss the problem of the disjunction between literacy teachers and subject teachers, highlighting the need for 'translation and retraining on both sides' to enable these two groups to speak to and hear one another. At the LC we have also argued for the need for literacy teachers within learning centres to be committed to a more empowered role in our practice and respond to the challenges of collaboration (Webb & Bonanno 1995). However, despite the encouraging rhetoric in the literature, in many institutions across Australia (including ours) there still persist perceptions of the role of academic literacy teachers which would be far removed from the 'ideal' view of us as campus mediators.

Although not the focus of this paper, no discussion of collaboration and partner roles should take place without alluding in passing to the context of practice, since roles are defined and challenged by the contexts in which they operate. We would argue that our pedagogical and theoretical base at LC falls within the sociocultural models of academic literacies (Johns 1997; Lea & Street 1998). Since the inception of LC the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics has played a key role in the development of LC practice and research. The theory has provided us with a rich and integrated model of language in context and is used as an explanatory tool which helps make explicit to students literacy practices across disciplines. It also helps build a metalanguage for students, subject staff and us to talk about language. This is not to say, however that other socially oriented and student-centred theories of learning (Ramsden 1992; Biggs 1999) have not played a vital role in shaping both our practice and our research.

To pick up on some of the issues raised in the discussion above on collaboration we will revisit the triangular model of partnerships (Swales 1988) to examine more closely the roles and partnerships in the LC at the University of Sydney. This simple triangular concept can be extended to encompass the University context and is

overlaid with a shaded representation of the two main ways in which the LC operates, the Central Workshop Program and the Faculty Program (Figure 1). The overlay is an attempt to depict how each Program overlaps and informs the other. The overlap in the two programs represents the common purpose and the pedagogical approach that they share - that of providing learning support, as well as the mutual enrichment and interchange of ideas that strengthens them.

The bi-directional arrows along each side of the triangle represent the two-way partnerships between each party (Figure 1).

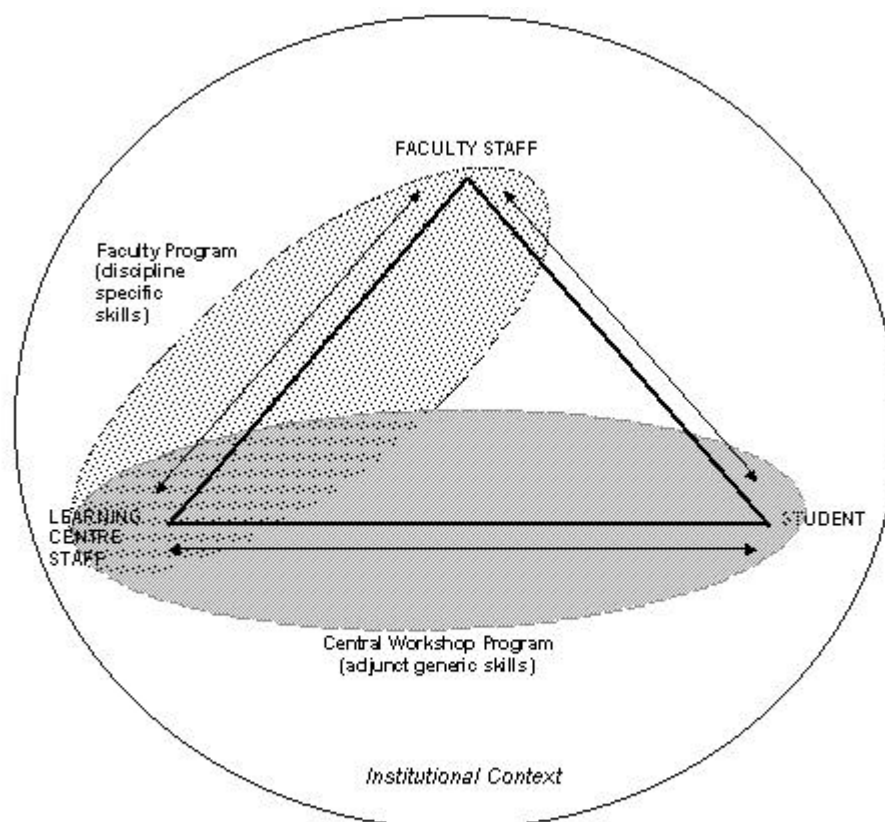



Figure 1: A diagram of partnerships and roles in learning support

(adapted from Dudley Evans, 2001)

The adapted diagram allows us to foreground and background the partners in the collaboration process according to which party has entered into a direct relationship with the other. For example, the Central Program has LC staff and students foregrounded in a direct relationship, with the third member of the partnership, the subject teacher, indirectly present or backgrounded. The content of the workshops in the Central Program is drawn from a range of disciplines and genres, and students



engage in reflection and analysis of the discourse practices not only of their chosen disciplines but those of other students, in which the faculty staff are indirectly implicated.

In the Faculty Program, LC staff and Faculty academic staff are foregrounded in a direct relationship, working together through a process of negotiation and collaboration to create some form of context-specific learning support for the student. This support can be either integrated into students' subject course or can be offered as an adjunct to it. The third partner in the relationship, the student, whose learning needs form the basis of the collaboration, while not in a direct partnership with the other two partners, is the indirect and backgrounded beneficiary of the process. The fulfillment of the students' needs shapes the objectives of the partnership, while the student evaluation of the outcome of the collaboration, that is, the learning support, helps to change and modify that support.

Thus the diagram helps to depict the variety of ways of delivering learning support that are needed to accommodate change. This is not so much a change of identity or role, since our job has essentially remained the delivery of learning support. It is rather an increased focus on flexibility of modes of delivery within that identity, and also flexibility within the partnerships we create as we respond to institutional priorities, both centrally and at a faculty level.

Within the Faculty Program, a number of ways of approaching the partnership are possible, resulting in a continuum of different types of context-specific support, ranging from adjunct workshops (workshops outside course timetables) through integrated to fully embedded programs (Figure 2), depending on the varying levels of contribution from Faculty staff and the constraints of the context.

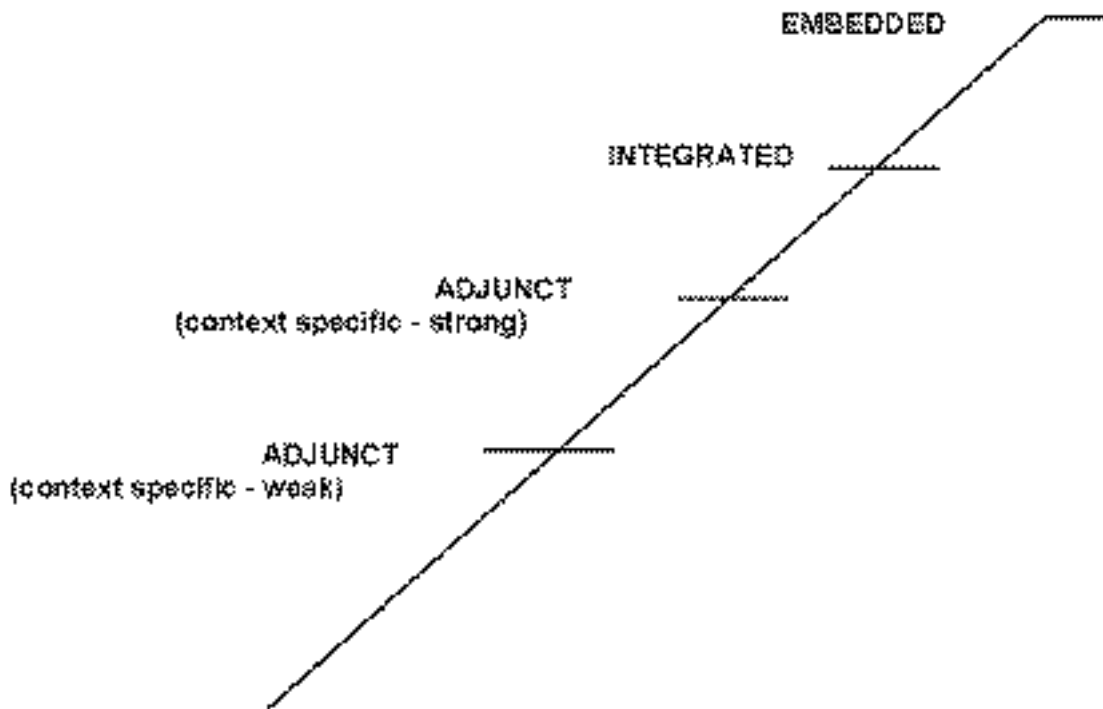



Figure 2: Approaches to Collaboration in the Faculty Program

Different approaches to Faculty collaboration are mapped along the continuum.

Although four positions are marked on the diagram, it should be noted that many variations exist and each new partnership between LC staff and Faculty staff has unique features. The points marked 'adjunct' mean that the learning support provided within the department occurs outside the students' timetabled course. Support in the adjunct category can range from that with a 'weak' discipline focus, (e.g. some workshops on essay writing from the central workshop program taught as preparation for an essay assignment in Nursing, with minimal context-specific adaptation and minimal collaboration from Faculty staff) to that with a 'strong' discipline focus. The latter might be designed specifically for a targeted group of students to focus on a particular genre or task, such as a series of workshops on reading cases in undergraduate Law. This type of approach would draw heavily on the target genres and tasks within the context of the course. The degree of collaboration may also vary in this approach. 'Integrated' refers to workshops or




lectures supporting the development of academic literacy within the students' discipline. This support is delivered by LC staff (often with subject staff present in the classroom) and is timetabled into the students' course as an integral component. An example of this approach will be discussed below in the second case study. 'Embedded' we use here to describe the collaborative design of a curriculum in which the development of generic skills and academic literacy is the organising principle for the course and which is ultimately taught by subject staff.

The fully integrated or embedded model of learning support has been the subject of much recent discussion in the literature (see for example Skillen et al 1999; Skillen et al 1998; English et al 1999; Barrie & Jones 1999; Bonanno & Jones 1996; Drury & Taylor 1996; Webb et al 1995 for some local examples). However, we are not suggesting at this point that the upper end of the continuum is necessarily the ideal approach to collaboration for all contexts or one which subsumes or negates the others. The intent is to map the complexity of the approaches to collaboration we have experienced, in an attempt to provide a framework to reflect on this complexity and to reflect on the need for flexibility in the way we support faculties and departments.

For over a decade we have worked collaboratively at different times with each of the 17 Faculties of the University, in an ever changing landscape of Faculty (and institutional) priorities and goals. Although this experience has been rich and rewarding, more recently we have had to shift somewhat from the goal of fully embedded models of curriculum collaboration, as a result of institutional pressures such as reduced access for us to internal funding through devolution and increasing demands from Faculty to cope with the diversity of student needs.


Our past experience of fully embedded developmental approaches in first-year Accounting and Biology was based on the assumptions that all students need learning and language development and that their needs are similar and simultaneous. Since the two programs have not lasted in their original conception or have been considerably 'watered down' (for reasons explored below), these assumptions have started to be questioned by Faculty staff, by our Centre and by the students. We also believe that such questions would be a fruitful area of research.



Possible reasons for the lack of durability of such programs include the absence of ongoing resourcing and staffing instability in the department responsible for teaching the program. To work effectively the programs need a great deal of initial resourcing of time, money and commitment, and this resourcing needs to be ongoing for such things as tutor training and student support. In the mid nineties the University distributed centralised Equity and Quality funds for such projects to ‘kick-start’ them and we were able to access this funding through submitting joint bids with academic departments. In the current climate, however, this type of resourcing is not as accessible to us. In addition, in our institution the initiation of these projects is often dependent on one or two extremely committed subject teachers, and when they move on, their successors are often not as committed. For us, the models of faculty partnership which have been flexible and lasting have been the discipline-specific adjunct and integrated approaches. To exemplify aspects of the foregoing discussion we will now focus on two case studies of our practice and the partnerships inherent in each case.

Case study 1: Flexibility in partnerships in the Central Workshop Program

The Central workshop program is depicted in Figure 1 as foregrounding the partnership between Learning Centre staff and student. Faculty staff are backgrounded yet curricular tasks and disciplinary expectations are represented through the student. To maintain a dynamic partnership between the two foregrounded partners there needs to be an ongoing link between central and faculty work. Student needs in the Central Program and the Faculty Program have informed the design of the LC’s Generic Skills framework and the development of the skills framework has formed the basis for much of the faculty work, which has then fed back into the Central Program. The framework is aligned to the institutional policy on generic attributes and is also linked to institutional and divisional Strategic Plans. It encompasses the areas of *Planning and Organising*, *Learning*, *Research and Analysis*, *Structuring* and *Communicating*. The workshops underlying the framework are designed to develop skills within each category and, where relevant, link to those in other categories.




Over the years, the framework has had to evolve to become flexible enough to allow and encourage the growth and diversity of activities as students' and institutional needs change. It has attempted to respond to the three factors outlined earlier - the generic skills agenda, the increased diversity of the students and the quality assurance agenda - by providing a generic skills framework for course delivery, by offering greater flexibility of learning support and by aligning our Strategic Plan to the Teaching and Learning Policies and Strategic Plans of the University.

The flexibility of support is characterised by an ongoing refinement of skill development and learning pathways for students, by the modularisation of some larger and longer workshops in the Central Program to cater for their changing needs, and by targeting specific groups of students. These will be explored more fully below.

The continuing process of refining skills development and of creating new learning pathways and responding to student feedback fits into the current institutional policies on good practice in teaching and learning and on generic attributes. For example, the critical and independent thinking skills of the Generic Attributes policy is now acknowledged by many departments as an important course outcome and as an explicitly stated component in the assessment criteria of many written assignments.


These changes in policy have in turn influenced our workshops, for example, our series of workshops on critical reading and critical writing. In an attempt to unpack the meaning of the attribute of 'critical thinking' across a range of disciplines, a series of workshops has been designed in the Central Program to assist students to analyse the language and structure of set course readings and written student responses to various genres such as essays and critical reviews. A pathway through the series allows first year students to start with an introductory lecture on Critical Thinking as part of their orientation program. They can then follow this up through the Central Program workshops: *Introduction to Critical Reading* and *Introduction to Critical Writing*. At a more advanced level students can attend *Critical Reading of a Journal Article* and at a postgraduate level they can enrol in *Writing a Critical Review* and *Writing the Literature Review of a Thesis*. Many of these have been adapted to run in faculties with course specific content. Student feedback and a recognition of



the need for more refined development of these skills at first and second year levels prompted these changes. Students are of course free to do any workshop at any time they deem appropriate but a developmental pathway is there for those who need it.

At the same time as refinement of the workshops, several have been modularised. This process involves breaking up larger and longer workshops into smaller ones and has occurred in response to the changing needs of our students and their demand for more flexibility in the Central Program timetable. Increasing numbers of students are employed while they study or may be mature aged students with varying outside commitments so that maintaining attendance in our longer workshops has become difficult. In response to attendance figures and student feedback *Essay Writing*, a twelve-hour workshop (4 sessions x 3 hours) was broken down into four shorter workshops - *Analytical Writing*, *Analysing the Assignment Question*, *Planning an Assignment*, and *Development an Argument* - which can be attended separately. This move also recognised that not all students required the full workshop although it is still offered in the longer form. To provide more flexibility, the materials from the four workshops have been adapted into self-directed learning booklets for students who may not be able to attend the workshops due to timetable clashes or other commitments. Many of our resources are also being developed for online use.

The key issues of flexibility and student diversity have also meant an increased specialisation of learning support so that different groups of students can be targeted. For example, workshop programs have been designed to specifically support the developing skills of mature aged students, international students, students with a learning disability, and local students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Two of the above are presented as blocks of workshops separately timetabled for the targeted groups. For example, those for students with a learning disability covers reading and writing skills, time management skills and enhancing self confidence. The Program for International Postgraduate Students (PIPS) provides workshops such as *Grammar Clinic for Editing and Proofreading*, *Oral Presentation*, *Discussion Skills* and *Working in Groups*. These students are of course eligible to participate in the full range of other workshops as well.




Finally, the central workshops are designed to encourage students to apply what they have learned to their assessment tasks and courses and to reflect on their own disciplinary expectations and on those of other students in the workshop who come from a wide range of disciplines. This practice has the potential to widen students' views of the differences inherent in academic cultures and literacies, which may not always be an outcome of a very targeted faculty-based workshop.

Case study 2: MASUS and the Faculty of Pharmacy

Our second case study discusses an example of a faculty partnership towards the 'integrated' end of the continuum in Figure 2, in which subject teachers and literacy teachers collaborate to develop students' academic literacies within their course. This case study illustrates the response of the Centre to the Faculty's perception of the inadequacy in students' academic literacies in first year and reflects the our joint commitment to improving the first year experience, which has become an institutional priority. It also illustrates the value of research in demonstrating the rationale for our work and in helping to maintain our academic credibility.

This faculty partnership between Learning Centre staff and subject staff in first year Pharmacy has proved particularly dynamic. Remarkably, our partnership has lasted for nearly a decade, despite fluctuations in the staff with whom we work, changes in the degree structure (from 3 to 4 year degree), and a shift in the status of Pharmacy from a Department to a Faculty in its own right. Our collaboration has been based on the use of the MASUS procedure (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students [MASUS], Bonanno & Jones 1997), the literacy diagnostic instrument developed by the Centre during the mid 1990's. This diagnostic procedure has played a key role in our faculty partnerships targeting undergraduate students, because it acts as a change agent enabling the development of a systematic response to the diversity of literacies present among first year students. It achieves this by providing a flexible framework for follow-up support for those students identified as needing it, with the involvement and expertise of subject staff utilised in the process.



The Pharmacy partnership was initiated by the then Department of Pharmacy in 1992, arising from its concern for the poor communication skills of many of its students. They approached us with a request to be involved in the development and Faculty trials of the MASUS. The development and trials of MASUS were supported initially by central 'Equity' and 'Quality' funding, which is now no longer available, although other devolved funds still exist for improving teaching and learning in Faculties. A general procedure was developed for establishing the MASUS within a course, involving collaboration with Faculty at all stages. This included discussion about:


- the selection of the task and the subject content
- the link (if any) to course assessment
- the possible modification of the MASUS criteria to fit the task
- what form the support will take (integrated or adjunct or both)
- who will administer and mark the task.

In the version adopted by Pharmacy, subject staff were involved in all stages of the procedure except the last.

The duration of the partnership with Pharmacy staff has enabled the collaborating partners to engage in research which has helped to validate the diagnostic procedure and the aims of the curriculum integration and support.

Constants over the years of the partnership have been the concern of the subject staff for the communication skills of their students and our mutual understanding that neither we nor they had all the answers.

They were therefore interested to explore with us through research the literacy profile of their students and what it told them about their curriculum and about their students. The research was conducted by the Learning Centre and the Faculty of Pharmacy between 1996 and 1999. Using the results from the MASUS over this period, the research consisted of three separate studies of the academic literacy of their first year students and its relationship to progression through the degree, to



selection procedures, and to choice of Higher School Certificate (HSC) school subjects. It highlighted a number of important factors concerning the diversity of the literacies of first year students coming directly from school. For full reports of these research projects and their findings, see Holder et al 1999; Jones et al 2000a and 2000b.

The research findings have been powerful incentives for the Faculty to retain a high focus on the communication skills of their students in their curriculum and to discuss with us ways of adapting their curriculum to meet the needs of the students and the demands of the profession. The Faculty has taken on board the necessity of seeking external funding to support this research and has funded our continued involvement in the curriculum. Our role is to provide integrated lectures and tutorials for all students in the *Professional Pharmacy* course. The course outline states that 'oracy and literacy skills are developed in the context of professional pharmacy issues' and one of the objectives of the course is that students will be able to 'analyse, critically evaluate and communicate information both verbally and in writing at an appropriate level'. The MASUS task is an integral element of the course and a satisfactory performance is required to pass the course. .. We would describe this partnership as an integrated rather than an embedded approach, in which MASUS has been a powerful agent helping to change faculty staff (and student) perceptions of literacy.

These case studies of two different modes of learning support have been used to illustrate the need for Learning Centre staff to be adaptable and responsive to the external and internal changes affecting all the partners in learning support. In committing ourselves to the provision of a range of modes of support delivery we hope to be in a stronger position to respond creatively and strategically to changing institutional and faculty demands and to diverse student learning styles, preferences and needs. The students' need to access support in a variety of ways is a continuing challenge for learning centre staff in their partnership roles with both students and Faculty.



Concluding comments

What we have attempted to do in this paper is to reflect on our role and on our practice at the Learning Centre in order to provide an insight into some of the key challenges we face at our institution and to give a broader context for these challenges. We wish to stress, however, that while many of the challenges we face are common across Universities in Australia and elsewhere, learning centres will respond differently as their own contexts and demands dictate. We have explored the concept of collaboration with both students and faculty and what effect that has had on our perception of our changing professional and institutional roles. While we have been fortunate enough to have had a relatively long and reasonably stable existence, despite major internal and external change, we cannot afford to become complacent.

The unique work of learning centres lends itself to collaborative approaches to practice and opportunities to make useful and potentially powerful partnerships with Faculty. Whether we align ourselves with the more empowered conceptions of our role as 'co-producers' of new knowledge or as 'campus mediators' through our partnerships depends on us and our beliefs and values. One powerful way to maintain our profile within our own institutions and within the broader context is to continue to enter into new collaborative partnerships with Faculty and with students for the purposes of practice and research. It is through these partnerships that we can retain and contribute to critical perspectives on our practice and on our role and it is through scholarly inquiry that our practice can be informed and enriched.



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