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Author Biographies (200-300 words)

Dr Quentin Allan is a Senior Lecturer, and Learning Advisor, at Auckland University of Technology. As a member of the Learning Success team within the AUT Library, Quentin uses his knowledge of pedagogy and applied linguistics to develop students' academic literacies, working closely with faculty lecturers from a wide range of academic disciplines.

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Student success and retention

Reader notes

The key argument in this chapter is that academic literacies development in a university environment requires close collaboration between faculty lecturers and learning advisors. Ideally, teaching and learning materials are informed through close analysis of exemplar texts of student writing.

In terms of recommendations, it is desirable that students are scaffolded in the development of practical academic writing skills in an environment that is characterised by an exploratory developmental approach and plenty of dialogue. Ideally, students collaborate closely with staff in the development of teaching materials as part of a more student-centred approach.

Introduction

In this chapter, we argue that academic literacies development in a university environment ideally involves close collaboration between faculty lecturers (FLs) who are subject experts in their discipline and learning advisors (LAs) whose expertise in applied linguistics informs their academic writing guidance. This chapter has been co-authored by two LA colleagues and one FL. The subject context in this case is biological sciences with a focus on human anatomy and physiology; the linguistic guidance is informed by the ‘genre approach’, as outlined by foundational writers in the field of educational linguistics (Martin & Rothery, 1993; Swales, 1990). This approach is characterised by a focus on helping students identify salient features of different assignment types. In practical terms, this involves careful deconstruction of exemplar texts that have been produced by students in authentic assessments (Rose & Martin, 2012). Through observation of student writing, and recent interactions with faculty lecturers, the LAs have been inspired to move beyond their best-practice model of embedding academic literacies development as outlined in McWilliams and Allan (2014), to something more collaborative: working together to tackle student study, learning and communication issues. One important way in which we have extended the original model is through the use of exemplar texts as the point of departure. In this case study, we consider short answer questions as a particular text type. One challenge related to the sharing of genre knowledge with FLs who may not have a background in applied linguistics (Tribble & Wingate, 2013). In particular, we were interested in exploring the effectiveness of developing teaching materials derived from a careful deconstruction of exemplars.

This case study starts by identifying two key themes from the literature: institutional awareness and use of exemplar texts. It moves on to summarise the experiences of an FL who requested LA support. The assessment was in a second semester paper on human anatomy and physiology in Auckland University of Technology’s School of Public Health and Interdisciplinary Studies. Next is a discussion of FL awareness of embedding academic literacy practices followed by an examination of the importance of student exemplar texts. The case study concludes with a consideration of how the collaboration has enhanced student learning, followed by recommendations.

Lecturer awareness relating to the value of embedding academic literacy

Collaborative, embedded literacy practices have become more widespread across faculties and disciplinary programmes in recent years (Devereux et al., 2018). To reflect these developments, a number of useful models or frameworks of embedded practice approaches have been developed (e.g., McWilliams & Allan, 2014; Charlton & Martin, 2018; Maldoni, 2018). This focus on discipline specific practices has raised lecturers’ awareness of the linguistic features and rhetorical conventions of particular assessment types (Purser, 2011). Furthermore, lecturers find value in analysing the schematic structure of different student exemplars to identify the particular academic writing

conventions of undergraduate coursework assessments (Wingate, 2018). The value here resides in lecturers' ability to draw students' attention to salient textual patterns that are associated with the assignment type and the 'work' that those features accomplish in the text. In a teaching environment, whether online or in a classroom, it is also possible to generate productive discussions with students about learning in general, and academic writing in particular - including the possibilities of writing to learn, as distinct from learning to write (Abegglen, S., et al., 2021).

Importance of student exemplar texts

The use of student exemplar texts has become central to developing effective literacy materials to support students when completing assessments (Dixon et al., 2020; Hawe et al., 2021). Whilst some research suggests that the use of exemplars can be overwhelming for some students (Hendry et al., 2011), the dominant view is that their use is beneficial for improving the quality of student writing. In terms of motivation, providing students with tools to examine their own writing enhances self-efficacy and self-regulation (Hawe et al., 2021). These tools are complemented by lecturer feedback on formative assessments which includes comparisons between exemplar texts and students' own writing (Carless & Boud, 2018).

Fostering collaboration between learning advisors and faculty lecturers

In a busy university setting, many interactions between staff members end up being merely transactional and non-dialogic; in contrast, in this case, the interaction between LAs and FL is characterised by a richly dynamic and ongoing relationship that has at its heart student success and retention. From the FL's perspective, one of the primary objectives is to scaffold students in their understanding of the complexities of biological science. This starts with the classroom content and is linked to real life examples with an awareness of the relevance to future practice in their respective health fields. The focus then tends to be on subject content rather than writing. However, students can experience difficulties with writing about this type of subject and showcase their learning through writing. These difficulties include concise paraphrasing of complex physiological processes, using appropriate terminology but also familiarising themselves with the subject specific genre.

The collaboration in this case emerged from a request by the lecturer for multiple individual student consultations. This request was not feasible given the LA team's limited staff resources. With its large student cohort (in Semester two, 2019 n= 572; in Semester two 2020, n=676), for the assessment tasks in this paper, a number of writing challenges presented for which there had not been any previous embedded support. The type of support offered by LAs can be synchronous (in-class/online literacies workshops) or asynchronous (recorded workshops and short targeted screencast videos with animated text). Teaching resources can be adapted and tailored to the particular writing challenges of different assessment types, given that each has a distinctive structure, purpose, and set of language features.

The collaboration here was in response to a request from the FL to help students structure their writing for short answer questions. The LAs consulted firstly with students who had been identified as needing support, then, by way of follow up, the LA team met with the FLs to understand from the teachers' perspective the sort of problems students were encountering. The next step was to develop a series of academic writing workshops to address the unique writing challenges of responding to this assessment type. A key aspect of the LA approach is the use and systematic analysis of exemplar texts that have come from previous student writing to highlight and scaffold the learning required. In this context, an exciting new development relates to the employment of emerging technologies in the form of text animation to emphasise salient features of the exemplars. Our joint objective was to develop sustainable resources for a large cohort that can be transferred

from one semester to the next, indefinitely. In this case, the close partnership between the FL and the LA enabled the coming-together of our different epistemological approaches and practices, developing mutual understanding and cooperation for the benefit of increased student engagement with their learning. The partnership developed gradually. Firstly, we met to discuss the particular writing challenges as identified by the FL. The teaching and learning materials emerged from this dialogic interaction. From the FL perspective, students did not always understand the particular writing expectations of short-answer questions. As a response, LAs developed a series of interactive classroom activities. Firstly, students were asked to identify key words in a sample question. This led to another activity in which students' attention was drawn to linguistic exponents for particular language functions, e.g. language for describing anatomical structures, and language for explaining physiological processes and neurological pathways. Students were then shown an exemplar text as a model which had been deconstructed and annotated to highlight key textual features. Finally, students were provided with opportunities to practice, and given feedback via formative assessment.

How did this collaboration enhance student learning?

The impact on student learning is encouraging. Informal feedback from students who attended targeted writing workshops indicates that they are aware of developing a more nuanced understanding of academic writing, via the explicit pedagogical focus on text structure, purpose, and language choices – and especially through opportunities to discuss aspects of their writing with classmates, ALs and FLs.

Furthermore, FL feedback suggests that the embedded literacies focus has resulted in students achieving higher grades; results compared with the previous year indicate improved pass rates:

- Semester two 2019 - 64%
- Semester two 2020 - 85%

The coming together of FLs and LAs in this project produced a cache of annotated exemplars that the students themselves could return to as part of their self-directed learning. A conscious decision was made to provide unlimited access to this growing suite of self-access videos to enrolled students for the duration of their degree.

Conclusions

Staff collaborations such as this are designed to enhance teaching and learning. Our approach is informed by solid pedagogic principles, and the value of such collaborations is well attested in the literature (McWilliams & Allan, 2014). Certainly, from our experience, we have observed positive change in students' performance over time, and we acknowledge enhanced professional development, and enriched inter-professional relationships. In this collaboration, the FL reflects a heightened sense of linguistic awareness and a greater confidence to talk about text in practical ways with students. In terms of the FL's emerging understanding of the collaborative process, whilst there is an appreciation of the video resources, that are seen as effective and replicable, the process can also be seen as developmental, ongoing and organic in that materials have been constantly generated, trialled, critiqued, and re-worked. Feedback from students has been positive; however, in terms of materials development, the student voice has been somewhat backgrounded. In future, it would be desirable to involve students, and integrate them more fully as partners in the process, including post-course impact feedback exploring how students had used the resources and how they had helped in the understanding and ability to articulate their new learning.

The focus of this case has been on the growing relationship between LA colleagues and FL. With students' development at the heart, such collaborations unfold over time and, in retrospect, can be seen to exhibit a number of dynamic dimensions, including catalysing reflection and promoting creative approaches to student support and writing. Such relationships are dynamic in that meetings are ongoing, albeit with differing objectives (planning, team teaching, debriefing). For example, after a series of meetings, the FL has made a conscious decision to incorporate a more explicit focus on textual features into future teaching. Guided by the LAs' linguistic expertise, and with the explicit focus on student exemplar text, the FL has reflected a more nuanced understanding of what students need to focus on in crafting short answers.

This approach takes the guesswork out of managing the writing demands of a content rich paper. From an LA perspective, our objective is to establish an approach that is effective and enduring. Sustainable academic literacies support is enhanced with recourse to multi-modal approaches, both synchronous and asynchronous. Reflecting on this case study has inspired us to rework the original model (McWilliams & Allan, 2014) with the student exemplar text occupying a more central role in the collaborative process. Even more so, it has inspired us to continue our partnership and work closely with subject lecturers to develop students' academic literacies. This is co-learning and co-teaching in action.

Recommendations

In order to support students in understanding the expectations of the assessment task set and ease students into their epistemic communities, it is important to ascertain the level of detail required in each type of assessment. Ideally, students will compare a range of texts in order to identify salient features. With guidance from both subject staff and support staff, students can be helped to develop both subject content knowledge and appreciation of the language needed to express understanding.

In the interests of precise communication, we recommend that students are scaffolded in the development of practical paraphrasing skills using appropriate language together with factual knowledge of the subject area; ideally, this teaching/learning takes place in a supportive environment in which students are able to practise their writing, and receive ongoing dialogic feedback.

In terms of future interventions and the desirability of closer partnerships with students, it would be ideal to collaborate more constructively with students and integrate their views on approaches and resources.

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