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Academic literacy across the curriculum: Towards a collaborative instructional approach

Ursula Wingate is Senior Lecturer in Language in Education and works in the Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication at King's College London. Before moving to London, Ursula taught for eight years at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and four years at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her

research interests are in academic literacy, English language policies and practices, and language teaching methodology. In recent projects, Ursula has developed and evaluated various approaches to teaching academic literacy in mainstream higher education, drawing on the King's Apprentice Writing Corpus for the creation of instructional resources in different disciplines. Her publications in this area are concerned with the theoretical models underpinning literacy instruction, the impact of formative feedback on academic writing, and the teaching and learning of argumentation. In her recent book 'Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice', Ursula promotes the concept of academic literacy as the ability to communicate in a new discourse community, an ability which involves an epistemological and sociocultural understanding of the academic discipline and needs to be acquired by students from all backgrounds. She proposes a curriculum-embedded model of academic literacy instruction, which is based on the collaboration of literacy experts with academics in the disciplines, and argues that market forces such as growing competition for students and the expectations of diverse student populations will increase the need for universities to develop instructional approaches that are discipline-specific and inclusive of all students.

My paper is based on the understanding that in order to study successfully at university, students need to acquire academic literacy, i.e. the ability to communicate competently in their academic discourse community. This ability encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing, and requires an understanding of the community's epistemology, of the genres through which the community interacts, and of the conventions that regulate these interactions. It follows from this understanding that academic literacy can only be developed within the academic discourse community – be it an academic discipline or, in the case of undergraduate students, the very study programme in which they are enrolled. However, in many Anglophone universities, difficulties that students experience at the level of academic literacy tend to be confused with English language problems, and, as a result, the only support provided to students are language classes focused on grammatical accuracy and the rhetorical features of a (nonexisting) universal academic English. These classes are typically offered outside the discourse community and target only specific student groups (in the case of UK universities those who are deemed to be 'deficient' because they are non-native speakers of English). This means that, while higher education has over the last decades become more inclusive, academic literacy instruction has remained exclusive, neglecting the fact that students from all backgrounds are novices in academic communication.

In this paper, I will first present examples from Australia, South Africa and the UK of curriculum integrated literacy instruction, which is collaboratively designed and delivered by literacy (EAP) experts and subject lecturers. I will then discuss an intervention study carried out at Kings' College London, in which genre-based methods of academic literacy instruction were implemented in some disciplines and feasible ways of collaboration between subject lecturers and literacy experts were explored. Lastly, I will discuss my experience of running a professional development module on academic literacy instruction which is offered to lecturers from all disciplines. The interaction revealed that the participants had little initial awareness of the complexity of students' academic literacy acquisition, and limited awareness of how they could contribute to this acquisition. Furthermore, the lecturers themselves tended to have only implicit knowledge of the literacy practices and conventions of their discipline. The module required them to carry out an ethnographic study of literacy requirements and instruction in their departments, and helped them to integrate literacy support into their regular teaching and assessment practices. Although this initiative has led to instructional improvements in some places, it is obvious that institution-wide approaches are needed to make academic literacy instruction an integrated part of curriculum and therefore inclusive of all students. This would involve investment in staff development, incentives through appropriate workload allocations, and structures that facilitate the collaboration between literacy experts and subject lecturers. ■