

Learning Development Service and Academic Literacies

As Vision 2020 and its widespread changes are implemented across the university, the Learning Development Service is also changing its approach to student support to better address the needs of staff and students at QUB. LDS will be moving away from the traditional deficits based “generic skills” model of academic support, and towards a more theoretically rigorous and diverse approach embedded in the faculties. This new direction for LDS draws on the aligned pragmatic foundations of Academic Literacies (Lea and Street 2006) and Writing in the Disciplines (Deane and O’Neill 2011). These models reject the notion that “academic skills” are a generic or neutral skill set, which must be “acquired” by the student. It is based on the belief that separating academic development from content is artificial and that making “skills” the focus of a separate form of teaching is pedagogically and theoretically unsound approach that pathologises the student (North 2005). Instead this new approach argues that writing and academic production is the process of learning, not the product of it. Furthermore, it highlights the diversity of academic competencies needed across disciplines, viewing the production of academic materials - from essays to presentations to seminar engagement - as a complex set of social and contextual practices which cannot be taught generically (Ivanic 1998). Thus, LDS will be moving towards a model of practice in QUB that embeds academic and learning development into discipline specific learning within schools.

Theoretical Context

The belief that “standards of student literacy are falling” has been embedded in Higher Education for a long time where “many academic staff claim that students can no longer write” (Lea and Street, 1998: 157). Such a belief led to the development of services, such as LDS, that attempted to “fix” the student’s deficits. However, recent research in the UK demonstrated that the problems that were perceived by academic staff were less a result of student weaknesses and more a result of complex disciplinary and institutional practices of writing and participation that mystified students, particularly the growing numbers of non traditional students (Deane and O’Neill 2011). Moreover, research that spoke to students identified a clear mismatch between student and staff expectations and understandings of academic skills (Lea and Street 1998). This research demonstrated that, to students, terms such as “structure”, “argument” “critique” and “plagiarism” were complex and confusing. Moreover, such terms are not neutrally or unproblematically defined, but change across disciplinary, modular and institutional

contexts. As a result, the research that has engaged students has not supported the notion or benefit of generic and transferable skills training (Lea and Street 2006).

Academic Literacies developed as a framework out of this research and is predicated on several fundamental points:

- Writing is inseparable from intellectual development
- Academic practices differ across subjects.
- Emphasis of academic development should be on process rather than product
- Academic development should be situated in the discipline.
- A successful approach involves a range of forms of academic production
- Students should be viewed as joining a conversation in their discipline

Thus, this approach argues that it is through the process of academic production that students participate in their learning, and therefore that production is intrinsic to their disciplinary education and not a separate set of skills. Academic “skills” within this framework are seen as multifaceted, varied social practices which are discipline, genre, context and community specific. (Deane and O’Neill 2011; Hardy and Clughen 2012; McConlogue et al. 2012; Lillis 2006; Russell *et al.* 2008).

Implications for LDS

Within this new framework, LDS will be drawing on the example of the Thinking Writing team at Queen Mary University of London (McConlogue *et al.* 2012). LDS will be moving towards a more staff facing role, engaging with academic staff to enhance pedagogy by embedding academic development within modules, programmes and assessments. Our aim is to be holistic and flexible, working with individual academics, schools and students to craft context specific interventions for learning development that will produce long term, effective results. This could be through pilot programmes, co-teaching, consultancy in developing modules or assessments, additional embedded teaching for specific assignments, organising working groups, advice giving or any other form of development to enhance student learning.

Implications for Schools

Our long term goal is to move away centralised one to one support and to engage directly with academics. Currently then we ask academic staff and school managers to contact the relevant learning development tutor for your faculty with suggestions, questions or conversation about learning development in your area.

Implications for Students

We believe that students must take responsibility for their own education. Our view of the degree is that it is analogous to a gym membership: as with exercise, the student only gets the benefit of the effort they put into their education. So, our one-to-one provision will be changing in line with this. Our one-to-ones will now be based on goal setting and planning for achievement rather than being deficit or problem based. We will be laying out our expectations of students on our website and will expect them to engage with our online resources and be committed to enhancing their learning. Therefore, we will be prioritising students who have demonstrated ongoing motivation to learn and engagement with LDS for one-to-one support over students who expect a “quick fix”. In line with this, LDS staff are undertaking a qualification in coaching and mentoring students.

Contacts

Staff and students interested in talking to LDS about support or engaging students please contact:

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Further Reading

Deane, M. and O'Neill, P. (2011) *Writing in the Disciplines*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Hardy, C. and Clughen, L. (2012) *Writing in the Disciplines : Building Supportive Cultures for Student Writing in UK Higher Education*. Bingley: Emerald.

Ivanic, R. (1998) *Writing and Identity: The discursual construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Press.

Lea, M. R. and Street, B.V. (1998) '[Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach](#)', *Studies in Higher Education* 23 (2), 157-173

Lea, Mary R. and Street, Brian V. (2006) '[The "academic literacies" model: Theory and applications](#),' *Theory into Practice*, 45(4) pp. 368–377.

McConlogue, T., Mitchell, S., Peake, K. (2012) '[Thinking Writing at Queen Mary, University of London](#)'. In Thaiss, CJ, (ed.) *Writing Programs Worldwide*. Anderson, Palmer Press, 203 - 211.

North, S. (2005) [Different values, different skills? A comparison of essay writing by students from arts and science backgrounds](#), *Studies in Higher Education*, 30:5, 517-533,

Russell, D., Lea, M., Street, B., Parker, J. and Donahue, C. (2008) 'Exploring the notions of genre in academic literacies and writing across the curriculum: Approaches across countries and contexts', in C. Bazerman, A. Bonini and D. Figueiredo (eds) *Genre in a Changing World*. Fort Collins: Parlor Press.

Thinking Writing at QMUL <http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/>