

# THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND LEARNING ADVISERS IN UNIVERSITY SETTINGS: HELPING STUDENTS TO HELP THEMSELVES

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A very diverse student body (particularly linguistically and culturally) is the norm in Australian tertiary institutions with many international students having to study in English as a second language. This paper briefly examines the approaches and provisions that Australian universities are adopting to help international students develop English language for academic purposes. Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers, whose role is to facilitate student learning, carry out this role in a number of different ways in different universities. This paper discusses how this role is carried out within the Communication Skills Centre of the Curtin Business School, at the Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. Staff at the Centre have, over a number of years, adapted their role to ensure that students become active learners and take maximum responsibility for their own development. Some of the principles that have guided our work include: a continued emphasis on student development, rather than remediation; services available to all students studying at all levels across the Curtin Business School; support which aims to demystify academic discourse; student taking responsibility for their own work; and three way learning (students learn from us and from each other, but we also learn from them). This paper then discusses the strategies, based on the above principles, which have been adopted by staff to help students develop the skills they require in English for academic purposes. It is argued that the very diversity which marks our classrooms needs to be fully explored and built upon in order to teach valuable intercultural communication skills for global/multinational settings and to enrich the tertiary learning experience for all students.

**Keywords:** academic adviser role, academic discourse, internationalisation

## 1. Introduction

The increasing diversity, particularly cultural and linguistic, of the student body in Australian universities, has become a major factor for teaching staff in the development of their teaching and learning programs (Lawrence 2005). This diversity has coincided with 'massification' of tertiary education and with a strong push, largely from employer groups, for graduates to be equipped with transferable generic skills/attributes (Clanchy & Ballard 1995; James, Lefoe & Hadi 2004). These trends and the accompanying growth in international education have, in more recent years, brought with them concerns about maintaining standards and quality, with universities being held to account for 'student outcomes'. Thus while Australian universities have become more assiduous in their marketing of tertiary education to international students, there is a growing debate and increasing concern about 'standards' (Reid 1996; McInnis 2000).

International education in Australia has expanded rapidly since the 1980s, showing an increase not only in the number of international fee-paying students coming to

Australian universities but diversification in the ways tertiary education is provided to international students. Curtin University is amongst the four largest Australian providers of tertiary education to international students, with numbers having shown a steady growth in recent years. Curtin University statistics show an increase in international student numbers from 6,828 in 1999 to 11,313 in 2002 and around 17,000 in 2006, including 'offshore' enrolments (that is, enrolments outside Australia either in partner institutions or in Curtin campuses overseas) (Curtin University Planning Office 2007). Similar increases are reflected in other Australian universities, with more recent government statistics showing that over 25% of the total university student population of some 957,000 in Australia is now comprised of international students (DEST 2007).

It would be wrong, however, to assume that only international students require support with academic discourse. The student diversity alluded to above also includes large numbers of mature age learners and students coming to tertiary study from a variety of non-traditional pathways (that is, not directly from schooling). In this sort of context, the role of Academic Language and Learning Adviser (ALL Adviser) has developed (some would say 'blossomed') quite significantly in more recent years. The number and type of language and learning support units in universities around Australia has increased, as has the number of Advisers. The operational models vary from centralised, to Faculty-based, to School-based units and in some cases to 'team-teaching' situations. The Curtin Business School (CBS) Communication Skills Centre, described below, is a Faculty-based model.

For all the above types of students in the tertiary context, academic discourse poses particular problems. For international English as a second language (ESL) students, this problem is compounded, in that they need to acquire academic discourse in a second language. This involves not only support with continued development in English language, but related issues such as:

- understanding local academic expectations;
- understanding and acquiring local conventions for interpersonal discourse; and
- understanding cultural contexts impacting on communication (Reid, Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 1998; Briguglio 2000; Mulligan & Kirkpatrick 2000).

Another major issue remains the sensitising of teaching staff to better understand the needs of local and international students in regard to academic discourse. Academic staff do not generally see their role as encompassing the responsibility for developing students' academic discourse skills; nor do they feel they have the necessary preparation to enable them to contribute to this in any significant way. They are therefore very happy to leave this to 'language experts'. Much research indicates, however, the importance of the development of linguistic and communication skills in the context of the disciplines and in collaboration with disciplinary colleagues (Lee *et al.* 1995; Bonanno & Jones 1996; Johns 1997; Barrie & Jones, 1999; Crosling & Wilson 2005). Our model therefore, while aiming for language skills de-

velopment, also aims to integrate support within the disciplines, and we work collaboratively with discipline staff wherever possible.

## **2. The Curtin Business School (CBS) Communication Skills Centre**

The CBS Communication Skills Centre (the Centre) was established for the purpose of providing support to its student population, both local and international, and also to assist staff to be better equipped to deal with student needs. Staff at the Centre (currently 5, including 2 full-time and 3 part-time positions) have applied linguistics and/or language and/or English as a second language (ESL) qualifications, and several also have teaching qualifications. Now in its tenth year of operation, the Centre provides student and staff support in a variety of ways. The Curtin Business School is a very large Faculty with some 11,000 onshore students, of whom some 5,000 are international students (Curtin University Planning Office 2006), representing just under one third of the University's onshore enrolments. The services of the Centre are available to all onshore students, while materials on our website are available to all offshore students and staff. Our Centre thus caters for a very wide range of needs.

### **2.1. Operating principles**

The Centre operates a student academic development service aimed at all CBS students: Australian and international, undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate. The Centre aims for student development in four broad areas: academic study skills; interpersonal communication; academic writing; and professional communication. Our belief is that all students are on a development continuum, and that our purpose as ALL Advisers is to help them progress along that continuum to achieve increasingly better results. Our operation is thus based on the following principles:

1. services available to all students studying at all levels across the Curtin Business School;
2. a continued emphasis on student development (and not on remediation) with a belief that all can improve their linguistic proficiency ;
3. support which aims to demystify academic discourse for students;
4. students taking responsibility for their own work (teaching and helping students to develop the skills they require for self-improvement); and
5. three way learning (students learn from us and from each other, but we also learn from them).

From the beginning we resisted the perception that the Centre would in some way address only the needs of struggling students. All our publicity and marketing messages and all our interaction and correspondence with academic colleagues are pitched in a positive light, and indeed this is how we see our role. We assist students from across the spectrum from those who are struggling to those who are very high achievers. Because we believe all students can continue to learn and develop, we aim for student

development, rather than 'remediation'. While in more recent years the perception of the role of ALL Adviser has moved from 'fixer' to 'developer' (Craswell & Bartlett 2001), such a perception is by no means universal amongst academic colleagues.

Emphasis on development also means that we work with students to help them to progress to the next stage. In looking at their academic writing, in particular, we analyse the areas students need to improve, suggest strategies that might help, and guide them to improve their own work. This sometimes means resisting the temptation to 'correct' students' work. Rather, we analyse major errors, question linguistic forms and overall structure and discuss with students how they can be improved. In this way we also aim to educate students that we are not there to 'edit' their work but rather to help them acquire the skills to become better writers and editors of their own work.

Over time, particularly through individual consultations, students gradually acquire the skills for self-improvement and greater confidence with academic discourse. In this area we also help them by explaining academic conventions (such as referencing and formal academic language) and guiding them to see discourse patterns. A large part of our work is dedicated to making what is implicit in the disciplines explicit for students. As Crosling & Wilson (2001: 6) state: "when students have appropriated approaches privileged within the disciplines [...] they are positioned to be better able to function successfully in new and yet unimagined future situations".

In order to do this successfully, however, ALL Advisers need to listen carefully to students. Support can then be targeted to exactly what the student needs at a particular time, so that teaching is most effective because it is in context and at point of need. ALL Advisers also need to listen most empathically so that they are able to hear what students 'mean', and not just what they say. Often, a request for "help with my English" hides a myriad of different needs, from clarification of an assessment task, to an explanation about how to quote references, to help with syntax, to simple encouragement, and so on. In this way we also learn to become better teachers since we become more sensitive and better able to diagnose student needs. This is where, if we are open to learning and renewal, students have much to teach us.

Students also have much to learn from each other. In our workshops and seminars we often use group work, which students not only enjoy but find stimulating and useful. Because our student population is so diverse, the mixing of students from all over the world creates its own interesting dynamics and provides differing points of view. As ALL Advisers we draw on this diversity and deliberately utilise it to foster intercultural learning and understanding (Crosling & Martin 2005; Briguglio 2006).

## **2.2. Services provided to students**

The current services of the Centre include a range of programs targeted specifically at students. We offer individual and small group consultations to discuss students' assessment tasks and provide advice for improvement, as described above. Although these are time consuming (lasting for between 20 and 60 minutes) they

are most effective in addressing individual needs. Seminars (one hour) and workshops (two hours) on a variety of academic study and communication skills topics, such as oral presentation, essay writing, note taking, qualities of academic writing, preparing a thesis proposal and so on, are run regularly. These provide opportunity for much group and pair work, which encourages skills development and interaction with students from across the Faculty. A weekly academic writing class allows for grammatical and discourse analysis, and a weekly conversation class aims to assist the development of international students' oral skills and also facilitates integration with local students, who often participate as volunteers.

All our workshops and seminars are evaluated and analysed through a simple written survey; feedback from these is invariably positive, with students also encouraged to provide suggestions for any changes or for specific workshops they would like run which are not currently on offer. We also receive much informal feedback (either verbally or through emails) which indicates that students value our services highly. The email below was recently received by one of our Advisers:

*Dear xxxx*

*Thank you for helping me with my last assignment in my university study. I got a High Distinction for that assignment which wrapped up my uni assessments really nicely. However, I wouldn't be able to achieve such a high grade without your help throughout the course. I would like to say thank you for your time, your professional service and more importantly your encouragement to me to be more confident in academic writing. It's a great service that the Communication Skills Centre offers and it's very helpful to international students like me who consider English language as the biggest barrier to my study and living in Australia.*

*I wish you all the best and will come visit you on my graduation day!*

In order to extend our reach, we produce two electronic publications aimed specifically at students. The first is entitled *High Flyer: Student Notes for Success*, of which 17 issues have been produced thus far, on a range of communication and study skills topics. A new electronic publication, *The Finer Points: Grammar Notes for Better Writing*, aims to cover aspects of academic writing and addresses topics such as punctuation and cohesion in academic writing. The Centre also has a dedicated website with useful materials available for downloading and a small resource centre with materials for borrowing.

### **2.3. Collaboration with staff**

From the establishment of the Centre we have emphasised collaboration with disciplinary staff, since we know this will extend our reach to students and is considered more effective for student learning (Catterall 2002; Brackley & Palmer 2005; Crosling & Wilson 2005). Our first initiative in this sense was to obtain membership of the Faculty's Teaching and Learning Committee, so that we are aware of broader issues which affect the whole Faculty. Working collaboratively with academic staff has also meant joining other special committees and working parties, such as a Faculty committee reviewing our Bachelor of Commerce. We have also worked with

Faculty colleagues on specific projects, for example in developing a diagnostic writing task for first year students. This enabled us to then develop our program of academic writing classes based on an analysis of student needs. We offer and are often invited to provide input into specific units, including guest lectures, seminars or joint planning. More recently we contributed to the design of a new unit, *Foundations of international Business*, for the revised Bachelor of Commerce.

Dissemination of information to staff about the services available to students, through class visits and email communication, is ongoing. Staff disseminate this information verbally to students or post it on the Faculty's electronic learning platform. This has proved to be a very effective dissemination strategy. We also discuss with staff ways in which they can assist students to develop communication skills. Another effective mechanism has been to develop Power Point resources for staff on communication and study skills topics. These have been developed on a range of topics including essay writing, referencing, qualities of academic writing and oral presentation. Staff can use them as they are or adapt them and incorporate them into their own teaching. Informal feedback from staff, either verbal or in the form of emails, indicates that they are appreciative of our materials and support, as the emails below illustrate:

*Thanks for all this – you're a gem and I do appreciate the work and information that you forward to us.*

*Thanks for the notes – brilliant!*

Finally an electronic publication, *Business Communication Newsclips*, has been developed specifically for discipline-based staff. The purpose of this publication is to bring to the attention of staff current research and issues in the area of business communication, academic discourse and teaching and learning matters.

#### **2.4. Developing students' intercultural communication skills**

It is also important, in the ALL adviser role, to be an advocate for student and staff learning in the area of intercultural communication. Academic colleagues can quickly perceive cultural and national diversity as "a problem", and international students as needing to make up a gap. However, any university which claims to call itself international (and many currently do) should make provisions as a matter of course to ensure the facilitation of the adaptation process for international students, and, moreover, should aim to utilise fully the opportunities that such diversity presents. In Australia not enough use is made of this rich cultural diversity to teach students valuable skills for working in multinational teams, although this is an area that is currently receiving greater attention (see Crosling & Martin 2005; Briguglio 2006; Caspersz, Skene, Wu & Boland 2004). At CBS we have begun to trial a workshop<sup>1</sup> with students who are going to engage in a group or team task for assessment purposes and early results are encouraging. Questionnaires complet-

<sup>1</sup> The *Students Working in Multinational Teams* workshop was developed as part of the writer's PhD in 2005 and interest in trialling it has been expressed by colleagues in several other Australian universities. Further details about the workshop are available in the Briguglio (2006) paper cited in the list of references.

ed by students after the exercise indicate that they learned valuable skills from this exercise and that they considered the workshops to be valuable. What is more interesting is that the workshop, which was developed by our Centre, is now being adapted and implemented by School of Management staff (that is, non language specialists) as part of a CBS project in curriculum innovation. In 2009 the workshop was also run with students at Sydney University. These staff have reported to us that both they and their students have enjoyed the workshop, and that students have found it beneficial for group work.

### 3. Conclusion

The Faculty-based model we have adopted has allowed us to become an integral part of learning and teaching at CBS. Operating within a Faculty-based model means that Centre staff continue to develop: specialist knowledge in the business disciplines; a greater awareness of the sorts of learning and assessment issues faced by our students; a bank of knowledge of common students' queries and issues (and their perspective on learning); and a close relationship with staff within the Faculty. Our operation is thus 'embedded' within (Green, Hammer & Stephens 2005), and integral to, the work of the Faculty.

Over the ten years of its operation, the Centre has developed and grown by being responsive to the different needs of CBS students and staff. As ALL Advisers, how we communicate our role and work to academic colleagues affects if and how they will use the services we provided and how they view us. It also influences how they perceive the value of our work and whether they in fact consider us colleagues in the process of tertiary teaching and learning, or merely adjuncts and 'outsiders'. We believe that in order for the work of ALL Advisers to flourish and be highly regarded we ourselves need to promote what we call the three Rs: Resources, Room and Respect. The first of these, Resources, is easy to understand – unless academic support units are provided with sufficient well qualified staff and the necessary material resources, it is difficult to provide an excellent service. The second, Room to move, indicates that staff need to be allowed enough room to experiment and grow in their role. The third, Respect for the work of ALL Advisers, needs to be earned through providing a service which makes a positive impact on the quality of the teaching and learning experience of both students and staff. This paper has argued that through careful planning and monitoring, and continued innovation, an effective and highly respected service, which enhances student learning, can be developed.

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