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Critical reflections on an academic literacies policy five years on

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Abstract: As a result of changing student demographics many universities have now formulated a policy on developing academic literacy skills in their increasingly multicultural and linguistically diverse students. Policy can determine curriculum design so that specific skills are integrated into the learning outcomes and assessment criteria and explicitly taught in all programmes. This paper reflects critically on an academic literacies policy at the Auckland University of Technology in NZ from the viewpoint of staff development. With the introduction of the policy in 2001 there was extensive staff development in the form of public lectures, workshops, consultancies and provision of resources. The latter extended to new staff at orientation, new EAL (English as an additional language) staff and curriculum designers of new programmes. The paper explores the many roles required of an academic developer entrusted with policy action and implementation. It discusses the framework provided to support curriculum designers in their integration of academic literacies into the curriculum and examines the professional development implications in such a recommendation. It draws on this experience to discuss the need for academic developers to find an appropriate interdisciplinary language and forms of dialogue to communicate with colleagues in the increasingly diverse membership of the academy.

Keywords: academic literacies, academic development, discipline discourse

Introduction

Given the linguistically diverse student body and the financial commitments that students incur for education today, it is incumbent on universities to offer quality teaching to attract and retain students. A major step towards ensuring this would be to mandate appropriate teacher education as well as ongoing professional development for tertiary teachers. Meanwhile, tertiary institutions need to find other ways to encourage their teaching staff to make a commitment to their teaching practice. One means to this end is to introduce and implement an institutional policy.

This paper takes as its starting point a policy for enhancing learning through the systematic inclusion of academic literacy skills in all programmes at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The adoption of the policy led to professional development initiatives that were designed to foster an understanding of the concept of academic literacies and a culture of viewing literacy needs from a discipline perspective (Fiocco, 1996). The ensuing professional development interactions with teaching staff revealed that concepts associated with academic literacy development needed clearer explanation and examples of good practice were also required before tertiary teachers were able to integrate them into their programmes and ultimately their teaching. This in turn made new demands on academic developers.

Background: The ALIC policy

The Academic Literacies and Intercultural Capabilities (ALIC) Policy, introduced in December 2000, aims to enhance the development of the academic literacy skills in English that are required for students to be able to participate fully in an English medium institution. One definition of academic literacies is the reading, writing, speaking, listening and critical thinking skills, together with “habits of mind that foster academic success” (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates, 2002, p.2). The policy links the development of English academic literacy skills with an understanding of the particular cultural context in which they are used. Through this policy AUT aims to ensure that there are appropriate language competency criteria in all programmes and that these are communicated clearly to students. In addition, teachers identify where and how academic literacy skills are developed within a programme. To achieve these goals discipline teachers need support to foster language development in their teaching and to be role models of the discourse conventions of their disciplines.

The second part of the policy conceptualises intercultural skills as the ability "to understand and interact effectively with people from a wide variety of cultures"(Little, 2001). It aims to ensure that teachers understand the cultural traditions and norms which students bring to their studies and the academic culture of the discipline they are studying and to recognise the professional development that may be needed for teachers from different educational traditions.

Through its implementation of the policy, AUT commits itself to the development of appropriate graduate outcomes for academic literacies and intercultural capabilities in all courses. Underpinning the policy is the understanding that teachers accept responsibility for developing language and cultural skills in themselves and their students. Professional development is seen as a key to helping academic staff achieve these ends.

Development of the policy

Policy makers are traditionally senior academics familiar with academic institutions and the complexities of academic procedures. Those who worked on the development of the ALIC Policy had experience in administrative processes, policy planning and writing. This resulted in carefully staged developments: a series of seminars by a senior manager and expert on academic literacies from outside AUT, and later a consultative process on the ALIC Policy university-wide. This process enabled mainstream staff to participate in policy-making (Lueddeke 1999) and to engage with new standards of practice that were designed to give a cohesive structure to the teaching and learning needs arising from linguistically diverse groups. The initial focus was on staff development requirements to address the language and cultural issues that gave rise to the policy. A staff developer was appointed to oversee the implementation of the policy and to provide lectures, workshops, consultancies and resources for all staff including new staff at orientation, new EAL (English as an additional language) staff and curriculum designers of new programmes.

The primary aim of this paper is to reflect critically on the last five years where, as academic developer, I have been responsible for the implementation of the policy. Feedback on such a wide-ranging policy is inevitably piecemeal and spasmodic, but some aspects have been systematically evaluated (Sanders, Newall, Kirkness & Daldy, 2004). I am not attempting an assessment of the total impact of the policy so far. Rather, I wish to give some account of my

own reflections over the last five years as I have mentally noted successes and more particularly grappled with shortcomings. They are inevitably subjective, but it is hoped that this critical retrospective will contribute to a future vision for ways and means of aligning policy with the realities of practice.

Successes and shortcomings

Among successes I would include the increased awareness of issues in linguistically and culturally mixed classes around the university, faculty activities and requests for staff development support through workshops and materials. Furthermore, some teachers chose to complete a 60 credit certificate in language teacher training, thereby obtaining a stronger foundation for teaching a linguistically mixed group. Although few teachers have chosen this path (Kirkness, 2005), each one that did can act as a resource in their School and help raise awareness of the academic literacy issues that need to be considered. Such networks of like-minded teachers (Knapper 2000) are often a catalyst for a request from their programme leader for a student language needs analysis to be carried out by the academic developer with their class. By taking the students' own perceived needs into account, the teaching team can then consider appropriate strategies to promote the simultaneous development of language and conceptual development in the discipline (Fiocco, 1996).

The School of Languages has designed courses targeting the language needs of postgraduate students as well as a range of adjunct or integrated papers for other disciplines to run in their existing programmes as required papers. Those taught by discipline specialists who are also trained language teachers, or by trained language teachers who also have a discipline speciality, exemplify the principles of the ALIC policy. Nevertheless, mainstream teachers still need to understand the rationale for the papers included in their programmes.

Policy making and implementing is not all plain sailing and there have been many shortcomings. They offer much food for thought or critical reflection. By examining them in detail here, I hope to explore the issues we faced to inform the future developments we undertake. These issues of language, curriculum development and staff development will now be discussed.

Language

The language of policy writing

Communication is vital in any complex organisation, but even more critical in a university made up of highly specialised Schools. Clear language is central to good communication between staff and students, between academic and allied staff, between managers and their teams, and between colleagues. Language is also the key to conveying educational concepts underpinning a policy on academic literacies. I wish to discuss three main aspects for successful use of language in policy making and implementing - 1). a clearly comprehensible title, 2). clarity of policy wording for all users, and 3). the skill needed for academic developers to communicate complex concepts from one discipline to another.

One ongoing issue for the implementation of the ALIC Policy is the lack of clarity in the title: Academic Literacies and Intercultural Capabilities. The name focuses on the academic principles the policy embodies and requires an understanding of these principles to know what the policy is about. Precise as the educationists thought their terms were, the name of the policy appears to have hindered many from engaging with the issues. Had they tried to explain the policy to a target audience at orientation – a patisserie teacher from Italy, a podiatrist from China and an art teacher from Samoa - they might have gained some useful feedback about the title.

A university-wide policy needs to use and promote an easily accessible title for the wide range of colleagues it targets. In hindsight, I now see the inclusive role that plain English plays in attracting commitment from all members of the academy. Language that is not fully understood only serves to discourage colleagues and adds to the obscure jargon throughout so many academic documents. I find myself paraphrasing the polysyllabic title (“a policy about language and cultural development”, “education for the multicultural classroom”), or even apologising for it, as I explain it to staff.

The inclusion of a reference to culture in the term “intercultural capabilities” adds further confusion to the title. In New Zealand the word culture in such a context has close connotations with biculturalism and the relationship between European and Maori New Zealanders. Indeed, when curriculum designers are asked to show how their curriculum fosters intercultural capabilities, most discuss the Maori components of the course. These writers fail to understand one aim of the policy - to recognise the teaching demands in a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom. Many classes are multicultural in their mix: in some there are few Maori students; in others European New Zealanders or pakeha may be in the minority. In hindsight I would argue for one concept in the policy title; academic literacies. I would also take the view that as language embodies culture and is inseparable from it, intercultural capabilities are a necessary and integral component of any policy on academic literacies.

A metalanguage

Frequent requests to help with clarifying and simplifying the written language of student handbooks, teaching materials, and surveys attest to the increased awareness of mainstream academics that they are writing for a multicultural student body. More evidence stems from the ongoing debate among academic staff about assessing second language writing. Typically, these issues are resolved at departmental level, and there is no one solution. In general, most Schools agree that their duty is to educate professionals who can communicate clearly, in both written and spoken English, in the workplace and to ensure that their marking of language and feedback on it reflect this.

While raising language awareness, the policy also created new challenges for the language specialists responsible for overseeing its implementation. The term language specialist / academic developer will be used synonymously here as academic literacy teaching is an area typically entrusted to academic development units (Lee, 1997). The skills to make oneself easily understood are at the heart of academic collaboration and interdisciplinary work where the challenge is to communicate clearly with a wide range of discipline experts.

Curriculum development

One stage of policy implementation that emerged as a vital component of the policy for all participants was programme specification. A programme specification or paper descriptor makes academic standards explicit by providing a framework for setting out educational expectations. According to Jackson (2000), these involve the rationale, aims, learning outcomes, curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, assessment methods and performance criteria for a programme. The model arises from trends in education towards greater transparency for stakeholders, students, teachers, curriculum designers and quality officers (Jackson, 2000). The design of a new programme following this model requires expertise from the target teaching discipline as well as educational expertise in curriculum design and assessment.

The curriculum should align the needs of the students in written and oral communication skills with their discipline content. These needs may be very different from the traditional expectations that teachers have of their students' skills (Jones and Sin, 2002). Programme design with a focus on course content often overlooks ways in which writing is, for example, "central to the process of learning" (Lea, 2004). In an academic literacies approach, curriculum designers will ensure that the curriculum is not just a narrow focus on course content, but develops communication and conceptual skills simultaneously. Thinking beyond the target discipline is essential if the "complex relationship between the acquisition and development of subject-based knowledge and writing in higher education" (Lea, 2004) is to be recognised and students enabled to develop their mastery of the discipline discourse. Moreover, it is important for students to understand that these generic skills are likely to be a key to future employment (Jones and Sin, 2002; Baldauf, 1996).

Programme approval process

In the early days of the policy, a separate sign-off was required for academic literacies as part of the Programme Approval Process. This was to confirm that academic literacies had been duly integrated into the programme design. In my role as ALIC portfolio holder, I was often faced with discipline experts who produced a comprehensive draft of the document for final sign-off. They had not realised that one of the foundation stones was missing - namely an academic literacies approach which included reference to academic literacy outcomes throughout. Not only was the sign-off too late to have any major effect on the final version of the programme, but it became very clear that the concepts of academic literacies as set out in the policy were not fully understood by many programme developers. At times the written statement demonstrating compliance with the policy was too generalised, often glib, and could have fitted any programme.

It was proposed that programme developers be alerted at an early stage of curriculum design to take the ALIC Policy into consideration. Guidelines were provided to supplement the policy document and demonstrate how the requisite literacy outcomes could be included. This resulted in the academic developer having one-to-one consultations with programme developers to enable them to integrate the principles of academic literacies in the initial conceptualisation of the programme.

A more complex problem was how to bring about a change in the understanding of tertiary teachers who may resist any input perceived to come from outside their discipline and hence seen as interference (Knapper, 2000). The academic developer needs to clarify the educational relevance of the policy so that the discipline expert can suggest where and how it can be applied to the target discipline. The communication between the two needs to be clear, open and honest so that academic literacy outcomes are comprehensible for the classroom teachers who will be integrating them into their teaching and assessing them, and for the students aiming at achieving them. Hence, the sign-off document should not be just empty rhetoric but "an aid to quality assurance" (Jackson, 2000, p.148).

Discipline experts complying with policy requirements

I will now outline some of the issues that arose at this stage of the design process as the curriculum was aligned with new educational concepts. For reasons of confidentiality, I have drawn examples from the documentation of several programmes which focus on teaching a practical skill. I have deliberately avoided examples from the humanities, where specialist expertise tended to result in innovative and creative ways of integrating literacy development with discipline teaching.

In attesting to the integration of academic literacy principles in the programme, the curriculum writer for a practice-based programme states that language issues are not of concern because literacy has been proven in the university entrance requirements. This indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of academic literacies as a particular style of literacy required for academic work (Lea, 2004; Lea and Street, 1998).

Conceptualising language as a static skill (Turner, 2004), it also demonstrates a lack of understanding about language development. The way students develop their ability to communicate at university has a profound influence on how well they achieve and how fully they participate in the intellectual life of the university. Students need to understand the importance of being able to communicate their discipline knowledge and should be given opportunities to develop both their content knowledge and the language with which they communicate it: "accurate language use, especially in written language, is part of the academic message" (Turner, 2004, p.95). As outlined above, the definition of academic literacies in the policy document did not convey this meaning for curriculum designers.

The events referred to earlier to familiarise academic staff with the concept of academic literacies were attended largely by those members of the academy who had professional expertise in language and educational developments. Typically, curriculum developers who work in practical but less traditional areas appear to hold strong views that reading and writing skills are the territory of language experts. Many teachers who treat their subject as a topic rather than a learning process focus on the volume of curriculum content they need to cover and cannot conceptualise where literacy components would fit in. After discussion with the academic developer about the documentation for the course, one curriculum designer wrote an outcome for students to use "the language of the specialist discipline in interactions with peers, teachers and the public in a retail setting", indicating a clear aim to develop the specialist vocabulary of the discipline discourse. Further opportunities for students to develop their oral and written skills were included in the rationale when it emphasized that reports are presented both orally and in writing. At first sight, it appears that the policy requirement to include literacy outcomes is having some influence. But a later reading of the final document used to teach the course revealed that the outcomes in the rationale were not present in any single paper. These words remained on paper, and were not actioned at all. It appears that learning outcomes lacked conceptual understanding and hence were unlikely to be effective (Ramsden 2003).

Professional development implications

The literature is unequivocal (Street, 2004) about the discipline base of academic literacy initiatives, and many discipline groups have demonstrated how they have incorporated the principles of academic literacies (Barton & Neville-Barton 2003; Holder, Jones, Robinson, and Krass, 1999). However, there is less literature discussing the skills that enable specialists to collaborate successfully. How do academic developer and discipline expert learn to understand each other's discipline content and language? What are the professional development needs of academics as they conceptualise a new programme? Who should develop the expertise? If linguists, what training do they have for explaining their concepts to non-linguists? I am mindful of experts who have designed a policy that many in the academy find difficult to understand. Who or what can facilitate this communication? These issues pose questions for discipline experts across the academy, in particular in programmes where expertise is invited in from another School as a core component of the course.

Teachers need to see practical applications of the policy to their discipline, and exemplars of the design phase of other programmes can help here. If they think that adding academic literacy objectives to their programmes involves additional work for themselves or their students, then they will not support this move. And if they see learning outcomes as outside their curriculum, then it is unlikely that they will be integrated (Hazell and Woodward-Kron, 1996). The teachers' understanding of an academic literacies approach is crucial to the students' learning of these skills. Hence, collaborative success is partly a result of language expert and discipline teacher being able to see through each other's "lens" (Peterson, 1997, p. 158).

The other lens

All tertiary teachers need to understand that academic literacy skills are both an educational goal and the medium by which other educational goals will be achieved (Snow, 1997). As a means of encouraging classroom teachers to engage with academic literacies, Snow explains to them that if academic literacies are integrated into the programme, content mastery will improve (Snow, 1997, p.301). The same advice can serve curriculum designers to show them the fundamental importance of improving generic communication skills.

The onus is on the academic developer to take on the role of interpreter for disciplinary experts and communicate the concepts more clearly. There needs to be an interaction between academic developer and discipline expert where questions can be put in a non-threatening atmosphere (Haigh, 2004) so that the appropriate professional development can take place. A skilled academic developer needs to gauge the level of understanding of the curriculum writer and tailor the explanation accordingly.

A collegial conversation can explore ways to combine expert knowledge and to "identify the common ground as well as the differences and to recognise the degree of solidarity and commitment in relation to the agenda" (Haigh and Haigh, 2004, p.6). Skill in questioning and elicitation at this stage of dialogue can move practitioners beyond customary thinking about learning and teaching so that they critically analyse different ways of thinking about learning and explore new ways of teaching (Haigh, 2000).

Academic development is about "changing lecturers' understanding of teaching" (Ramsden, 2003, p.245). As I have outlined above, academic development to promote a policy on academic literacies is about changing the belief that discipline teachers teach their discipline alone. Equally important is the teachers' understanding of how they can promote academic literacies. While a policy can establish goals, it is up to academic developers and others in leadership roles to ensure that they are implemented. To this end, teachers need support in recognising and articulating their own skills at communicating their discipline knowledge. A policy on teaching needs teachers to engage with it. This may be the greatest challenge to the success of the policy and ultimately, the learning developments it aims to achieve.

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