Embedding academic literacies in the enabling curriculum: innovations to enhance successful student transitions into undergraduate study

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Enabling courses occupy an established, albeit marginal, space in the Australian higher education (HE) landscape. Although enabling courses are designed to prepare students for study at the degree program level, little attention has been paid to the explicit development of students' academic language and literacies within the context of the disciplines. This means that the benefits of embedded academic literacies curricula have not been fully examined at the enabling level. This paper will explore perspectives on embedding academic literacies before offering reflections on a case study of how subject-specific academic literacies support has been embedded within an enabling linguistics course at a regional Australian university. It then suggests that an approach that explicitly articulates disciplinary expectations and literacies may enhance students' preparation for undergraduate study within that field. This paper proposes that such an approach offers both students and teachers new opportunities for enhancing learning and teaching in enabling programs, and better facilitates student transition into undergraduate programs.

Keywords: *enabling programs, embedding academic literacies, language support, transition*

Introduction

Although writing is commonly accepted to be difficult, "writing" is often viewed unproblematically as "product." This reduces the complex web of activities, ideologies, and contexts that constitute it as a process and practice to a text written for assessment. In the context of widespread acceptance that students' academic writing needs support, it is broadly acknowledged that generic study skills approaches to teaching academic writing have serious shortcomings regarding practice and epistemology (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Mitchell, 2010; Wingate, 2006). Following critiques of study skills approaches to teaching / supporting student writing, viewing language as neutral, transferrable between contexts and reduced to a matter of decontextualised "skills", many researchers (Chanock, 2013; Percy, 2014; Thies, 2012) have called for academic reading and writing instruction (known as *academic literacies*[1] in the Australian context) to be located in the disciplines. However, while this concept is gaining recognition in Australia as a desirable program for supporting students' reading and writing (Chanock, 2013; Percy, 2014; Thies, Wallis, Turner, & Wishart, 2014), insufficient attention has been paid to embedding academic literacies into alternative pathways into undergraduate study.

In this paper, we present a case study of how subject-specific academic literacies are embedded into an enabling course on linguistics. We do not intend to offer a replicable model of "good practice." Instead, our aim is to promote discussion of the need to not only teach the "nuts and bolts" of how to read and write in disciplinary spaces, but also to unpick disciplinary discourses that both open and constrain particular texts and practices, and encourage disciplinary teachers to consider their own views of, and practices around, language.
Context

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[1] In this paper, we differentiate between two uses of the term *academic literacies*: when not capitalised, it refers to sets of texts and practices that constitute academic reading and writing in Australia; when capitalised, *Academic Literacies* marks the critical field of inquiry that conceptually frames this paper

Embedding academic literacies

Embedding academic literacies within disciplinary contexts addresses what Percy (2014) refers to as the "fragmented ways of fostering and monitoring students' academic and disciplinary language and learning capabilities" (p. 1) that exist when writing instruction and support are typically located in marginalised spaces in the academy or in central, generic units (see also Mitchell, 2010; Turner, 2011). Embedding explicit reading and writing teaching within the disciplines facilitates the development of epistemological links between subject knowledge and writing, thus making writing instruction more relevant and "user-friendly" for students (Clughen & Connell, 2012; Mitchell & Evison, 2006; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). Embedding academic literacies usually involves an academic writing specialist working with disciplinary staff to help design curricula and assessment tasks and to explore discourses that shape, and are shaped by, the texts and practices of the discipline. A further goal can be to aid disciplinary staff in exploring their own views on the role language plays in their subject and discourses of writing.

However, as Wingate et al. (2011) point out, there are few examples of feasibly implementing and embedding writing instruction. A consistent issue that complicates the success and sustainability of such initiatives is a lack of resources to support such ventures and, in some cases, the reluctance of disciplinary staff to be involved (Clughen & Connell, 2012; Mitchell & Evison, 2006). In the case study below, the disciplinary staff member also has an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) role in the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the same institution. This idiosyncratic blend of roles in the one teacher renders our description of good practice here ungeneralisable. However, this does permit us to circumvent the potential reluctance of disciplinary staff in considering their own epistemologies and the increase of workload that has been reported (e.g. in Lea & Street, 1998) as obstacles to sustaining such initiatives.

In order to critically reflect on the efficacy of disciplinary-specific writing instruction within an enabling course, we have drawn on Lea & Street's (1998) conceptualisation of academic writing in higher education:
1. a study skills model, which takes a neutral and transferrable view of language and positions writing as a "fixable" entity"
2. a socialisation model, where disciplinary novices (students) are inculcated into disciplinary writing practices by experts (teacher-assessors) through generic disciplinary models
3. the Academic Literacies model, which views writing as a set of social practices comprised of issues of power, meaning-making and disciplinary learning (Lea & Street, 1998), offering possibilities for transformation (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

Although outlined as three different models, Lea & Street (1998) note that these models are not atomised; instead, the socialisation model builds on study skills, and academic literacies includes elements of both the other models. Lea & Street (1998) have spurred a growing body of work into students' (and more recently, academics') writing, known as Academic Literacies. This conceptual and methodological framework permits the exploration of not only texts but also attitudes and issues around institutional power, epistemology, identity, and meaning making.

Enabling education

Entry to university is often conceived of as a ritual for "traditional" groups of students (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Quinn, 2010) and much political rhetoric and policy around higher education in Australia (and internationally) have focused on widening participation through alternative pathways into HE. University-based enabling education is one such pathway offering opportunities for often marginalised groups of students who, as such, represent

institutional efforts to address social justice and equity issues inherent in the academy (Bennett et al., 2012). At the University of Newcastle, Australia (UoN), the Open Foundation Program (OFP) offers students over the age of 20 the opportunity to prepare for tertiary study. The program is offered in both one-year part-time and one-semester full-time (intensive) modes and students who successfully complete the program are able to compete for a place in New South Wales universities through the Universities Admission Centre. In keeping with the ethos of the program, there are no entry requirements and there are no tuition fees. Within the program, there are no courses specifically designed to teach academic literacies, instead, they are embedded within each discipline. The explicit inclusion of academic literacies is demonstrated here in a case study of a linguistics course within the program.

While the widening participation agenda has opened access to many students who may have previously declined entry into, or deferred from HE, the massification of higher education has brought myriad challenges for institutions, academics, and students. Institutionally, the diversity of the student body has required the development of new ways of thinking about how to design, deliver and support reading and writing in HE, especially in the diverse landscape of Australian HE. From the student perspective, entering the disciplinary spaces of university and adapting to their literacy requirements can provide substantial challenges (Krause, 2001). However, we note Bennett et al.'s (2012) argument about the inappropriateness of applying standard measures of retention and attrition to enabling programs.

Case Study – The Study of Language

The course

The Study of Language course (SoL) provides students with an introduction to disciplinary study of linguistics. The course is offered in two modes: part-time (three hours per week for two 12-week semesters) and full-time (six hours per week for one 12-week semester). This case study outlines the full-time offering of the course. The course contains both lecture and tutorial formats, but the divide between these two methods of instruction is blurred. During the traditional lecture component, students are encouraged to participate in discussion of course content, as well as writing practices and to participate in group activities. The tutorial component comprises student activities, discussion, and practice. Students explore numerous areas in linguistics, such as semantics, morphology, sociolinguistics, stylistics, and syntax. In this context, they develop knowledge of not only discipline content and its writing practices, but suggestions are also made to facilitate success in HE more generally.

Many scholars (e.g. Lea & Street, 1998; Mitchell, 2010; Wingate, 2006) argue that adjunct skills workshops are ineffective in improving student knowledge about reading and writing in particular disciplines. Such workshops are rarely attended, especially by those who would benefit most from them, with students preferring to seek help from each other rather than external learning advisers (Goldingay et al., 2014). Before academic literacies were embedded in SoL, a learning adviser gave in-class sessions on particular "skills." However, the examples used were generic, and having an external, non-disciplinary specialist appeared to disengage the students. Unlike the external presenter, the content lecturer always contextualises academic literacies within the discipline.

Multidisciplinarity

Linguistics straddles the science-humanities schism in that is has sub-disciplines fitting both the scientific paradigm (such as phonology, morphology, and syntax), and the humanities paradigm (e.g. sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and linguistic anthropology). This at first may appear an issue in teaching discipline-specific academic literacies because the range may seem so broad. However, it provides an opportunity to discuss the broad differences each sub-discipline has within its writing conventions.

Most students who take SoL do not go on to study linguistics at degree level. Therefore, one of the course objectives is to prepare students for academic writing in many disciplines, such as the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. Indeed, one of the challenges of teaching SoL is preparing students for undergraduate study in courses other than linguistics. Making students aware of the variations between disciplines alerts them to the fact that there is no one way to "write academically," contradicting the generic writing advice given in "study skills" workshops. Furthermore, discussing academic literacies in class rejects the positioning of writing support as remedial or something that students seek if their writing is inadequate. In turn, this should help ease enabling student transitions into not only undergraduate study overall, but also between different disciplines at that level.

Embedding academic literacies in the enabling curriculum

To best "staircase students to degree programs" (Trewartha, 2008, p. 30), time is allocated in the SoL curriculum for discussion around academic reading and writing practices. These practices appear in the course schedule (see Appendix) and are integrated into course content so that in each lesson students learn not only about linguistic topics, but also specific components of academic literacies. Lessons dedicate time for academic literacies, for example, interpreting assignment questions, and discussing and practising discipline-specific writing conventions. One particular task students perform is analysing de-identified samples of authentic student writing for areas where discipline-specific writing conventions have not been adhered to. The sample sentences are from previous student assessment tasks and are chosen and adapted to emphasise typical errors that student writers face in making meaning. These may include run-on sentences, inaccurate referencing, or imprecise wording. Students then discuss how to improve the sample text to suit the expectations of writing in linguistics.

The creation of a space for such discussions is fruitful and allows students to explore various ways of expressing ideas. This practice connects with Ivanič's (1998) method of *talk around texts*, which brings the student voice into discussions around writing. In this context, talking around writing creates a space for students to explore their writing and often leads to broader discussions on the reasoning behind certain writing conventions. This can lead to conversations about what is acceptable in the discipline; for example, accurate referencing of sources often arises and students explore various reasons for the necessity of precise referencing beyond simple avoidance of plagiarism. Such exchanges develop into exploration of how use of referencing can provide a means of expressing the writer's voice through critiquing sources and evidence, thus enhancing argument. Although these discussions originate with issues of accuracy and precision in written expression, which connect with Lea and Street's (1998) "study skills" model, they also connect with the socialisation approach because they become contextualised within the discipline of linguistics. A vital component of this practice is for students to realise that academic writing is more than simply being "right" or "wrong" and adhering to pre-conceived "rules." It is a complicated mixture of negotiating certain conventions and expectations, while still maintaining the position of the author.

Assessment

Embedding discipline-specific academic literacies is not a matter of simple abstraction, as is the case with study skills approaches; instead, academic literacies are discussed in the context of course objectives and assessment tasks. In SoL, there are four assessment items. The first task includes students writing an academic paragraph. Before the assessment is due, students analyse differences between written academic and colloquial language and learn about paragraph structure. Students are then encouraged to incorporate this advice into the next assessment task – an essay. After submitting this task, students receive feedback in a similar manner to that given on the paragraph. The next assessment task is an in-class test, where students write a one-paragraph answer to a question. This not only provides them with the opportunity to further consolidate their academic literacies, but also has the additional element of doing so under pressure and thus allows students to practise for the end-of-semester exam. The exam requires students to write paragraph answers to three separate questions and write one essay. The exam then allows students to apply what they have learnt regarding not only academic language but also how to make meaning and communicate learning in linguistics. At the same time as looking at these more discursive academic literacies, students also have to engage with more highly discipline-specific exercises such as analysis of syntax, semantics, and phonetics.

Academic literacies are taught in class in the period leading up to each of the four assessment items. Students receive prompt feedback for each item in two forms. First, they receive personalised written feedback, and then issues relating to all the students are discussed in class. The aim of this procedure is to allow students to see not only areas they can improve in their own writing, but also to see that other students may also be experiencing similar issues. The intention behind this is to break down writing barriers and create a sense of community among students, which includes the lecturer who speaks openly about his own experiences of writing and learning to write in the discipline. By exposing his own practices and issues with writing, the lecturer opens a space in which to discuss the complexities of writing: how meaning making is not easy and how writing can have emotional consequences. In doing this, the lecturer aims to create a safe space in which to explore disciplinary academic literacies.

Embedding academic literacies in this enabling course is anchored around assessment, which could be viewed as problematic and as encouraging assessment discourses of writing (writing for only what is needed to pass the course). However, we argue that this is partly avoided by the discussion of these features of writing in the discipline beyond the course and into university study generally. Moreover, students are encouraged to apply disciplinary-appropriate features to their writing in a task-pertinent and meaningful context. This prevents discussions on writing from being disjointed and decontextualised.

Discussion

The case study presented above signals the importance of embedding academic literacies at the enabling level. Enabling education is designed to offer students an alternative pathway into HE and all the attendant capital that a university degree offers. Without explicit attention to the kinds of reading and writing that are valued in disciplinary contexts, enabling educators are arguably offering impoverished preparation for the rigours of undergraduate study. At the core of embedding academic literacies in this particular course is the allocation of time and attention *in class* to the explication and development of core reading and writing practices that constitute disciplinary study and epistemology. This is a small part of the case study but arguably the most important because of the conscious decision to dedicate time – a precious resource - to academic literacies at the perceived expense of core content. In addition, while other teachers may question this allocation of time, we view the blending of

explicit attention to academic literacies in the context of class materials and assessment tasks (both formative and summative) as an effective use of time and resources. Our case study suggests that this kind of explicit positioning of academic literacies in a content-driven enabling course may have beneficial implications for practice and, significantly, for students' successful transitions into undergraduate study.

This case study also illuminates core epistemological challenges in embedding academic literacies into this enabling course. There is tension between offering opportunities for authentic engagement with writing and teaching in fragmented sections and explicitly towards assessment objectives. The centrality of assessment in this case study is in some ways incongruent with the view of literacies taken in this paper. By teaching the "hows and whys" of academic literacies around assessment tasks, we run the danger of reifying assessment as the writing "end-game" for students. Furthermore, focusing on assessment could be perceived as emulating the kinds of writing that the students might have done (possibly unsuccessfully) at school. Moreover, this assessment-centred approach might create disfluency with the intended exploratory approach to academic reading and writing in context. However, despite recognising that centring this writing delivery on assessment tasks is undesirable, we chose to do this as our experience and the literature tell us that student engagement is diluted if the writing task does not contribute towards an assessment mark. Furthermore, the assessment tasks provide a frame for not only building key practices needed to complete assignments, but also for managing the balance between core content and academic literacies. In this way, framing around assessment became a pragmatic choice.

Indeed, a key critique of Academic Literacies is the absence of a "design frame", or pedagogy, for writing (Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Tribble & Wingate, 2013). There have been suggestions of what an Academic Literacies pedagogy might include, and the influence of Lillis' (2006) call for *feedback as talkback* is presented in this case study, where the content lecturer engages the students in a cycle of feed-forward commentary and advice for the development of their academic literacies. However, we propose that it would be inappropriate to implement a "full-blown" Academic Literacies pedagogy – which might see students researching the writing in their disciplinary setting and exploring how particular kinds of disciplinary writing have come to be valued and why others are not. This is because while the purpose of enabling education is to provide a foundation from which students may develop literacies, disciplinary knowledge and confidence, it is perhaps not the right place to ask students to critique practices over which they have only nascent mastery. In this case, we agree with Wingate (2012) in her appraisal that students need to "understand the underlying conventions and practices" (p. 34) before they can be challenged.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an exploratory case study of an enabling course that has academic literacies embedded into it. Using the Academic Literacies framework as a critical lens for exploring academic literacies in context offers insight into what kinds of reading and writing are privileged, how writing is part of the epistemology of a discipline, and how institutional mechanisms open and constrain possibilities for meaning making and identity. It is clear that embedding academic literacies within curricula is part of the core language work of enabling education. This paper intends to open up a conversation about the role of language in pedagogy and curricula and how best we can develop design frames for sustainable language and literacies instruction within the enabling sector. However, the concerns raised here about the role assessment plays in terms of foregrounding these literacies are significant and certainly appear to warrant further exploration.

Appendix – Course schedule for The Study of Language full-time course (six hours per week)
Specific academic literacies (in bold), are explicitly taught throughout the semester, and appear alongside course content in the schedule.

Week	Lecture	Tutorial
1	Introduction; What is language?; language universals; nouns & determiners **Writing academically vs speaking colloquially**	*No tutorial*
2	Phonetics & phonology; adjectives & adverbs **Writing paragraphs**	Nouns & determiners
3	Design features of language; animal communication; prepositions **Reading & note-taking**	Phonetics & phonology;
4	Language acquisition; semantics; pronouns **Library & research activity**	Adjectives & adverbs, **writing academically**
5	Mid semester revision; verbs **Uni life review, planning essays**	Verbs; Prepositions & pronouns
6	Language variation **Using evidence in writing**	Semantics
7	Language & the brain Competence & performance; tense **Writing essays**	Language & the brain, **analysing critically, writing essays**
8	Australian English; auxiliary verbs, **Analysing critically**	Auxiliary verbs, Australian English
9	Languages in contact; Australian Aboriginal languages; aspect **Writing essays – feedback & reflection**	Languages in contact, Aboriginal Languages
10	Language & gender; tense & aspect **Revising for tests**	Tense & aspect
11	Morphology & word formation	Morphology
12	Revision **Preparing for exams**	**Reflection task**

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