370 The complexity of interdisciplinary collaboration: what LCT's Autonomy can tell us about success and failure

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Abstract

Sustainable collaboration between academic language and literacies experts and experts from university students' target disciplines is highly valorised in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), yet fraught with challenges (Murray & Nallaya, 2016; Sloan & Porter, 2010). At her current institution, this author has experienced a range of success and failures in attempts to collaborate with target discipline experts in the development of students' academic literacies. This paper presents the analysis of focus group data where participants discussed the need for academic writing and literacies support for their students. This data has been analysed using the dimension of Autonomy from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). The analysis illuminates the relations between disciplinary and EAP practices and where they are positioned on, and move across, the autonomy plane, offers great insight into why approaches to collaboration are likely to succeed or fail.

Full paper

Sustainable collaboration between academic language and literacies experts and experts from the students' target disciplines is highly valorised in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Collaboration has historically taken many guises. From target disciplines providing texts for the EAP educator to exploit in the EAP classroom, to team-teaching with the target discipline, who may focus on 'content' while the EAP educator focuses on 'language', with many other configurations of collaboration existing in between. Collaboration, however, is fraught with many challenges, not least its inability to be sustained due to its reliance on charisma and networking skills (Murray & Nallaya, 2016) and an unsupportive institutional culture (Sloan & Porter, 2010). These challenges continue to problematise sustainable collaboration between target discipline and EAP expert.

UK universities (indeed many HE systems within Anglophone countries) are increasingly aware of the need to support students from all backgrounds with their development of academic literacies (Wingate & Tribble, 2012; Murray & Nallaya, 2016). In the UK context, supporting students classed as international or speakers of English as an additional language, has largely been the remit of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) educators. Consequently, this support has traditionally only reached a proportion of an institution's student population. There is an emergent and ever-expanding body of work that is seeing EAP educators collaborate with experts from other disciplines with the common aim of academic literacies development being enacted within the disciplinary classroom (McGrath et al., 2019; Macnaught et al., 2022) and, therefore, being accessible to all and ultimately more sustainable.

In the post-pandemic era, this EAP educator has been involved in initiatives to foster greater collaboration between EAP expert and target discipline experts across a Russell Group institution, with various degrees of success. The challenges faced stem from a lack of top-down support for such collaboration, a lack of local policy advocating for the need for collaboration and a lack of awareness within the institution of what expertise exists and crucially where it is located. Centralised academic writing provision that once existed and 'served' departments has been replaced with support for employability and graduate skills. The institution's EAP experts are misunderstood as English teachers and perceived to be able to only support students with an English language deficit. There is institution wide frustration with a lack of academic literacies development for all students across disciplines. Leaving the question; who can, or should, help students develop their academic literacies across this institution.

This paper shares the analysis of focus group data from different faculties across the institution tasked with discussing this question. The analysis enacts the dimension of Autonomy from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to explore relations between disciplinary experts' and the EAP expert's practices when it comes to helping students develop their academic literacies. Autonomy "explores what makes practices distinctive" (Maton & Howard, 2021b,

p.79) and starts from "the premise that any set of practices comprises constituents that are related together in particular ways" (Maton & Howard, 2021a, p.28). The dimension "focuses on relations between sets of practices (such as subject areas) and conceptualizes their organising principles as autonomy codes" (Maton & Howard, 2021a p. 28). Where practices are positioned within the four autonomy codes (and their movement between) is determined by degrees of strength of insulated positions, or how strongly actors are associated with the context and how autonomous principles are, or whether actors act according to specific ways of working (Maton & Howard, 2021a, p.30). By examining the relations between disciplinary and EAP practices through the lens of Autonomy, we can begin to gain insight into reasons behind the successes and failures of the approaches taken within the institution to collaborate on the development of academic literacies. This can be powerful knowledge in creating sustainable collaborations for developing students' academic literacies.

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