Research students' experiences of Academic Literacies development

The Tertiary Context

Diversification of tertiary education has meant greater numbers of students from a wide range of backgrounds, including from overseas. While international enrolment in Australian universities has begun to decline at most levels of study, enrolments for postgraduate research continues to increase, by 9.6% in the last year (AEI, 2012). These national figures incorporate institutional variation; at the University of Newcastle, Australia (UoN), RHD enrolments overall increased 6%, yet international on-shore Research Higher Degree (RHD) enrolments in 2011 were 22% higher than 2010 (UoN, 2012). This trend is expected to continue, yet our understanding of international students' learning seems to lag behind their increasing numbers (Heffernan et al., 2010). It is known that educational expectations vary in different cultures (Watkins & Biggs, 2001), which can cause academic culture shock for international students. While all new research students must adjust to the research culture in their discipline, international students can experience broader and deeper challenges. The associated stress may be mitigated with the strategic use of explicit and timely Academic Literacies teaching.

Academic Literacies

The concept of *Academic Literacies* (AL) incorporates 'skills' for learning in a context of deeper understanding of their functioning and application. This is based on the principle that learning involves "participation in complex 'social learning systems'" (Wenger, 2000, p.226), and "social practices embedded in context" (Jacobs, 2005, p.475). AL means more than isolated skills; the term recognises situated conventions of meaning-making (Gourlay, 2009). Many graduate attributes can be considered AL, including critical thinking and clear communication. Commonly, however, AL are not explicitly addressed in tertiary teaching. They are sometimes incorporated into documents to satisfy requirements to identify 'skills', with little impact on design or delivery of courses. AL teaching is often outsourced to centralised departments that address students' 'skills deficit', in remedial models that run counter to best practice (Chanock, 2007; Jacobs, 2005; Lea & Street, 1998). According to the AL approach, development of these literacies constitutes "threshold practice" (Gourlay, 2009, p. 181) and "professional practice" (Lea & Stierer, 2011, p. 606), and as such is a vital part of students' developing doctoral identities. Gee (1990, cited in Jacobs, 2005) considers an understanding of socially accepted discourse to help "identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group" (p.143, cited on p.477). Explicit teaching of AL may therefore support students' construction of positive doctorial identities and help mitigate some of the challenges of acculturation outlined above. AL teaching should form part of students' "enculturation" into a community of practice (Dysthe, Samara & Westrheim, 2006).

Because RHD students enter their programs via a range of pathways, we cannot assume they have received training[1] in AL. Logically, then, candidates should have access to such training. This is

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[1] 'Training' in the sense of guided acquisition of vocational or professional competencies.

partially supported by institutional policy, which refers to 'language tuition, *academic writing*, computing, statistical methodology and information retrieval' (University of Newcastle, 2007). National policy also states that doctoral graduates will engage in 'critical reflection, synthesis, and evaluation, and disseminate and promote new insights' (AQF, 2011). As discussed above, these AL are best developed in authentic disciplinary contexts; however due to the absence of any doctoral curriculum (Green, 2012) this is often not feasible. Various alternative models exist at different institutions. Some target particular cohorts, such as compulsory bridging courses for international students (e.g. University of Adelaide, 2005); others provide optional support, including formally assessed Graduate Certificates (e.g. University of Tasmania, 2012), or non-assessed self-access resources (Larcombe & McCosker, 2005). At UoN, a team of Learning Advisers promotes AL development through workshops, consultations, and writing circles, thus contributing to the myriad avenues of support available to candidates. Currently, however, there has been no holistic review of students' experiences of this support. This study takes a more macro perspective of RHD students' experiences of AL development, to evaluate their perceptions of the support provided. It is hoped that the evidence collected will inform the future development of AL teaching for research students.

Methodology

RHD students who have accessed support from Learning Advisers will be invited to participate via an email which links to an online survey. This online methodology has been chosen not only for convenience but also because email is a standard form of communication between the university and its students. It is therefore expected that most students will be familiar and comfortable with the technology. Of course there are also disadvantages to this style of data collection (see for example Opdenakker, 2006). In this case, however, the advantages outweigh the limitations. Online communication enables inclusion of participants who may be unable to attend face-to-face interviews or discussions; and the asynchronous communication enables greater flexibility in participation. Furthermore, the absence of face-to-face communication may allow some participants to respond more openly and honestly, particularly if they are culturally averse to expressing criticism or negative opinions (Hughes, 2004).

The online survey includes closed and open-ended questions. The closed items request basic demographic information (e.g. age, gender, international or domestic) then ask students to respond using drop-down menus and Likert-type scales to indicate what sources of support they have accessed, and how useful they felt the support to be. This may enable identification of effective AL support from sources other than Learning Advisers. The open-text items explore participants' experiences from a more affective perspective, for example whether they have felt adequately supported, or whether they feel confident in their identity as a researcher. Analysis of this qualitative data aims to identify correlations between students' accessing of support, their experiences of AL development, and how this may influence their perceptions of identity.

Contribution

Theoretically, this work contributes to the growing evidence-base supporting the discipline of Academic Literacies, particularly the teaching of Academic Literacies for research students. Given the current growth in post-graduate research enrolments, particularly of international students (AEI, 2012), and the imminence of national graduate attributes (AQF, 2012; see also Chanock, Clerehan, Moore & Prince, 2004) it is likely that this will become an area of continuing relevance and

importance in the future research training context. On an immediate and practical level, this analysis will inform subsequent design of Academic Literacies education for RHD students at this institution. Weaknesses in current practice may be highlighted, and particular cohorts may be identified as being in need of additional resources. I hope we will also be able to identify areas where existing provision seems to be effective, and perhaps begin to hypothesise as to the reasons for this; which may pave the way for further research to investigate emergent themes in more detail.

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