Academic literacy development: A multiple perspectives approach to blended learning

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This paper describes how the interaction of different research perspectives – multiliteracies, academic literacy, student engagement – combined with the practicality of an open source software environment has influenced the implementation of a blended approach to student learning development. It discusses affordances and constraints that we have faced in our instructional context, describes the changes that have been implemented, and reflects on the value of a multiple perspectives approach to creating a blended learning academic support environment.

Keywords: multiliteracies, academic literacy, blended learning, student learning development

Introduction

Several key changes, both internal and external to the University of Waikato, New Zealand have combined to stimulate a blended learning approach to the university's provision of centralized academic literacy development. In 2006, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) changed the university-funding model from one based on student enrolments to one focused on student achievement, university programme distinctiveness, and research outputs (Government of New Zealand, 2006). This change has brought increased pressure on universities to ensure that students not just enrol in degree programmes, but that they actually complete them and achieve a qualification (Scott, 2009). In 2007, Moodle, an Open Source Software (OSS) learning management system (LMS) replaced the proprietary course management system at the university, which in turn necessitated all courses being moved into the new eLearning environment. Later, in 2008, Student Learning, which had been an isolated and somewhat marginalized unit, was relocated into a larger organizational funding environment. These changes have afforded an opportunity for a 'rethink' about how academic literacy development could be conceptualized and provided (Johnson, Haines, & Strang, 2009) within a blended learning environment.

This paper will describe how the interaction of different research perspectives – multiliteracies, academic literacy, student engagement – combined with the practicality of an open source software environment has influenced the implementation of a blended learning approach to student learning development. It will also discuss affordances and constraints that we faced in our instructional context, describe the changes that have been implemented, and reflect on the value of a multiple perspectives approach to creating a blended learning academic support environment.

The student learning context

The Student Learning unit at our university provides academic literacy development for students across all learning programmes at the university from pre-degree bridging courses, to undergraduate, post-graduate, and higher degree. In addition, it caters to the academic literacy needs of both domestic and international students, with their varying levels of language and literacy competence. Although the intended outcomes for all students who seek learning assistance are the same – the development of sufficient academic competence for successful study – the starting points for different types of students vary and the paths that they follow to achieve learning outcomes also vary. Such factors as students' background academic preparation in school, language proficiency, cultural expectations, and prior

cognitive skills development affect their engagement with tertiary study. For example, international students typically have difficulties with semantic norms and although their writing can be "correct" from a grammatical perspective, their sentences often include oddly constructed word or phrasal combinations. Other problems such as inaccurate word or verb forms, limited understanding of modality, inadequate or mechanical signposting (leading to problems of coherence and cohesion in text), or simplistic lexical choices and collocations are common. On the other hand, domestic students' grammatical errors are likely to include informal and inaccurate sentence structures, such as incomplete sentences, inadequate (or no) understanding of punctuation rules, poor spelling, or illogical signposting (caused by an underdeveloped sense of the logical relationships between sections of texts, rather than from not understanding grammatical structure). In short, although both groups experience distinct problems, their language and academic literacy needs often overlap.

Until 2008, academic literacy development within Student Learning was limited to physical spaces, through face-to-face meetings (tutor-student), group workshops (generic or tailored to specific university courses), and print-based resources. While it can be argued that face-to-face teaching is pedagogically effective, it is nevertheless labour-intensive and, importantly, it is time-bound. Not all students conduct their academic study between 8:30 and 5:00 when the learning tutors are (physically) available. Moreover, widespread access to computers and the Internet means that students *expect* support and resources in various forms to be available on-demand (Wesch, 2009).

Thus, Student Learning staff decided to develop a web-presence at the university, within the Moodle environment, and use a variety of software tools. Further, the new online environment was intended to supplement face-to-face sessions with students – either as an instructional *tool* (to work collaboratively through interactive workshop content) or as an instructional *resource* (to show students where text-based information could be located and downloaded), or provide a set of resources that students could access independently. By working collaboratively with students and showing them how to use the online workshops, tutors can not only assess students' learning needs, but they can also demonstrate independent learning processes to the student. Such collaboration can help raise student awareness of important features of academic literacy, yet provides an emotionally supportive learning environment (Chanock, 2007).

However, we face some constraints, such as a small staff (4.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) tutors) to meet the learning development needs of approximately 10,000 equivalent full-time students (EFTS). In addition, there are fiscal constraints, which limit the range and extent of online or print-based resources that can be assembled and made available to students. Another (potential) constraint is that none of the learning support team is a specialist online instructional designer or computer programmer. Nevertheless, we have overlapping expertise in educational computing theory, learning support development, curriculum design and development, and teaching and learning processes, which is an affordance – as is the availability of Open Source Software (OSS).

Research perspectives influencing blended learning development

The development of our blended learning environment has been influenced and shaped by research in three main academic areas – multiliteracies, academic literacy, and student engagement. This is not to state that other research perspectives have not contributed useful ideas, but rather that these three perspectives have proved most salient. The multiliteracies research describes key shifts in thinking about the fundamental, yet broad-based, nature of literacy within a modern context. Academic literacy focuses closely on the types of reading, writing, and thinking skills and processes required by students within such contexts as tertiary education – precisely what we aim to develop. Student engagement research literature primarily focuses on students' literacy, pedagogical, and social practices within higher education – particularly those leading to academic success. Within our context of Student Learning, all three perspectives provide powerful insights both into what is possible, but also what is key in the design and development of students' academic competence through a blended learning approach.

Multiliteracies, academic literacy, and student engagement

Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, and Gee (1996) in their seminal discussion of multiliteracies describe a fundamental shift in understanding of reading and writing literacy from one which assumes a page-bound, monolingual, monocultural environment to one which includes multicultural, multilingual, and multiple channels of communication. This has included moving away from a text-based approach to literacy development to one that includes print, visual, and multimedia resources. Further, life, work, and study parameters are not as clearly demarcated as they have been in the past. Increasingly, life, work, and

education intermingle in students' lives; they conduct their studies anywhere including within physical classrooms, online with computers at home or on campus, in transit or on field trips using hand-held mobile devices, or in the library reading books and journals. In short, learning is distributed (The New London Group, 2000).

Anstey and Bull (2006) have extended concepts of multiliteracy to explicitly include the idea of social interaction and contexts. Simply knowing *about* different forms of literacy or having knowledge of a "repertoire of literate practices" (p. 19) is insufficient to prepare students for life within such contexts as work or leisure, or prepare them for active citizenship, community activities, and personal growth (p. 19). Moreover, "in order to become effective participants in emerging multiliteracies, students need to understand how the resources of language, image and digital rhetorics can be deployed independently and interactively to construct different kinds of meanings" (Unsworth, 2001, p. 8). It is this precisely this independent / interactive perspective that we explicitly wish to capture within our blended learning environment.

As regards current understanding of academic literacy, Leki (2000) and Braine (2002) describe a range of research and argue that academic literacy includes more than just knowledge of discrete language skills or appropriate language use in context. It needs to be understood holistically and includes, for example, competence in reading, writing, critical thinking, knowledge of independent learning processes, tolerance of ambiguity, effective practice of good judgement, and development of a deeper sense of personal identity. Expectations for what constitutes academic literacy competence become more demanding as a student progresses through tertiary study. For example, while written work that demonstrates solid paraphrasing and referencing skills might be awarded an 'A' in first-year, it would not be at Honour's level where evidence of more nuanced, independent, and theory-based writing is required. The development of academic literacy must be seen as a long-term endeavour, requiring practice and refinement of knowledge and the awareness that meta-cognitive learning processes and strategies are transferable across a variety of tasks. Moreover, academic subjects and their literacy requirements can differ across disciplines so that expectations for Science students can vary in straightforward (or subtle) ways from those for History students. Such variation could include written (or oral) conventions for how to structure an argument or report research findings (Carkin, 2005; McCallum, 2004), and variations can cause confusion among students as regards requirements.

Recent research into student engagement in higher education has found that although most students do need help at some point during their university studies to develop academic literacy skills, they tend not to actively seek assistance (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004). Multiple and often interrelated factors such as poorly articulated orientation programmes, students' own inability to self-assess their learning needs, disappointment with performance in courses, and a lack of awareness of what help is available or how to access it all contribute to retention problems at university (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Yet, it is precisely the relationship with a supportive learning tutor and appropriate study materials that are key in helping students bridge learning gaps and complete their studies (Brew & Ginns, 2008); developing multiple and various support structures through which students can be reached is of critical importance for their academic achievement. Equally important are the range of software tools, variety in instructional approaches, and flexibility in how students can interact in both physical and virtual spaces.

OSS for blended learning

Given space limitations in this paper, only the SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model) and FLAX (Flexible Language Acquisition) blended learning developments will be discussed although some proprietary software tools are also being used within our environment. The overall interactive learning environment, for both domestic and international students, has centred on Moodle, particularly its community building (forums and dialogue) and resource management tools. The interface to SCORM that we use is eXe (eLearning xhtml editor), free software for making educational exercises. SCORM was selected to develop a range of interactive academic skills workshops, including for example, study skills, paraphrasing, the essay writing process, and time management. The online workshops developed include a combination of texts for concept explanation, reading activities for setting learning tasks, and true-false, multi-choice, and completion item types for assessing understanding. All item types permit explanations to be added for both correct and incorrect answers, which means that students are presented with more complex and nuanced learning feedback than is often the case in online testing environments (Johnson & Brine, 2001). Each workshop topic includes a non-graded practice exercise, which can be submitted as a Moodle assignment for tutor feedback and then returned to the student through the private dialogue area. Multi-choice practice quizzes are also used so that students can self-assess understanding and obtain feedback in a more immediate fashion. Alternatively, a student can enter individual workshop pages to

seek clarification on a particular learning point or reread and reflect on material already completed. Both types of practice and self-assessment quizzes cater to students' more immediate or longer-term developmental learning needs and increase the flexibility of our environment.

FLAX (Flexible Language Acquisition) is powered by the Greenstone digital library software (Wu, Franken, & Witten, 2009) and can organize authentic texts and multimedia resources as input for language learning purposes. Of particular interest to Student Learning are the "web phrases" and "web collocation" modules of FLAX, which access language in the British National and from the World Wide Web. Students (domestic, but particularly international) often visit Student Learning anticipating that tutors will proofread their writing and correct their grammar, but this is not a service that we provide. However, in conversation with a tutor, higher proficiency language learners can often identify sections of their writing that might need attention. Working collaboratively with the student, tutors help them learn how and when the FLAX phrases or collocations tools can be of benefit in their writing. The software provides frequency statistics, which learners can be trained to recognise as correlating with accuracy. Although FLAX cannot distinguish between correct or incorrect language, it can identify frequency patterns and list collocations in close proximity to the student's supplied writing. What we have found is that FLAX can hone a student's language awareness and for motivated students, lead them towards grammatical independence, but they need the face-to-face training to help them begin.

The new blended environment is in a state of constant development and extension. Raising student awareness of the availability of the online resources is ongoing, but the most successful method of raising student awareness has been through face-to-face encounters, followed by online practice and reinforcement of concepts. For example, physical workshops to introduce students to online resources for checking their grammar online (including FLAX) have been fully subscribed. To date, specific evaluative feedback on the resources has been limited, but positive. For example, students have remarked that the online workshops extended what they had learned in face-to-face courses. We anticipate that as increased numbers of students use the resources, on their own or collaboratively with a tutor, we will obtain more robust and nuanced feedback.

Reflections and conclusions

There is some evidence that ICT and eLearning, in their various forms, can transform education through supporting collaboration, connection, and customisation and individualisation of learning environments. However, technological potential does not guarantee successful, or worthwhile, use of computers in educational contexts (Convery, 2009), and even the availability of flexible or varied software tools is not sufficient to promote student learning. What is required are traditional texts, digital and other electronic texts coupled with multiple opportunities for discussion, both among students and between students and teacher, so that ideas can become integrated into new knowledge formation opportunities (Dazakiria, 2008).

In Student Learning, we have found that identical software can be used to assist students from very different backgrounds. An advanced international or a low-proficiency domestic student can potentially benefit from the same software tool, but it is the *approach* that tutors follow in their interactions with students that varies. The goal is to guide students so that they begin to comprehend parallels between theory and practice, develop their analytical and critical voice, and can demonstrate integrity and thoroughness in research outputs. Further, although tutors are (physically) available to support learners as they work through the activities, students are then expected to take responsibility for their own learning needs and work autonomously in the online environment. Clear, visually attractive, yet succinct explanation of the overall purpose of the online workshops and their individual activities have thus been essential in order to attract and maintain student interest (Salmon, 2002). Design choices have included keeping learning activities short and focused, providing content focused on well established local learning needs, developing activities that can provide students with a sense of skills-mastery, and making explicit the ways in which the knowledge can be transferred across learning tasks.

Further, because students visit Student Learning on a voluntary basis, as opposed to being enrolled in a course of study, we consider it essential to combine the inter-personal with the online when helping students develop their academic literacy competence. It is precisely the "conversation" in shared space, supplemented by online activities, which can be a powerful tool for engaging students in their learning, for promoting the development of academic literacy competence, and for doing this through the use of multiple resources and software tools. The physical without the online is limited in who can be reached and what can be taught; the online without the physical can be lonely and alienating; but blended learning environments are powerful tools for helping students succeed.

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