

Straddling two worlds: How academic literacy can inform discipline-specific teaching

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Academic literacy and discipline specific teaching have often been separated in Australian higher education settings, where academic skills advisors facilitate academic literacy skills whilst disciplinary specific academics deliver content area knowledge and skills. This superficial separation has often created situations where academic literacy advisors have had to address student learning issues without a clear understanding of subject specific knowledge and assessment requirements. The current article explores the greater integration of the teaching of academic skills and content area knowledge through an autoethnography, in which two professional roles merge. This study documents an advisor's attempts to use writing activities to scaffold discipline specific teaching within a Bachelor of Primary Teacher Education subject at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). It illustrates how academic advisors acquire a unique insight into effective teaching strategies as they directly address students' learning needs.

Key Words: academic literacy, discipline specific teaching, embedded literacy development.

1. Introduction

Working within two different professional worlds has involved some role-related confusion, but for the most part, it has meant accessing the richness of two different perspectives. Although I have straddled the responsibilities of being an academic skills advisor and a teacher education academic for the past five years, I have only now begun to question the ways that one role has informed the other. This reflective process was triggered by a particularly challenging assignment within a teacher education subject, in which students struggled to meet the required outcomes. I had previously believed that my responsibilities as an academic skills advisor were quite separate as my advising work appeared to lie in the practicalities of “solving” or “fixing” problem areas through a remedial approach. Chanock (2007) vividly illustrates this “fix it” view of academic advisor work, stating, “our centres seem to be regarded as a form of crash repair shop where welding, panel-beating and polishing can be carried out on students’ texts – an idea that makes sense only if you regard the text as a vehicle for the writer’s thoughts, and separable from the thoughts themselves” (p. 273). This view is believed to originate from a deficit model of teaching and learning that creates the impression that academic skills advisors work mainly with “surface problems” that are easily addressed and are useful for short-term success at university, and are less relevant for their work and life (Star & Hammer, 2008; Wingate, 2006). As an academic skills advisor, I acknowledged the limitations of my role when consulting students due to my lack of content area knowledge. I attempted to create clarity from sometimes vaguely worded subject outlines and assessment descriptors, trying to discern academic’s expectations and closing with the disclaimer, “But please check with your lecturer to be sure.” I conceded that the academic staff had ‘knowledge’ far more authoritative than mine as creators and assessors of tasks and as experts within the disciplines. In moving into the teacher education field from academic skills, I found myself asking where my expertise lay and whether the skills acquired bore

any relevance in teaching future teachers. This question was partly addressed through a recent experience in delivering a teaching portfolio assessment task.

So how does academic skills work fit into teaching in the disciplines? The current article is contextualized in a new teaching portfolio assessment task undertaken in a final year pre-service teacher education subject at The University of Technology, Sydney. It has taken place within two semesters in 2014 and 2015 and has involved one group of thirty and another group of twenty students. The teaching portfolio was established in 2014 to enable students to engage in greater critical and analytical thinking and workplace preparation. Students needed to build a base of evidence to showcase their core philosophical beliefs and relevant teaching skills. This task was particularly relevant as it followed the model of assessment for teacher accreditation, which was established by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2014). The AITSL accreditation process similarly required individuals to collect and analyse artefacts that demonstrate their developing professional capabilities, aspirations and achievements (AITSL, 2014). The assessment was therefore aimed at building student capacity for higher order thinking and the practice based learning that students would undertake as future teachers. The teaching portfolio involved a teaching philosophy statement that embodied their core teaching beliefs and critical commentaries of three artefacts that deeply reflected their teaching skills, experiences and beliefs. The current article depicts the difficulties students experienced in meeting the demands of the task. It documents the scaffolding implemented in the second delivery in 2015 to address the emerging learning issues. It proposes that the ability to scaffold learning was partly informed by the skills acquired through academic advising.

2. Academic skills advising as a model for skilful teaching

The current article illustrates the connections and the overlaps between academic advising and discipline specific teaching. It seeks to explore the complexity of academic skills advisor work to shed light on the ways it can inform content area teaching. This complexity has often been attributed to the nature of the work, where academic literacy “encompass[es] knowledge, concepts and skills that address study effectiveness and scholastic achievement” (Peacock, 2008, p. 2). Academic literacy advisors are believed to facilitate such learning through developing language, which is regarded as the key building block of knowledge, and writing, which is a way of learning, expressing and thinking. They aim to deliver rich learning experiences that help students become autonomous learners as they assist, deconstruct or demonstrate ways of thinking, and provide examples and illustrations and encourage the critical and metacognitive types of reasoning (Lowenstein, 2005; Hemwell & Trachte, 2003; Kramer, 2003). Through an advisor’s careful guidance, for instance, students may discover and address gaps in their reasoning, knowledge and expression. As students are provided with models of writing, reading and critical thinking, they can also become familiar with the conventions of academia required by higher education studies. The advisor can further cultivate the personal development of learners by providing them with the analytical and metacognitive skills to actively engage in the process of becoming autonomous learners (Lowenstein, 2005). Crookston (1994) refers to the developmental relationship formed in the advisory relationship, where the student engages in a series of developmental tasks that facilitates learning of both participants. Life-long learning and personal development is consequently conceived as a core principle of an advisor’s work (Chickering, 1994; Kramer, 2003).

Academic advisors are shown to be uniquely positioned as they interface directly with students about specific learning issues. By attending directly to students’ immediate learning challenges and concerns, advisors may acquire stronger listening skills, empathetic awareness and discipline specific knowledge (Wade & Yoder, 1995). The central presence of emotion is regarded as a particularly strong trait of one to one consultations, as the advisor aims to create a safe environment through which “lifelong learning habits” can be acquired (Huijser, Kimmins, Galligan, 2008, p. 27). In addition, academic advisors are made aware of the importance of scaffolding and making learning expectations explicit as they directly address the confusion and difficulties that result from a lack of such support structures within discipline-specific subjects. Through consultations with students, advisors can gather insight into how students engage with their

learning and subsequently develop a strong understanding of ways to effectively design and deliver tasks and assessments (Huijser, Kimmins, Galligan, 2008).

3. Autoethnography

Autoethnography is the chosen methodology as the current study seeks to provide a detailed description of one particular context to highlight the complexities of discipline specific teaching and the academic advising process. It seeks to present a case of the researcher's own experiences of using skills acquired as an advisor to inform her teaching practice within a teacher education subject. Autoethnography enables the researcher's personal experiences to act as a basis for research (Burnier, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Lahman, 2009; Reed-Danahay, 1997). By shedding light on the personal thoughts and emotions inherent to any given encounter, autoethnography provides a holistic and insider viewpoint as the researcher's underlying thoughts and emotions are made visible (Uotinen 2011). The term autoethnography refers to this combination of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bocher, 2011). On an autobiographical level, the author is shown to selectively write about past experiences, in particular, critical moments that have impacted the author in a profound way (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin, 1989). On an ethnographic level, autoethnography embodies the notion of the researcher becoming an observer in the culture of their own experiences as they take field notes of their context (Ellis, Adams, & Bocher, 2011). It is considered to be different from ethnography in that the researcher paints a portrait of the self rather than the 'other'.

An autoethnographic study consists of evocative and aesthetic writing that engages the reader through the techniques of 'showing' to enable the reader to 'experience' various encounters (Adams, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Autoethnographers add to the 'thick description' of a culture within ethnographic writing to create evocative and aesthetic descriptions of their individual experience (Ellis, Adams & Bocher, 2011). Thick description was relevant for the current article as the researcher aimed to describe the complexities of the teaching and learning dynamics in this particular situation. The current article is constructed as a 'layered account' as it integrates the different dynamics, the researcher's account and the relevant literature (Charmaz, 1983). It incorporates different voices of students, reflexivity and short narratives to "invoke readers into the emergent experience of doing and writing research" (Ronai, 1992 as cited in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, para. 10). Students' voices were documented through observations of tutorials, feedback on the assignments through email, face to face interaction and online and paper surveys that were administered at the end of the subject. The researcher's observations were written as field notes to capture the researcher's emergent understanding of teaching, and written into a journal to document the changes implemented in the second delivery of the subject.

Autoethnography enables a connection between the personal and the social and cultural as the researcher's individual experiences are situated in a broader context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is accordingly depicted as "ethical practice" as it illustrates attempts to shed light on deeper meaning through direct experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). In this same way, this article seeks to share an example of the overlaps in practice between academic literacy and discipline specific teaching to provoke further discussion into effective ways of providing academic literacy support. This notion has been supported by Denzin (2000), who indicated that an important criterion of research was its transformative effect. Bochner (2000) similarly proposed that autoethnography should motivate positive social change and move us to action. Autoethnography is an effective methodology for the current context as it presents opportunities for transformative learning, where individuals can share their diverse worldviews to a broader audience (Glowacki-Dudka, Treff & Usman, 2005). It is shown to be a part of transformative learning as it enables diverse world views to be disclosed. In the current study, the researcher similarly seeks to provide a unique perspective that embodies the views of two worlds of academic literacy and content area learning. It proposes that depicting interactions within these spaces will provide a clearer idea of the partnerships possible between the two professional roles.

4. Moving from Academic Skills to Philosophy of Education

The narrative below documents the scaffolding that was implemented to enable students to develop compelling responses to the teaching portfolio assessment task.

4.1. Realising the need to scaffold learning: the first delivery of the task

I remember the high expectations I had when I first delivered the teaching portfolio task. I had invested much time and thought into designing a task that could cultivate the critical life-long learning skills needed in future teachers. I was awaiting compelling examples of writing that revealed students' complex and dynamic personhood. Most students in the class believed teaching to be a vocation and had passionately vocalized their thoughts in class. I was anticipating something similar in writing:

“When I read your teaching philosophy statements I want to be able to sense you in the room with me. Your writing should be so vivid that I should be able to see your faces as I read it.”

Some students sighed deeply as I spoke. At this point I was not aware of how ill-prepared they felt about this assessment. We had already spent the last tutorial reading through examples of different teaching philosophy statements. This was in fact the only preparation I had provided. At the end of class, one mature aged student met me at the door.

“Could you take a quick look at this? I just want to know if I am on the right track.”

She held out her teaching philosophy statement. It was typed in large font, but I could easily see the empty white spaces. It only took me a few moments to finish reading but I hesitated before replying.

“I spent seven hours on it the last couple of days. I can't seem to do anything more than this. This assignment is absolutely killing me.”

Her face slightly reddened as she spoke.

I was surprised. This student was extremely articulate in class and she had a breadth of professional experience as a manager in a health profession, but she had included none of this. Instead, her words read like a check list of effective teaching practice that she had ticked off, including topics such as group work, student-centred learning, teacher learning and high expectations.

“Ok Kate, I am having a bit of trouble connecting with your writing as I can't find much of you there.”

This interaction should have lit up the warning signs, making me realise that students needed more help with their work; but even so, I still could not imagine that students would find this task too difficult. Writing was something I enjoyed; I felt that reflective writing should come easy as it was a natural and personal form of communication. Despite the few troubled emails in the lead up to the due date, with a handful of students asking for extensions citing the challenging nature of the task, I was ignorant about the difficulties experienced. Some of these challenges were related to the critical and self-reflective thinking skills required by the task. Others were related to the challenges of expressing their core principles and beliefs in authentic and evocative ways.

Student A: “I have been working on [the assessment] for a few days, but I cannot seem to write about what would differentiate me from others as a teacher. I am getting stressed and having difficulty reflecting upon myself and discovering my strengths.”

Student B: “I keep questioning myself, but to be honest, I am not sure of why I am a good teacher. I just know that I like teaching... it was really stressful as I thought I did not know myself well enough and I always seem struggle to answer questions that introduces myself.”

Student C: “As you said, it was really difficult to communicate my teaching beliefs - it was a challenge to speak with conviction without sounding contrived.”

I had not anticipated that this assignment would trigger such anxious questioning of one's identity and worth as a teacher. I had wanted individuals to engage deeply in their learning and had not foreseen the angst it would create. The short extensions did not reach their mark and after marking the portfolios, I had found that only a handful had made a deep impression. Like Kate, students framed their teaching philosophies as a list of generic teaching competencies and had adopted the formal tone of an essay. Students also experienced difficulty choosing critical artefacts that reflected the richness of their teaching experience, knowledge and skills. Many targeted similar teaching skills and did not reflect the broader responsibilities and complexities of their work. It was obvious students needed more support in the underlying critical and reflective thinking skills to engage deeply with their ideas. They also required greater support with conveying these ideas through writing. Given the simple models I had provided, it was not surprising that students have found this difficult. Aside from showing limited models of teacher philosophy statements, I had created little opportunity for students to discuss, think or write about their work. The lack of scaffolding was reflected in comments made in the final student evaluation, such as, "It would have been useful to have seen some examples of the portfolio to get a sense of what we needed to do."

4.2. Scaffolding learning through writing: the second delivery of the task

"How many people here don't like to write and find writing difficult?"

Considering all the assumptions I had made about students abilities in the previous semester, I asked this question in my first tutorial. I was taken aback to see more than two-thirds of the class raised their hands. What was even more surprising was to see even the strongest writers tentatively raise their hands. My mind began to whirr; I wondered how I could guide these students to the place where I wanted them to be. This idea of leading students to the higher level of learning has been referred to as scaffolding. Scaffolding has been described as a key teaching tool to help students accomplish tasks and achieve higher levels of understanding that they are not able to manage on their own (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Scaffolding involves this process of providing learners with just enough assistance for them to reach a higher level of skills or higher order of thinking. It places of a focus not on the potential of the learner alone, but on the potential that he or she could reach with assistance from others (Wilson & Devereux, 2014). This potential for learning has been defined by Vygotsky as the Zone of Potential Development (ZPD) and refers to the way in which a teacher slowly takes away the scaffold to help students build on their capacity to work towards independence (Wilson & Devereux, 2014). The two main ways that scaffolding were implemented was the modelling of the type of writing required within the teaching portfolio and providing greater opportunities for students to construct meaning through writing and speaking.

Scaffolding was incorporated into the second delivery of the assessment task to help students become familiar with the critical and reflective writing process. Blogs were introduced in the following semester to help students write reflectively. Over the course of the semester, students wrote eight blog entries where they articulated their personal beliefs about critical issues, such as ethical practice, aims of schooling and the rights of a child. The blogs were intended to give students opportunity to reflect critically on their teaching beliefs and to help them to become familiar with the writing process. Ellis and Bochner (2002) relate the need to create such spaces where students can practice and feel comfortable using language to convey experience. They describe how so few students can convey anything deeply because of their, "[inability] to move around in the experience and [to] see it as it might appear to others" (p. 752). They compare such text to vivid and powerful writing that allows readers to feel like they are reliving a part of their own memories. The writing activities for the subject were accordingly designed to inspire creative thinking and to help students use language in a reflective and playful way to convey meaning. Creating these opportunities was invaluable due to the less tangible and concrete nature of the writing required. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) refer to Dewey (1934) to express these points, describing how artists are called to transform the "faintest hints of life" into perceived but unarticulated wholes that are "expansions of ourselves" (p. 268). These activities led a student to observe, "The tutor has managed it very well and created a comfortable and non-threatening environment that allows us to express freely of our own thoughts."

The teaching philosophy statement also posed a challenge as students needed to be “present” in their writing, such as the way that vivid artworks are often imbued with the creator’s energy and spirit. Having become familiar with more formal and academic writing, students seemed to struggle with having to engage in subjective, personal and reflective forms. The teaching philosophy, however, needed to be aesthetically and subjectively written to relay a sense of conviction and personhood. Webb (1994) presents the importance of personhood, or “voice”, stating that it lies at the heart of any authentic text, as writing is “... an expression of the writer’s authority and concern. . . done for human beings by human beings ... [being] strictly a human enterprise” (p. 16). Writing is believed to flow freely when individuals speak their own words, whilst it sounds lifeless and hollow when they do not. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) illustrate this point by referring to Dewey’s description of presence as a sense of aliveness or “an active and alert commerce with the world” and by depicting presence as the very definition of an aesthetic experience (p. 268). This sense of an active or alert language was critical to the teaching philosophy as individuals needed to convey a personable presence. In reading the philosophy statements, my senses were attuned to whether the deeper presence of the writer was conveyed through their words.

Aiming to help the second group of students to write in this way, I read passages from past philosophy statements that had demonstrated such writing. Scaffolding through providing model texts was important due to the different type of writing that students were engaged in. Having been accustomed to writing essays, students were unfamiliar with the reflective and critical writing skills that underpinned a teaching philosophy statement. Successful writing is believed to entail understanding the conventions of a particular genre, such as style, structure and content (Charney & Carlson, 1995). Providing models of writing that exemplify specific genres is believed to be a key way of scaffolding such writing. Model texts are shown to influence the content and organization of texts by bringing students’ attention to other relevant concepts and help them to understand the textual patterns with a text (Charney & Carlson, 1995). The writing conventions of the current assessment task were scaffolded through providing textual models and opportunities to engage in such writing. For example, we were able to discuss and analyse what they found effective in terms of the language used. In the student sample writing below, we explored the images conjured up by the writer about her context and the language used to evoke strong emotions of change and renewal.

“The week after my childhood dog died, I flew across the Indian Ocean to Kesnand: a tiny rural village in the state of Maharashtra, India. During those three weeks, I mourned and I transformed. When I took my first steps in Australia following that teaching journey, I wasn’t the same person. I was someone with fevered passion and purpose.”

I aimed to make my expectations clear by detailing my responses to student work. After reading through a series of static writing, I read out these lines to show how words could flow with a life of their own, running like cool water down a parched throat. I highlighted the phrases that had a measure of playful and evocative language that conveyed the passionate personality of the writer. The difficulties of skillfully articulating rich meanings on to paper has been expressed by Webb (1994), who states, “. . . words on a page are never finished. Each can be changed and rearranged and can set off a chain reaction of confusion and clarified meaning” (p. 161). Murry describes the joy of creating beauty through words, commenting, “Making something right is immensely satisfying, for writers begin to learn what they are writing about. Language leads them to meaning, and there is the joy of discovery, of understanding, of making meaning clear...” (as cited in Webb, 1994, p. 167). Murry also describes the different effects words and combinations of word can have, stating, “Words have double meanings, even triple and quadruple meaning. Each word has its own potential for connotation and denotation. And when writers rub one word against the other, they are often rewarded with a sudden insight, an unexpected clarification” (as cited in, Webb 1994, p. 167). Such attempts to capture one’s understanding through words is further believed to help students to develop the skills of observation, as they may learn to become highly receptive to their environment and inner thoughts as both observers and participants. These keen skills of observation are believed to be exemplified by expert teachers who possess, “. . . a complex amalgam of seeing, hearing, observing, taking notice, pay-

ing close attention, understanding, while at the same time comprehending what action is required in the situation and ensuring that it is authentic and compassionate” (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010, p. 61). Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) equally acknowledge how writing enables individuals to attain a sense of presence or a keen alertness to one’s environment, which they describe as, “... a state of wide-awakeness ... a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements” (p.268).

The last form of scaffolding used was joint participation of learning, in which students actively participated in negotiating meaning (Hammon & Gibbons, 2015). Classroom talk and writing-to-learn activities are regarded as common ways that teachers implement scaffolding as students are believed to ‘learn to learn’ through language. In other words, talk is believed to enable the sharing of ideas and perspectives that generates new understandings and ways of thinking. Vygotsky highlights how language is a key enabler for learning since language is a symbolic means to convey and organise knowledge (Wilson & Devereux, 2014). Learning through talk and writing-to-learn activities were consequently embedded into the second delivery of the subject to help students think on a more critical and reflective level. These activities often began with an oral component that led to a written response. One activity, ‘Defending your life,’ enabled students to reflect on the importance of ethical teacher practice by asking them to think of a moment in the classroom that they were not proud of. The purpose of the activity was to help students to reflect on an audience and to clearly and critically explain their ideas through including details and a justification for their reasoning. Students were also able to think reflectively of what they thought this moment might reveal about themselves. ‘Revealing moments’ was another activity that helped students to search for ideas to include in their teaching portfolio and to acquire the language skills to write a subjective and reflective account of their experiences. Students needed to draw on their experiences as they identified three significant memories in their teaching experiences. They then free-wrote for a couple of minutes on each event and shared their ideas with a partner who chose one moment that they would like to hear more about. Through this writing activity students learnt to identify, describe and reflect on critical encounters that demonstrated a key area of their teaching philosophy and to relay a sense of personhood through their words.

6. Discussion

As I reflected on my experiences helping students to achieve the anticipated outcomes within the second delivery of the teaching portfolio assessment, I could see important parallels between these experiences and my academic advising work. This realization became more apparent due to the challenging nature of the portfolio assessment task, where students obviously struggled to articulate complex and personal ideas in an evocative and authentic way. I became aware of the assumptions I had made about student understanding. I had assumed that they possessed the necessary knowledge and skills and therefore provided little explicit instruction. This realization came through a comment made by student D in the second delivery the task. He had written an email requesting for additional help with his writing.

Student D: “It has taken a while but I have come to understand many of the processes of university. I have a growing appreciation of the purposes and benefits of essay writing and especially the associated research. Without any expectation or justification for special consideration, I want to say that I left school in year 10 and have worked mostly in blue collar (blue singlet) jobs. I believe that I have performed above expectations in most areas at university. However I could do better.”

Although academic advisors may hear such comments as they interface directly with students on their learning issues, academics may have less opportunities to engage in these discussions as they may focus more on delivering a wealth of subject specific content. This article aims to illustrate how effective attempts to bring students to the required level require the combined expertise of academics and academic advisors. It highlights how academic advisors are in a unique position as they listen directly to student concerns. If disciplinary teaching is informed through the understandings gleaned from academic advisors conversations with students, it is proposed

that learning programs may be better designed to meet student needs. Having listened to student complaints about poorly scaffolded assignments as an academic skills advisor, I was surprised to realize that I had been putting my students in a similar situation. I recognized my own students as the confused learners who I had frequently consulted as an academic skills advisor. This recognition enabled me to create activities to allow students to talk and write to increase their knowledge of and familiarity with the content and skills involved. The consequent adaptations were acknowledged by students in the final subject evaluation.

Student E: "I thought the learning opportunities provided by the tutor were really great, allowing us to explore the ethical issues that confront us in our professional lives. I was encouraged to question my own ethical ideas and think about what kind of teacher I aim to be."

Student F: "Very insightful subject. It made us all think outside the box and reflect on our own attitudes and practice as future teachers."

Student G: "I really enjoyed coming to classes as it gave me food for thought, and always got me questioning who I am."

Student H: "This subject helped me to think critically about what it means to be a teacher, and how to be the best teacher I possibly can be."

Conversations about the overlaps and connections between academic advising and disciplinary teaching are believed to be particularly valuable as academic advisors are often seen as moving within the "margins of universities," where their work is considered to be "peripheral to teaching as the central mission; it is an added burden, an extracurricular, non-teaching activity" (Crookston, 1994, p. 9).

7. Conclusion

This article depicts a detailed description of a context in which the skills of academic advising complemented disciplinary teaching by enhancing the learning outcomes within a particularly challenging subject. It is believed that such case studies or descriptions of individual accounts of practice are significant as learning advisors are often seen as being, "slow to provide evidence by engaging in scholarship and research, and sharing those insights with a wider university community of scholars" (Huijser, Kimmins, Galligan, 2008, p. 24). It is proposed that such evidence of practice would broadly elevate the status of academic advising work as a form of "serious" rather than simply "remedial work," which will consequently generate more effective forms of collaboration between academic staff (Huijser, Kimmins, & Galligan, 2008, p. 24). Finally, in terms of my role as a teacher of future teachers, I have been able to provide an example of explicit teaching through my academic advising role. I have learnt to provide highly participatory, scaffolded and challenging learning activities that guide students more effectively in their careers than simple instruction may have done, as one student observed.

Student H: "I have learnt a lot from her, not only the things that she taught, but how she conducted herself as a teacher."

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