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# Practical challenges and possibilities for the integration of academic literacy in a first year subject

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## Abstract

Changes to Queensland teacher accreditation (Queensland Government, 2009) have increased teacher educators' responsibility for graduate literacy. This paper offers a perspective on the implementation of a general literacy initiative into a specialist subject. Specifically, it details the engagement process undertaken with a broad academic literacy agenda, the *First Year Literacy Initiative* (FYLI), to refresh *Foundations of Educational Technology*, a first year education subject at James Cook University. An action research approach was used to identify and respond to key resourcing, pedagogical, assessment, and knowledge-based challenges and strategies. As subject lecturer I provide a preliminary evaluation of four strategies including (i) general-to-contextual resource adaptation, (ii) a teach-to-learn approach, (iii) a guidance-not-remedial approach to literacy feedback, and (iv) a collaborative action research approach to literacy integration across first year subjects.

*Keywords:* academic literacy, action research, student support strategies, teacher education

## Context

The Queensland state government has proposed changes to the teacher registration process (Queensland Government, 2009). These changes, in response to the Masters Review (2009) into student achievement in literacy, numeracy and science, have placed the onus on Queensland universities to prepare graduates for preregistration testing. Ideally, students who enroll in a preservice teacher education degree would already possess a high, to very high, level of literacy. However, the move to more external oversight of graduate standards comes at the same time as an Australian Government review of higher education (Bradley, 2008) promotes an agenda to increase opportunities for disadvantaged students to achieve university entry and graduation. A key recommendation in the *Bradley Review* (2008) is to widen participation in tertiary education. Increased diversity of the student population in a preservice teacher education degree potentially increases the pressure on university staff to prepare all students for future employment as teachers of literacy.

A longitudinal approach to academic literacy development of students, embeds literacy support in as many subjects as possible across a degree. This creates challenges for lecturers of specialist curriculum subjects. Lecturers of specialist subjects need to consider how best to support student literacy development without diluting the existing curriculum content or losing the specific subjects' foci. To aid longitudinal improvement in academic literacy without alienating students from core content, the authors of this paper met regularly as a literacy group, and action research team to examine and discuss literacy matters. As the lecturer of *Foundations of Education Technology* I used these discussions to evaluate and modify my approach to embedding literacy. The premise for this paper is that a first person, bottom-up perspective contributes effectively to authentic implementation of literacy learning. The literacy group discussions contributed to the design, development, and implementation of *The First Year Literacy Initiative* (FYLI) (Adam, 2010, forthcoming). I use this paper to reveal and respond to four key challenges to embedding literacy in *Foundations of Educational Technology*. These

challenges include (i) resourcing issues, (ii) engaging casual staff in assessment processes, (iii) choosing engaging pedagogies, and (iv) providing specialist literacy support.

### **Literacy challenges**

There are four major literacy challenges. First, resourcing literacy support raises two related issues; time management and funding support. Balancing the amount of time I need to allocate to different academic roles is a professional consideration. Like all academics, I need to manage not only teaching and research requirements but also allow time for administration and community engagement. Time used to modify subject materials may negatively impact on one of the other three areas of responsibility. Second, the resource pool available for literacy support is limited to the additional workload hours allocated to each first year subject which is 50 hours per subject. After meeting together, the literacy group decided to allocate these additional workload resources to assist with the diagnostic phase of the FYLI. This decision does not leave any additional hours for other literacy strategies within the technology subject. There is a need to provide additional training for the casual staff to recognise and assess the literacy criterion of summative assessment. To address this I held a meeting prior to the marking of each technology assessment piece to explain the FYLI strategies and my expectations of the students' assessment, including literacy components. The casual staff member was provided with the FYLI resources including the booklet and literacy rubric. I was expected to use my own time to provide the staff training and there was no workload allocation for casual staff support. Staff training and moderation is to be expected to obtain defensible grades. However, the extra time required does add to the pressure I felt to fit these tasks into the weekly program.

The third challenge is to choose pedagogies to engage students with the process of academic literacy development. The pedagogies chosen should meet current students' academic literacy needs while also adding to their repertoire of literacy pedagogies.

The final challenge concerns my own confidence in providing literacy support for students while also dealing with the usual range of academic and student matters inherent in teaching any subject. As a curriculum specialist, I have not received formal training in providing specialist literacy support at university level. In light of this consideration, I propose four strategies to meet the challenges to embed literacy into a specialist subject. These are (i) general-to-contextual resource adaptation, (ii) a teach-to-learn approach, (iii) a guidance-not-remedial approach to literacy feedback, and (iv) a collaborative action research approach to literacy integration across first year subjects.

### **Literacy Strategies**

This section describes the approach taken with each literacy support strategy. Three strategies were used in *Foundations of Education Technology*. For each literacy support strategy, student feedback was gathered in the form of a questionnaire, administered in week eight of semester (see Table 1). Additional evidence was gathered from email communication with students. The fourth literacy strategy was the use of action research to reflect on the effectiveness of the other literacy approaches and make recommendations for future action. The conclusions from the participatory action research are included within the individual strategy sections they refer to.

Table 1

*Table of students' attitudes to academic literacy support strategies*

Strategy	Very useful	Useful	Somewhat useful	Not very useful	n
Literacy content in lectures	14	28	15	2	59
Feedback on rough draft	33	16	5	1	55
SQRRR tutorial activity	13	30	9	1	53
Rubric tutorial activity	21	31	7	0	59

*Note.* A total of 59 surveys were returned from 121 students enrolled. Four students indicated that they had not submitted a rough draft. Six students indicated they were unaware of the SQRRR activity.

### **General-to-contextual resource adaptation**

The general-to-contextual resource adaptation highlights the need to modify the general literacy resources to fit individual subjects and contexts. An advantage of this strategy is that it models the same process education students can use with curriculum documents. The FYLI literacy guide (Adam, 2010, forthcoming) contains eleven different literacy modules, of which eight were adapted to fit within the specialist lectures. A series of two to three slides were included in eight lecture presentations and were colour coded to distinguish them from subject content. One literacy aspect was covered each week for eight weeks and took a maximum of ten minutes approximately half way through the one hundred minute lecture. All lecture presentations were available to students via the James Cook University on-line platform, LearnJCU, a minimum of four days prior to each week's lecture.

The aim was to spotlight literacy development for the first eight weeks of the semester. Each literacy segments was presented as clearly as possible and connections were made to the FYLI literacy guide and the literacy community website (Adam, 2010, forthcoming). Student response to this strategy was mixed, (see Table 1). Several students viewed the inclusion as a "waste of time" while others wished for more detailed follow-up. As one student commented: "Some of the lecture points have needed lessons as I do suffer in this area". A complementary approach to resolve both of these criticisms is to embed the general literacy content more deeply into the specific subject material.

General literacy development support is available for all James Cook University students, either through support sessions as part of the FYLI (Adam, 2010, forthcoming) or from regular support sessions advertised by the Teaching and Learning Department at James Cook University. While several students mentioned their use of Teaching and Learning support services, records of such access were not available.

When the literacy group considered the results of this strategy, it concluded the materials used were too general. The overall feeling of students, while positive, was that the lecture segments were too remedial. Chanock, D'Cruz and Bisset (2009) recommend avoiding a remedial approach to literacy. The literacy group identified two potential improvements on the literacy segments. The first improvement involved placement of a greater emphasis on explicit teaching of literacy pedagogy instead of literacy content. The second improvement involved use of more direct links each week between literacy topics and technology content and pedagogy.

### **Teach-to-learn approach**

A teach-to-learn approach to literacy learning positions student learners as future teachers through the use of explicit pedagogy in tutorial activities. Two tutorial activities were chosen to assist students specifically in academic literacy development. The first, in week two of semester, was explicit teaching of the summarising strategy *Scan, Question, Read, Recite, Review* (SQRRR) (Stout, 1999). In this tutorial students were guided through the note taking process from initial journal article perusal to the created summary. The tutorial was structured to focus student attention on the pedagogical advantages of using this type of literacy strategy in their own teaching.

A follow-up activity occurred in week six, three weeks prior to submission of the second assignment. The second assessment in the subject was a piece of academic writing in the persuasive genre. To assist students to reflect on whether their responses would meet the minimum assessment requirements, I chose to focus the tutorial activity on reading and interpreting the assessment rubric. This activity explored the literacy of using a rubric, the importance of reading the rubric in conjunction with students' responses and interpretations of the expectations present in the assessment rubric.

In the first tutorial activity, I observed that many students seemed to have little or no prior experience in reading academic papers. These students read the articles in sequence from start to finish rather than read for a specific purpose. Whereas they were keen to underline sections of the article they were reluctant to write notes or summarise key ideas in their own words. Few students indicated that they had used the SQRRR framework or anything similar in the past. Students generally considered this process to be useful (see Table 1) and 105 out of 121 students attended the SQRRR tutorial in week 2.

Attendance at the week six tutorial was similar with 93 from 121 students present. At this stage of the semester, I could see that students present at this tutorial could be clearly separated into two distinct groups; those who indicated regular use of rubrics in assessment preparation, and others who had never considered this process. The majority of students familiar with the use of rubrics to prepare assignments indicated they had learnt this skill at school. Despite the range of prior knowledge concerning rubrics, the majority of students viewed this tutorial activity as useful (see Table 1). I reflected on student feedback and, after discussions with the literacy group, I decided to continue with these two tutorial activities as both seemed effective strategies to support students' literacy development.

The literacy group identified another activity to scaffold student literacy development. This activity involved the use of a literacy rubric to indicate areas of difficulty in specific elements of literacy in the submitted assessment. First year lecturers can use the literacy rubric to provide students with the choice to accept a provisional assessment grade or improve their result through use of the FYLI community website (Adam, 2010, forthcoming). This strategy has been trialed with some success by another member of the literacy group (Taylor, Adam, & Jackson, 2010, forthcoming). These initial positive results seem to contradict other studies in the field, for example Chanock et al. (2009) reported a very low student response to this type of opportunity. The use of the literacy rubric as part of the FYLI framework is an area the action research team will investigate further in Semester 2.

### **Guidance-not-remedial feedback approach**

The guidance-not-remedial feedback approach attempts to strike a balance between the needs of the literacy learner and the resources available to the lecturer. This feedback approach addresses student demand for feedback on rough drafts of assessment items in a resource-effective way. Students were encouraged to submit rough drafts for the first two assessment pieces. Due to resourcing pressures, the feedback sheets for these assessment pieces were designed as "tick and flick" with an indication of

either “on track” or “needs attention” for each element of each rubric criterion. I assessed the students’ rough drafts in ten minutes and emailed a feedback sheet to the student one week prior to the assessment due date. A minority of students also took the opportunity to meet with me during the designated subject consultation time to receive additional verbal feedback.

This approach to feedback was designed to assist students identify areas that required further work and to point students towards support structures for further assistance. Student work was not edited, rather key problems were highlighted only. The opportunity to gain feedback on rough drafts was advertised to students via lectures, tutorials and the weekly announcements on the LearnJCU subject site. A much larger number of students submitted rough drafts for the first assignment than the second assignment. Out of 121 students, 51 submitted a rough draft for the first assignment while only 14 submitted a rough draft for the second assignment. My initial conclusion to the lower submission rate was that students were dissatisfied with the feedback process. However, the student survey results (see Table 1), show a positive response. The majority of students (n=49/51) viewed the feedback as either a very useful or useful strategy to make modifications to their assessment. Levels of satisfaction are possibly related to utility (Price, Handley, Millar & O’Donovan, 2010). Students who received feedback on their rough draft were generally positive. Here is an example of one such comment:

Thank you for the feedback, it is very much appreciated ... I realize how much extra work this is for you and very very much appreciate your feedback. ... you are one of the only teachers that gives us any feedback and assistance, and it is very much appreciated.

The lower submission rate for the second assignment may simply have been that students were focused on other tasks. Interestingly, only two of the students who submitted the rough draft for assignment achieved lower than a grade of Credit (i.e. result < 65%) on the first assignment, which may indicate students most in need of guidance do not engage with the feedback process nor view the process as beneficial. Several students commented negatively on the format of the rough draft feedback. One student commented: “More detailed feedback would be great to narrow down exactly what to do and where to improve. I know I need to improve my grammar and essay structure and would like more specific information/feedback”. This seems to support other studies (Price et al., 2010) which report student dissatisfaction with a “tick and flick” feedback model.

The literacy group considered possible responses to student comments on the feedback model. We decided that providing more detailed feedback was incompatible with the level of resourcing available to lecturers. Furthermore, the aim of the feedback was to prompt student reflection to access further support rather than an attempt to correct all errors. Indeed the impact of corrective feedback focusing on remedial support has been shown to be ineffective (Chanock et al., 2009) and the provision of the level of support mentioned by several students was already available through literacy support sessions (Adam, 2010, forthcoming) and from the Teaching and Learning Department. After several discussions with the literacy group, I decided to persist with feedback on rough drafts, continue with a “tick and flick” model, but to make a greater effort to highlight the other literacy support structures available to students.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlighted three preliminary findings which will inform the next stage of the research cycle. First, my lectures will continue to contain literacy segments but the focus will be on literacy pedagogy and I will endeavour to highlight strategies students can use in their own teaching practice. Hopefully, this refocused alignment with pedagogy will assist students to view the explicit literacy segments as a learning opportunity rather than as remediation. Second, while I will continue to trial the rough draft feedback, I will initiate more dialogue with students about the purpose of feedback and how

to access additional literacy support. Third, the tutorial activities successfully support student literacy development and will continue in their current format. Summarily, my experiences show that utilising a bottom-up approach to the broad literacy agenda provides students with effective and achievable literacy support.

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