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Developing Academic Literacy At The University Of Cumbria

By Kaz Stuart

Penrith, ENG, GB Education Higher Education Practice



About The Author



Kaz Stuart
Professor
Penrith, ENG, GB
2 Articles Published

I am a professor of social and health inequality at the University of Cumbria, motivated by social justice. I believe everyone should experience wellbeing - by that I mean feeling good and functioning well - a standard

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Project Summary

This paper explores academic literacy development from the perspective of social capital, identity and communities of practice. Many universities are widening participation for social justice and financial imperatives. The arrival of increasingly diverse students is not, however, always matched with flexible approaches to developing academic literacy. 65% of our students are ‘non-traditional’ and we are challenged with supporting their academic literacy. We explored this practice through three conceptual lenses and with case study data from six staff and three students. As a result of the case study we are re-developing our child and family studies programme academic literacy support to a more socio-cultural model for the next academic year.

Project Context

This paper presents a case study of the development of academic literacy at the University of Cumbria. Academic literacy is a key issue for many students and particularly those entering under a ‘widening participation’ (WP) agenda from non-traditional backgrounds or with low University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) points. A genuinely equitable ethos coupled with a competitive need for student numbers increases WP in higher education. Unfortunately, it may come at a cost as, “universities with the most success at widening participation to working-class students are predominantly those that are perceived to be low status” (Reay, 2017:118). The University of Cumbria is proud of its Widening Participation role and recruits learners from WP backgrounds at a local and national level. Defining and identifying WP is complex, but University of Cumbria statistics show around 65% of our students are traditionally under-represented in HE. They are particularly likely

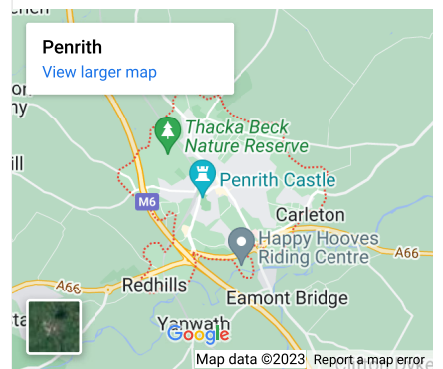
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to choose programmes with lower entry points such as Youth Work and Working with Children and Families Degrees. These fall within the Child and Family Studies group and are the focus of this research.

Research Goal, Method, and Outcome

Background and Purpose

This project comprised first person action research as Kaz and Sandie (programme manager and academic support manager) came together to investigate how they might improve academic literacy for students they support. Academic literacy includes a range of practices of communication that are used, assessed, and valued in higher education. Typically these require students to summarise, analyse, evaluate and compare, contrast and synthesize ideas and information from different sources. This paper presents a case study of the action research which informed the development of academic literacy at the University of Cumbria. Academic literacy is a key issue for many students and particularly those entering under a 'widening participation' (WP) agenda from non-traditional backgrounds or with low UCAS points. A genuine equitable ethos coupled with a competitive need for student numbers perpetuates WP in higher education. Unfortunately it may come at a cost, as; "universities with the most success at widening participation to working-class students are predominantly those that are perceived to be low status" (Reay, 2017:118).

Information Services at the University of Cumbria currently pursues the model of embedded academic literacies and provides academic literacies support for all as far as possible (Wingate and Tribble, 2012). In our university with its high intake of WP students, we encourage students to see academic literacies development as an acceptable part of their higher education experience, rather than as a remedial service required due to skills deficiencies (Bathmaker et al., 2018:77). Even if the ideal situation of embedding of academic literacies cannot be achieved, our experience is that where students witness a positive working relationship between academics and professional services, they are less likely to perceive the service as remedial and more likely to seek support as development. The Child and Families suite of programmes (Youth Work, Community Development and Working with Children and Families) at our university attracted a high number of WP students. As a result we often referred students to Information Services for academic literacy support. Despite skilled staff, this did not seem to turn around student performance. We then tried embedded delivery with specialist staff delivering with us in our programme and on additional programme days. This again did not have the impact we expected. As a result, we were curious to find out what would work better, and to put those actions into place to provide more equitable HE for WP students. First person action research was adopted (Tolbert) so that we could understand what we were doing as a team to support student success or failure. We developed this as a bounded case study (Yin, 2004) as we were uncertain whether the results would be at all generalisable outside the University of Cumbria C&F Studies Group.

The purpose of the case study was to improve academic literacy for all C&F students by co-creating solutions to equitable AL with staff and students.

Method

The action research was small scale in both scope and data collection. The two programmes that comprise C&F studies include around 100 students and 10 staff. The students and staff were asked if they wanted to participate in the research and a very small percentage agreed. Six staff and three students engaged in respective focus group discussions for one hour and one and a half hours respectively. Whilst the findings of the case study will only be directly applicable to the C&F studies group, however it is also hoped they may be generalisable to other institutions on the grounds of the value of context-dependent knowledge (Flyvberg, 2006).

The research team (Sandie and Kaz) conducted two semi-structured focus groups. We took notes during these sessions rather than audio recording as the participants said they would prefer to not be recorded. We interacted in an organic conversation loosely connected to the topic of supporting WP students and both took written notes. Sandie and Kaz wrote up their notes independently and compared them for accuracy. We used a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) approach to ensure we captured all relevant data, however the themes of the two sessions could not have been more different. Indeed we were rather caught off guard by how wrong our assumptions were when talking with the students. It was a great pleasure to be so caught out.

Findings

Staff Consultation

In a routine C&F staff meeting six of the academic team considered, during an hour of meeting time, how we might best support the development of academic literacy. After some exploration of issues the following solutions were suggested:

- *Run a detailed AL diagnostic in induction week*
- *Use an initial personal tutor session with individuals to pick up needs early on*
- *Ask students to write small amounts from week one and give regular feedback*
- *Run weekly quizzes and formative assessments to ensure learning is secure*
- *Teach less content in more depth to reduce demands*
- *Embed academic skills sessions across both programmes at all levels*
- *Ensure there is constructive alignment between module content and assessments*
- *Continue to develop rubrics to make grade descriptors clearer*
- *Provide grade progression workshops so all students benefit regardless of level*
- *Write academic literacy actions in student progress review action plans.*

As can be observed, these are all technical responses to the AL issue. This approach is also demonstrated in the C&F Studies AL Framework which breaks down the development of academic skills into incremental detail in the hope it will render them more achievable.

The 'skills' approach has been embedded within the institution since its inauguration in 2010. The C&F academic team have been working with Information Support staff on a 'skills' agenda for over three years, and issues still remain. We hoped that insights from students would support our understanding of the barriers and potential solutions.

Student Involvement

Kaz invited all Level six students ($n = 35$) to come to a workshop to explore how they learn academic skills. Three students accepted the invitation and volunteered to engage in this AL case study. The students were from two different programmes, two from Working with Children and Families and one from Youth Work and Community Development. The students joined Kaz, Sandie and Tracy (another academic team member) for an hour to discuss their experiences and ideas about AL. The students' comments were noted on post-it notes and in field notes and transcribed. Whilst we had initial concerns about the quantity of data we could collect from 'only' three students, it soon became apparent that the students contributions were rich in depth and quality.

(a) Our opening questions were geared towards the development of academic skills – further illustrating the assumptions underpinning our institutional approach:

Kaz: "So we were wondering how you developed your academic skills, what helped and what got in the way?"

(b) The students did provide some skills led answers to these prompts:

Nicole: I don't know what to read and I can't remember what I read.

Katie: Referencing is so hard, it takes so long to learn how to do it.

(c) It soon became apparent, however, that identity development lay at the heart of the issues rather than a skills deficit as the following extracts illustrate:

Leeanne: I'm trying to take on another voice – the academic voice is different

Katie: I'm learning my voice is not good enough and so I worry, will they think I copied this if I don't add a citation?

Nicole: I worry I am a 'lazy' reader, I can't say I'm a 'strategic reader'

Katie: My opinion won't matter unless I can write it properly

Nicole: I'm a confident person in practice – what is it with this academic stuff!!

Leeanne: We're excluded by this elitist academic community.

Leeanne: As a WP student when I first arrived I had little academic confidence in myself. WP also equated in my mind, to a token student who had been accepted as part of a government statistic to prove they were seemed to be doing something about social divide and inequality. You could say, I had as many bias and judgments about upper class and hierarchy as I thought they had about me!

(d) The students all experienced success, it seemed, when they managed to integrate who they were into their work, rather than trying to be someone else:

Leeanne: After looking at various other papers for joining words or phrases, I stopped trying to write what I thought people wanted me to write and started including my own opinions and my own style. This was a turning point for me as I realised that if universities/academia was going to help bridge a social divide whilst addressing social issues and future practice, then I wanted to try and help.

(e) The Information Support Staff and academics shared their own stories of insecurity with the students in order to reassure them that we all find it hard to develop/adopt an academic identity:

Kaz: I still feel like an imposter. I did really badly at school and learned I was stupid, and that is really hard to shake. Even as a 'doctor' I feel like I am not really an academic.

~~Categories elicited.~~ The data was tentatively categorised into emerging stages of academic identity development as shown below:

- Non-academic identity
- Developed academic identity
- Uncertain, unsure, used my own voice
- Not good enough at English
- Not good enough words
- Excluded by this elitist academic community.
- Finding reading boring
- Learning my voice is not good enough – will they think I copied this if I don't add a citation?
- My opinion won't matter unless I can write it properly
- Need positive feedback to keep me going
- Trying to take on another voice – the academic voice as different

- Don't know how to read, what to read, forget what I've read
- Using family and friends to peer read
- Need developmental feedback to learn with positive feedback to keep me going
- Feeling I am not myself – voiceless, only cite other people
- Self-critical now I know what is expected
- Worry I am a 'lazy' reader, not a 'strategic reader'
- Worry I 'read the wrong things' rather than 'wide reading'
- Can't write with flow
- I'm a confident person in practice – what is it with this academic stuff!!
- Own voice integrated with that of others – my academic voice / professional voice.
- Member of the academic and professional community.

The findings above resonate with Lea and Street (1998) ethnographic research which found that universities “do not take account of the importance of issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority that surround, and are embedded within, diverse student writing practices across the university” (1998:157). This was clearly reflected by the students feeling they had to ‘*be someone else*’ in order to do well at university. If we endeavour to understand AL as a “socially situated discourse practice” that is “ideologically inscribed” (Lillis and Scott, 2007:192) then we can start to design inclusive, identity oriented AL support. It is no small task to support students to cohere an academic identity with existing class bound identities, nor will it be easy to redress class bias within institutional systems. It has become clear, however, that unless this is tackled universities will remain intrinsically inequitable.

Outcomes

As a result of this work the C&F team and AL team at UoC now intend to work together throughout the year in a socio-cultural approach to AL. Sessions will be co-delivered throughout the year to all staff and students in the programme to support the academic community of practice, academic identity development, and the supporting toolkit (described in the next paragraph).

The first phase of the sessions will focus on the identification, exploration and valuing of the ‘toolkit’ that students arrive with. Our students are rich in lived experience, work experience, world experience and previous knowledge and learning. We do not want them to throw away or hide this when they arrive at university. Initial workshops may therefore focus on who you are, what your toolkit is, and how you can use that in this new context. Sessions will then progress to explore the strengths and tools that everyone in the room possesses and how that can build into a potent co-created skill set. Finally new skills, knowledge and understanding may incrementally be added as and when the students’ identity changes demand it. In this way, the academic identity creation will follow the stages of empowerment outlined by Maynard and Stuart (2018). The stages included in this model include: development of awareness or critical consciousness, leading to an individual ‘wanting’ and ‘committing’ to a change (in this case the addition of an academic identity). At this point the individual would then be able to make positive choices about how to develop this identity, enabling them to take actions which are meaningful to them in order to achieve their choice. This would contrast to the existing system where students are ‘sent’ to the information serviced to ‘receive’ packages of pre-planned learning that staff feel are relevant to them. The process of empowerment takes longer, but ultimately is more successful and is also a sustained change that lends to personal development per se as well as the acquisition of academic literacy.

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