



# Creating a Rich Environment: Co-operation between academic support and disciplinary teaching staff

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**Abstract:** *The emphasis on quality in higher education learning and teaching has heightened appreciation of the role of academic support staff and resulted in increased co-operative efforts between subject teachers and academic support staff. Other researchers have investigated various forms of co-operation, and examples include Murphy and Stewart (2002): subject content assistance; Ramburuth (1999): language development; and Zhu (2004): academic writing. This paper explores the vital role that collaborative relationships can play in the development and presentation of effective student learning programs. There are clear benefits for student learning from contextualised and relevant programs that emerge from these co-operative ventures. At the same time, there are also benefits for staff from both areas. When working with each other in program development staff are introduced to each others' ways of looking at the world, or 'literacies' (Street, 2004). As both perspectives are presented (Lave & Wenger, 1991) a new environment is created, which combines*

*both the academic support and the disciplinary view. This rich environment impacts positively on students, contextualising instruction in the academic support program. The outcome is that students understand the situated nature of successful interaction and communication, and learn that no one approach is suitable for all situations. Thus, students develop understandings at a 'meta level', preparing them for future work in unknown settings. In this paper, we explore some facets of the new collaborative environment that meld learning approaches with unstated disciplinary assumptions and expectations. We investigate these relationships and outcomes in relation to some established programs.*

**Key words:** *learning enhancement cooperation*

## **Introduction**

Higher education is currently subject to strong accountability pressures, some of which can be attributed to the pursuit of quality assurance. In their turn, teaching and learning have come under greater scrutiny, partly in response to a changing student demographic. The phenomenon of a diverse student profile including large numbers of international students studying on shore in Australian universities, is a significant factor that has impacted on higher education. One result is that disciplinary teachers and academic support staff have been drawn into a closer peer relationship because they find themselves sharing a common need; namely, to provide quality teaching and learning to a diverse student population.

In practice, this may mean that disciplinary staff will refer students in need of study assistance to an academic support unit where the programs and advice may be generalised in nature, while others may offer a range of programs to support study in the disciplines. In other settings, academic support operating alongside faculties is able to provide programs and advice that supports learning in the disciplines. This work is carried out in an even more disciplinary-focussed context when academic support staff are located in the faculty, integrating their programs, and advice into the disciplinary setting and working collaboratively with disciplinary teachers. We believe that these latter 'in faculty' programs are the most advantageous for student learning

in that they make a clear link between disciplinary knowledge and its underpinning academic approaches and skills. Furthermore, the process of students seeking study assistance is normalised as academic support is perceived as just another facet of the faculty's operation.

In this paper, we emphasise the value of student learning programs that arise from collaboration between disciplinary and academic support staff. As the world views of both these parties overlap in collaborative work, a forum is created, which is richly impregnated with disciplinary values and assumptions, and those of academic support with its focus on student learning. The result is that in the collaboratively-developed programs, study approaches in the form of thought patterns, learning and writing are contextualised and perceived as a social practice. Thus, the disciplinary values and assumptions are understood by students as shaping their learning and writing. We also highlight in this paper that a most important benefit from this approach is students developing understandings of the unique properties that shape communication and learning in different contexts, so that they develop what may be seen as 'meta level' modes of operation. The outcome of this, we argue, is that students are better positioned for their lives on graduation, when they will operate in new and yet unforeseen situations.

Firstly, we outline previous research on academic support-disciplinary collaboration, and then discuss the productive and therefore rich environment that characterises our approach. We present a conceptualisation of the collaborative environment, and then provide examples from established practice, including 'Legal Language for Commercial Law', 'First Year Management' and an Academic Transition Program.

## **Reviewing Collaborative Programs**

We recognise that collaboration between academic support and disciplinary staff is not a new concept, and some of its advantages for student learning have already been proclaimed. For example, Murphy and Stewart (2002) used evaluation processes to determine the value of a collaborative program and subsequently as justification for integrating academic support into the formal faculty teaching material.

They argue that there is a link between academic support input and increased student understanding of subject content. Similarly, Webb, Zhang and Sillitoe (2000) explain that the development of a stand-alone guide for students, to circumvent problems of students missing language support classes due to pressure of contact hours and clashes, arose from the collaborative work of academic support staff and faculty lecturers. Ramburuth (1999) in discussing graduate students, is concerned with the diversity of student language and how that impacts on learning. She notes that where language support is within faculties, it is more attractive to students, is seen to have a higher status and more likely to be supported by academic staff.

Collaborative programs are also claimed to have a positive impact on the affective aspects of student learning. Brackley and Palmer (2002) in reporting on a post graduate nursing course in which academic support advisers worked both alongside subject lecturers in an integrated program, point out that, for students, the results were an improved academic experience with an increased likelihood that work would be submitted on time.

Advantages of collaboration for academic support and disciplinary staff are also noted in the literature. Brackley and Palmer (2002) cite the positive outcomes from integration, based on collaboration. They make the point that devoting time to developing a relationship with the faculty lecturer can enable a better understanding of each other's expertise; for the faculty lecturer this can mean adopting new teaching methods, developing a better-structured class and learning to understand students' need to understand assessment. They suggest that this collaboration means a deepening of understanding of learning and teaching for faculty, including a broadening of responsibility to include sociopolitical dimensions of the subject. For the language adviser, collaboration has meant learning about evaluating courses and their impact on students (Brackley & Palmer 2002).

Similar advantages of collaboration are reported by Catterall (2002, p.37) who sees the language adviser as 'sounding board', 'collaborator', 'learning expert' and 'outside expert' and in turn cites Shulman (in Catterall, 2002) who claims that through these teaching partnerships, there is a break from the isolation experienced in the classroom. This partnership provides advantages for the language skills adviser because it allows for listening and learning about the content, and for the faculty

lecturer, it is an opportunity to learn how to be more focussed on a student centred teaching methodology.

The transformative nature of the relationship for both parties is discussed by James et al. (2003). Through integration, the sharing of knowledge and understanding produces feelings of collegiality. Collaboration occurs through informal discussion and when freed from constraints, both parties needs can emerge from the discussion. Stressing the importance of being exposed to other examples of collaboration in order to understand possible strategies, James et al. (2003) highlight the point that the art of collaboration includes respect for the other's contribution. Lee (as cited in James et al. 2003, p.134) speaks of 'co-production of knowledges', and Harper (as cited in James et al. 2003) claims the conditions for collaboration are reflection and discussion. Using an adaption of Kolb's learning circle to explain the transformation through knowledge to negotiation, implementation and reflection, they refer to Harper's term 'the arts of the contact zone' (James et al. 2003, p. 136). These ideas remind us that collaboration is more than a set of steps; it is transformative of people's practices and values (James et al. 2003). We share the perspective expounded by James et al. (2003) of collaboration for transformation. We make the point that the optimal mode for developing programs that meet student needs is indeed one that creates conditions for transformation and it is this rich environment that allows the transformation in terms of understandings of student learning that we intend to explore further.

### **The Resource-Rich Environment of Disciplinary and Academic Support Staff Collaboration**

The collaboration that arises in faculty-embedded settings has multiple benefits. It is a particular strength for institutions and disciplinary teachers as they strive to enhance the quality of student learning. For students, collaboratively-developed programs reveal both the assumptions and expectations of study in the disciplines, at the same time as making relevant and meaningful the skills and expertise they require for successful negotiation of the discipline. The disciplinary staff member learns about the different ways their students learn through insights into the expertise of academic support staff, while the latter learn about the prevailing disciplinary values and assumptions that shape students' approaches for successful learning in those disciplines. In sum, such rich resources arising from the melding of the

understandings of academic support and disciplinary staff establish a forum from which learning for both the academic support and disciplinary staff can occur, and from which highly- contextualised student learning programs can develop.

Through student learning programs that arise from this setting, students' academic operations function as social practice (Bazerman, 1988; Myers, 1989; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Crosling & Pavlidis, 2002). This approach may be compared with a generic, skills-based approach, where academic writing (including any underpinning cognitive pattern) is assumed to be 'simply objective, impersonal and informational' (Hyland, as cited in Crosling & Pavlidis, 2002). Students are encouraged to operate with their eyes open to the practices privileged by their disciplines, are able to develop a deeper understanding of how to take part in these, and how to demonstrate these in disciplinary communication.

When students have appropriated approaches privileged within the disciplines and thus implicitly appreciate the variation of preferred approaches across disciplines, they are positioned to be better able to function successfully in new and yet unimagined future situations. The differences or similarities across disciplines may also be made explicit and explained in terms of disciplinary value systems in student learning programs. This underpins the development of students' understanding at the 'meta level', 'equipping them with skills that will enable them to decode' the norms and modes of operation in new situations (Crosling, 2004, p. 9). In this way, our views expressed above concur with those of Street (2004) expressed in relation to student writing. Street (2004) explains that in 'the new communicative order' (p. 18) study skills and academic socialisation of students may need to be viewed in a wider context. Rather than a situation of either study skills or academic socialisation, a model needs to include the multimodal dimensions of communication in use in a faculty. Street's (2004) views also align with our concern that what is implicitly understood in faculties needs be made explicit.

For academic skills units there are flow on benefits from working in 'in faculty' programs because our expertise becomes readily accepted as a facet of faculty offerings, thereby countering the argument that academic skills work is limited to one of student learning 'expert' (Zhu, 2004), or to remedial work with students who are somehow deficient. We suggest that in situations where disciplinary and academic

support staff truly collaborate, they create a collegiate relationship rather than one that sees the academic staff member as a service provider.

## **Framing Academic Support and Disciplinary Collaboration**

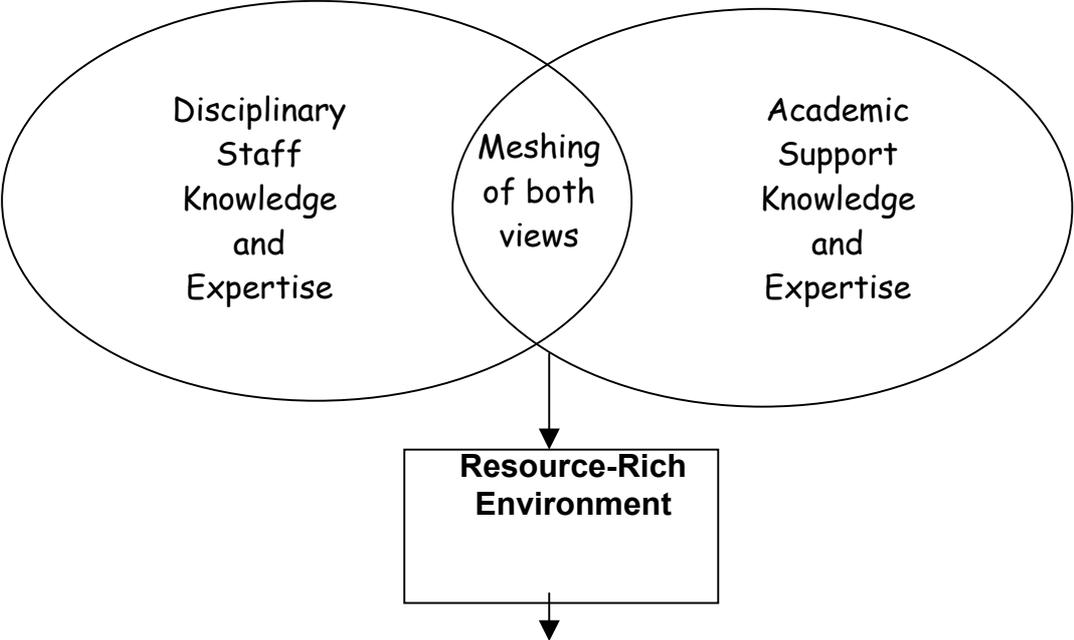
In the process of collaboration, the academic support and the disciplinary teaching staff bring together their own views of the world as ways of achieving the enhancement of student learning. This is clearly articulated in the view that cultural groups perceive reality through a lens that reflects their values. That is, their world view is shaped by these values, assumptions and modes of operation (Bizzell, 1992; Beaufort, 1997), and these are often subconsciously adhered to. While Gee (1994) refers to the patterns that encapsulate these as 'discourses', Street (2004) speaks of these as literacies, wherein ways of looking at the world are legitimised and formalised. Becher (1989) investigates the cultures of academic disciplines and identifies particular knowledge forms which together become a way of being part of a specific academic culture. Insights from academic writing theory further explain that academic writing reflects disciplinary practices. For instance, Swales' understandings of a discourse community provide tools to assist the academic support staff member to decode the writing practices of the particular discipline. Swales (1990, p.25) explains that a discourse community embodies a common set of goals as well as "mechanisms for intercommunication and that these include preferred genres and specific lexis. While the disciplinary staff member is able to identify and articulate the goals of the disciplinary community, the academic support staff member has the resources to interpret and therefore explain these as writing practices.

Indeed, a deepening awareness of these different academic cultures is perhaps most clearly identifiable when working in a collaborative relationship. Participating academic support staff usually find themselves working with disciplinary teachers whose perspectives may be shaped by different influences and affiliations and by the values and assumptions of their particular discipline. The values that drive academic support *vis`a vis* student learning can be encapsulated as assisting students 'to develop as independent learners and enhance their academic achievements' (Crosling, 2005, p. 7). More specifically, academic support may be seen as enhancing students' capacity to

develop as successful learners in their disciplines, and to be able to transfer core language and learning skills into other settings (Carmichael, Hicks, McGowan & Vanderwal, 1999). But the task confronting those who would work in this close environment is how to accommodate disparate understandings that bring various pedagogical and professional affiliations together, with the express purpose of focusing on students and their learning.

In the joint venture of enhancing student learning *in relation to* a discipline's values and assumptions, an intermingling of world views of disciplinary and academic support staff occurs, as shown in Figure 1. In the common, overlapping sector, the values of both worlds are meshed, creating what may be seen in some respects as new understandings, or transformations, as James et al. (2003) explain. The result, not often achieved without negotiation, is an initiation of both parties into each other's world. The exposure reveals how particular values and assumptions underpin cognitive approaches and communication in a particular discipline. Programs that result from these discoveries of the other's values and assumptions not only unravel the values and assumptions for each staff member, but embed for students in learning programs the ways of the disciplines of their study, and interpret them in ways that impact on students' approaches to study. The quality learning programs developed and the learning that occurs is the result of this rich environment.

Figure1: Academic Support World Disciplinary Perspectives



## Effective Student Learning Programs

The overlapping section in Figure 1 represents the productive environment that we have discussed. The common focus for both parties is one of improving student learning and assisting students to function independently in their studies. In the development of student learning programs, the stage represented by the overlapped section is where disciplinary values and expectations are counterposed and interwoven with those of academic support. As seen in Figure 1, the result is a 'resource-rich' environment that enables the unpacking of academic and disciplinary assumptions and expectations, in ways relevant to the students and their learning needs. It is also the site for the translation of these as thought patterns and styles of writing, including disciplinary preferences for genre and lexis. Thus, the teaching strategies that emerge in the student learning programs take into account student backgrounds and current realities in learning in the particular discipline.

To encapsulate the situation, the collaborative relationship can be conceptualised along the lines of the situated learning and cognition approach of Lave and Wenger (1991) where learning develops from experience and social action. Shared meanings are developed as newcomers move into particular communities and develop understanding of the appropriate way to communicate and thus how to be understood by other community members. In relation to the common area in Figure 1, staff are moving towards each other and in so doing and as mentioned previously, common, intermingled values are developed. In Catterall's (2002) words, through the transformation of both parties' understandings and perspectives the disciplinary teacher grows in understanding of student learning and communication, and the academic support staff member increases their understanding of the discipline's values.

### **Discussing Collaboration and Student Learning Programs**

A range of academic support programs that have been developed through collaborative activity and which have impacted positively on student learning outcomes have been presented and discussed in the literature. In this section we

demonstrate the rationale for and outcomes of programs in which the authors have been involved. From the staff perspective, we explain the way that the disciplinary and academic support staff collaboration that underpinned the development of the programs enabled learning for both parties; their respective approaches to student learning were broadened and therefore transformed by the sharing of expertise. From the student perspective, we discuss the way that academic processes can be imbued with meaning through positioning them and thus making them real within disciplinary practices, and the way that, implicitly, students' understandings of communication at the meta level can be developed through this approach.

### **'Legal language for Commercial Law'**

One of these programs is an adjunct program for students in their studies of Commercial Law, as part of a degree in Business. Entitled "Legal Language for Commercial Law", the program operated at Monash University (Crosling, 1997). A major objective of the program was to improve students' learning and writing in the subject. Students learnt to appreciate the shape of appropriate cognitive patterns, as well as the practice that shaped them. In turn, they were familiarised with the representation of these values in the preferred disciplinary writing.

In achieving this objective in the development of the program, faculty staff explained the cognitive patterns that are privileged, and the role that they play in the discourse. These are based on the adversarial legal system which is at the core of, and a basic assumption of, Australian law. Successful outcomes in communication tasks required students to reflect this adversarial approach through the structure of their responses and legal arguments (Crosling, 1997). Arising from the collaboration, the underpinnings of macro structure and rhetorical conventions are thus unearthed and explained, and students have practice in developing, structuring and writing legal arguments. In so doing, approaches that students need to engage in for successful written communication in their assessment tasks are contextualised and made meaningful, rather than being taught in isolation as techniques to be applied to some indeterminate written context.

Consequently in the resulting student learning program, the academic support staff view of student learning broadened as they perceived appropriate approaches to thought and writing in the context of the discipline's practice, in which the approaches

enabled representation of the practices. Their understanding of the preferred writing genre in terms of its structure and purpose was deepened through interpreting it as a reflection of disciplinary practice. Furthermore and most importantly in terms of meta level learning, the process of aligning thought and writing practices with the disciplinary culture alerted students to the changeable nature of preferred forms, depending on the particular context. Indeed, the teaching emphasised that the preferred forms were a realisation of the disciplinary values and contrasted these with those of other disciplines.

The disciplinary staff, through learning that the particular genre for the subject differed and in some way, contrasted with those for other subjects could appreciate more deeply the bridge to be traversed and the transition required for students to study the subject successfully. The academic support staff also expanded the disciplinary staff understandings of student learning by explaining, for example, that for some students, making judgement about the actions of parties in a legal dispute may be problematic, given their cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences. Transformation of the perspectives of both staff parties regarding contextualised student learning thus occurred.

### **First Year Management**

The next example concerns the teaching of writing in a first year Management subject at Monash University (Crosling & Pavlidis, 2002). The faculty staff member reported that students experienced difficulties with Management due to issues of language competence. Thus, the academic support staff member examined examples of successful and less successful students' assignments supplied by the staff member. These indicated that, while non standard grammar and expression contributed to that assessment, and while some students did appear to lack strong English language skills, a difficulty appeared to be that some students were not demonstrating the control of referencing required by the discipline. Following discussion with faculty staff to identify values and assumptions privileged within the discipline, it became clear that a major role of managers and management in an organisation is to gather information, and on this basis, to make decisions. Such a role, translated as a value that is fundamental to the discipline, implied a sense of

authority and could be seen as reflected in the writer's control of referencing through the writer's voice and comment in relation to the supporting citations used in the text.

As discussed in relation to the previous program, the major benefit for the student learning program of the collaboration was that the instruction of the preferred genre for the discipline was embedded, and took on meaning in, the disciplinary practice. Students were thus positioned to function with understanding in the academic tasks, in some ways reflecting a manager's leadership role as they marshal and cite sources as evidence for their points in their written texts. Furthermore, because of their awareness of the reasons why the preferred thought and writing took their particular forms in the discipline, they were prepared to expect variation across settings.

In the collaborative environment from which the program arose, the academic support staff member explained the communication conventions embedded in the cultural backgrounds of some students, as well as their positions as newcomers to the Australian higher education system and Australian society in general. Further collaborative examination of the student writing samples indicated that the students who produced what were deemed as successful writing examples positioned themselves authoritatively in their use of citations; that is, as they introduced and discussed information that supported the viewpoints, or decisions, they made in their simulated role of a manager.

The outcome of such collaborative discussion which was based on the sharing of values and assumptions as learning programs were discussed and developed, was that disciplinary staff came to appreciate the importance of investigating their own positions, making them explicit to others and revealing to students the need to take up positions and roles in their writing, and the rationale for this. Transformation of perspectives for the academic support staff can be evidenced in understanding the discipline's assumptions and values, which contextualise writing conventions. They paved the way for deeper analysis of the genre. For the disciplinary staff, transformation takes place through appreciating more fully students' difficulties, as well as features of their previous cultural and educational backgrounds that may impinge on their studies.

## **Academic Transition Program**

The final example of such work was the collaboration that occurred through participation in a Business faculty's academic transition program. The "Success at Monash" program was developed and presented in cooperation with Library, Faculty and academic support staff. The nature of collaboration involved a team of Library and academic support program presenting students with the opportunity to take a guided walk in preparing an essay style assignment. The seminar began with question analysis, moved to database search and back to integrating referencing into the essay. At the same time, the purpose of these steps and their outcomes were contextualised to meaningful processes within academic culture.

There are clear, documented benefits of this program for all participants. Firstly the collaborative approach has meant that students are lead through an academic reality, through what may seem initially a bewildering set of manoeuvres involving the requirements of a university assignment. By the end of the session, the research and writing process has been integrated, and students have participated in question analysis therefore diminishing some of the fear in the first assessment. They have seen how searching the library database is connected to the results of their question analysis and they have in front of them their first attempts at choosing appropriate academic references. Students begin to see a part of what university study will require of them in terms of appreciating that there are no absolutes in knowledge and that a range of views and perspectives, and thus a vast amount of literature, surrounds issues and topics.

The program evaluations assert that students see value in this time investment because it reveals the complex and integrated mysteries of the academic world which they are about to enter, and supports them as they experience it in the program.

Staff evaluations (including those by both authors who have participated in the planning sessions and materials preparation) show that the model of presenting the essay writing process as a complex interaction of reading and thinking, researching and writing has its merits. For the staff of the library and the academic support teams, they came to understand each other's work, to appreciate how staff from each area of expertise interacts with students and to see the benefits to be gained from an

integrated teaching of writing essentials. Thus, the approaches of each is contextualised, learning and transformation occurs for each as the mysteries of the other's discipline are unravelled.

## Conclusion

In our focus on collaboration between academic support and disciplinary staff, this paper has elaborated on the resource-rich environment from which effective student learning programs can be developed. The programs that arise from this setting are well-fitted to transform students' disciplinary understandings so that they function with meaning in their academic tasks. Furthermore, the collaborative development phase for programs of the form considered in this paper allows for the broadening and transformation of the understandings of both sets of staff. Our conceptualisation of the resource-rich collaborative environment included in this paper provides a visual representation of the way that both parties enter, to some degree, into each other's world. Emerging out of the 'mingling' of both staff' views and understandings, the overlapping of the worlds, academic approaches can be truly grounded in the particular discipline, thus ensuring their relevance for student learning. An outcome is that students' motivation is enhanced as they are not performing isolated academic operations, functioning with meaning and understanding. In these times when higher education institutions are seeking ways to improve the quality of their learning and teaching, we have discussed an approach through which students can not only be assisted to improve their academic performance, but also develop meta level understandings. Through appreciating implicitly and explicitly the variation of values and their realisation in thought, learning and writing across disciplines, students are well-positioned to decode and therefore cope, in future and yet unknown situations. This is for the benefit of the students, their teachers, and their institutions.

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