

e-Journal of Business Education & Scholarship of Teaching
Vol. 3, Iss. 2, 2009, pp: 41-48.
"http://www.ejbest.org"

Developing a three-way collaborative model to promote first year student engagement and skill support

Johanna Einfalt

Student Services
University of the Sunshine Coast
E-Mail: jeinfalt@usc.edu.au

Janet Turley

Library
University of the Sunshine Coast
E-Mail: jturley@usc.edu.au

Abstract

Recent discourse about engaging first year students calls for more collaboration in terms of adopting a holistic approach to course delivery. This paper discusses a model visualised at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) that seeks opportunities and ways to provide skill support in a more collaborative way than has been historically practiced. Therefore, a three-way collaborative model, involving the Faculty Teacher, the Skills Advisor and the Librarian, has been developed to improve students' skill levels and promote student interaction with staff. By illuminating the link between the writing and research process and the course content, the model promotes student and faculty accessibility to the Library and Academic Skills services and fosters better collegial relationships. Literature around first year engagement indicates that this three-way collaborative model provides the framework for facilitating first year awareness about individual skill development.

Key words: *First year experience; first year student engagement; academic skills; research skills; collaborative instruction.*

Introduction

Recent discourse about the First Year Experience (FYE) advocate that in order to engage students, course delivery needs to be reconceptualised in terms of a holistic approach involving both academics and support staff (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2009). Skill development in the use of information literacy and academic skills is seen as an important factor which impacts on the persistence of first year students (Lawrence, 2005; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Gibson, 2007). In response to the observation that these skills are often provided in an unrelated way, the Librarian and Academic Skills Advisor joined forces to provide a better mode of support for Business faculty students. By promoting a collaborative relationship with faculty, a three-way model was visualised.

The development of this model evolved from collaboratively instructing research and academic skills in four first year Business subjects at USC in 2009. The benefits of embedding skills and developing working partnerships between skills support and faculty academic has been documented (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Cochrane, 2006; Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996). However, the shared territory between teaching academic and research skills has received limited attention. Results from a small number of Australian and New Zealand Universities have suggested that embedding collaborative instruction can lead to higher pass marks and greater retention (Hammill, 2007; Bordonaro, 2008; Huerta & McMillan, 2004). Literature also explores the common ground between Skills Advisors and Librarians and presents arguments for merging the provision of support (Mahffy, 2008; Elmborg, 2003; Peacock, 2008; Sheridan, 1995). To date, however, there are limited studies that explore the value and practice of teaching these skills in an integrated manner.

A Move towards Collaboration

There are different approaches to the role of support skills and collaboration with academic faculty. These partnerships often involve tensions and can change in nature and role due to external and internal factors (Hicks, 2005). Jones, Bonanno, and Scouller (2001) argue that reflection on role and the partnerships created through collaboration between the Faculty Teacher or academic, the student and the skills teacher, that is the Skills Advisor or Librarian, is integral to the understanding of best practice. It was reflection on the provision of service and the role played by the Librarian and Skills Advisor at USC which led to the visualising of an improved model of involvement with the academic faculty.

The manner of collaboration between teachers of skills (Skills Advisors or Librarians) and faculty academics has been explored. A useful taxonomy, which has been documented, uses three levels to describe the cooperation that Skills Advisors and Librarians experience with Faculty teachers or academics (Dudley-Evans, 2001). The first level is cooperation, where the Skills Advisor seeks information from the faculty about the course content and assessment tasks. The second level is collaboration, where the Skills Advisor and Faculty Teacher or academic work together to devise support classes which run concurrently with the course. The third level is team teaching, where the Skills Advisor and Faculty Teacher or academic co-teach in the same space. These different collaborative approaches may be viewed as sitting on a relationship continuum. Historically at USC, the provision of support by the Librarian and Skills Advisor had been mostly at the co-operation and collaboration level, where skill support would be offered in add-on adjunct classes that often only the more enthusiastic students would choose to attend. The value of providing skill instruction as an intervention, as opposed to providing it as an add-on or a generic all-purpose study skill, is supported by recent literature, as it can be immediately applied to the specific course (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). In addition, Wingate (2006) asserts a need to eliminate separate study skills sessions as these were argued to be an ineffective way to enhance student learning. To move away from these generic skills sessions and in an effort to foster a move towards the third level of faculty co-operation, that of

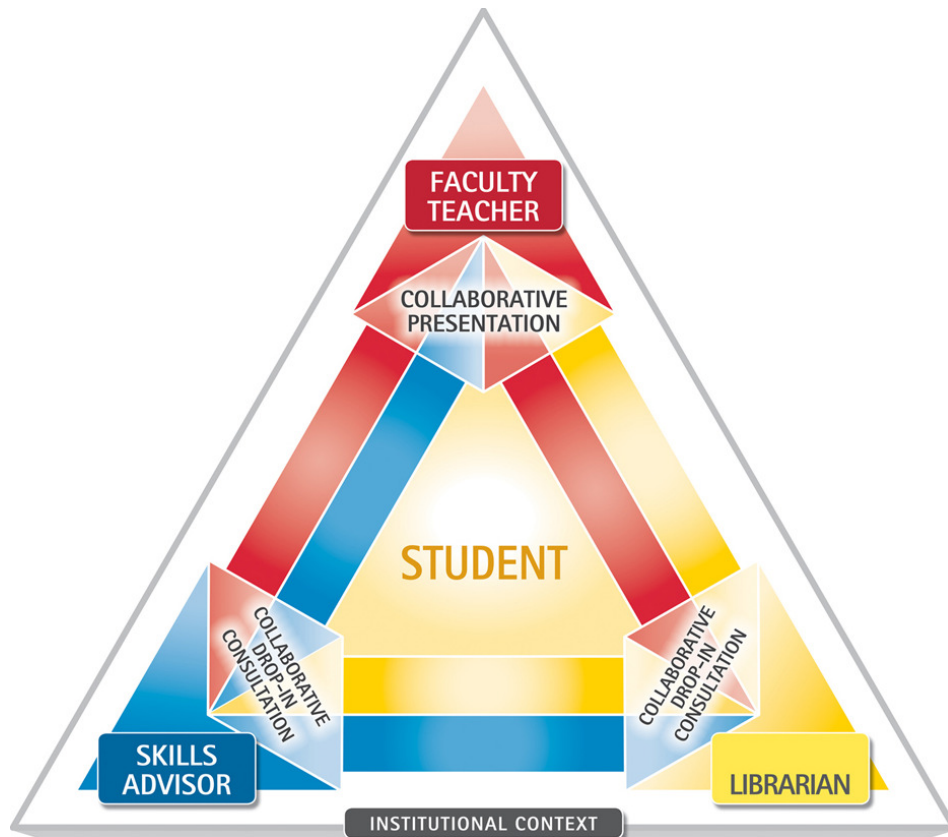
team teaching, a three-way collaborative model was developed to include elements of team teaching. This shift towards a co-productive relationship by both Skills Advisors, Librarians and Faculty Teachers or academics is advocated in a paper by Lee, Baynham, Beck, Gordon, and San Miguel (1995). Through initial three-way collaborative meetings between the Faculty academic, the Skills Advisor and Librarian, a common desire was identified to find better ways to promote students' meta-cognitive skill development, to improve their self-management skills and accessibility to skill support services.

The model

This model visually represents the collaborative role and relationship between the Skills Advisor, the Librarian and the Faculty Teacher or academic, as shown in Figure 1. Participants are placed at each point of the triangle, within the University context, and the student is placed central in this visual diagram of the model. There are links between each participant to represent the connection and communication that each participant has with the other. Each participant's involvement is represented by a link to other participants; therefore, the Skills Advisor is linked in communication and collaboration with the Faculty Teacher or academic, and at the same time, is linked in collaboration with the Librarian. However, this link is not only in one way, as the Faculty Teacher or academic is also instigating this relationship of collaboration with both the Skills Advisor and with the Librarian. Such links represent communications, such as discussions, planning and the referral of students, who are advised to access other participants in the model. Therefore, this model is seen as promoting three-way collaboration as the interactions ideally become negotiations involving the three participants, often achieved through a common meeting. As a result of these interactions, support sessions, consultation advice, and the sharing of information and feedback are produced and offered in the institutional context. The student is central in this model, as the communications, results and involvements by participants are instigated by a desire to support and engage them. Therefore, the student, as represented by the central triangular section, is surrounded by the opportunity to engage in the results of these interactions between participants.

Some specific examples of what has emerged from the practice of this three-way collaboration at USC in 2009 have also been represented in figure 1. These are examples of projects where all three participants come together in one place, resulting from collaborative meetings aiming to put this model into action. First, the "collaborative presentation" was designed by the three participants to meet the specific skill needs of the main assessment task and integrated into the Faculty Teacher's lecture, where it was team-taught by the Skills Advisor and Librarian (Einfalt & Turley, 2009). Second, a "drop-in consultation" service was designed and provided to students within a meeting room provided by the faculty. This consultation service was established as an opportunity for students to gain one-on-one advice on assessment tasks in a space where the Skills Advisor, Librarian and the Faculty Teacher or academic would be available for advice and skill development.

Figure 1:
The three-way collaborative model.



The Connection between Information Literacy and Academic Literacy

The three-way model is founded on an overlapping of aims in the provision of information literacy (research), provided by the Librarian, and academic literacy (academic skill support), provided by the Skills Advisor. Both academic literacy and information literacy have a specific discourse and are guided by teaching and learning strategies developed over time in evidence-based practice. Each exists within a specific professional field, which is bound by specific qualifications and expertise in that discourse (Peacock, 2008). Even though the discourses for both these skills notionally overlap, a curious disconnection between Librarians and Skills Advisors has been evident. Both these support areas usually sit outside the academy and are disassociated from each other in terms of content, development, delivery and student engagement (Elmborg, 2003; Peacock, 2008). Fister (1992) refers to this as an invisible intellectual wall between those who teach students to write and those who teach students to research. By exploring the way these different skill areas are defined and showing what they have in common, the potential for collaboration between the Skills Advisor and the Librarian is clearer.

Information literacy has been defined by Bundy (2004) as knowledge and behaviour which is supported by fluency with information technology, sound investigation methods, and critical discernment and reasoning skills. Models have emerged, such as Kuhlthau's (2004) information search process and the seven pillars model (SCONUL), which organise information literacy into a developmental process: recognising an information need, determining ways of addressing the gap,

constructing search strategies, locating and accessing information, comparing and evaluating it, organising, applying and communicating it, synthesising and creating a new product based on it (Gibson, 2007). Gibson also raises the importance of collaboration among academic professionals to promote information fluency due to the unpredictable nature of the technology environment which students are expected to research in. The importance of looking beyond the “skills inoculation” model of instruction to promote a more robust “viral” model of information literacy which encourages life-long learning beyond university study is advocated (Elmborg, 2003; Peacock, 2008; Hughes, Bruce, & Edwards, 2007).

Academic literacy involves knowledge, concepts and skills that address study effectiveness and academic achievement. Academic literacy is generally considered to be a learning process that focuses on language as a key building block of knowledge and writing as a way of learning, expressing and thinking (Peacock, 2008; Jones et al., 2001). Like information literacy, academic literacy is a process-to-product model with a genesis in constructivist learning theory (Kift & Nelson, 2005). Such process stages generally include: brainstorming, planning, outlining, organising, synthesising, citing, revising and proofreading (Bordonaro, 2008). While academic literacy places an emphasis on constructing content in the written form, information literacy puts emphasis on finding and using information effectively. Both skill areas have a recursive element, where process stages may need revisiting, and both rely on the use of critical thinking to apply mechanical skills successfully (Bordonaro). Most importantly, both information literacy and academic literacy emphasise the means to an end, not just the end itself, and it is in this focus on process that a clear connection between the teaching of research skills and academic skills has been founded.

A Skill Focus on Process

In a paper about blending academic skills and research skills in terms of service provision at QUT, Peacock (2008) argues that there is good reason to link these groups, as both focus on product and process and share aspirations that address academic efficiencies, retention and success. Elmborg (2003) makes comment that both these professional groups tend to work with anomalous status in institutions that underestimate the practical concerns of writing and researching for undergraduate students. Bundy (2004) suggests that there is need to reinvigorate the discussion about the writing process and how the search for information is shaped by that process. Equally, questioning what it means to be a writer has moved the emphasis away from the mechanics of writing toward the facilitation of an unfolding process (Bean, 2001). In a case study of first year legal education students, Kift (2002) demonstrates that attitudinal, cognitive, communication and relational skills are all interconnected and she argues that it is important to make explicit the incremental path of skill development. It would then seem logical that a merging of teaching research and academic skills should occur in the teaching arena; thus, students gain exposure to these skills as interconnected processes crucial in the production of a quality assessment task.

Engaging First Year Students

Central in the three-way collaborative model are students and an aim to engage them in both research and academic skill development in conjunction with their content learning. There has been much discussion about the impact of the first year experience on student persistence and mastery of university study. The development and application of the three-way collaborative model has been influenced by recent literature advocating a holistic approach (Kift, 2009; Carini, 2006; Lawrence, 2005). First year experience theory argues that in order to engage students, course delivery needs to be approached as an integral component of a model of institutional action which brings together faculty, academic, administrative and support programs (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Kift, 2009). In order to engage students, it is important to understand them. First year students have special learning needs due to the social and academic transition they are experiencing. All students are on a journey, starting from different points, to becoming self-managed learners (Kift & Nelson, 2005). The diversity

and complexity of students' profiles is pointed out by Kelly (2003), who nominates different levels of student learning skills and attitudes as variations in: academic language skills; study skills; confidence to participate; English language skills and numeracy; motivation to study; and prior knowledge and skills in a discipline. Lawrence (2005) suggests that a response to this has been the so-called "deficit" approach, where the focus has been on fixing problems generated by diversity. She challenges this approach and aims to generate new ways of thinking about the first year experience by proposing a framework for student engagement and mastery. This framework visualises first year transition as a process of negotiation of discourses and literacies and perseverance on the journey to mastery (Lawrence, 2005). The focus is to move away from remedial assistance, and "fixing" those in need, as in the deficit approach, to one of facilitating all students' familiarity with the engagement process (Skillen, 2006). Based on this approach, it is important to expose all students to literacy support, regardless of what point they are at in terms of their skill development.

Summary

This paper presents a model based on collaboration between the Faculty Teacher or academic, the Librarian and the Skills Advisor, as a promising way to support and engage first year students. It would be useful to explore the potential of this model through research to identify if outputs from this model into action, such as the embedded collaborative presentations on skills or the drop-in consultation service as seen in figure 1, can be linked to improved skill levels in first year assessment tasks. This paper also discusses how transition pedagogy places first year students at different starting points and at different stages of skill development. In response to this pedagogy, the three-way collaborative model aims to promote a holistic approach to curriculum design, and a move away from the deficit approach by focusing on engaging all students as they embark on diverse individual journeys in learning and skill development. Other benefits to be gained from applying this model are a fostering of better collegial relationships and the opening of channels for future consultation between Faculty academics, Librarians and Skills Advisors. The three-way collaborative model encourages a rethinking of the way we provide support to first year students and aims, through the fostering of individual skill improvement, to provide a positive experience for university students in their first year.

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