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Title

Developing students' academic reading skills: learning developers as lynchpins.

Introduction

This short article reflects on how active and collaborative reading is crucial to support novice readers in their subject disciplines. Learning developers are key to normalising this practice by modelling it for the subject lecturers.

Key words: collaborative reading pragmatic autonomous discourse

As a 'first gen' student in 1978, when 7% of the population attended Higher Education, it was assumed that I would acquire the academic skills to succeed at university by 'the pedagogy of osmosis' (Turner 2011, p.21). Support for Academic Literacy was non-existent and I muddled through, like many others. Years later, learning how to teach those academic skills was revelatory. I once made a video to share how I had adapted a reading technique to manage the reading and writing load during my Master's degree. It was a highly instrumental and pragmatic approach and the video is still valued by students. However, my approach assumed that the student had understood what they had read; could paraphrase the content and could think critically about it: all on their own.

I increasingly doubt that my approach in that video is enough: how does it foster the 'can do' confidence towards tackling the reading of, for example, a journal article; to interpret the discourse; to support a novice in a discipline to compare and contrast what they have read? According to Thesen and van Pletzen: "All students, whether they are ...non-traditional or 'traditional' students, are novices when dealing with academic discourse in the disciplines" (2006 cited in Wingate and Tribble 2012, p.482). Some recent studies of reading practice paint a gloomy picture of

disengaged students who avoid reading complex texts (Baker et al. 2019; St. Clair-Thompson, Graham and Marsham 2018).

The Becoming Well Read symposium in March of this year was a welcome opportunity to celebrate academic reading as a source of discovery; a means to develop multiple perspectives collaboratively, generating empathy with fellow learners; and to offer the chance to consider how we, as learning developers, might proactively champion reading as an activity.

The theme which spoke directly to my concerns about students who are attempting as a novice to engage alone with their discipline, was the theme of active and collaborative reading. Aimee Merrydew's presentation on the collaborative annotation of texts using Talis Elevate addressed this directly. Reading alone is potentially very isolating, so any tool which promotes *discussion* of text should really help to demystify academic conventions, language and concepts for students. Whilst the facilitator has to prepare and scaffold activities and do demonstrations initially, the aim is that the students become self-sufficient, supporting each other with key readings. This fits with my philosophy of teaching and learning Academic Literacy: it is based on empowering both students and colleagues to achieve autonomy by building their confidence and self-development. Fazey and Fazey (2001) claim that all students have the potential to become autonomous learners and that HE professionals need to facilitate the development of their metacognitive skills explicitly, not implicitly (cited in McKay and Devlin 2014). UWE has been piloting Talis Elevate in some modules so I now await the review and hope that the tool will be purchased soon.

Such online, collaborative tools are also inclusive: they require a low bandwidth; allow student anonymity and the asynchronous activities can reach a wider demographic, such as mature learners who can access the activity when convenient but still see the comments of their peers; have the time to reflect and then contribute if they wish to. One delegate said that collaborative online tools 'make reading visible'. This resounded with me as the mother of a dyslexic teenager who prefers to learn by video rather than read text and to vocalise his learning rather than write. Students engage with learning in multiple ways and, as reading often poses a challenge to students with Specific Learning Difficulties, any tool or technique which can lift words off the page is enabling.

Aimee's presentation also prompted me to reflect on the discourse analysis which I regularly employed as a technique when working with joint honours students who were advanced learners of English. I scaffolded their learning by a careful selection of texts to analyse. By modelling how text works, I was able to empower them to analyse a range of genres (Nesi and Gardner 2012) and build their personal vocabularies. Week by week, their confidence grew. I concur with Mottha-Roth's assertion that 'Students need to become discourse analysts' (2009, p.344). However, I now rarely have the opportunity to use this practice because I no longer have access to the same group of students for several weeks or months. By offering embedded and generic workshops, but no courses, learning developers rarely see the same students twice and cannot easily replicate collaborative reading in a 1-1 context.

Academic reading is challenging to both do well as a student and to facilitate its improvement as a learning developer, yet it is seen as crucial, being the foundation for much thinking and writing in HE (Maguire, Reynolds and Delahunt 2020). Given this, why does it receive less priority in learning development practice? One symposium delegate plausibly suggested that reading is seen as less important because it produces no measurable output that can be directly assessed. Back to my pragmatism.

The way forward should be in collaboration with subject lecturers to embed more than one workshop into a module in order to model, to both students and subject lecturers, the value of collaborative reading techniques. It should also be emphasized how it links to assessment. The hope is that the lecturer then takes this on as a regular activity within their module. Indeed, this may already be happening in some cases- without the intervention of the learning developer- since some students have recently told me that flipped learning online has necessitated some lecturers to teach academic reading skills more explicitly, using a discourse analysis approach. Wingate claims that lecturer-led academic literacy provision is the most advanced form of embedding and is to be encouraged (2016).

I believe that we are still some way off this becoming the norm and that learning developers should view themselves as the lynchpin; mediating between lecturers and students, occupying Meyer and Land's liminal spaces (2003) where students move between old and new understandings and where learning takes place. We have the agency to advocate for students, to feed backwards and forwards between lecturers and students; collaborating with both to improve academic reading skills. We are the 'Para-academics' to whom Macfarlane refers (2011) and Wingate's 'literacy experts' (2015, p.153).

The excellent presentations given at the symposium have generated several conversations about academic reading between faculty staff and learning developers at UWE and have set my colleagues and I on a journey to improve academic reading practice. We have recently consulted a student panel on their reading skills which, perhaps unsurprisingly, revealed a preference for small group facilitation within their subject disciplines. Now our challenge is to resource this within the faculties.

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