Embedding Academic Literacy Instruction in Disciplinary Courses

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Agenda

• Introduction to Learning Commons

• Academic Literacy: goals & theory
  • Addressing the tacit assumptions of the academic culture

• Faculty conceptions of academic literacy

• Collaborative programming models
LC Partners: Libraries, Career Centre, Learning Skills Services, and Writing Department
The Virtual Learning Commons: SPARK

**Why revise?**
We often hope to research and compose our essays from beginning to end without making any revisions. But this hope overlooks the fact that writing about a topic is also a way of learning about it. Writers deepen their understanding of their topic as they write and rewrite.

Reviewing and revising your work will help you to:
- "re-see" your topic and what you have said about it
- see new points to make, find better explanations of your ideas, and make interesting new connections among those ideas
- improve your understanding of your topic and the quality of your essay

This module on making revisions is closely related to the following modules:
- **Writing Strategies** which deals with strategies for **drafting**
- **Essay Editing** which deals with strategies for **editing**

**Revising, drafting, and editing** are closely related processes. In fact, most writers do not readily distinguish the three as they work. They do not simply draft once, revise once, and edit once in that order. They are likely to move back and forth among these processes readily and frequently. This module will help you develop efficient and productive strategies for revising your work, wherever you may be in the writing process.
Supporting Academic Literacy Instruction Within Courses

- The purpose of our LC Faculty Subcommittee project
  - to establish a Summer Institute on the teaching of academic literacies. We wish to help York instructors adopt strategies to aid their students in developing academic reading, writing, and information literacy skills.

- The role of the Teaching Commons in the Learning Commons project
Steps in Preparing for an Institute on the Teaching of Academic Literacy

• Hired graduate student with expertise in literacy education, aka Rebecca! (Spring 2012)

• Literature review on supporting faculty teaching of academic literacy within university courses

• Focus groups with faculty at York University

• Pilot-programming with York Teaching Commons
The term “academic literacies” refers to the writing strategies, library research strategies and learning skills needed for effective engagement with university coursework, including how to read sophisticated academic material.
Entering the Academic Culture
Academic Literacies: Theoretical Context

- Socio-cultural ideas of learning (apprenticeship)
  - Academic world as a discourse community, or set of discourse communities
  - Thinking like a Political Scientist, Psychologist, ...
- Developmental rather than deficit model (Haggis)
  - Embedded rather than supplemental instruction
- Novice-expert progression (Leckie)
- Systemic barriers to developing literacies
  - Unaddressed gaps, the tacit, the taken-for-granted
  - Making implicit processes just as explicit as the product of those processes
Faculty Members’ Conceptions of Academic Literacy Instruction

Faculty focus groups at York University
  • Four groups with a total of 18 participants
  • Summer 2012

Included Faculty of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences, Faculty of Health, Faculty of Science & Engineering

Department Chairs nominated participants from General Education courses or core first/second year courses

Facilitated by Rebecca Katz
  • Outside literacy studies scholar
Participants agree that academic literacy skills of students require development

“...once they have the information in front of them, they have a hard time reading it and understanding it and summarizing it and evaluating it. All those skills I think need to be shown or taught.”

Literature and Language Professor
Participants see critical reflection and engagement with research and coursework as fundamental for student learning and growth. Critical reading gets special emphasis.

“...they’ve been told to read the primary literature but they haven’t actually been given any guidance. I mean even in first year, we’re telling them to go find the literature. But there isn’t true guidance about how to read literature and dissect it. And as we know, a lot of it is very, very obtuse writing.”

Biology Professor
Plagiarism often identified as being connected to students’ lack of academic literacy skills, and a great deal of concern expressed about this issue

“The fire that we had to put out was plagiarism... What was discovered was... they think writing a paper is copying stuff and editing it. So we spend the 12 weeks [dealing with questions like] Why are we at university? What is writing a paper all about?... What is academia?

Health Studies Professor
Participants readily offer diagnoses of the problem they see with student abilities. Often refer to motivation, high school, part-time work or need for remedial attention

“But I do find that students...come in with a lack of understanding and the difference between their opinion and evidence, what we’d like to call evidence-based conclusions, or something of the sort...they seem to come from high school with the view that any opinion is equally good, or my opinion is as good as the experts.”

Psychology Professor
But, participants speak about research as a recursive, iterative process and see role for selves in scaffolding the process

“And I used to think my job was to deliver content. It’s not about content...[It’s about] process, process and psychological support. I teach them to learn how to learn.”

English Professor
Participants feel that TAs must play a fundamental role in academic literacy instruction and associated challenges

“I’m thinking more of the TAs I’ve worked with and my suggestions to them...we go over how to critically read in the tutorial and how to, you know, make notes from what they’re reading, identify key points and arguments, have students do reading – like pose a question that they have to then delve into and extrapolate more...”

Social Sciences Professor
Participants see Learning Commons possibly providing a forum for dialogue about academic literacy issues and instructional techniques.

“And I think what would be really good for this summer institute would be to help faculty find ways of integrating different writing assignments, different levels of writing, different skills...so it’s not just like one big research paper, for example, like I do. But it should be --- this is dreaming, but anyway, it should be a sort of collective effort.”

Languages and Literature Professor
Our Initial Programming

90 minutes workshop for faculty members on developing students’ critical skills

Half-day workshop on teaching academic literacies within the context of the Course Design @ York program
Implications for our practice

Continue our programming with a Learning Commons academic literacy approach
  • joint planning of programming for faculty
  • deficit vs. socio-cultural model
  • concept of tacit knowledge

Treat critical reading as the entry point for embedding literacy instruction

Focus on assignment design support
  • Introduce principles of assignment design
    • scaffolding, sequencing, alignment
  • Introduce design frameworks for academic literacies
    • Coonan & Secker, Biggs, Bloom
Implications for our practice (continued)

Represent ourselves as process experts
  • Spell out explicitly for faculty members the aspects of reading, writing, and library research that are taken for granted within the academic culture
  • Encourage modelling of expert process
  • Encourage explicit, guided practice

Provide faculty members with multiple examples of worksheets, exercises, and assignments consistent with academic literacy approach

Be prepared to address issues of large courses and heavy marking responsibilities.
Good sources for examples of exercises, worksheets, and assignment design templates


All items from these sources are in the public domain
Sources that informed our presentation


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