Supportive collision: Facilitating cross-disciplinary communication among doctoral writers through collaboration

Key Words

academic communication, cross-disciplinary, doctoral writing, peer support, teaching and learning

Abstract

Since 2013, the University of Melbourne's Academic Skills team has been developing and delivering a cross-disciplinary Academic Communication Program for ESL/EAL PhD students. The program aims to foster cross-disciplinary interaction and critical language skills needed to become effective thesis writers and communicators in English in an Australian and global context. Research has consistently highlighted the benefits of embedded academic skills and language development programs involving disciplinary language and discourse (Larcombe, McCosker, & O'Loughlin, 2007; Maldoni & Lear, 2016). However, a gap exists in research on cross-disciplinary communication programs. Some studies suggest that embedding is more effective, but a question remains as to what happens when the potentials of cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration are explicitly addressed and when students work actively to create their own support network broader than the disciplinary discourse. An emergent trend in university curriculum design and pedagogy has been to embrace cross-disciplinary studies and to promote transferrable skills (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). While this movement does not oppose embedding these skills in disciplines, this situation calls for reflection and investigation into what the unique value of a cross-disciplinary academic communication program might be. Besides the fact that running such a program is much less resource-intensive than having multiple faculty-based programs, can the program's purpose of facilitating learning of transferrable communication skills in academic and professional contexts stand as a valid reason for its existence? And even if there is a niche for such a program, how can it be best delivered? This paper addresses these questions through an evaluation of a co-facilitated Academic Communication program that was delivered in March-May, 2017 by Academic Skills at the University of Melbourne. A program such as this results in many types of collaboration: facilitator-facilitator, facilitator-student and student-student. This paper focuses primarily on the student-student aspect of collaboration: a multi-faceted collaboration which involved diverse forms of peer to peer support. Specifically, the course set up many opportunities for participants to share their own thesis experiences, work together on common academic communication tasks and provide advice on their peers' writing drafts. Through a process of peer critique, students were able to provide a valuable objective 'eye' on their classmate's work – a form of support rarely found in their everyday discipline-specific research contexts. This process also helped students to reflect on their own work critically, with more audience awareness. Data was conducted through the use of reflective writing by teachers, student evaluations and other student-produced writing artefacts. The findings support the crucial role that a program such as this has in providing an environment that moves the PhD candidate beyond the supervisor-student model of collaboration, a traditional model that still dominates the discourse of doctoral support at this advanced level of academic endeavor.

References

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