



## Discipline matters: Embedding academic literacies into an undergraduate nursing program



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### ABSTRACT

In recent years the higher education sector in Australia has been increasingly concerned with ensuring that the English language proficiency levels of students are commensurate with the academic and professional tasks that they must perform. In many universities, this heightened attention to language proficiency has driven changes to teaching and learning practices. This paper reports on a project to embed academic literacies development into a core first year subject within a Bachelor of Nursing program in a large, culturally and linguistically diverse, metropolitan university. Prior to the commencement of their nursing program 747 students completed a Post Enrolment Language Assessment. Students who required additional support were advised to enroll in tutorials which included an additional literacy focus. These tutorials were part of the normal tutorial program for this nursing subject. Students with lower level language skills who attended the streamed tutorial with additional literacy support showed a greater improvement in their written communication than those with similar language proficiency who attended non-streamed tutorials. Evidence suggests that this improvement was transferred into writing tasks in other non-streamed subjects. The findings reported in this paper highlights that discipline specific embedded strategies are an effective approach to the development of academic literacies.

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### Introduction

The importance of good oral and written communication abilities in nursing cannot be underestimated Garling (2008) recognised that patient safety can be compromised through miscommunication in inter-professional communication, documentation and during clinical handover. Conversely, effective communication was found to reduce errors and improve patient safety (Garling, 2008). In the higher education sector the development of communication capabilities is increasingly viewed as the responsibility of academic programs, and attention has turned to the most effective ways of achieving these goals. The long term goal of this project was to embed academic literacies development across the curriculum for all students. The term academic literacies

is used as an umbrella term to cover a number of sub-categories commonly used in to describe language practices in higher education including academic writing, communication skills and English language proficiency. Whilst it is acknowledged that English language proficiency includes listening, reading writing and speaking, and these issues are being addressed in our school, the focus of this paper is on the development of essay writing skills. In order to gather evidence to support changes to teaching and learning practices, a program was designed that would focus on providing additional academic literacies support to students identified with lower levels of English language proficiency.

The model entailed using a Post Enrolment Language Assessment (PELA), a brief writing task, and streaming, which involved separating students into tutorials for this specific subject. This streaming was based on the results achieved for the PELA writing task. This model was adapted from one used successfully in several disciplines at another university. In response to a need identified in one of these projects (San Miguel et al., 2013), this paper aims to supplement existing accounts of student satisfaction with evidence of academic achievement. The strategy described in this paper was an early initiative in a holistic program adopted by the School to improve the academic literacies of nursing students. This

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constantly evolving program remains a core feature within the School.

### Context of the strategy

The nursing program is situated in a large metropolitan Australian university which caters for a diverse multicultural community representing more than 170 cultural/ethnic groups. It attracts a student population that is diverse culturally and linguistically, as well as, in socio-economic background and age. In 2010, 2122 students were enrolled in the Bachelor of

Nursing. Of these, 17% (361 students) were international and 27.7% (588 students) came from lower socio-economic postcodes. In 2009, Smith and Taylor reported that (44.4%) of students in this program did not speak English as their main language at home. Salamonson et al. (2012) found that 38% of local students in the nursing program at this university were born overseas and tended to be mature-aged, and engaged in high hours of paid work. Currently around 16% of students enter through the traditional schooling pathway, while others are admitted through vocational education and training pathways, mature age provisions, foundation courses or from overseas. Nursing lecturers at this university cater for a student population that is heterogeneous in terms of the English language proficiency, prior experiences and preparedness for academic study. In seeking to cater for this diverse group of students, the teaching team in this study was also responding to standards set by the professional nursing and registering authorities and increasingly by the higher education sector.

### An increasingly regulated environment

The National Competency Standards for the Registered Nurse require the nurse to effectively communicate with individuals and professional groups in order to facilitate provision of care (The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC), 2006). Registration with Australian Health Practitioners Registering Authority (AHPRA) (2011) requires English language skills at a level where all registered health practitioners can provide safe and competent practice. This level is considered to be an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) level 7 in each of the four components (listening, reading, writing and speaking) or attaining at least a B score across all four components of the Occupational English Test (OET). Evidence of completion of five years of fulltime equivalent education taught and assessed in English in a recognised country also fulfils the requirement (AHPRA, 2011). Therefore if there is a disparity between the English language proficiency of students at entry level and the level required at registration, then nursing programs have a responsibility to develop the communication skills of students throughout the BN program.

On a broader scale, the tertiary sector has reacted to fears that low English language proficiency levels might be impacting on academic standards (Birrell, 2006). This concern, raised in the context of the English proficiency of incoming international students, came at a time when a number of studies were highlighting the difficulties that international students were experiencing with the complexities of analytical and critical writing (Heatley et al., 2011). In a similar vein, Borglin (2011), writing with a European nursing perspective, reported that students often leave Higher Education Institutes without meeting acceptable levels in academic writing or critical thinking, attributing this to a number of factors, including the prevalence of 'non-traditional students', the theory–practice divide and the relative paucity of teacher training among nursing lecturers. Experience in Australia suggests that concerns about levels of English language proficiency should not be confined to international students only (Murray, 2013). One

outcome of this debate in Australia has been the release of the 'Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International students' which highlight the responsibility of universities for ensuring the development of English Language proficiency (Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). Universities are required to put in place measures that ensure language needs of students are identified early and that there is adequate support (Murray, 2010). Of particular relevance to the nursing pilot project reported on in this paper is Principle 6 which requires that the development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods (DEEWR, 2009, p. 4). There is a good fit between this principle and the context of many newer universities in that local students, both native English speakers and those who speak English as an additional language, are as likely as international students to require additional support to successfully engage with their studies.

### Rationale for the selection of an embedded approach

In developing this program, the project team was primarily informed by an academic literacies approach which views the development of ability in reading and writing as a social practice linked to disciplinary knowledge and discourses (Lea and Street, 1998). The model is useful to nursing education because it recognises the complexity of switching between literacy practices as students move from theoretical to practical literacy settings and between various assessment and professional genres.

In the development of teaching resources and classroom strategies the teaching team also drew on the pedagogical traditions of the "Writing Across the Curriculum" movement, in particular, the importance of genre-based, student-centred activities that allow students to understand and reflect on the language features of disciplinary discourses (Russell et al., 2009). In keeping with this tradition, the project team sought to create space in the curriculum for disciplinary specific writing practice and feedback. An important advantage of a disciplinary specific approach is that students learn the conventions of writing that will be relevant in their nursing studies (Andre and Graves, 2013).

The term 'embedded' refers to disciplinary specific approaches where student capabilities in required academic literacies are developed within the content and assessment framework of the program and within the timetabled classes of the program. While there are undoubtedly places in higher education today for more generic approaches to writing instruction, adjunct, study skills approaches are increasingly seen as less effective and less attractive to contemporary students than more embedded approaches (Wingate, 2006). Similarly, Haggis (2006) has argued that it is no longer possible to 'remediate' for the diversity of prior experiences and types of preparedness in the student body, because it cannot be assumed that students are sufficiently prepared for completion assessment tasks. Murray (2010) proposes that abilities related to both academic literacies and professional communication should be embedded into curricula as a part of the normal responsibility of the subject lecturer. Yet, not all subject lecturers are confident language teachers. This embedded team teaching model was attractive to nursing lecturers and language experts because of the opportunity to build professional capacity by exchanging expertise through the collaborative development of resources and through teaching partnerships.

Another advantage of an embedded model is that explicit development of academic literacies can occur within timetabled classes. It is often students who are judged to be most at risk of academic failure by their lecturers who are least likely to attend additional 'bolt on' classes (Wingate, 2006). This is most likely due

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