Creating partnerships in suporting student learning: A paradigm shift in student learning support

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper is the creation of partnerships between learning development academics and curricula, faculty staff and the institution that seek to ensure students achieve at their potential. These partnerships are part of a paradigm shift in learning support that has replaced a remedial philosophy with a developmental philosophy. The paper also focuses on the value of these partnerships to curricula, discipline academics, faculties and the institution as well as to students. It highlights three issues:

- the creation of partnerships to ensure student learning;
- the benefits of these partnerships to learning across an institution;
- the benefits of these partnerships to teaching across an institution.

Evaluation of the model and its partnerships has shown that:

- staff acquire a level of explanatory power about tertiary writing that allows them to rethink curriculum development and teach and assess skills as well as content;
- rich, inclusive curricula are produced that allow students to acquire skills quickly during the course of a semester;
- instruction can be integrated into core curricula across 3 or 4 year degree programs to ensure that degree programs produce quality graduates and that students progressively acquire the skills needed for success in the discipline;
- faculties can more easily teach and assess generic and professional skills within such a model;
- greater levels of student development in required skills are achieved than in a regular curriculum;
- significant development in generic and discipline-specific skills is achieved across the whole cohort of students within a subject;
- the institution is provided with an avenue for the development of both teaching and learning.

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CREATING PARTNERSHIPS IN SUPPORTING STUDENT LEARNING: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN LEARNING SUPPORT

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The main focus of this paper is the creation of partnerships between learning development academics and curricula, faculty staff and the institution that seek to ensure students achieve at their potential. These partnerships are part of a paradigm shift in learning support that has replaced a remedial philosophy with a developmental philosophy. The paper also focuses on the value of these partnerships to curricula, discipline academics, faculties and the institution as well as to students. It highlights three issues:
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In recent times, student learning support has undergone a paradigm shift with the realisation that most students, not just disadvantaged students or less capable students, are entering new disciplines as well as a higher level of education and need to acquire generic and discipline-specific skills suitable for these new contexts. Older models of supporting students' learning involved the traditional partnerships between faculty and curricula, curricula and students and, on the outside of curricula, a partnership between learning development academics and students.

In these partnerships there was no place for the explicit teaching of discipline-specific or generic skills inside curricula, because students were expected to already have acquired the requisite skills. Those supposedly 'poor' students who hadn't already acquired the skills were taught outside curricula by learning developers via Learning Centres which sat on the periphery of the institution. In this teaching, there were no 'real' partnerships between learning development academics and faculty or curricula thus ensuring that the teaching remained for the most part unrelated to what students were doing in their courses and remedial and generic in philosophy and practice (Skillen & Mahony, 1997; Skillen, Merten, Trivett & Percy, 1998).

The new model of student learning support that has been implemented at the University of Wollongong (one that we have previously called the IDEALL model) has a developmental philosophy that depends on the explicit teaching of skills inside curricula. This has required

the creation of partnerships between learning development academics and discipline lecturers, departments, faculties, curricula and the institution that have brought benefits to both learning and teaching.

The creation of partnerships to ensure student learning
In this new model of supporting students' learning of skills, explicit teaching of skills is seen as a part of ensuring students' smooth entry into disciplines and the discourses of those disciplines. It is also seen as part of ensuring the acquisition of generic skills during the course of students' study at university and the graduation of students who have desirable graduate attributes and is thus an integral part of core teaching and learning activities. Partnerships at the University of Wollongong have been developed between:

- learning development and discipline academics;
- learning development academics and disciplinary curricula;
- learning development academics and faculties;
- learning development academics and institutional policy.
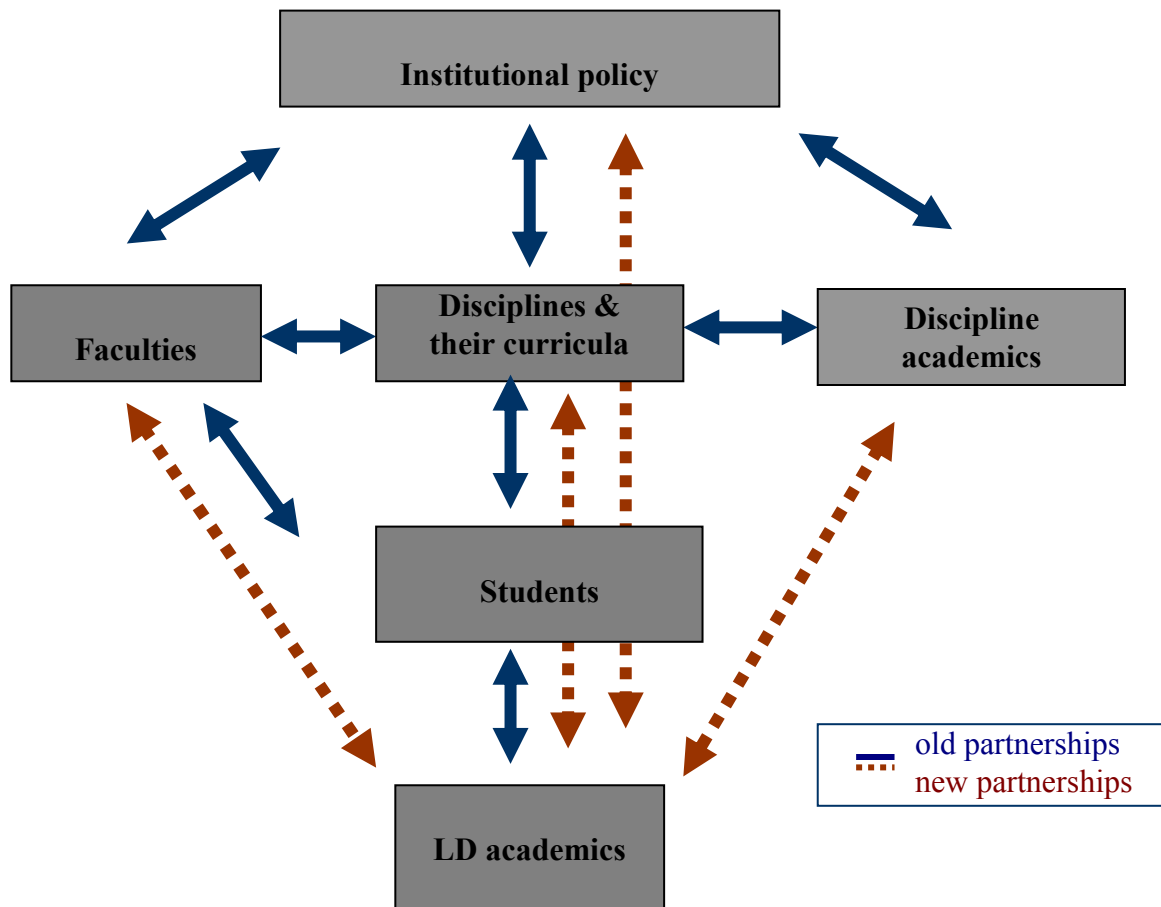
Fig.1 *Expanding partnerships in the provision of learning support*
In this new model, these partnerships are vital and are the vehicle for the provision of learning support.

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The most basic of these partnerships is the one between a learning development and discipline academic; it is here within this partnership that collaborative curriculum re-development takes place. Together, the partners assess the curriculum's learning objectives and assessment schedule to identify what skills are needed by students to learn and perform well and whether, where and how those skills can be taught inside the curriculum. This often results in rescheduling assessment to include more opportunities for staging and feedback; adapting teaching to include explicit teaching about skills and active learning activities that focus on skills and content; designing instructional resources around the curriculum's texts and assignment types; and using these resources to both support face-to-face teaching and give students maximum opportunity to revisit skills' topics. Of course, this partnership between academics works most effectively when both parties are clear about what they will each gain: the learning developer is able to provide relevant, timely and discipline-specific teaching to maximum numbers of students and the discipline academic is able to provide a richer curriculum that makes the expectations and the skills of the discipline clear to students.

This productive stages in such a partnership might include the following:
- a collaborative curriculum review and skills inventory;
- the strategic placement of assessment tasks to allow for an iterative feedback and development process;
- the development and use of explicit marking criteria to assess assignments and provide feedback;
- the strategic placement of skills instruction in the curriculum;
- the development of a marking handbook for discipline tutors and lecturers;
- a marking workshop; and
- the redevelopment of web-based and print-based learning resources to underpin the instruction and assessment.
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The collaborative development of explicit marking criteria is one of the most important stages in this process as it allows discipline academics the opportunity to articulate the exact skills that students are expected to master within their assessment tasks, and it allows learning development academics to assist in articulating the discourse and literacy conventions of their discipline. The use of such criteria to assess students' work means that students are receiving timely feedback that unpack the requirements of their assessment tasks and make explicit that which is valued. It also provides a framework for the development of relevant learning resources. In the process of this collaboration, which aims to assist students, learning development academics become more familiar with discipline content and skills and discipline academics become more conscious of the literacy expectations of their disciplines. This can be an important bonus as while discipline academics are skilled in their disciplines they are not necessarily skilled in teaching students explicitly about the discursive and structural characteristics of writing within their discipline.

Theses stages might sit inside an action research framework that allows the partners to document and evaluate the effectiveness of the integration and the partnership itself. It also, of course, allows for refining and extending the partnership in following semesters. Such partnerships are the basis of all Learning Development's involvement in curricula at the University of Wollongong.

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A higher level partnership can exist between learning development academics and departments or disciplines and their curricula. In this partnership, learning developers collaborate with whole departments or disciplines to redevelop disciplinary majors so that a core subject at each year level includes the teaching of skills seen as desirable for graduates within that discipline. This collaboration allows the discipline to provide skills instruction that is tailored to the needs of the discipline as well as the curriculum and to do so in a logical and sequential manner that keeps pace with the students' growing familiarity with the culture of the discipline. Indeed, this sequential, cohesive teaching of skills alongside content adds to the enculturation process that constitutes studying a discipline. Of course, nested inside this partnership is the one between the learning developer and the discipline academics whose core subjects are chosen to 'carry' the skills' teaching.

In this partnership, learning development academics collaborate with discipline heads and/or coordinators to review the content and sequencing of subjects in the discipline, along with the skills taught and the teaching methods used. This is followed by the development of strategic solutions to the teaching, learning and related issues that are shared with the entire group. Such a partnership may result from the discipline's recognition that their students need to develop skills that are specific to the discipline and that need to be developed in a sequence that mirrors the development of knowledge in the discipline. It also results from the discipline's acceptance of the responsibility for teaching these skills and the need to meet university aims in terms of graduate attributes and the requirements of professional bodies.

High-level partnerships can also exist between learning developers and faculties. The goals of this partnership may be to articulate the desired generic skills of graduates of that faculty, eg health professionals from a Health & Behavioural Science faculty or engineers from an Engineering faculty, and develop and assess those skills within subjects that are core for all disciplines within the faculty. This partnership provides one avenue for faculties to enact their own and their institution's policies with regard to graduate skills, particularly communication and tertiary literacy skills.

Within this partnership, learning development academics might collaborate with deans, faculty education committees and departmental representatives in the process of mapping and reviewing curricula and planning the integration of skills instruction into core faculty curricula. This is a whole degree approach to ensuring the integration of developmental and articulated skills instruction throughout the degree programs so that all students graduate with the attributes that signal their enculturation into a profession or broad discipline area. This recognises that there is a generic set of skills required, for instance, by all health professionals whatever their specific discipline or by all engineers, whatever their sub-discipline. .

The highest level partnership exists between learning developers and the institution and its policies. This partnership allows learning developers' expertise in learning and literacy to inform university policy in relation to the teaching and learning of tertiary literacy and to enact that policy. It exists via membership of committees such as faculty education committees, university working parties and executive committees whose aims are to develop policy on specific issues.

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Examples of the contributions learning development academics can make to the development of university policy or to vehicles for institutional change are such things as:

- contributions to the development of learning and teaching strategic plans that produce strategic goals and guidelines for the enhancement of teaching and learning;
- memberships of generic skills working parties that identify generic skills and develop university-wide strategies for achieving the teaching, development and assessment of generic skills;
- membership of literacy and language working parties that develop policy about literacy and language and that identify strategies for ensuring that expectations about literacy and language can be met;
- membership of peer review working parties that develop guidelines for peer review practice within the institution for the enhancement of teaching; and
- membership of thesis-editing policy working parties that develop policy and identify strategic solutions to the problems surrounding thesis writing, supervision and thesis submission.

Input at an institutional level such as this not only provides guidance and strategies for the university to move towards 'best practice', but in many cases also allows learning developers the opportunity to define their role and involvement in addressing these 'issues' according to our philosophy and practice.

The benefits of these partnerships to learning
Research into the benefits of this model and its partnerships to students' learning of skills has shown that significant learning outcomes can be achieved (Skillen, Merten Trivett & Percy 1998; Skillen, Merten Trivett & Percy 1999). When the teaching of skills is integrated into curricula, students not only see the relevance of the skills to their discipline but acquire significantly higher levels of skills than students whose curricula do not include skills teaching. Most importantly, the teaching of skills inside curricula achieves these significant learning outcomes in generic and discipline-specific skills for the whole cohort of students in the subject.. This contrasts sharply with older models of supporting students' learning where only the very best students or those who opted to attend learning centre workshops would have had the opportunity to develop their skills at this pace and to these levels.

Research also suggests that the benefits of teaching skills inside curricula are felt in terms of not only skill levels but also in terms of content knowledge. Stoodt & Balbo (1979), for example, showed that there was an increase in students' learning of content knowledge when skills were taught inside curricula. Given the ability to think, read and write within the conventions of a discipline, it may be that students are more able to extract information from what they read, more able to think critically and more able to give evidence in written assignments and examinations about their learning of disciplinary concepts.

The benefits of these partnerships to teaching
The adoption of this model also impacts on the teaching and learning culture of an institution because of the partnerships involved in working together to develop curricula and to teach within curricula. It impacts on discipline academics and what they consciously know, on

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curricula and on teaching policy and practice at the institutional level. The first impact is on faculty academics, on what they consciously know about the genres and literacy conventions of the disciplines they teach and therefore on what they can explicate to students. Discipline academics are often less able to explain the technical details of writing in their discipline than they are to replicate it because their knowledge about writing is largely unconscious. In working collaboratively in curriculum re-development in this way, discipline academics learn more about the details of tertiary literacy and make conscious their knowledge about the literacy conventions of their own disciplines. This consciousness-raising produces a level of explanatory power about tertiary writing and their own discipline's discourse that allows them to be more effective teachers. They are more able to teach about the discipline's literacy conventions, are able to mark more effectively and productively and are more able to provide useful feedback to students.

The partnerships produce benefits in terms of curricula, on what is taught and learned within curricula, and on how learning takes place. Curriculum redevelopment results in rich curricula that teach content and the skills that allow students to read, think and write about that content in ways that are appropriate in that discipline. When active learning situations such as peer marking and staged assignment are included, these curricula also provide students with greater learning opportunities not only in terms of skills but also in terms of content. At faculty and the institutional level, the partnerships have impacted on the policies and practices that are implemented. These provide a direct benefit for overall teaching practice within the institution, ensuring the sharing of expertise, parity between sections of the institution, common aims in terms of learning outcomes, a focus on graduate skills and a culture of openness and collaboration.

Conclusion
The creation of partnerships between learning development academics and discipline academics, disciplines, faculties and institutions can bring about significant benefits for students' learning of the skills and content necessary for development within disciplines and within higher education. With a focus on collaborative curriculum development, the partnerships can also provide an avenue for the development of teaching as well as learning, and the opportunity for learning developers to redefine their role within institutions based on a philosophy of development not remediation. This philosophy of development and the partnerships it creates is producing a paradigm shift in the way learning support is offered in higher education.

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