Integrating the development of academic literacy into mainstream teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is challenged to develop effective and independent learners of students who experience learning difficulties. These students are however (potentially) able to engage in and benefit from higher education and do not necessarily lack the inherent abstract cognitive capability necessary for academic success. Rather, they have not yet learnt to mobilise the particular cognitive processes, termed academic literacy, that are required to deal successfully with the problems typical of the higher education context. Academic development needs to be integrated into mainstream teaching and learning focussing on developing the academic literacy of students, but in practice this is not easy. The aim of this article is to provide insight into what needs to be done in practice to integrate the development of academic literacy into mainstream teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in South Africa is challenged to develop effective and independent learners of students who experience difficulties in engaging in typical university tasks successfully. A key to addressing student learning difficulties is appropriate academic development work (Scott 1994). Current thought in academic development proposes that academic development be integrated into mainstream disciplines as opposed to it being an add-on process catering specifically for a specific group of so-called "disadvantaged" students, and that it develop the academic literacy of all students.

The Psychology Department at Rhodes University aims to integrate the development of academic literacy into mainstream teaching. During 1997, a programme evaluation (Amos 1998) was conducted to assess how academic literacy was being developed in the tutorial programme of the first-year Psychology course at Rhodes University. Evident from the findings of this research is the difficulty of implementing an integrated approach to academic development. There is also very little in the literature on concrete guidelines as to how an integrated approach to the development of academic literacy can be implemented into mainstream teaching and learning.

This article begins by providing the theoretical background to integrating the development of academic literacy into mainstream teaching before focussing on issues of practically implementing the development of academic literacy into mainstream disciplines.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION TO INTEGRATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC LITERACY INTO MAINSTREAM TEACHING AND LEARNING

The problems students need to be able to deal with in higher education are typically ill-structured in nature (Strohm Kitchener 1983). These are problems for which there is no single, unequivocal solution which can be determined at the present moment by employing a particular decision-making procedure. Strohm Kitchener (1983) distinguishes these problems from puzzles, which are well-structured problems with only one correct final solution and which can be guaranteed by using a specific known and effective procedure or formula.

To deal successfully with ill-structured problems, sophisticated forms of cognitive activity are required. Strohm Kitchener (1983) points out that three levels of cognitive processing must be distinguished to account for the complex monitoring which adults engage in when faced with ill-structured problems. At