

Exploring the development of discipline-specific language skills with increasingly diverse art and design student groups.

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Background

Within all academic disciplines there are a range of terms and words that are the language of that academic community. This language has evolved and developed within disciplines to communicate particular ways of seeing and thinking specific to that subject. This discipline specific manner of communicating is obviously less familiar to those outside or attempting to enter this academic community.

Within the subject area of fashion and textiles (and art and design generally) there is a large amount of terminology and technical language used to describe the details, techniques and production processes in this field. The majority of lecturers, as practising professionals, use these words and phrases in their teaching practice. Without intending to baffle the students, these subject-specific terms can unwittingly restrict the ability of lecturers to communicate their points, if the students are not fully conversant with the language of their subject.

It would seem that it is in both the lecturing staff and students best interests that discipline-specific language skills should be developed through studio based activities. Establishing the level of students ability to use and understand subject-specific language in their first year of study, whilst including activities that develop these skills within the curriculum, may lead to more successful student participation and learning.

Context and learning situation

With this issue in mind and through my experience of teaching first year art and design (foundation) students for the last ten years, I felt there had emerged a need to specifically encourage and support the skill of communicating well within my discipline. Rather than assuming that students will pick up their academic literacy as they go along or relying on existing English language support or literacy classes, I wanted to devise some specific activities to gauge and develop students ability to understand and integrate discipline-specific terms.

Within the context of this paper, I am using the term academic literacy to mean 'being literate within ones specific or chosen academic discipline'. I do not intend

it to mean rarified academic English prose, the kind only found within university walls.

Whilst pursuing this path of enquiry I staged a small scale research project, within a project with my current student group. This research activity was 'Action Research' - research concerned with the action of tackling problems in real situations, attempting to further the understanding of a specific issue and trying to find ways of addressing this in a practical manner.

The project that this case study is sited within was only the second fashion and textiles project that my group of students had undertaken. Before this they had spent ten weeks studying general introductory art and design activities (drawing colour 2 dimensional design / 3 dimensional design) and their first (three week) fashion and textiles project. The specified learning outcomes for the project within which the case study is sited (entitled Construct, Connect, Communicate) were a body of personal research (including a sketch book, drawn and photographic reference), verbal presentation of research at 'show and tell' session, a completed questionnaire, sampling and development, personal concluding ideas, participation in filmed interviews and completed self-assessment form.

I make no claim to represent a complete picture of developing discipline-specific language skills here. However this provides an opportunity to discuss attempts at supporting academic literacy through studio-based activities and to reflect upon methods that may be helpful within art and design.

Activities

With a group of 27 fashion and textiles foundation students of varying abilities and backgrounds (including two mature students, three overseas students), I introduced three activities that were designed to provide some insight into this subject. These activities implemented as 'action research', were carried out in the studio environment. The range of these activities were intended to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in a variety of ways.

1. The survey

At the beginning of the second project within their specialist area of fashion and textiles, I introduced a survey to my students. The survey was intended as a way of establishing the level of students' existing knowledge and familiarity with some discipline-specific terms.

I compiled a survey / questionnaire that consisted of a variety of subject related images that needed to be labelled, as I have found from previous experience that written questions or words that are not familiar to students are often typed into

computer search engines and copied down – without any real understanding of the word.

I also ensured that the images in the questionnaire ranged from the very familiar to quite obscure and included technical equipment, contemporary and historical reference. I felt it was important to use a variety of sources, if the questionnaire was to be useful in establishing students' existing knowledge.

2. The Show and Tell session

The show and tell session involved each student being given a different word – in this instance each student was given a technique that is used or associated with fashion and textiles. Each student had to research their word and find an example or image to illustrate their technique and present this to the group.

My intention in including this activity was to encourage students to do some independent and individual research of discipline-specific terms. The verbal presentation of their research demonstrated the students' understanding (or otherwise) of their technique and was a chance for the rest of the group to get an explanation of the other assigned techniques.

3. Filmed interviews

At the end of the project students were individually interviewed about specific aspects of their work in their studio space, on camera. I chose to film the interviews rather than to rely on written responses, as this enabled non-verbal reactions to be recorded – body posture, facial expressions and tone of voice. All of which can be revealing in terms of confidence when discussing certain issues. Another important aspect of the filming, was to put each student on the spot (just a little) offering the opportunity for reflection and for them to connect what they had learned with where they want to go. Additionally, there was no time for the subject to rehearse responses or to copy their peers, so the answers were frank and individual.

Questions asked to student:

Can you describe what you have learned during this project?

How did you learn these things?

How have you used what you have learned?

What have you enjoyed about this project?

What have you not enjoyed about this project?

Has this project helped you find your direction within the fashion and textiles area?

Outcomes

The results of these three activities clearly confirmed the vast range in students' ability to communicate verbally (especially about their subject), within this particular group. The diversity of the group was clearly illustrated, ranging from the self-confident, articulate student who is at ease speaking in group situations

to those who struggle with aspects of the English language or those who did not understand what was expected of them. As a result of these findings I believe there is a clear need to have some aspects of the curriculum that deal with improving and supporting students' discipline-specific communication skills.

My findings also revealed that some of the most creative, motivated students who produced much of the most interesting work during this project, were the least articulate or confident in the sessions that required them to talk about ideas and processes. Conversely, other students who had not engaged with the project and who had done very little work, spoke very convincingly on film about their subject.

These activities highlighted the different approaches students have to the whole learning process. There were those students who were extremely diligent in researching the answers for the survey / questionnaire whilst others hastily filled it in just before we went through the answers. There was a similar approach to the 'Show and Tell' session with some students having clearly rehearsed their presentation and researched a wealth of visual examples to illustrate their allocated word. Others had only one very grainy image downloaded from the internet and gave only the briefest description of their word.

When students were asked on camera during the filming session "What have you learned during this project?" some talked about research skills, ideas and developing critical thinking, others talked about basic skills and techniques that staff had demonstrated to the group during the project. I felt these answers gave an insight into the level of learning and personal engagement that was going on within the group, that I had not anticipated.

Evaluation methods

At the end of the project there was a crit / marking session where students were required to display all the work produced for the project and present this to small groups of their peers. Marking the activities that I had introduced to this project to encourage the understanding of discipline-specific language skills was based on student participation and was pass or fail only. This seemed the fairest way to proceed, as these aspects of the learning outcomes had been included to get an overview of students' existing skills in light of diversity. After this first look at discipline-specific language skills it was now possible to start tracking student progress through group presentations and individual tutorials.

I found that it was very difficult to gauge any concrete improvement in students' ability to use discipline-specific terms during just a three week period. Becoming literate in discipline-specific terms will surely be a gradual process and not something that will happen in one project. It is difficult to know how quickly

measurable language gains could be expected to present themselves and in which manner. For example: new terms or vocabulary may be learned quite quickly, but integrating those words into description or discussions may take longer.

Wider issues affecting rationale Diverse student groups

The issue of developing any academic discourse must be considered in the light of widening participation and increased diversity of student cohorts – whether that be culturally, socially or linguistically diverse. There is often a gap between the skills students arrive at university with and what will be expected of them once they start their studies.

Student language skills, whether native speaker or international, are more variable now than at any other time as are students' pre-university experience and familiarity with the subject. This combination - communication skills plus pre-existing knowledge of content, is going to be a unique equation for each student and as such no assumptions can be made.

As a lecturer it is easy to be frustrated by the skills that students lack when they first come to university and to focus on what isn't there. From that view point it is easy to make inaccurate judgements about a student's ability to learn and develop.

With competition higher than ever to attract International students and widening participation initiatives increasing, universities need to demonstrate a world class level of support for a huge variety of students.

It falls upon all lecturers to attempt to narrow the skills gap between what students bring to the academic community and what that academic community expects of them, whether these skills are practical, theoretical, verbal or critical thinking.

Existing English language support

Existing English language support classes for most students, whether they may be those with dyslexia, learning difficulties or International students requiring extra help with written assignments are held separately from studio work. This assistance is generally focused on how to analyse certain texts and how produce a competent piece of writing, rather than being centred on the subject content that the student has come to university to study.

The written assignments of first year art and design students are often seen as parallel to studio activities and are generally not sited directly in the subject focus,

therefore the research for and the writing of these assignments does not always relate to discipline-specific manner of verbal communication discussed here.

Especially in the case of art and design, the production of essays and written assignments as a learning outcome is less frequent than in other more academic courses. However the verbal communication of ideas and practice within the art and design subjects is crucial and is often used to gauge understanding, whether in the form of making oral presentations or contributing to group discussions.

There have been attempts to combine the development of English language skills with discipline-specific language skills within various universities in such schemes as 'Writing Across the Curriculum' and 'English for Specific Purposes'. For these schemes to be truly successful there needs to be a high level of collaboration or team teaching between the English language or literacy staff and staff from the discipline, with mutual respect, interest and understanding on both sides.

This type of 'Adjunct' course has had limited success mainly due to the highly individual nature of each academic subject, lack of interest in collaboration and the lack of time available to spend on developing this aspect of the curriculum. It is clearly an unrealistic task for the English language teacher to become familiar with the methods of communication particular to each subject, especially in view of the fact that most disciplines are not static, continually developing, refining and moving on. There are also subject staff who feel the issue of literacy (whether generally or discipline-specific) has little to do with their role of teaching.

Students learn how to use the language of their subject most efficiently from teachers who have a solid grasp of the subject and who have been through the process of learning the language themselves and continue to use it in professional and educational discourse.

Importance of communication from the start.

Like all living systems, organisations establish and maintain themselves through communication within their environments and amongst their parts.

(Lee Thayer – quoted in Myers & Myers 1982)

The first year of a university experience needs to provide new stimulation for intellectual growth and firm grounding in inquiry-based learning and communication of information and ideas.

Jenkins, Breen & Lindsay – Reshaping Teaching in Higher Education

The first year of a university education or area of subject specialism should contain an introduction to all the building blocks and skills that students within that discipline will be required to develop. Generally, this happens for many of the practical and intellectual skills deemed as crucial to an understanding of the subject. These introductions act to level the playing field in many cases for students with a wide range of pre-university experience. Occasionally a glossary of terms will be distributed at this point, but very little dedicated time is spent on unpicking discipline-specific language.

The value of verbal communication in art and design education has become increasingly important. As a trend in the art world generally and as Madge & Weinburger note in *Art Students Observed* (1973). There was a change in art school education in 1968 from just making objects to an emphasis on the problems of defining art and design issues in verbal terms.

There has also been a development in some of the aims of art and design education, to encourage students to consider their employability and long term career aspirations. This aspect, along with new thinking about methods of teaching and learning generally, has led to the increase of activities such as group presentations and seminars for students, whether in the education environment or in the work place. I am not suggesting that discipline-specific language skills need to be in place before the student can undertake intellectual work on the subject, but there is an increased emphasis on verbal communication as a demonstration of learning or understanding.

As the constant theme of education is communication, there are clearly benefits to be gained by ensuring everyone is conversant with the language being used. If lecturers plough on using highly specialised language and technical terms without any consideration of the audiences ability to understand, it can give the impression of superiority. This can lead to further barriers between the teacher and the learner. By improving the avenues of verbal communication about the subject, it makes the role of the teaching staff more meaningful and fulfilling, allowing future discussions to be centred around more complex ideas and subtleties of the discipline rather than dealing with descriptions and explanations of basic processes.

However there are those involved in the teaching of art and design who believe that there is no specific concept of 'academic literacy' within art and design (in contrast to subjects such as economics or other sciences for example). As a result they would argue that there is no need for this issue to be directly addressed within the studio. There is a belief that the development of academic reading and writing skills of students are dealt with through the written assignments and adequately supported by existing language support.

Often lecturers in art and design believe they should stick to teaching their subject (as that is what they are the expert in), and by doing this demonstrate to students how discourse within this subject is carried out in a professional context. They believe that students will become conversant in 'Art-Speak' if they are exposed to it and left to find their own way through it. Such lecturers deem the only way for students to learn about the complex activity of discussing ideas within their discipline and using the appropriate language, is for them to make sense of it for themselves and then attempt to join the debate.

It is important to say here that I am not suggesting that we should ask students to completely re-think the way that they speak about their subject. All students, no matter how diverse, will bring with them the ability to communicate verbally about their work and ideas. In fact young people coming to art and design subjects today will often bring words and descriptions of their subject that are truly contemporary, either in the use of more informal 'street' language or slang (which is later taken up by a wider audience – the term 'grunge' for example), or through the reference points they may use. It is important to acknowledge this from a teaching point of view as this loose and informal way of describing aspects of the subject can demonstrate a student's understanding of a subject as well as helping others to find a way into certain tricky aspects. This is also important from an academic point of view, no subject is set in stone (especially art and design) and new influences and ideas come from all sorts of sources. It is crucial to be aware of and notice how academic discourse changes. This can be a mutually beneficial process.

Whilst exploring this idea, it is important to stress that it would be counter-productive to allow the emphasis on learning the new 'correct' terms to develop into a strangle-hold on the students and their ability to express themselves. There must always be room for students to use their own language whilst encouraging and supporting them to add to the way they speak about their subject. Through this process, the use and understanding of particular words and terms can be refined.

We want to validate our students as people and language users, but we also want to teach them to use language in ways that support academic success, ways they do not know when they enter our classes.

Between Students' Language and Academic Discourse: Interlanguage as Middle Ground – Eleanor Kutz 1986

Academic Literacy

Becoming literate is achieved and defined by reading, writing, speaking and listening. It involves knowing particular content, language and

practices. It relates to the context in which it is used and the roles of the individual in that context and it integrates many influences.

Ann M. Johns – Text, Role and Context – Developing Academic Literacies.

The activity of becoming literate within different academic settings is influenced by individuals motivations, cultures, languages and experiences. Literacy is most readily acquired as students seek meaning and process leaning activities that are of interest to them. Hopefully, it involves an on-going process of perpetual enlightenment during the students education and greater immersion in the subject.

Those who can successfully use and integrate certain terms and language rapidly become members of the discipline community. Learners are viewed as 'social beings', achieving a sense of identity through leaning to participate with increasing confidence into 'ways of working' that are the features of each particular community or discipline.

There are clear benefits of working in groups with a commitment to a common interest, to build on these skills. First year students are keen to fit into their community, in part by using the appropriate language. In the case of fashion and textiles students, using unspoken methods of communication such as wearing the clothes(or the uniform), listening to the music, reading the chosen magazine of their particular 'tribe'. This could be deemed trivial or immature in view of academic concerns, however this process of socialization helps students to gain confidence and understand where they sit in relation to the bigger picture of their subject. If they feel included in that community, they are more likely to be motivated and participate.

Encouraging students to communicate confidently using a new and specific language, requires a more inventive approach than giving the students a glossary of terms or insisting on a 'drill and practice' approach. These methods can be seen as a dull and meaningless attempt to facilitate a grasp of academic literacy for students to further develop. They are especially meaningless to creative individuals who respond to best to visual stimulus.

To learn to communicate in any discipline, students must become engrossed in the subject, through practical activities, reading, researching and experimenting. They will also learn by participating in their field both inside and outside of the educational context, by doing, by sharing and by talking about it both with their contemporaries and those who know more. They can learn by watching and trying to understand how professionals within their field communicate and carry out their own practice. Every teacher's role involves helping students negotiate meaning within their field of interest.

Benefits

From student response, I feel the range of activities and the level at which the activities were pitched were about right for this particular student group. There was a range of teaching and learning activities employed, allowing students to demonstrate their understanding or abilities in a variety of ways. The activities seemed to strike the right balance between being important enough to be taken seriously by the students but not so daunting as to paralyse them with fear of failure. The survey / questionnaire was very popular with students and has since been developed into a topical quiz for other consecutive projects with a prize for the top score and spot prizes along the way.

The activities alerted students to the importance of being able to communicate in a mature manner about their work (both within an academic setting as well as for professional purposes), and that there is a need to expand their vocabulary associated with their subject in order to achieve this. As a consequence, the Show and Tell sessions are now a feature of every project requiring students to undertake individual research and present their findings to the group.

For teaching staff, these curriculum interventions have helped highlight the diverse range of communication skills within the student group. These activities have also raised issues concerning student confidence (or lack of confidence), when having to articulate ideas, helping to spot those who may need more support or a different kind of approach to learning to talk about their ideas in a group situation. The filmed sessions have acted as a useful learning resource allowing students to see themselves speaking about their work, giving them a new perspective on how they may appear to others in a presentation situation.

Initiating these activities that tackle issues that we, as academic staff, are concerned about has allowed me to test out new theories, re-consider previous teaching strategies and has enabled me to open the debate about certain aspects of teaching with my colleagues. As the student population is changing we must surely question and review what we do and what we are asking students to do and in so doing reflect.

Becoming literate in any language requires speaking, listening, reading and writing and as these curriculum activities develop I feel there needs to be some activity that builds on students ability to write about their discipline in a mature and increasingly complex manner. This however does not necessarily need to be strictly academic. Jonathan Baldwin, whilst reviewing a book on student writing in higher education, suggests a creative and inventive approach to writing for art and design students. He argues that just as we encourage students to consider a wide range of creative expression (such as styles of painting,

sculpture, poetry and performance), we should encourage a variety of approaches to writing in art and design. He sites student journals and letter writing as a starting point.

The consequence of these curriculum interventions can be looked at and analysed, at the conclusion of the project. Their true impact cannot be felt without seeing how students continue to develop their discipline-specific communication skills within their own context. We can help them begin, but not complete the education of their academic literacy. As Zamel insists (1995), 'Language, discourse and context are intertwined' and there is no formula to acquiring literacy skills within any discipline.

There is no question that this is a tricky and illusive area to quantify or assess. Language and verbal communication is a complicated business and seen within the context of a specific discipline no less complex. The tangled nature of this issue will surely involve adaptation on the part of the students and the staff.

The process of acquisition is slow-paced and continues to evolve with exposure, immersion and involvement.

Zamel V. – Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL Students Across the Curriculum - 1995

Conclusion

To initiate students into the academic discourse community, we do not have to change our orientation completely, assign tasks we ourselves cannot master or limit our assignments to prescribed, rule-governed tasks. We can instead draw on our own knowledge and abilities as we strengthen and expand the knowledge and abilities of our students.

R. Spack – Initiating ESL Students into the Academic Discourse Community: How far should we go? – 1988

Whilst researching this subject, I have found that many of the issues discussed in this paper have been considered previously by those concerned with teaching literacy, English as a second language, applied linguistics and education - despite academic staff of other disciplines being the people who generally bemoan students' ability to communicate. I have found it difficult to unearth any writing on discipline-specific communication skills from within particular academic disciplines. I maintain that it is those involved in the teaching of that discipline who are best placed to ensure that the verbal communication skills of students entering that academic community are developed.

Being involved with our own subject, both professionally and within an educational context we are in a position to recognise the importance of a multi-skilled ability with discipline-specific language. As students get closer to becoming professionals themselves they must be able to listen, write, read and comment orally on their subject in increasingly complex and sophisticated ways. Its all part of becoming the person they aspire to be.

So will the learning of discipline-specific terms make students into better artists and designers? The short answer is NO, however by introducing and encouraging them to explore this language aspect of their discipline or field of interest the students will surely develop a deeper and broader knowledge and understanding of their subject. As knowledge acquisition is also socially generated, students can benefit from collaboration and group activities within their peer group as they are challenged to make sense of their new subject and start to feel accepted into their new community. The understanding and familiarity with discipline-specific language can also improve the lecturer's position. This will enable the way in which ideas and practice within the discipline is spoken about to grow increasingly more sophisticated and professional as the students' academic literacy increases.

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