Academic literacies as a theoretical underpinning for Learning Development support

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Presentation abstract

Research into academic literacy or literacies, however the term is defined, and how the field relates to disciplinary practice, has been debated in recent decades (Lillis and Scott, 2007; Lillis, 2019). Consideration of academic literacies is also a key component of the Learning Development community as the profession has evolved and developed its own identity. Is the term defined as 'literacy' or 'literacies'? Is it a core component of Learning Development practice, or is it more tied to disciplinary and curriculum-based delivery? By understanding the literature around the definition and the development and application of academic literacies, can we consider how this relates to current perceptions and understanding of the field in a Learning Development context and what impact it may have on student learning?

This workshop provided participants with the opportunity to hear about current research being undertaken by the ALDinHE research virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) to investigate our current understanding of academic literacies, how they are (or it is, if considered a singular literacy) perceived across the Learning Development community, and how we might measure its impact on our practice and student learning. For simplicity within this paper, academic literacies will be referred to as a plural form.

Due to the historical creation of Learning Development teams in response to sector changes in higher education, this workshop provided participants with the opportunity to hear about the current research on academic literacies. Participants were also able to discuss their own experiential views to develop a shared understanding of how we may

apply this understanding to practice, and what the impact on our work may be. The workshop aimed to help define our understanding of academic literacies—both in terms of the literature and in practice—and take away ideas and examples of practice that we can apply in our own work.

Keywords: academic literacies; learning development; impact; curriculum-based delivery.

Community response

In 2001, Lillis argued that rather than problematising the student, higher education should problematise its own practices. The framing of our profession as Learning Development—rather than Learner Development—emphasises this focus on the broader structures of higher education, rather than implying 'deficits' within specific students (Hildson, 2011). With this framing in mind, there has been an ongoing debate around the theoretical underpinning of the profession, specifically whether it should emphasise a 'study skills', 'academic socialisation', or 'academic literacies' model. Although Lea and Street (1998) provided an overview of possible distinctions between these models, Ganobcsik-Williams (2004, p.36) has argued that the categorisations are more fluid and do not follow a 'simple linear pattern'. The complications around these models are further compounded by questions over whether they should be implemented through pre-sessional, in-session, embedded, integrated, bolt-on, universal, or other support (Warren, 2002). Such contestations mean that—more than two decades later—there are continuing misunderstandings about what academic literacies are and how they influence our practice as Learning Developers (Koromila and Powell, 2024).

In last year's Conference Collaborative Proceedings, White and Webster (2023, p.5) emphasised that urgent work was required by the community 'to combat the misunderstandings that surround our work'. Chin and Sum's presentation can be seen as part of a response to this call for action. Their session offered a valuable opportunity for members of the Learning Development community to get their teeth into what academic literacies mean for us as Learning Developers. Some participants suggested that a strong takeaway from their session was that the community needs to do more to clarify what academic literacies are, particularly what these should mean for our daily work. In doing

so, it will be important to articulate how academic literacies can move from 'design space' to implementation as practical pedagogy. As the wider debates in Learning Development have shown, it will be no mean feat to bridge this divide. It is essential that different initiatives across the community are brought together to unpack the concept. ALDinHE's research virtual Community of Practice can be a key part of this work.

Next steps and additional questions

Chin and Sum's session demonstrated the enduring connection between an academic literacies model and Learning Development as a profession. At the same time, this connection remains under-defined. It is easy for the term to be seen as complex or even slippery.

What are the specific features of an academic literacies approach to Learning Development? The ongoing research of ALDinHE's virtual Community of Practice (vCoP), of which Chin and Sum are contributors, will hopefully provide the community with some clear answers to this question. There is certainly a clear gap for a resource that explains academic literacies in plain English and gives a variety of short, practical examples of them being used in practice. ALDinHE's vCoP seems well placed to support the creation of such resources as part of clarification of the profession's role in contemporary higher education.

Author's reflections

ALDinHE hosts a research vCoP that discusses pertinent Learning Development themes and shares experiences and knowledge. The topic of academic literacies arose, and the group felt that there was a potential gap between the literature and embedded practice of Learning Developers. It was this issue that led some members of the vCoP to investigate the topic further and develop a research project to review the literature and consider how it might relate to the day-to-day practice of Learning Developers. As part of this project, our conference workshop, hosted by Paul Chin and Kiu Sum from the research group, engaged participants in active discussion around their perceptions and practice relating to academic literacies.

The question we wanted to answer is how the literature on academic literacies relates to the day-to-day practice of Learning Developers. Are Learning Developers consciously aware of academic literacies theory and applying aspects of the literature to their practice, or is it more organic and based on common good practice across the sector? Steven White from the University of Southampton gave an excellent talk on his perspective of academic literacies and the difficulties of understanding the theory and how it might translate into practice. This prompted a great discussion in the workshop about how people interpret academic literacies theory and how it applies to their specific roles.

As part of the vCoP research project, the workshop launched a survey and has been following up with additional interviews. These data will provide a greater insight into Learning Developers' perspectives of academic literacies and how this learning might inform the development of future practice across the sector. It is intended that the data collection and analysis will be completed later in the year, with the aim of publishing the results early in 2025.

Acknowledgements

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