Transforming teaching practice in a linguistically and culturally diverse higher education setting

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Abstract

The Language for Professional Communication in Accounting (LPCA) project is transforming teaching practice in a linguistically and culturally diverse postgraduate accounting program at Macquarie University. The Master of Accounting degree is the largest postgraduate accounting course in Australia and allows students to combine a professional qualification from CPA Australia with a postgraduate qualification. Although the LPCA project was initiated partly in response to the needs of non-English background students and the demands of the accounting profession in Australia, the project's learning activities are designed to address the professional communication needs of all students in the degree. This paper provides an overview of a project where student diversity is regarded as an asset or resource to be valued rather than a liability or problem to be addressed. It reports on the way in which interdisciplinary collaboration is supporting the integration of academic and professional communication skills with discipline content within the Master of Accounting program. In the development of these skills, the paper discusses how accounting lecturers provide disciplinary expertise and language teachers from the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) focus on specific academic and professional skills linked to assessment tasks. It also outlines the ways in which students and teachers are benefiting from this ongoing transformation of teaching practice. In particular, the paper demonstrates how lecturers can move away from accounting 'content download' and make a greater contribution to the development of students' professional communication skills. While designed to meet the needs of a specific group of students within a professionally oriented postgraduate program, the elements of transformation have relevance beyond the project. Among other educational goals, many professionally oriented university programs now face the challenges of preparing linguistically and culturally diverse groups of students to participate in workplaces that are equally diverse, and where new language demands are being created by organisational and technological change. The activities of the project described here may be of interest to practitioners in other institutions who are likewise considering ways to move beyond a deficit approach to maximize the opportunities presented by diversity, in order to provide a high quality educational service in return for the investment made by international students in their education.

Key words: accounting education; collaborative teaching; student diversity; professional communication skills

Introduction

Macquarie University's Master of Accounting (MAcc) degree is one of the largest postgraduate accounting courses in Australia. A key feature of the MAcc program is its emphasis on the development of academic and professional communication skills in tandem with disciplinary learning, recognizing that these skills are essential for success in professional accounting practice. This is being achieved through the Language for Professional Communication in Accounting (LPCA project), which is supported by a strong and continuing collaborative relationship between staff from the Department of Accounting and Finance and the University's National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR).

The MAcc program attracts a significant proportion of the University's international students, with dramatic increases in international student enrolments over the past 7 years. In 2006, students with permanent residency outside Australia represented 34% of the University's student enrolments, while 45% of the total Macquarie student population indicated that English was not their main language spoken at home (Macquarie University, 2006). In 2007, approximately 72% of full-time enrolments in the MAcc were international students. More than 65% of international students were from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), predominantly from mainland China. Further, the majority of local students are also from non-English speaking backgrounds. The MAcc program is a 'conversion' course, meaning that it can be completed by students with an undergraduate degree in a non-accounting discipline in order to satisfy the educational requirements for entry into the professional education programs of the two major professional accounting bodies in Australia. As such, the MAcc program attracts students from undergraduate

programs as diverse as architecture, chemistry and civil aviation who may be unfamiliar with the academic and professional discourses of accounting. Likewise, local NESB students enrolled in the program share many of the challenges experienced by international NESB students. However, the LPCA project also recognizes that NESB students are not alone in experiencing difficulties in academic reading and writing: as noted by Ferman (2003: 40), 'competent native speakers [also] spend years acquiring and polishing their [writing] skills'. In his 2006 study, Birrell reports language issues not only among international students, but also local graduates aspiring to enter the Australian accounting profession.

Although the LPCA project was initiated partly in response to the needs of NESB students, as well as to address changing accreditation requirements and the demands of the accounting profession in Australia, workshops and other activities of the project are designed to address the needs of *all* students within the program. This is achieved through integrating the development of academic and professional communication skills with disciplinary content in a range of workshops in 77% of program subjects, (as well as a series of adjunct literacy and study skills workshops specifically tailored to the needs of MAcc students), a range of assessment related activities, and strategies for identifying and meeting the needs of students at academic risk.

This paper reports on an action research project that was designed to examine the effectiveness of the LPCA based on staff, students' and employers' perceptions. The research project also examined the effectiveness of the collaborative approach used in the LPCA project, in order to demonstrate the value of this approach to others. The project included a series of focus groups with 40 MAcc students, interviews with 9 of the 16 MAcc lecturers and 6 NCELTR teachers involved in the project. It also

included workshop observations, a review of workshop materials, and interviews with several practising accountants to gain an insight into the value and use of communication skills in accounting practice. Research data in the project includes audio recordings and transcripts of interviews and focus groups: anonymous extracts from these are reported in this paper.

The Language for Professional Communication in Accounting Project

The LPCA project is a response to changes affecting postgraduate accounting education in Australia. It differs from attempts to address the development of professional communication skills within comparable professional programs in Australia in three key ways: 1) in the size and scope of the project; 2) in the extent to which academic and professional communication skills are integrated with disciplinary content through interdisciplinary collaboration; and 3) in the approach taken to implementation. To date, no similar initiatives of this size and scope have been reported in the accounting education literature. A recent survey of accounting education programs in Australia (Jackson et al., 2006) undertaken within a project funded by the Australian Government highlights Macquarie's LPCA project among initiatives designed to support the development of generic graduate attributes. The LPCA project brings a range of benefits to students and staff. In particular, it is assisting teaching staff in the MAcc program to identify and meet the needs of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and is building the capacity of the program to draw on linguistic and cultural diversity as a resource.

Growth and development

The LPCA project began as a relatively small initiative in late 2002, when workshops were first introduced in three MAcc subjects. The project is now fully embedded within the MAcc program, with academic and professional communication skills presented to students as a key aspect of the program. In the second half of 2007, 1945 student subject enrolments in the MAcc programs (Trimester 3) participated in project activities. These activities include: integrated communication skills workshops in 10 out of 13 units (77%) of the Master of Accounting program; assistance from NCELTR in identifying students in the program in need of language support; the provision of individual student language and academic skills support and a series of weekly adjunct voluntary workshops; and a number of assessment related activities.

The early stages of the LPCA project reflected some key decisions that have been significant in shaping its development. Many lecturers recognized their own, and students' needs for development in academic and professional communication skills, but felt that support would be better provided by staff from NCELTR with expertise in this area:

> There needs to be an increasing emphasis on … equipping [students] with better communication skills … the challenge is … trying to blend that in … I guess what I find is a personal challenge is, not being an expert myself in [the communication skills] area, yet having to assess students in those areas, then trying to better equip them. (MAcc lecturer, evaluation project interview, 2005)

From the outset, there was no attempt to impose a structured framework for developing communication skills throughout the MAcc. Although steps have been taken to scaffold and sequence skills throughout the program, the decision not to take a 'top-down' approach to implementing change was deliberate. In addition to respecting lecturers' autonomy, compulsory participation and a lack of ownership

among MAcc staff were seen as unsustainable, and as limiting the extent to which academic and professional communication skills could be integrated with subject content. This 'bottom-up' approach has led to a high level of student and staff engagement, as reported in focus groups and interviews, thus ensuring the continued growth of the project.

In implementing change within the MAcc, a program level approach has been balanced with changes at subject level, reflecting principles of educational change advocated by Fullan (2001; 2002). MAcc staff have been encouraged to consider integrating communication skills development within subjects through discussion in formal and informal staff meetings and the annual MAcc Staff Development Days, with participating MAcc lecturers sharing their experience of the LPCA project with other staff along the way. The success of this incremental and voluntary approach to change is evident in the expansion of the LPCA project.

Although there are many examples in the higher education literature of subject or program level responses to addressing the needs of diverse groups of students (e.g. Devita, 2000; Curro & McTaggart, 2003; Lawrence, 2005; Andrade, 2006; Shaw et al. 2007) or to integrating generic skills (e.g. de la Harpe et al., 2000; Medlin et al., 2003; Crebert et al., 2004; de la Harpe & Radloff, 2004; James et al., 2004; Sumison & Goodfellow, 2004; Peat et al., 2005; Al-Mahmood & Gruba, 2007, Briguglio, 2007), sustainable success can be limited by: an absence of participation and a lack of ownership among stakeholders; a perception among academics that development of generic skills is not their responsibility; the assumption that academics should bear full responsibility for teaching generic skills and undertake professional development enabling them to do this; and variations in academics' conceptions of the nature of generic graduate attributes and their relationship to disciplinary learning and of

appropriate strategies to address their development (de la Harpe et al., 2000; Bath et al., 2004; Barrie, 2006; Jones, 2006; Barrie, 2007; Moore & Hough, 2007). Lecturers report a change in their attitude to the development of generic skills through their involvement with the LPCA project:

> My involvement with NCELTR] has given me a greater appreciation of trying to encourage students to develop [communication] skills, rather than simply focusing on, you know, the debits or the credits or whatever it is that we're looking at … Certainly … I wouldn't by any stretch say that I was negative when the concept was first introduced to me … a few years ago … I wasn't negative, but I certainly probably didn't appreciate the benefits that would be obtained … as much as I now can look back and say look, there's *definitely* been some benefits. So … my attitude towards it certainly has changed … I think it's very important, and we don't want to go back to what we had. (MAcc lecturer, evaluation project interview, 2005)

Unlike some projects where language specialists have worked with discipline academics in designing teaching and learning activities that address the development of generic skills and then withdrawn their support, the effectiveness of the LPCA project draws from the ongoing collaboration between NCELTR teachers and MAcc lecturers. The fact that the LPCA project has not only continued to operate, but has grown substantially over the past four years is evidence of the efforts made by project representatives to ensure the sustainability of the project. For a project like the LPCA to survive staff turnover and other changes, learning outcomes must be firmly embedded with subject learning outcomes. Likewise, expectations of teaching staff in relation to their commitment to the project and to the development of academic and professional communication skills must be embedded within departmental recruitment policies and practices. Coordinators of the MAcc program now actively recruit teaching staff with a commitment to developing students' communication skills and NCELTR is also committed to recruiting teaching staff with those 'skills, attitudes

and personal qualities' (Dale & Lubbers, 2005: 9) needed to ensure the success of the LPCA project and other collaborative projects of this kind.

The LPCA project aims to meet the needs of *all* students through transforming curriculum and teaching practices. This is in contrast to remedial models of support for NESB students that can be based on a 'deficit' approach to diversity through '[conceptualizing] differences as "deficits", in effect blaming students for their lack of "preparedness"' (Lawrence, 2005: 244). While remedial models of English language support for NESB students, including models of support based only on 'adjunct' academic English workshops undoubtedly have a place within a comprehensive institutional response to student needs (Parker 2007), in the case where students have already achieved the level of language proficiency required for university entry, they are not a complete answer, suggesting that further language learning is separate to and should precede disciplinary learning.

Wingate (2006) and Carroll (2005) discuss a number of limitations to a 'bolt-on' rather than 'built-in' approach (Bennett et al., 2000) to supporting student learning in higher education: students who need support most are less likely to attend; students may be unmotivated due to a lack of relevant content; and students may find it difficult to relate generic support to subject demands. Perhaps more significantly, a model of support that involves only adjunct workshops brings with it the risk of shifting responsibility for the development of academic and professional communication skills away from lecturers and their subject learning outcomes. This promotes both the idea that these skills are in some way separate to discipline content, and the view that any problems experienced by NESB students are a product of student 'deficit' rather than something that might be addressed in any way through teaching or curriculum. The LPCA project provides opportunities for MAcc lecturers

to take an active role in the development of students' academic and professional communication skills, through integrating these skills with discipline content in consultation with NCELTR teachers. NCELTR teachers involved in the project draw on their business background as well as their expertise in teaching academic and professional and communication skills and their experience in teaching NESB students in general English, academic English, and direct university entry programs offered by NCELTR.

Integration of academic and professional communication skills

Integrated workshops in the LPCA project are designed in consultation with MAcc lecturers and facilitated by NCELTR teachers during lecture time, with lecturers remaining in the classroom for most sessions. This is both to reinforce the idea that workshops are integral to subject content, and so that lecturers can provide their disciplinary expertise. In most cases, integrated workshops are 2-3 hours in length and are limited to one workshop per subject, with a focus on a specific set of academic and professional communication skills linked to assessment tasks within each subject. LPCA workshops are repeated for each class group: this means that in second trimester 2006 for example, NCELTR teachers facilitated a total of 63 integrated workshops over the trimester. Five of the integrated workshops also include follow up marking of assessment tasks by NCELTR: in second trimester 2006 NCELTR teachers undertook 466 hours of marking for these subjects. There are currently four different types of external weekly workshops, with some repeated more than once a week: in second trimester 2006, NCELTR teachers facilitated 46 of these workshops, as well as providing 48 hours of individual or small group consultations.

Integrated and adjunct workshops and small group consultations are designed to provide students with 'forms of social connection and activity that support learning' (McInnes, 2003: 14). They utilize teaching methods and approaches drawn from English language teaching, with an emphasis not only on providing opportunities for peer and group discussion, but also on developing the skills needed to participate in discussion and work in a team. Further, adjunct workshops and small group consultations are designed to provide opportunities for students to find study partners and establish study groups. Lecturing staff report the benefits of this approach:

> I'm so pleased to say that over the last couple of years, the quality of the assignments that have been given in [my subjects] is far superior. So, I think its having a positive impact … The way that they try and present and prepare and communicate technical issues has certainly improved out of sight … So I think it's having a really positive effect. (MAcc lecturer, evaluation project interview, 2005)

Rather than viewing the development of communication skills as separate to, or displacing, discipline content, the LPCA project regards these as fundamental to enabling or facilitating disciplinary learning. Within the LPCA project, the responsibility for development of communication skills is shared between accounting lecturers and NCELTR teachers.

Academic language needs are recognized by an 'audit' of all students' language skills in their first lecture of a core first trimester subject that assesses academic reading and writing skills, including reading comprehension and strategies, summarizing and paraphrasing skills, and writing skills at clause and paragraph level. The language audit is administered and marked by NCELTR teachers who provide each student with a confidential feedback sheet that includes an indication of any specific needs and recommendations regarding forms of support available, including

individual consultations and adjunct workshops. Many students have commented on the benefits of this process:

> [The language audit is] great … After that, I … study a lot to improve … so I think it's kind of a reminder … you are left behind from others … you have to catch up … so it's good … really good (MAcc student, evaluation project focus group, 2005)

> [The language audit] gauged your ability … It gives you the alarm if your English is not good and you need to work something out. I think it's good, you should do it again. Because, especially, a couple of my friends, in my study group, they had a lower mark in the audit, and they really worked it out. It really helped them (MAcc student, evaluation project focus group, 2005).

One of the features of the collaborative approach is that MAcc and NCELTR staff remain in contact to ensure that NCELTR teachers fully understand the requirements of assessment tasks each trimester, and so that they can work with MAcc lecturers to revise integrated workshops accordingly. This ongoing dialogue extends beyond assessment tasks to an understanding of subject learning outcomes and content. MAcc lecturers recognize that to a large extent the effectiveness of integrated workshops rests on their ability to communicate their expectations to NCELTR teachers:

> I think it's just important, the more we use them, or if we're going to use NCELTR staff … [that] we really communicate with NCELTR staff on exactly what we want and ... what we're trying to achieve. (MAcc lecturer, evaluation project interview, 2005).

> The more we can take the time to provide a context for what we're doing and what we're trying to achieve, then the more effective [NCELTR teachers] can become. (MAcc lecturer, evaluation project interview, 2005)

Benefits for students and teachers

Like many professionally oriented university programs, the MAcc faces the challenge of preparing students to participate in workplaces that are increasingly linguistically

and culturally diverse, and where new language demands are being created by organizational and technological change (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001; Johnson & Kress, 2003). The LPCA project seeks to address this challenge by assisting students in developing and applying disciplinary knowledge and participating in disciplinary and professional discourse communities. This requires not only the development of disciplinary knowledge, but also the ability to communicate that knowledge to others, and to interact in academic and professional settings.

As a result of the project, students report that they better understand the requirements of accounting practice and have the opportunity to develop skills that will enable them to become more active participants in their program and their profession:

> [The presentation skills workshop] was very useful … It really helped us to catch up with how is the presentation happening here, what are the guidelines we should follow. How should we prepare it, what should we talk about, what we should not talk about too much … all those things really help you communicate. (MAcc student, evaluation project focus group, 2005)

> [The study skills workshops] kind of give you the insight of what they expect you to do … I found it really encouraging, to speak English, to get used to the culture, to get used to how to study and what they expect you to do. It's been good for me. (MAcc student, evaluation project focus group, 2005)

> I've seen and been delighted with Macquarie's emphasis on … building communication skills … I think that's a great plus again … [I've] seen … other graduates from other schools come through [other programs] that are not very well equipped to be able to communicate either verbally or in writing … in exams … [and] reports. (MAcc lecturer, evaluation project interview, 2005)

The focus on the role of communication skills in becoming an accountant in early subjects of the MAcc program has played a part in transforming students' expectations of what accounting is, and what it means to be an accountant.

> When I came to Australia I didn't know – how does an accountant work in Australia? It's different from our country. What you can do after your finish your studies and the areas you can work in. I used to think you just work in an office and compute … it really helped me. (MAcc student, evaluation project focus group, 2005)

Interdisciplinary collaboration is providing the means for MAcc staff to respond to challenges presented by increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, changing professional accreditation requirements and new professional demands. The LPCA project provides opportunities for staff from each department to share ideas, expertise and experience on issues related, but not limited, to teaching and assessing academic and professional communication skills, the needs of NESB students, and the discourse requirements of professional accounting work.

Collaboration between departments and individuals is providing a range of opportunities for staff development. In particular, dialogue between MAcc lecturers and NCELTR teachers provides ongoing informal staff development that is influencing teaching and learning within the MAcc program, beyond LPCA workshops. One obvious example of this is revisions being made to assessment processes. Within many MAcc subjects, NCELTR teachers are working together with MAcc lecturers to adapt assessment criteria for written and oral assessment tasks to reflect the interpersonal and textual dimensions of meaning as well as 'content'. In four subjects throughout the MAcc, written assessment tasks are marked jointly by NCELTR teachers and MAcc lecturers.

In addition to supporting the development and marking of assessment tasks, and helping MAcc lecturers to better address student learning outcomes in relation to academic and professional communication skills, the LPCA project has provided lecturers with opportunities to become more reflective teachers, moving away from

'content download' to focus on the process of teaching. This move is being supported both by ongoing informal dialogue with NCELTR teachers, and by the more formal staff development activities that are enabling MAcc staff to share ideas on teaching methodology. Ongoing research is examining the role of spoken language in mediating teaching and learning in the MAcc program, focusing on features of classroom discourse and curriculum planning that shape students' participation in diverse classroom settings. This is in contrast to research within accounting education literature that examines the behavioural characteristics of students that shape their classroom behaviour (e.g. see Gardner et al., 2005 for an overview of research on 'communication apprehension'). While there is a growing body of research that investigates the role of language in learning and development in early childhood, primary and secondary school settings (Halliday, 1993; Painter, 1999; Christie, 2002; Gibbons, 2002), research on the relation between classroom discourse and disciplinary learning in higher education is limited.

For NCELTR teachers, benefits include the challenge of developing their teaching skills in a different context and with larger and more diverse groups of students. At the same time, NCELTR teachers acknowledge that working with their counterparts in the MAcc has provided the support needed in meeting this challenge. Over time NCELTR teachers are finding that their increasing knowledge of subject content and outcomes is contributing to their ability to design and facilitate workshops. In subjects where NCELTR teachers are involved in joint marking of tasks, this adds to their understanding of the subject and their effectiveness during workshops. In subjects where the MAcc lecturer remains in the classroom during workshops, this further contributes to NCELTR teachers' understanding of content

and subject requirements, and ensures the accuracy of workshop materials and activities:

> I had nice support from the [MAcc lecturer] who was usually there and … could always be included … in the team teaching – not just to offer content, but as far as [management] and organisation of the classes. It was great to have her there … a lot of good came out of it and … I felt I developed new skills over that time.
> (NCELTR teacher, evaluation project interview, 2005)

While NCELTR teachers are building their knowledge of accounting content, they are also beginning to contribute their expertise to curriculum and assessment task planning within the MAcc to ensure that program content responds to changing student needs and the requirements of the accounting profession in relation to professional communication skills.

Institutional benefits

In addressing the needs of a diverse group of students, the intention of the LPCA project is not to 'define students by their membership of target populations', but rather to focus attention on students' identities 'as learners in their chosen field, [because] if recognized as such they are more likely to be integrated into the community of learning that the university offers, and more likely to achieve their intellectual and professional goals' (McInnes, 2001: 112-113). Sharing the responsibility for meeting students' needs among NCELTR and MAcc teaching staff provides a means to move beyond a 'deficit' approach through transforming curriculum and teaching practice. It provides a framework to ensure that all students' language needs are identified and met, and is contributing to MAcc lecturers' capacity to draw on students' linguistic and cultural diversity to enrich the MAcc program and assist students to contribute to an increasingly international profession:

> I never knew anything about China till I spoke to like quite a few friends … I didn't know anything about Korea, Indonesia till I actually met people from there … like you read about them, but you don't have first hand information about anyone … Since we are doing an international course, we need to have international exposure.
> (MAcc student, evaluation project focus group, 2005)

In some university programs the response to linguistic diversity has been to modify the curriculum by introducing multiple choice and short answer assessment tasks, or avoiding individual and group oral presentations or tutorial discussion which may be seen as too linguistically challenging or too difficult to manage with larger class sizes. Throughout the MAcc program, students are invited to consider ways in which their linguistic and cultural diversity may be considered as assets to their profession. Integrated and voluntary workshops are promoted by staff as opportunities, rather than remedial strategies to address students' deficits. While Biggs (2003: 139) suggests that in teaching international students, teachers 'focus on the similarities between students rather than on the differences', the LPCA project sees that some explicit attention to intercultural differences has the potential to enrich teaching and learning and better prepare graduates for professional practice.

This is consistent with the views of Asmar who asks 'whether making difference invisible is really in the overall interests of a student body whose members will graduate into a globalized and multicultural world' (2005: 294). Instead of drawing on cultural and other stereotypes, the LPCA project is maximizing opportunities to draw on diversity as a resource, by valuing 'different ways of knowing and different ways of doing' (Johnson & Kress, 2003: 6). Beyond economic imperatives, internationalisation can be seen as presenting opportunities for local and international students and their teachers to learn to interact and participate in intercultural contexts (Trevaskes et al., 2003).

Higher education literature often refers to the learning experience of NESB students, and makes recommendations to lecturers on language use in diverse settings. These recommendations are often at the level of vocabulary use, or limited to ad hoc teaching strategies, and are rarely grounded in a systematic theory of language. This is of particular concern given that '[t]eaching and learning are largely conducted through talk' (Wells, 1996: 74). The LPCA project provides a framework for ensuring that students develop the language and professional skills required to participate at university and in professional practice, assisting MAcc coordinators in continuing to offer a high quality program that meets the needs of a diverse group of students without compromising academic standards.

Summary

Increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in Western universities has been described as the 'most visible and widely publicized indicator of educational globalisation' (Singh & Doherty, 2004:9). Drawing on student focus group discussion, lecturer interviews and workshop observations, this paper provides an overview of a project within a postgraduate accounting program in which student diversity is regarded as an asset or resource to be valued, rather than a liability or problem to be addressed. The development of academic and professional skills is being integrated with disciplinary learning, with lecturers providing disciplinary expertise and NCELTR teachers focusing on specific academic and professional communication skills linked to assessment tasks. Collaborative relationships are developing between accounting lecturers and NCELTR teachers, through which each can appreciate and benefit from their complementary knowledge and skills.

This paper has outlined ways in which students and teachers are benefitting from this collaboration. It has also indicated some of the institutional benefits of the project. Students who graduate with a MAcc from Macquarie University are well prepared for new professional language demands that are created by changes in accounting work as well as technological change. Collaboration between accounting lecturers and NCELTR teachers provides a range of opportunities for staff development. Accounting lecturers are gaining confidence to move away from 'content download' and focus on student learning. NCELTR teachers are developing their understanding of discipline content and making a greater contribution to the effectiveness of integrated and adjunct workshops. While designed to meet the needs of a specific group of students within a professionally oriented postgraduate program, the elements of collaboration described here have relevance beyond the project, in supporting the effort of individual lecturers and institutions in integrating 'an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of education' (Knight, 2004: 11).

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