

TARGETED, TIMELY, LEARNING SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: ONE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY'S APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper documents the approach taken by an Australian University to enhance student study skills, development of academic language, and writing skills. The Curtin Business School (CBS) has the only fully faculty-based student learning support centre at Curtin University in Western Australia. Called the CBS Communication Skills Centre (CSC) it has seven academic staff charged with enhancing learning outcomes, intercultural communication and study proficiency for a diverse student cohort having a large proportion of international students. Described here is the CSC approach to using a suite of targeted services and collaborative practices in multiple academic disciplines to assist transnational learning. Challenges faced by international students using learning support services, and by staff designing and delivering those services in an Australian University form part of this discussion.

Keywords

transnational learning, student learning support services, international students

Introduction

Curtin University (CU) is situated in Perth Western Australia. Although regarded as the most isolated capital city in the world, Perth is ideally situated to provide university services to the Asian region and is therefore a key centre for learning for international students. To put into context the scale of student support described in this paper, of the five universities in Perth, CU has the largest student cohort with approximately 44500 students enrolled in 2009. Of these, 15879 were enrolled in the Curtin Business School (CBS), with 5500 being fee-paying internationals (fpi) onshore, and 4500 (fpi) offshore. Having about 60% of the overall student cohort as international students has required CBS to take a strong role in providing learning and language services to support international students at all levels of study. In addition, given the many offshore Curtin Campus locations and partnership arrangements in operation, CBS has also needed to ensure learning support for international students who have undertaken part of their degree studies in situations where English is not the first language used, and learning standards or practices are not always in alignment with those at the principal Perth Campus. When students from these alternative settings undertake higher degree studies, often they encounter performance requirements that differ from their undergraduate degree home-country-based standards. This presents a range of learning support challenges for staff at the CSC.

To address the learning support needs of all international students enrolled at CBS, a fully faculty-based learning support service called the Communication Skills Centre (CSC) was established by CBS in 1994. Being faculty-based, the CSC is fully focused on addressing the Business disciplines and therefore provides students and staff with targeted learning and teaching support services and resources. During 2010, the CSC provided over 6400 student contacts through various workshops, consultations and short learning support courses. The CSC is a significant service provider to all students in CBS, but is particularly focused on supporting the learning needs of international students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds at CU.

Given the diverse makeup of the student cohort, having a diverse skill set in the staff mix in the CSC has led to a multi-dimensional approach to content development and presentation methods. The depth of experience, possessed by CSC staff, in teaching and evaluating student English literacy levels and learning needs is of particular value when choosing the materials and approach needed to best assist students seeking assistance. This also informs the teaching philosophy and practices that together form the holistic approach to student support and development taken by CSC staff.

Communication Skills Centre: Background

Individual CSC staff members are not discussed here, but the following information may help to inform the reader of the types of experience and qualifications the Centre staff possess. Three CSC staff members have a PhD, with each having more than twenty five years tertiary teaching experience in education, including many years in discipline specific roles to do with language education and teaching those with English as a second language (ESL). Three other staff members have a Masters degree in education and business. Each has extensive experience in teaching with one also having been the director of a major English language school.

Importantly, CSC staff, like the CBS students, come from a range of countries with differing language and discipline backgrounds. They each have their own cultural influences, perspectives, and ways of speaking. A key element in developing the CSC learning and teaching culture is the team's focus on tapping into that diversity when delivering student support services. The learning and teaching culture provided by the CSC takes place in an Australian setting but does so in the context of acknowledging the value brought to every conversation and workshop by many international students seeking to construct their knowledge (Miranda, 2009; Splitter, 2009) in a culture often quite different to that in which they have undertaken most of their learning. Further, staff in the CSC have a robust mix of cultural, professional and academic experience that together provides a diverse palette of languages, accents, teaching approaches, and learning skills. In this rich mix there is a clearly articulated sense of purpose and a constructivist approach to learning and teaching that provides unity to the workshops and individual services to students (Herron, 2009).

Creating a learning environment: Transnational study, local setting

The context in which the CSC was established was that of a university experiencing a changing learning and teaching environment as a result of a changing student cohort when it began recruiting international students to its courses. The Curtin Business School established links with a number of overseas learning institutions in order to encourage enrolments. With the arrival of the first groups of international students to CBS, it soon became clear that a more inclusive approach was needed to teaching and learning as well as specific support services to assist students new to Australia and the CU learning culture. The CU learning culture rapidly evolved as a more multicultural setting in which a diverse group of students and staff from many different countries

and cultures were interacting in the learning journey. This was characterised by what Schwieger, Gros, and Barberan (2010) described as having “otherness” in the learning setting thus requiring a learning and teaching approach that bridges cultural diversity and diverse early learning experiences. To address this, the CSC was established with an initial brief to identify the learning needs of international students struggling to achieve success in CBS and to provide support services to ensure positive learning outcomes.

Many studies have shown that learning settings that engage student interest by projecting a positive approach to learning are likely to retain students and have positive learning outcomes (Fisher, Henderson, & Fraser, 1997). Wubbels (1991) reported that students who have a positive perception of their learning environment also often experience enhanced cognitive outcomes. Providing a learning environment where students feel positive about their situation is a powerful starting point for sustaining student interest and enhancing learning and retention. It is this premise that underpins the CSC approach to creating a positive learning environment for all CBS students. Although the CSC originally set out to build a supportive learning environment for transnational students, it has extended its service approach to cater for all students in the “intellectual contact zone” (Schwieger et al., 2010) that celebrates the international nature of that cohort and the richness that cultural diversity brings to the learning setting. Hence, the learning philosophies, teaching practices, learning experiences, activities and resources provided by the CSC have become not just a suite of services but a learning environment and culture inclusive of all CBS students. Such a learning setting is said to encourage student satisfaction (Henderson, Fisher, & Fraser, 2000).

Key elements for ensuring international student learning outcomes

Students undertake higher degree studies for the purpose of being competitive in employment markets. To understand what students regard as the most important attributes that employers were looking for and what employers similarly regarded as important, Australia Education International (AEI) conducted a study in 2010 involving 4500 graduates and numerous Australian and overseas employers of international graduates (AEI, 2010). It found that graduates believe that the most common attributes that employers look for are “effective communication skills, the ability to work in a team, knowledge and skills for a particular professional area or discipline, and qualifications and work experience held” (AEI, 2010, p. v).

Very few students nominated “effective problem solving skills, and even fewer nominated English language competency, both of which employers rated very highly” (AEI, 2010, p. v). When employers were asked their views, the four most common attributes nominated were: English language competency, effective communication skills, the ability to work as a team, and effective problems solving skills (AEI, 2010).

The CSC student cohort is comprised approximately of 70% international students and 30% local students many of whom are now Australian residents who have recently come from overseas as immigrants. In terms of learning levels, the cohort seen by CSC staff is comprised of about 30% postgraduate students, and 70% undergraduates. The apparent mismatch between student perceptions and employee goals for key attributes seen in the AIE (2010) report aligns with the approach taken by the CSC in its delivery of student support services and learning resource materials.

It is often said that *we don't know what we don't know*. This is frequently the case with international students coming to study at CU. One recent Canadian study (Huang, 2010) that examined the writing needs of graduate and undergraduate students found that “undergraduate students did not see themselves in need of developing any skills” (p. 529). Many students do not know that they need to know how to reference their work, how to write in formal or “academic” evidence-based ways, how to structure different document types, or how to prepare and make a

presentation. Some academic staff expect that all university students have these skills and are often not prepared to divert from teaching in their discipline context to spend time developing student knowledge or skills in more generic ways. It is therefore fundamental to the operations of the CSC that such support is provided at all levels of study at CU.

While it is not possible to reach all students in need of academic support, many studies have shown that strategies such as targeted writing workshops can improve student literacy as a first level of learning development for international or English as Second Language students (Salamonson, Koch, Weaver, Everett, & Jackson, 2010). For this reason, the CSC has, as one of its key support themes, the development of academic writing. The importance of this is noted in many studies (Gimenez, 2010; Huang, 2010; Salamonson, et al., 2010) and thus writing development is central to the suite of support services provided by the CSC. Given the high percentage of international students in the CSC cohort, the development of writing skills plays a central role in the overall approach taken as described in the following sections.

Ensuring student outcomes by knowing where to start

At the commencement of each new semester, students attend general course orientation sessions where CSC staff provide information about the services and personnel specifically tasked with supporting learning in the CBS. Providing such information at orientation is a key part of launching student awareness of support mechanisms aimed at enhancing learning and reducing student attrition (Huntly & Donovan, 2009; Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009). Curtin University's orientation approach was noted in commendations made in the 2009 AUQA (Australian Universities Quality Agency) audit report (AUQA, 2009).

The CSC provides all commencing CBS students with a schedule of study skills workshops, details of learning support services, staff contact details, and ways of accessing these through online or over-the-counter booking methods. Such information is provided through face-to-face orientation information sessions and in paper based and online forms. Taking a personalised approach to raising student awareness of CSC services and the staff with whom they will interact is a key part of establishing working relationships with students. Rather than taking a just-in-time problem-solving approach to student support, CSC staff seek to develop trust and student confidence by raising their awareness of available support services and how these might enhance their overall learning experience. Many studies (Nelson, et al., 2009; Scutter & Wood, 2009) have shown the importance of having a positive first year experience and development of study skills in building confidence and ensuring retention. This is of particular importance for international students who usually have limited knowledge of local culture and support services.

To ensure appropriate student outcomes, it is first essential to understand where those students are beginning their learning journey, and to construct learning and teaching activities appropriately. The open-door nature of the CSC services means that staff in the Centre must constantly diagnose student skill levels and learning needs through effective communication in face-to-face settings and increasingly, online. Since the vast majority of students who present at the CSC or at workshops do so of their own volition, CSC staff have no prior knowledge of their skill levels or particular learning needs. This means that CSC staff must be alert to every clue that might assist them in determining what each student might need in the way of personal guidance in workshops or one-on-one sessions. Huang (2010) noted the need to undertake context-specific analysis of student learning needs to ensure the appropriateness of the methods used. Such analysis needs to take into account the "different linguistic cultures and variety of institutional environments" (Huang, 2010, p. 535). Being aware of the vulnerability of international students, and knowing what appropriate support to provide can make the difference between retaining a student and losing them because of some simple difficulty they cannot easily resolve. For example, the comment shown below from an international student who could not readily cope with all things new in an Australian setting:

Thanx (sic) so much for you helping me yesterday. I cry so much I want to go home but

now I feel like I can finish my degree. I study hard now you make me confident and show me better way (Undergraduate First Year international student)

Delivery of CSC services

The CSC staff provides a suite of services and study resources to enhance learning for students and staff. The approach taken has two main streams. The first is built around services and resources developed by the CSC to provide overarching or general learning support services and tools for students while the second is structured around embedding timely, targeted coaching sessions into lectures and tutorials that form the mainstream of unit (classes) delivery.

Stream 1: Learning support services and resources

There are nine key services provided by the CSC. These are summarised in Table 1 (as Service Activities A-G) and then described in detail in the following text.

Table 1. *CSC Learning support services – Stream one*

Service Activity	
A	Conversation classes – nine, weekly one hour sessions
B	Short course for the development of language and study skills – Called CLASS; nine, weekly one hour sessions
C	Short course: Critical Analysis for Business (CAB). Nine, weekly one hour sessions
D	Short course: Writing for Publication and Presenting at Conferences. Seven, weekly one hour sessions
E	Learning skills workshops: four themes. Two hour sessions covering multiple topics.
F	Guest seminars and tutorials to support specific classes in various business discipline areas
G	Individual consultations: 30-60 minute 1:1 student consultations to assist with analysing, planning and writing assignments or understanding learning materials
H	Resource materials – a large collection of single page learning support materials is available to student in paper-based and online modes. Each item provides an overview of a topic or procedure to support the development of learning and writing skills

Activity A: Conversation classes:

To assist students with their English language development, understanding of the everyday context of Australian culture, and confidence in speaking with other students, the CSC run a nine-week series of “Conversation Classes.” Each of these one hour sessions usually involves about ten students engaging in short discussions with other international students, local students, and invited staff or volunteer ‘mentor’ international students who have been in Australia for a year or so. The main purpose of these conversation classes is to build student confidence in using English in public conversations, to make friendships for “study buddy” purposes and to learn more about the Australian university learning culture of practice. They play a key role in assisting student

retention and in the dissemination of tacit knowledge acquired by other students through their study experiences here. The conversation classes also serve a valuable purpose in introducing students to CSC staff and the various support services they provide. Often students at risk (of dropping out) are identified and supported through these classes; thus aiding retention.

Activity B: Short course in Language and Study Skills – CLASS

Run over a nine-week period, these one-hour sessions focus directly on the development of writing and speaking skills. Students engage in short writing and speaking (presentation) activities designed to enhance their use of English in an Australian university business school context. This includes many aspects of formal writing including referencing, evidence-based argument, the use of idiom, and particular vocabulary development for the Australian context. For some, that is a challenge in itself! This short course aims to assist international students to develop writing skills appropriate to the genre of their study discipline at CU. The need for this has been requested by academic staff at CU and noted in many studies (Gimenez, 2010).

Putting in context the style and vocabulary needed to explain discipline theories in language appropriate to tertiary study and professional discipline practice is as important to students as knowing content facts and concepts. The value of having appropriate language skills was noted by Priest (2009) who concluded that “the better you are at using academic discourse, the more successful you are likely to be at university” (A-3). The CSC approach ensures that students retain ownership of content and argument, while benefiting from the refining of language (written and spoken) for communicating their own ideas in the context of vocabulary discreet to their studies (Feast, 2003; Karlen, Neil, Jane, & Lynn, 2009). In 2010, 1173 students attended CLASS sessions.

Activity C: Short course in Critical Analysis for Business (CAB)

This is a short course delivered for the first time in Semester 1, 2011. It is a nine-week, two hours per session course designed to enhance student problem solving skills as sought by employers of CU graduates (AEI, 2010). Although the CSC runs a number of individual workshops to address critical thinking/analysis during the semester, this course is intended to provide a greater depth of understanding and development, particularly for international students who struggle with the English language, and nuances of expression that go with it. Of particular value in this course, is the use of example tasks based on actual assessment items drawn from the unit outlines of current CBS discipline areas. Students are encouraged to analyse the very materials that form their particular studies and therefore there is high relevance to this targeted coaching based course (Collins, 1991).

Activity D: Short course - Writing for publication and presenting at conferences

Introduced for the first time in Semester 1, 2011, this nine-week, two hours per session course was developed in response to a need for higher degree students to present their research through publications and conference presentations. Of particular importance to the development of this course is the emergence of writing and presenting difficulties for international students coming to CU for postgraduate studies. Many of these students have completed their undergraduate degrees in Asian universities where referencing of all supporting materials is sometimes not required or formally undertaken. When coming to Australia, many international students at postgraduate level have never referenced their work in the manner required here, and have seldom stood before an audience to present it. This course aims to equip such students with the skills to publish in journals and to present at conferences.

Activity E: Learning skills workshops

The CSC offers just over 50 one-hour workshops each semester covering a broad range of topics for the development of study skills. The CSC workshops are centered on four key themes that focus on student development of skills for:

1. *Academic writing*: including structuring essays and reports, evidence-based writing, building a balanced argument, referencing, and editing to refine documents.
2. *Interpersonal communication*: developing confidence for speaking with other students socially and in classroom interactions, building confidence in oral presentations and meetings, understanding Australian slang in everyday conversations, and speaking out in more formal situations.
3. *Professional communication*: using formal language in work settings and job advertisements, writing a CV and job application, and developing ways for speaking in job interviews.
4. *Study skills*: focusing on developing sound techniques for study, finding and using information, analysing data, formulating opinions, presenting balanced, evidence based argument, and, exam preparation techniques.

During the course of the semester, most workshops are repeated so that students have at least two opportunities to attend. Attendance is voluntary although, in recent times, some students have been required to attend particular workshops following their poor performance in mainstream studies. Usually they are directed by their unit coordinator or lecturer to attend CSC workshops that address matters such as referencing, plagiarism avoidance and writing skills. In some cases, students are also directed to attend one-on-one consultation sessions with CSC staff to address particular issues in their learning practices. In 2010, 902 students attended the 53 workshops offered.

Most CSC workshop activities incorporate simple authentic tasks which require students to work in small teams, or individually, to analyse and resolve problems typical of those encountered in core unit materials. Having authentic tasks in workshops encourages students to articulate their analysis and problem resolution strategies, with the support of CSC staff acting in the manner of a facilitator or mentor. Working in this way, with coaching from a facilitator/mentor, provides students with opportunities to acquire learning skills which they can then apply as tools in other applications outside of the culture and context in which they were first experienced (Brandt, Farmer, & Buckmaster, 1993; Järvelä, 1995; Woolley & Woolley, 2007). One aspect of learning skills development involves the use of new technologies for finding and using information and this is facilitated through CSC workshop sessions aimed at online applications and skills acquisition. For these sessions teaching and learning value is enhanced by having teams incorporating academic staff and education technology officers working together to develop an integrated and targeted approach to learning (Chanock, DCruz, & Bisset, 2009).

Activity F: Guest seminars and tutorials

Throughout the semester, staff from the CSC run short seminar sessions to address topics such as referencing, critical analysis, academic writing and the like, at the invitation of academic staff when they have a specific need. These sessions usually slot in between classes in almost every CBS discipline area to ensure students have specific knowledge at the time it will be most effective. That usually means being called in when an assessment item is being introduced in class or when students are approaching a difficult aspect of their studies that might require new study skills. The CSC ran 63 such seminars in 2010 with almost 1200 student attendees. This kind of coaching, on an as-and-when-needed basis has been shown to be effective at CU. For example, in

a unit on *Marketing* a series of workshops has been developed using discipline-specific knowledge from the unit coordinator, unit assessment items, and communication skills knowledge provided by CSC staff. These workshops optimise student learning outcomes in that particular unit by bringing together discrete discipline knowledge and language development skills. Outcomes from this collaboration, reported by the unit coordinator and tutors, indicate that students attending the workshops performed at notably higher levels in their assessments than those who did not attend.

Activity G: Individual consultations

One-on-one guidance sessions serve multiple purposes in the CSC suite of services. Generally, they are structured around a coaching and mentoring (Collins, 1991; MacGregor, 2000) approach with the view to addressing specific student needs or problem study matters as found in their assessment submissions. Often they are the catalyst for developing rapport with students and this leads to long term learning relationships that assist student retention through their entire university experience. During 2011, one member of the CSC team introduced a new service to students using Skype to facilitate face-to-face online support in one-on-one and one-on-several sessions. This has proved to be a great success particularly for students who are remote from the main CU campus such as those who study overseas, at other campus locations in WA, in regional areas, those who cannot leave their workplace easily (but can do online interaction from work) and those who are limited by health or life demands. Feedback from students using this Skype service has been most positive. The following student email feedback comments are typical of one such specifically focused one-on-one session:

I want to thank you for your help in improving my Economic assignment, I scored 80% which I am very happy with. I think your magical touch really did the work :) ... I look forward to see you again in the second semester. ...

(International undergraduate student; name withheld)

The general themes followed in most CSC one-on-one consultations are: grammar and academic writing skills; document format and structure matters; assessment item interpretation; analysis of questions and supporting evidence; and, reading for meaning using journals and texts.

Although the themes noted above form the basis for most one-on-one sessions, an examination of attendance statistics (and general knowledge emergent from staff) indicates that many students attending such sessions form ongoing mentoring relationships with CSC staff that endure throughout their full course of study. Student feedback concerning the effectiveness of one-on-one sessions with CSC staff suggests a highly positive impact on student outcomes including student retention. The following unsolicited comments were made by an international student:

Thank you for helping me with my last assignment in my university study. I got a HD for that assignment which wrapped up my unit assessments really nicely. However, I wouldn't be able to achieve such a high grade without your help throughout the course. I would like to say thank you for your time, your professional service and more importantly your encouragement to me to be more confident in academic writing. It's a great service that Communication Centre [CSC] offers and it's very helpful to international students like me who consider English language as the biggest barrier to my study and living in Australia. I wish you all the best and will come visit you on my graduation day!

(International undergraduate student; name withheld)

To optimise the value of CSC services to students and university staff, individual appointments are arranged through team-based discussions of the topics to be addressed and the particular skills of the various team members. Chanock (2007) noted the importance of student feedback in one-on-one sessions. CSC staff use feedback from one-to-one sessions and workshops to refine and develop workshop materials and learning resources to best address emergent student needs.

Working in this manner ensures that each student/staff member seen obtains the best service possible and continuity of that service through an ongoing guided learning or mentoring (MacGregor, 2000) relationship with CSC staff. The following comments, made by a postgraduate student, demonstrate how mentoring based relationships are developed through CSC targeted services:

I have appreciated Dr ... 's commonsense advice and guidance about postgraduate research in general, time management issues and how to maintain a positive attitude to the whole PhD study process ... his guidance has made the whole process more fruitful.

(PhD student; name withheld)

There are many positive aspects to providing one-on-one consultations that are transferable to any discipline area and any level of study. The direct learning elements are akin to a cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, 1991) mode of teaching which in itself often leads to long term mentoring relationships with students that support lifelong learning and student retention. Often just having a discussion and personal interest being taken can assist an individual in understanding their learning situation and take away the stress factors that come from being unsure of what to do or how to go about learning tasks.

Activity H: Resource materials

The CSC provides students with a broad range of study skills notes and learning tools in the form of one-page publications and help sheets called “High Flyer” or “Finer Points.” The High Flyer pages are concerned with topics such as critical thinking, case study analysis, and exam techniques. The Finer Points pages address grammar and writing techniques, particularly for students having English as a Second Language. All materials are available free to students via online and paper based resources. In 2010, approximately 100 “High Flyer” and “Finer Points” support tools were provided for students.

Stream 2: Embedded classes

Since 2010, the CSC has been running “embedded” workshop sessions in classes where academic staff have sought to provide targeted learning support for students dealing with very specific problem solving and writing requirements in assessment items. To provide appropriate learning support, CSC staff “sit in” on lectures where students are being introduced to new concepts or when being briefed on assessment items. Time is then set aside within that class period for the CSC staff member to run a short focused workshop session to address student understanding of the tasks asked of them and to provide coaching and scaffolding to assist them. Such purpose-specific workshops target the core of learning needs at a time and in a place that gives maximum learning impact to the support.

Such sessions have been extremely well received by staff and students in multiple discipline areas in the CBS. This embedded mode of CSC services will be increasingly applied in the future. Overall this approach mirrors many aspects of a cognitive apprenticeship (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Kolikant, Gatchell, Hirsch, & Linsenmeier, 2006) model for teaching and learning, with particular focus on the use of coaching (Collins, 1991) and articulation (Collins, 1991; Hampson, 2005) in all student contact interactions.

Conclusion

This paper examined the Curtin Business School's Communication Skills Centre (CSC) approach to facilitating ways to enhance student learning outcomes, particularly for international students, through a suite of activities and resources intended to develop study skills and communication methods. Having a large cohort of transnational students has necessitated CSC's development of very specific learning short courses and workshops to introduce and build a culture of learning as defined by the standards and academic practices of CU. In particular, the CSC has focused on study and writing skills aimed at developing competency in finding and using information to create evidence based essays, reports and presentations. Higher level skills in analysing, interpreting and applying findings have been targeted in workshops and short courses at all levels, but especially for higher degree postgraduate students. To optimise the value, relevance, and timing of CSC services, collaborative partnerships have been fostered between CSC staff and CBS unit coordinators and academic teaching staff. This has led to targeted, timely, learning support for students at CU.

The approach taken by CSC can be readily aligned to aspects of mentoring, coaching, scaffolding and articulation as explored in many studies to do with cognitive apprenticeship and authentic learning. The real strength of the services documented here lies in how they can be readily applied in other learning and teaching settings by mirroring the suite of services and resources in ways that match student needs. A key element of the approach discussed is that it is also readily adaptable to a blended learning approach through the use of online social media tools such as Skype and Learning Management Systems (LMS) that facilitate student access to video/audio and text based materials on a when and as needed basis via electronic delivery methods. Indeed, the CSC is currently building a blended learning approach to student learning and teaching support at Curtin University.

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