Embedding communication skills across the curriculum: Helping students into their degrees and out into the workplace

Siri Barrett-Lennard
English Language and Study Skills Adviser, Student Services and
Lecturer, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
The University of Western Australia (UWA)

Denise Chalmers
Director, Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, UWA

Nancy Longnecker
Science Communication Program Coordinator, Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences, UWA

Abstract

The crowded contemporary Australian higher education curriculum frequently leaves little scope for the teaching of academic and professional communication skills within the curriculum. This is despite high levels of employer demand for such skills. Although communication skills appear in all graduate attribute statements, there is no national framework for the development of communication skills. A way of systematically developing and measuring these skills throughout students' degrees is required. Coherent processes for developing academic literacy and professional communication skills would help students initially in their transition to university and later in their transition to the workplace. At UWA, a communication skills framework is being applied to all new courses from 2012. This session introduces this framework and invites discussion on communication skills development within the first year at university and beyond.

Australian FYHE: diversity and specialisation

When it comes to FYHE, Australia seems to be a lucky country indeed. First-year students can select from an increasing diversity of courses, each aligned to a unique career pathway. Specialisation begins in first year, with contemporary curricula typically crowded with content to enable students to swiftly cover the essentials of their chosen field. In second and third year, the focus narrows even more, so that by the time students graduate they typically know a great deal about a tiny sliver of knowledge, and very little of anything else at all. The problem is, according to many employer groups, that many new graduates also lack basic generic skills. The packed program they have passed through has not necessarily fostered the most basic and most transferable professional skill of all: communication.

Lack of a national framework for communication skills within HE

Despite consistent employer demand for graduates with highly developed communication skills, there has been as yet no national framework developed for communication skills in higher education that would parallel the national framework developed by university librarians for information literacy skills (Bundy, 2004). There are graduate attribute statements, all of which invariably include communication skills, but no Australian university

has yet laid down a clear pathway for ensuring that such skills are developed within the curricula. Our curriculum is simply too crowded.

Overseas, however, the picture is different. Skills in writing and rhetoric form a standard part of the curriculum of American liberal arts universities, and in the UK, Bournemouth University has conducted an audit to determine in which parts of the curriculum employability attributes, including communication skills, are taught, developed and assessed (Gush, 2006). There are many options for developing these skills, ranging from delivering them in parallel with the curriculum to delivering them through the whole curriculum (Yorke and Knight, 2006).

The need to locate communication skills within the FYHE curriculum

The time has come for Australian universities to let go of current assumptions that students will pick up academic and professional communication skills naturally and to instead provide structured opportunities for them to learn these skills, moving past 'negligence' to 'intentionality' (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p.6). It is time for us to recognise instead that all students need to develop language resources for university study and professional practice (Harper et al, 2011), and to locate tuition of academic literacy and professional communication skills within the curriculum (Murray, 2010, p 62).

Explicitly teaching first year students the discourses required for their new culture is congruent with FYHE principles. Locating the teaching and learning of communication skills within the curriculum, rather than outside it, will also allow us to achieve a 'deficit-discourse shift' (Lawrence, 2003, p.5) for such instruction. Continuing to build on and to systematically develop these skills through the remainder of the curriculum is, in turn, our best way to help students out of university and into productive employment at the end of their sojourn.

The Communication Skills Framework at the University of Western Australia

Having for many years diversified its course range, UWA is now reversing its direction. In 2012, the University will offer FHYE students a selection from five broad degrees: B Arts, B Science, B Design, B Commerce and B Philosophy. Common to all new degrees and consistent with the university's 'Educational Principles' (2008) is an explicit focus on the teaching and learning of academic and professional communication skills.

Subsequent to a recommendation for at least one communication skills unit in every undergraduate major (The University of Western Australia, 2008), a number of documents were issued in quick succession: a 'Communication Skills Working Party Report' (Reid et al, 2009), the 'UWA Communication Skills Framework: Expanded to guide course development' (Chalmers et al, 2009), and 'Good Practice Guidelines: Developing communication skills units and embedding communication skills into the New Courses' (Chalmers et al, 2010).

The 'UWA Communication Skills Framework', a broad conceptual framework for communication skills development across the curriculum, is the first of its kind in Australia. It includes written, oral, critical information literacy and interpersonal skills dimensions. For each dimension, four levels of progressive skills development are included: beginning, developing, advanced and professional (Figure 1).

Dimension	Beginning	Developing	Advanced	Professional
1 Students demonstrate **writing** that is clear, well structured and appropriate to audience and purpose	Demonstrate and reflect on a limited range of basic **writing** concepts and skills within an area of study with extensive structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on a moderate range of competent **writing** concepts and skills within an area of study with limited structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on an extensive range of advanced **writing** concepts and skills within and beyond the area of study with little or no structured guidance.	Demonstrate and reflect on a comprehensive range of professional **writing** concepts and skills in professional contexts with no structured guidance
2 Students give **oral presentations** that are clear, well structured and appropriate to audience and purpose	Demonstrate and reflect on a limited range of basic **speaking and presenting** concepts and skills within an area of study with extensive structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on a moderate range of competent **speaking and presenting** concepts and skills within an area of study with limited structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on an extensive range of advanced **speaking and presenting** concepts and skills within and beyond the area of study with little or no structured guidance.	Demonstrate and reflect on a comprehensive range of professional **speaking and presenting** concepts and skills in professional contexts with no structured guidance
3 Students demonstrate **critical information literacy skills** that are appropriate to context	Demonstrate and reflect on a limited range of basic **critical information literacy** concepts and skills within an area of study with extensive structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on a moderate range of competent **critical information literacy** concepts and skills within an area of study with limited structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on an extensive range of advanced **critical information literacy** concepts and skills within and beyond the area of study with little or no structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on a comprehensive range of professional **critical information literacy** concepts and skills in professional contexts with no structured guidance
4 Students demonstrate **interpersonal skills** (e.g. listening attentively, negotiating) that are sensitive and appropriate to the context	Demonstrate and reflect on a limited range of basic **interpersonal** concepts and skills within an area of study with extensive structured guidance	Demonstrate and reflect on a moderate range of competent **interpersonal** concepts and skills within an area of study with limited structured guidance.	Demonstrate and reflect on an extensive range of advanced **interpersonal** concepts and within and beyond the area of study with little or no structured guidance.	Demonstrate and reflect on a comprehensive range of professional **interpersonal** concepts and skills in professional contexts with no structured guidance.

Figure 1: UWA Communication Skills Framework (2009)

FYHE students at the beginning level receive extensive structured guidance in each dimension. This is consistent with FYHE principles for diversity, design and transition. Congruent with the FYHE principle for engagement, ongoing guidance and support is available throughout the remainder of the curriculum, and is withdrawn only when students have achieved the professional level, graduating from their degrees. Students moving through the curriculum are exposed to more complex concepts and are expected to demonstrate more advanced skills in a broader range of contexts.

Documenting communication skills development

From 2012, UWA students will be able to undertake a broad range of units within and outside their course major. Only 8 core units (out of a total of 24) are specified. These include two at Level 1, two at Level 2, and four at Level 3. As part of the approval process for new majors, course developers specify the units in which communication skills are taught, practised and assessed. Below is an excerpt from the template recommended for use (Figure 2).

		Level 1 Unit	Level 1 Unit	Level 2 Unit	Level 2 Unit	Level 3 Unit	Level 3 Unit	Level 3 Unit	Level 3 Unit
Dimension 1: Students demonstrate writing that is clear, well structured and appropriate to audience and purpose	Curriculum Content								
	Pedagogy								
	Assessment								

Dimension scale: Blank-Not Addressed, 1-Addressed at a Beginning Level, 2 -Addressed at a Developing Level, 3-Addressed at an Advanced level, 4 Addressed at a Professional Level

Figure 2: Framework for demonstrating that communication skills are developed progressively across a major (2010).

Evaluation

The 'UWA Communication Skills Framework' outlines basic expectations for four distinctly different levels of instruction and attainment in communication skills across an entire degree program in diverse disciplines. It is necessarily broad and requires interpretation by course and unit developers. Nevertheless, its application provides for the first time a coherent way of developing communication skills across the curriculum. Its systematic application in all degrees is expected to assist the transition of the university's increasingly diverse student cohort into university degree programs. In addition, it is hoped that this systematic application will assist in achieving the university's educational principles that pertain to communication, promoting amongst students the ability and desire 'to communicate clearly, effectively and appropriately in a range of contexts'; 'to develop spoken and written English communication skills at high levels'; and 'to acquire skills in critical literacy and interpersonal communication' (UWA Educational Principles, 2009).

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Session outline

Whole group discussion ice breaker (5 minutes): Consider the issue of embedding communication skills within the FYHE curriculum.

Presenters (10 minutes): Outline the Communication Skills Framework and its implementation at UWA.

Small group discussion (5 minutes): Consider the key questions below.

Presenters and whole group discussion (10 minutes): Draw together ideas from participants.

Key questions for discussion

1. To what extent is it important to explicitly teach academic and professional communication skills in the FYHE? In later years?

2. How are these skills best taught? By whom?

3. What implications does the teaching of communication skills have for Australian universities?