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Enhancing student outcomes: A communication skills centre approach

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This paper examines ways that the Communication Skills Centre (CSC) in Curtin University Business School (CBS) implements its approach to facilitating student retention, enhancing higher degree and coursework student learning outcomes and supporting academic staff. Detailed here is the CSC staffing profile and the approach taken with workshops, dedicated one-on-one learning support services, and student learning resources to provide a holistic student university learning experience. The CSC focus on improving study skills, verbal, and written communication skills is explored here in terms of learning outcomes as seen through contemporary literature and student comments from workshop feedback and email communications.

Keywords: developing academic language, coaching study skills, articulation in language development

Introduction

The Communication Skills Centre (CSC) is a dedicated service which provides learning support for students and staff of Curtin Business School (CBS). The CSC provides a range of learning skills services and resources with a particular focus on improving student retention by enhancing study skills and academic writing, particularly for those whom English is a second language. This paper provides an overview of the CSC operations, staff profiles, workshops, services and resources used to enhance student learning outcomes through a suite of customised services. Analysed here are the value adding aspects of the Centre's operations. Pivotal to that discussion is the manner in which CSC staff employ their knowledge and skills, derived from disparate learning journeys, to best effect in assisting students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The diverse skill set in the staff mix in this Centre facilitates 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.

CBS Communication Skills Centre: Background

The CSC has been in operation as a dedicated service for more than ten years. Currently, the Centre has five academic staff. The qualifications, experience and skill-set of this group is extensive, but more importantly are extremely well suited to the aims and working practices of the Centre. This situation has not simply evolved serendipitously; it has come about as a result of a recruiting drive by the centre manager who has sought to align an approach to learning and teaching students having particular study and language needs, to personnel having appropriate experience, skills and team-oriented collaborative working practices.

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). Two 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. This sound base to the CSC's profile is further strengthened by an extensive shared profile that includes multiple staff having qualifications and experience including:

- IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Examiner and Examiner Trainer;
- Cambridge ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) examinations team leader;
- Cambridge ESOL Main-suite examiner;
- University of Cambridge CELTA (Certificate of English Language Teaching) trainer and assessor;
- CUTE (Curtin University Test of English) examiner;
- extensive experience in ESL (English as a Second Language);
- active in duties as a member of the Western Australian Curriculum Council; and
- Ex Director of Studies for a major English language school in Perth Western Australia.

This profile, with its associated depth of practical experience and ongoing development through professional practice, keeps staff at the CSC at the forefront of matters for learning and teaching in the field of English language use and communication skills in university settings. It provides depth and quality to conversations within the Centre for understanding educational issues when developing strategies and practices for ensuring positive student outcomes through the workshops, consultation sessions and resources that we provide for students in CBS.

Bringing a common language to multiple disciplines in a business school

Having academic staff with diverse discipline and experience backgrounds is essential to addressing the needs of students and staff through workshops and individual consultation sessions in CBS, given the range of professional disciplines addressed there. A key element in the delivery of services by CSC staff is their experience in analysing academic writing from discipline areas other than their particular research field, and in advising others in ways to refine such materials for presentation and publication in academic journals. An important aspect of service departments such as the CSC is having staff classified as 'academic' rather than 'general', given the manner in which research and presentation opportunities, time allocations, and resources are defined and funded for these role types in universities.

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) notes the importance of student feedback in one-to-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 common sense 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 supplied).

Some universities have 'reclassified' academic staff in student service roles, or sought to employ non-academic staff for such services. Such an approach has the potential to restrict professional academic development by reducing opportunities to present at conferences or have research and writing time as part of the usual work role. However, service value is enriched when teams incorporating academic staff and education technology officers are brought together to develop an integrated and targeted approach to learning (Chanock, DCruz, & Bisset, 2009).

Orientation activities provided by CSC staff

CSC provides a range of services and study resources to students and staff to enhance learning through positive university experiences, in a collaborative and collegial culture of practice. For students, this process begins with orientation sessions at which CSC staff introduce students to 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's orientation approach was noted in commendations made in the 2009 AUQA 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 all of 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.

The student cohort and context of Australian learning culture

In recent years the CSC has provided approximately 5500 student contacts per annum through various group-based and individual activities. Approximately 30% of students accessing CSC services are undertaking postgraduate studies (some being Curtin staff members). From an international perspective, about 70% of all students seen come from overseas. In response to the high percentage of students coming from environments where English is not their first language, the CSC has shaped its approach to the development of study skills to include informal conversation classes designed to enhance student confidence and skill in using English in everyday settings. Although student take-up of these sessions is relatively small in the overall delivery of services (10% of student contacts) many students report that it enhances their ability to better understand the Australian accents of university staff and 'local' students. More formal workshop sessions, seminars, academic writing classes and one-on-one consultations make up the more structured services provided by the CSC.

Ensuring student outcomes by knowing where to start

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 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.

Diagnostic diligence is required to ensure the appropriateness of what is offered. CSC staff must often begin by working through student matters or issues that at first do not appear to be study related, before shifting the focus to learning and teaching. One CMC staff member noted that "... you just don't know who is going to walk in the door next". This makes the provision of student learning support unlike any other teaching because there is no defined curriculum to follow, and the topics will vary widely, depending on the particular student's area of enrolment and current needs. Flexibility, empathy, and spontaneity are essential attributes for a professional working in this field. Often CSC staff can at one moment be engaged in intensive teaching roles with individuals and small groups in workshop sessions and at another, providing informal life coaching advice, 'soft' counselling, and just general supportive conversation to ease student stress. Support such as this often results in student comments like the following:

... 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).

Like the students, CSC staff come from a range of countries with different 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 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. 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 (Herron, 2009) to learning and teaching that provides unity to the workshops and individual services to students.

Focussed study skills and learning workshops

Each year CSC workshops attract approximately 1000 student contacts. Guest seminars and tutorials provided by CSC staff attract about 1000 more student contacts. On average the workshops have about nineteen attendees with very little change in that number from the first to the last in any given semester. Workshop topics address all aspects of university study with those provided early in the semester focus on survival, study techniques, time management, referencing, and plagiarism avoidance.

As the semester progresses, topics are tailored where possible to suit the kinds of assessment activities students are undertaking, and more advanced study skills such as critical thinking, analysing and writing methods, and exam preparation. Workshops for improving presentation methods, report writing, editing, and refining documents for publication are always very popular with postgraduate students and university staff. With the growing number of higher degree students and staff accessing CSC services, it is significant that three of the five staff in the CSC team are PhD qualified. Having academic staff with skills and experience at this level assists in enhancing student learning outcomes through the provision of high level advice for research analysis and writing. The following comments made by a PhD student are typical of those received by all CSC staff throughout the year:

I would like to thank Dr. for his help with proofreading one of my manuscripts. His proofreading made a fantastic professional service on improving the nature of language. I just wanted to thank your Communication Skills Centre for your qualified staff and service (PhD student; name supplied).

Four workshop themes

The CSC workshops are centred on four key themes which focus on student development of skills for:

1. academic writing – for example, editing work, correct referencing, returning to study and essay structure;
2. interpersonal communication – for example, gaining confidence in oral presentations, meetings and understanding Australian slang;
3. professional communication – for example, understanding job applications and CVs and successful job interview skills; and
4. study skills – for example, improving exam techniques and reading skills.

Approximately fifty workshops and seminars are conducted each year. During the course of the semester most workshops are repeated so that students have at least two opportunities to attend. Generally 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 case students are also directed to attend one-on-one consultation sessions with CSC staff to address particular issues in their learning practices. Again, this is often plagiarism related.

At the conclusion of every CSC workshop, student feedback sheets are issued to gather information to inform the development of content and delivery methods for future workshops. Students are also asked to comment on what they most valued in the sessions, and what they might like to see done differently. The following comments are typical of those obtained using this formative feedback approach:

Table 1: Typical student feedback from workshops

What was the best/most useful aspect of this workshop for you?	Other comments about the workshop
I felt really motivated by the way the lecturer spoke to us.	Creative and engaging interactive delivery ☺ thanks.
Use of humour to get facts and useful information across was very engaging.	It is excellent. Keep it on.
The speaker tell (sic) clearly about case studies. Include his experience and make me understand on how to analyse the case study.	Created an informal non-threatening environment for the session.
Really liked the examples used for us to do critical analysis.	The lecturer walked around and kept students involved in the session.
The way the lecturer got us to do group discussion of case studies helped my critical analysis skills.	Engaging open dialogue. Please make C.L. a longer session or even over three days.
Lecturer help (sic) me to improve the way I am thinking both in a personal way and academic way.	Experience of the lecturer was of great help.

Targeted workshops in collaboration with faculty

In addition to the general workshops aimed at providing a broad suite of study skills, the CSC works in collaboration with unit controllers in CBS to run targeted workshops to address particular learning and teaching needs. For example, in the unit Marketing 100 a series of workshops has been developed using discipline specific knowledge from the unit controller, 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 controller and tutors, indicate that students attending the workshops performed at notably higher levels in their assessments than those who did not attend. This has become the subject of a longitudinal study, results of which will be reported in the near future.

One-on-one guidance consultations

One-on-one guidance sessions serve multiple purposes in the CSC suite of services. Generally they are structured around a coaching and mentoring 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. The following comments are typical of one such specifically focussed one-on-one session:

Hi ...

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.

Have a lovely day.

Kind regards,

(International undergraduate student; name supplied).

The following general themes are followed in most CSC one-to-one consultations:

- a. addressing grammar and academic writing skills;
- b. addressing document format and structure matters;
- c. guiding assessment item interpretation;
- d. analysis of questions, supporting evidence etc., and
- e. 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 high positive impact on student outcomes, including student retention. The following comments were made by one student in an unsolicited email:

Dear ...,

Thank you for helping me with my last assignment in my university study. I got a HD for that assignment which wrapped up my uni 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 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!

Kind regards,

(International undergraduate student; name supplied).

Enhancing learning outcomes: CSC approach

Each of the academic lecturers of the Curtin Business School CSC team has their own particular ways of teaching and communicating ideas to students. There is however an overarching approach taken by the team that provides consistency for students in the nature of the materials and philosophical delivery of teaching and learning by staff in the Centre. As noted earlier, the CSC team has great depth and diversity when it comes to the experience and qualifications of its members, but one of its greatest strengths is the united sense of purpose and clarity of teaching methods used. Overall the 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. CSC students are supported in their learning by CSC staff operating as facilitators, or in the manner of a mentor, by articulating expert knowledge and coaching them in the application of problem solving strategies to real tasks. For example, CSC staff model expert practice in workshops by: articulating how and why they have prepared the content and learning activities used in the session; demonstrating how these are linked to unit outlines and CBS assessment formats and marking rubrics; providing advance-organiser note-taking pages based on the PowerPoint slides used; coaching students through multiple authentic problem based learning activities using role play and group-based methods while giving feedback on student solutions and scaffolding them to assist revision of ideas and the development of alternative outcomes. This approach is supported by CSC provision of numerous paper based and downloadable two page information sheets on the full range of learning topics delivered

by the Centre. The methods and resources used in the workshops are mirrored in the one-to-one student consultation sessions.

The holistic approach used by CSC staff to guide student learning is enhanced by the use of resource materials that students can readily access to overcome problems that might otherwise present barriers to their progress. Such materials, along with advice, hints, tips and explanations form scaffolding to support students in resolving task related problems (Brown, *et al.*, 1989). Scaffolding resources include a suite of printed (and online) study help sheets that are constantly refined by CSC staff to reflect CSC workshop topics designed to address the tasks and concepts embedded in CBS unit outlines.

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, 1993; Järvelä, 1995; Woolley & Jarvis, 2007).

A major strength of the CSC team is its use of articulation to explain and contextualise strategies for student use in analysing and resolving unit assessment items. By modelling the use of reflective analysis and explanation, CSC staff guide students in their development of verbal and writing language skills appropriate to their academic setting and study disciplines. Putting in context the style and vocabulary needed to explain discipline theories in language appropriate to tertiary study and professional discipline practices 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” (p. A73). CSC staff do not attempt to convey the discrete knowledge of the many disciplines taught within CBS, but instead focus on developing appropriate levels of professional communication skills for students. Working in this way, students attending CSC workshops are guided in their development of study skills and language which equip them to produce assessment submissions which they can then bring to one-on-one consultations with CSC staff for refining. The common thread is the development of language and therefore CSC staff can assist students in all discipline areas without having to address discipline specific knowledge. The student retains 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 discrete to their studies (Feast, 2003; Karlen, Neil, Jane, & Lynn, 2009).

Using the learning and teaching approach described here, CSC staff can assist students in articulating personal thoughts and opinions, their reasons for using particular problem solving strategies, defending of ideas, and explaining the adopted solutions or decisions taken. To optimise the skills and strengths of CSC staff (as described earlier in this paper) a team based strategic approach is used to (wherever possible) match staff to student needs. This is often a game of chance with many unknowns. In the case of the general workshops staff experience and qualifications tend to guide our choices for delivering particular topics. Similarly, in the targeted workshops developed in collaboration with unit controllers, specific skills or strengths can be matched to topics and procedures: for example, analysis methods, case study approaches, exam methods and the like. The strength of staff experience on the CSC team

readily provides for postgraduate student consultations and workshops. When it comes to those students who just walk in the door for an appointment, a quick assessment is undertaken by whoever on staff interviews them so that an appointment with the most appropriate staff member can be arranged. This unstructured approach has proved to be quite effective because of the very collaborative nature of the CSC team and the awareness that each team member has of the others' strengths.

Conclusion

This paper examined the Curtin Business School's Communication Skills Centre use of a suite of activities and resources intended to develop study skills, improve communication methods, facilitate student retention, and enhance student learning outcomes. The approach taken by CSC staff 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. This is not surprising given that using methods that encourage students to construct new knowledge on the foundations of what they already know has been well proved in many research studies. Of special value here is that the mechanism for implementing such an approach in a dedicated service centre in a business school where staff have the kinds of qualifications, experience and skill appropriate to the task. What really makes this work though is the strength of the team as a collegial unit focussed on providing quality student learning outcomes.

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