



[Struan, A.](#) , [O'Brien, M. C.](#) , [Hannaford, E. D.](#) and Taylor, S. J. (2023) Staff-student collaboration across disciplines: an academic literacies approach. In: Abegglen, S., Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (eds.) *Collaboration in Higher Education: A New Ecology of Practice*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 93-97. ISBN 9781350334052 (doi: [10.5040/9781350334083.ch-4](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350334083.ch-4))

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.

<https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/293023/>

Deposited on 28 February 2023

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Staff-student Collaboration across Disciplines: An Academic Literacies Approach

Andrew Struan, Monica Catherine O'Brien,
Ewan D. Hannaford and Stuart J. Taylor

- Working collaboratively, permanent staff and Graduate Teaching Assistants (PhD tutors) can create meaningful, impactful academic literacies development for students.
- Academic literacies teaching is an essential part of promoting student success, and collaboration between staff and students (at all levels) is key to enabling this success.
- Multi- and interdisciplinary teaching, research and pedagogic development are crucial to providing twenty-first-century graduates with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to succeed.
- Collaboration across subject areas, and between staff and students, should be a central part of engaging students in their academic development.

Introduction

Learning or Academic Developers in the UK context are those ‘third space’ professionals who typically work directly with students to help them better understand HE and its codes and conventions – its mysteries. Typically, this work is seen as focusing either on ‘skills’, ‘socialization’ or ‘literacies’ (Lea & Street, 2006) with the latter seen as the most liberatory approach. More recently, Learning Development (LD) and the focus on academic literacies development are increasingly central components of the global HE sector (Boyle, Ramsay & Struan, 2019; Hill, 2010). LDs are essentially collaborative, working with students to build understanding of, and confidence and attainment in, academic study, academic research and academic writing. The academic literacies model creates a partnership between LD and student that encourages students to actively participate in their development of the specific practices of their subject areas (Bury & Sheese, 2016; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). As seen in the examples presented in this chapter, this model encourages LDs to work in multi-disciplinary/interdisciplinary modes and foreground ‘the variety and specificity of institutional practices’ (Lea & Street, 2006, 376) and to work together with colleagues and with students in demystifying and detangling these practices.

This chapter discusses the successful integration of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), who are employed to teach while they undertake their PhD studies, into the collegiate team of LDs at a Scottish research-intensive institution. GTAs come from all subject backgrounds across the institution, but instead of subject-specific teaching, the GTAs teach academic writing, academic study and researcher development to broad, multi- and interdisciplinary groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

These GTAs take on a variety of teaching, course- and curricula-design activities, one-to-one meetings with students, assessment, and resource creation. All GTAs are active researchers within their own diverse subject areas, ranging from creative writing to astrophysics, with most aiming to go into either academic careers in their discipline or into LD upon completion of their studies. As a result, the role of the GTA is designed as a career development opportunity into the broader world of learning and teaching practice in HE. The role and development of GTAs across HE have been discussed widely, but such discussion has focused on subject-based or subject-specific teaching (Gaia et al., 2003; Hey-Cunningham et al., 2021; Huffmyer & Lemus, 2019; Prieto & Altmaier, 1994; Ryker & McConnell, 2014). There has been little discussion of the role of a multi-disciplinary team of GTAs working to enhance students' academic literacies.

This chapter uses two examples to demonstrate how strong collaboration across the team, between the team and students and across subject areas enables the successful deployment of an academic literacies-based approach to LD. This case study, written jointly by a permanent LD staff member and GTAs, consequently highlights the ways in which collaboration acts as a guiding force within the department.

Composition of the Team and Collaboration Principles

The team is large: there are roughly thirty-six GTAs working with a team of eight permanent LD staff from across the disciplines, and together they assess and teach approximately 16,000 students per academic year (Boyle et al., 2019; Struan, 2021). While many GTAs have extensive experience of subject teaching, practice in and understandings of academic literacies-based pedagogies may be more limited. As a result, the LD department looks to embrace and embed collaborative practice at the heart of its development of GTAs. GTAs work hand-in-hand with permanent members of LD staff to develop, enhance and deploy a variety of initiatives, programmes of study and courses, as described in the first example. The second example illustrates how this collaborative practice takes the form of GTAs, LD staff and students working across multiple disciplinary boundaries.

Working Together: GTAs and LD Staff

The ethos of collaboration is at the heart of the department's structure and organization. GTAs and permanent staff from all disciplinary backgrounds work together to create and deliver all of the department's resources and classes. Meanwhile, students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate courses at the university shape the departments' focus and teaching through their continual feedback and participation in the flipped- and blended-classroom approach.

At the organizational level, GTAs collaborate across the team, through open and ongoing communication, regarding approaches to pedagogy, course organization and structures. The LD team were early adopters of the university's collaborative platform *Microsoft Teams* and piloted its initial use at their institution. The 'conversational'

format of the platform helped the team to maintain free-flowing conversations, enabled group and individual collaboration to emerge independently, and supported the rapid sharing and co-creation of documents/materials. The Covid-19 pandemic did not disrupt normal routes of communication and instead further solidified this open, digital form of departmental communication, discussion, and collaboration as the norm. The early adoption of *Microsoft Teams* allowed for a seamless transition to entirely online work at the start of the pandemic; the use of these instant, collaborative forms of communication is central to the team's ethos and the priority of ongoing debate and discussion.

The department's collaboration was exemplified by the development of new suites of courses to engage undergraduate students in the enhancement of their academic literacies at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, through live, interactive study of subjects of interest (Yu, 2020). Courses ranged in topic from 'History of Argument', 'Let's Play with Academia!' and 'Introduction to Creative Writing' to 'Rationality in Scientific Debate' and 'Learning from the Great Scientists'. Courses were vastly over-subscribed – there were several hundred students across the variety of courses, with almost 300 on waiting lists for free spaces. GTAs and permanent members of staff worked together to design and deliver the courses (Huffmyer & Lemus, 2019; McVitty & Andrews, 2021; Park & Choi, 2009). The GTAs and permanent LD staff members collaborated on all elements of course design: from topic, through class-by-class discussion points, to assessment and co-delivery of teaching.

Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the development of their academic literacies. We feel that the success of these projects is a direct result of the way that the GTAs and permanent members of staff worked together to design and build new courses with new pedagogical approaches to academic literacies teaching – with GTA bringing their research background to the LD community and with a permanent member of LD staff bringing experience in the pedagogical approaches (Abegglen et al., 2019; Chan & Luo, 2021; Donovan & Erskine-Shaw, 2020). Moreover, through this engagement in all areas of new course design, the GTAs involved have been able to develop knowledge and experience in course design from start to finish.

Furthermore, the collegiate approach to course design allowed GTAs to develop independence and a sense of self-efficacy in learning and teaching, an element often missed in their career development (Auten & Twigg, 2015; Ridgway et al., 2017). Importantly, GTAs were offered freedom in their approach to course design, resource creation and topic, and were encouraged to work together to develop ideas. This 'crowd-source' approach to course design allowed for innovation, fresh perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches to be foregrounded in this new provision. Collaborative 'best practices' were co-developed by GTAs drawing on the unique experiences and knowledge of their respective disciplines. The department's development of a free-flowing and comfortable space in *Microsoft Teams* saw daily collaboration between GTAs and LDs, and the space allowed GTAs and LDs to easily circulate and test ideas with their multi-disciplinary colleagues, and receive feedback and advice. Before the pandemic, collaboration also involved meetings of varying sizes for the department's projects. Zoom meetings substituted here, and while timing could be challenging, recordings and *Teams* ensured everyone remained up-to-date and involved in the conversations.

Working across Subjects: An Interdisciplinary Team

One of the main focuses of the LD department is the encouragement of inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to study and research. The model of academic literacies relies on effective understanding – often co-built between student and staff member – of academic practice and norms across a variety of subjects. This broad subject discussion has resulted in the LD department creating and hosting a unique annual undergraduate research conference and research journal (Bownes et al., 2020).

In this work, GTAs act as mentors for undergraduates from radically different subject backgrounds to their own. This collaboration supports students' development of their communication skills to speak to wide audiences in academia and their future workplaces. The external perspective on their work provided by the GTA also enhances students' critical reflection. The GTAs work one-on-one with the undergraduates in the development of a public research talk or a piece of written research for a multi-disciplinary audience. Through a process of active collaboration between GTA and undergraduate, a truly multi- and interdisciplinary piece of research communication is created.

In this role, GTAs act as mentor, guide, tutor and subject outsider. GTAs and students work together to refine research questions, draft presentations/articles and perfect multi-disciplinary communication. The results are pieces of undergraduate work that have been shaped through working and collaborating with GTAs (Stamp et al., 2015). Through this activity, GTAs bring their own experiences and subject knowledge to a new discussion; pairings have included, for example, historian GTAs working with undergraduate medical science students. Through a process of active – and quite intensive – collaboration, these projects encourage undergraduates to consider the broader implications of their research. From working collaboratively with the GTAs, the undergraduates also gain an understanding of different subject approaches and important experience and understanding of multi-disciplinary approaches that may otherwise be absent from their degree. These projects provide GTAs' valuable experience of working with students from across a variety of subject areas; the GTAs engage actively to develop their skills as mentors, interdisciplinary researchers and teachers (Craney et al., 2011; Gennis et al., 2020; Mariani et al., 2013).

Conclusion

The academic literacies model demands that LDs 'collaboratively investigate the range of genres, modes, shifts, transformations, representations, meaning-making processes, and identities involved in academic learning within and across academic contexts' (Lea & Street, 2006, 376). This model is one that applies directly to the role of GTA: through work with the LD department, GTAs are encouraged, through collaboration with staff and students, to explore the range of genres, identities, modes and processes involved in their own career development as educators, and in the academic development of the students with which they work.

The key takeaway elements from this collaborative practice, then, are:

- the importance of multi- and interdisciplinary development in liberatory learning and teaching practice for early-career academics;
- the significance of a standardized, easy-to-use platform for instant communication and dialogue, where that is then utilized for collaborative, cooperative and collegiate working practices;
- the impact of multi- and interdisciplinary communication as an essential part of the twenty-first-century student's studies and of academics' practice; and
- the ongoing relevance of the academic literacies model in developing students and staff at all levels.

Researching Together: A Collaborative Research Volunteer Scheme and Its Student-staff Partnership Evaluation

Lynn Wright, Max Korbmacher, Martha Gardiner, Julia Ngadi,
Ayesha Shahid and Scott M. Hardie

- A 'student as partners' approach successfully underpins our undergraduate research volunteer scheme.
- Successful partnerships require a structured approach, with clear communication about expectations and roles.
- Student 'partners in research' learn from the collaborative co-construction of knowledge.
- Research projects enabling a greater degree of co-creation were seen to provide the greatest mutual benefits.

Introduction

Engaging students in research programmes is beneficial; students gain valuable experience, develop core skills and form collaborative working practices with staff and with each other (Madan & Teitge, 2013). The Research Volunteer Scheme (RVS), a collaborative research initiative for students and staff, has run at Abertay University, Scotland since 2006 and at the time was not typical in the UK sector. The RVS continues to successfully run and has expanded over the last fifteen years covering all academic schools in the University. Increased participation by staff and students across the years demonstrates this to be a robust and enduring collaborative activity. Initially conceived by two colleagues in Psychology, it continues to be self-managed by academic staff, working with undergraduates. It is open to all academic staff across the