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Collaboration Across Disciplines In Postsecondary Education: Attitudinal Challenges

To begin this discussion of collaboration across disciplines, I would like to present three common concerns about teaching in the multicultural university of the 90s which I frequently hear from content-area instructors:

- My classes are filled with students who don't speak the language, can't read the textbook, and can't write a decent paper. These kids have graduated from American high schools, but they're not ready for college.
- I'm an economics professor. You can't expect me to become an English teacher, and anyway, I don't have the time.
- I would really like to reach these students, but I don't have the background or training.

These comments reflect the attitudinal continuum among teachers I've met in working across the disciplines in the postsecondary setting. These teachers range from those who are having trouble accepting the reality that demographic changes in California have profoundly affected the type of student coming into our colleges and universities, to those so entrenched in their traditional roles that they resist changing their instructional strategies, to those concerned faculty members who recognize that accommodations are in order but who feel at a loss in terms of expertise and experience to make the accommodation.

As an increasing number of language minority students enroll in college and university classes, content-area faculty require assistance in dealing with the instructional demands of teaching second language students. While many are indeed skillful teachers, there is a growing mismatch between the teaching strategies they have honed over the years for one type

of population and approaches which will engage the linguistically and culturally diverse students presently enrolled in their classes. The pedagogy exists in TESOL to collaborate with our content colleagues, but an attitudinal backdrop must also be considered for meaningful, sustained change to occur. In keeping with the theme of this special issue, I'll address some of the challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration which typically fall outside of discussions of pedagogy per se. Specifically, I'll discuss attitudes that content-area faculty hold about students' educational backgrounds and language skills and strategies for countering some of the obstacles that prevent faculty involvement in interdisciplinary collaboration. This discussion is based on my experience at California State University, Los Angeles where I codirect Project LEAP: Learning English for Academic Purposes, a program funded by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education (FIPSE) grant in which general education faculty, peer tutors, and language specialists work together to assist language minority students to improve their academic literacy skills.

Let me say at the outset that responsibility for meeting the needs of our language minority students is a two-way street. TESOL professionals in higher education must, in my opinion, take a broader view of their roles and responsibilities. We have much to offer our colleagues across the disciplines. The impact we can make in our individual ESL classes, while certainly significant and not to be underestimated, is limited when one considers the far greater amounts of time our students spend outside ESL courses in the real world of content-area classes. In addition to providing a critical outlet for our expertise, cross-curricular collaboration presents an opportunity for increased visibility and stature in the eyes of our campus communities as our content-area colleagues look to TESOL professionals for answers to their vexing questions about how to reach second language students.

In convincing our content-area colleagues to take greater responsibility for reaching all students, we need to begin by dealing head on with attitudes about who these students are and what kind of skills they bring to class. Content-area instructors must be sensitized to the complex social and demographic factors involved in educating language minority students in California's schools. From my experience, faculty simplify this complexity in two different ways. In one scenario, faculty make no distinction between the native English-speaking students taking their classes and their second language counterparts, and, thus, fail to understand the tremendous academic demands placed on language minority students in their classes. In this regard, I have found that Cummins' work provides insights that content-area faculty find very enlightening (see Cummins, 1981, 1992). In the other scenario, faculty refer generically to nonmainstream students as *for-*

eign students. While clearly there are many international students attending California colleges and universities, by far the majority of language minority students on our campuses are immigrants who have no plans to return to their home countries or U.S.-born students who have a second language in their personal or educational background.

The following characteristics of language and educational background may be helpful in distinguishing language minority students from each other and in assisting content-area faculty to understand their complex profile:

1. Some of the students we see in our college and university classes are recent immigrants who have developed social communicative skills in English through beginning-level ESL classes or through exposure to an English-speaking environment but have not yet developed academic language skills appropriate to their educational level;

2. Other language minority students have acquired academic language skills in their native language and initial proficiency in English but need assistance in transferring concepts and skills learned in the first language to English;

3. Still other students may have lived in this country for a long time or been born in the U.S. While usually bilingual, they are English-dominant as they have received little or no schooling in their first language. These students may have done quite well in their high school courses but are often not prepared for the increased demands of college or university study because they lack sufficient experience with or systematic instruction in academic language skills.

To deal with the attitudes exemplified in the faculty comments which appeared at the beginning of this article, TESOL professionals have to think realistically about what will motivate faculty to collaborate. In other words, how can we get faculty to buy in to cross-curricular collaboration? I believe that the answer requires several strategies. First, we must assist content-area instructors in improving their approach to teaching. Secondly, we must convince content-area faculty that they will see improvement in their students' mastery of course content if they assist them with academic language skills. Successful marketing of cross-curricular collaboration must also cast the ultimate objective of such activities as that of raising standards and course rigor rather than expecting less of students.

To meet the attitudinal challenges posed by interdisciplinary collaboration, we at Project LEAP look to Meyer (1993) who said, "Teachers should have two goals: to teach the content, and to teach the necessary conditions for learning it" (p. 106). We have seen dramatic changes in the attitudes of faculty after they have experienced a positive washback from being attentive to students' language needs and changing their own instructional strategies.

For example, faculty in Project LEAP general education courses have seen significant improvement in the quality of student writing and content understanding after redesigning their previous one-shot term paper assignments into multistep exercises whereby students submit assignments in stages. In an introduction to a political science course, Project LEAP students received very detailed guidelines at the beginning of the term, participated in a library tour, completed a homework assignment in which they learned to use on-line data sources such as LEXIS/NEXIS and CARL to conduct their research, reviewed model papers, and turned in the introduction and literature review sections of their research papers at the midterm point. They then added a discussion and conclusion, incorporating peer and instructor feedback in the production of the final draft.

Professors have also seen tremendous payoffs after experimenting with different ways to help students prepare for exams. In a humans-and-their-biological-environment course, for instance, the biology professor permitted students to submit questions to be used on examinations. By the third midterm exam, 42% of the questions which appeared on the exam were student generated. In cultural anthropology, a professor has seen an increase in the number of A and B grades awarded after asking students to bring mock essay questions to class and giving them time during class to brainstorm possible answers in groups.

In addition to revamping paper assignments and experimenting with student involvement in examinations, we have found content faculty receptive to a variety of other strategies for enhancing their own teaching approaches and so improving student mastery of course content. These include ways to:

- (a) revise their course syllabi to make expectations clearer;
- (b) accommodate diverse learning styles in the classroom through a variety of instructional techniques (e.g., increased wait time, avoiding spotlighting students, group work);
- (c) craft writing assignments which make explicit the critical thinking or analytical requirements of the assignment;
- (d) encourage more interaction between faculty and students (e.g., making one visit to the professor during office hours a course requirement);
- (e) make students more accountable for keeping up with reading assignments (e.g., pop quizzes, study guides);
- (f) assist students with note-taking strategies; and
- (g) improve lecturing strategies such as:
 - reviewing key concepts from the previous lecture,

- writing an agenda on the blackboard for each class session,
- not taking for granted that students possess general academic vocabulary (e.g., terms such as *hypothesis*, *watershed*),
- minimizing cultural, generational, or class-based references which might not be part of students' background experiences (e.g., *Alice in Wonderland*, *Gary Cooper*, *mortgage payment*).

Project LEAP faculty have also welcomed suggestions for responding to student writing and designing better multiple choice and short answer test items.¹

Selecting faculty to participate in cross-curricular collaboration is tricky business. We have found that junior-level faculty who themselves were educated in a multicultural milieu may be more likely to embrace the notions of diversity and equity in education. On the other hand, nontenured faculty, in general, do not hold leadership positions within their departments and, thus, the multiplier effect may be harder to achieve when working with them than when aiming at the outset to convert senior faculty to cross-curricular collaboration. The two most critical characteristics in selecting faculty, in our experience, are flexibility and willingness to change – attributes which know no age or status limits.

Other attitudinal challenges exist. We have found that, while many faculty members are very committed to improving their instructional skills, they are also wary of being perceived in their departments as too involved in teaching concerns when it comes time for review for promotion. Or, when they have innovated and produced positive results (i.e., students performed better in their classes), they are criticized for giving too many high grades or it is assumed that they grade too leniently. We have to accept that these kinds of biases and misperceptions exist and be prepared to help content-area faculty prove to their colleagues that they have, in fact, raised course standards by giving more complex assignments and holding students accountable for demonstrating high levels of content knowledge and language skill.

In short, TESOL professionals should take the initiative to share what we know about teaching language minority students by offering workshops and training sessions or developing comprehensive cross-curricular programs. Several recent CATESOL presentations have reported on efforts at the community college level aimed at assisting content-area faculty to meet the needs of second language students at Contra Costa College (Fragiadakis & Smith, 1992) and Santa Monica and Rio Hondo Colleges (Hartnett & Chabran, 1993). Beyond the workshop level, a variety of models of interdisciplinary collaboration exists at the postsecondary level. To cite two, writing across the curriculum is well-documented in the composi-

tion community (see Fulwiler & Young, 1990) and the adjunct model in the ESL literature (see Benesch, 1988; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989).

The stage is set for collaboration across the disciplines in California's multicultural colleges and universities. While there are many attitudinal challenges inherent in cross-curricular endeavors, we have much evidence that indicates that ESL and content-area faculty can successfully join forces to insure that language minority students develop the skills needed for academic success. ■

Footnotes

1. To receive Project LEAP training manuals containing instructional materials designed to assist language minority students in the development of their academic language skills, please write or call: Project LEAP, Learning Resources Center, Library South, Room 1040A, California State University, Los Angeles, 5151 State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032, (213) 343-3970.

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