Using a 'Conference Model' to Teach Communication Skills in a Communication Across the Curriculum Program

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Introduction

In Australian universities it is unusual to find obligatory writing courses. Elective courses in academic or technical writing are also unusual. Writing problems, of course, do exist, but students having difficulties with academic writing requirements are referred to learning skills units for one-on-one tutorials. Second language speakers of English are accommodated in these units, or in a separate ESL support unit.

Generally, the focus in Australia on communication skills is broader than that in North American universities. Courses in both spoken and written communication skills development share a crowded syllabus with enhancing electronic, small group, leadership and related skills. For the Australian academic then, there are two broad concerns about students' communication skills: one is the communication skills which they need to succeed as students; and the other is the skills they will need as graduates in the workplace. However, Baldauf (1996) has noted that despite these concerns, no Australian university has yet established a comprehensive institution-wide policy covering language, literacy and communication skills.

Put into perspective, the lack of institutional approaches to writing or communication skills development in Australian universities is not surprising, given the fact that there are few general education programs. Most students begin their specialized studies at first year, entering directly into faculties such as engineering, architecture, agriculture, and medicine, as well as into the generalist faculties of arts and science. Any requirements for writing or communication skills are faculty matters, and there is often great diversity in the requirements. In some faculties communication skills courses are obligatory, while in others the courses are electives, or not offered at all.

Whether or not stand-alone communication or writing skills courses are offered, individual academics can address these skills in their content

courses. However, WAC and WI designations for particular courses are not practiced in Australia. Indeed, most university staff development programs take a fairly generic approach to teaching and learning topics. WAC programs are all but unknown, and staff development in teaching writing or communication skills within the disciplines is rare.

Against this background, our small Communication Across the Curriculum Project (the CAC Project) at a large Australian research university faces a number of challenges. In our drive to foster communication skills across the curriculum, we have found that a major course project which involves students in the organization and execution of a public conference is an effective way to achieve the Project's aims. In this paper we give both theoretical and practical explanations for why we have developed this 'Conference Model'. We then present the Model's main features, and describe two major applications. The paper concludes with a brief evaluation of the Model's application so far, which may be useful to other practitioners who are working in the area of language and learning across the disciplines.

Theoretical Support for the Model

With some adaptations, WAC theory and pedagogical approaches have provided a sound basis for our CAC Project at the University of Melbourne. Clearly, WAC's cross-curricular approach to the development of students' communication skills accords with our beliefs that communication skills are best taught within the disciplines. WAC practice has informed our faculty staff development seminars, which promote the integration of communication skills into content courses.

However, staff development has been a slow process. Apart from the difficulties in starting the new cross-curricular venture, there are other forces which make it difficult for the CAC Project to attract widespread support. These include the lack of a University language, literacy and communication skills policy; a strong push by the central administration for academics to increase their use of information technology and multimedia in their classroom teaching (which distracts the attention of those who might otherwise be interested in helping students with their communication skills) ; and a strong tendency for academics to refer students to learning support units rather than addressing students' academic learning skills themselves.

For us, entry into the disciplines has come through acting as team teachers on content-specific courses. One of the first challenges that we face when working with colleagues is to set out our own beliefs about effective communication. At times, it is difficult to explain that modern theories of communication supercede the widely-regarded transmission models of communication, and that to us the social aspects of situated

and project-based learning are vital. We often have recourse to Driscoll's (1994) clear articulation of five key principles of social constructivism to help explain our reasons for thinking that student conferences work well in enhancing communication skills development.

In the following paragraphs, key features of the Conference Model, and our experiences in using the Model are presented to show how Driscoll's five principles guide our practice.

1. Integrate authentic activity within a complex learning environment

Although some academics have argued with us that "a student conference isn't really authentic", we counter with the argument that authenticity occurs whenever there is a situation in which the price of failure is high and has widespread implications. Seen this way, organizing a public conference at a major urban university is clearly real. The students certainly see such a project as 'real' as they struggle with the complexity of the task set before them. As the conference nears fruition, they come to feel a sense of ownership and accomplishment that often goes beyond what they have experienced in other academic pursuits.

2. Emphasize social negotiation as integral to learning

Placing the group project at the core of the class focuses student attention on group dynamics and interpersonal communication. Students quickly realize that the conference project is too large for only a few students to organize and come to understand that they must work collaboratively towards the goal. Because of inherent conflicts in coming to terms with what a conference is, social negotiation in and out of class takes place. Our role as instructors is then increasingly one of facilitating informed reflections on social and organizational processes that are taking place within the larger context.

3. Juxtapose instructional content and include multiple modes of representation

Students studying a content subject which also contains a communication stream inevitably are confronted by a juxtaposition of ideas in their classes, and in the sources from which they gather materials. The nature of the conference project ensures that they work with multiple modes of representation (spoken, written, individual, group, graphic and electronic).

4. Keep instruction relevant to student needs

Throughout the organization of such an event, a number of contingencies arise. For the smaller crises, we respond to students with individual or group email messages. The larger problems force us as a whole class to resolve an issue at hand, or to address a topic that is necessary if we are to be able to go forward. With experience, teachers are able to predict when students will be likely to require a lecture. In this way, we

give a lecture or demonstration (for example, on 'how to give an effective oral presentation') at the time when students also see the need.

5. Reflect on practice

When we first used a conference in our classes, we made the mistake of giving students all the time we could. Because of that, students would hold their conferences on the last day of the semester. That way of thinking led to a hollow victory, as we often had no way of finding out who had learned what. When we revisited our theoretical foundations, we saw that we had not allowed sufficient time for us, or the students to think about what had gone wrong, what had gone right, and how we could improve the way we communicated. That is, we did not reflect on the communication practices that had influenced the successes or failures of the conference. We now advise that a class should hold the conference no later than week ten of our twelve-week semester. During the last two weeks, we debrief students with a series of self and peer assessment activities.

The Practical Rationale for the Conference Model

There is also a very practical reason why the Conference Model has been so successful for the implementation of the CAC Project. Quite simply, conferences attract the attention of our fellow academics. In addition, they can readily see that the activity challenges the students to improve their communication skills. As previously explained, the University has no communication skills policy or general education requirements, and so there is no pressing reason why fellow academics should integrate the teaching of communication skills into their content teaching. We have to attract 'clients' and find out what communication needs they identify among their students. Oral communication is a high priority; followed by small group, collaborative work; and the alliance of critical thinking with academic writing. The Conference Model addresses these needs.

Essential Elements of the Model

No matter whether students are going to run a conference in a content course or in a stand-alone communication skills course, the instructor needs to work out the relationship between the course objectives, mode of delivery, and order of topics very carefully. A course based on the Conference Model is complicated for students and teachers to grasp. Above all, assessment tasks in their various modes (written, oral, small group work and so on), and the sub-tasks and stages need to be worked out well in advance of teaching the course. Appendix A shows the assignments which were required in a Communication Skills course taught to third year Computer Science students.

Some of the key elements of a Conference Model course are listed below:

A Fast Start

Explain the Conference concept and how it will be achieved in the first week of class, to allow students time to grasp the implications. Here is an account of how students received the news in a Computer Science class:

In the first ten minutes of our communication skills subject, we announced to students that they were to hold a public conference eleven weeks later, and that they had to organise the event themselves. Our role, we told them, was to help facilitate their efforts.

The first reaction from the students was silence, and then the questions began. Who was to fund the conference? How could we fit 65 student papers into one day? What *was* a conference (Gruba & Sondergaard, 1998).

The Organizing Committees

When a full Conference Model is implemented, each student joins one of the Organizing Committees. Students can be randomly assigned, or join a committee in whose activities they are particularly interested. One way to form the Steering Committee is for each of the other committees to second one member to the Steering Committee. Joining a committee can be linked with specific communication tasks, like writing an application letter and forwarding a CV to support the application. An expansion of this task is to post the CVs of committee members on the Committees' Webpages.

The names and duties of the organizing committees can be varied, but we have found that the seven-committee structure we have devised (see Appendix B) covers the major tasks. With smaller classes, we have had as few as four committees. Larger classes have needed an IT Committee to help with Web publishing.

The Committees hold their first meetings in week one of the semester, and for the remainder of the semester they need to meet regularly, both in and out of class time. Committee meetings are at first tentative and hesitant as students feel their way with each other and with their teachers. Students can organize meetings as they wish, although teachers may want to suggest that they appoint a chair, at least on a rotating basis, if not a permanent officer, and a minute-keeper. Committees are required to post the minutes on the Website, or keep them in hard-copy folders, which the teacher examines at times.

Some Committees go beyond their briefs, while others keep to it narrowly, but over time, students come to realize that they have ownership of the conference and their tasks. Some responsible students do much more work than they should because of poor delegation skills. Tension builds up between intrinsically-motivated students who may become ob-

sessive about the project, and instrumentally-motivated students who do the minimum of work. There are widely disparate views (associated with individual time management skills) on what constitutes a reasonable workload.

Timely instruction and readings on small group and leadership processes are important if students are to reflect productively on their collaborative processes. Chapters on communicating in groups, and on group development can be found in most communication skills textbooks (for example, Johnson & Johnson, 1997; and Mohan, McGregor, Saunders & Archee, 1997).

A Process Approach

The committee, oral, written work and electronic assignments involve cumulative tasks which must be carried out according to agreed time-lines in order for the project to be achieved.

Peer work

Students give feedback to each other on proposals for papers, on oral presentations and on written papers, either face-to-face, or by assessment sheets, email and Web conferencing. In spite of the stresses of small group collaboration, an important outcome of a Conference project is that peers come to be valued as resources, not only as critics or competitors.

Wider Community Involvement

Students learn a great deal about communication and about course content from the contacts they make with the wider community outside their field of studies. In order to stage the conference, they interact with invited speakers from outside the university context, sponsors, academics from other fields, and non-university members of the conference audience.

Reflection

As recommended by Driscoll (1994), periodic reflection is an important part of any learning process, and communication skills teaching frequently involves reiterative reflection on both processes and products. Various reflection tasks can be carried out by individuals and groups. Students can be asked to keep reflective logs, debriefing sessions are held after the conference, and a final reflective essay is often part of the assessment for the course.

The Role of the Teacher

It can be difficult for both teacher and students to become accustomed to the role of the teacher when a Conference Model is being applied. When students are working in committee, the teacher may not be physically present, but even during class time, the teacher is no longer the holder of all knowledge, with answers to all problems. Students have to deal with their conference and interpersonal interactions themselves.

Sometimes the teacher is operating in a fairly traditional way in lectures during the course, but switching to the facilitator role as far as the conference project is concerned. The teacher can help students by giving input and advice on some aspects of conference organization, and on small group processes, conflict resolution and so on. At the same time, teachers need to hold back, and allow students to get frustrated. Deciding when intervention is needed can be difficult. In addition, teachers may have to face a heavy load of detail and management of a Conference Model course.

The Social Aspects

Social aspects of running a conference should be recognized and integrated into the course, not dismissed or ignored. A social event, such as a lunch-time barbecue, part way through the semester, can help students from different committees to appreciate each other.

Variations in Applying the Conference Model

A basic issue is whether to apply a full-scale Conference Model, or a scaled-down model. During our work on the CAC Project we have worked as members of teaching teams on several courses which applied both full- and scaled-down models. We have also watched colleagues who applied full-scale models as sole instructors on their courses.

An example of a course using a full-scale Conference Model is *Science and Communication,* which is an obligatory first year course for students in the Institute of Land and Food Resources. There are usually 65 – 80 students, and the course is team-taught. Lectures and tutorials cover issues in the history and philosophy of science, communication skills, academic study skills, and several professional skills such as marketing and leadership. There is a heavy emphasis on electronic skills in the course, and most of the course management is done through the Web (see *Science and Communication*, 1999).

Some much smaller classes using a full Model, and taught by only a single teacher, have been offered by the Faculty of Arts in elective communication skills courses, available for students from all faculties across the disciplines.

As an example of a scaled-down application of the Model, there is the course on *Professional Issues in Computing* (1999) offered by the School of Electrical Engineering & Computer Science. About 150 students took this course, of whom most were in third year computer science, with others from a range of disciplines. The content on computing issues was presented by expert guest lecturers, and the communication skills module was presented by the two CAC Project lecturers. Since many of the students had not written argumentative essays during their degree program, the course co-ordinator was very keen to stress critical argumentation in

humanities-type essays. Another requirement was that students should learn and use LaTeX – a software particularly useful for collaborative writing. It was decided that the class was too large for individual oral presentations at the conference, and also that there would not be time for full committee work, given the other course requirements. Therefore, a scaled-down Model was adopted, with a single volunteer committee of about 16 students organizing the entire conference (with assistance from one of the communication lecturers). The conference oral and written papers were prepared and presented by pairs of students.

In deciding how to apply the Conference Model, several considerations need to be borne in mind. Firstly, it can be adapted easily to different disciplines, and differing balances of communication skills can be accommodated. For example, lecturers and students in some courses may want more or less focus on oral work, or on research writing, or on collaborative work, or on the resources of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Secondly, the Model can be adopted at differing year levels. When used in a first year course, it is a powerful way of helping students to transfer from high school to university. This is particularly relevant in Australia, where the upper grades of high schooling can be strongly teacher-focussed, with limitations on collaborative or independent student learning, associated with the need to gain good grades in internal and external competitive assignments and exams. A Conference Model taught in a first year subject also builds a sense of collegiality and community, which help students to settle into the anonymity of tertiary education. In contrast, if taught at a senior level, a Conference Model can be associated with a professional practice course, and stress workplace communication skills.

As we have seen with the computer science course, the amount of time which students can be expected to give to conference organization, in conjunction with the nature of the course content and other requirements can determine whether to apply a full-scale model or not.

Evaluation of the Conference Model

Observations by both content and communication skills instructors, student comments on course evaluation sheets, and reflections in logs, essays and committee reports reveal a number of benefits which students derive from participating in a conference. These include:

- A sense of camaraderie and group identity, which reduces the sense of alienation which first year and international students, in particular, may suffer from in a large, impersonal research university.
- A sense of achievement both as individuals and members of small and large groups.

- The development of new skills and resulting material for students' CVs. This is extremely useful for students who are applying for positions which require proof of good communication skills.
- Peer recognition of each other's talents.
- The acquisition of useful knowledge of how things work in the university itself, and in the wider community.
- An appreciation of this kind of learning.

The following two excerpts from students' emails illustrate some typical reactions to their experiences.

First year student
When I first heard that we had to put on a conference and that we had to come to uni on a Saturday to attend the conference I thought that it was a stupid idea and a waste of time. I also didn't like the idea of the committees and having to go to meetings each week for them. But now that it is all over, I look back on it and would say that it has been the most enjoyable uni activity (although the pub crawls and Booze Cruize come close), for the whole year. The conference was interesting and it gave me a good experience in presentations. I liked listening to all the other talks and found most of them to be very informative. Looking back on the committee work, it gave me a good chance to organise a major event and it gave me the opportunity to get to know a number of other students in the course who I had never talked to before.

Third year student
After ensuring the sponsors were happy and content and that I had done appropriate introductions, I ensured I knew how to use the technology in the Latham Theatre and organised the bustling students trying to load their presentations onto the computer.

I compared the rest of the day in the Latham Theatre, which I found to be an interesting experience with such a small audience. After listening to presentation after presentation on cryptography, I became so bored in the afternoon sessions that I completed a report for every single presentation held in the afternoon session. I thought this may help out Joanna and she seemed to appreciate it.

Although we have heard anecdotal accounts of student conferences being incorporated into content courses in Australia and the USA,

there does not seem to be much literature on this topic. Borstler and Johansson (1998) report on a one-semester course with a final public conference, but with a much smaller class, less student involvement in the organization, and without the reflective assessment components. Papers written by academics at our own institution include Gruba and Lynch (1997), Gruba and Sondergaard, 1998, and Rimmington, Lynch and Gruba (1997), all of which discuss the Conference Model in terms of constructivist pedagogy.

So far we have not been able to carry out qualitative or quantitative research projects to evaluate the application of the Model. In particular, we are eager to investigate the nature of student interactions in their collaborative group work.

A further refinement during this third year of using the Model is to pay more attention to the quality of student writing (especially in terms of critical thinking, argumentation and writing style), which until now has been somewhat neglected. As noted earlier in this paper, using a Conference Model is very complex, and our earlier efforts focused on developing students' oral presentation skills, their group work, and peer review. Now we are ready to pay more attention to other aspects of written language and the interplay of writing and learning content.

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Appendix A
Assessment Tasks and Activities for a Computer Science Communication Skills Course

Committee statement (15%): group-produced document of each committee's mission statement, individual member profiles and responsibilities, work-plan setting out project milestones. Assessed for completeness, evidence of group coherence (consistent tone of member profiles, etc), structure, style, grammar.

Conference written paper (40%): individual or collaborative (up to 3 authors per paper). Word limit 2000— 3000 words. Recognition of audience awareness is important (reader in the field or outside, or a mixed readership). Topic chosen by student from a list of possible topics offered by lecturer. Must be on a non-trivial issue, relevant to subject content and theme of the conference.

Conference oral presentation (15%): all students present individually. Team of academics as evaluators, using guidelines and an assessment sheet. Two major categories are content and delivery. Students all had copies of assessment sheet before making presentations, and were encouraged to submit sheets on each others' presentations to evaluators.

Self-evaluation (20%): a formal one or two-page latter addressed to the Head of the Department. Describes the student's individual contribution to the class project.

In-class essay (10%): an in-class reflective essay on the role of communication skills in practice. Students write an essay chosen from 3 or 4 possible topics.

Two popular topics are:

• This subject used a "conference approach" as a way to teach communication skills. Choose one aspect of the conference project (organizing, publicity, theory, etc.), assess that aspect critically and suggest ways to improve the conference approach.

• To give a truly effective oral presentation, would it be better to deeply know your subject matter or deeply know your audience?