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Knowledge building made clear: aligning academic language learning and content in pre-service teacher education.

Key Words

Knowledge building, alignment, engagement, academic language fluency, content

Abstract

Education students at Charles Darwin University (CDU) are not engaging in their learning. Recent studies show that CDU ranks the lowest in student engagement (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2016) and within the cohort of education students, there are large numbers of at risk and low literacy students. Pre-service Teachers (PSTs) have the aspirations to be teachers that are able to respond to complex learning needs (Davis, Samara & Luce-Kapler, 2015), but are unaware of the relationship between academic language and content knowledge. Therefore, they are blind to the rules of the 'learning game'. As a result of this, there is a need for student learning in university courses to be designed and delivered in a way that transparently builds students' knowledge. This will enable students to better engage with their position within teaching and learning. Our study is interested in understanding how to best design learning to ensure students understand the game (unit outcomes) and the rules of the game (unit learning materials), to transform student learning. Drawing on the concept of semantic density within Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Maton, 2014) we discuss how a unit (Education pedagogy) was re-designed to build academic fluency by explicitly aligning meaning and purpose to ensure students were aware of the learning process. The unit was re-designed collaboratively by specialists in pedagogy and linguistics with the shared goal to improve students' academic language fluency. The semantic density of student's academic language was measured at the beginning of semester through a translation device (Maton & Doran, 2017), and shared with the students. The baseline position supported students to understand their trajectory towards using content knowledge fluently at the conclusion of the unit. Through a series of carefully designed tasks within the unit, academic language was explicitly integrated with content knowledge. The semantic density of each students' response to the final unit assessment task was measured using the same translation tool. Comparison of the two measures of semantic density showed a transformation in students' level of academic language fluency. We concluded that when there is explicit embedded teaching of academic language within content knowledge, students are more able to self-assess and engage in the knowledge building process.

References

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