



The hard working learner: third party services and academic language and learning

Key Words

Third party products; Academic literacies; Digital resources; Online tools

Abstract

Digital, third-party educational products are now sprinkled throughout the university student's learning experience. They range dramatically in scale and form, from a simple hyperlink to an online video added to a course site, to vast suites of publisher-owned content which can include a textbook, learning activities, quizzes and supplemental materials that together comprise most (if not all) of the content in a course. An increasing number of these products are designed to support a student's language and literacy development, and may take the form of automated online tools, self-paced modules, publisher content, MOOCs, natural language processing tools, and online platforms for facilitating one-to-one advice. A student may encounter one or more of these products within their courses (integrated into a course site) and/or offered alongside learning resources developed by academic language and learning (ALL) advisers. This paper provides an overview of these products, and aims to position them within the theoretical landscape used to situate language and literacy development. Drawing on some concepts familiar to ALL practice: study skills, academic socialization, academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2006) and EAP/genre (Hyland, 2007; Wingate & Tribble, 2012) this paper argues that third-party products offer what might best be described as a study skills approach – one that is limited in its capacity to impact significantly on student learning. We suggest that these limitations are due in part to the kind of learner they imagine: one who is able to navigate, select, and integrate information from a diverse array of sources, and adapt this appropriately to specific academic contexts in order to advance their learning. Whereas ALL practitioners have tended to favour curriculum-integrated approaches in which language development is connected seamlessly with epistemological development in the discipline, we argue that these products are part of an emerging, curated learning environment characterized by genericness, decontextualisation, individuation, and fragmentation. We suggest that a socially-oriented narrative which might provide coherence and meaning to a program of learning is beginning to fade from view, and a new kind of hidden curriculum is emerging: one in which the student is increasingly expected to take responsibility for assessing, designing and managing their own learning journey. We discuss the impact of these products on learning in higher education, and the role ALL can take in mediating and supporting their use.

References

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