

## CHAPTER 27

# BUILDING RESEARCH CAPACITY THROUGH AN ACLITS-INSPIRED PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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In a 2007 article which they describe as part AcLits research overview, part position paper, Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott wrote:

At this point, we consider that our aims should be to: ... Sustain current support and critical discussion systems that exist for the development of researchers in academic literacies, acknowledging the marginal position of many in this field. (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 22)

This chapter addresses the aim identified by Lillis and Scott (2007) through exploring an initiative to support the development of research literacy among practitioners delivering English for Academic Purposes (EAP) provision for international students, in the UK higher education system and in other national higher education systems where non-native speakers of English participate in courses taught in this language. *Research literacy* refers to the ability to engage with existing research reports and to produce accounts of research that illuminate aspects of EAP practice in a rigorous, persuasive and engaging way.

The chapter opens with three scenarios of EAP practitioners preparing to undertake research; it describes the thinking behind a professional association's initiative to build an EAP researcher support network, partly in response to the three scenarios; it explores ways in which AcLits course design principles helped shape this initiative and suggests points for further consideration. The viewpoint reflected in the chapter is that of the coordinator of the events and follow-on resources which formed part of the researcher development initiative.

## SCENARIOS

Alexandra works in a language centre in a UK university and teaches in-session al EAP, i.e., non-assessed, non-credit-bearing language support for international

students. She designs teaching materials which help international students develop their ability to write postgraduate dissertations. The students in one particular group she works with have different supervisors with different expectations about academic writing. Alexandra would like to interview the supervisors and report the findings in a more formal document, beyond integrating those findings into teaching materials. She is also considering starting a PhD to explore feedback strategies in more depth.

Brian is in charge of pre-session courses in a different university. Prior to starting their studies for an academic degree, a number of international students are required to take a pre-session EAP course and their acceptance onto the university degree course is dependent on successfully completing the pre-session. Brian would like to find out how his students subsequently perform on university courses, both in order to enhance the quality of the pre-session and to encourage subject lecturer input into the pre-session course content; he believes that subject-specific EAP provision is likely to increase students' academic performance at university.

Carina is the head of an EAP unit in a UK university. She needs to generate evidence to persuade senior management in her institution that an in-session course, delivered by the unit to support a particular Business programme, is fit for purpose and a justifiable expenditure. At the same time, she is reviewing staff development strategies within the unit she leads.

## **POINT FOR CONSIDERATION**

Alexandra, Brian and Carina are qualified to master's level in their area, but not all have completed a research-based dissertation or have comparable experience of academic, practice- or policy-oriented research. Time for academic research and related publication activities is not formally built into their contracts and workloads. Their situations can, however, yield valuable insights not only for their immediate contexts but also for the wider professional community and to develop a theoretical knowledge base in EAP. *What support network can be made available to Alexandra, Brian and Carina to ensure that their questions are developed into projects with successful outcomes?*

## **INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS FOR EAP RESEARCH**

To place the above point for consideration into the institutional context in which Alexandra, Brian and Carina deliver EAP teaching, coordinate and/or are involved in strategic planning of EAP provision, the three scenarios outlined above are grounded in a UK higher education context, where links between academic research, on the one hand, and teaching and learning practice, on the other, are gradually becoming stronger, albeit not consistently so across academia. EAP pro-

vision is strongly embedded within institutional structures associated with teaching and learning; staff delivering EAP provision usually hold the status of teacher practitioners rather than discipline academics with research responsibilities. The nature of institutional mechanisms of reward for research (the UK Research Excellence Framework, [www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)) means that there may be limited institutional support for EAP practitioner research. The work of EAP practitioners is often invisible in high status research publications. Within their institutional context, EAP practitioners may have access to professional development related to the design and delivery of EAP provision, but it is less likely that they will be formally supported to plan and conduct research and they are not legitimate participants in the “research game” (Lisa Lucas, 2006) in academic life.

In the United Kingdom EAP-related research is conducted in Applied Linguistics departments, whereas research into the internationalization of higher education systems, which could potentially be informed by insights from EAP provision and in its turn have a bearing on international student support, is conducted in a range of other research-focused departments (e.g., Education, Sociology, Business). These areas have limited if any input from EAP practitioners like Alexandra, Brian, and Carina (a notable exception is a study by Diane Sloan and Elizabeth Porter, 2010).

## RESTES: WITHIN/OUTSIDE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

BALEAP, *The global forum for EAP professionals* ([www.baleap.org](http://www.baleap.org)), has responded to the situations exemplified by the three scenarios by creating opportunities for the development of a support network, through setting up ResTES, a Research Training Event Series consisting of face-to-face one-day training events. Participants (presenters and audience members) have varying degrees of investment in research; they may be researching their own teaching practice, working towards a research degree, conducting institutional research for quality assurance purposes or interpreting research to construct policies. At the time of writing this chapter, five one-day face-to-face events have taken place. The events, hosted in 2011 and 2012 by universities in different locations in the United Kingdom, were open to an international audience of BALEAP members and non-members. The rationale behind the series is described as follows:

The academic experience of international students in English-speaking countries has gained increased visibility as a result of new developments in government policy and legislation. Perhaps more so now than ever before, research into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) can and should inform decisions made not only in the context of individual academic practice but also at the level of institutional and governmental agendas on academic aspects of the

international student experience. (BALEAP, 2011, p. 207)

Each of the five events that constitute the research training initiative addressed a separate aspect of the research process: 1. Defining the research space: Literature reviews and research questions; 2. Methodologies for researching EAP contexts, practices and pedagogies; 3. Issues in EAP classroom research; 4. Qualitative data analysis in EAP research; 5. Quantitative data analysis in EAP research. The format for each of the first four events was half a day of input by an expert or experienced researcher in the field (a masterclass) followed by half a day of presentations of work in progress scheduled in a single strand. A call for presentations of work in progress was issued prior to each event. The fifth event was delivered as a one-day workshop on quantitative data analysis in an IT suite software.

In order to pre-empt projecting an image of the research process as a set of discrete stages through which researchers proceed linearly, resources from the series are available online ([www.baleap.org](http://www.baleap.org)). Event participants can thus revisit materials, and BALEAP members not taking part in face-to-face events can work through the material in an order and at a pace appropriate for their individual interests. The online resources bring events together as a coherent whole and showcase accounts of ongoing research.

The emphasis on presenting work in progress rather than finished accounts reflects the ResTES ethos of peer learning, i.e., “the sharing of knowledge, expertise, experience, highs and lows in practice and research, pedagogic principles and professional interests, curiosities and uncertainties” (BALEAP, 2011, p. 207). Participants at the events have varying degrees of experience of conducting research, which creates fruitful peer learning opportunities.

## **ACLITS: CHALLENGING INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS**

A programme supporting the development of REF-type outputs such as academic journal articles (*Writing for Publication*), informed by AcLits and sponsored by an academic journal is discussed by Theresa Lillis, Anna Magyar and Anna Robinson-Pant (2010). The research outputs on which the ResTES work-in-progress presentations focus do not necessarily, however, fall within the Research Excellence Framework (REF) remit. Nonetheless, AcLits lends itself well as a basis for developing the ResTES, given that ResTES is intended as a catalyst for research and as a set of opportunities for practitioners to develop as researchers. This is due to AcLits’ exploratory rather than prescriptive approach to literacy development and its emphasis on creating spaces in which institutional frameworks and expectations can be integrated and transformed.

One particular aspect of AcLits, namely the pedagogic principles for course design (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 2006), informed the development of ResTES. The

origins of AcLits can be traced back to an endeavour to reframe student academic literacy not as a set of generic skills or as the object of straightforward enculturation into the practices of a specific academic discipline but as the site where individual identities, social practices and institutional frameworks interact and are reshaped in the process. AcLits has developed primarily in relation to assessed academic writing within university degree courses, where its perhaps most immediate relevance lies. The attention it pays to power, authority, institutional contexts, individual and social practices and identities, however, makes it a robust and flexible framework to explore ways of supporting EAP teacher practitioners to develop research literacy in relation to EAP.

In one of the key AcLits texts, Mary Lea (2004) discusses how she and her colleagues drew on the relationship between writing and learning identified through AcLits research to develop principles for course design, and illustrates these principles with the help of a case study of an online course delivered globally in English to a group of postgraduate students working in education-related roles. Four of the principles put forward by Lea (2004), in particular, resonated with the aims and the contextual specificity of ResTES. These four principles stipulate that the AcLits approach to course design

- a. acknowledges that texts do more than represent knowledge,
- b. involves thinking about all texts of the course—written and multimodal—and not just assessed texts,
- c. attempts to create spaces for exploration of different meanings and understandings by all course participants,
- d. sees the course as mediated by different participants. Allows spaces for this and embeds this in both the course content and the course design (Lea, 2004, p. 744).

The selection of four—rather than the wholesale adoption of all—principles listed in Lea (2004) is underpinned both by the ResTES designers' choice to explore the situatedness of AcLits and by AcLits' inherent flexibility as an enabling rather than prescriptive pedagogic framing. A later study by Mary Lea and Brian Street (2006) offers two examples of courses aimed at different audiences (a programme developing the academic literacy of pre-university students in the United Kingdom and a course aimed at supporting law academics to write introductory law course materials); in their 2006 study, Lea and Street further elaborate on the last principle selected for discussion in this paper (principle d, see above) by noting that the tutors and participants

worked closely ... to collaboratively investigate the range of genres, modes, shifts, transformations, representations, meaning-making processes, and identities involved in academic learn-

ing within and across academic contexts. These understandings, when made explicit, provide greater opportunities for teaching and learning, as well as for examining how such literacy practices are related to epistemological issues. (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 376)

AcLits research and the AcLits design frame are closely interrelated, in that the former generates insights into literacy, teaching and learning which can inform further course development. The remainder of the chapter elaborates on the ways in which the four AcLits course design principles identified above are helping shape BALEAP's researcher development initiative; the "Points for further consideration" in the closing section of the chapter highlight aspects into which additional research is needed to take the ResTES forward and further refine its design.

## ACLITS AND RESTES

While the overall framework of ResTES was inspired and informed by AcLits principles for course design, participants were not formally and explicitly introduced to these principles or to the research from which they were derived. AcLits underpinned the design of learning opportunities; it was not part of the content explored at ResTES events. Lea and Street (2006) also chose not to introduce the Law academics on the *Writing Level One Course Materials* workshops explicitly to the AcLits conceptual underpinning of these workshops, and instead enabled them to experience the AcLits approach through the activities designed. They found that this did not hinder fruitful discussion and academics' exploration of literacy as a situated social practice. In the case of ResTES, the implicit rather than explicit presence of AcLits within the series is partly explained by a desire to maximize the space for presenters and participants to negotiate their own understanding of what it means to develop as a researcher.

### *a. Texts do more than represent knowledge.*

The research texts with which ResTES participants engage either as consumers (e.g., published research) or as producers (e.g., draft reports or writing produced for the award of a postgraduate degree) position participants as researchers in the field and the identity work involved in transitioning from practitioner to researcher is supported through opportunities to offer constructive critique of published work and feedback on work in progress. As well as prompting identity work, texts provide guidelines within which new knowledge can be created. In the inaugural ResTES masterclass, Ian Bruce, an established researcher in the EAP field (e.g., Bruce 2008, 2011) shared with the audience a literature review excerpt from one of his published texts and invited them to unpack the textual strategies he had used to position his work among existing research. In the second half of the event, as

an audience member, he engaged with the “texts” which the presenters of work in progress contributed to the event (PowerPoint slides, oral commentary, handouts) and offered constructive feedback on how the projects could be shaped to reveal more fully the voice of the author, make claims of legitimate participation in the chosen research field and open avenues for further inquiry.

*b. Think about all texts of the course—written and multimodal—and not just assessed texts.*

While most of the EAP research shared at ResTES events may eventually be incorporated into written documents following institutionally-endorsed academic writing conventions, the aim of the series is to capture snapshots of various stages in the development of research projects, those stages which are frequently edited out of final published documents but which are central to developing research literacy. ResTES presenters may be working towards producing a piece of writing assessed as part of a postgraduate degree in a specific higher education institution, but within ResTES emphasis is placed on supporting the journey towards creating new knowledge. While masterclasses unpack published texts, work-in-progress presentations centre on draft texts which are transformed in the interaction between audience and presenters. To take just one example of how a multimodal text was used in the context of ResTES, one work-in-progress presenter at the third event (*Issues in EAP classroom research*) chose to communicate the milestones in his ongoing research journey through the medium of prezzi (<http://prezi.com/>). When complete, his research will be reported in a master’s dissertation. As a pedagogic tool to enable peer learning, the dynamic account of the research process captured the real research experience more effectively than a draft methodology section following accepted academic conventions.

*c. Create spaces for exploration of different meanings and understandings by all course participants.*

Unlike in the case described by Lea (2004), which involves a course delivered to a student cohort expected to engage in a pre-established number of teaching and learning activities for a delimited period of time, the coherence of the ResTES series comes not from the assessment element linked to the award of a degree but from participants’ own choice about the level of investment they are prepared to make in this form of professional development. Event participants explore different meanings and understandings related to research methodology in the space of the face-to-face event; EAP professionals who access resources online can relate these to their own research experience or use them as a starting point for further involvement in/with research. For example, at the second ResTES event one of the presenters was an international student conducting doctoral research at a UK university on pre-sessional courses. The pre-sessional tutors and course directors in



the audience were able to bring to the discussion a different set of understandings of the way in which access and researcher roles can be negotiated in such a situation. They were also able to take away a nuanced insight into how they could act as gatekeepers in their current roles or, had they been conducting similar research to that of the presenter, the implications of their own roles for gaining access to and reflecting on relationships in the data collection context.

*d. The course is mediated by different participants. Allow spaces for this and embed this in both the course content and the course design.*

As key stakeholders in the training event series, participants have a greater level of input into the content and focus of each event. Two levels of participation are associated with face-to-face ResTES events: presenting work in progress and participating as an audience member. Collaboration between tutors and students is taken one step further. While in the context of one particular higher education institution tutor and student roles are often hierarchical and formally assigned, in the learning and teaching space created by ResTES they become flexible and interchangeable; presenting participants become tutors, while at the same time receiving useful feedback from their audience. One ResTES participant at the fifth event (not a presenter) attended this event in order to consolidate his knowledge about quantitative research methodology and, for the benefit of others planning to engage in/with quantitative research, recommended a number of texts about quantitative methodology that he had found useful. While participant feedback from each event informed the design and delivery of subsequent ones, the evaluation sheet for the fifth event was redesigned in order to facilitate a greater level of participation in the series, beyond attending the face-to-face events. The redesigned evaluation sheet invited participants to annotate resources and share information about the likely extent of their involvement in research (and/or supervision of research projects) in the near future, as a basis for refocusing the ResTES in response to evolving researcher development needs.

## REACHING OUT

Plans to evaluate the impact of the training series are in place, to learn how participants like Alexandra, Brian, and Carina in the chapter-opening scenarios benefitted from engaging in AcLits-informed development opportunities and to use the lessons learnt as a basis for taking the series forward. Meanwhile, an open access, online publication, *Snapshots of EAP Research Journeys* (Lia Blaj-Ward & Sarah Brewer, 2013), was chosen as a vehicle for disseminating, to a global audience, research experience narratives written by presenters and non-presenting participants at ResTES events. The choice was made in line with AcLits' emphasis on giving participants greater responsibility for mediating learning and teaching



opportunities (in this case, by creating resources that can support the development of research literacy). It also reflected how

the ResTES team (BALEAP's Research and Publications Sub-Committee) is looking forward to facilitating cross-border dialogue about supporting, generating, and using EAP research to enhance student experience in a global higher education community. (BALEAP Research and Publications Sub-Committee, personal communication, 16 September, 2011)

The current priority to facilitate cross-border dialogue means that in addition to being of value as a design frame, AcLits can offer a helpful tool for formulating questions in order to explore the politics of academic knowledge production (Lillis & Curry, 2010) in the global context and to collect scenarios of EAP practitioners based outside the United Kingdom which can inform the further development of ResTES. Some of these questions, based on discussions among ResTES designers and event participants, are phrased as points for further consideration below and will be addressed at forthcoming ResTES events and in related publications.

## **POINTS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

- To what extent are conceptualizations of EAP shared in the global EAP professional context? What EAP aspects are EAP professionals researching?
- To what extent are EAP literacy, teaching and learning practices similar or different across the institutions in which EAP professionals work?
- What are the commonalities and differences in institutional support for EAP in the various institutional/national contexts in which EAP professionals work, both as regards teaching and as regards research?
- To what extent are EAP research methodologies transferable and translatable across institutional/national contexts?
- What languages and local academic conventions are privileged in the contexts in which EAP professionals disseminate their research findings?
- What kinds of research literacy do EAP professionals possess and what research literacy do they need to acquire, in order to make an impact in the contexts in which they work, as well as on a wider scale?

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