Interviewee: Dr. Sandra Zappa-Hollmann
Interviewer: Dr. Laura K. Baumvol

Dr. Sandra Zappa-Hollman (PhD in TESL), is an Assistant Professor in Language and Literacy Education and the Director of Academic English programming at Vantage College, University of British Columbia. Her teaching and research contributions aim to support multilingual speakers, particularly those that have English as an additional language, into English-medium academic contexts. Her projects and related publications focus on academic discourse socialization, integration of language and content instruction, interdisciplinary collaborations, development of intercultural competence, and the use of Systemic Functional Linguistics in the teaching of second language academic literacy.

https://seer.ufrgs.br/organon/article/view/88815/51224

Organon: Can you tell us about Vantage College: what type of unit is it, and what is its mandate?
A few years ago, partly in response to national and institutional internationalization strategies, UBC -- the University of British Columbia -- decided to create Vantage College (https://vantagecollege.ubc.ca/). Our unit was launched in 2014, and we have just celebrated our fifth year seeing many of our Vantage College graduates complete their degrees at UBC. One of the key mandates of Vantage is to provide academically strong international students whose English language proficiency is just below the admission standards, with an enriched, supportive environment that helps them transition into an English-medium Canadian university environment. We currently offer three programming options: first year Bachelor of Arts, first year Bachelor of Engineering, and first year Bachelor of Science. In addition to helping our students develop academically through taking first year credit-bearing disciplinary and foundational academic English coursework, we also concurrently focus on their social integration and well-being. That is, through the Vantage College programs, our students become socialized into the kinds of valued academic discourses and practices across their respective fields of study. Going beyond that, we try to generate opportunities for students to very early on begin to establish relationships - networks of peers, friends, and also their instructors, staff members and teaching assistants, as we recognize this type of social support plays a fundamental role in supporting integration, wellbeing, and learning. Upon graduation from their first year at UBC in a Vantage Program, students continue their studies as second year students in their respective faculties.

Vantage was also created as an interdisciplinary hub for pedagogical innovation, where students' (and faculty and staff) experiences are enriched through the many interactions among colleagues from across disciplines. This, in turn, allows us to design curriculum,

specific lessons, and develop strategies that help us get the students ready for their disciplinary studies, as while they are in our program, the students develop an awareness of the kinds of academic and linguistic demands and expectations they'll encounter as university students. And beyond gaining awareness, our students also develop skills, strategies, and tools to succeed as they move along their study paths.

Vantage is in some ways unique in that academic English instruction is embedded within this first-year program, and is thus very closely linked to the disciplinary courses that the students are taking, as we integrate language and content learning. Perhaps also rather unique - or less common, compared to similar pathway-type programs -- is the fact that students take so many academic courses, all for credit (that is, they count towards their degree). Since our programs include extra courses that provide students with a foundation in language and literacy, as well as research skills, our program is 11 months long.

Organon: So, does that mean that they have a greater number of hours in the classroom compared to other UBC first-year students who take the same number of credits?

Well, our students don't have more contact hours than students taking the same number of credits, but our students do end up having very packed schedules, in some cases more packed than students in the same program outside Vantage. But that's the case because of the additional courses that have been designed to help with the transition: the foundational language and academic literacy courses (i.e., the LLED and VANT 140 courses), as well as a research training course through which students gain very valuable research skills - including completing a literature review, designing, and carrying out a project. So, all of these enrichment pieces, obviously, mean that our students do have very packed schedules, also because, for certain courses, they may also have additional opportunities for tutorials or workshops (some of which are also optional). That also means then that they have additional support.

Organon: Ok. Can you talk a little bit about your involvement with Vantage College and your current role?

Sure. I have been connected to Vantage since early 2014, when I joined the program as Director of Academic English Programming. My first task was to finalize the curriculum, which had been largely designed by one of my colleagues on the Academic English Program team, Dr. Alfredo Ferreira. We fine tuned some of the elements of the curriculum and also worked hard to get our first set of custom-designed teaching materials. Another key task early on was to build a team of academic English instructors, who were recruited nationally and internationally. We began with six full-time lecturer positions and have grown to fourteen full-time lecturers plus a number of sessional lecturers and teaching assistants that work as a part of our team. In my role, I oversee all matters related to curriculum and instruction of academic English programming. I am also in charge of leading our program evaluation study, which is an ongoing investigation that systematically tracks students' experiences in our program through surveys and interviews with those who wish to participate in the study.

Organon: Ok. Can you talk a little bit about how language and content are integrated at Vantage?

Yes, as I briefly mentioned, we use an integrated language and content approach. We view the learning of language and so-called "content" (subject area knowledge) as inseparable and mutually constitutive. They are inseparable since when students learn new content in all their courses across the disciplines (e.g., chemistry, geography, sociology, etc.), they do so through using language as they read, write, interact in the classroom with peers or listen to their instructor. All of this provides rich learning opportunities to learn "content" through language, right? We take some of those examples - from readings, lessons, assignments and such -- provided by the disciplinary instructors to the academic English instructors -- and use these materials to inform the design of curriculum and materials for the language-oriented courses, particularly the adjunct courses (VANT 140) we offer. You can learn more details about our pedagogical approaches in our recent publication, which Dr. Ferreira & I co-authored - https://benjamins.com/catalog/langct.00007.fer/fulltext/langct.00007.fer.pdf) Of course, this kind of work involves a lot of collaboration between the instructors across the disciplines and the English for academic purposes instructors.

Organon: What challenges have emerged from these collaborations among disciplinary instructors and "language" instructors?
Yes, collaboration is a big "topic" in our program and it really permeates every aspect of what we do. We engage in different kinds of collaborations: collaborations across the same course in multi-section courses, as well as interdisciplinary collaborations that involve typically members of the academic English program working alongside their peers in either of our programs (arts, sciences, and engineering). One of the main challenges that we continue to have, despite all the collective experience of collaborative to date, is finding enough time. I am not even sure that this is an issue that can be fully solved, as one of the reasons we struggle finding enough time is that everybody is super interested in engaging in so many different projects! So, there is never enough time for all the ideas that faculty and staff come up with, but particularly in relation to, for example, the coordination of a particular cohort of students. Since we do work in cohorts, that means that all of the members of a particular team that teach the same cohort of students need to meet quite regularly. In the first couple of years, we actually met on a weekly basis and this was extremely helpful because it gave us a lot of insight as to what was happening in the classroom. In these meetings, we got to know our students so much better through sharing what each of the colleagues teaching the students had observed. We also exchanged strategies for problem-solving particular situations with students, and we identified certain gaps in curriculum and resources that had to be addressed. As a result of all of these conversations, which are really collaboration in practice, we ended up developing a number of resources to help students cope with some of the issues that they were facing early on.

Ideally, and this is often the case, these collaborations are reciprocal and non-hierarchical; that is certainly something that we constantly strive to achieve, and that I wrote about in some of my publications out of research on collaborations that I have done in the context of our program. The findings of this research, published in a special issue focusing on content and language integration of the International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, show that when the focus is put on the students, when everything that is done is for the sake of improving the student experience, then any egos and any personal agendas are left aside, and instead there is more openness to trying out something that might be new for some of the instructors. For example, there might be more openness to receiving feedback, to exchanging strategies, also, in some ways, consulting with colleagues about what works, what doesn't.

We have several examples of extremely successful collaborations with colleagues going even a step further than just doing these exchanges randomly, sort of on an ad hoc basis, and instead engaging in very systematic collaborations to the point where they have completed "scholarship of teaching and learning" projects investigating particular aspects of their collaborative teaching practices and assessing their impact on student learning development and trajectories. Some of these projects have been presented at national and international conferences, and workshops have been given based on the outcomes of such collaborations. We also have some publications that have come out of these collaborations, which have in turn also inspired the colleagues that have not yet had the same kind of experience or opportunities to collaborate.

Organon: You mentioned that some collaborations actually ended up being research projects - scholarship of teaching and learning, as you mentioned. Could elaborate about one of these projects?
Sure. Very early on, a couple of our engineering colleagues -- one academic English instructor and the Engineer who teaches the physical-chemistry course -- collaborated in a more systematic manner. Their collaboration was around the lab report assignment, so a very specific type of genre that engineering students need to know how to write. Through the adjunct course that is linked to that engineering course, the students were able to gain a much better sense of the genre expectations of the lab report: how it's organized structurally, as well as what specific lexico-grammatical features make it a high caliber report. The students developed their lab report genre knowledge through enriched feedback from the academic English instructor, who with the help of a teaching assistant, was able to provide a lot of feedback on draft reports that the students wrote. Students were graded on these drafts mostly in terms of the rhetorical and linguistic aspects. Once the students incorporated that feedback, they submitted the final version of their report to their engineering instructor, who graded the assignments focusing primarily on accuracy of content aspects. This has been a very successful collaboration and the instructors have received very positive feedback from the students who indicated that this has helped them tremendously to understand the purposes, format, and overall expectations of how lab reports are to be composed. And from the instructors' perspective, both the "content" and "language" experts were able to exchange key knowledge in their respective fields of expertise, so they both feel they are even better equipped to help engineering students become more effective communicators.

A number of other kinds of collaborations have taken place also, some of which have involved common assignments across linked language and content courses, for example. Yet they have not always necessarily been super effective because of logistical challenges. Still, even if at the end of the day doing a collaborative assignment across different courses was perhaps impractical, a very good outcome of those conversations was, once again, that the exchanges facilitated a greater awareness of how perhaps the same topic could be approached from different disciplinary areas, for instance. So that is where the interdisciplinary orientation or the disciplinary conversations can happen, and when conversations about language can lead to an enhanced awareness of the role of language and the impact that language choices have on the creation of texts of different kinds.

Organon: What kind of research has been conducted so far about Vantage College?

Well, I'm best positioned here to describe the projects I have been involved in, but of course there are many other examples of research - particularly classroom-based projects, as I mentioned earlier, that have investigated the impact of some innovative pedagogical practices on student learning. For example, some projects focused on the role of technology in mediating content and language instruction (for example, the use of virtual reality technology), or the use of online text annotation tools used for peer feedback in a class focusing on Science language patterns. Another project examined which kinds of multiple-choice prompts seemed most appropriate for multilingual speakers. So, these are just examples that can give you a sense of the types of projects.

In my case, I have been involved with program evaluation. As part of our program evaluation we have conducted multiple surveys every year and through these surveys we have gathered students' accounts on their perspectives on different aspects of the program: their development in different areas in relation to their academic preparedness overall, to their academic language and literacy development, to their integration, to the campus and the host community, to their awareness of resources for well-being. We are currently analyzing data over the five years in conjunction with quantitative data that includes performance of students across the years, as we do have access to institutional research data that tracked students' performance over their year in Vantage and up until their graduation. We also have conducted focus groups on individual interviews with students, so that is one additional type of data that we are integrating in our analysis. One of those topics that has emerged out of this program evaluation research focuses on the notion of language choice. We are really trying to understand what the different drivers are that prompt students to choose one over another language as part of their linguistic repertoire, both inside and outside the classroom, and we hope that this can then inform the kind of advice we give students to support their multilingual language development.

I also conducted a study that focused on students' perceptions of the Vantage 140 course (the adjunct course linked to various disciplinary courses students take in each program). This is a course that we have adapted over the years - in great part drawing on student input - to better meet their expectations and needs. A concrete example of a curriculum change is that we initially began with what is known as a "traditional adjunct model". In a "traditional adjunct model", there is a language class that is linked to one specific discipline. For instance, then, there would be an adjunct course that is linked to the psychology class that students are taking. We offer three of these in the Arts Program because our students take three social science courses -- such as psychology, geography, and political science. But the feedback from our students was that they felt that each of these adjunct courses was actually a separate course. And we really did not want that to be the case. We wanted it to come across as one course with three different "flavor", if you will, where they could make comparisons of how language patterns (e.g., voice, tense, level of certainty expressed) are used across texts in different disciplines. For a number of pedagogical as well as logistical reasons, we decided to pilot a different approach to this adjunct course, which we called an "adjunct integrated approach", which integrates the three disciplines. Once we clustered the teaching of the linked version into this integrated version, the instructors had more time and space and opportunities to innovate in different ways. Students felt that their workloads were more manageable. Obviously, the students who had the linked versions did not experience this, so I guess we're not comparing the same group of students, but we did notice that in the feedback that we would receive at the end of the year, students felt the course was much more valuable,

and instructors also had a much more positive experience, as they had a chance to spend more time with the students and they had more freedom to pick and choose whatever they felt students needed to focus on the most.

Organon: That's great. You have mentioned a couple of times, literature shows and also our experience with Content and Language Integrated Learning or English as a Medium of Instruction in Brazil has shown that professional development is a key aspect. How has Vantage College been approaching this so everybody's on the same page and learning from what they do?

I'd say that this is one of the most challenging aspects -- to continue being on the same page in an ongoing basis. We have a core group of instructors, maybe even 80 percent of our faculty members, who have been teaching now for five or four years depending on when the programs started. We have a lot of stability in terms of who is teaching in the program, and that has meant that those faculty members either feel they already have a very solid understanding of what it means to teach at Vantage, what it means to collaborate, what it means to integrate language and content. But at the same time, we are always welcoming new colleagues and bringing them up to speed with the kind of insights we've gained, with the theoretical and practical approaches we embrace, takes time, energy and resources.

Typically, if you join Vantage to work in our program, you will be spending some time first meeting with people, getting to understand the program, how it works, the kinds of resources, as well as the pedagogical orientations that we embrace. We don't have necessarily a formal training program but we have a number of resources (foundational readings, for instance), particularly in relation to our academic English approach, that we share. I know of some of our colleagues that have purchased copies of books on content and language integration and that have shown a keen interest in developing expertise in that area beyond the conversations that we have had. There's a lot of reflection happening as well because of the regular program planning meetings as well as the general monthly faculty and staff meetings and annual retreats. These create important opportunities to better get to know each other as well as to focus on a topic or issue of common interest, and figure out ways to address it to better improve different aspects of our instructional approaches.

Also, in our academic English program we have had specific initiatives that have helped us sync in our pedagogical approaches. For example, the first two years we had an external workshop developer come and give a series of workshops on Systemic Functional Linguistics, and we also have an in-house SFL expert who provides support (via consultations and suggesting or specific resources. And in the academic English course planning meetings, EAP instructors also engage in marking calibration exercises as well as exchange tips on how to teach a particular aspect or topic. Also, throughout these five years, we do showcases in which at the end of each term instructors volunteer and, in 15 to 20 minutes, they showcase either a lesson or a particular statement or a particular outcome of a research project that they have engaged in. And the rest of us learn from these experiences. There are lots of synergies that happen as a result of these exchanges, as we all get inspired. There is a wide range of topics that are covered, including assessment and how to get feedback and how to approach the teaching of a particular metalinguistic term, for example. In addition, we have also done some professional developments with faculty across the disciplines by offering some workshops focused on systemic functional linguistics (SFL).

There's always room to do more, but some of the concrete challenge is once again the limitation of time and people's availability so that everybody can attend the sessions.

Organon: I know you are both the academic English program director at Vantage College and a professor at the Language and Literacy Education (LLED) department of the UBC Faculty of Education. Can you tell us a bit more about the work you do beyond Vantage?

Yes, I actually divide my time between Vantage and my home department. I am an assistant professor in Language and Literacy Education (LLED, https://lled.educ.ubc.ca/profiles/sandra-zappa-hollman/) and I get to teach and supervise graduate students in my home department. I'd say that the graduate course I have designed has given me a wonderful opportunity to disseminate the kind of work that we do at Vantage. In this course we cover a number of topics for which I have gained many of the insights through my work at Vantage, more recently, and that complement my over twenty-five years of teaching and research experience. We cover topics around EAP curriculum development, language and content integration, use of a Systemic Functional Linguistics orientation, genre-based pedagogies, interdisciplinary collaborations, and so on. So, beyond the context of Vantage, I have that opportunity to disseminate the kind of work we do and our colleagues are doing the same thing in their respective departments whenever possible, in units like the UBC Center for Teaching and Learning (CTLT), offering workshops on instructional skills workshops, how to give feedback, and how to integrate multilingual students in their classrooms, for instance.

Organon: Would you have any comments about the future directions of Vantage or the content and language integrated approach?

Well, Vantage College is in a great place right now. We -- I mean faculty, staff and students of course -- are benefiting from our collaborative efforts these first five years that have allowed us to fine tune the curriculum and resources so that our students can maximize their learning. Our academic English instructors now have developed significant expertise - I'd say awareness -- of the kinds of genres and language demands of the disciplines represented in our program. But of course, there's always more to learn! So, we still have a long way to go, if you will. And the model we currently have works for us, yet this doesn't mean that it's the only type of model, in terms of curriculum, that could work. I'm sure that at some point we will be exploring other options. But this is precisely one of the reasons why working in a multidisciplinary context such as Vantage is so exciting.

Organon: This is great, Sandra. Thank you so much for your time.

Interview transcribed by Willian Dalmagro Braga.