

**Refereed Proceedings of the 2005 Biannual Language and  
Academic Skills in Higher Education Conference:  
Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice.**

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# Preface

## Critiquing and reflecting

On 24-25 November 2005, The Australian National University hosted the biennial Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Conference, *Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice*. Every two years, the LAS conference brings together academics and professionals from Australia and New Zealand, while also regularly attracting international participants. The LAS2005 Conference, as with previous LAS Conferences, proved directly relevant to people researching, teaching or interested in the teaching of academic, language and learning skills at a tertiary level. Over 140 participants attended the conference.

We chose the title *Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice* because the LAS2005 Conference marked an anniversary of sorts. In 1994, just over ten years ago, Kate Chanock of La Trobe University hosted the first national conference under the Language and Academic Skills banner; this, together with the development of the Unilearn discussion list, was a breakthrough in terms of communicating what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. The LAS2005 Conference aimed to provide a forum at which to critique and reflect on the development of the Australasian LAS profession since 1994; to exchange ideas, research and experiences in academic skills teaching; and to contribute to the growth of a network of national and international LAS practitioners.

The LAS2005 Conference was a watershed in the development of the Australasian LAS profession, as we laid the foundations for creating a professional association. Thus, the conference theme of 'critiquing and reflecting' invited LAS practitioners to foreground many of the issues that LAS professionals face as individual practitioners, as part of a team, as a centre/unit within the academy, and/or as a profession. In response to the conference theme, LAS practitioners produced papers on a range of issues, including how to advise students in virtual space, how to use e-learning to encourage students to be independent, how to coordinate peer mentoring programs, how to develop a knowledge management framework to organise what it is we know, how to remain creative in the face of routines, and how to resist the dreaded 'remedial' tag. The implications of online learning on LAS practice were considered by many writers, as was the issue of how we evaluate and assess what we do. Others drew on the work of particular theorists, for example, the work of Michel Foucault or of Viktor Shklovsky, in order to reflect on LAS knowledge and practice. Workshops, too, were held on the challenges faced by those new to the LAS profession, on the need to initiate a nationwide study to evaluate the provision of LAS services, on strategies for working with graduate coursework students in one-to-one consultations, and on interrogating the 'LAS Position Statement 1999' so as to consider how the LAS profession can initiate institutional change rather than react to change. In addition to giving papers and running workshops, LAS practitioners presented posters that focused on, among other things, the role LAS centres can play, in an age of diminishing resources, in providing LAS services to an increasingly diverse student body; the challenges associated with evaluating the effectiveness of LAS programs and interventions; and the use of developing technologies to enhance student access to LAS provision. The LAS2005 Conference also provided an opportunity for heads of LAS centres to identify what they considered to be the issues that we as a profession need to confront.

## Reviewing process

In her Keynote address, Kate Chanock, who has had experience editing LAS conference proceedings, cautions editors and reviewers against taking on 'the mantle of gatekeepers' and suggests instead that our 'expertise is more usefully employed in helping less experienced writers to shape their papers for publication'. With *Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice* we hope we have managed to strike a balance between gatekeeping and being supportive. Indeed, we took the view that both the process of writing the paper and the process of reviewing papers provided LAS practitioners with a professional development opportunity.

To support peer reviewers we put in place protocols that would help those new (and those not so new) to the reviewing process. For writers, we put in place a reviewing process that provided feedback to writers at every stage, from the abstract to the final draft. For this conference, the LAS2005 Conference Steering Committee reviewed the abstracts. If we could not see how the proposed paper was related to the conference themes or how the paper was grounded in the literature, then we contacted the authors and asked them to re-consider and re-write their abstract. In total, 46 abstracts were accepted by the steering committee. Of these, 28 authors wanted their papers to go through the double-blind peer review process.

Some authors received consistent recommendations from their anonymous reviewers; for example, both reviewers might have deemed the paper acceptable for publication subject to minor revision or they may have believed that the paper needed to be revised and resubmitted. Other authors received differing recommendations; for example, one reviewer may have said a paper was acceptable for publication as is, while the other reviewer may have said it needed to be revised and resubmitted. After the peer-review process, most authors acted on the reviewers' feedback and, after negotiating changes with the editorial committee, chose to re-submit their papers for consideration for the proceedings. A number of authors found this reviewing feedback process to be very beneficial. One author said: 'I . . . feel grateful for the initial reviewers' reports which helped me a great deal'. Another said: 'We would like to thank the referees for their time and care. Other pairs of eyes are essential in producing good quality writing'.

In the end, the editorial committee reviewed 24 papers for the proceedings. Using the reviewers' feedback, we read the revised drafts and assessed them against the following criteria:

- The paper addresses the conference theme of 'critiquing & reflecting';
- It engages with issues/problems of significance to the LAS profession;
- It is grounded in theory/scholarship;
- It is logically argued to a well-supported conclusion;
- It evidences coherent development and appropriate academic style; and
- It conforms to format guidelines, including appropriate referencing style and proofreading.

At the end of this process, 16 papers, as well as Kate Chanock's Keynote address, were considered appropriate for the proceedings; one of these papers was subsequently accepted for publication elsewhere and was therefore not included in the final proceedings.

Authors of papers that were not included in the proceedings were given detailed feedback as to why the editorial committee made that decision. On this process, an author commented: 'Thanks for all your hard work in bringing together the feedback on our paper. Far from feeling depressed we feel we have learnt a lot from the process'. Of the 15 papers that appear in this proceedings, some required minor revisions and, in some cases, cuts to the word length. During this stage of the process authors were consulted about changes to their paper. Again, at the end of this process the editorial committee received positive feedback from authors: 'We thank both the reviewers and the Committee for the commitment to high standards, and all of their feedback'.

Other papers presented at the conference will appear on the conference website. We feel it is necessary to do this in order to make LAS knowledge available to the LAS community. Unrefereed papers from the 'Changing identities' LAS2001 conference are on the University of Wollongong website; over the years I have often had cause to refer to them. As a conference attendee, I have attended excellent presentations that were not included in the proceedings. Therefore, having the conference presentations available on the web provides the LAS community with a valuable resource.

## **Acknowledgements**

As David R. Rowland and Mandy Symons make clear in their paper, acknowledging assistance is a typical and appropriate feature of academic writing. Likewise, this conference proceedings could not have been completed without the work of many others. Thanks to the LAS2005 Conference Steering Committee – Annie Bartlett, Judy Bell, Gail Craswell, Alison Cumming-Thom, Stephanie Fadini, Marian May, Stephen Milnes, Megan Poore, Paul Preston, and Valli Rao – for making the conference possible in the first place; to all the authors, those in the proceedings and those not, for making a contribution to the development of LAS knowledge and practice; to Valli Rao for organizing the peer review process; to the peer reviewers for acting as supportive gatekeepers and doing their utmost to ensure that the papers reflected the conference themes; to the Editorial Committee – Annie Bartlett, Gail Craswell, and Valli Rao – for reading so many papers; and to Anthony Mason for taking time out from his regular work to design the template for the proceedings and for providing advice on formatting issues.

Stephen Milnes

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# The John Grierson Keynote: Critiquing and reflecting

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**Abstract:** *To begin this conference by remembering John Grierson feels exactly right. In his career and in himself, John combined the qualities that we, as LAS practitioners, would most like to bring to higher education: a passion for teaching, combined with a critical perspective; and a commitment to developing a collaborative community around our work. We can only hope to do these things with the gentle humour, and sense of proportion, that his colleagues remember in John. This conference has been dedicated to examining the progress we have (and have not) made, as a professional community, over the last ten years, and the ways in which we would like to consolidate and advance our position. We have been invited to reflect critically on all aspects of our work and on our institutional roles and relationships; and we hope to emerge with an association, a name, and a journal. The process of debating these matters over the last year or so has revealed dissatisfaction with the identities assigned to us by our institutions, though it has not produced unanimity about the identities we would prefer to project. The concerns expressed have been less about the work we do than about the ways that others perceive it. In this address, I would like to explore the implications of these discussions, for ourselves and for the kind of association we want to take into the future.*

**Key words:** *professional, community, identity*

## What we are here for

I want to start this address with a cliché. In my experience, clichés are clichés because they have proved true and appropriate again and again, and it is in this spirit that I wish to say how honoured I am to be asked to give this keynote address. It would be an honour, in any case, to be asked to open the LAS Conference, but this is more special still, because we are coming together to remember John Grierson. John's death in 2003 ended a working life whose trajectory resonates, in one way or another, with so many in this room. His enthusiasm for experiencing and appreciating cultures not his own; his movement into teaching ESL, and from there into a university learning centre; his involvement in teaching, in producing learning materials, in collaborating with faculty staff

in the disciplines; his concern for students who faced more than the usual challenges to make equal opportunity a practical reality: we share these enthusiasms and these concerns, and John has been an inspiration to us in our work. His personal qualities, his ideas and their implementation were a gift to the colleagues who worked with him, and his efforts to establish a professional community in our region, through his moderation of the Unilearn discussion list, are a valuable legacy to all of us in LAS.

Although it recalls our sadness at losing John, therefore, it feels most appropriate to begin this conference by remembering him. John combined the qualities that we, as LAS practitioners, would most like to bring to higher education: a passion for teaching, combined with a critical perspective; and a commitment to developing a collaborative community around our work. We can only hope to do these things with the gentle humour, and sense of proportion, that his colleagues remember in John.

This conference has been dedicated to examining the progress we have (and have not) made, as a professional community, over the last ten years, and the ways in which we would like to consolidate and advance our position. We have been invited to reflect critically on all aspects of our work and on our institutional roles and relationships; and we hope to emerge with an association, a name, and a journal. The process of debating these matters over the last year or so has revealed dissatisfaction with the identities assigned to us by our institutions, though it has not produced unanimity about the identities we would prefer to project. The concerns expressed have been less about the work we do than about the ways that others perceive it. In this address, I would like to explore the implications of these discussions, for ourselves and for the kind of association we want to take into the future.

## **What we are trying to address**

The concerns brought to the surface by our collective decision to form an organisation have been present since the early days of LAS in our region. Well before the first LAS conference at La Trobe, there were annual Australian Study Skills conferences, at which many of these concerns were aired, including the difficulty of getting our work recognised and understood beyond our circle, and the very modest material rewards for doing it (see, e.g., Samuelowicz, 1990). Professional identity, institutional status, inadequate resources, and misconceptions about the nature of our work are discussed year after year, in our tea rooms, our conferences, our publications, and on Unilearn. Many of our publications have been exercises in self-definition, aimed at sharing, questioning, clarifying, elaborating, and extending the nature of our work, for each other as well as for outsiders, for we have had to work hard at building our field at the same time as working within it. A key moment in this collective exploration of what LAS is and should be about was the publication, before most of us were active in LAS (and, indeed, before LAS had a name), of *Literacy by Degrees* (Taylor et al., 1988).

The first LAS Conference, held at La Trobe in 1994, was not, therefore, the first conference of LAS practitioners, but it was a revival of collective activity after several years during which, though meetings had been shelved, the number of LAS positions in the region was quietly expanding. When we convened the first conference, in fact, we had no idea how many of us there were across Australia, and our surprise at the attendance (by

around 150 people) was echoed by other participants. Many of us had felt isolated and uncertain, in some respects, about what our work should entail, and the chief benefit of that first conference was to establish a large and lively community of interest, a social and intellectual reference group for what we do.

A year later, we felt strong enough to start squabbling amongst ourselves. The Working Conference at Bendigo in 1995, which produced the very useful 'Position Statement: academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers in Australian universities' by Vanderwal, Hicks, McGowan, and Carmichael (1999), was not so much a meeting as an ordeal. I mention this because we are here to critique as well as to reflect. On the one hand, the document that resulted from that conference shows that we should not be afraid to disagree, for its apparent consensual quality belies the heated discussions from which it emerged. On the other hand, I would be sorry to go through such an experience again, and it is possible to identify some of the reasons for the difficulties that, at the time, the organisers did not in the least expect. First, some of the participants expressed suspicions about the agenda, and possible hidden agenda, of the conference organisers. This was partly because it was a small gathering, by invitation. The organisers had thought this likely to be more efficient, for co-drafting a document, than a larger free-for-all, and no doubt they were right about that; but to some, it suggested an intention to impose decisions that had not been democratically arrived at, and that is something we will be wise to avoid now and in the future. The other source of tension was that the working conference focussed on industrial matters which might affect our livelihood. In defining our values, our principles, and our objectives, we were in broad agreement; it was the section on 'Qualifications, experience, and research' that exposed the differences among our visions of who we were and how inclusive our profession ought to be. Could anybody come into LAS work, from any intellectual background? Or must they be qualified in education, ESL, or linguistics? How far must they have gone up the ladder of postgraduate qualifications? How much experience must they have accumulated already? This section was eventually drafted to accommodate demands for greater inclusiveness, and this is something I hope to see maintained as we consolidate our professional identity.

In the end, we emerged with a statement of enduring usefulness, the main features of which (briefly summarised) were LAS practitioners' commitment to:

- Equality of opportunity for all learners, and appreciation of cultural diversity
- Enhancement of students' skills and strategies for their courses and for lifelong learning
- Use of a variety of teaching modes, and collaboration with discipline staff on curriculum, teaching, and assessment issues
- Recognition that our role is developmental rather than remedial, academic rather than auxiliary, and 'integral to the ongoing process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions'
- Research and professional development of LAS practitioners (as individuals)
- Development of LAS as a profession
- Secure funding for LAS services 'appropriate for the student population'
- Development of appropriate working conditions and methods of performance appraisal that recognise the 'unique nature of the work' and reward it fairly (quoted passages are from Vanderwal et al., 1999).

In most of these goals, we have made considerable progress. With respect to funding, equitable working conditions, and opportunities to participate in research and professional activities, however, much remains to be desired, and some units have even experienced setbacks (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004). This underlines the urgency that many of us feel about the need to form a national organisation to collect and make available the ideas, experiences, and information that may help us to resist erosion of our working conditions and perhaps to secure improvements. Vanderwal et al. (1999) put very succinctly the concern of LAS advisers, that:

Effective work with undergraduate and post graduate students and other academic staff requires that academic skills lecturers are personally engaged in academic work, both to advance the theoretical basis of their field and to have advisory credibility within an academic environment. It is essential that academic and learning skills advisers are integrated within the academic structure of their institution.

Despite the gains we have made, it is clear from themes of the last two LAS conferences as well as this present one, and from Unilearn discussions throughout the time that the discussion list has run, that we continue to have problems in relation to our professional identity, and I would like to look at these more closely in the remainder of this address.

## What's in a name?

Many of our discussions have been about the words we do not want to use in describing ourselves and the work we do. The words most likely to be shunned include 'skills', 'language', 'English', 'support', and 'advisers'. There are, I think, three reasons for our desire to distance ourselves from the denotations and connotations of these terms. One is that we are a diverse crowd, hailing from ESL, from linguistics, from counselling, from education, and a host of other disciplines, and terms like 'English' and 'language' seem to foreground some of us and background others. A second reason is the simple inconvenience of having people ring us up because they think we are the English or linguistics or foreign languages department, and having to transfer their calls; or else not having people ring us up for LAS advice because they think we are one of those other departments, and missing out on appointments that they really need. The most important reason, however, is our fundamental misgivings about the silent 'mere' that accompanies words like 'skills' and 'support': that is, we worry that these words will be understood to mean that if we teach skills, we *merely* teach skills, or if we support students, we *merely* support them.

The first problem should just remind us, I think, that any form of words we settle on should be encompassing rather than apparently exclusive. Our diversity is a source of richness in our field, and should not be a source of division. The second problem is trivial, but real. Perhaps it is futile to try to buck against Bock's Law (as enunciated by Hanne Bock, my colleague at La Trobe in the late 1980s) – 'Whatever can be misunderstood, will be; and whatever cannot be misunderstood, will also be'. However, it would be more efficient to have a name that generates less confusion, and perhaps we can accomplish this today and tomorrow.

The third problem, however, is not at all trivial; it is at the heart of many problems we experience in our work, as well as the problem of finding a satisfactory public face to project. Nor are we alone in this dilemma of the silent 'mere', for writing tutors in the United States have been struggling with it for decades. In 'The idea of a writing centre', published in 1984, Stephen North complained, 'My colleagues . . . do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center' (p. 433). Six years later, this problem was reiterated by Muriel Harris, who noted that 'There seems to be a long and tenacious tradition of not understanding or misunderstanding what writing centers are about' (1990, p. 18); and Hemmeter (1990) wrote that 'To read the publications of writing center teachers and administrators is to listen to a disenfranchised voice from the margins telling a tale of painful marginality' (p. 35).

Ironically, we owe our jobs to the very misconceptions about the nature of academic skills that we deplore. The LAS profession would not have been established were it not for the perception, widespread among discipline lecturers, that many students arrive at university deficient in skills they should have learned at school, and that remedial work focusing on the correct use of language can make up this deficit. Ann Johns (1997) has found that lecturers across a range of disciplines believe there is a single set of academic values:

good writing, effective reading, careful listening and note-taking, and sound critical thinking . . . . Most faculty believe quite sincerely that literacy instructors can teach students some generalized approaches to each of these academic values, which will serve the students in every context and disciplinary culture (p. 34; see also Odell, 1992, pp. 86-87).

These 'generalized approaches' are the 'skills' from which we have come to distance ourselves as our experience of LAS advising has deepened. Immersed in the textual practices of higher education, we have come to realize that literacies are multiple, situated, and contested, as Lea and Street (1998) have argued, and that the common view of literacy as an autonomous set of mechanical skills (Street & Street, 1991) is quite inadequate. On the one hand, it underestimates the novelty and complexity of the challenges our students face, such that their struggles to express themselves effectively for academic purposes are ongoing and developmental, rather than remedial. On the other hand, it fails to recognize the intellectual interest inherent in the work that we do (Johns, 1997, p. 73); and this is frustrating both personally and also professionally, if we are denied funding for scholarly activities.

Perhaps it would be useful to explore the nature of skill more thoroughly, but our inclination has been rather to reject the label of skills adviser. We do not wish to be identified with a dualistic way of thinking (Russell, 1991) that artificially separates research from teaching, theory from practice, knowledge from skill, content from form, ideas from language, and thought from expression. It is the dualistic idea that language serves as a 'vehicle' for thought which generates the familiar images of the 'fix-it shop' (North, 1984), or the 'grammar garage' working 'on the sentence-level problems of underprepared student writers' (Waldo, 1990, p. 75). Our students are poorly served by such a limited understanding of the nature of skill, and we have been held back by it professionally. In each pair of terms above, the first is valued and privileged over the second, to which a silent 'mere' becomes attached. Nor is it always silent, for as Squires (1990, pp. 42-43)

,has pointed out, the academy defines itself in terms of research, theory, and knowledge, as distinct from 'mere' practice and skill. Because of this dualism, lecturers

often fail to understand their responsibilities in promoting literacy in every class through the active teaching of reading and writing as related to 'ways of being' in the disciplines, . . . [and] the entire responsibility for student literacy, and its intricate relationship with communities of practice and their genres, falls, in many cases, on marginalized literacy units within an academic context. (Johns, 1997, p. 153)

As we have come to understand the limitations of the dualistic conception of skills, we have gone beyond our original brief as LAS advisers to look at these 'ways of being', and to look at the 'intricate relationships' between students' literacies and the discourse communities to which they submit their work (e.g., Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Ivanic, 1998; Chanock, 1998, 2004; Moore, 1999). Not only our thinking but our modes of teaching have developed accordingly so that, as Vance and Crosling (1998) have noted, our offerings of 'generic courses in academic skills' have been giving way, increasingly, to 'more context-specific instruction . . . [and] integrated programs run in collaboration with discipline specialists, to the benefit of the entire student cohort' (p. 362). Involvement in such programs has, in turn, raised our profiles in our institutions, but a residual misunderstanding of our work persists in many places.

It is this misunderstanding that makes us want to dissociate ourselves from any terms which may suggest that our work is basic rather than advanced, autonomous rather than imbricated in the intellectual mosaic of academic endeavour (terms such as 'language' or 'English'); that it is mechanical rather than intellectual (terms such as 'skills'); or that it is auxiliary rather than central (terms such as 'support', 'service', or 'adviser'). As I noted earlier, the contestation and rejection of such terms has formed a large part of the discussion about the nature and naming of our professional association, suggesting a preoccupation both with our own identity and with the way that others in our institutions perceive us.

I would like to suggest that these two aspects should be disentangled, in the interests of clarifying our thinking as we consider the names and aims proposed for our institution. There is nothing wrong with supporting and advising students, and there is nothing wrong with language or skills. Language is something that we value and enjoy, or we would not be in this line of work. A skill is an idea in action, an intention fulfilled, an ability to join action to thought that is no more divisible, despite the pervasiveness of dualism in Western thinking, than mind is divisible from body. It is possible to analyse and make visible the ways in which forms work with contents, but that is not the same as separating them out. Nor is it 'mere'; it is, after all, what art historians do with paintings, what sociologists do with institutions, what literary scholars do with poetry, what historians do with events. I am sure that you can supply a great many more examples from fields beyond my area of humanities and social sciences.

Nor are support and assistance unworthy activities. A large part of our job satisfaction comes from helping students to understand the contexts and cultures within which they work, and helping them to shape their performances in ways that make sense to them as well as finding favour with their audiences. Our problem is not with the roles and activities

of LAS advising, but with the 'mere' that others have attached to these; and if we collude by repudiating these roles and activities, we risk suggesting that they *are* inherently less worthwhile than the work of people in the disciplines.

In combating the misperceptions that others have about our work, however, it may well make sense to use language that sidesteps these. The proposal that we name our association the Association of Academic Language and Learning, which we are presently considering, has been arrived at after much discussion both of what we are and of what we are not, with a view to representing ourselves to our institutions and the wider public. At the same time, the enunciation of the association's aims in the draft mission statement – a document chiefly for ourselves -- does not shy away from mentioning skills and support, but contextualises these as part of the development of learning. Similarly, the LAS Conference website this year describes the work of LAS advisers in the following terms:

Our primary role . . . is to assist students to understand the cultures, purposes and conventions of different academic genres and practices. In this respect, our work is developmental, not remedial. We don't 'fix' problems - rather, we teach students the strategies and skills with which they can achieve the outcomes to which they aspire. This objective of teaching students how to take control of their academic writing and learning is fundamental to our pedagogic philosophy. (Academic Skills and Learning Centre, 2005)

## What benefits may a professional association bring?

As we embark on incorporation as an Association, we start a new chapter in our collective narrative; and this seems like a good time to ask ourselves what it is important to carry over from earlier chapters. I think our great strength, up to this point, has been our commitment to mutuality: with our students, with our colleagues in our institutions, and with one another. We have shared ideas and resources without reservation, and contributed to conferences without rivalry and without diffidence. I think it is important to keep this in mind as we expand and develop more formal procedures, to ensure that increasing professionalism will support, rather than undermine, our sense of community.

We have achieved a great deal in the way of professional development without a formal association, but we have reached a point where our numbers are large enough, and our activities and interests various enough, to be able to benefit from a greater level of organisation. It will be good to have a website where we can lodge our resources and draw upon materials created, and information collected, by colleagues all around our region. Announcements of conferences and other professional activities will be easier to locate, and publishing opportunities should increase. But we will be wise to resist the temptation to establish our credentials by simply raising the bar for our members. It is all too easy for editors and reviewers to take on the mantle of gatekeepers, when their expertise is more usefully employed in helping less experienced writers to shape their papers for publication. It is easy to privilege theory over lore, and statistics over stories; but more useful to explore what kinds of insights can be gained from all these sources.

## Conclusion

The momentum that has brought us to this point of forming an Association has been developed by valuing our work and the people who do it. Our purpose in forming a professional organisation is to promote this work and demonstrate its value, as well as to improve the conditions under which we do it. At the same time, professionalism carries with it a responsibility to reflect critically on our own performance, so it is appropriate that the organisers of this Conference have asked us to address the theme, 'critiquing and reflecting'. In this address, I have tried to critique and reflect upon some aspects of the process that has brought us here; but mine is only one perspective, and I very much look forward to hearing many others over the next two days.

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# Language and academic skills advising in the era of internationalisation: A multiliteracies perspective

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the application of the notion of ‘multiliteracies’ (New London Group, 1996, 2000), widely used at primary school level, in the internationalised higher education context. The concept of multiliteracies extends the definition of text and literacy to account for both the proliferation of non-standard versions of English and the increasing multimodality of texts which commonly incorporate designs of meanings beyond the purely linguistic. A multiliterate concept of text privileges no mode of representation of meanings, no particular text-type and no idealised version of English thus offering a model of equitable access and opportunity of success to students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds as well as other traditionally disadvantaged students. Furthermore, a multiliteracies model fosters an educational environment where students from any cultural background, including local students, can benefit from the interaction with others as multiple literacies become valued in class and assessment tasks. The role of LAS advisers within this model, both as teachers and as participants in the higher education community, is discussed. It is argued that a pedagogy of multiliteracies can inform LAS teaching practice if a position critical of dominant academic discourses is adopted. The paper further suggests that LAS advisers are uniquely positioned to promote and support a change towards multiliteracies within the broader academic community of students and staff.*

**Key words:** *multiliteracies, internationalisation, inclusive practices*

## Introduction

Language and academic skills (LAS) advisers are regularly consulted by university students who may be experiencing difficulties with their course assignments or practical placements. In particular, students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) seek specialist support in managing a number of issues related to language and cultural differences which impact negatively on the progress of their studies. LAS advisers’

responses to these issues often focus on the planning and implementation of workshops to support this particular cohort of students and on offering individual tutorials where the students can work intensively with advisers on their assignments. According to students and lecturers, this response is highly effective as it makes the expectations of a subject, the assessment requirements and the academic conventions, explicit to the students. However, all too often the fast pace of our work and the demanding requests of students to obtain the *know-how* of assignment writing can make our work uncritical and make us overly prescriptive of the text-types used in academia. A prescriptive approach sanctions the reproduction of accepted conventions without contestation and, while it may deliver a good result for the student in the short term, it does not foster a deep understanding of the relationships and structures of power which gave rise to those conventions in the first place; it does not encourage in the student the development of a critical inquiring mind as it is intended in university.

A prescriptive reproductive approach is essentially assimilationist in that particular groups of students, such as NESB, are instructed to recognise, accept, and ultimately embrace as valid and natural the practices of the dominant group, in this case, the Western academic discourse community. This process of assimilation and acculturation (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003) may be disregarding of the practices of the minority and disadvantaged groups, silencing the students for whom the process was initially conceived and put into practice. Thus, such a process may unwittingly result in the alienation of these minority groups, including a particular group of students that Australian universities are striving to attract: the international student cohort. Furthermore, acculturation of the minorities does not take into account that those who belong to the majority groups may also need 'support' to function successfully in a context where they do not constitute a majority, a context of *difference*, as it may occur in the future in the Australian internationalised university and more generally in the increasingly globalised workplace or even the culturally diversified Australian social environment.

This paper argues that inclusive teaching practices that embrace difference are needed, as opposed to assimilationist approaches (Gale & Densmore, 2000), in order to sustain a truly internationalised university. It proposes that the adoption of a pedagogy of *multiliteracies* (New London Group, 1996, 2000) in the university context encompasses such practices. The paper further discusses the impact of a *multiliteracies* framework on the work of LAS advisers and units, and suggests that LAS advisers, located strategically in the continuum between faculty academics and students, are uniquely positioned to promote and support a change towards *multiliteracies*. It concludes that the application of a *multiliteracies* approach to LAS teaching requires a strong commitment to critical reflective practice.

## Current situation in higher education

Language is the system of representation of meanings most valued in Western academic contexts, be it in written or oral mode. Other semiotic systems, such as the visual, are considered essential complements of the linguistic modes but do not command by themselves the same degree of respect and acceptance as valid ways of expressing arguments, positions or facts. They are generally used in a secondary manner in terms of logic and design. For example, the logic of visual discourse is commonly presented

as subordinate to the linear logic of writing or speech (Kress, 2003), as is the case in the delivery of an oral presentation enhanced by visual aids.

Within the language realm, in turn, the written mode is privileged over the oral, perhaps for its inherent ability to sustain an argument over time. In many university courses, writing is given a particularly pre-eminent position and, especially, essay writing is elevated to constitute perhaps the most valued communication skill that university students should develop during their tertiary courses. However, depending on their chosen profession, many graduates will use their writing skills only minimally at the workplace (for instance, nurses, doctors, accountants, paramedics) and it is quite unlikely that their writing will ever take the shape of an essay. Other skills may be more important for employment but are not always given the place they deserve in tertiary courses. For example, Crosling and Ward (1999, 2002) have found that oral skills in undergraduate business courses at Monash University are underestimated in the curriculum, in terms of development and assessment, when compared to the future demands of graduate employment. Information literacy skills, that is, the skills to thoroughly and accurately search and locate information, have also been identified by most universities to constitute essential abilities their graduates should develop (The Australian National University, 2004).

The overvaluation of the linguistic above other semiotic systems at university assumes students' mastery of the English language, its contexts of use, its discourses and associated values. It presupposes that students behave, believe, value and act according to an idealised norm largely based on Western academic discourses. In the existing language-based university culture, although it is recognised that a student might not fit this 'fictional learner construct' (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 118), there are no provisions to accommodate students' difference other than silencing the students by facilitating their acculturation to the norms of the majority – as if these norms represented the only *correct* ones – or even punishing them to reinforce the norms' correctness. This educational approach thus resonates with the poststructuralist notion of *othering* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998; Pennycook, 1994; Said, 1978) that equates difference with wrongness. It classifies the students in binary terms: either they perform in the *target* way using the *target* language and text-type (and become part of *us*) or they do not (and become part of the *others*).

Most of our international students and local students whose first language is not English have come from an environment where the academic culture, as it is conceived in the West and embedded in our idealised student construct, is not necessarily valued. The culture of inquiry, argumentation and debate; the practice of questioning and articulating doubts over what other people say or think, particularly over those in a position of authority such as writers of books or scholarly papers; and the rather direct approach to writing may not be considered proper practices, for instance, in societies of Confucian heritage. Likewise, a student, in being an apprentice, may not be expected to write or orally express openly their position and thoughts on a given issue (Handa, 2004). Therefore, if universities are committed to the internationalisation of their student ranks, the pedagogies employed today need to be changed and become inclusive of the diversity of all students' practices, values and beliefs (Battersby, 2002; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2001).

## The concept of *multiliteracies*

The term *multiliteracies* was first coined by the New London Group (1996) mainly in relation to language and literacy teaching in the primary school context. The New London Group's (1996, 2000) model uses the word *multiliteracies* in a dual sense. On the one hand, the term refers to the ability to construct and understand meanings expressed not only by language but also by the integration of linguistic elements with a range of other designs of meaning, namely, visual, audio, gestural, spatial as well as multimodal combinations. On the other hand, the word *multiliteracies* refers to the ability to create and negotiate texts in diverse forms of the English language, including its intersections with other languages, thus acknowledging that varieties of English do exist and that no variety is superior to another. Indeed, English has become a *lingua mundi* and a *lingua franca* being widely used today all over the world and in multiple realms (Pennycook, 1994). In its spread, English has fragmented in a myriad of varieties responsive to geographic as well as specific discourse communities. The *multiliteracies* model (New London Group, 1996, 2000), in taking these aspects into account, does not raise one form of English over another. Furthermore, it does not raise language over other systems of representation of meanings.

A *multiliteracies* pedagogy appreciates the value of difference by extending the traditional concepts of text and literacy to include meanings constructed in a range of semiotic systems. Students' skills and knowledge *albeit* expressed in ways different from the linguistic, with a different logic and grammar, have a place and obtain recognition as fully valid means of expression, not just as complementary to language. In this way, a model of *multiliteracies* moves away from the binary dichotomy of *us* and *others* that privileges a standardised written form, rewards the students who perform as per prescribed norm, and punishes those who are different. In valuing all modes of representation of meaning, this pedagogy encompasses a broad dimension of communication and underpins a model of inclusion. It is in this sense that the model suits the internationalised higher education context.

## The role of LAS advisers and centres

The adoption of a *multiliteracies* approach can face resistance from all sectors of the academic community. It demands accepting a change, which not all would realise is necessary. For this change to occur it is essential that LAS advisers understand the notion of *multiliteracies* and actively promote it. As Clerehan, Orsmond, and Wilson (2001) have stated:

Learning Centres are at the centre – even the epicentre – of changes in learning. We are in a unique position in that, from our anthropological bird's eye-view, we are able to detect shifts sometimes before those embedded in their disciplines do; and this must mean that we can act to facilitate change where we see the need. (p. 7)

As a first step, LAS advisers would have to raise awareness and promote understanding of the need for such a change as a move to ensure that internationalisation involves more than just income for the institutions. While universities have certainly realised the

potential of internationalisation as an educational project beyond the obvious financial rewards, many of the guidelines developed by policy-makers to support staff in the process of internationalisation present international topics and perspectives in course design and delivery as discrete contributions to be added to the core components. This approach strongly marks the boundaries between core and additions, and ensures that the Western modalities, themes and norms remain invulnerable as the centre of a course. A framework of *multiliteracies*, in construing literacy as the ability to produce and negotiate texts from multiple channels and multiple cultural positions, relativises the Western norm and incorporates a critical perspective which enriches the academic debate and leads to an overall better education. A pedagogy of *multiliteracies*, in contrast to tokenistic approaches, blends the additions with the core to redefine the mainstream.

The fear of change among academics would need to be addressed. This is a task that could also engage LAS advisers, who are in position to explain that traditional approaches to teaching and learning are not replaced or disregarded but instead are supplemented by *multiliteracies* (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000) in order to accommodate variations relating to culture in particular and to other more general factors, such as individual students' learning styles or the existence of disabilities.

At an operational level, the implementation of a *multiliteracies* pedagogy would redefine the role of LAS units, as the emphasis would not be placed on language but on a range of semiotic systems. The model requires the integration into the same organisational unit of traditional English language and academic skills advisers and staff with skills in other areas. In fact, professionals in areas such as instructional design, Web development, audio visual production and IT, as well as maths and visual arts, are often employed in the same support division as LAS advisers, and available to academic staff for consultancy services. But what is proposed here is for professionals with knowledge and sound understanding of the logic and grammar of other semiotic systems to be included as LAS advisers, where the L would stand for *languages* accordingly extending the concept of language beyond the purely linguistic system. Professional development programs to facilitate the acquisition and development of teaching skills for these new advisers and of familiarisation with alternative media for traditional advisers would have to be implemented and team work would be most important.

In support of the above idea, Craswell and Bartlett (2002) hold the view that the range of academic backgrounds and skills found among LAS advisers has only been beneficial to the provision of a better service to students at The Australian National University. They even argue that the diverse backgrounds of staff working together in LAS units over the years have positioned the LAS community 'somewhat ahead of its time' (p.10) in embracing multidisciplinary teamwork for the development of scholarship.

## **Implementation of a multiliteracies pedagogy: Examples and reflections**

The double meaning given to the word *multiliteracies* opens a range of possibilities for the interpretation of what *multiliteracies* are and how a pedagogy of *multiliteracies* can be realised. It has been reported (Lankshear, Green, & Snyder, 2000) that for some teachers, *multiliteracies* are accomplished when the traditional print forms are replaced

by other media reflecting, as a result, current technological advances and providing choice and flexibility to their students. This is a common interpretation in the higher education context where, even in on-campus courses, communication via WebCT or similar platforms can overtake most other ways of communication between students and lecturers (and university administrative staff), including class discussions, clarification of assessment tasks and submission of assignments. However, as Kalantzis and Cope (2000) explain, this technology is not equally embraced by all students; some are actually put at a disadvantage precisely by its use and feel excluded as a result.

This is a situation increasingly experienced by international students. While they are generally quite proficient in the use of basic computer skills, many students need to overcome significant cultural barriers to approach their lecturers online and participate effectively in an electronically-based course. Moreover, international students often feel deceived on arriving in Australia and finding themselves visibly abandoned to their own resources in this type of courses, aggravated by the fact that appointments with the lecturers are not readily available. Because the nature of LAS work places advisers side by side with the students at the receiving end of this pedagogy and exposes us to the weaknesses of such an approach, it becomes our responsibility to act consequently and educate academics that *multiliteracies* involve more than replacing traditional print and face-to-face forms by electronically mediated ones. It is also our task to advocate on behalf of the students for the provision of truly flexible, multimodal ways of communication. Just teaching students how to approach and manage computer-based communication is not enough; it only endorses the shortcomings of the teaching approach and fosters a pattern of inequality of access to educational opportunities.

A more positive example where *multiliteracies* are associated with new technologies and flexibility has been reported by Ogilvie and Ryan (2004) in the assessment of a project in two marketing subjects. The students were given the option of delivering the project orally or through the production of a video or DVD. A great number of students took the visual option and expressed the view that being given a choice as well as the opportunity to showcase their abilities had raised their self-esteem and had increased their engagement with the course. Similar positive outcomes have been reported with different cohorts of students at post-secondary level of education in different contexts, such as Asian students in intensive ESL courses in Australia (Abu-Arab, 2005); Aboriginal students learning digital text technology (Doherty, 2002); tertiary students in South Africa developing information literacy skills (de Jager & Nassimbeni, 2002); and Australian nursing students developing oral competence for clinical placements (Hussin, 2002).

A case relevant to LAS professional practice where a *multiliteracies* approach has been implemented successfully for several years is described by Hunter and Morgan (2001). It concerns a university-level academic English credit-bearing unit for first and second year students in a Canadian polytechnic institute. The lecturers embrace the concept of *multiliteracies* in its full dimension. From the perspective of developing literacy in diverse media technologies, Hunter and Morgan (2001) expose their students to a range of multimodal texts, such as traditional print, spoken texts in public events, television films and advertising, print advertising and Web sites. They also explicitly teach their students a metalanguage to talk about these multimodal texts by discussing matters relating to the choice of images, shapes, colours and words. The introduction of a metalanguage highlights that multimodal texts respond to a logic of organisation different from that of

pure written texts and therefore need to be described by an adequate functional grammar. Students' achievement is finally assessed through two multimodal assignments: a group panel presentation and a multimedia research paper for which students receive explicit training on database searching as well as explicit teaching of academic discourse conventions.

For developing their students' ability to negotiate multiple languages and multiple forms of English and their associated discourses, the lecturers (Hunter & Morgan, 2001) maximise opportunities of interaction among the students in the class to enrich the discussions with fresh and varied perspectives. These interaction instances are fostered by the lecturers' welcoming attitude to diverse cultural interpretations inevitably enhanced and coloured by students' access to non-academic channels of information, such as texts in their own languages or widespread popular culture-specific beliefs.

The examples presented so far suggest that an approach to *multiliteracies* is an approach to equity and fairness which provides access not just to university but also to success at university. For this success to occur it is important that lecturers appreciate their international students for who they are and what they have to offer in the broad realm of knowledge and skills as opposed to focusing on who these students are not (Australians from Anglo-Celtic background) and the ability in English they have not by virtue of coming from a country of non-English speaking background.

The reconceptualisation of international students and their abilities as valuable resources for student learning that a pedagogy of *multiliteracies* can foster, should transpire both in the enrichment of class discussions (in line with academics' aspirations) and in the design of 'culturally responsive assessment' (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003, p. 135). This type of assessment task entails flexibility, choice of media, and selection of topics relevant to students' interests and cultures (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003), and therefore has the potential to benefit all students, international and local. This benefit needs to be clearly perceived by the totality of the student populace as well as the staff for the internationalisation of universities to become more than a mere income-generating exercise by administrators and international recruiters, which despite creating employment opportunities and useful services, gives rise to resentment from those affected (see Schapper & Mayson, 2004, for a staff perspective on this issue).

A question that remains to be answered, which was raised by Craswell and Bartlett (2002), relates to whether it is possible for an LAS pedagogy to be framed within the *multiliteracies* approach even in one-to-one sessions. In agreement with the authors' view, this paper argues that it is possible. But it contends that the success of such a pedagogy ultimately depends on how LAS advisers, as a group and individually, see themselves operating in the academic community. The applicability of a *multiliteracies* pedagogy and its success depend on whether advisers resist the dichotomising discourses of content versus skills fabricated by the dominant forces in academia, or accept instead to act as their gatekeepers.

This paper further suggests that a perspective of *multiliteracies* in language and academic skills advising should place a strong emphasis on the 'critical framing' stage (New London Group, 2000, p. 247) of literacy development. It should particularly aim to facilitate and develop international students' understanding and critique of the dominant discourses

– both in their countries of origin and in the West – that have led them to seek a Western education and that will place them in a position of privilege over others on return to their home countries with their well-earned degree. Neither time or institutional limitations nor our own position of privilege in Australian society should preclude our responsibility as educators to encourage reflection and promote change for the transformation of society and of the individual.

## Conclusion

It has been argued that a *multiliteracies* approach to teaching, learning and 'being' at university can provide an inclusive framework for internationalising the university thus moving internationalisation away from tokenistic approaches and simplified assimilationist initiatives that only exacerbate the gap they purport to bridge. LAS advisers' unique position in the university structure situates them as key players in facilitating the adoption of a *multiliteracies* approach and, further, confers upon them an undeniable responsibility to act as agents of change in the broad academic community of lecturers and students. The opportunity for LAS advisers to successfully endorse a *multiliteracies* perspective in their own teaching depends on their commitment to adopt a critical hybrid position consistent with the promotion of reflection as a pillar of transformative education.

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# LAS advisers as virtual tutors: A report on an interactive online writing course for undergraduate students

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*Abstract: This year the Language and Learning Skills Unit at the University of Melbourne launched its first tutor-moderated interactive online writing course for undergraduate students. This was developed and facilitated by the Unit's Language and Academic Skills Advisers (LAS) advisers and was part of the University's Academic Interactive Resources portal (AIRport). The course ran over four weeks and consisted of seven modules aimed at helping undergraduate students understand the conventions and processes of academic writing. Each module provided information, examples and interactive exercises on features of academic writing, and gave students the opportunity to submit written tasks to a 'virtual tutor'. The evaluation process involved analysing student submissions, administering an end-of-course questionnaire and obtaining detailed feedback from LAS advisers. This paper explores the issues and difficulties faced by the LAS advisers in developing and conducting the interactive writing course. These issues include: developing accessible materials and activities with a high level of interactivity to promote active learning; meeting the needs of students from a range of disciplines; and providing useful and timely feedback. The paper discusses strategies used by the LAS advisers in attempting to address these issues and it outlines the lessons learned. The key implication is the need to engage in continued professional development in the areas of online materials design and effective online communication. The paper concludes by describing the evaluation process and presenting a summary of the student feedback on the first course.*

**Key words:** *online learning, interactivity, academic writing, feedback,*

## Introduction

The past few years have seen a significant increase in the use of the Internet for online course delivery in higher education (Savenye, Olina, & Niemczyk, 2001; Elgort, Marshall, & Mitchell, 2003), as well as an increase in the demands for flexible delivery of language and academic support services (Kokkin & Stevenson, 2004). In response to this, the Equity, Language and Learning Programs Department at the University of Melbourne has recently launched its Academic Interactive Resources portal ('AIRport'). AIRport contains a wide range of online resources on transition, language and academic study skills. It also offers an online tutor-moderated short course on academic writing for undergraduate students.

The aim of AIRport is to provide a web-based delivery of transition, language and academic skills support that corresponds in quality to that provided in face-to-face settings. One of the main benefits of this type of online support, is that it allows asynchronous provision of services, which is essential for students who have limited time to access resources and who may expect support outside of our traditional office hours (McInnis & Hartley, 2002).

This paper outlines the objectives and key features of AIRport's tutor-moderated online academic writing course. It discusses the issues and challenges faced by the LAS advisers in developing and delivering the course, and it reflects on the lessons learned.

## AIRport: an overview

In order to meet the different needs of an increasingly large and diverse student cohort, AIRport has three portals or 'gates' with different functions and purposes (see Figure 1):

1. Gate 1 consists of a series of stand-alone interactive activities and resources on various aspects of transition, academic writing, and study skills. All the resources in this gate are self-access and provide automated feedback to the user.
2. Gate 2 includes the tutor-moderated short course: 'Developing Academic Writing'. This gate also provides additional resources on essay writing as well as a 'Writing Lounge'.
3. Gate 3, which is currently being developed in collaboration with first-year subject co-ordinators, will contain resources on faculty-specific academic skills.

This paper focuses on the Gate 2 tutor-moderated short course in academic writing.

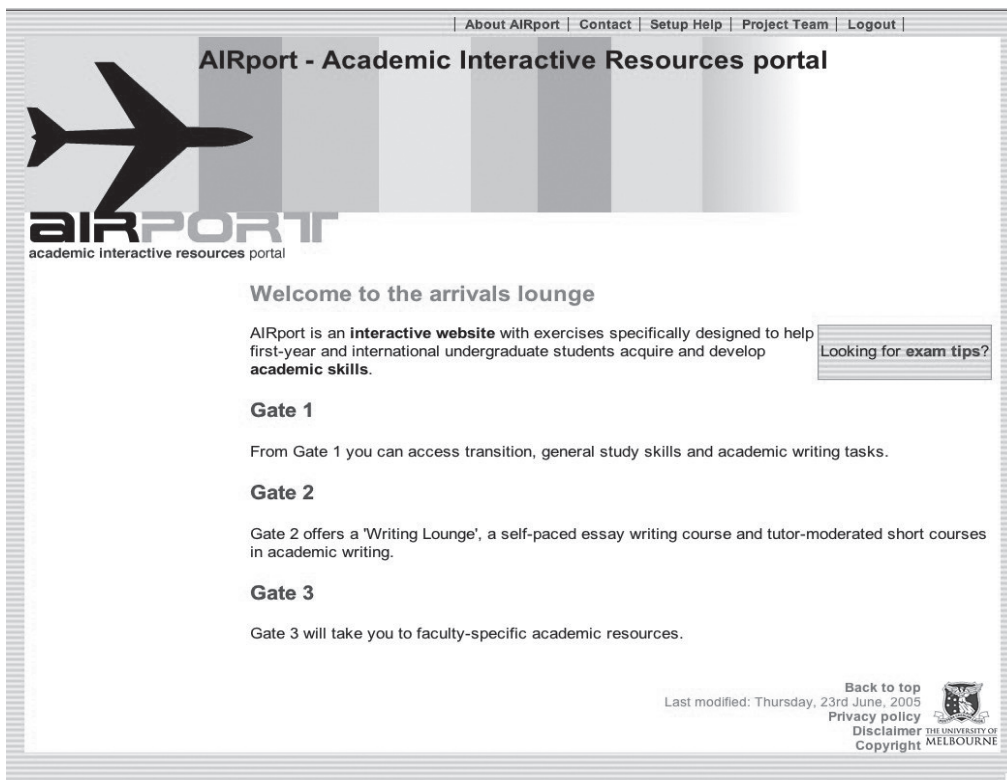


Figure 1: Academic Interactive Resources portal home page

The tutor-moderated writing course offers two streams: 'Developing Academic Writing' and 'Developing Academic Writing (ESL)'. Students are required to enrol in the course and then complete a series of lessons over a four-week period. Although the structure and topics covered in the two streams are the same, they differ slightly in content to cater for the different needs of the two target cohorts: NESB and ESB students. Both streams are moderated by LAS advisers, with an English language specialist being assigned to the NESB stream. At the time of writing, the course had been delivered twice in 'pilot mode' with 14 students participating in the first pilot and 26 students participating in the second.

The topics for the seven lessons in the course are:

1. Features of academic writing
2. Planning to write
3. Critical analysis
4. Structuring your writing
5. Effective use of paragraphs
6. Incorporating and acknowledging sources
7. Revising and editing

Each lesson begins with an introductory screen providing a brief explanation and orientation to the particular aspect of academic writing being presented. Our aim in the introductory screen is to provide students with sufficient context to see 'the bigger picture' and to encourage them to think critically about where this particular aspect of writing fits within the process of writing an academic assessment task. In most lessons, short authentic

examples with text commentary are provided followed by an interactive exercise with automated feedback. To complete a lesson, students submit a written response to an extended text exercise, where they further practise the skills introduced in the lesson. This text is then emailed to the relevant tutor who provides individualised feedback to the student via return email. Figure 2 shows an exercise from lesson three ('Critical Analysis'), in which students are asked to compare two paragraphs and identify examples of analytical language.

The screenshot shows a web page for 'GATE 2 - Short courses and writing lounge'. The page title is 'Lesson 3 - Critical analysis' and the exercise is 'Exercise 2. Identifying critical analysis'. The page includes a navigation menu on the left with options like 'AIRport Home', 'Gate 2 Home', 'Writing Lounge', 'Essay Writing Course', 'Developing Academic Writing', and 'Lesson three'. The main content area contains a paragraph about critical analysis in academic writing, followed by a question: 'Which paragraph demonstrates critical analysis? Explain why. Identify examples of analytical language from the text and submit your answers.' Below this are two text boxes, 'Text 1' and 'Text 2', each containing a paragraph of text. 'Text 1' discusses the difficulty of remembering letters compared to digits and mentions a list of letters 'U N I V X Y Z B A M E L'. 'Text 2' describes a psychology class exercise with 72 participants and discusses the associative strength of letters. The page also features a 'BOARDING PASS' graphic in the top right corner and a 'Feedback | Logout' link in the top right.

Figure 2: Lesson 3 Exercise 2: Identifying critical analysis

Although the online writing course encourages a sequential path through the lessons, this sequence is not enforced. This gives the student flexibility and control in how they approach the lessons. In fact, there have been several students who have completed the entire course in one sitting, while others have used the full four weeks. Comments and feedback from students suggest that they value this feature of the course; however, some advisers have expressed concern that allowing students to complete all the exercises at once leaves little time for reflection between lessons. This issue is discussed further in the section 'Issues and Challenges'.

## Developing the online writing course

The course materials were developed by a small team of LAS advisers in close collaboration with an instructional designer. Although most of the materials and tasks were written specifically for the online course, some of our text examples were taken and modified from The Macquarie University's 'Writing Gateway' under a mutual agreement of

resource-sharing. In all stages of the development process, we considered two important factors in effective online learning: interactivity and accessibility.

### **Interactivity vs. Accessibility**

It is now widely recognized that interactivity is a key factor in effective online learning (e.g., Clerehan, Turnball, Moore, Brown, & Tuovinen, 2003; Hedberg, 2003; Khoo, 2004; Lander, 1999). Interactive exercises allow learners to engage actively with the materials and assume some control over their learning. Interactivity also involves decision-making and thus a deeper approach to learning (Manathunga, 2002). In trying to make our writing course highly interactive, we were concerned with how we could best design and structure the course material to encourage active student participation and engagement (Hedberg, 2003). We aimed to do this by ensuring that the course materials and activities:

- support learner engagement;
- are relevant to the learning context – that is, reflect the types of language and academic skills students would have to apply in studies at university;
- challenge students to build on their existing knowledge and develop their own understanding; and
- provide practice and opportunities to learn from feedback (Boud & Prosser, 2002).

In addition to interactivity, the other equally important consideration in course design and development is the issue of accessibility. The term ‘accessibility’ implies the ‘global requirement for access to information by individuals with different abilities, requirements and preferences, in a variety of contexts’ (Stephanidis, Akoumianakis, Sfyarakis, & Paramythis, 1998, p.3). It is important to note here that accessibility problems are not confined to users with disabilities, but can also arise from the nature of the tasks, as well as the technological platforms and devices used to access information.

In developing the materials for the AIRport short course, our focus was to produce materials with the highest levels of accessibility. To achieve this, we made a design choice to create a text-based site. This meant that we were restricted in the types of visual elements we could include in the material (e.g., diagrams, charts, arrows, shading, etc.), and this caused considerable frustration among the writing team as these types of visual elements had frequently been used to great effect in our face-to-face teaching.

The writing team was also restricted in the types of interactive ‘tools’ we could use for our activities. These included ‘pop-ups’, animations and roll-over buttons. According to our instructional designer, animations can present accessibility problems for students who do not have the correct plug-in or who have slow internet connections, and roll-over buttons which rely on JavaScript can cause problems for certain browsers.

These restrictions raised concerns amongst some LAS advisers who argued that without the ‘flashy’ interactive tools and animations commonly used on the Internet, AIRport would be visually unattractive and unappealing for students. This issue was discussed in numerous development meetings, and questions were raised about whether we should ‘relax’ some of our restrictions to make the site more ‘inviting’ to students.

Although the discussion has remained open, we have – at least for now – decided to continue with the highly accessible text-based site. There are two important reasons for this: firstly, as equity of access for students at the University is part of our Unit's remit, we should strive to be the standard bearers for accessible interactive content within the University; and secondly, it is possible – albeit very challenging – to develop engaging, useful materials that are both interactive and highly accessible.

## **Issues and challenges**

### **Content issues**

Linked to the issue of accessibility, a major challenge in writing materials for the online course was the requirement to develop materials in 'viewable chunks of information' (Savenye et al., 2001, p.377). Given that young students do not like reading long texts on the web that require frequent scrolling (Nielsen, 2005), we had to ensure that our text examples were not only engaging, but concise and succinct as well. One strategy in dealing with this challenge was to present an outline of the text (e.g., main points of each paragraph), or part of the text (e.g., the introduction and conclusion of an essay), and provide a link to the full text. Students could then decide whether to read the longer, complete text or move on to the next activity.

Another issue faced by the LAS advisers in developing the course materials concerned the generic nature of the content. Our main challenge was developing generic materials that were not so 'generalised' that students would see them as being unrelated to their area of study and thus irrelevant to their needs (Ramsden, 1992). This would not only affect the level of student interest and engagement with the materials, but also their motivation for continuing the course. The writing team tried to address this issue in some exercises by providing students with a choice of topics from various disciplines. For example, the submission exercise in Lesson 2: 'Planning to Write', includes topics in Anthropology, Media/Cultural Studies, Economics, Health, History, Education, Psychology and Science.

This issue will hopefully be resolved by 'Gate 3' of AIRport. This gate, which is currently in the planning stage, will provide discipline-specific resources for students and will be developed in close collaboration with first-year subject coordinators from various faculties.

### **Pedagogical issues**

As mentioned earlier in the paper, concerns have been raised by several LAS advisers about the pedagogical integrity of allowing students to complete all seven lessons in the writing course in one sitting – that is, before receiving any feedback from the tutors. This seems to be a valid concern considering that one of the recognized advantages of asynchronous modes of communication is that the time delays that are allowed – between a message being received and a response being generated – enables time for reflection on the topic being discussed (McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; Jackson, 2000). By allowing students to complete all modules at once, without waiting for tutor feedback, are we in fact inadvertently encouraging bad, non-reflective learning behaviour? Should we be insisting that students only move on to the next lesson once they have received the tutor's comments?

Some argue that online learners should be given control over the 'pace, sequence and form of the instruction' (Lander, 1999), and that one of the main advantages of the online environment is that students 'find their own paths through materials' (Clerehan et al., 1999, p. 3). In the case of online resources and activities with automated feedback, we agree with this argument, and in fact, this is the theoretical underpinning of Gate 1 in AIRport. However, when trying to meet the needs of first-year university students, we believe that an online writing course which focuses on the process of writing, should be essentially linear in the sense that students are guided or scaffolded in their learning to progress from one lesson to the next (Manuel, 2001). This approach would still allow considerable student control within each lesson and it would still require a high degree of self-directed learning.

### **Communication skills: giving useful feedback**

Another issue that has been raised by several tutors is the extremely demanding nature of 'teaching' by giving feedback to students via email. The first issue concerned the content of our email message. Questions were asked, such as: How much detail should we provide? Should we use questions to elicit a 'better' response from students (as we would in face-to-face interaction)? To what extent should we 'correct' or highlight English language errors? In a face-to-face tutorial, we could point out common errors in language usage or grammar and ask the students to 'self-correct', but this proved to be much more difficult to do using an asynchronous form of communication.

Generally, the length and content of the tutors' feedback depended on the quality of the students' responses, and students were often asked to rethink the problem and 'try again'. Sometimes tutors gave hints to students, especially when it was clear that they needed more support in completing the tasks. We were also mindful of the fact that our feedback should prompt students to think about how they could improve, 'not just what to improve' (Turner, 2004, p. 32).

The second challenge in providing feedback to students concerned the style of our writing. It was clear from the first week of the course that being a 'virtual tutor' required a range of different communication skills (Barker, 2002). As online tutors, we had to be very careful about how we constructed our message to minimize possibilities for misunderstanding (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004). We not only had to consider the possibility that some of our expressions may be unfamiliar to our NESB students, but we also had to consider the tone of our message and the different ways meaning could be interpreted. Added to this was the challenge of providing meaningful feedback – the type that leads to critical thinking and deeper learning – in a concise, succinct and unambiguous way.

Thirdly, questions were raised by the ESL tutors as to how we could check whether students had understood the feedback given: 'How do we know and how can we check whether students have understood our point?' In face-to-face teaching, we check understanding by asking questions and we can often 'read' the students' body language and facial expressions to see if they are confused. In an asynchronous online environment where all communication is done in writing, we could no longer rely on our traditional teaching techniques for checking understanding and clarifying meaning.

## **Time demands and workload**

Linked closely to the challenges of providing useful feedback is the issue of time. The LAS 'virtual tutors' in the two pilot courses commented that providing feedback online was more time consuming than face-to-face interaction. This was particularly the case for the tutors in the NESB stream as they had to take more care in constructing their comments so that meaning was clear and unambiguous.

There were also issues with the timeliness of feedback given to the students. Initially, we set a maximum response time of three days to provide feedback on students' submissions; however, we soon found this to be problematic as there was no way of controlling when the students submitted their responses. We could receive one or two submissions in one week and 18 –20 the next. This created problems with planning and time management, particularly for part-time staff, since online tutoring was only one small part of our work as LAS advisers. In addition to being 'virtual tutors' in an online course, we had other teaching responsibilities in faculty-specific short courses and generic workshops, and we faced continuous pressure to meet the growing demand for individual tutorials.

Since the first two pilot courses, we have tried to address this issue by assigning tutors to students as they enrol in the course, with a maximum number of five students per tutor at any one time.

## **Implications**

### **Professional Development**

One of the main implications of the increased demand for online language and academic support is the need for continued professional development in some of the key online competencies as identified by Salmon (2003, p. 54):

- Understanding of online process
- Technical skills
- Online communication skills

The importance of staff development for online tutors has been emphasized by numerous authors (Salmon, 2003; Bennett & Marsh, 2002; Barker, 2002). This is particularly important for the LAS advisers in our unit, as most of us are new to online tutoring and do not have the 'background as online learners upon which to draw' (Bennett & Marsh, 2002, p.14). What is clear from our experience as tutors in the AIRport writing course is that we cannot simply apply traditional face-to-face ways of teaching and giving feedback to an online environment; we must also consider the teaching and learning processes involved (Bennett & Marsh, 2002).

In addition to this, LAS advisers need ongoing professional development opportunities to improve our skills in writing materials for the online learning environment. Although much knowledge and 'know-how' has been gained through the process of developing and delivering the AIRport writing course, we would benefit from a continued, more comprehensive approach to professional development. Such an approach would address

the issues and challenges that arise in all stages of our work as virtual tutors – from designing materials, to writing accessible and interactive activities, and to improving our online communication skills. After Barker (2002, p.12), we suggest that such training should be delivered electronically to provide more experience and practice in the online learning and teaching environment.

### **Supporting online learning**

Another implication of the increasing demand for LAS advisers to work as ‘virtual tutors’ is the need to explore ways in which we can support students to learn effectively online. This is an important issue considering that the role of a student in an online course is quite different to the role he/she usually takes in a classroom learning environment. In an online course, students are more responsible for their learning (Savenye et al., 2001); they are required to take more of an ‘autonomous stance’ and become- self-directed learners (Manuel, 2001, p. 226).

The LAS advisers in our Unit have tried to support students to develop their independent learning skills by: giving students learning choices; offering ‘tips’ on how to approach the online course materials; providing links to resources on study skills such as time and task management; and referring them to other relevant online resources and activities. While these are useful ways of supporting student learning, we believe that we also need to identify more specific strategies and techniques to facilitate effective online learning. Admittedly, some of us are quite new to online learning and have not paid enough attention to developing our own skills in this area. If we are to provide effective support to students learning in an online environment, perhaps we first need to build our own experience as online learners – that is, participate as a student in an online course. Whilst this would require a considerable time commitment on our part, it would certainly help us to gain a better understanding of the specific challenges and difficulties faced by our online students. This would inform all aspects of our work as virtual tutors – from developing the course materials, to providing useful feedback, and to supporting students to develop their own online learning skills.

### **Evaluations**

Participants in the first two pilot courses completed online questionnaires about the courses. Fourteen students participated in the first pilot course and 26 students participated in the second pilot. Every student who completed the course (about half the cohort) submitted an evaluation. One student completed the questionnaire before finishing the course.

The questionnaire consisted of seven multiple-choice questions and three free-text response questions (see appendix). Tables 1 and 2 show the summaries of the evaluation results from the first two pilot courses.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The short course was helpful	62.5%	37.5%	0	0
2. The short course met my expectations	37.5%	37.5%	25%	0
3. The online adviser's comments were helpful	13%	87%	0	0
4. The online adviser identified ways I could improve my academic skills	0	62.5%	37.5%	0
5. I have more confidence in my academic skills as a result of this short course	12.5%	75%	12.5%	0
6. The lessons covered topics that were relevant to me	37.5%	62.5%	0	0
7. The time available to complete the course was:	75% Right		25% Short	

*Table 1: Pilot 1 - Summary of evaluations*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The short course was helpful	44%	56%	0	0
2. The short course met my expectations	22%	78%	0	0
3. The online adviser's comments were helpful	22%	78%	0	0
4. The online adviser identified ways I could improve my academic skills	33%	67%	0	0
5. I have more confidence in my academic skills as a result of this short course	11%	89%	0	0
6. The lessons covered topics that were relevant to me	11%	78%	0	0
7. The time available to complete the course was:	100% Right			

*Table 2: Pilot 2 - Summary of evaluations*

As the evaluation summaries show, the vast majority of respondents were positive about the structure of the course and the feedback from the online advisers. One hundred per cent of the participants 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the course was helpful, relevant, and that the advisers' comments were helpful. Although these initial results are pleasing, we recognise the need to investigate reasons for some students not completing the course.

## What next?

After numerous meetings with the LAS advisers who moderated the first two pilot courses, several changes were recommended:

- Revise instructions to the submission exercises to ensure clarity and avoid confusion. Some students' responses to certain tasks showed that they had not fully understood the task requirements. After the task was explained to them in more detail however, they were able to complete the task;
- Alter the expected response time for feedback from 'a few days' to 'within a week';
- Have a 'rolling enrolment' system so that students can enrol in the course at any time of the year, rather than during fixed periods in the semester; and
- Ensure that students are only able to complete an evaluation form once they have completed the course.

It was recommended that these changes be implemented before the commencement of Semester 2, 2005.

It was also concluded that ongoing evaluation and discussions with students and staff are needed to ensure that the writing course continues to be relevant and useful to the students. We also need to investigate the reasons why students did not complete the course: Were the tasks too difficult? Did the students lack the skills to engage in online learning? Did the content appear to be too generic and thus irrelevant for their discipline? The answers to these questions will inform our decision on what aspects of the course need to be changed or improved to meet the needs of our diverse student cohort.

## Conclusion

Providing online language and academic support for a large and diverse student cohort has been both interesting and challenging for the LAS advisers at the University of Melbourne. We believe that the AIRport writing course is a valuable resource for undergraduate students. It contains materials that are challenging enough to keep students interested and motivated in learning (Hedberg, 2003), and it scaffolds student learning through a range of interactive exercises (Manathunga, 2002). The main challenges in developing and delivering the course have been writing materials with the highest levels of interactivity and accessibility, and providing meaningful and timely feedback. The most important implication for LAS advisers working in an online environment is the need for continued professional development – through participating in an online training program, engaging in facilitated online discussions, conducting research in online learning issues, or by participating in a tutor-moderated course as an online learner – as 'without staff development, nothing is likely to happen beyond pilot schemes' (Salmon, 2003, p.80).

# Appendix

## Online Evaluation form

Gate 2 Home

Writing Lounge  
Essay Writing Course  
Developing Academic Writing  
Developing Academic Writing (ESL)

### Congratulations on finishing the course

Please spend a few minutes to complete the following questions so we can improve the course for future students.

1. The short course was helpful  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
2. The short course met my expectations  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
3. The online adviser's comments were helpful  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
4. The online adviser identified ways I could improve my academic skills  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
5. I have more confidence in my academic skills as a result of this short course  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
6. The lessons covered topics that were relevant to me  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
7. Would you do another online course with a similar format?  
 Yes  No
8. Would you recommend this course to other students?  
 Yes  No
9. The time available to complete the course was  
 Too long  A good length  Too short
10. Please describe the best parts of the course:
11. Please describe the worst parts of the course:
12. Do you have any suggestions for more courses, different content, anything else?

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# 'Knowingly constructing' our future: Reflecting on individual LAS practice

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**Abstract:** *There has been considerable debate amongst Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners via Unilearn and LAS-related conferences as to who we are, what we do, why we do it and how we should go about it. The debates have centred on whether there is a particular pedagogical framework that best describes our work (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002), whether we are part of a discipline or a profession (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; Milnes, 2005), whether we should be classified as academic or general staff (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004) and so on. This debate reflects our diversity and an active engagement with our future. LAS practitioners are evolving, as Webb (2002, p. 10) would have it, 'towards the destinies [we] jointly construct, whether knowingly or unknowingly'. But while there is considerable progress towards knowingly and jointly constructing a LAS discourse and destiny, in this paper I reflect on the degree to which, as individuals, we are unknowingly constructing our destinies. I argue that because our profession is our practice, and vice versa, as individuals we must knowingly construct our roles and create perceptions of what we do with students within the academic community and within the institutions in which we work. Unless we do so, LAS professionals risk perpetuating the view that they are 'just' teachers, working at the margins.*

**Key words:** *LAS professional identity; knowingly constructing*

## Introduction

Increasing debate about our professional roles as Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners reflects a maturing professional consciousness and has centred on whether there is a particular pedagogical framework that best describes our work (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Percy & Stirling, 2004), whether we are part of a discipline or a profession (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; Milnes, 2005), whether we should be classified as academic or general staff (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004), and so on. Such debate reflects our diversity, and our active engagement with our future, culminating at this conference with the launch of the Association of Academic Language and Learning. We

are evolving, as Webb (2002, p. 10) would have it, 'towards the destinies [we] jointly construct, whether knowingly or unknowingly'.

Nevertheless, I am conscious of an underlying unease in terms of the shadow that falls between our professional rhetoric and our individual professional practice. Arguably, our individual practice forms the basis of our profession, and this means we must be acutely conscious of how we construct our roles and create perceptions of what we do. Here, I argue that, while professionally we may have matured, as individuals I suspect we may be reinforcing perceptions of our roles within institutions as remediators, 'just' teachers, working at the margins, not doing 'real' work. In making this argument I use Vanderwal, Carmichael, Hicks and McGowan's (1999) 'Position of Academic Language and Learning Skills Advisers/Lecturers in Australian Universities' ('Position Paper') and the new Association of Academic Language and Learning's (AALL) draft 'Mission Statement' (Barthel, 28 July 2005) in order to reflect on individual practice with students, with disciplinary staff and with the institutions within which we work. In making the argument I also reflect on conversations with LAS practitioners since 1989 when I first began working in the area. Conversational evidence is not hard evidence – and I am aware of this shortcoming in making my argument – but it is indicative of how we as individuals, and how others, may be perceiving what we do, and where such perceptions undermine our practice, my view is that we need to knowingly challenge them.

## Background

LAS roles are complex and have developed in highly particularised institutional settings which have often shaped the LAS professional role to 'fit' with the institutional resources available. Thus, it is not always possible to draw a sharp line around work that we *all* do. Nevertheless, at one level, as outlined by Andresen (1996, p. 40), our role may encompass academic staff development, teaching/learning consultancy, instructional design, educational evaluation, academic management/leadership, and research into student learning. At another level, most recently outlined by Zeegers (2004, p. 28), our joint role may be to develop students' learning, language and academic skills, assisting students in the development of key strategies including literacy and numeracy, critical and analytical thinking, problem solving, information literacy and research skills, written and oral communication, self-management of time, resources and tasks, and the ability to engage in independent and reflective learning. Given this diversity of LAS roles, it is imperative to establish what we hold as core professional values for individual practice. In other words, given that *our individual practice* – and the perceptions we and others have of that practice – *is our profession*, we need to focus on the degree to which we knowingly construct our roles and the perceptions that students, colleagues and the institution have of these roles.

## Knowingly constructing our role with students

Knowingly constructing our roles with students relates to the ways in which we value their diversity, work with them in a developmental manner, and challenge the institutional myths that characterise linguistically diverse students as primarily having linguistic difficulties. Vanderwal et al. (1999, p. 3) persuasively made the case that we value 'cultural diversity,

in which all students are encouraged to contribute equally to, and benefit equally from, the skills and knowledges available at tertiary level', a value reinforced in the AALL draft Mission Statement (Barthel, 28 July 2005). This suggests our role with students is founded on inclusivity, and implies that we actively value and knowingly construct our roles with students, regardless of how different they are from us or from each other.

Yet, in reflecting on individual practice, anecdotally I hear relationships with students constructed on the basis of 'us and them' – 'them' being international, not local – and a conflation of cultural differences. In discussion, diversity often applies to 'them', not 'us', overlooking, in the first instance, diversity among local students and, in the second, diversity amongst 'them'. The expression 'Confucian cultural heritage students', for example, implies a cultural experience which excludes diversity in students' approaches to learning and their educational experiences – whether they speak Standard Chinese or Hokkien, whether they are from a local suburb or Shanghai. The term 'Asian students' also implies a monoculture and, if not used alone, it is often taken to mean 'international students', itself often an assumption that 'international' refers to students from countries in Asia – not students from Germany, Canada, or Argentina. The 'us and them' binary also promotes expressions such as the 'the West', 'Western approaches to learning' or similar, which are used in ways that suggest 'Western approaches' are privileged, better, and all the same. The assumption that there is a 'Western approach' would, on the basis of my experience, suggest that rote learning, descriptive writing, and non-acknowledgement of sources are as commonly practised amongst students as are critical analysis, synthesis, evaluation and so on.

If we knowingly construct our role with students on the basis of stereotypes, we undermine a core value of our work – that of accepting diversity and recognising that students' experiences lead them to learn in different ways. Student Michelle Wiranto (1999, p. 6), in considering the sum of her parts, noted she was:

50 percent Javanese-Indonesian; 25 percent Manadonese-Indonesian; raised in Australia for 40 percent of [her] life, Indonesia for about 50 percent; educated 80 percent at the Jakarta International school, 15 percent at the University of New South Wales and 5 percent at the University of California, Berkeley.

We need to recognize that all our students are as diverse in their backgrounds and experiences as Michelle Wiranto and to knowingly and explicitly construct our individual relationships with students on the basis of 'respect for what they bring to us' (Fitzsimmons, 22 July 2004). We must treat them as unique individuals, bringing to us their own sets of needs, fears and confidences.

A core principle of our work, identified by Vanderwal et al. (1999, p. 3), is that our work with students is 'developmental and intended to enhance academic potential rather than remedial', a point iterated in the AALL draft Mission Statement (Barthel, 28 July 2005), and this is a principle to which, rhetorically at least, we adhere. Yet often in practice – implicitly and explicitly – we construct relationships with students on the basis of the twin pillars of 'remediation' and 'support', both of which undermine a developmental approach to students' learning. This is not to suggest that we do not support students – we do – but it is only one aspect of a complex set of activities LAS professionals undertake. Further, is this how we would wish to characterise that undertaking in our own minds and the minds

of those with whom we work? The terms 'remedial' and 'support' have been addressed in earlier papers (e.g., Chanock, 1994; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002). Nevertheless, as recently as twelve months ago I heard a colleague say, by way of introduction, 'I am just a remedial teacher' – a comment which suggests that, as individual LAS practitioners, we can be our own worst enemies.

We can also work against ourselves in relation to working with linguistically diverse background (LDB) students. Over time, LAS professionals have jointly challenged the view that LDB students' problems are primarily linguistic, and we see evidence of this challenge in our naming and in our conference discussions. Undoubtedly, there are students who struggle because they lack the language proficiency tools they need for academic success – and this applies to native speakers, too. It was common ten years ago, at the beginning of the boom in LDB international students coming to Australia, to encounter university staff who attributed academic progress problems to 'a problem with English' (May & Bartlett, 1995). Ten years on, I still hear individual LAS professionals attributing LDB students' academic progress issues to 'a problem with English'. If we define LDB students' – or for that matter, native speaker students' – LAS issues as being primarily linguistic, we risk misconstruing the complexity of the students' needs which may well include lack of academic preparedness, lack of mastery of disciplinary discourse, lack of background knowledge and so on.

We need to challenge the 'problem with English' view via our individual practice. When we work with a student on text, are we explicitly focusing on English language issues, or on the use of appropriate genre, clear focus, wide and critical reading, reasoning, style and presentation? When we work with students preparing oral presentations, are we focusing on the skills and strategies that develop students' confidence, their facility with answering questions, or are we focusing primarily on English language proficiency issues? To what extent do we provide to students – because we are pushed for time or because it is 'easier' – 'quick fixes', editing and proofreading? Unless we carefully construct what we as individuals do, we risk unknowingly constructing a relationship in which all other aspects of students' academic capabilities and achievements are conflated into linguistic ability.

Some students do lack the English language proficiency they need in order to operate successfully in an academic context, but we should not attribute the cause of the lack to the student – it may be a lack of institutional judgement in admitting the student in the first place. Moreover, we should not implicate students with comments such as 'he/she has/must have circumvented university protocols/testing protocols'; or 'he/she has come in through a backdoor'. If students come to our institutions ill-prepared and ill-equipped for academic performance and success, and have circumvented the processes our institutions have established, our role is not to judge the students, nor their practice, but the institutional processes and practices. We must assume the students have used an existing, legitimate pathway into the university – however problematic this pathway may be. It may be that that admissions decisions have been poorly informed, or that there are aspects of a student's application which have not been interrogated, but in such cases we need to use our knowledge to educate staff, not blame the student. If there has been a mis-judgement, we should challenge it in appropriate ways.

Knowingly constructing our individual relationships with students also extends to how we work with them in individual consultations. There are persuasive reasons for offering individual consultations, best put by Chanock (1996, p. 50) who argued they are ‘a basis for communication and . . . collaboration with lecturers in the disciplines’. Yet, in constructing our relationships with students, consultations can become, I suspect, ‘safe’, non-transparent places not just for students, but also for us. It is difficult to see inside a consultation. There is very little public scrutiny of what should or should not happen in them – and in this we are not necessarily different from other university staff. But consultations are a key professional LAS mechanism. Accepting that there will always be a need for flexibility, I would argue that there is a need for much greater induction into and professional scrutiny of individual consultations. If our individual practice is our profession and if consultations are a key, and jointly defended, form of LAS delivery, we need to knowingly construct them and be accountable for them, such that our relationships with students, and the ways in which we work with them, in these fora are explicit.

Consultations can work against jointly constructed LAS practice by ‘de-skilling’ or ‘de-strategising’ students, such that a relationship of dependency is constructed. I reflect on statements such as: ‘I don’t encourage [students] to approach their lecturers and tutors for assistance because they are not comfortable doing so’. This attitude implies that students’ questions are ‘better’ answered in a safe, secure place by us, the inherent risk being that we are constructing an environment which is isolationist, disengaged and non-developmental. De-skilling and/or de-strategising can also equate with ‘mothering’ or ‘nurturing’ – there is a clear connection to our feminised LAS profession – both of which connote a pastoral focus, rather than a professional LAS focus. Although there are elements of pastoral care, our work is not counselling *per se*, nor should we describe ourselves as mothering or nurturing, or allow such perceptions of our work – by students or staff – to develop. We need to individually challenge such perceptions.

Knowingly constructing our individual roles with students thus implies that we do not stereotype, we work developmentally, we challenge the myths – particularly those associated with linguistic proficiency and institutional practice – and we carefully evaluate our individual work with students.

### **Knowingly constructing our role within the academic community**

Returning to Vanderwal et al.’s (1999, p. 3) Position Paper, a core professional principle is that we ‘collaborate with faculty staff on curriculum, teaching and assessment issues’, and that our role is ‘integral to the ongoing process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions’, a point foregrounded in the draft AALL Mission Statement (Barthel, 28 July 2005). Thus, it is incumbent on us to constructively engage with the academic community – in its entirety – in order to promote quality teaching and learning. Nationally, there are some innovative examples of this: discipline-specific work, the embedding of academic skills within the curriculum, working with professional staff to embed information literacy, tutor training and so on.

Yet, there is often an underlying, implicit rejection of engaging and working with disciplinary staff, captured by the comment addressed earlier: ‘I don’t encourage [students] to approach their lecturers and tutors for assistance because they are not comfortable

doing so'. Not only is there an assumption that it is 'better' for the students to have their questions and LAS needs dealt with by the LAS professional, but such a view mitigates against engaging with the broader academic community. It can effectively sequester LAS practice and knowledge, and de-strategise the student. It prevents LAS expertise from being recognised and valued in the academic community and, further, mitigates against our professional mission, that is, 'foster[ing] . . . recognition of the academic nature of our work' (Barthel, 28 July 2005).

Individual consultations can also work against LAS practice, particularly if they are used in ways which mitigate against negotiating with disciplinary staff for better outcomes for students. Martins (2004, pp. 76-77) puts it well: 'To have students engaging with us does not [necessarily] increase their interaction with their peers in class or with their lecturers or tutors'. Our professional role is to induct students into ways of approaching disciplinary staff in order that students develop the skills and confidence with which to engage and interact. If we sequester students, there is less likelihood of them becoming what we value – independent and responsible for their own learning.

If we take a developmental approach to learning, we operate from the basis that all students can gain the knowledge, skills and strategies they need in order to successfully operate within the academic community. It may not be – for the students or us – an easy process. Rejection, intimidation, and exclusion are no strangers to the relationships students have with university staff. But there are in every institution, policies and procedures designed to assist students in the process of engagement. Students have rights, and the academic community has responsibilities, and *vice versa*. Our role is to ensure that the students know about and have recourse to the knowledge, skills, and strategies that will enable them to successfully navigate the hurdles that affect their academic progress.

Sequestering our professional practice in individual consultations may also reinforce a sense of individual marginalisation, a phenomenon about which we complain in terms of our overall professional status, and reinforce a deep professional psychosis, that is, academics do 'real' work (see Lee, 1997; Webb, 2002). There is again a sense of 'us and them' and a severe undermining of our professional expertise. Communicating what we do and how we do it benefits us by providing more opportunities for our work to be known and recognised. It also benefits students: rather than fishing them out of the river, we stop them falling in. And there are key points at which they fall in, including transition points, course delivery, and assessment practice. Unless we feed back into the academic community what we know - about how well students are prepared for university, how well they are taught, how assessment tasks are confusing or problematic, difficulties in supervisory relationships and so on - we exacerbate students' struggles and dependence, and a sense of LAS marginality.

Knowingly constructing our role within the university community, then, needs to begin with holding up an academic community mirror and analysing what is reflected in it. Is our work known? In what ways is our work described? How often is our expertise sought? How often do we stand beside disciplinary staff in the lecture theatre/tutorial room? As individuals, we need to knowingly construct how we are reflected in the mirror. When we see scrawled on a marked essay 'Go to the LAS Centre – you have a problem with English', and this is not the problem, we must feed this knowledge back into the academic community. When we realise there is a 'problem' in a particular faculty because students

are staying away or coming in droves, we must also feed that back. If we are hearing from the academic community – implicitly or explicitly – the terms ‘remediation’, ‘Chinese/Confucian cultural heritage students’, ‘study skills’, ‘linguistic difficulties’, then there is a problem with what or how we are communicating about what we do to the academic community, and what we know about students’ academic skills and learning experiences. And if, at the same time, our professional role and expertise is relatively invisible to the academic community, then we are unknowingly constructing a destiny which is at odds with our core principles.

Knowingly constructing our individual roles with the academic community thus implies that we do not sequester the knowledge we have of students’ LAS needs; rather, we actively engage with the academic community, feeding back information and challenging the myths about what we do and why.

### **Knowingly constructing our role within the institution**

Disseminating information to the ‘wider academic community through publications, and in the practice of the profession within tertiary institutions’ was in 1999, and is currently, a core objective of the LAS profession (Vanderwal et al. 1999, p. 5; Barthel, 28 July 2005). How we knowingly construct our relationship within our institution is a key LAS concern. As alluded to earlier, our individual practice is our profession. Thus, if we profess to be experts on LAS issues – from time/project management, through to professional journal article writing, to online resources development and consultancy work – we have to match our claim with exemplary practice. Yet, were the academic community to critically assess our individual practice vis-a-vis our rhetoric, what would it note?

The academic community may note that at conferences, for example, we struggle with time management – given fifteen minutes, we want more. They may note that often our workshop programs do not include aims and objectives. They may note that we do not always know the outcomes we want or the criteria by which we evaluate what we do. They may note the quality of our overheads (readability and clarity) and our mastery of technology. They may note our editing prowess – not something in which we profess to be expert, but which is associated nevertheless. I recall Chanock’s concern after refereeing the 2001 LAS conference proceedings: ‘we have still got some way to go in the area of proofreading. . . . And inconsistencies in references were only the tip of the iceberg’. She expressed her chagrin, given that ‘we’re supposed to teach other people to control their writing’ (Chanock, 2002). Zeegers (18 May 2004) iterated this concern with ‘*In the future . . .*’, the proceedings of the 2003 LAS conference: ‘the quality of the writing and the academic merit of some [a few] of the non-accepted papers was woeful, when one considers that the authors are those who assist students in the development of their academic skills’. The academic community may also note our struggle with creating posters, writing reports, writing abstracts, speaking in small and large groups and so on. Students watching us ‘strut our professional stuff’ on time management may note how we may not prioritise, think ahead, prepare in advance, start and finish on time, synthesise and distil, acknowledge sources, obtain feedback and so on. In all these ways we are knowingly or unknowingly creating perceptions of our role within the institution.

One of the other key ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly construct our relationships with the institution is through our writing. If we are tasked with teaching students how to take control of their writing, we must work towards mastering our own – understanding the nature of the task, what guidelines exist and what strategies we must incorporate, and we must seek review and feedback. When we take on a professional task, we need to demonstrate – individually – our mastery of that task, be it an abstract, an introduction, a conclusion, a particular kind of report, or a poster. We need to use this mastery to knowingly construct perceptions of our role within the institution. As an example, occasionally disciplinary staff approach us, as higher degree students, wanting advice on writing a conference paper or journal article, developing a literature review and so on. The advice we give rewards us twofold. We may have worked with a student, but we have also demonstrated our professional expertise to a disciplinary staff member. If they are impressed with our work, they are more likely to value and promote what we offer their students. Their perceptions of what we do, how we do it and why will contribute to them knowingly constructing a perception of our work with their colleagues and their students. If this is positive, and they can see that we are integral to their learning, it is for us invaluable. We can demonstrate – individually – that we are doing *real* work.

On a broader scale, within the institution, when we present cross-institutional or faculty-based programs, we must be exemplary too – we are the individual faces of our profession. We need to have mastery of our ‘brief’ as it relates to the students with whom we work and their teaching and learning needs. In other words, we need to do our homework. We cannot be all these things if we perceive ourselves to be *just* teachers or, even worse, *just remedial* teachers. Some of our best teaching experiences in relation to understanding LAS issues as they apply to students is through having to undertake – and unpack – our own experiences of working in a new area, in a new forum, with very little prior learning.

We could well take heed of our own advice to students in terms of knowingly constructing our relationships within our institutions. If students conceptualise themselves as *just* students, without rights and with no real power, professionally our role is to negotiate the problem and identify the resources, strategies and skills they can use to seek redress. It is self-defeating to imagine oneself without power. Too often that ‘imaginary power’ is associated with being classified as either ‘Academic’ or ‘General’ staff – yet, in the latest survey of LAS classifications in Australian universities (Barthel, 26 July 2005), it is clear that the profession is relatively evenly balanced across the classifications, and there have been some significant and powerful examples of LAS collaboration, regardless of LAS staff classifications. Our individual power to change practice within our institutions is not necessarily limited – unless we choose it to be. And if we regard ourselves as *just* teachers, marginalized from the academic community, choice does not operate at all.

Knowingly constructing our role within the institution also relates to how we network, undertake committee work and contribute to university policy. In networking we need to convey to others our professional worth and the academic nature of the work we do, and be prepared to professionally deliver. We need to research the university community – know where its strengths and weaknesses are, know where the power lies, and knowingly negotiate and construct strategies and solutions. It takes time, energy, preparation and research, but if we want to break out of the ‘*just* teachers, at the margin’ paradigm, and bring ourselves and the work we do into the centre, it is essential. Committee work is an opportunity to take networking to a different level, and to ensure that our voices are heard

within the university community. If we believe that our students are disadvantaged – in whatever way – not only should we be aware of policy as it relates to these matters, but we should also contribute to new policy formation.

## Conclusion

The launch of the Association of Academic Language and Learning provides yet another important mechanism with which we can communicate to others what we do professionally. The Association, its finalised Mission Statement, its goals, and its nascent website and journal are tools we can use to knowingly and jointly construct perceptions of what we do. Used well, these mechanisms will assist in profiling and communicating our work, provide professional leverage, perhaps enhance our professional status. But these tools are only as powerful as we, as individuals, make them. Having a professional profile will not necessarily change our perceptions of ourselves and the perceptions that others have of us. As individuals, we must work to knowingly construct our relationships with students, with academics and with the institutions in which we work. In this, our professional rhetoric must match our individual practice. Our practice is our profession, more so than in disciplinary areas, and how our individual LAS practice is reflected in the academic community mirror will determine how well we are reflected in the core business of universities.

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# The LAS adviser's role in supporting dyslexic students

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**Abstract:** *While Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers play an important role in the support our institutions offer to dyslexic students, there is considerable variation in our understanding of the condition and its implications for studying at university; in our arrangements for collaborating with other relevant staff; and in our opportunities to use what we learn from working with dyslexic students to influence inclusive teaching in our universities. Rather than being trained to help dyslexic students with academic work, we are likely to be chasing information and strategies as the need arises. This paper argues that LAS advisers need to know more about dyslexia, both to inform our work with individual students and to improve our institutions' capacities to anticipate and meet the needs of a diverse student population.*

**Key words:** *dyslexia, academic support, social construction of disability, inclusive teaching*

## Introduction

In this paper, I would like to explore some concerns that arise out of our work with dyslexic students.<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992) (DDA) requires universities to make 'reasonable accommodation' for students with a disability, to ensure that they have equal opportunity to engage in and benefit from a course of study. The primary responsibility for implementing this requirement lies with the institution's Disabilities Office, which tries to provide each student with whatever they need to compensate for the limitations imposed by their impairment. If they need support with academic skills, however, they are referred to us, like any other student.

In many ways, dyslexic students are like any other student: they are encountering the unfamiliar cultures of a range of disciplines, whose purposes, forms, and language

1. In Australia, 'Learning Disability (LD)' is the preferred term, rather than 'dyslexia'. However, I have chosen to retain 'dyslexia' here because LD includes other conditions such as dyscalculia, dyspraxia, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, and sometimes Asperger's Syndrome, which are not discussed in this paper.

they need to understand in order to succeed. In other ways, however, they are not the same, for they are hampered in their literate performances by physiological differences whose nature is unclear even to experts in the field of learning disabilities. Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers may feel ill-equipped to help these students, for we are not normally trained in this (or any other) disability. Earlier this year, I conducted a brief survey of colleagues on the Unilearn discussion list, asking whether they had ever had training related to dyslexia. Of the sixty-one LAS advisers who responded, only thirteen had had any training: for most, no more than a seminar, sought out by the LAS advisers rather than offered by their institutions. Forty-eight said they had had no training at all. These numbers should not, however, be taken to indicate that LAS advisers are satisfied with their ability to meet the needs of dyslexic students: in addition to the 13 who had already taken steps to learn about dyslexia, 17 respondents said they would like to know more about this area.

It is not unreasonable of our institutions, in fact, to hope that we can manage without this sort of training. We see students with a wide range of disabilities each year, but not many students with any one kind of disability. Perhaps the numbers do not, as yet, justify the expense of training us in all of these, and it seems invidious to pick out one for special attention. Nonetheless, I would like to argue that, because of the challenge dyslexia poses to academic habits of thought and performance, LAS advisers need a fuller understanding of it – both to inform the ways we work with individuals, and to improve our institutions' capacity to anticipate and meet the needs of a diverse student population.

## **The meanings of disability**

Dyslexia is a condition that uniquely challenges basic assumptions about what an educated person should be like. All disabilities are socially constructed, both in the sense that other people construct an interpretation of what one's physical difference means about oneself, and in the sense that particular social expectations about normal performance are, to a greater or lesser extent, responsible for the disabling effects of the difference. Dyslexia is disabling in both these ways. Our society equates literacy with intelligence, so that limitations to literacy are understood to signify limited intelligence. Dyslexic students do not fit with our construction of an educated person because, while they are as intelligent as other students and can learn quite effectively in other ways (Reid & Kirk, 2001, pp. 154-172), reading and writing are very hard for them (Herrington, 1995; Singleton, 1999, pp. 2, 17-18, & 29; Farmer, Riddick, & Sterling, 2002, p. 224). Difficulties with written language are disabling in an educational environment whose currency is writing, for most disciplines do not readily offer students other ways of showing what they have learned (Morgan & Klein, 2000, pp. 198-199).

## **Accommodating dyslexic students**

Let us look, then, at how universities respond to the needs of dyslexic students. In compliance with the DDA, accommodations are devised to meet the needs of each individual student with a disability, depending upon the ways their disability is likely to disadvantage them in their studies. Dyslexia is a syndrome, rather than a clearly delineated condition, and neither its underlying cause(s) nor the full range of effects has,

as yet, been pinned down with any certainty (Rice & Brooks, 2004, pp. 13-16). While most investigators agree that a physiological difference is responsible for the syndrome, there are several different views on where exactly that difference (or differences) may lie (Reid, 2003, pp. 6-7; *A Framework for Understanding Dyslexia*, 2004). There is, however, widespread agreement that dyslexia involves a difficulty in distinguishing the phonemes of language (Snowling, 2000) – for example, being able to separate ‘met’ into ‘m’, ‘e’, ‘t’ – which may affect accuracy in comprehending speech and/or in pronunciation, and which usually proves an obstacle to reading and writing because the alphabetic principle depends on being able to match phonemes to symbols. In many cases, problems with written language are exacerbated by visual disturbances in which print appears to move, fade, or even disappear (Singleton, 1999, pp. 27-28; Mailey, 2001).

These difficulties in dealing with letters have suggested a ‘medical’ model of dyslexia, in which it is viewed as a deficiency in some facult(ies) for processing language. However, dyslexic people are often very articulate, which complicates this understanding, and at the same time, more than language seems to be involved (Farmer et al., 2002, ch. 7). Sometimes dyslexic people have poor physical coordination, and many have limited short-term memory (Singleton, 1999, p. 27). Dyslexic students commonly experience difficulties with following, and with producing, the linear structure of ideas conventional in discursive academic writing (e.g., Morgan & Klein, 2000, pp. 200-201; Herrington, 2001, pp. 188-189). This does not necessarily mean that dyslexic students will achieve less than others, however, for many are able to take advantage of a strong spatial sense, and a tendency to think holistically rather than sequentially, which serves them well in fields like art, architecture, and engineering (Singleton, 1999, p. 30). Whether these talents are merely unaffected by dyslexia, or are actually more common in people with dyslexia, is a matter of debate. The variety and complexity of the talents and limitations associated with dyslexia has led many who work with dyslexic students to view the syndrome as a difference rather than a deficiency in their physiological makeup (Herrington, 2004, pp. 12-13). However, within the rights discourse established by the DDA, a medical diagnosis of deficiency is needed to trigger accommodations, which vary with individual needs.

Every person with dyslexic characteristics experiences a different cluster of difficulties, and experiences them with a different degree of severity (Monash University, 1993; Reid & Kirk, 2001, p. 3; Mortimore, 2003, p. 61), so the likely effects on their studies will vary widely. However, the effects generally include stress and fatigue, because the reading and writing assigned in their courses require much more time and effort of them than of non-dyslexic students (Preston, Hayes, & Randall, 1996; Singleton, 1999, p. 29; Fawcett, 2004, pp. 179-180); anxiety about their ability to cope with study and, in the longer term, with work; inaccurately written and often unconventionally organised assignments; and frustration at their limited ability to demonstrate their learning in the ways that their courses require.

Some of these effects can be addressed by the Disabilities Liaison Officers (DLOs) who have primary responsibility for supporting dyslexic students at university. Depending on the types and severity of an individual student’s difficulties with literacy, accommodations may include

- discussion with the DLO about the nature of dyslexia and the accommodations available;

- employment of a notetaker and/or a library assistant;
- pre-recording of core readings and recording of lectures;
- provision of assistive technology such as mind-mapping software to help with planning of assignments; voice-recognition software, so that students can compose orally and dictate to their computer; and/or screen-reading software which can read, in a synthetic voice, materials scanned into the computer, materials available on the internet, and the student's own writing (this helps with proofreading);
- advocacy and negotiation of extended deadlines and/or extra time in exams; and
- referral to a counsellor or LAS adviser. (Payne & Irons, 2003, p. 17)

## Room for improvement

All these things can be helpful, but we cannot be satisfied that they will 'level the playing field' for dyslexic students, as intended. Some of the shortcomings often found in such an approach were raised, in Britain, in the Report of the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education (Singleton, 1999). One significant problem is that almost half of dyslexic students in universities are not identified as dyslexic until they are partway through their course (Singleton, 1999, p. 83). In Australia, Payne and Irons (2003, p. 14) found this to be true for a third of dyslexic Australian students, but for 50 percent in Queensland. This problem occurs because dyslexic students have found ways of learning, during their earlier schooling, which compensated to some degree for their difficulties with the normal acquisition of skills in reading and writing, and it is not until they encounter the heavier and different demands of university study that these compensating strategies prove inadequate. This means that many dyslexic students do not receive support for some time, and others never receive it because they do not know that they might be dyslexic and so do not consult the DLO. Many of us will have the experience of being the first person to suspect that a student may be dyslexic, and being faced with the uncomfortable challenge of raising this – often very upsetting – possibility with the student. A related problem is that an undiagnosed student may be expected to pay up to \$500 for an assessment with an educational psychologist, which is necessary to authorise support by the DLO (Payne & Irons, p. 15); some forego this option and never find out whether they are dyslexic or receive accommodations. Those who are assessed often find the experience distressing (Farmer et al., 2002, pp. 77-86) and the subsequent report incomprehensible, so that its benefit to them is very limited (Singleton, 1999, p. 109). It is of some concern, as well, that even experts have grave doubts about the science and the thinking underpinning such assessments, which rely upon IQ testing with all its shortcomings (e.g., Stanovich, 1999; see also Franklin, 1987; for problems with some of the commonly-used tests, see Farmer et al., pp. 18-21, 202-203).

Once students are diagnosed, there are problems with implementing the support available. Some students provided with assistive technology make little use of it, because they are not trained in it sufficiently to appreciate the ways in which it could help them (Singleton, 1999, p. 124; Payne & Irons, 2003, p. 28). Extra time on assignments or exams, meanwhile, is helpful but not sufficient to make up for problems with memory, retrieving information, understanding what the questions are asking, and producing answers the marker can understand (Morgan & Klein, 2000, pp. 139-140). Indeed, the chief problem identified



Library staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make searching easier</li> <li>• allow longer loans</li> <li>• help students with using electronic equipment</li> </ul>
Examinations staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• implement accommodations for individual students</li> </ul>
Teaching staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make their teaching and assessment methods more inclusive</li> <li>• recognise students who may be dyslexic and refer them to the DLO and/or LAS</li> </ul>
LAS advisers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recognise students who may be dyslexic and refer them to the DLO</li> <li>• understand the meaning of reports from educational psychologists</li> <li>• talk with students about their experiences of learning</li> <li>• help them to develop strategies</li> <li>• help them negotiate with teaching staff</li> <li>• help them to develop self-advocacy</li> </ul>

*Table 1: Staff who should have some awareness of dyslexia*

At present, out of all these people, only DLOs are likely to have received any training relating to dyslexia.

The situation in the UK is quite different in at least one respect: dyslexic students receive one-to-one tutoring by specialist dyslexia-trained tutors. Our efforts to help students with dyslexia seem likely to be unsatisfactory by comparison. However, in discussions with dyslexia specialists in British universities, I found that they considered expertise in dyslexia less important than familiarity with the demands of academic study at this level. What is essential, in their view, is frequent one-to-one consultation about the work that students are doing for their subjects, informed by an understanding of the purposes of their assignments and the cultures of their disciplines (see also Herrington, 2001, p. 191), and focussing on whatever the individual student most needed to work on, in ways best suited to that student's learning style (for an excellent source on dyslexia and learning style, with practical strategies for students to use in acquiring, storing, and expressing ideas and information, see Mortimore, 2003). This is the way we try to work with any individual, and it may be that extensive training in specific techniques for teaching dyslexic students would not add a great deal, as these were commonly considered less relevant, and less likely to be effective, for working with adults than with children.

Nonetheless, it is important for us to inform ourselves about dyslexia, for a number of reasons. If we are the first to tell a student that s/he may be dyslexic, we need to do it sensitively, and to explain their options knowledgeably. If a student has had an assessment for dyslexia, we need to be able to make sense of their report (see, e.g., Farmer et al., 2001, pp. 198, 210-211). While each student will be different, we need to know enough to set aside unhelpful assumptions about what strategies are likely to work best for our dyslexic students. Where we might work on helping a non-dyslexic student to see the structures of written language and academic discourse, and to reproduce these for assessment, it may be more effective to help a dyslexic student to *listen* for these, to store ideas in diagrammatic form, and to offer an oral commentary on a visual presentation. Some

dyslexic students will need us to help them find alternatives to course requirements that disable them; others may prefer to use their time with us, and/or assistive technology, to improve their literacy -- for, although dyslexic people's problems with literacy are attributed to lack of phonic awareness, there is also evidence that phonic awareness can be a consequence of becoming literate (Castro-Caldas & Reis, 2003; Rice & Brooks, 2004, p. 28). We also need to appreciate the effects dyslexia may have beyond the obvious literacy difficulties, in terms of personal organisation and emotional responses to setbacks in the course of an individual's studies.

## Resources for professional development

Fortunately, the resources we need are already available, and key sources are accessible online. The large and interesting literature on dyslexia can be a mixed blessing, for it can be difficult to identify where to begin when we have so little time to give to DIY professional development. I would like, therefore, to point to just a few resources where the information we need has been very competently condensed and helpfully presented, and where references to more specialised sources can be found. One of these is the revised *Opening All Options II*, funded by DEST and available at <http://services.admin.utas.edu.au/options/index.htm>. This is addressed to a diverse audience including students, teaching staff, and LAS advisers, and deals with most aspects of learning at university with dyslexia, and of teaching and supporting such learners. It does not really deal with the range of theories about the physiological causes of dyslexia, however. Indeed, it is difficult to tackle these in a confined space, and perhaps also risky in that the more we know about these, the less inclined we may be to regard the syndrome as scientifically well-defined. However, I do not think it is helpful to distance the practice of dealing with dyslexia from the science of explaining it: such a separation simply replaces confusion with vagueness. Fortunately, there is an online publication that presents these theories briefly, and discusses areas of agreement and disagreement among them: *A Framework for Understanding Dyslexia*, which can be found at the U.K. government website, [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/understandingdyslexia](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/understandingdyslexia). A more contentious account can be found in *Developmental dyslexia in adults: a research review*, available at [http://www.nrdc.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc\\_166.pdf](http://www.nrdc.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_166.pdf), which surveys 1800 articles on dyslexia since 1987.

*Opening All Options II* also does not fully deal with the important issue of whether dyslexia should be understood as deficiency or diversity. A good online source on this, at <http://jarmin.com/demos/index.html>, is the DEMOS project: follow the links to 'Disability awareness' and 'Dyslexia'. Still more relevant to LAS advisers, but not available online, is Herrington's (2004) book incorporating the views of experienced dyslexia-trained skills tutors in British universities.

## Improving institutional response

In addition to informing ourselves about dyslexia, we can try to work more closely with other relevant staff to ensure that students get the kinds of support they need as expeditiously as possible. University structures usually assign responsibility for disabilities, for counselling, for learning skills, and for information technology to different units, but a student's needs

may well encompass all of these functions. If we have no formal structures or procedures for communicating and collaborating amongst our different units, we should consider establishing these; or, if that is not feasible, setting up informal networks to share ideas and information, so each of us can learn what people in the other units can do to help a student with dyslexia.

Most important to students is that their tutors understand dyslexia, and LAS advisers are well placed to raise awareness of dyslexia among teaching staff. Our LAS expertise should help us to understand how our dyslexic student's constellations of strengths and weaknesses articulate with the demands of their subjects, and we can discuss this with their tutors in specific, rather than generic or simply legalistic terms. Farmer et al. (2001, pp. 49-50) touch on this, and their investigation suggests that many tutors would welcome information on dyslexia (pp. 174-175). Some of the measures we suggest may be specific to a particular student's dyslexic profile, but others may have wider benefits. The largest challenge posed by dyslexia is that of changing teaching methods to be more inclusive – not only for dyslexic students but for all students, who bring a great variety of learning styles, strengths and weaknesses to their academic studies, and who would benefit from most of the adjustments that would help dyslexic students. To prepare subject materials and make them available, online, well in advance of teaching; to be explicit about the purpose of work assigned, and the important points in reading, lectures, and discussions; to anticipate and avoid confusion in the wording of assignments; to present ideas and information in a variety of modes; to accept a range of ways of demonstrating learning for assessment: all of these methods, which are recommended for teaching dyslexic students, would be helpful to others as well (see, e.g., Noble & Mullins, n.d.). LAS advisers can play a role in identifying what would be helpful, and how it could be done without adding unreasonably to lecturers' workloads, and then in talking with them about methods that have worked for others and might work well for them. Some of these methods, in case studies, can be found online, for example, Herrington and Simpson (2002) and Zakaria and Osborne (1997); and looking ahead, eight British universities have begun a 'SPACE' Project (Staff-Student Partnership for Assessment Change and Evaluation) which will also collect relevant examples at <http://www.space.ac.uk>, and University College, Worcester is developing a website of Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study ('SCIPS') at <http://www.scips.worc.ac.uk/Plone>.

## Conclusion

Payne and Irons (2003, p. 30) remark that 'A wide range of support services and accommodations are being provided' but that this is being done 'in a reactive way. A better approach', they suggest, 'may be to focus on teaching practice so that it is inclusive of the needs of all students, and supported by systemic provisions for the particular needs of those with [learning disabilities]'. In this paper, I have discussed the role that LAS advisers could play in such an approach, and a range of resources to inform our efforts.

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# Creativity versus routinisation: Critical reflections on the role of the learning adviser

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**Abstract:** *How do learning advisers keep alive a creative and critical edge in the work we do? A compulsion for students to make rapid progress is built into the experience of academic learning in the contemporary tertiary environment. In response to this we can find ourselves teaching routinised procedures that will help students get through their assignments as efficiently as possible. However, this kind of teaching may be achieved at the cost of a certain creative and productive chaos that is an important part of learning. A thoughtful response to this dilemma requires us to maintain a critical engagement with the educational context in which we operate. We need to continue to reflect on what it is we are aiming to achieve, and what education more generally is for. In a practical sense, we need to find ways of teaching that keep rich and valuable processes in play, even as we attempt to pass on neat packages of skills. The cultural studies literature on education (Giroux, 2004; Horner, 2000; O'Shea, 1998) reminds us of the critical and transformative value of our work. From the field of cognitive psychology, Claxton's (1999) understanding of the qualities of successful learners suggests a productive framework for positive change. In response to these diverse literatures, this paper presents a negotiation of the tensions between productive chaos and premature control, patience and haste, and creative vs. routinised teaching.*

**Key words:** *creativity, cultural critique, learning advisers*

## Introduction

This paper reflects critically on the beliefs and values that underpin the practice of learning advising. It asks how learning advisers can keep alive a creative and critical edge in the work we do, which appears to suggest that our creativity and criticality are flagging. In fact this is probably not the case. Indeed, given the increasing recognition of the value of our work for student success and retention, things may never have looked better for the learning adviser's creative contribution to education.

At the same time, however, there are larger ideological questions at stake in contemporary tertiary education, which has become increasingly market-driven (Readings, 1997; Barnett, 2003; Burwood, 2003; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). This impacts on the work that learning advisers do. In particular, neo-liberalism's market orientation functions to commodify education (Horner, 2000; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Universities are being linked with the needs and demands of the marketplace; they are to contribute to an entrepreneurial culture that will guarantee the economic future of the nation, seemingly at the exclusion of any desire for more fundamental social change that might transform existing hierarchies of power (Giroux, 2004). There is an increasing focus on identifiable and measurable outcomes that can be tagged to the skills required to service economic growth (Moore, 2004). The consequence is that the potentially transformational capacity of education, its potential to change student, knowledge and society, may be undermined.

In raising such issues, this paper reflects on the intellectual and ideological conditions in which learning advisers operate and the kinds of teaching we do. In undertaking such a reflection this paper suggests that we might learn from those disciplines within the academy that self-consciously and critically reflect on the assumptions built into their own intellectual practices, such as cultural studies. The critical project of cultural studies is two-fold; in the first instance it aims to 'challenge specific institutional fixities' (O'Shea, 1998, p. 518). In this sense, the discipline of cultural studies challenges the workings of power in order to analyse 'how objects, discourses and practices construct possibilities for and constraints on citizenship' (Nelson & Gaonkar, 1996, p. 7). Citizenship, in the cultural studies framework, is not limited to formal political participation, but is concerned with a broader sense of how people experience their place in the world. Thus the second element of a cultural studies critique is an effort to identify possibilities for different ways of being and acting that may allow people to 'change their context for the better' (Grossberg, 1996, p. 143). It involves fostering 'an optimism of the will' that allows alternate possibilities to be recognised and valued (Gramsci, 1971, as cited in Grossberg, 1988, p. 286). Such a two-fold approach can enable us to ask productive questions about the work that we do as learning advisers, and consider possibilities for a resourceful response to the challenges of contemporary higher education.

## **Market-driven education and learning advising**

The massification of higher education over the past three decades has led to numerous institutional changes, such as the modularisation of courses and increased internal assessment. Many of these changes were initially designed to facilitate access to higher education by a larger and more diverse student group and to improve the quality of tertiary teaching (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). A side-effect of these changes, however, has been increased pressures on all students to undertake more tasks, and more complex tasks, in a shorter space of time. At the same time, financial pressures produced by the rising cost of education and the limited availability of a living allowance mean that students of this generation are more likely to work longer hours in paid employment than their predecessors. The consequence is a framework in which students are continually rushed and always thinking under pressure. To this picture must be added the challenges faced by students from non-English speaking backgrounds, for whom the pressures of the learning load are frequently multiplied.

In this pressured and high-speed learning environment learning advisers must assist students to come to terms with multiple and complex tasks as quickly as possible. We do so, it might be presumed, out of a desire to improve students' chances of succeeding in higher education and reaping the ensuing personal benefits. Learning Advising, at least in the centre where I work, has an ethic of social transformation at heart. Te Tari Awhina is the Learning Centre at Unitec New Zealand. Te Tari Awhina's *kaupapa* (policy or rules of operation) states that we are committed to 'equity of educational opportunity' and that we recognise 'that equal outcomes often require unequal inputs' (Te Tari Awhina, 2004, n. p.). Fundamentally, we are motivated by a desire to help students get what they came for and to contribute to more equitable outcomes for structurally disadvantaged students. In this sense we do basically operate out of a critical pedagogy that is interested in social transformation (Giroux, 2004).

Such a pedagogy may well be in conflict with the neo-liberal agenda that organises higher education today. In particular, the notion that speed and efficiency, which are central requirements of commercial enterprise, should likewise apply to teaching and learning is of concern. It is understandable that, because students are so pressured, and because learning advisers are interested in assisting them to get what they came for, we try to find ways to make complex tasks graspable. In the interests of efficiency, but also out of a desire to help students cope with the demands and the essential foreignness of the tertiary environment, we find ourselves teaching things like a stepped process for essay writing. We continually try to boil down complex activities to their essential components in order to make them comprehensible and accessible to our highly pressured audience. In doing this work we have any number of 'how-to' guides at our fingertips, including published study skills manuals, resources on the web, and material that synthesises published work with our own teaching and learning experience.

Such an approach seems almost forced upon us by the commodification of education, which Naidoo and Jamieson (2005, p. 271) define as 'the transformation of educational processes into a form that has an economic worth of its own and has an "exchange" value rather than an intrinsic "use-value".' In other words, learning is no longer valued for its own sake as a form of human development that makes for a well-functioning society, but is utterly indexed to economic outcomes for the individual and for the nation. In this context teaching staff are made into 'commodity producers' and students conceive of themselves as 'consumers' (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 271). Thus constituted, the participants in teaching and learning may seek to formalise complex processes with routinised frameworks that promise to bring such processes under control.

### **Making complex processes explicit**

A couple of examples might serve to make the point. The first is Cottrell's (2003) seven-point procedure for writing assignments and the second is Davis and Parker's (1997) systematic approach to writing the doctoral dissertation. This is by no means a definitive survey of the literature; these are merely two examples that represent particular strands of study skills advice. One addresses the beginning writer in thoughtful and useful ways, the other the advanced student as competent practitioner, but what they have in common is an attempt to give form and structure to complex activities.

Let us begin with Cottrell, who lists seven processes that need to be worked through in writing an assignment (Cottrell, 2003, pp. 152-3). It is perhaps unfairly blunt to represent these processes as a simple list, since each point is explained and expanded with further bullet points, and supported by the much larger discussion of the book as a whole. However, in outline, the steps are as follows:

1. Clarify the task
2. Collect and record information
3. Organise and plan
4. Reflect and evaluate
5. Write an outline and first draft
6. Work on your first draft
7. Final drafts

At each stage there are points of clarification, further tasks, or questions to be answered, but what is described are a number of decision-making, reflective or evaluative processes that might assist a beginning writer to find his or her way through the maze of ordering evidence into an argument.

Cottrell's work provides an excellent introduction to the skills required for tertiary study and I do not mean to suggest that the seven-step model is flawed in itself. Rather, my aim is to trouble the faith that learning advisers often seem to have in such frameworks. For although it would be nice, and nicely efficient, if learning were to proceed along such orderly stages, the kinds of creative and critical thinking that higher education claims to value may well involve more disordered processes. These processes may include all kinds of apparently time-wasting activities such as getting side-tracked, circling round and getting busy doing a hundred other things, or simply having ideas that one intuitively feels are related but which do not initially seem to connect up. All these chaotic states might be vital parts of the learning process and essential to the work of moving beyond taken-for-granted assumptions that innovative and inspired thinking demands.

To further problematise lists like the one taken from Cottrell's book, it may even be the case, as Claxton (1997, 2000) suggests, that making complex processes explicit is not necessarily helpful. Polyani provides an argument against the provision of explicit instruction in the form of maxims, or pithily worded-truths:

Maxims are rules, the correct application of which is part of the art which they govern . . . Maxims cannot be understood, still less applied, by anyone not already possessing a good practical knowledge of the art. They derive their interest from our appreciation of the art and cannot themselves either replace or establish that appreciation. (1958, as cited in Claxton, 2000, p. 35).

In other words, study skills advice looks good to those of us who already know how to do the activities involved, but it may be the case that, as Claxton (2000, p.36) puts it, 'explicit knowledge cannot be easily converted into practical know-how'. This perspective runs contrary to the common practice of making learning processes explicit that organises much of our work, which involves the development of metacognition, or 'thinking about thinking' (Devlin, 1995, p. 8). However, it may be the case that we are unhelpfully requiring students to prematurely impose order on their learning. Given time, and the

encouragement to be patient, students might discern through their own eyes how order is fashioned out of apparent disorder. We may do a disservice to students in our efforts to shortcut such slow-moving processes.

Our task should surely be to offer a range of possible strategies, rather than a single prescription. Routinised forms of instruction necessarily seek to avoid the kinds of disordered processes students frequently find themselves delayed by. Yet, within the speeded-up context of contemporary higher education, encouraging students to slow down and value less obviously productive states might be a useful intervention that learning advisers could make. Claxton (1999) argues that successful learners are able to demonstrate resilience, reflection and resourcefulness. Resilience indicates an affective capacity to persist in one's learning even when the going gets tough. Reflection involves thinking over and examining what has been more or less effective in one's study practices and making appropriate adjustments. Resourcefulness, according to Claxton, means being able to draw on a range of possible cognitive strategies to tackle different problems. Learning advisers work in all three areas. We encourage resilience by providing support to the struggling student, and we teach the metacognitive skills of reflection. But we might encourage students to draw on a wider range of cognitive resources. By emphasising structured and orderly procedures we may teach students to distrust what Claxton (1997, p. 2) terms more 'contemplative or meditative' forms of thought. Such unfocused, fragmentary states are largely undervalued by a pedagogy that emphasises focus, deliberation, argument and problem solving. These are clearly valuable *outcomes* of academic analysis, but they may not provide good models for the *processes* of critical and creative thinking.

## Hard thinking and soft thinking

My second example takes us further into these questions. Davis and Parker present a highly rational model for thesis writing that is intended to 'assist doctoral candidates in completing a better quality dissertation in a shorter time' (1997, p. v), invoking the imperative of speed that organises even advanced scholarship. They describe the thesis as 'knowledge work' (Davis & Parker, 1997, p. 25), which is 'human mental work performed to generate useful information' (Davis & Parker, 1997, p. 26). Then they set out a number of strategies for increasing productivity in knowledge work, which are listed as follows:

1. Improve motivation
2. Improve task management
3. Conserve attention
4. Reduce errors and omissions
5. Eliminate redundant processes

Each strategy is elaborated over one or two pages which describe both the practical activities and the attitudinal orientations that are required in order for the student to be efficient and effective in carrying out and completing his or her research. For example, dividing the project into manageable stages which can then be timetabled 'reduces wasted time and improves synergy among activities' (Davis & Parker, 1997, p. 30). Similarly, redundancy is to be prevented by having a thorough and comprehensive plan for every stage of data collection and analysis, so that the entire project is brought under cognitive control from the outset.

This advice seems eminently sensible and practical, and it reflects a great deal of the literature that is available on thesis writing in that it attempts to reduce what can be an overwhelming and highly disordered process to something logical, rational and controllable. Davis and Parker's model is basically an injunction to get on with the job, and to avoid getting side-tracked, losing focus or wasting time. It is highly product-oriented and it describes an expectation that the process of advanced research will mirror the product in so far as it demonstrates what Claxton (1999, p. 123) describes as 'hard thinking'. Hard thinking, as Claxton (1999, p. 123) explains, 'derives inescapable conclusions from valid arguments that draw out the implications of premises that accurately and completely capture a state of affairs.' When such highly ordered and rational thinking is presented as the only desirable approach then slower, more exploratory and often more chaotic aspects of thinking, learning and writing are precluded, possibly at great cost to creativity and criticality.

As a supplement to the conscious, rational, deliberative approach Claxton (1999, p. 146) offers the notion of 'soft thinking'. Soft thinking is more contemplative than deliberative and more dreamy than deductive. It is particularly useful when the definitions or parameters of a given problem are not clear. In such cases, the issue is often one of finding a new way of conceiving the problem, rather than solving it. In this foggy, unstable territory hard thinking may be the least useful approach; or rather it only becomes useful later, after one has had recourse to some soft thinking. Soft thinking involves paying attention to insights, hunches and complete guesses. It requires patience – the ability to sit with a difficult problem over time without attacking it too directly or losing sight of it entirely. Indeed a premature attempt to crystallize problems or one's thinking about them can be entirely counterproductive.

If tackling complex problems requires the slow thinking skills of tolerating confusion and lack of focus and if being able to think in sophisticated ways about the consequences and implications of the solutions we come up with takes time, then teaching packages of skills that help students to impose control and proceed more quickly may not facilitate creative transformations of thought and may only encourage routinised learning. Effective teaching needs to do justice both to the complexity of the tasks involved in learning and research and to the time involved. What is needed then, are measures to slow down learning within the speeded-up context of contemporary higher education.

## **Slowing down and the practice of learning advising**

I do not mean to suggest that we should withdraw the provision of skills instruction, nor even that we should cease to make the requirements of academic discourse explicit. As learning advisers we should continue to offer our students packages of steps to be followed in response to their demand for skills they can pick up in the drive-through world of contemporary higher education. Clearly, 'how-to' guides can be useful: students like them and they form a useful basis for teaching that is frequently much more nuanced and interactive in practice. But we should offer these on the understanding that such routinised frameworks might be more comforting than enabling. Packages of skills can be useful props or pointers on the unfamiliar road our students travel, but there are no shortcuts to creative and critical thinking. It is important that we continually trouble the notion that the good advice of routinised 'how-to' instruction is adequate in itself.

An example that demonstrates the contrast between good advice and a more productive approach is the question of procrastination. Given the value this paper has accorded to slow thinking and the time needed for creative and critical thinking, the perennial issue of procrastination presents a useful example of the gap between advice that is designed to speed up learning through routinisation and other, less reductionist, possibilities.

Procrastination, or the inability to get on with one's work, is a distressing experience and it seems an unquestioned good that students should learn to minimise it. Guides to tertiary study often include a section on time management that advises students to establish routines; make a timetable and stick to it; break a larger task down into smaller, achievable steps; and to increase motivation by setting goals and rewarding their achievement. This is all good, sound advice. Yet in my experience many students (and many learning advisers) find such advice very difficult to follow all the time. Might such anecdotal evidence suggest that the failure is not entirely in the student, but in the advice itself?

Procrastination carries with it a host of rather culturally specific moral judgments, so that the procrastinator declares themselves to be lazy, undisciplined, lacking the strength of will to shirk off the compulsion to delay. Yet, procrastination is not simply a function of poor willpower, nor an unwillingness to follow good advice. Kachgal, Hansen, and Nutter (2001) address the complex nature of procrastination and propose a multi-faceted approach to overcoming it that takes into consideration both students' understanding of and practical approaches to the tasks they must carry out, as well as the emotional and self-management aspects of the learning experience. More interestingly, however, Chu and Choi (2005) introduce the possibility of a positive type of procrastination, termed 'active', in which students may use procrastination to manage their workload. Chu and Choi (2005) suggest that active procrastinators are flexible and able to continually adapt their timetable to respond to new demands, an approach that would appear to be very useful in the pressured context of contemporary tertiary education.

It may also be the case that the models of timetable management and goal setting that learning advisers advocate frame certain delays as inappropriate when they are, in fact, highly productive forms of waiting. Valuing the kinds of unfocused and contemplative thinking mentioned earlier may allow students to trust processes of working through and problem solving that are not fully amenable to inflexible timetabling. Sometimes the delaying tactics of reorganising one's work space, cleaning the kitchen, or even just going for a walk can allow a small epiphany to take place. Such 'aha' moments may require a minimisation of self-beratement for the unscheduled delay in order to be fully received.

My advice to students is to treat procrastination as an interesting problem, rather than as a moral problem. An interesting problem deserves thoughtful engagement, so that we might inquire into the nature of the delay, or even ask ourselves whether there are good reasons for waiting. Thus students might learn to trust processes of contemplative working through that are not entirely under cognitive control. Indeed, procrastination may allow thoughtful and creative responses to intellectual problems to emerge, an approach that seems utterly at odds with the focus on measurable outcomes that education is required to demonstrate today. Coming up with solutions to problems that include what Claxton (2000, p. 39) terms 'a holistic perception of the problem in relationship', rather than responding out of taken-for-granted assumptions about the factors involved, is a process that takes time. For these reasons an overemphasis on strategies designed

to foster discipline may not facilitate creative transformations of thought and may only encourage routinised learning.

## Conclusion

In addressing the relationship between creativity and routinisation this paper has attempted to forge links between the speeded-up context of higher education, the market-orientation that drives it, and the work of the learning adviser. Although we may be called upon to provide easily assimilable skills, it is debatable whether or not such skills are always useful for students. They may even function to obstruct slower and more disordered processes that are an important part of learning. Furthermore, encouraging students to think that there are proper and orderly ways to proceed might obstruct the development of their own ideas and practices.

To this end, learning advisers might trouble the notion that packages of skills are helpful and instead see ourselves as points in the constellation of instruction at which students are invited to slow down and think about what they have been asked to do from a fresh angle, to ponder the dimensions of a problem and to think about the consequences and implications of the response they come up with. Such an intervention might be a way in which learning advisers can hold onto an understanding of the intrinsic value of learning that is not first and foremost linked to economic imperatives. Valuing the time it takes to develop creative and critical thinkers, we should resist the routinisation and ready answers that a commodified understanding of education seems to entail. If students need to become 'skilled', then perhaps it is equally or more important that they become authorised to fashion their own response to the context in which they find themselves. The anxiety and lack of confidence that plagues many students, especially non-traditional students, might be alleviated by encouraging trust in the chaos and discomfort of the process.

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# Toward a knowledge management framework for language and learning services

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**Abstract:** *Among the many buzzwords born of business-speak in the new economy, the term 'knowledge management' stands out as uniquely impenetrable, but also of unique pertinence to the work of Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners. Often discussed in the same context as organisational learning, knowledge management's central focus is to get the knowledge out of the heads of experts and made available to anyone within an organisation who needs it. In essence, knowledge management allows an organisation to reflect on what it knows and to develop techniques for sharing its collective knowledge. At the core of our profession, language and learning centres are organisations dedicated to helping students learn the skills they need to succeed at university. In this respect, our mission is similar to that of any other learning organisation: LAS centres and the individuals who comprise them have expertise to be shared with students, with faculties, and with each other. Yet no coherent knowledge management framework exists for these centres to follow. Such a framework would need to address both the technical and the collaborative aspects of knowledge management as they relate to teaching and learning. This paper will present a preliminary framework to improve the management of knowledge within language and academic skills units.*

**Key words:** *knowledge management, organisational learning, academic skills*

## Introduction

As Language and Academic Skills (LAS) professionals, one of our first responsibilities is to teach students how to write with clarity. We try to express the importance of avoiding unnecessary jargon or modish neologisms. For some of us though, terms like 'knowledge management' represent more than just excessive obeisance to the cult of business-speak. Some might argue that the very idea of managing knowledge is an impossibility:

How can something so amorphous and immaterial be managed? Some might not take objection with the phrase itself as oxymoronic, but with what it stands for. Acolytes of Don Watson and his *Death Sentences* (2003) will critically point to such terms as representing a concerted obfuscation of public language. But if such 'weasel words' are at best contradictions in terms, and at worst one step away from Orwellian Newspeak, why should language and learning services be interested in adopting this terminology? Not intended to be an apologia for the catchphrase industry, this paper seeks not only to illustrate the many ways in which knowledge *can* be effectively managed, but also to highlight how many of the principles and practices of LAS advising *are already* steeped in knowledge management (KM) techniques. One central theme of KM is the concept of 'organisational learning' (Senge, 1992; Pemberton & Stonehouse, 2000). Because we are all employed by organisations dedicated to learning, the final purpose of this paper is to present a four-step framework that can be employed by LAS units to improve our capacity to contribute to student learning. If knowledge management can help us help others to communicate more clearly, it might be one buzzword that is worth adopting.

## **Knowledge management: A general background**

It is no secret that we live in an 'information age', and that the 'knowledge economy' has permanently altered older modes of production in areas such as agriculture and industry. In the simplest terms, our emergence into a postindustrial period of history means that a large proportion of participants in today's economy are knowledge workers, producing nothing more (or less) than information for the world's consumers. Drucker (1993), Lash and Urry (1994), and Castells (2000) have done much to document this shift in the global economy, as well as to reflect on what these changes might signify for society. Where labourers in the past were responsible for manufacturing tangible artefacts, today's 'labourers' are more likely to produce products through their mental activity. They are called knowledge workers because they are charged with the responsibility of creating knowledge, through the application of knowledge. While there has been great progress since the industrial revolution in managing the production and distribution of physical objects, managing the production and distribution of knowledge is a much newer – and increasingly more important – field. Hence KM.

Most businesses and organisations have long recognised the importance of keeping track of valuable assets like manufacturing equipment, raw materials, and finished products. Indeed, a company will not stay in business long if it does not have any formal systems to record what its assets are, how much they are worth, and who is in control of them. Only more recently has it occurred to organisations that this truism should also apply to knowledge assets as well. Countless examples can be found in the literature to detail how nonprofit organisations, NGOs, small-to-medium enterprises, and multinational corporations have all attained competitive advantage from implementing KM strategies (see Stewart, 1998; Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999; Tiwana, 2000; Liebowitz, 2000; Dixon, 2000). These case studies highlight how organisations have successfully harnessed the collective knowledge of their individual members and contributed to an atmosphere of organisational learning, which in turn propelled them into a position of increased efficiency and effectiveness in their fields. The irony is that for many of the companies profiled in these cases, the advancement of knowledge was not their main business – or, to put it in KM-speak, organisational learning was not among their 'core competencies'. Despite the fact that educational institutions

should be seen as premier examples of 'learning organisations', KM has largely been ignored by schools and universities up until very recently.

In no other industry should the goals of organisations and the principles of knowledge management be more closely aligned. Educational institutions are dedicated to teaching and learning, their primary resource is information, their most important clients are students, and their best-selling product is knowledge. If KM strategies are important for companies in other industries, they are vital for educational institutions. The following section briefly outlines some contemporary initiatives to promote knowledge management in the education sector.

## **Knowledge management in education**

At the most fundamental level, education has always been implicated in the transition to a knowledge economy, as formal education continues to be an important avenue by which people gain access to knowledge in the first place. Tertiary education, though, has been held particularly accountable for the job of imparting knowledge, for it is at universities that future workers are expected to gain the knowledge required to keep this economy rolling. The recent increase in tertiary enrolment numbers worldwide (OECD, 2000) points to the fact that fewer school-leavers are entering the industrial job market or considering careers in the trades or manufacturing. But at another level, it is also clear that universities have had to adjust their offerings in reaction to this global shift toward postindustrialisation. Not only have universities contributed to the growth of the knowledge economy, they have had to reconsider their degree programs to reflect the new demands of today's students, as well as the changing needs of their potential employers. Goddard (1998) and Johnston (1999) have both touched on universities' role as participants in the knowledge economy. In particular, Burgess (2001) has remarked on the growing prevalence of degree programs catering to the knowledge industries, citing increased enrolments in management and information technology programs, and discussing the growing popularity of postgraduate degrees in the field of knowledge management itself.

Although most formal education happens in the early years of an individual's life, as these students turn into workers they will continue to engage in learning. Advances in the notions of lifelong learning, and an increasing emphasis on further education in the form of workplace training, have ensured that adult education is a major component of the knowledge landscape. Kinney (1998) has pointed out the importance of KM in adult education, especially while on the job. Since so much of workplace training has been moved onto online environments, it is only natural that there be links between knowledge management practices and e-learning. Citing a report by the Gartner Group, Rosenberg (2001, p. 18) illustrated the zeal created by the natural affinity of this link with the following optimistic quote: 'In two years, KM will be a subset of elearning. Or elearning will be a subset of KM'. While this prediction has not fully eventuated, others (Oakes, 2002; Reamy, 2003) have also pointed out the increasing convergence between these two once-distinct fields.

While most of this work has gone toward discussing the macro relationships between knowledge management and education at the institutional or policy level, the objective of this paper is to look more closely at the practical point where the KM rubber meets the

educational road – that is, where knowledge management theory is put into pedagogical practice. As busy teachers and researchers, university staff demand and deserve more specific details of how knowledge management can benefit them in their day-to-day jobs. Rowley (2000, p. 325) discusses just this in a paper on KM in higher education. Focusing on the key KM activities of ‘creating knowledge repositories, improving knowledge access, enhancing the knowledge environment, and valuing knowledge assets’, Rowley cites examples of how staff, management, and students have adopted knowledge management techniques within the UK higher education system.

Drilling down to an even smaller scale, Rao (2002) explores the use of KM strategies within individual academic departments. Using a computer science department as a case study, Rao illustrates how the organisational unit undertook a seven-step process for knowledge management, working its way through the identification, collection, selection, storage, sharing, application, and creation of knowledge. Similarly, Curtis (2003) provides an example of KM in action within a teaching-and-learning community centred around an integrated university preparation program. Detailing the progression of knowledge management using web logs (blogs) within collaborative teacher and student groups, this work highlights some of the practical advantages of adopting a KM strategy for people on both sides of the lectern.

## **KM in LAS**

There are almost as many different KM frameworks as there are definitions for knowledge management. Some generalised frameworks tend to focus on the technological aspects of knowledge management (Allee, 1997), others pay closer attention to the socio-cultural dimension of KM (Tanner, 2001), while some – like the European Committee for Standardisation Integrated KM Framework (CEN, 2004) – detail a complex, layered approach to knowledge management at a nation-state level. For smaller organisational units, where time and resources are at a premium, the simplest framework is often the best. Because the staff of most Australasian LAS centres have such numerous demands on their time, anything but the most straightforward KM framework would be counterproductive. The four-step KM framework which follows does not necessarily represent ‘best practice’ in the field of LAS knowledge management, as such a term implies that one solution can fit all circumstances. Rather, this is a framework of ‘good practice’, whose components can be adopted and adapted to suit an individual organisation’s needs. It should also be noted that my own Language and Learning unit has only begun to implement a few of these strategies, with the remainder representing a sort of ‘where-to-from-here’ hypothetical future.

### **Step 1: The knowledge audit**

In an education context, a knowledge audit can be regarded as *collective reflection* (Curtis, 2005). As such, a knowledge audit is an opportunity for an organisation to review and reflect on all its knowledge assets at a group (as opposed to an individual) level. Liebowitz (2000) breaks a knowledge audit into three questions:

- What knowledge is needed?
- Who needs this knowledge?
- What knowledge is available and what is missing?

To answer the first question within an LAS environment is relatively simple. For an organisation with a teaching focus, all knowledge should be couched in how it addresses the language and learning needs of students. From a student-centred perspective, an LAS unit's knowledge needs are dictated by the types of students that use our services, their academic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, the discipline-specific context in which they are working, and the unique difficulties they encounter given these parameters. In short, the principles and values which guide good teacher reflection (Schön, 1983) at an individual level, are the same principles and values that govern knowledge auditing at an organisational level: We need to reflect collectively on who our students are, where they are coming from, what troubles they are facing, and how we have been (in)effective in addressing these troubles up until now. This process can be done with interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, or through brainstorming sessions. Once the knowledge needs have been established at the collective level, the second question narrows the answer down to certain individuals within the organisation. Maybe some staff members work exclusively with non-English speaking background (NESB) students, maybe some only with postgraduates, thereby limiting their own knowledge needs to these specific areas.

When it comes to determining what knowledge is available and what is missing, it is useful for an organisation to make the distinction between 'explicit' and 'tacit' knowledge. As defined by Polanyi (1967), explicit knowledge is that which has been formally articulated, and is typically expressed in words or numbers in documentary format. Tacit knowledge, in contrast, is deeply rooted in personal experience and intuition. It involves ingrained mental models and technical know-how. Referring to this multidimensionality of knowledge, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) recommend that an organisation identify these different attributes, including the following:

#### Knowledge forms

- Explicit knowledge (written reports, policy statements, books, journals, conference proceedings, discussion forums, blogs, intranet sites, letters, memos, emails, instant messages, lecture notes, teaching materials, wikis, software, etc.)
- Tacit knowledge (skills, abilities, subject-matter expertise, relationships, personal experience, etc.)

#### Knowledge stores

- Explicit stores (libraries, databases, filing cabinets, hard drives, network drives, intranets, post-it notes, scrap paper, etc.)
- Tacit stores (wizened veterans, 'boundary-spanning' colleagues, resource officers, new employees from other industries, project teams, research interest groups, etc.)

#### Knowledge sources

- Explicit and tacit knowledge from prolific individuals, teaching experience, social networks established through conferences, popular mailing lists, journals, etc.

Knowledge **flows**, constrictions, and sinks

- Between which members of the organisation is knowledge passed?
- Are there knowledge bottlenecks or gatekeepers?
- Are there any dead-ends or knowledge graveyards?

Answering all these questions can be an incredibly time-consuming and laborious process. But often the process of the knowledge audit is as valuable as the end-product. That said, once all these attributes of knowledge have been catalogued, the organisation can move on to the next stage in the LAS KM framework.

## **Step 2: The knowledge map**

A knowledge map is a visual representation of an organisation's knowledge assets. As such, it 'points to knowledge but does not contain it' (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, p. 72). The idea behind the knowledge map is just as it sounds: It is a cartographic tool for navigating an organisation's knowledge resources. Like a map in geography, it does not attempt to alter or improve the landscape, it merely tries to represent reality as it is. From the findings of the knowledge audit, a map can be drawn as a navigational aid to identify knowledge sources and stores, as well as the flows between them. But a knowledge map can also help in locating bottlenecks, gaps, or areas of missing knowledge – just as the charts of the early navigators pointed out spots where 'there be dragons'.

Depending on the types of knowledge that an organisation wants to chart, a knowledge map may take the form of a hierarchical tree, a diagram of nodes and links, or a flowchart. If an organisation's knowledge is especially social in nature, it may be found in a community of practice (CoP), in which the community creates knowledge as members interact with one another (Duguid, 2005). If this is the case, the relationships and CoPs in which the knowledge resides can be represented by an interaction ontology or sociogram, whereby the social networks of an organisation are represented graphically. An interesting approach to mapping communities of practice was recently taken at Bell Labs in California (Tyler et al., 2005), where email logs were used as a form of spectroscopy for the automated discovery of community structure within the organisation. While most LAS units will not have access to these kinds of sophisticated analytics, it is not difficult to identify people within our own organisations with whom we have the most face-to-face conversations, email exchanges, or telephone calls. Because knowledge resides in documents, in people's heads, in practices, and in relationships, any knowledge map drawn by an LAS centre will need to represent not only tacit and explicit sites of knowledge, but also the social networks in between them. A knowledge map therefore needs to encompass not just the know-how of one person, but the know-what, know-why, and the know-who of the whole organisation.

## **Step 3: The knowledge atmosphere**

Through this process of identifying and mapping knowledge, it will become obvious that some individuals within an organisation are better at sharing their knowledge than others. This notion of knowledge share is pivotal in the success of any KM project. If members of a group are not willing to share what they know with other people, there is no point in trying to manage the group's knowledge collectively. Fortunately, both researchers and practitioners (Speel et al., 1999; Burnett et al., 2004) have pointed out the positive benefits of performing the knowledge audit and mapping procedures. Claiming that the

collective engagement of an organisation in this sort of reflection process serves to rally the individual members around the knowledge management cause, KM scholars and consultants have shown that these practices can positively influence an organisation's knowledge atmosphere. This leads to an ethos of knowledge sharing and to a shared vision for the organisation's KM objectives.

In an LAS context, a commitment to improving the knowledge atmosphere can be fostered whenever and wherever LAS practitioners gather to reflect on and discuss their work. Within an individual language and learning unit, professional development forums on teaching and research can contribute to a knowledge sharing environment, as can the formation of dedicated work teams to tackle specific projects. Across the LAS discipline, study trips, conferences (such as LAS2005, for which this paper was written), and email discussion lists like Unilearn (in which LAS advisors and lecturers post and answer questions about their practice) also help breed a knowledge-sharing atmosphere with colleagues from inside and outside our own institutions.

Despite these measures, there are still some real and potentially insurmountable obstacles to successful knowledge management. Research has shown that the overwhelming cause of KM failure within an organisation can be found in its organisational culture (Husted & Michailova, 2002). If an organisation has a strictly hierarchical leadership (heavy-handed management style), if there are structural barriers to staff interaction (dislocations in time or place), if there are severe constraints on staffing or resources, or if collegiality is not seen as an organisational priority, then any KM initiative will surely fail. The most conducive culture for knowledge management implementation is one that is driven from the bottom up, one that does not tolerate knowledge hoarding, and one that is open to organisational change. The challenge faced by LAS units is to promote this kind of atmosphere despite the external pressures of workplace and higher education reforms, and a climate of declining international student numbers, all of which serve to threaten our funding and future job security.

#### **Step 4: The knowledge repository**

The fourth step in this KM framework is what many people associate with the term knowledge management. This is the stage where all the knowledge that was identified in the earlier steps is collected, codified, stored in a central repository, and distributed to the organisation. As Liebowitz (2000, p. 64) says, 'a knowledge repository is an on-line, computer-based storehouse of expertise, experience, and documentation about a particular domain'. In the LAS context, the repository should contain all the knowledge we have about our students, their language and learning needs, and how to address these. According to Housel and Bell (2001), the knowledge repository stage includes the following activities:

- Knowledge capture
- Knowledge generation
- Knowledge organisation
- Knowledge access and retrieval

The creation of a knowledge map in Step 2 feeds directly into the capture of an organisation's existing knowledge. Usually the simplest part of building a knowledge repository, the

capture phase includes the formal collection of all identified *explicit* knowledge into one centralised location. If an organisation's current explicit knowledge resides mostly in electronic documents, this can be as easy as ensuring that all individuals' files from their personal computers are backed up and stored on a central network drive. But because an LAS unit's explicit knowledge usually takes the form of both paper-based and softcopy documents in a variety of different formats, archiving all these files can become a complicated process. In addition, the difficulties of cross-platform and inter-generational compatibility (Will this Microsoft Word 6.0 lesson plan created on a Macintosh work with MS Word 2003 on Windows XP?) coupled with authorship and version-control issues (Which copy of `StudySkillsForPGs.ppt` is the most recent?) can make for hair-pulling stuff when deciding exactly what explicit knowledge to include in the repository. In cases like these, the findings of the knowledge audit – locating who has the answers to these questions – can be beneficial.

Even more difficult than compiling explicit knowledge is the conversion of *tacit* knowledge. Identified by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) as the central focus of all knowledge management, this process of generating the explicit from the tacit is a fundamental challenge of any KM strategy. A number of KM researchers and practitioners (Linde, 2001; Denning, 2001; Ingelgård et al., 2002) take an ethnographic approach to this process, recommending socialisation through dialogue or 'storytelling' as the most effective technique for recording and formalising an individual's tacit knowledge. Advocating narrative techniques such as the use of metaphor or analogy, these KM professionals find that the easiest way for a person to externalise their accumulated internal experience is to tell stories of how, when, and why they have used knowledge in the past. These explanations can be translated, recorded, and stored. An effective way of storing this experiential and newly explicit knowledge is in a case-based repository. Here other LAS advisors, when faced by a situation new to them, could find out how their colleagues have approached similar situations in the past and learn from their successes and mistakes.

Of course, all the centrally stored knowledge in the world is of no use unless it is organised in a meaningful way. Databases are built to store and retrieve data; in the same way, a knowledgebase can be designed so that users can easily find the explicit knowledge they are looking for. One key element in knowledge organisation is the effective application of metadata. Usually defined as 'data about data', metadata is most often used to describe and categorise documents. Establishing important attributes of a file like its title, authors, and keywords, metadata can add a wealth of value to otherwise contextless resources. While there are some applications that seek to discover a document's metadata through sophisticated textual analysis algorithms, metadata is most often added as a manual process of tagging the document's text. The metatags themselves can be added according to a number of standardised formats (IMS, EDNA, Dublin Core) within the mark-up of any web-based document, such as an html file. When an organisation's intranet is fully tagged with metadata, it makes the process of searching for knowledge much easier. If an organisation's knowledge repository is not web-based, metadata about resources can be stored in a database management system, or they can be represented through agreed and strictly enforced file-naming conventions (e.g. MED-ClinicalCommunication-UG-04.doc, which tells us the name of a document, the faculty and level it is intended for, and when it was produced).

When the knowledge repository is effectively organised, issues of knowledge access and retrieval are much easier to deal with. If we know who the original authors of a knowledge resource are, we can contact them with questions, or for consent to alter the resource. In addition, we can set permissions about who has the rights to manage individual resources. Although a knowledge-sharing atmosphere is crucial to effective KM, a good repository should be able to keep track of who is sharing which knowledge with whom. In the end, the ideal knowledge repository in LAS could take a number of forms: a searchable expert 'yellow pages', a knowledge assets inventory, or a 'lessons-learned' directory. Of course, these 'expert systems' are intended to complement the expertise held by individuals within an organisation, not to replace them with all-knowing virtual LAS advisors. It should also go without saying that any knowledge management system is worthless without adequate staff training on KM methodologies and technologies. Finally, regardless of the technology or the file structure used, the knowledge repository should never be seen as a finished product. A lot of time, effort, and money can go into the making of a knowledge repository, but because knowledge is always changing and expanding, the repository should be seen as a living creature, constantly adapting to accommodate new knowledge.

## Conclusion

The profession of language and academic skills advising is diverse and demanding. Some of us have been in the profession for only a short time; others for well more than a decade. Together, the LAS advisers and lecturers who make up the discipline have contributed to an overwhelming body of knowledge. Through our work together, through our shared experiences of teaching and research, LAS professionals have helped contribute to a knowledge-rich environment from which we have all benefited. But as the sheer volume of knowledge about our discipline expands, there has never been a more pressing time than now to establish effective knowledge management strategies. Although there are many blanks to fill in, the KM framework outlined herein presents an approach to developing one such strategy.

As the nature of tertiary education continues to evolve, we must work together to develop solutions to keep up with these changes by sharing our knowledge with each other. But more importantly, as educators, we must develop solutions to share our knowledge with our *students*. If nothing else, I hope this paper has highlighted the fact that teachers have always been knowledge managers, and that knowledge management involves much more than just the coolest technology or the latest catchword. KM is really about getting knowledge out of the heads of experts and into the heads of people who stand to benefit from this expertise. In this respect, knowledge management *is* teaching.

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# Locating learning advisers in the new university: What should be our role?

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**Abstract:** *During the past two decades, Australian universities have begun to prioritise generic skills development (James, Lefoe, & Hadi, 2004) in response to pressures created by the diversification of the student body and industry demands for graduates with 'transferable' skills. While some academics still believe that these generic skills, attributes and values should be taught separately from 'content' (Moore, 2004), the current consensus is that they are most effectively developed within disciplinary contexts (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode, & Kocatepe, 2004; Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004). This shift from a deficit model to a more complex framework for understanding the relationship between knowledge and academic skills development (Lawrence, 2003) effectively requires the development of a new curriculum (DEST, 2002, as cited in Hirst et al., 2004; de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000). Hence, it has significant implications for Learning Advisers, who have traditionally provided academic skills programs from centralised Learning Centres (Tiernan, 2001). Because the institutional location of Learning Centres influences the type of work undertaken by the staff within them, location itself has sometimes been the focus of debate among Learning Advisers (Tiernan, 2001). In this paper we contribute to this debate by reflecting on our own experience as newly 'embedded' learning advisers in the Learning Development Unit within the Griffith Business School. We suggest that learning advisers can play a vital role in the development of the new curricula demanded by Universities, employers and students by developing partnerships with disciplinary experts, which are based explicitly on a model of co-production (Gordon & Lee, 1998). Adopting*

*this model means that the new curriculum is seen as a third knowledge, which must be constructed through strong and equal working relationships between disciplinary and language/skills specialists.*

**Key words:** *generic skills, curriculum development, learning adviser, higher education, academic literacy*

## **Introduction**

External pressures, from the rise of the knowledge worker to the increasing reliance of universities on both international and national full-fee paying students, have led to a profound shift in the perceived role of Australian universities. Industry demands for graduates with generic skills have occurred alongside a discernable trend towards increasing student diversity, both in terms of ability and cultural background. Together, these changes have had a significant impact on the culture of teaching and learning in Australian Universities, and this trend has serious implications for the role of learning advisers (Tiernan, 2001). Within this context, we argue that learning advisers can play a vital role in the development of the new curricula demanded by universities, employers and students through the development of partnerships with disciplinary experts.

This paper will begin by exploring the challenges faced by the Griffith Business School (GBS) and its Learning Development Unit (LDU) in relation to the broader context of changes in higher education. Next, it will critically examine the current pedagogical debate arising from these changes, between those who focus on deficiencies of the modern student and those who advocate a student-centred pedagogy. It will then outline the GBS response to these changes: a two-pronged approach that places an emphasis on both curricula and staff development as the best means to ensure that Griffith graduates develop the generic skills increasingly required by employers in the professional sphere. We base our role within this process explicitly on the model of co-production (Gordon & Lee, 1998). Ultimately, we argue that the new curriculum for the 'new university' must be constructed through strong and equal relationships between disciplinary and language/skills specialists.

## **The 'new university'**

Australian universities have faced changes that stem from a combination of sources. Firstly, the growing role of intellectual labour in Australian economy has seen an increase in professional knowledge workers (Boreham & Hall, 2001, p. 173). Within this context, universities are increasingly assuming the role of employment training providers (Marginson, 2000, p. 98; Marginson & Consadine, 2000, p. 28). The rise of knowledge workers in western countries, such as Australia, has been driven by a second source of change affecting universities: the growing influence of internationalising markets (Marginson, 2000, pp. 98-99). The increasing influence of international markets has also placed Australian universities in competition, both with each other and with universities from other nations.

However, some (Bostock, 2002; Lowe, 2004) would argue that, by implementing a corporate governance model, government policy has played a more definitive role in shaping changes to higher education over the past twenty years. This corporate model was seen by government as a way of ensuring economic accountability, and took the private sector as the ideal role model (Coaldrake, 2000, p. 9). From this perspective, universities are expected to behave more like business, competing for educational markets both here and abroad. The Hawke-Keating Government introduced this competitive, corporate model for universities; a model it also prescribed for the rest of the public sector. This model has continued to be promoted under the Howard Coalition Government, most recently in its policy paper, *Backing Australia's Future* (Clark, 2004, pp. 12-15; Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 28-29). Although the corporate model has continued to find favour with governments, it has not been as well received at an institutional level. As Bryant, Scoufis, and Cheers (1999, p. 4) explain: 'It is seen by many in the university community as both radical and inappropriate'. A corporate model that reconceptualises students as 'clients' places pressure on academic staff to deliver on expectations: a trend that is exacerbated by what some refer to as the 'massification' of teaching (Bryant et al., 1999, p. 5).

In addition to government policy, changes in the Australian labour market have also seen students attending universities in increasing numbers. As a consequence, universities can now be more accurately described as sites of mass, rather than elite, education (Bryant et al., 1999; Marginson, 2000). The enrolment of increasing numbers of students has been accompanied by a shift in government policy, which has seen a significant withdrawal of government funding (Marginson, 2000, p. 99). As a result of this funding shortfall, increasing numbers of international full-fee paying students have been recruited from Asia, Europe, America and elsewhere. According to Schapper and Mayson (2004, p. 191), 'Australia is currently the third largest provider of education for overseas students after the United States and the United Kingdom and overseas students represent 18% of total enrolment of students in Australia'.

### **Student literacy: From crisis to competency**

These changes have placed unprecedented pressures on academic staff within the 'new Anglo university' (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 74). One response has been to define the current situation as a 'crisis' in tertiary literacy, within 'a discourse of language deficiency [and] remediation' (Collins, as cited in Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 73). In 1996, Postle et al. (as cited in Lawrence, 2003, p. 4) found that the Australian academics they interviewed did not perceive students' difficulties as a reflection of their teaching practices; instead they were more likely to frame the problem as a remedial one requiring intervention from support staff. More recently, McInnis (2000, p. 24) found that 'high proportions of academics' in fifteen Australian universities reported negative attitudes about the abilities of their students. Moreover, they felt that 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' created a 'problem'.

Despite an academic discourse focused on student deficiency, the new role of universities, both as institutions of mass education and as sites of education export, has resulted in a convergence of government policy and business expectation in relation to learning outcomes and teaching quality (Coaldrake, 2000, pp. 11, 13). Seen from this perspective, universities must provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary for their

professional formation. Providing reliable learning outcomes becomes particularly pressing if one considers the increasing number of international and local students paying up-front fees. It is the pedagogical response to these imperatives that drives the paradigm shift in the teaching and learning culture in the modern university; a shift which has effectively called the 'deficit model' into question (Bryant et al., 1999, p. 4).

Educational theorists have variously defined this shift as a movement from teacher-centred to learning- or student-centred pedagogy (e.g., Prosser & Trigwell, 1999); from content-based to process-driven curricula (e.g., Biggs, 2003), and from the separation of research and teaching to the recognition that teaching can be a scholarly activity in itself (e.g., Shulman, as cited in Catterall, 2003, p. 37). Within this context, an alternative and more complex relationship between language and learning has emerged. The way this relationship is conceived is based on the premise that literacy is a socio-cultural practice, which is 'evolving, developing and contextual' (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 74). This alternative, discursive approach suggests that the university, like any other institution, is a dynamic culture, with 'a multiplicity of subcultures, each imbued with their own discourses, literacies and practices' (Lawrence, 2003, p. 5). Knowledge and literacy need to be seen as inextricably linked - one cannot know one's discipline without being literate in it and vice versa (San Miguel, 1996, p. 31). Being literate, then, means attaining the full spectrum of graduate skills, or attributes. These include critical thinking, information literacy, problem solving et cetera, as well as written and oral communication, within a disciplinary context. Literacy is 'about being able to participate in appropriate ways in the discourse of one's chosen discipline, to enquire, interpret, hypothesise and challenge – in short to negotiate meaning' (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 74). Within this framework, every student's transition to university is seen as a cross-cultural experience that demands the development of cultural competencies, rather than a deficit requiring 'fix-it remediation [from] support staff' (Lawrence, 2003, p. 7; Tapper, as cited in Aitchison, 2000, p. 2).

## **Situating the Griffith Business School**

Within this context, the Griffith Business School (GBS) faces two related issues: first, the impact of internationalisation on teaching and learning within the School, and second, to remain internationally competitive, the need for the school to seek accreditation from both American and European business accreditation bodies. To achieve accreditation, the GBS will need to demonstrate, among other things, its capacity to develop generic skills in its graduates. This is in line with wider university policy, and also with government (DEST, 2002), and industry (ACCI, 2004; de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000; Kelly, 2003; Gush, 1996) expectations.

Decreased financial support from successive federal governments has led Griffith University, amongst many others, to become increasingly dependent on the higher fees paid by international students. For the GBS, which receives the majority of international enrolments, increasing numbers of international students have presented new challenges for teaching and learning. Coming from a variety of educational backgrounds, international students often experience difficulties in adjusting to the learning environment at Australian universities (Sinclair, 2003; Briguglio, 2004; Tiong & Yong, 2004; Chalmers & Volet, 1997). For their part, until recently, Australian academic staff have been inclined to take for granted that the Anglo-Saxon model of tertiary education was universally used and sufficiently

transparent for students to understand what it requires of them (Vandermensbrugge, 2003, p. 3). For this reason, learning difficulties faced by international students are often assumed to be largely a consequence of insufficient language skills (Sinclair, 2003, p. 304; Vandermensbrugge, 2003, p. 1). While language proficiency undoubtedly has an effect on students, recent research suggests:

Many international students are confused by differences in teaching styles, lecturer expectations of their role in their own learning, what is required of them in terms of assignments, by the emphasis placed upon learner independence, and by their relationship with academic staff. (Sinclair, 2003, p. 304)

The desire to circumvent such confusion was one significant factor leading to the establishment of the GBS' three member Learning Development Unit (LDU). The LDU was established to develop a program for embedding graduate skills such as critical thinking, information literacy, written and oral communication within the business curriculum. By making these generic skills an explicit goal of undergraduate teaching, it also aims to make expectations of lecturing staff, and the western tertiary education model, more transparent to international and national students alike (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 91; Egege & Kutieleh, 2004, p. 81). Where possible, it will also include the means for developing intercultural skills for both international and national students, through a process of making broader cultural norms and values explicit to all students (e.g., Barker & Woods, 2003). Such an approach not only treats international students as a valuable resource, rather than a necessary evil, it also acknowledges a growing consensus on the value of intercultural communication skills for business graduates (Edwards, Crosling, Petrovic-Lazarovic, & O'Neill, 2003; Schapper & Mayson, 2004; Cheney, 2001).

Another factor leading to the development of the LDU was the GBS' plan to attain international accreditation. The LDU is responsible for establishing a program to bring both curriculum development and teaching practice within the Business School in line with the expectations of these accreditation bodies. Generic skills, such as those mentioned above, are increasingly seen as a requirement for graduates wishing to obtain employment in the professional sector (ACCI, 2004; Kelly, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 73). Therefore, the generic skills program developed by the LDU is seen as critical to ensuring successful accreditation for the School. Beyond the requirements for accreditation, there is a growing perception within the Business School, and elsewhere (ACCI, 2004; Kelly, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002) that Australian students are graduating without the necessary skills to carry out their professional responsibilities. For example, a recent Australian study found that less than half of the undergraduate students it surveyed appeared to have the important graduate skill of critical thinking (Phillips & Bond, 2004, p. 278). To meet the demand for graduates with the requisite generic skills, university Business Schools need to change the curriculum and how it is taught (de la Harpe et al., 2000). Despite the challenges associated with these aims, the Griffith Business School views the current context as a unique opportunity to make significant changes to its curriculum design and teaching practice.

As key players in this cultural shift within the School, the three staff members of the new LDU have given considerable attention to the definition of our professional role. Our concerns, which are shared by other Learning and Language Advisers (Percy & Skillen, 2000), are part of a much wider debate about the nature of academic skills development.

Moore (2004) has characterised this debate as bi-polar: at one pole are the 'generalists', who argue that a skill like critical thinking, for example, can be taught in general stand-alone courses, divorced from disciplinary content; at the other pole are the 'specificists', who argue that critical thinking cannot be separated from the discipline in which it is applied. Within this framework, generalists believe that generic skills should be taught prior to, or parallel with content, while specificists understand these generic attributes need to be learnt as an integral part of disciplinary knowledge (Barrie, 2004). Somewhere between these positions, 'relativists' such as Ballard and Clanchy (as cited in Moore, 2004, p. 14) believe that a generic skill, such as critical thinking, needs to be learned contextually, but once learned can be transferred to another disciplinary context. While generalists such as Robert Ennis came to the fore during the 1960s and 70s, and were most influential during the 1980s, evidence suggests that specificist, or at least relativist, approaches have now gained institutional support (Barrie, 2004; Cargill, 1996).

Given the history of many student learning centres in Australian universities, which were established at the height of the generalists' influence on educational policy, the current interest in the legitimate role of learning advisers is not surprising. While the learning support originally tended to be offered 'outside the curriculum', to individual students, or groups of students attending generic skills workshops, many learning advisers in Australian universities now see their work as 'pro-active, systemic and developmental' (Percy & Skillen, 2000, p. 244). Hence in 2003, Catterall found learning advisers were assuming a variety of roles in collaborative teaching projects, including that of a 'sounding board', a 'collaborator', a 'learning expert', and an 'outside expert' (p. 37).

Tiernan (2001) argues that the development of such diversity in the profession can in part be attributed to the range of institutional locations in which language and learning advisers find themselves. Currently, learning advisers operate from a diverse range of locations: in student services, in faculties, in staff development units, or split between two or more different locations within the university (p. 88). Each location will shape learning advisers' relationships with students, their research capacities, the types of services offered, and their ability to influence policy development in the wider institution (Tiernan, 2001, p. 89). While Tiernan suggests that there are legitimate reasons for these different locations, she also points to a number of potential strengths in the faculty-based model (pp. 93-4): it enables learning advisers to take a developmental approach to skill development through greater co-operation with other academic staff; it makes it easier for learning advisers to establish their credibility, and it can help ensure quality research into learning issues.

Tiernan's research echoes an earlier survey (McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone, & Devlin, 1995) of learning advisers in Victorian universities, which pointed to the influence of location on the nature of learning advisers' work. In McLean et al.'s survey, faculty based units were seen to be better placed to integrate learning development with course work and/or seek course accreditation than centrally located units, while units placed within staff development centres had closer links with teaching and research issues (p. 80). McLean et al. (1995, p. 85) concluded that the following principles should inform the development of learning services within universities: the need for a contextualised program, the consequent need to work cooperatively with faculty staff, and the importance of research. These findings informed the GBS' decision to appoint two learning advisers and a learning development manager to form a Learning Development Unit (LDU) within the School itself. They also shaped the LDU's plan for embedding generic skills into Business curricula, which was

based on a two-pronged approach of engaging students through course and program development, and engaging staff through teaching development.

## The Learning Development Plan

### Engaging Students

By embedding skills development in GBS curricula, the School ensures that students acquire appropriate generic skills currently required by employers (ACCI, 2003), but which also enable students to engage actively with the Australian tertiary learning culture. This strategy is designed to achieve a number of goals. These include improving student retention, demonstrating the School's commitment to the Griffith Academic Plan (O'Connor, 2004), supporting the School's aim of attaining European Quality Insurance System (EQIS) and the Association of American Schools and Colleges of Business (AACSB) accreditation, and finally, targeting the School's operational plan 2004-2007 to improve the quality of student experience through the development of effective program management and student support.

Through the LDU, the Business School will promote student engagement by embedding the development of identified sets of skills across the curricula of all degree Programs offered by the School. The LDU's sequential and context specific approach to skill development will commence in 2006 with the first year undergraduate intake; these students will complete one compulsory Primary Skills Development Course each semester. The skills developed through a combination of lectures, additional workshops and tutorials will be practised and improved through assessment in all first year courses. The first proposed Primary Skills Development course, Management Concepts, is being tested in Semester 2, 2005. This approach is based on the premise that a disciplinary context is required to make meaning of generic skills. From this perspective, generic skills are interwoven with the particular disciplinary discourses of departments within the GBS (Barrie, 2004; Moore, 2004). Working from this perspective also means that the LDU and the GBS must ensure that generic skills are developed holistically through a whole-of-program approach.

Consequently, part of the LDU's role is to ensure the application of standards across the GBS and provide a consistent and supportive learning context for first year students. This includes (where possible) the development of common resources, terminology, standards and assessment criteria. The LDU is developing these standards and resources in consultation with relevant university stakeholders, including program convenors/directors, academic staff, Information Services (INS) and the Griffith Institute of Higher Education (GIHE). The process will include a review of degree programs and first year courses to ensure that program objectives, professional accreditation objectives, skill development objectives and assessment are aligned. A common resources bank is also being developed to ensure that students receive consistent messages about standards and skills development in first year. Disciplinary differences can be introduced in second year once students have had a year of consistent guidelines and standards. However, the second stage (2006-2007) of developing graduate skills/attributes into the GBS will be to ensure that it continues to be embedded in the program through second, then third year. This stage is based on research, which shows that even in programs that emphasise skill development in initial stages, if this development is not continued students often revert to

surface learning strategies (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002; Barrie, 2004). If students are to graduate with the required skills, then they must be thoroughly integrated throughout each discipline within the Business School.

### **Engaging Staff**

Significant changes in teaching and assessment practice in lectures, tutorials and courses will be required in order to enable students to acquire appropriate skills. Teaching staff are the primary source of disciplinary expertise in this process. Consequently, the LDU believes that the Business School must develop, recognise and reward the teaching professionalism of all academic staff. We have argued that it is essential for teaching staff connected with Primary Skill Development courses. To this end, the LDU is developing, in conjunction with GIHE, a *Certificate in Small Group Teaching Practice*, aimed particularly at tutorial teachers within Primary Skill Course teachings teams. Workshops will also be offered for *Teaching and Managing Large Classes*, which are aimed at staff who wish to learn or share practical strategies for engaging students in large classes; they are also aimed at staff who manage large teaching teams. Proposed core workshops and short courses will enable participants to develop student-focused skills and to enhance their cross-cultural teaching practice.

All of this is developed from the perspective of further enabling already-experienced full-time staff, and professionalising and valuing existing sessional staff, who are often the primary point of contact for first year students. As past and present lecturing staff, members of the LDU are keenly attuned to the demands placed on academic staff, who in the current context, face a nearly constant barrage of policy and institution-led reforms. In the face of heavier workloads and greater student numbers, time is a rare and valuable commodity. To accept the importance of embedding graduate skills within their disciplinary context is to acknowledge the centrality of staff with their disciplinary expertise. From this perspective, universities must provide staff with the necessary incentives and support to develop their teaching practice. As higher education scholar Margaret Buckridge asks:

When we invoke the idea of 'student-centred learning', do we acknowledge its correlative of 'staff-centred development'? Do we come to terms, genuinely, with the primacy of the disciplinary or content knowledge, and realise its cognitive and tribal imperatives run deep? (as cited in Scoufis, 2005, n.p.)

In developing and defining our own roles as Learning Advisers in a faculty-based unit, we have particularly drawn on Gordon and Lee's (1988) model of co-production. As Gordon et al. (as cited in Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 6) point out, an holistic, contextual approach to literacy and learning essentially calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between the language specialist and the discipline specialist, 'away from the notion of specialist with their own area towards a situation in which both language specialist and discipline specialist are jointly involved in the work of knowledge construction'.

Such collaboration produces a 'third knowledge', greater than the sum of its parts, which explicates the discursive construction of disciplinary knowledge, 'in terms of genre, textual practice, pedagogy and learning' (Lee cited in Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 6). In Gordon and Lee's case, the authors found that production of this third knowledge was limited by two factors: power/knowledge (or the institutionally supported traditional 'alpha/beta relationship' between faculty and learning support staff) and the degree of social distance

(in their case, an unwillingness to challenge the perception of intimacy based on the fact that all staff involved were women). They concluded that their attempt at co-production had failed because the learning advisers involved did not adequately explain their knowledge (1998, pp. 7, 20). In their view, successful co-production depends on both parties making their hitherto implicit, specialist understandings explicit and open to critical examination (Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 21).

Unlike the situation analysed by Gordon and Lee, our experience at Griffith has so far been positive. We believe this is due to two key differences in our respective environments: first, our role in the Business School's accreditation process has the imprimatur of the Dean and other senior academic staff at Executive level; second, academics within the Business School have been quick to see the potential of the co-production model. While many academics may find the idea of co-production is at odds with the academy's traditional emphasis on individual ownership of knowledge and 'strong boundary maintenance in terms of expertise' (Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 16), the term has resonance within the disciplinary culture of the Business School, because contemporary management practices favour shared responsibility for production in self-managed teams. Hence, our environment is perhaps more conducive to instituting change in a systemic and proactive manner, than that experienced by Gordon and Lee. However, this is not to understate the complex, developmental nature of our program, nor the likelihood that we will encounter resistance or apathy along the way.

Our experience in the Griffith Business School to date suggests that for co-production to work well, we need to take both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. In our case, the urgency of the accreditation agenda has undoubtedly helped us do both. Our Unit is directly responsible to, and has the full support of the Associate Dean, Teaching and Learning. It is this support which gives the LDU's proposed Learning Development Program both the authority and the resources to implement change. At the same time, we recognise the success of our program depends on the quality of the partnerships we build with individual course convenors and their teaching teams. In developing strong working relations with discipline-based staff, we are guided by the same principles we apply to engagement with students: that quality learning is both constructive and communal. Rather than define our role as 'meta-professional', as some learning developers have suggested (Candy, as cited in Percy & Skillen, 2000, p. 245), we prefer to foster the development of collaborative partnerships based on respect for the expertise that each team member brings. In this and other aspects, our approach resembles Schön's (as cited in Leask, Medlin, & Feast, 1999, p. 1) model of reflective practice. Like Schön, we have found that it is essential to build consensus regarding the nature of the pedagogical 'problem' we are dealing with. Consequently, we spend considerable time questioning assumptions regarding language deficiency and other myths. Constructing a coherent understanding of a problem in any group of teachers within our rapidly evolving context can be difficult. However, we find that explicit acknowledgement of the expertise or 'artistry' (Schön, as cited in Leask et al., 1999, pp. 2-3) of each professional involved fosters an environment that is conducive to co-production.

## Conclusion

Employment and policy-based imperatives that drive the new student-centred pedagogy challenge universities to re-conceptualise themselves as centres of teaching and learning, as well as places of research. The current focus on graduate attributes or skills is one particular response to these external imperatives. There is now a consensus that to ensure that university graduates successfully acquire these skills, universities must explicitly teach the cultural competencies required for each discipline. Within this context, the Griffith Business School has chosen a learning development model that emphasises not only the disciplinary context of generic skills development, but also the new relationship of co-production that must exist between what we have referred to as the language specialist and the discipline specialist. For a 'third knowledge' that makes transparent both disciplinary practice and content to emerge, we have argued that learning advisers and academic staff must work as equal partners.

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# Improving oral communication in pharmacy education through interdisciplinary research

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**Abstract:** *A major criterion for the registration of pharmacists in Australia is a demonstrated ability to communicate effectively in diverse professional interactions. Development of professional communication skills is, therefore, an integral part of the undergraduate program in the Bachelor of Pharmacy degree at the University of South Australia. Recent evaluations of the pharmacy program have indicated that a significant number of students have difficulty in reaching the required communication standards, particularly students with English as a second language. When Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers work with students to develop their oral communication skills, they need insights into the disciplinary expectations. Collaboration between lecturers and LAS advisers not only satisfies this need, but also offers opportunities for reciprocal exchange of discipline specific expertise. An interdisciplinary research project was undertaken using a framework developed by Roberts and Sarangi (1999). This collaboration resulted in beneficial staff development, resource development and enhanced outcomes for students.*

**Key words:** *oral communication skills, pharmacy education, research*

## Introduction

In Australian universities, much of the focus of the work among Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers is on the process of acculturation to tertiary study, its expectations, conventions and behaviours. LAS practice, however, varies widely and is framed by a number of different paradigms (Percy & Stirling, 2004), informing different approaches

ranging from remediation to transformation (Webb, 2002). Included in the debates around LAS practice are the advantages and disadvantages of working with individual students versus a group, parallel provision versus embedded approaches, as well as the significance of the discipline of study in the development of LAS. Enhancing students' use of English in the academic context raises particular challenges for LAS advisers who rely on insights into and knowledge of the language of the subject areas. One way to gain entry to the discourses is to work collaboratively with academic lecturers to find ways to meet the challenges.

In 2004-05, a collaborative research project was conducted between a LAS adviser and the course coordinator of a final year course in the Bachelor of Pharmacy at the University of South Australia (UniSA). The focus of the study was on effective communication skills for professional practice which is an essential criterion for the registration of pharmacists in Australia. After completing their degree, students undertake a traineeship. This includes a registration examination which assesses their knowledge of professional practice as well as their ability to communicate effectively with peers, general practitioners, patients and the public. As elsewhere in Australia, pharmacy educators at UniSA have responded to the expectations of the professional bodies by integrating the development of professional communication skills into the undergraduate program.

In recent years, Home Medicines Reviews (HMR) have been used as the vehicle for teaching and assessing communication skills in professional settings and students' ability to apply pharmacology in the treatment and care of patients – referred to as pharmacotherapeutics. HMRs are part of current professional practice aimed at quality use of medicines and best health outcomes for patients. The assessment process involves three activities:

- a case presentation that draws on rudimentary information provided by lecturers and is augmented through research by the student group;
- a simulated interaction between a pharmacist (role played by student) and general practitioner (GP) (role played by tutor) in which the drug regime of the patient is discussed and changes are decided; and
- a simulated interaction between a pharmacist (role played by student) and patient (role played by tutor) to discuss the findings of the medicines review and to negotiate any changes.

Although many students are able to meet the expectations of the assessment criteria, a significant number of students, many of whom come from non-English-speaking-backgrounds (NESB), have difficulty in attaining the required communication standards. Since more than half the students enrolled in the degree are NESB, lecturers and tutors have found it difficult to provide the level of learning support needed for many of these students. With increasing numbers of international students, some of whom articulate into third year through twinning arrangements with offshore universities, there are increasing numbers of students requiring support to improve their skills in communication.

Over the last eight years, LAS advisers have worked closely with pharmacy lecturers to provide assistance with 'language development' for students at risk in all years of the program. With final year students, in particular, the efforts were limited because LAS advisers were not familiar with the discourses around HMRs. What was needed was an opportunity for a LAS adviser to spend time with students and tutors to develop an

understanding of the relevant discourses and practices. As a response to this, the research project was undertaken to investigate communication practices in the three HMR activities in order to identify those valued by pharmacy professionals. This paper reports on the study and its findings and focuses on the importance of a collaborative approach in relation to the debate among LAS advisers regarding generic versus embedded approaches to LAS development.

## Theoretical framework

Simulated interactions with peers and clients commonly form part of assessment practice in educating healthcare professionals at UniSA. The interactions are challenging for students and usually involve one or two tutors who participate, observe and assess student performance in class or examination settings. These kinds of activities or encounters are often seen as 'a transparent channel through which facts, values, and opinions pass' (Roberts, Sarangi, Southgate, Wakeford, & Wass, 2000, p. 370) and are assessed as such. Where the encounters involve NESB students, the challenges in the interaction are even greater because of cross-cultural communication issues and the power and status differential implicit in the positions of teacher and student (Levinson, 1978 in Gumperz, 1982). These students, who bring their own values, beliefs and ideologies into the interactions, often lack knowledge of details like the particular setting, the participants and the usual topics of conversation so that there is little understanding of 'the local circumstances and wider discourses that circulate in the organisation' (Roberts & Sarangi, 2005, p. 634).

Various approaches to discourse analysis were investigated to locate a way to analyse the text and talk in the HMR activities that involved discourses that were widely accessible rather than being restricted to a linguistics community. A framework developed by Roberts and Sarangi (Roberts et al., 2000) was selected because it was designed to examine talk and text in professional and institutional settings in collaboration with non-linguistic researchers. Roberts and Sarangi have used the interactional sociolinguistic approach to investigate interactions in a number of medical settings (Roberts et al., 2000). Their ethnographic approach identifies the 'communicative ecology' of the setting and provides a sound understanding of the context of the professional interactions. It is a top-down approach that focuses 'on the context and culturally specific situated inferences that members rely on to convey communicative intent . . . [and] . . . whether or not interpretive procedures are shared' (Gumperz, 1999, p. 458).

The interactional sociolinguistic (IS) approach developed by Roberts and Sarangi centres on the activity type, the basic significant unit of interaction in terms of which meaning is assessed (Levinson, 1978 in Gumperz, 1982, p. 130). The term 'activity' emphasizes the dynamic process which develops and changes as the participants interact. The activity type limits interpretations of utterances by foregrounding certain aspects of knowledge and underplaying others. Roberts and Sarangi begin their analyses by mapping the whole activity or 'event' (Gumperz, 1999, p. 458).

The mapping draws on analytic themes to investigate 'how meaning is negotiated and judgements are made in interaction' (Roberts & Sarangi, 2005, p.632). The analytic themes include the interactive frames and footing, contextualisation cues and inferences, face

and facework, social identity and rhetorical devices which filter values and behaviours to suit particular interactions (Roberts & Sarangi, 2005). Interactive frames refer to the filtering of values and principles in the particular encounter; footing is the way that roles and relationships are affected during an interaction through, for example, participants aligning themselves to others through their talk; contextualisation cues and inferences are signals that give an utterance meaning in the particular context; face and facework refer to the way interactants 'save face' and maintain social relations through using politeness strategies and indirectness. Social identity, as an analytic theme, relates to the participants' identities that are brought into the interaction and are also brought about through the interaction; and rhetorical devices are patterns of argumentation like repetitions often used in institutional encounters.

Another important element in the mapping process (Roberts & Sarangi, 2005) is the distinction identified by sociolinguists between three types of discourse as existing in medical encounters: institutional, professional and personal discourse (Roberts et al., 2000, p. 371):

- Institutional discourse – talk that is about professional practice giving it a kind of concrete existence.
- Professional discourse – talk that is used by pharmacists in practice, signalling membership of the professional community.
- Personal experience discourse – talk that is often personal accounts of experience or feelings.

The mapping process may involve the modes of talk and examining their impact on the success of the interaction, or it may involve uncomfortable moments between interactants. These kinds of maps provide tools for examining complex interactions.

## Method

Agreement was reached for a LAS adviser to conduct the research in the School of Pharmacy and Medical Sciences at the University of South Australia. The LAS adviser drew on course information, observation of classes, tutor meetings, modelling of effective simulated encounters, and post-class discussions with tutors to identify the 'communicative ecology' of the setting (Roberts & Sarangi, 2005).

Participants were sought in one final year undergraduate course and permission obtained from tutors and students to audiotape simulated interactions. The three activity types of the HMRs, the case presentations and simulated interactions with GPs and with patients, were audiotaped and these texts form the bulk of the data. In all, 46 students and 8 tutors agreed to be participants. The student group consisted of English speaking background (ESB) students and non-English-speaking-background (NESB) students. The body of transcribed data included: 12 case presentations (7 ESB & 5 NESB), 14 simulated GP interviews (4 ESB & 10 NESB) and 20 simulated patient feedback sessions (12 ESB & 8 NESB). Where possible, the tutors' feedback was also audiotaped. The audiocassettes were coded to ensure confidentiality and transcriptions were completed by an independently employed transcriber. For the purposes of this study, transcription conventions were limited to hesitations, pauses and overlapping. To draw on examples of students' more

experienced interactions, transcriptions from the final 4 weeks of semester were selected for analysis. The initial mapping involved turn-taking, uncomfortable moments between interactants and matching tutor feedback to the interactions.

## Findings and discussion

Initial findings indicate three factors that identify successful students: organisation and signalled staging of the activity type, length and types of turns, and use of institutional, professional and personal discourses. Another finding relates to variation in tutor interaction and feedback.

### Activity types

As an activity type or event (Gumperz, 1999), case presentations in the HMR are information-giving narratives reporting on a patient's health status. There are a number of obligatory stages (Eggins & Slade, 1997) such as demographic details, medical conditions, related drug treatments and anticipatory elements such as gaps in information requiring clarification and discussion in the other HMR activities. The focus of activity in the pharmacist - GP and pharmacist – patient simulations was on treatment options, problem-solving and decision-making. As with the case presentations the organisation of information, through appropriate packaging, staging, prioritising and signalling, was significant for effective communication and highly valued by tutors. In addition, there were a number of obligatory stages such as new drug treatments. Initial comparisons of ESB and NESB texts indicated marked differences in managing the topic and signalling shifts in topic. For example in the following interaction, an ESB student signals a change of topic to the GP by referring to its order:

- 26 Pharmacist: OK ... Secondly, I notice that she has been on Amiloride and Frusemide since 1999 ...

On the other hand, most of the NESB students consistently used 'and' to signal all topic changes, as in the following interaction with an NESB student in a pharmacist -GP interaction:

- 32 Pharmacist: And also regarding her hypothyroidism ...  
39 Pharmacist: And ... and ... also her BP ...  
47 Pharmacist: And another thing ... also is ...

### Length and type of turns

Apart from topic control, the effectiveness of the encounter depended largely on successful turntaking. Like any interaction, the HMR interactions between pharmacists, GPs and patients were jointly constructed through turn-taking (Roberts et al., 2000). As Gumperz (1999, p. 454) states:

Speaking, when seen in practice perspective, is not just a matter of individuals encoding and decoding of messages. To interact, as conversational analysts have shown, is to engage in an ongoing process of negotiation, both to infer what others intend to convey and to monitor how one's own contributions are received.

Where the encounter involved a collaborative development of the exchange, it was assessed to be effective by tutors. Although most students started the interactions with a set of prepared notes, the progress and quality of the interaction, like any interaction, depended on how well each question or response contributed to the information exchange. The quality of the interaction among NESB students was influenced by a lack of confidence in general conversational English as well as a dependence on 'prepared scripts' or protocols that they read from during the interactions. Close following of the prepared scripts usually led to mismatches in the schemata or frames within the encounter (Gumperz, 1999, p. 456) and resulted in inappropriate responses in the turn taking. In some cases, the students' turns consisted of long stretches of information-giving identified in the transcript as regular patterns of more than 10 lines followed by occasional brief back-channelling like 'um-hm' or 'yes' which kept the conversation flowing (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Of particular note is the number of unnecessary information-giving turns taken by many students to present details that the GP or patient already knew. These kinds of turns usually only required back-channelling for agreement and did not add to the collaborative development of the encounter. For example, in an ESB student interaction, the patient knew that the purpose of the pharmacist's visit was to explain a drug regime, yet the student (pharmacist) repeated what the patient had said:

- 03 Patient: Oh ... I've been expecting you from the pharmacy ... to explain all my medicines to me ...
- 04 Pharmacist: Now, last time you mentioned ... last time you mentioned that you had some difficulty understanding the medications, especially ... have you got that list?
- 05 Patient: yes, somewhere...
- 06 Pharmacist: ...especially the new ones that you started in hospital. What I'll do today is go through the new medications that you have been put on and then we'll talk about some of the changes that we suggest, myself and Dr G, suggest to your drugs, and we'll see what you think about those...
- 07 Patient: Um-hmm

Analysis of turn taking (Schlegoff, 1990) also revealed variation in relation to the types of turns that tutors took. Although the tutors were typecast in their roles as GP and patient, they interpreted their role in relation to their own knowledge as pharmacists and their experiences with HMRs. For example, some tutors playing the role of GP interpreted the role as requiring them to feign ignorance of new drug treatments to set up an information-giving turn for the student, while others provided clues for students about the new drug during the encounter. The varied ways in which tutors interpreted their responsibilities in the simulations as helper and assessor led to variation in turns and in the levels of joint construction of the encounter. From an interactional sociolinguistic perspective, tutors contributed directly to the construction of the talk and strongly influenced its success (Roberts et al., 2000, p. 371).

Variation was also found in the levels of success between ESB and NESB students, particularly in cases where students interacted with two tutors playing patient and resident nurse in a residential aged care facility. Side sequences aimed at providing insights into real life experience were especially challenging for NESB students. For example, in the

following interaction about the importance of relaxation techniques, the student pharmacist has difficulty maintaining control of the topic:

- 113 Pharmacist: Yep ... and here's a self care card ... for relaxation techniques ... which can help you improve your sleep. It's to relieve the symptoms of your ... stress ... either mentally or physically.
- 114 Patient: I think it would take more than a piece of a paper to get me stressed ... unstressed
- 115 Pharmacist: OK (smiles embarrassed)
- 116 Registered nurse: This young man is giving you some stuff that might help you. You should really ...

Even when this student gets a turn, he does not maximise the opportunity because he uses institutional discourse:

- 98 Registered nurse: OK, well we can discuss it later anyway...
- 99 Pharmacist: And it is important for you to maintain a good sleep hygiene. Research have ...um yes... um found that people with a good sleep hygiene feel ...um sleep ...um ...alert... when ...um ...when they wake up...
- 100 Patient: Sorry...?

These interactional difficulties appear to result from the unexpected shift in frame and discourse type (Roberts et al., 2000). A closer linguistic analysis of these kinds of awkward moments also revealed that ESB students were better able to deal with the distractions by using closed questions or intonation to gain control of the turns and manage the topic. For example, during the interaction below, the patient initiated a distracting side-sequence about improving all the food in the residential care facility (line 89) but the ESB student took a turn starting with "So..." (descending intonation) and regained topic control.

- 86 Patient: I think it's the diet here actually ... (said softly, confidentially to the pharmacist while looking at the registered nurse, L.)
- 87 Pharmacist: Well, actually talking to you, L., maybe just increasing fluids and increasing fibres can help ... constipation also ...
- 88 Registered nurse: Yep, I can do that!
- 89 Patient: (looking at the nurse) And having better food all round really, I'd say ...
- 90 Pharmacist: So... if you get all those things and you know you can get the constipation sorted out, and maybe the sleep will help as well...

### Use of institutional, professional and personal discourse

The language used in case presentations assumed relatively high levels of background knowledge among the audience of peers and made use of common medical conditions, treatments and potential drug interactions. The discourse was a blend of professional and personal discourses (Roberts et al., 2000). The use of discourse markers, for example 'first' or 'therefore', also signalled the level of topic control. Many transcriptions of case presentations, particularly those of NESB students, indicated poor use of discourse markers.

In terms of the interactions with GPs, the language use assumed high levels of background knowledge of medical conditions, treatments and commonly prescribed drugs, and professional discourse dominated the interaction (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999). The language used with patients, on the other hand, assumed a relatively low level of background knowledge and the language was a blend of professional and personal modes of discourse.

The use of institutional language is evident where students are required to provide evidence or where they meet resistance to their suggestions. When GPs, for example, asked for further details about new drugs or rationales for changes to drug regimes, students often drew on the institutional mode. In situations where students met resistance from patients in the feedback session, many drew on institutional language to persuade the patient to make the changes. For example, in an interaction between a pharmacist and a patient in the company of the registered nurse in a residential care facility, the pharmacist tried to persuade an elderly patient to stop taking sleeping tablets and to try non-drug therapies. When the patient resisted, the student drew on the institutional discourse of 'excessive doses' and 'precipitate ... your nightmares' to try to persuade her:

- 13 Pharmacist: O.K. ... well ... um ...having a chat to your doctor, it's not really good that you use benzodiazepines on a, when? Like, like, continuous basis.
- 14 Patient: Well it's a good many years now. I don't know about not very good. I've been doing it for a long time ...
- 15 Pharmacist: Well you could just build up dependence, and that's probably why you're needing to ... needing more and more. Plus also, excessive doses can, they could precipitate ...um...your nightmares you're having.
- 16 Patient: What d'you mean?

The student's use of the institutional or "textbook" language was not understood by the patient who, in this case, asked for clarification with 'What d'you mean?'. The student playing the role of pharmacist could, instead, have explained that the long usage of the drug meant that it had lost its effectiveness.

### **Tutor feedback**

Tutor feedback focused on 'inappropriate' language use and poor inter-relational factors like maintenance of good relations linked to status and power differentials (Levinson, 1978 in Gumperz, 1982). In relation to this, an important factor was once again the careful management of the shifts in topic through signalling. This is closely linked to inter-personal aspects of the interaction which require the pharmacist to interact with the GP and patient in ways that foster affiliation. Given the status and power differential, the pharmacist needs to avoid imposing on the GP and to generate goodwill.

Although there was a set of marking criteria for the assessment and the required standards were clearly articulated, students perceived the assessment to be based on largely unexpressed criteria resulting in inconsistent grading. What seems to exist around the assessment of HMRs is either a conscious or unconscious desire by the tutor for the student to become 'someone like us' or 'someone we would get on with' – a phenomenon that assumes a level of sharedness and solidarity which overrides

apparently objective procedures (Jenkins, 1986 in Roberts & Sarangi, 1999). One student expressed dissatisfaction as summed up in the following evaluation:

It is not fair for the teacher to say 'Yes that was good' and then give a Credit. If I get less than a HD then I want to be told specific areas which I need to improve, otherwise there is not much point in the exercise.

Although the main impetus for the study was to support NESB students, what became clear in the analysis was that ESB students also grapple with the different modes of talk and assessment expectations. Hence, the knowledge generated from the study has broader application for pharmacy educators and LAS advisers working with pharmacy students.

## Conclusion

The expectations of pharmacy staff in relation to high levels of communication skills place pressure on the students to work towards achieving them. Among the large number of students who are NESB, are some who struggle to pass and others who compete to achieve high grades. These problems appear to be linked to practice and talk in practice:

The different ways in which clinical practice is talked about in different institutional and professional domains and by different groups produces a range of discourses that call up particular types of vocabulary, metaphor, and grammatical constructions and certain lines of argument and representation. (Gumperz, 1982 cited in Roberts et al., 2000, p. 371)

Several findings from the study will have immediate and expected outcomes for students and staff. An online resource has been developed to enhance communication for pharmacy practice and changes to the marking criteria in the workshop have been made. In addition, an elective course has been proposed for developing communication skills. An unexpected outcome of the collaboration and extensive dialogue was the opportunity it afforded for more intense reflection on the assessment practices. The analysis of the data involved extensive dialogue between the course coordinator and the LAS adviser. During these conversations, the LAS adviser gained important insights into the expertise of the pharmacy educator and the pharmacy lecturer learned about interactional sociolinguistic analysis and gained insights into normalised pharmacy behaviours. In this way the success of the collaborative project went beyond the initial goals and into professional development through reciprocal exchange of expertise and skills and resource development. This collaboration provides a model for LAS work in the area of oral communication for professional practice, especially for health science students.

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# **Postgraduate Essentials: An online transition program for commencing PhD students**

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**Abstract:** *Postgraduate Essentials is the first online interactive course in Australia designed to build an inclusive postgraduate learning community while delivering integrated candidature information, transition advice and academic skills support to students in their first year of PhD candidature. In content and focus, Postgraduate Essentials aims to complement and enhance traditional research supervision to ensure that an increasingly diverse student population has access to information, skills support and an active peer-network. It does this by facilitating new PhD students' transition to a research environment and their membership of the postgraduate student community, and by providing support to develop the academic and professional skills that underpin successful completion of common first year PhD requirements. This paper reflects on the experiences of the Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers on the Postgraduate Essentials project team, and on students' participation in and evaluations of the program in 2004. We focus on the unexpectedly high enrolment of on-campus students who already have access to face-to-face academic skills programs. We observe that student expectations regarding levels and modes of academic skills support, coupled with the resource-intensive nature of multimedia development, create additional demands on LAS advisers' time, skills and resources. For projects such as Postgraduate Essentials to be sustainable, we recommend a collaborative approach that utilizes the skills and expertise of key staff in different areas of teaching and support.*

**Key words:** *academic skills, postgraduate learning communities, online learning support*

## Introduction

*Postgraduate Essentials* is a 12-week online interactive course designed to support University of Melbourne PhD students in their first year of candidature. Over the six fortnightly modules, the course familiarizes students with the common stages and requirements of PhD candidature and assists them to develop academic and professional skills – such as literature reviewing and network building – that underpin a successful first year. The program also aims to enhance students' experiences of postgraduate research by facilitating interaction and community-building among this often isolated and diverse student cohort.

This paper reviews the 2004 pilot offerings of *Postgraduate Essentials* in the context of the increasing demand for academic skills support services from postgraduate students. It considers current applications of online support for this cohort and describes the aims and features of *Postgraduate Essentials*. We analyse the high level of interest in this form of online support among the general cohort of postgraduate research students. Finally, we explore the implications of the program for Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers in terms of the resources, skills and time needed to develop and maintain this type of program.

## Background: online support for research postgraduate students

Recent years have seen a substantial increase in the demand for language and academic skills support services at the postgraduate level. At the University of Melbourne, postgraduate students are disproportionately high users of the individual tutorial service offered by the Language and Learning Skills Unit (LLSU), and the LLSU offers more than 100 hours per semester of teaching (workshops and short courses) at the postgraduate level. Support is most commonly sought for the development of academic writing skills; oral presentation skills classes are also well attended. Time and project management skills form the third significant area of work at this level.

Two main factors are readily identifiable as driving the increase in demand for academic support at the postgraduate level at the University of Melbourne: firstly, the overall increase in numbers of students undertaking postgraduate research and coursework degrees (School of Graduate Studies, 2003, p. 9); and, secondly, the increasingly diverse cultural and educational backgrounds of postgraduate students (Pearson and Ford, 1997, p. ix). Postgraduate research students face additional pressures from the institutional focus on 'timely completions' and the subsequent reduction of average completion time for a PhD – from 3.95 years in 1997 to 3.63 years in 2002 (School of Graduate Studies, 2003, p. 9).

Most universities have developed a range of strategies to address increasing demands for LAS services. Campus-based workshops, seminars and short courses are common as are, increasingly, various forms of online support including Internet-based access to advisers and academic skills resources. The move to provide online academic support for postgraduate students is a logical one, given that the majority of online courses are offered at the postgraduate level (Bell, Bush, Nicholson, O'Brien, & Tran, 2002, p. ix) and that online learning appears to have 'wider applicability and acceptance among postgraduate

students' (Bell et al., 2002, p. 2). Potentially, online delivery is also better able to address the geographical distribution of postgraduate research students – whether enrolled in online or campus-based courses – and their need for greater flexibility in access to services, given work and family commitments. For many postgraduate coursework and research students, the capacity for web-based communication with language and learning skills advisers as well as academic supervisors is an important feature of online learning support.

Increasingly, universities are developing online communication tools for forming and maintaining learning communities, and the benefits are being investigated in a range of educational settings (Reisman, Flores, & Edge, 2003; Bell et al., 2002; Borthwick & Wissler, 2003). However, only limited attention has been paid to the use of online learning communities for PhD learning and support. Communication tools and activities such as email lists or bulletin boards are usually positioned as 'supplementary' forms of online delivery for disciplinary specific subject areas (Bell et al., 2002, pp. 5-6). According to Honey, Gunn and North (2004, p. 414), the use of these basic kinds of online communication tools in combination with traditional on-campus course delivery works well with a relatively homogenous, disciplinary based, postgraduate cohort such as postgraduate nursing students. Stacey (1996) outlines similar uses of electronic conferencing, email and file transfer technology for Deakin University Education Doctorate students. However, Love (2001, p. 4) sees both synchronous and asynchronous online discussion groups as of particular relevance to PhD 'research training'. In principle at least, web-based communication tools, and the formation and facilitation of learning communities, enable forms of collaboration and knowledge building (Brook & Oliver, 2003) that are ideal for postgraduate research cohorts.

Online learning support at the postgraduate level has also been applied in developing higher degree research students' 'generic capabilities' (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003). These are generally defined as 'workplace related skills' or 'the skills and attributes that have a direct link to postgraduate research students' employability' (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003, p. 1). They include: leadership and communication, project management, commercialization of research, entrepreneurship and public policy (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003, p. 30). These programs aim to capitalise on what is described as a desire, from both industry employers and research students, for stronger university-industry research links and skills training (Harman, 2002; Gilbert, Balatti, Turner, & Whitehouse, 2004). A significant example in Australian tertiary education is the Australian Technology Network's (ATN) Learning Employment Aptitudes Program (LEAP), an inter-university online generic capabilities project. Aiming to develop research students' employment related skills, LEAP is able to effectively utilise online technologies to provide self-paced and moderated resources while enabling discussion-based network and community building related to the topic areas (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003, p. 55).

*Postgraduate Essentials* at the University of Melbourne utilizes the capacities of online support for both community-building and development of students' generic capabilities. In addition, it aims to provide an integrated transition program to support students in their first year of PhD candidature. The decision to develop an online program emerged out of the need for more flexible access to postgraduate transition, administration and academic skills support. Traditionally a 'campus-based university' with an emphasis on face-to-face interaction and a 'campus experience', the University of Melbourne's research

postgraduates are nonetheless widely distributed: the University has 9 regional and rural campuses across Victoria and arrangements with more than 25 institutions approved to supervise postgraduate research. While research postgraduate students based at the main Parkville campus enjoy access to a comprehensive range of short courses, workshops, seminars and skills development programs, students based at regional and smaller metropolitan campuses - including affiliated teaching hospitals and research institutes - do not enjoy the same ease of access to many of the transition initiatives and academic programs available to their Parkville-based colleagues. Improving the provision of services to students at regional and remote campuses and affiliated research sites was a specific priority in the operational plans of LLSU and the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) in 2003 and 2004.

## ***Postgraduate Essentials***

*Postgraduate Essentials* was offered as a pilot program in each semester of 2004. With its own online course facilitator and a panel of advisers on-call, the 12-week course provides an effective 'one-stop-shop' for practical information and advice on:

- Starting your PhD – settling into your department, locating resources and identifying the main milestones of a PhD;
- Getting Organised – time, task and information management strategies, including a guide to creating an EndNote library;
- Working with your Supervisor – discussion of supervision styles and various supervision relationships; tips for making the most of supervision meetings and ensuring effective communication;
- Searching the Literature – why and how you search for literature relevant to your project using the latest databases, journal indexes and search strategies;
- Writing a Literature Review – strategies for organizing a drafting a literature review; and
- Preparing for Confirmation – information on the process and requirements for 'confirming' PhD candidature, with advice on preparing the written report and the oral presentation.

The original objective of *Postgraduate Essentials* was to provide access to academic and research skills support for students unable to attend face-to-face programs available at the Parkville campus. When the needs of the 'non-Parkville' students were analysed, however, it became evident that they also 'missed out' on a range of networking and transition opportunities regularly available at Parkville. A second objective was thus developed: to offset the isolation of non-Parkville PhD students by facilitating their transition and integration into the broader academic community of the University and, in particular, the peer-network of postgraduate research students. To facilitate this objective, it was decided to integrate within the program:

- synchronous and asynchronous discussion forums for student interaction and networking. These are supported by an online course facilitator, a 'Who's who on the course' page with photos and profiles, a 'who's online' function, an introductory activity and prompted discussion topics;

- online support and advice from a panel of ‘experts’ including staff from the School of Graduate Studies, language and learning skills advisers, the postgraduate research consultant, experienced academic supervisors and representatives from the Postgraduate Association;
- structured information on particular aspects of the PhD organised in a roughly chronological sequence of topics, reflecting students’ shifting focus as they move through the first 6 to 12 months of candidature; and
- interactive learning activities and resources, including videos, quizzes and animated literature searches, designed to support the main tasks encountered in the first year of a PhD – searching and reviewing the literature and presenting a detailed written and oral research proposal.

Overall, then, *Postgraduate Essentials* was intended to provide non-Parkville PhD students with an integrated program that supports research candidature by providing a gateway to administrative information, academic skills advice, information management strategies and tools, and community building forums and opportunities. It was hoped to engage the target student cohort by providing ‘just-in-time’ information and authentic tasks and examples, and by adopting a user-centred design that caters to students from different backgrounds and disciplines. The *Postgraduate Essentials* project team was committed to providing non-Parkville students with the same level of support that Parkville-based students can access. For this reason, while students are able to use the material as a stand-alone web-resource of generic information and advice if they choose, we aimed to provide a ‘course’ experience with access to advisers and opportunities to address individual needs.

A major surprise from the pilot of *Postgraduate Essentials* – one that caught the program organizing group off-guard – was the high level of demand from Parkville-based students to participate in the course. The project team decided that no students should be excluded from the pilot; consequently, the Autumn 2004 course enrolled 92 students before closing enrolments, and the Spring 2004 course enrolled 121 students.

Formal and informal student evaluations of both the Autumn and Spring offerings endorsed the value to all commencing research students of a program designed to support PhD candidature.

	Agree	Disagree
This course helped me to identify resources and skills required to successfully complete my PhD	94% (Autumn 2004) 76% (Spring 2004)	0% (Autumn 2004) 0% (Spring 2004)
The course increased my understanding of the expectations and stages of the PhD degree	88% (Autumn 2004) 85% (Spring 2004)	3% (Autumn 2004) 0% (Spring 2004)

*Table 1: Student evaluations of the 2004 pilot of Postgraduate Essentials.*

Completed online evaluation questionnaires were returned by 35 students from the Autumn cohort, and 24 students from the Spring cohort. Focus groups and individual phone interviews were also conducted as part of the pilot program evaluation. Students’ comments underlined the importance of concurrent support to supplement the traditional

supervision relationship, and a number of respondents identified confidence-building as an important, practical benefit of the course:

[A] good opportunity to share knowledge with people who wouldn't judge your lack of knowledge.

[A]fter I have work through them [course modules] I feel more confident.

I've only just enrolled in my PhD studies so I found the course extremely useful as a 'lead up' activity. I've been working at the University for a number of years so people assume I already know how to do a PhD – I didn't. What PGE has done is help me get oriented to the task ahead, providing plenty of practical tips.

Most students enrolled in the program had not previously participated in an online course and so *Postgraduate Essentials* also provided a valuable introduction to online learning and communication options and strategies.

The goal of ensuring equitable delivery of services to students at a range of distributed sites was largely realised with a high level of interest and participation among the cohort of non-Parkville students. Approximately 40% of students enrolled in each pilot were studying at non-Parkville sites, primarily at hospitals and medical research institutes. Given that between 25 and 30% of Melbourne's PhD students are located at non-Parkville sites this represented a disproportionate uptake of the course by non-Parkville students. However, the majority of course participants (60%) were located at Parkville, undertaking research in all 11 faculties, with high levels of participation among Engineering and Arts students. This was particularly surprising given that no advertising had been conducted at Parkville.

## **LAS advisers' reflections on *Postgraduate Essentials* 2004**

Two LLSU advisers were involved in the design, development and piloting of *Postgraduate Essentials* in 2003 and 2004. Wendy Larcombe was involved with the project from its inception in late 2002 and was the principal curriculum designer and text writer. Anthony McCosker joined the project team in February 2004; he contributed additional content material and acted as an online adviser for both iterations of the course in 2004. Our reflections here focus on the high uptake of *Postgraduate Essentials* and what this might reveal about students and supervisors' expectations regarding structured and integrated candidature support for all postgraduate research students, not only those in designated equity groups.

Through the 2004 pilot of *Postgraduate Essentials* it became evident that, at the level of research higher degrees, students now expect that face-to-face programs for generic capabilities and other forms of candidature support will be supplemented with online resources and programs. Parkville-based students at Melbourne already have access to a range of face-to-face services offered by departments, faculties, the LLSU, the Information Division, the Postgraduate Association (UMPA) and the School of Graduate Studies (SGS). Yet they enthusiastically sought out *Postgraduate Essentials*, and they are now using it

in conjunction with the face-to-face courses and programs available. Academic staff have also been highly enthusiastic about *Postgraduate Essentials*, considering it as a means for providing their research students with a PhD ‘transition’, if not ‘training’, program. Strong support in referrals from academic supervisors indicates that such programs, designed not to replace any of the duties and responsibilities of supervisors but rather to complement their work, now enjoy an accepted role within academic research culture.

Most departments and faculties offer some form of structured support for their Honours and Masters students. In this respect, *Postgraduate Essentials* is a familiar extension of existing ‘research-training’ programs. Because it caters for students from all disciplinary backgrounds, however, *Postgraduate Essentials* intentionally shifts the focus from specific aspects of research, project development and thesis writing, to the processes and resources that can help to frame and direct those experiences. For example, in synchronous chat, two students and an academic skills adviser discussed reading groups as a way of managing and working through the academic literature in their field. In chat about their respective reading groups it emerged that they are quite different in form: one group has all members read and discuss one reading per week on an area of theory, the other group requires each student to take a turn summarising two or three articles so that other group members do not have to read them. One student is working in the humanities, dealing with postcolonial theory; the other in science dealing with genetics. The differences became a point of discussion, while the main focus was on the strategies and techniques students use to get organised and stay on track in the first year of their research.

Students’ usage of the chat and discussion forum functions has ratified *Postgraduate Essentials* as an *integrated* form of community building, academic support and skills development. The content of the modules delivers official handbook, examination, confirmation and other candidature information; tuition in the use of database and citation software; and project management, writing and academic skills resources and guidance. These forms of support and learning may not be the central or sole focus of students’ experience of the program, however, which also reinforces a sense of coherence and shared PhD identity, centring on common aspects of the initial stages of the PhD, and focussing attention and discussion around the research process and PhD experience.

In our view, *Postgraduate Essentials* is most successful insofar as it provides rich opportunities for students to discuss the processes and skills of postgraduate research – and their myriad differences and similarities – with the static and interactive information and resources acting as the significant context and prompt for that discussion. Moderators and advisers play an essential role in facilitating the community-building aspects of the program. Students are empowered in the PhD process when they have access to advisers, when they are able to pass on their own knowledge and discoveries to other students, and when they are able to post links, make suggestions, and ask even the ‘dumb’ questions about particular aspects of the PhD process. It appears to be particularly enabling for PhD students to have a ‘safe’ zone for peer discussion and reflection on the PhD experience beyond the view and judgement of academic supervisors and departmental colleagues.

On reflection, these features of *Postgraduate Essentials* may help to explain why it has attracted such a high level of interest even among students who currently access other forms of academic skills programs, networking opportunities and administrative

support. In this respect, *Postgraduate Essentials* supplements and complements other LAS offerings, providing a new option within the range of academic skills support for the Parkville-based cohort. Off-campus student support has also been improved as a result of *Postgraduate Essentials*, although it does not replicate the more intensive modes of academic skills support and development, available to Parkville-based students through face-to-face short courses. In this sense, the program is only a partial answer to some of the academic support needs of non-Parkville students. As this section has discussed, however, *Postgraduate Essentials* is able to support student learning at the PhD level in other ways: by fostering a peer-community, emphasizing the common elements of the PhD student experience, facilitating students' transition into higher degree candidature, and building their confidence to undertake the required tasks leading up to confirmation of their candidature.

### **Implications of the 2004 pilot of *Postgraduate Essentials***

The outcomes of the 2004 pilot of *Postgraduate Essentials* have encouraged us to pause and reflect on the diverse composition and distribution of the postgraduate research cohort; PhD students' needs and expectations when it comes to candidature support, information literacy and generic skills development; and on how LAS advisers can best cater for this cohort in the future. The manner in which *Postgraduate Essentials* was taken up by on-campus students and supervisors has extended our understanding of the types of support that all research students and supervisors now expect. We also need to consider the implications of this form of support, however, in terms of the resources, skills and time needed to produce such programs, and on the continuing requirement to stretch existing staff and resources to meet ever-increasing and changing demands.

An online program such as *Postgraduate Essentials* appears to be an effective means of providing key resources and networking opportunities for the postgraduate research student cohort. A number of features can be identified as contributing to the program's effectiveness; in our analysis these relate, firstly, to the communication opportunities provided by the course and, secondly, to the capacity of the program to highlight common stages and requirements of the PhD at a point when specialization often isolates research students. Above all, however, the integrated nature of the program – combining academic skills, literature searching and management skills, candidature information, links and discussion forums – appears to be central to its capacity to address and 'integrate' commencing PhD students.

In this respect, the collaborative development of *Postgraduate Essentials* has been fundamental to its success. Utilizing the skills, resources and programs of the LLSU, the School of Graduate Studies and the Information Division respectively has ensured that the program has 'something for everyone' as well as making it a genuine 'one-stop-shop'. The creation of content in a way that places resources and tasks for academic skills development alongside information literacy, supervision, and candidature support has provided both challenges and benefits for LAS advisers. Working within an integrated online context allows us to more effectively combine our knowledge with key staff from other areas of the university to meet the broad range of students' needs and expectations in terms of candidature support. The main challenge here is that collaboration itself takes time – time to achieve common understandings, to formulate common objectives and

to negotiate responsibilities and workloads. Time was also needed for LAS advisers, used to face-to-face teaching, to become familiar with and skilled in developing learning resources for an online environment and in facilitating online discussion.

The formation of a coherent learning community through *Postgraduate Essentials* has certainly required ongoing facilitation and maintenance. This has been a challenging part of the running of the program; although each module provides stand-alone, self-access candidature support material, the success of the program relies on active participation in discussion by a portion of the enrolled cohort. In the two iterations of the course, active engagement with the material and participation in discussion has developed primarily through skilled and diligent moderation. As Brook and Oliver (2003, p. 147) point out, 'simply employing the software and hoping that conditions conducive to the formation of community will develop' is not enough to foster a strong learning community (see also Hiltz, 1997). With *Postgraduate Essentials*, sustained facilitation by a moderator with PhD qualifications has worked best when coupled with regular postings by 'expert' advisers responsible for enriching the static and interactive material of the different modules.

The shared commitment of the three Units to maintaining, staffing and updating the program has helped to ensure that the cost of future iterations of the program is not too onerous. This is not an insignificant consideration. It is now well recognized that online programs do not necessarily offer a cost-efficient alternative to face-to-face courses (Bell et al., 2002, p. 2) and the often 'invisible' workload of online moderation (Stacey, 1996, p. 2) needs to be acknowledged.

It has been clear, through the piloting of *Postgraduate Essentials*, that development and delivery of an online support program places an additional demand on LAS advisers' time and professional skills. Furthermore, the program has not lessened the teaching and tutorial load of LAS advisers and staff from the other units involved. Indeed, its uptake by Parkville-based students and the high rate of referrals to the program by academic supervisors are likely to mean that increased numbers of postgraduate students are better informed about and more likely to attempt to access the other face-to-face types of academic skills support available. In this sense, the program raises the profile of academic and information skills among students who otherwise may not have known of or accessed these services. Rather than meet demand for academic support services, *Postgraduate Essentials* is likely to foster it.

It is equally clear, however, that all postgraduate research students now expect to be able to access online learning resources and discussion and networking opportunities, as well as candidature and administrative information. The cohort of commencing PhD students at the University of Melbourne has proved to be particularly welcoming of candidature support in the form of a structured, online program facilitated by an online moderator with completed PhD qualifications. Academic supervisors also appreciate that an integrated transition program for this student cohort can effectively complement research supervision and enhance students' PhD experience. Online access to candidature and learning support is evidently appealing to both time-poor students and their supervisors. If LAS advisers were not equally time-poor, the further development and expansion of online support options for research postgraduates would similarly offer both potential and reward.

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# LAS and its disciplinary ambitions

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**Abstract:** *Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners have been vitally interested in legitimating LAS knowledge, practices, and academic identity, primarily to counter institutional marginalisation and institutional misperceptions of who we are and what we do. In the quest for legitimation we have become involved in the process of organising our professional lives (Becher, 1989, p. 1) to improve our profile, status, and visibility. The emergence of the Unilearn discussion list in 1995 (Barthel, 2004) as a forum to share information and resources is one example of this process. Other examples include the organisation of the Language and Academic Skills Conferences, beginning in 1994 at La Trobe University; the 2005 launch of our own professional body, the Association of Academic Language and Learning; and, finally, the claim by some LAS practitioners that LAS is a discipline (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; McLean & Webb, 2002). This paper interrogates the 'disciplinary ambitions' (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993a, p. 19) of LAS, suggesting that the narrative of LAS as a discipline, while pragmatically necessary (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004, p. 45), is conceptually difficult to sustain. The paper concludes by considering LAS as a 'community of practice' (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Webb, 2001) rather than a discipline.*

**Key words:** *discipline, socialisation of LAS practitioners, community of practice*

## Introduction

Being a Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioner involves, to invoke the words of literary theorist Fredric Jameson (1984, p. viii), 'its own kind of legitimation'. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, we have been vitally interested in legitimating LAS knowledge, practices, and academic identity, primarily to counter institutional marginalisation and institutional misperceptions of who we are and what we do. In the quest for legitimation we have become involved in the process of organising our professional lives (Becher, 1989, p. 1) to improve our profile, status, and visibility. Examples of this process of organising

our professional lives include the inaugural Language and Academic Skills Conference at La Trobe University in 1994 and the ones that followed, particularly the 2001 LAS conference, which focused on Identity rather than, as did previous conferences, Language, Learning, Student Needs, or Working with the Disciplines; the emergence of the Unilearn discussion list in 1995 (Barthel, 2004) as a forum to share information and resources; the 2005 launch of our own professional body, the Association of Academic Language and Learning; and, finally, the claim by some LAS practitioners that LAS is a discipline or in the process of becoming one (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; McLean & Webb, 2002). This paper will interrogate the last of these, the 'disciplinary ambitions' (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993a, p. 19) of LAS.

By the mid-1990s the narrative of LAS as a discipline began to be articulated for historically contingent reasons. I use the term 'narrative' because narratives are what 'communities tell themselves to explain their present existence, their history and ambitions for the future' (Malpas, 2003, p. 21). The narrative gathered momentum at a time when LAS practitioners were beginning to overcome professional isolation via conferences, publications, and the development of Unilearn, when LAS practitioners sought to extricate the work we do from counselling and 'confirm our field as an academic one' (Chanock, 1995, p. 29), when postgraduate qualifications were becoming increasingly important in terms of 'the professional expectations of LAS advisers' (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, p. 8), and when we insisted that our work with students was not remedial but developmental in nature, as stated in *The position of academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers in Australian universities 1995-1999* (Vanderwal, Hicks, McGowan, & Carmichael, 1999). Taken together, these factors have contributed to a strong sense of professional and academic identity. The narrative of disciplinary ambitions that emerged at this time has a positive function, suggesting we, like the rest of the academic community, have mastery over particular content knowledge, that we share an understanding of particular core concepts and ways of reasoning, and that we are involved in the core academic activities of research and teaching.

On the issue of the disciplinary status of LAS, however, Chanock, East, and Maxwell (2004, p. 45) intimated that the 'question of whether we belong to a discipline is perhaps less important conceptually than pragmatically'. This paper suggests that both are equally important: pragmatically, the narrative of LAS as a discipline works to draw attention to the academic nature of our knowledge and practices and to garner institutional credibility; however, that strategically pragmatic function will be compromised if the narrative draws on a conceptually narrow understanding of discipline. This paper first defines discipline, recounts the emergence of the narrative of LAS as a discipline, and, in exploring the processes associated with disciplinary socialisation and reproduction, argues that the idea of LAS as a discipline, while pragmatically necessary, is conceptually difficult to sustain. The paper concludes by considering LAS as a 'community of practice' (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Webb, 2002) rather than a discipline.

## Defining discipline

The concept of a discipline encompasses knowledge, organisation, and reproduction. *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines discipline as knowledge, 'a branch of instruction'. Following that, it defines discipline as the system put in place to produce and organise

that knowledge – ‘a department of knowledge’ (Onions, 1969, p. 519). For knowledge to be passed on, subjects must be disciplined: ‘The training of scholars and subordinates to proper conduct and action by instructing them and exercising them in the same’ (Onions, 1969, p. 519). Therefore, in addition to referring to knowledge and its production and organisation, the term discipline refers to power (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991, p. 202).

Recent academic work on the nature of disciplines resonates with the above meanings. First, disciplines produce knowledge and epistemological niches. They do this by identifying ‘the objects we can study . . . and the relations that obtain among them’ and by ‘provid[ing] criteria for our knowledge . . . and methods . . . that regulate our access to it’ (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993b, p. vii). Second, to exercise control over this knowledge, disciplines are ‘organized and organizing’. Each discipline is situated within an institutional framework and has its own professional associations, publications, hierarchy, and language, all of which enable disciplines to ‘assemble, direct, and monitor the processes essential to its functioning’ (Messer-Davidow, 2002, p. 20). Finally, in order to function, disciplines must perpetuate themselves, their knowledge and their practices. They do this by ‘socializing practitioners’ (Messer-Davidow, 2002, p. 20). Disciplines require something to work on and control: they need subjects. As Becher (1989, p. 143) notes, ‘The viability of a discipline is also closely bound up with its capacity to attract students’.

Before examining the limitations of the way in which the term discipline figures in the narrative of LAS as a discipline, I will trace the emergence of the narrative.

## **The emergence of the narrative of LAS as a discipline**

Prior to the mid-1990s, the idea of LAS as a discipline had not emerged. There are two possible reasons why it had not. First, LAS practitioners were often isolated, working alone or in small centres, and institutionally positioned within a non-academic context. While some LAS staff were attached to academic development centres or to particular departments and schools, many LAS units or LAS individuals were originally located within general staff locations such as student services, health, counselling, and careers (Quintrell, 1985; Samuelowicz, 1990; Webb & Bonanno, 1994; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Jessup, 2004). Second, in an early study of the situation nationally of ‘learning counsellors’, Samuelowicz (1990) presented a picture of a group with little sustained experience of disciplinary socialisation, particularly when compared to academics working in a discipline. In terms of the formal academic qualifications of ‘learning skills counsellors’, Samuelowicz (1990, p. 100) found that of the 57 respondents, 11 had undergraduate qualifications, 25 had had one year of graduate experience (3 with a Diploma in Teaching and 22 with a Graduate Diploma), 19 had a Master’s degree, and 2 held a PhD. Of this small sample, more than 60 percent had not experienced the sustained disciplinary socialisation ordinarily associated with having an academic career, that is, a career in a discipline.

In an early paper on LAS identity, Webb and Bonanno (1994) presented a similar overview of LAS marginality, in terms of LAS practitioners lacking professional and disciplinary status. Comparing the professional status of LAS staff with academic staff based in

the disciplines, Webb and Bonanno (1994, p. 130) situated LAS staff in a subservient relationship to the disciplines:

Subject teachers are typically experts in one discipline, and sometimes have a foot in several other disciplines. Their work is directed towards the same discipline(s). By contrast, although language and learning staff have expertise based in one or a few disciplines, their work is directed towards all disciplines. In this sense, their work serves the disciplines.

Their emphasis on the verb 'serves' locates LAS not as a discipline but as an ancillary. Indeed, throughout the paper a master/servant dichotomy maps the differences between academics in the disciplines and LAS practitioners located either in the disciplines or elsewhere.

Developments within LAS that addressed the issue of marginalisation and the lack of disciplinary socialisation created conditions conducive to the emergence of the idea that LAS is a discipline. The 1990s saw the beginning of a regular series of LAS conferences, the establishment of Unilearn, the development of a position statement (Vanderwal et al., 1999), and wider communication among LAS practitioners. On the issue of disciplinary socialisation, the situation seems to have changed. As Craswell and Bartlett (2002) noted in their chronological analysis of advertisements for LAS positions, greater emphasis is being placed on the postgraduate qualifications of potential LAS professionals. More and more LAS practitioners, it would seem, have had intensive disciplinary socialisation, though, as I will suggest later, this socialisation has occurred in a variety of disciplines. In late 2004 I sent out a survey to all Academic Language and Learning Centres, asking for the formal qualifications of staff. Sixteen LAS centres responded, providing information about the qualifications of 137 people. This number of individuals is higher than Samuelowicz's sample of 57. In that survey, 37 percent of respondents had undergone intensive disciplinary socialisation. With my survey, 62 percent of respondents had undergone disciplinary socialisation, with 20 having a PhD and 64 people having a Master's degree (research or coursework).

From the mid-1990s onwards, LAS practitioners began to float the idea of LAS as a discipline. Famously, the Victorian Language and Learning Network meeting in November 1994 inspired a collection of essays whose subtitle made explicit the direction some LAS practitioners saw the profession moving: *Academic skills advising: Towards a discipline* (1995). In the introduction to the volume, Garner et al. (1995, p. 2) made the following, and relatively brief, justification for their use of the term 'discipline':

We included the word in the title to this collection because we believe that the practice of ours is formed by perspectives from a number of parent disciplines – philosophy, applied linguistics, education, psychology. Perhaps one of the marks of a maturing discipline is the passion and urgency with which it identifies and grapples with a series of key issues. If so, then language and academic skills bids fair to be included among the disciplines in higher education.

Similarly, the term 'discipline' figures in the introduction to *Academic skills advising: Evaluation for program improvement and accountability*, the second volume in the series. Referring to the earlier volume, McLean and Webb characterised its essays as 'scoping

some of the issues confronting the then relatively new discipline of academic skills advising' (c2002, p. 1). Indeed, the idea of LAS as a discipline brackets their discussion of the volume's essays. At the conclusion of their introduction, McLean and Webb mention that the essays in the second volume extend the aim of the first volume, that is, 'to share current practice and encourage debate on issues that affect our discipline' (c2002, p. 4).

The idea that LAS was a discipline, though not developed extensively by Garner et al. (1995), gained currency. At the start of the 21st century, more and more LAS practitioners have begun to perceive themselves as belonging to a discipline. In the proceedings of the 2003 LAS conference, *'In the future . . .'* (Deller-Evans & Zeegers, 2004), for example, various authors refer to LAS as a discipline. Zeegers saw the development of a LAS professional organisation as a necessary first step for LAS 'to be seen as an academic discipline' (2004, p. 31). Elsewhere, Chanock et al. connected the number of publications produced by LAS practitioners 'to a strong desire for LAS advisors to build on our discipline knowledge' (2004, p. 47). Percy and Stirling (2004, p. 53) invoked a metaphor of efflorescence when speaking of LAS coming of age as a discipline. Similarly, Unilearn postings on that perennial issue of academic versus general staff classification in LAS units have been framed in relation to the disciplinary status of LAS. For example, McLean argued that '[t]he classification issue IS vital for our discipline' (2004), a view echoed Clerehan (2004).

Interestingly, the narrative is characterised by a tentativeness that works to undermine the claims being made for LAS as a discipline: *'Perhaps* one of the marks of a maturing discipline is the passion and urgency with which it identifies and grapples with a series of key issues. *If so*, then language and academic skills bids fair to be included among the disciplines in higher education' (Garner et al., 1995, p. 2, my emphasis). These qualifications create a sense of uncertainty about the very notion of LAS as a discipline. Similarly, Maxwell, Chanock, and East (2003) hedge on the issue of whether or not LAS is a discipline. After quoting the above-mentioned quotation from Garner et al., they follow it with: *'If that is true*, a cursory glance at some of the key issues identified and discussed within the academic publications of LAS advisers leaves us in no doubt that they have been written from within an engaged and self-conscious academic discipline' (p. 2, my emphasis). This, I argue, is a big if.

The emergence of this narrative has not gone unchallenged, though objections to the use of the term 'discipline' to characterise LAS as a profession have, overall, been few. When the term 'discipline' figured in Unilearn discussions in 2002, the use of the term was debated. In a series of posts over the issue of the reclassification of academic skills advisers from academic to general staff experienced by advisers at Edith Cowan University, various writers used the term. Zeegers (2002), for instance, linked the reclassification issue to the fact 'that we are not regarded as a discipline in our own right'. This viewpoint carried no favour with Davies (2002), who stated categorically: 'To view our area as "a discipline in its own right" is folly'.

Terms other than 'discipline' have been used to refer to LAS, the most common of which would be profession. While at the start of the 1990s Samuelowicz (1990) deployed the term to interrogate whether LAS practitioners as a group could be characterised as a profession or an emergent profession, by the end of the 1990s the assumption that we were a profession informed the development of our position statement. Indeed, the

position statement concentrates on issues related to professional status, integration into the institutional community, tenure, funding, and so on. In formalising aspects of LAS practice and representing a professional identity for LAS practitioners, the position statement had a pragmatic purpose. It sought to repudiate one identity that had been bestowed on LAS practitioners, that of remediators, and put another in its place, one that emphasised the 'knowledge, professional insights, and expertise' (Vanderwal et al., 1999, n. p.) of LAS practitioners. In her plenary address at the LAS 2001 Conference, Webb (2002) consistently viewed LAS practitioners as belonging to a profession, referring to LAS as a 'profession' (p. 2) and to us as a 'group of professionals' (p. 3) and 'LAS professionals' (p. 15).

## **LAS and its disciplinary ambitions: a critique**

As mentioned earlier, Chanock et al. (2004) remarked in passing: 'The question of whether we belong to a discipline is perhaps less important conceptually than pragmatically' (p. 45). While the pragmatic work associated with the narrative of LAS as a discipline is important, the narrative needs to be underpinned by a robust conceptual understanding of what makes a discipline a discipline. If the narrative of LAS as a discipline relies on an insufficiently developed and narrowly argued understanding of discipline, then the pragmatic force and effectiveness of the narrative will be diminished. To be successful in a pragmatic sense, the narrative of LAS as a discipline should forward a view of a discipline that is consistent with the way in which the university generally conceptualises disciplines. The narrative, therefore, needs to account for knowledge, organisation, and reproduction.

In relation to the first meaning associated with discipline, that of knowledge, there is little dispute that LAS practitioners produce knowledge of an academic kind; for those in doubt, consult Maxwell et al.'s (2003) list of LAS publications or refer to any of the LAS conference proceedings. With regard to the notion of a discipline being 'organized and organizing', LAS is currently in the process of doing this, as the launch of the Association of Academic Language and Learning attests, but there is still much to be done. This paper concerns itself with an aspect of discipline that the narrative of LAS as a discipline has not addressed: reproduction. It is in this area that the limitations of the narrative can be critiqued.

The first limitation of the narrative of LAS as a discipline, its emphasis on knowledge, is paradoxically one of its strengths. While the concept of a discipline centres on the interconnections between knowledge, organisation, and reproduction, the narrative of LAS as a discipline primarily focuses on the first meaning associated with discipline. With this pragmatically narrow focus, the narrative convincingly demonstrates that LAS practitioners produce academic knowledge, and this is consistent with what disciplines do. Garner et al. (1995), for example, focus on the object of study and the production of knowledge. Others emphasise LAS research and teaching (Maxwell et al., 2003; Clerehan, 2004). Garner et al. (1995) forward two reasons for LAS being seen as a discipline – first, that LAS knowledge draws on various disciplines and, second, that it grapples passionately and urgently 'with a series of key issues' (p. 2). However, this is a conceptually narrow representation of what constitutes a discipline. Disciplines do more than produce and control knowledge, share discourse and ways of reasoning, and

engage in research and teaching; they also induct others into the discipline, that is, they reproduce subjects.

The second limitation of the narrative of LAS as a discipline is that it does not address the issue of power, that is, the role disciplinary socialisation plays in reproducing a particular disciplinary identity. To maintain their presence and function within the institution, disciplines need disciplinary subjects, commonly known as students. Without subjects, disciplines would have nothing to organise, no bodies or minds to shape. As Lenoir (1993, p. 72) notes in relation to science: 'Disciplines are institutionalized formations for organizing schemes of perception, appreciation, and action, and for inculcating them as tools of cognition and communication'. To arrive at some sort of disciplinary competence, the student 'has to learn the central concepts and theories, certainly; but also the tacit rules of reasoning, and the unspoken criteria for making inferences . . . [T]he governing paradigms and their exemplars have to be understood, and accepted as the way of doing things' (Barnett, 1990, p. 177). To practice in a discipline, an individual has to be disciplined, a process that usually takes three or more years of graduate study and involves voluntary submission to the relations of power embedded in the way a discipline produces knowledge, what Lenoir (1993, p. 73) calls 'the internalization of patterns of discourse, structures of knowledge, and modes of practice'. This process of internalization requires, as most graduates would attest, compliance. Reflecting on his graduate student experience, Cohen (1993, p. 406) highlights the cost an individual pays when being subjected to disciplinary reproduction: 'my institutional vulnerability subjected me to the somatic effects of normalization'. At the end of disciplinary training, normalised subjects are then ready to think and act in a specific disciplinary framework. The narrative of LAS as a discipline has to consider such questions as: Whom does LAS discipline? Who are our subjects? How do we reproduce LAS knowledge?

Finally, in situating LAS practice and knowledge in relation to 'a number of parent disciplines – philosophy, applied linguistics, education, psychology' (Garner et al., 1995, p. 2), the narrative of LAS as a discipline does not sufficiently account for the heterogeneity of LAS practitioners and their disciplinary backgrounds. For LAS practitioners educated in these parent disciplines, epistemological continuity may exist between the disciplinary socialisation of their graduate experience and LAS knowledge and practice. For LAS practitioners educated in other disciplines, for example, Biology, English, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Engineering, or Anthropology, there may be a disconnection between their disciplinary socialisation and their present position in LAS. Zeegers (2002) articulated this sense of disjunction: 'I am a chemist by training but now an educational psychologist through practice'. Similarly, when Percy and Stirling (2004) considered the situation of a neophyte LAS practitioner with a background in the Humanities, they identified two types of LAS practitioners: those disciplined in one of the parent disciplines and those disciplined in other disciplines. Neophyte LAS practitioners with a background in 'language, literacy, learning and/or pedagogy' (Percy & Stirling, 2004, p. 55) would be unlikely to wonder 'exactly what is it we do and why?' (Percy & Stirling, 2004, p. 53). In contrast, neophyte LAS practitioners disciplined in other disciplines would most likely be forced to contemplate that question.

An alternative to seeing LAS as a discipline is to see it as a community of practice. Developed by Etienne Wenger and invoked by Webb at the LAS 2001 Conference, the concept of a community of practice refers to a group of people 'who share a concern,

a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). We could in fact characterise the process of developing a professional LAS identity during the 1990s, as documented by Craswell and Bartlett (2002) and Webb (2002), as the process of becoming a community of practice:

Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice. (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5)

Likewise, Webb (2002) views LAS practitioners as sharing 'a common set of goals and interests . . . [and] a common language about their work' as well as having 'relatively close agreement about what topics and issues are of greatest relevance at particular times . . . [and] a sense of belongingness' (p. 3).

Superficially, similarities exist between the concepts of a discipline and a community of practice; for example, both overlap in terms of sharing a passion for a topic and for extending knowledge. However, in terms of the organisational structure required to reproduce knowledge and socialise subjects, a community of practice is 'more loosely connected, informal, and self-managed' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 41) than a discipline. LAS minds and bodies are shaped, but this, as Zeegers (2002) suggests, occurs in practice in a professional context rather than through training in a disciplinary context. For some LAS practitioners, the development of a professional identity through practice enables them to understand, develop, and further LAS knowledge.

Knowledge production, organisation, and reproduction are central to the way disciplines are conceptualised in the university. The narrative of LAS as a discipline has not yet established that LAS can be conceptualised in the same way. Structurally, however, LAS does share the three elements necessary for a community of practice to exist: 'a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27). As a profession, we work on a set of issues. In relation to those issues, we have developed and will continue to develop practices that allow us to make a difference.

## Conclusion

To rephrase Chanock et al. (2004), whether we belong to a discipline is important pragmatically and conceptually. Any limitations on the conceptual underpinnings of the argument that LAS is a discipline will ultimately hamstring the pragmatic imperative of the narrative. To date, the narrative of LAS as a discipline represents an inchoate example of 'boundary-work', a rhetorical style that Gieryn (1983), in analysing the way in which scientists constructed a boundary between science and non-science by attributing to science unique and special characteristics, describes as essentially pragmatic in character and political in intent. Boundary-work marks the point 'in which scientists describe science for the public and its political authorities, sometimes hoping to enlarge the material and

symbolic resources of scientists or to defend professional autonomy' (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782). From Gieryn, we can contextualise the narrative of LAS as a discipline as consistent with the overall aims of boundary-work: to legitimate LAS knowledge and expertise to others and our political authorities, that is, the university, with the aim of increasing our resources and defending our status and autonomy. For LAS, this process of legitimation will be an ongoing one.

While the emergence of the narrative of LAS as a discipline has a legitimate and useful pragmatic function, the content of the narrative does not address other important issues related to the roles of disciplines. Significantly, how does LAS discipline, socialise and authorise LAS practitioners, particularly those who come from a disciplinary background not ground in the so-called 'parent disciplines' (Garner et al., 1995, p. 2)? Do we control 'the apparatus for training future practitioners and admitting them to [our] ranks'? (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991, p. 207). In short, LAS does not in an institutional sense organise its future practitioners into a disciplinary culture. The narrative, to have credibility, needs to address issues associated with knowledge production, organisation, and reproduction.

The limitations of the narrative of LAS as a discipline, as it is presently articulated, can be avoided if we see ourselves as a community of practice. We have, I believe, established that we are a community with a particular interest in a domain of knowledge and, with our publications, conferences, and Unilearn discussions, we are developing practices that help us to be effective. Some have sought for LAS an institutional identity located within a traditional framework. The notion of community of practice, in contrast, offers for LAS practitioners an identity and organisational features more consistent with our heterogenous disciplinary origins and with the heterogenous and dispersed nature of our institutional situation.

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# Theorising what we do: Defamiliarise the university

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**Abstract:** *Language and academic skills (LAS) work in Australian universities was initially provided from within counselling services and so had its roots in counselling models of practice. In the 1980s, 'study skills' personnel began to be employed as such by universities and so other models of service provision started to develop. Since then, there has been a gradual evolution of work practices by LAS providers. While there has been considerable variation in the classification, location and designation of LAS practitioners, there have also been significant commonalities and a growing sense of ourselves as an identifiable profession, as evidenced by current plans to form a professional association and produce a professional journal. A key characteristic of a profession is the development of theoretical frameworks to inform its work. One of the tasks, therefore, for us as a profession, is to devise such frameworks and this process is underway. This paper adds to that process by taking the concept of 'defamiliarisation', as proposed by the 1920s' Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, and applying it to the work of language and academic skills advisers, presenting it as one framework for describing and informing the work we do.*

**Key words:** *LAS profession, LAS theory, developmental education theory, defamiliarisation*

## The evolution of our profession

The Language and Academic Skills (LAS) profession had its beginnings in Australia only twenty or perhaps thirty years ago, depending on when you start counting. It was in the mid-1970s that Clanchy and Ballard began their work at the Australian National University, and perhaps there were others elsewhere. However, it was only as a result of the Roe report in the early 1980s (Roe, Foster, Moses, Sanker, & Storey, 1982) and his identification of 'study skills' as a service in its own right that LAS became a distinct part of university life rather than an activity carried out primarily by counselling staff. Our

work and status within universities have evolved considerably since then and we now see ourselves emerging as an identifiable profession, with all that that entails.

The evolution of our profession has been documented in various ways. In part, the story has been told by a trail of conference papers written, over the past twenty years, by practitioners reflecting and reporting on their own and their colleagues' practice. Among the first of these was one by Neil Quintrell in 1985. He was a counsellor at Flinders University and his paper anchors the beginnings of 'study skills' within counselling territory. His paper set out explicitly to locate 'language and learning skills' provision in Australian universities, verifying that most of them were, in fact, positioned in counselling centres (Quintrell, 1985).

More recent papers by learning development professionals have reflected our awareness of our path towards professional identity. This is exemplified by the keynote address from a recent LAS conference. In 2001 Carolyn Webb spoke of our 'professional ontogenesis' (Webb, 2002) in spatial terms; of a profession characterised by insiders and outsiders and those 'on the edge'. She identified the 2001 conference as being particularly significant in that it 'foreground[ed] the concept of professional identity', an endeavour which she claimed had been little pursued prior to then. Included in the list of signs she considered relevant to 'understanding the status of LAS and LAS professionals in universities' in Australia was the fact that our role was 'poorly understood by others' (Webb, 2002). In fact, as Craswell and Bartlett (2002) pointed out, there is, or at least was, a prevailing attitude that 'anyone with a modicum of intelligence can do this job'.

According to Wilensky (1964), this belief that anyone-can-do-it is one of the threats to an occupation acquiring the status of a profession. There is a problem, he claims, if an occupation's 'technical base . . . consists of a vocabulary that sounds familiar to everyone' (p. 148). Rather, he says that '[t]he optimal base of knowledge or doctrine for a profession is a combination of intellectual and practical knowledge' (p. 149). Greenwood (1966) is even more explicit on this point, claiming that 'the skills that characterize a profession flow from and are supported by a fund of knowledge that has been organized into an internally consistent system, called a *body of theory*' (p. 11).

Writing specifically of the US context, Chung (2005) identifies a lack of 'overarching, shared theoretical framework' as a major contributor to the situation where 'developmental education and learning assistance programs will continue to be undervalued and vulnerable' (p. 11). He maintains that, without such a framework, 'developmental educators and learning assistance professionals will have a hard time articulating a clear professional identity . . . legitimating their work in the face of ongoing criticism . . . communicating effectively among subgroups, and enhancing the overall quality of both practice and scholarship' (p. 3). This need is identified also by Casazza and Silverman (1996) when they argue that '[w]e need to have a full understanding of our professional behavior, to be able to predict outcomes on the basis of sound principles and know why some outcomes are more successful than others' (p. 177).

It would be useful to know the extent to which our work is founded on a sound theoretical base and how that has been documented. Lundell and Collins (1999) carried out an extensive survey of the developmental education literature with the aim of getting 'an understanding of what the profession's common assumptions and what the extant [sic] of

unarticulated theories might be'. On the basis of their findings, they concluded that 'the primary body of literature in developmental education remains focused on under-theorized curricula practice and traditional disciplinary models' (p. 7). In the US literature, at least, there seems to be little documented evidence of a professional LAS body of theory.

This concern has been reflected on the Australian scene. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) observed that 'little attention has been given to developing a comprehensive framework for LAS pedagogy' while Webb (2002) similarly noted that 'the surface has barely been scratched of the LAS profession's epistemologies and practices'. Percy and Stirling (2004) asserted that, for someone beginning work in the field, 'the foundational principles and theories informing LAS expertise are by no means apparent' (p. 53) and argued that 'the crucial point . . . is that if we are going to continue to evolve as a discipline . . . we have to develop a shared base of reference' (p. 57).

## Theoretical frameworks

The question then arises as to how a fledgling profession seeks to go about developing or articulating its distinctive body of theory. Chung (2005) advocates the formulation of 'an overarching, authentic, common theoretical framework' (p. 4). He rejects the notion of adopting or adapting pre-existing theories, claiming that the 'top-down, import model . . . simply hasn't worked' (p. 4). He proposes, instead, a bottom up approach whereby theory is derived from 'the foundation of practice' (p. 4). He suggests that this process start at an individual level, with practitioners articulating their own personal theories and that these be aggregated and scrutinized at various levels, with commonalities being identified and thence formulated into one overarching theory, presumably acceptable by all.

Lundell and Collins (1999) express some concern at any attempt to identify the 'tacit theories' underlying our practice, in that these are typically based on 'deficit models and normative practice' (p. 12). My concern with each of us articulating our own personal theory and agglomerating these is not that I believe our practices to be based on inappropriate models, but rather that Chung's process has a rather homespun quality to it and is antithetical to the academic principle of locating oneself within and contributing to a field of scholarship. It buys into Duderstadt's (2000) notion of higher education as a 'cottage industry' (p. 300) with us as cottage workers. What I consider more valuable is to reflect on our practice in the light of our knowledge of relevant existing theory and try to map our practice against this theory so that we can begin to build up the theoretical base which describes and informs the work we do.

Like Lundell and Collins (1999), I too carried out a survey of relevant literature, though my search was much more modest than theirs. Mine, however, resulted in different findings. I identified a number of theoretical frameworks explicitly identified by LAS (or educational development) practitioners as underpinning their practice. These represent a diverse range of perspectives and I present them as an assorted collection, without attempting to organise or categorise them in any way, but rather just to give an indication of the spread and diversity of theoretical approaches used within our profession:

- Lundell and Collins propose *Gee's Discourse theory* as providing the theoretical basis for their work. They interpret it in terms of Discourses being

'comprised of interpenetrating patterns of values, "knowledge", language, beliefs, roles, and relationships' (Lundell & Collins, 1999, p. 13). An appreciation of the processes by which new Discourses (particularly academic ones) can be facilitated or impeded by existing Discourses can, they say, inform the work of the development education teacher.

- Wambach, Brothen, and Dikel (2000) suggest a theory of *Self-Regulation*. They identify attributes of authoritative parenting, namely demandingness and responsiveness, as qualities which most appropriately represent the skills students need for success in higher education. These qualities allow students to be self-regulating, that is, to 'identify areas where their skills must improve and seek the means to improve them'.

- Ryan et al. (1999) identify a process of *Modelling* which they consider best describes the work they were reporting on in their research paper. Their approach is based on the belief that 'students will be assisted in their learning when we make explicit to them the skills, conventions and expectations of academic reading and writing in the particular discipline in which they are operating' (p.20) and involves a consideration of the social purposes as well as the textual features of discipline-based writing genres.

- Taylor (1999) proposes two models for his practice, one for work with individual students, the other for work with student groups. His individual model is *The Concrete Universal*, in which the student represents the concrete realisation of 'academic and broader social forces, those of thought and language patterns', resulting in a situation which the practitioner must read and be 'absorbed into its frame, just as when we view a painting (p.160).

- To the group situation, Taylor (1999) applies Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances between games' (p. 160). The literacy tasks required of students have overlapping similarities, but are never completely identical and *Games Theory* provides a model for the slippage and fluidity involved. Our insights into these games, he says, provide us with a dual responsibility - to communicate our perceptions to academics and to undergraduates.

- This notion of unperceived differences is fundamental to Pittman's (1999) model of LAS development. She uses Becher's metaphor of *Academic Tribes and Territories*, maintaining that students need to develop tribal knowledge; 'to have some understanding of their disciplinary culture, its epistemology, what is valued as ways of working and acceptable as evidence, and have at least a basic understanding of the discourse of their field' (p. 224). Not only students, but also the language and learning specialists who work with them, need to have this discipline-specific understanding.

- Craswell and Bartlett (2002) also draw on the diversity of academic literacies in the theory of *Multiliteracies*. They apply the notion of designs of meaning to enhance students' understanding, claiming that the student thereby 'acquires both improved understanding of discourses generally and greater textual control in context'.

- Gluck, Draisma, Fulcher, and Worthy (2004) explain their work with students in terms of *Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development*. They theorise their work in terms of providing the expert guidance that enables the student to cross over the zone or terrain to achieve the relevant learning goal.

To go back to the US scene, Casazza and Silverman (1996) do not actually describe their work in terms of a particular model. Rather, they consider a learning development scenario and analyse it in terms of five common approaches to learning – behavioural, cognitive, social learning, motivational and adult learning – maintaining that ‘it is important for us to be familiar with a broad range of theories’ and to ‘synthesize ideas from a variety of perspectives’ (p. 35). Drawing on each of the approaches in turn, they consider practical implications of their analysis and devise appropriate action plans. They then take an eclectic approach devising an integrated plan which draws on elements of all five theories.

I have identified ten different theoretical approaches which LAS practitioners have explicitly documented over the past ten years. It appears that we are building up a professional body of theory. I would like to add to that body by proposing another theoretical perspective.

## Defamiliarisation

When I came across Shklovsky’s (1917) notion of ‘defamiliarization’, it occurred to me that it encapsulates much of what we do with staff and students; we defamiliarise the university, and many of its constituent parts, making the familiar strange. We reverse the process of familiarisation (or, in Shklovsky’s terms, ‘algebretization’) by which the conventions, processes and language of academic life become commonplace and taken for granted; at least for those who work with them on a daily basis.

Viktor Shklovsky was a Russian literary theorist and leader of the Russian Formalist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote of art, of poetry, of life, asserting that ‘as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic’ (Shklovsky, 1917). He called this ‘algebretization’, akin to the process in algebra where complex mathematical variables are represented by single letters. Complexities of life can, similarly, through familiarity and habituation, become commonplace and abstracted, represented by single words, so that we are totally inured to, and dissociated from, them. In Shklovsky’s terms: ‘We live as if coated with rubber . . . We must first of all “shake up” things . . . We must rip things from their ordinary sequence of associations. Things must be turned over like logs in a fire’ (Shklovsky, 1917). In another context, he says that this ‘[h]abitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war’ (Shklovsky, 1923) and quotes from Leo Tolstoy’s diary ‘if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they have never been’.

The reverse process, the turning over of the logs, Shklovsky (1917) calls ‘defamiliarization’. He says it of the Impressionist painters who used dots instead of blocks of colour, ‘They perceived the world as if they had just suddenly awakened’ (Shklovsky, 1923), and particularly of the novelist Leo Tolstoy, who typically, deliberately, removed the labels from things: ‘He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time’ (Shklovsky, 1923). For example, in ‘Shame!’ (1895),

an essay against corporal punishment, Tolstoy gives an account of a flogging, a common enough occurrence at that time. He does not name it as such, and thereby removes the protective coating provided by a known and familiar word. Instead he describes the event as if it were something strange and unfamiliar.

I see this as what we do in a university context. We help make the university familiar to newcomers by peeling off its labels and probing its strangeness; we turn over the logs. In order to help others who are seeing it for the first time, we too need to see it as if for the first time. At the most macro level we have the big label 'university'. In fact, one of the Orientation sessions we offer at Adelaide is called *Doing University*, wherein we attempt to give some meaning to what 'university' is; to defamiliarise some of the contexts, processes and conventions that help to make up 'university' – lecture, lecturer, tutorial, practical, seminar. We play a dual role; we attempt to see 'university' as if for the first time, yet we also bring our knowledge of that which has been algebetised. We simultaneously take positions of wisdom and naivety and use the one to illuminate the other. We consciously and deliberately unpick our familiarity, remembering or imagining what it is like to be unfamiliar and the implications of that.

We also tease out, for new students, what lies under labels like 'essay', 'oral presentation', 'referencing', and 'plagiarism'. However, defamiliarisation is not something that happens once, at one level. A colleague recently described her work as 'unpacking layers of hidden expectations' (Helen Fraser, personal communication, 18 August 2005). Removing one layer of algebetisation exposes new layers to be defamiliarised in turn.

Not only are there multiple layers, but what lies behind any one layer may not be uniform. A few years ago, a colleague and I sought to defamiliarise the term 'article review', our purpose being to produce an online guide on 'Writing an Article Review' (O'Regan & Johnston, 2000). We were perplexed at the confusion we found lying behind that term, that task. When we analysed the guidelines students had been given to help them write an 'article review' (or some close variant) in different subject areas, we found that they represented a range of tasks which differed from each other in critical ways, the expectations for each being more or less explicit in the guidelines. The algebetising of 'article review' had familiarised, for each group of teaching staff, one of many sets of expectations. Students were then presented with one label 'article review' perhaps unaware of the confusions which lay behind it. Our defamiliarisation involved identifying and, at least partially, untangling some of the multitude of meanings clustered behind the term. Our guide made explicit the fact that there were multiple possibilities. That insight, at least, was brought into the public arena for staff and students to deal with if and how they chose.

Our work also involves us dealing with the algebetisations that are specific to particular discipline areas. Last year, for the first time, I was asked to give a workshop to Law students on how to write a Law essay. I needed to defamiliarise that term, 'Law essay'. So I engaged in a process of gentle interrogation with the lecturer concerned: What is it that's distinctive about a Law essay? What are the students setting out to achieve? How do they do that and demonstrate that they have done that? What are the particular conventions, in terms of form and language, that apply? What does a good Law essay look like? It was only as a result of this defamiliarising that I was able to give the workshop for those students, which I did in conjunction with the Law lecturer.

So, it is by calling on this process of defamiliarisation that we may prompt mainstream academics to see the strangeness of their familiar ways and the need for this strangeness to be explicated to newcomers. Let me illustrate this further through a recent example. We had a stream of students referred by the English 1 staff. These students had not done well in their first literature essay, and one of the consequences was for them to be sent to us. As none of us in the Language and Learning Services has a background in literary criticism and as we did not know, in specific terms, why the students were being sent to us, we asked the English staff to specify their expectations for our assistance. The staff were quite explicit about what they had wanted the students to do and about the nature of academic argument as it relates to literary criticism. In addition to that, they provided an example of the kind of structure appropriate to an argument in literary criticism. None of this had been made explicit to the students. When they then came to see us, we were able to say 'This is what your lecturer wants when she asks you to write a literary criticism'. One of them actually said to me (seemingly without irony) 'I'm really looking forward to re-writing my essay now that I know how I'm meant to do it'.

A subsequent email from the course coordinator included the following:

Several students told me about the usefulness that attending the [Language and Learning service] would have for future work across several subjects.

The discipline has added a couple of lectures on essay writing and argumentation for the courses at level 1 in the light of the problems we have encountered.

The review of level 1 teaching during last semester also remarked on the need to rethink the kinds of questions we ask students to write about in assignments.

In this case, students as well as LAS and content area staff, were involved in the process of defamiliarising 'essay' as realised in literary criticism. The students had started off with one algebreitised understanding of 'essay'; the content lecturer was immersed in the familiarity of her discipline-specific algebreitisation. We, by asking the naive 'what do you mean by "essay"?' question, were able to uncover the mismatch, which the three groups, students, LAS and discipline staff, together untangled through a joint process of defamiliarisation.

I started off talking about defamiliarisation at the macro level, but it applies right down to the micro level of individual words. Nearly twenty years ago, Rosalind Meyer (1988) identified misunderstandings that occur with the specialised academic use of words which have other meanings off campus; words like 'argument', 'critical', 'discuss', 'opinion'. These misunderstandings still occur. In Shklovsky's terms, these words have been algebreitised in different ways in the different contexts and both uses need to be defamiliarised so that a common understanding can be reached. Our awareness of this means that we can initiate and facilitate the process.

## Conclusion

We LAS practitioners in Australia see ourselves as coming of age as a profession. One of the aspects of this is the development of a distinct body of theory which both describes and informs our work. In this paper, I have proposed that Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation provides a model for understanding and explaining the work we do. We have begun the process of identifying, applying and developing theoretical frameworks to describe and inform our work and it is important that we continue this. Equally important is the documentation, collation and dissemination of such theory. We need to consciously set about establishing processes by which this can happen.

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# Representation for (re)invention

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**Abstract:** *In response to the suggestion that in comparison to other educational developers, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners in Australian universities have been less strategic in addressing their identity and practice ‘to secure their place in the landscape of university work, [and] to reinvent themselves for securing future places’ (Webb, 2002, p. 14), this paper suggests that models of practice provide LAS practitioners with powerful signifiers around which they are able to (re)invent themselves in response to institutional agendas. Models of practice, however, must also be understood as historically and contextually contingent with both constraining and enabling effects and, therefore, require ongoing interrogation. This paper illustrates its points through a reflection and critique of two models of Learning Development practice at the University of Wollongong. Seeking neither to validate nor invalidate either ‘model’, the purpose of the paper is to highlight how learning advisers might be more strategic about how they represent their practice.*

**Key words:** *models of practice, learning advising, professional identity*

## Introduction

In her plenary address to the 2001 Australian Language and Academic Skills Conference, Carolyn Webb (2002, p. 7) suggested that in comparison to other educational developers in the university context, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners had been less strategic in addressing their identity and practice ‘to secure their place in the landscape of university work, [and] to reinvent themselves for securing future places’. She concluded with the suggestion that LAS practitioners might wish to see themselves as ‘facilitators of organisational learning’ (Webb, 2002, p. 17). Both of these points will be addressed

in the following discussion. This paper argues that models of practice can be understood as powerful signifiers around which learning advisers are able to (re)invent themselves in response to institutional agendas. The point is illustrated through a reflection and critique of a shift in representation of Learning Development practice at the University of Wollongong, with the most recent representational model attempting to capture the notion of the LAS practitioner's role as making a significant contribution to organisational learning as it relates to the quality enhancement of student learning in general. The reflective process in this paper is informed by the quality imperative currently in circulation at the University of Wollongong: that is, to plan, act, review and improve.

## Models of practice

Models of practice can be understood as 'representations' encoded with specific cultural meaning. Post-structural theory contends that systems of representation constitute reality rather than merely reflect it in some way. Stuart Hall (1997, p. 3) argues that because these systems are saturated with the values of culture, they have the capacity to 'organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects'. Representational systems, then, tie meaning to specific cultural contexts and regulate connections between concepts and reality, theory and practice. We use this idea here to better understand how models of practice (understood as linked systems of representation within a specific cultural framework) provide a necessary and coherent logic for what are otherwise seemingly *ad hoc* sets of practices. This logic is essential to an intelligible narrative of LAS identity and practice. However, the link between any representation and the thing it represents is not immutable: it is culturally negotiated (Hall, 1997) and, as such, can always – at least potentially – be renegotiated. Thinking of models of practice in this way configures them as dynamic signifiers around which learning advisers are able to (re)invent themselves within their institutions.

If we accept the notion that the learning adviser is positioned by multiple and often contradictory discourses, a point which both Webb (2002) and Melles (2002) allude to, then we can be seen to be in constant dialogue with those discourses which seek to constitute us, as we attempt to constitute ourselves. Our models of practice might, therefore, be understood as occurring in an unstable conceptual space between these discourses and subjectivity (Bacchi, 2000): in other words, between techniques of domination and practices of self-formation (Burchell, 1996). Within this framework of understanding, a model of practice can be seen as actively prioritising particular 'truth claim(s)'<sup>1</sup> regarding professional identity and practice.

## The IDEALL model

The first model of practice this paper will discuss is the Integrated Development of English and Academic Language and Learning (IDEALL) model (Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1998). This model emerged within a particular historical moment, and closely reflects the

1. This notion of 'Truth claim(s)' derives from the work of Michel Foucault (see Foucault 1984a, 1997; see also, Stirling & Percy, 2005) and refers to those ways we are able to speak the 'truth' about ourselves in relation to the way we operate as subjects within multiple and sometimes contradictory discursive economies.

'developmental and necessarily contextual' truth claims made around learning advisers' work. This model, as with all others, can be understood as historically and contextually contingent, and while providing a range of benefits, it also had delimiting effects.

### **The (inter)national context**

During the 1990s, with the help of international bodies such as the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank (Currie, 1996), neo-liberal political rationality and its attendant discourses were well into the process of permeating research, policy and practice at all levels of society in the 'Western' world (Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1999). The discourse(s) and educational demands of the 'learning society' and 'knowledge economy', combined with 'free-market theory' (Marginson, 1995), reconstituted universities as globally competitive enterprises producing globally proficient and enterprising 'lifelong-learners' or 'Graduates' (Edwards, 2004).

By the mid 1990s in Australia, the push to develop the 'lifelong learner', particularly within the framework of 'Graduate Attributes', had become the 'mantra' of higher education reform (Allport, 2000). This reform agenda located the 'learner' and the development of 'generic skills' (nee Graduate Attributes, tertiary literacies) at the heart of pedagogical initiatives (e.g., Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994). The formalisation of such reform manifests in Government commissioned policy papers such as the Dearing Report in the UK (*Higher Education in the Learning Society*, 1997), and the West Review in Australia (*Learning for Life*, 1998). To some degree, it could be argued that learning advisers, as with other educational developers, were the beneficiaries of these reforms in higher education, particularly where these practitioners found themselves constituted, not entirely to their dissatisfaction, as 'full partners' in the education process (Candy et al., 1994, p. xii).

Candy's acknowledgement of the learning advisers' potential contribution, and this new way of thinking about teaching and learning, had to be generally welcomed. It appeared to harmonise with, if not reinforce with some measure, what learning advisers had been making various arguments for since their emergence in Australian higher education. As early as 1982, the literature being produced from within the field contested the notion that learning, literacy and language development could be seen as remedial and taught effectively independent of context (Bock & Gassin, 1982; Taylor, Ballard, Beasley, Bock, Clanchy, & Nightingale, 1988).

Increasingly, it was being widely acknowledged that tertiary literacies were inseparable from disciplinary knowledge and practice and therefore most effectively taught within mainstream curricula (Chanock, 1994; Golebiowski, 1997; Golebiowski & Borland, 1997). Commentary from the field of teaching and learning argued strongly for the pedagogical integrity of teaching tertiary literacies inside a discipline's curricula. From an institutional point of view, the value of this pedagogical model for addressing tertiary literacies was enhanced by its efficiency: it allowed for maximum ratios between students and learning advising staff.

### **The institutional context**

The institutional impact of the educational reform agenda mentioned above shaped the 1995 restructure of the Learning Development Centre at the University of Wollongong. Prior to the restructure, the Learning Development Centre had been functioning as an independent

academic unit operating within the Library since 1992. However, during the restructure, the Centre was dismantled. 'Learning Development' was moved physically and reorganised becoming a sector of Student Services within the University; thus it became aligned with Counselling, Disability Services, International Student Advisers and the Dean of Students.

Aligning Learning Development with student support services that were largely seen as 'remedial' and dealing with student 'problems' marked a potential regression in the unit's symbolic 'positioning' within the academy. The shift could be seen as reinvoking notions of the medical model of student support and the pathologisation of student learning. Ironically, however, the restructure occurred in the context of a broader institutional and policy shift in teaching and learning that sought a curriculum-integrated approach to proactively developing tertiary literacies/Graduate Attributes (*Generic Skills Working Party Report* [UOW], 1997), and cast the newly created Learning Development playing a key role.

It is important to note here that this was not a seamless progression; rather, it was a multiply influenced and uneven process that was finally formalised in the institutional publication of the *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 – 2003* (UOW, 1997). At the 'end' of this process, Learning Development lecturers had maintained their academic status, which made them an anomaly within the Student Services Division, while they were also formally considered a part of the Academic Services Division which also combines the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), the Library and the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre. This positioning of Learning Development as having 'one foot in each camp' saw learning advisers constituted as both student and curriculum (if not staff) developers, and unofficially as both 'remedial' and 'developmental'. This effectively created a fragmentation in professional identity. This positioning among other factors, it will be argued, influenced the structure of the IDEALL model and its attendant narrative.

## Reflection

The IDEALL model, shown in Figure 1, marked the formalisation of a philosophy of practice underpinned by the pedagogical logic that prescribed the development of tertiary literacy within the disciplinary context (Skillen et al., 1998). The model privileged curriculum-integrated practice over the more traditional student-centred practices. It achieved this by constructing a binary relationship between the systemic (curriculum-integration) and generic (student-centred practices) arms; by labelling the systemic arm 'developmental' and the generic arm 'remedial'; and by representing the generic arm as inefficient and inequitable (Percy, James, Stirling, & Walker, 2004). This model was used to represent Learning Development practice at the University of Wollongong from 1998 to 2004.

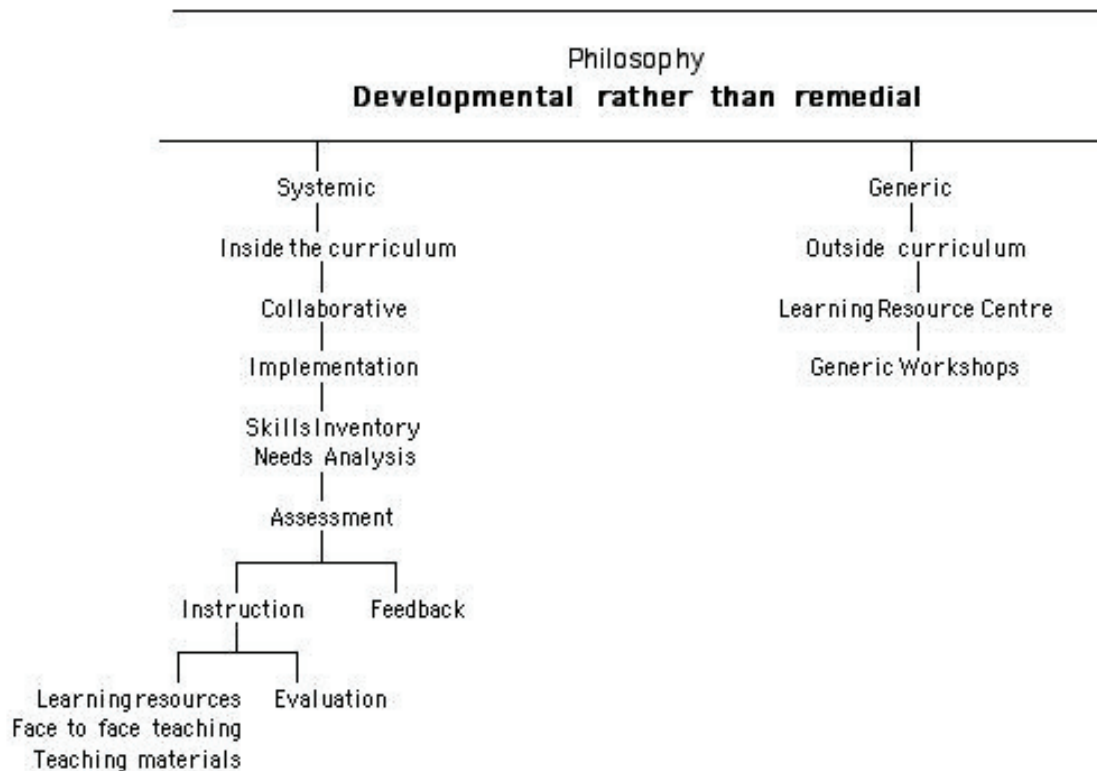


Figure 1: The IDEALL Model (Skillen et al., 1998).

Although with some hindsight the apparent disavowal of student-centred practices would appear to be a case of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, when understood as both historically and institutionally contingent, for the Learning Development lecturers, the IDEALL model represented a progressive approach to student learning development. It also prioritised a necessary truth claim with regard to the Learning Developers’ work; specifically, one which insisted on the developmental and necessarily contextual nature of our work, and vehemently resisted the ‘deficit - remedial - decontextualised’ understanding of student learning support. The prioritisation of this truth claim can be seen to be contingent on a range of factors: the already existing ‘remedial’ view of Learning Development amongst staff and students at UOW; the historical struggle of LAS advisers to have their work recognised as ‘developmental’; the evidence- and theoretically-based conviction that curriculum-integration represented the most progressive and pedagogically sound approach to students’ tertiary literacy development; and perhaps subconsciously, the problematic positioning of the newly instituted Learning Development.

As a powerful discursive representation of a particular truth game, the model and its relationship to policy and practice across the university formed the crux around which the Learning Development lecturer was able to narrativise her/ his professional identity. Importantly, it provided the discursive conditions for the lecturers to constitute themselves as ‘full partners’ in the teaching and learning process. It relocated the development of tertiary literacy to the heart of the curriculum. It saw responsibility for fostering tertiary literacy as a collaborative effort between Learning Development lecturers and discipline staff and, as such, provided the opportunity for learning advisers to apply their knowledge about student learning and student writing within a disciplinary context. Perhaps most

importantly, it was seen to provide more students with context and subject-specific tertiary literacy instruction as a seamless part of their disciplinary studies.

The model was based on the principles of fostering ownership of literacy pedagogy within the disciplines, transforming the knowledge and practice of the discipline lecturer, and generally improving teaching and learning practice across the university. It was also based on a range of assumptions: particularly, that there was an ideal way for collaboration and integration to occur; that collaborative efforts could necessarily result in the discipline lecturer assuming responsibility for the integrated activities and resources; and that collaborative efforts and ongoing work at the discipline and institutional level would result in the necessary cultural change to meet all students' needs.

### **Critique**

While the IDEALL model had obvious benefits, not least by impacting on a wide cross-section of the student body, its limitations in a dynamic and increasingly complex system began to show. Almost immediately the idea of what counted as 'collaboration' and 'integration' became far more varied than originally conceived in the model. The systemic arm as it was originally conceptualised focussed specifically on a written assignment and assumed curriculum-integration would occur where two similar written tasks could be used as pre- and post- assessment of students' academic literacy development. Although a pedagogically sound approach, in the current economic climate, two written assessment tasks in one subject is a luxury that cannot be afforded in most disciplines. Further, the required tertiary literacy development in some subjects was not always tied to writing or an assessment task. Significantly, different forms of collaboration and integration were brought into play from the outset.

The binary model also dislocated the flow of knowledge between the student and discipline-based experiences of learning advising staff (Percy, James, Stirling, & Walker, 2004). By privileging the systemic arm, the full-time Learning Development lecturers dedicated the majority of their 'teaching' time to their work with discipline staff while casual staff '(wo)manned' the Learning Resource Centre and engaged in the more student-centred practices. In effect, it isolated the full-time staff from what had originally been considered the source of their unique knowledge; that is, direct access to and an understanding of the complexity of the individual learning experience. It is this knowledge, we argue, that is vital for the LAS practitioner to develop greater insight into how integrated work can be improved (Chanock, Burley, & Davies, 1996). It is also a constant reminder of the inevitable and persistent limitations of integrated work.

The basic assumptions underpinning the model also proved to be far more unstable than originally envisaged: in the majority of cases, collaborative efforts tended to be problematic for a wide range of reasons; although collaborations always involved enthusiastic individuals, they did not always result in the discipline lecturer assuming responsibility for the materials; expansion of integrated activities across a degree program could often be closely followed by a reduction, again for a wide range of reasons; faculty ownership of the process is highly dependent on the leadership of particular individuals; and while discrete 'transformations' have been evidenced at all levels of practice, the extent to which these have managed to penetrate in any significant way the cultural fibre of faculty teaching and learning practice in general is highly questionable.

The pedagogical logic embedded in the theoretical notion of collaboration and integration (e.g., Lee, 1997; Skillen et al., 1998; Cartwright & Noone, 2000; James, Skillen, Percy, Tootell, & Irvine, 2004) tends to be impeded and distorted by multiple factors. These include: practical constraints, such as time, resourcing, casualisation and staff turnover; political constraints, such as competing agendas, faculty priorities and discipline boundary issues; pedagogical constraints, such as delivery, timetabling and technology; and not in the least, the basic flaw in the assumption that discipline staff will (willingly and unproblematically) learn and adapt their teaching as a result of our collaborative efforts. This is not news. Garner (1997, p. 41) had previously signalled a clear discomfort with the efficacy of integrated practices specifically in relation to the assumptions we make about the willingness and the abilities of the staff with whom we collaborate (not to mention our own – see Taylor, 1990). Indeed, Ballard (1994, p. 23) had already suggested that students would always be ‘more willing and flexible learners than staff’. Furthermore, Catterall (2004, pp. 40-41) reminds us of the research around the power relationship in the collaborative effort, where the desire for ‘interpersonal harmony’ generally impedes the kind of dialogue required for qualitative change to occur.

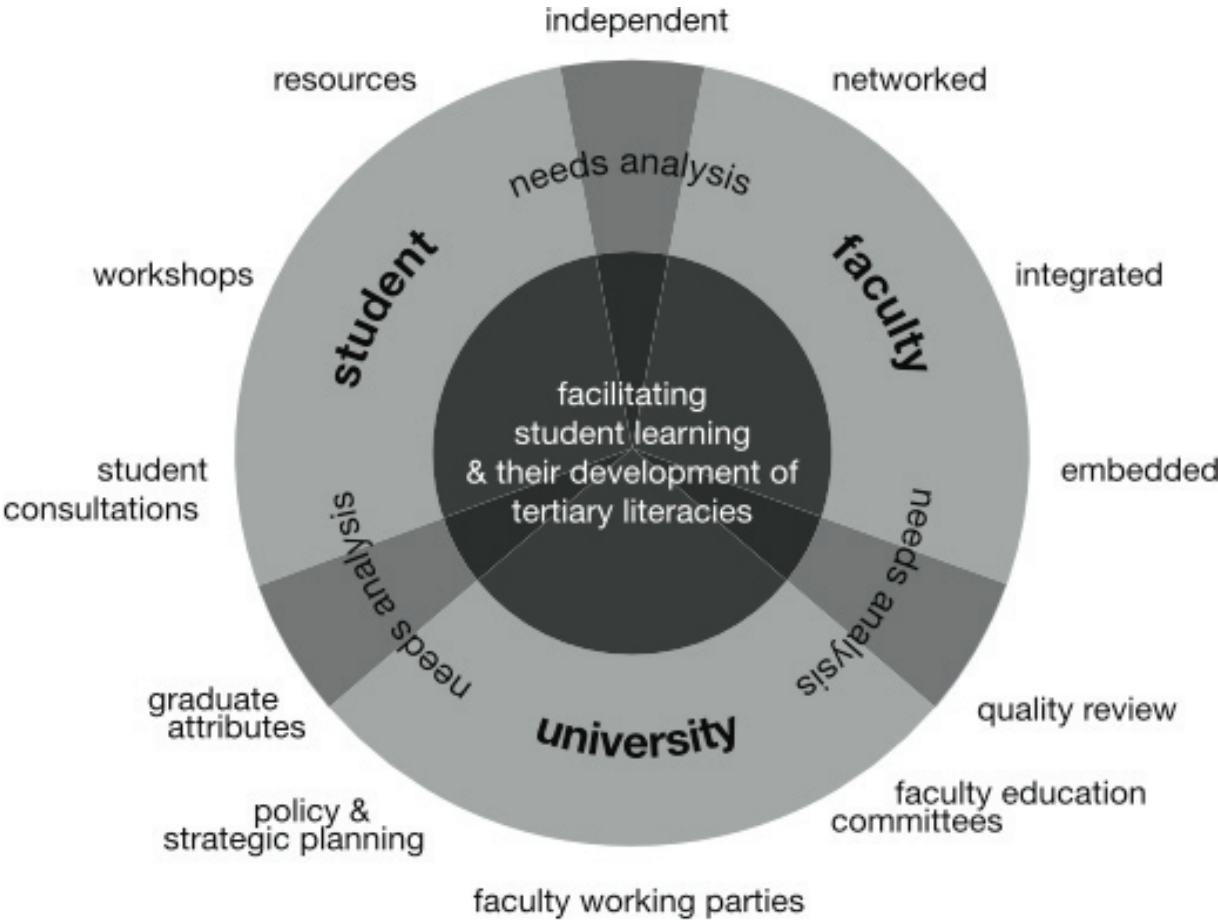
It is important to emphasise that despite the critique provided here, the authors are not arguing against collaborative practices and integrated activities *per se*. There can be no doubt that Lee’s (1997) ‘co-production’, Cartwright and Noone’s (2000) ‘flexible collaborations’, and James et al.’s (2004) ‘transformation’ represent honourable aspirations for the learning adviser to pursue. However, it has become uncomfortably clear that even the ‘best’ theoretical understandings of what ‘ought to be done’ *will* be constrained by the real and dynamic institution within which we work most of the time. It is difficult, then, not to agree with Gail Craswell (1994, p. 41) who argued that while ‘the literature has provided the necessary corrective to any notion that generic skills can be taught in ignorance of discipline-specific practices, this does not mean that integration is the best way to proceed in all situations’. Her argument is perhaps becoming more intelligible as the university environment becomes increasingly complex and unstable. In a similar vein, Jones, Bonanno, and Scouller (2001) testify that although collaboration is a core component of their role, the notion that there can only be ‘one way’ or even a hierarchy among practices is untenable in a dynamic system that requires flexibility.

The notion of increasing complexity, the inclusive valuing of all LAS practices, the need for flexibility, and the facilitation of a necessary reflexivity are at the heart of the shift to the second model, which will be referred to in this paper as ‘The reflexive model’ (Percy et al., 2004; Percy, Skillen, & James, 2005). A wide confluence of factors provided the imperative to develop this model. As a unit, we were delivering services to the many satellite campuses of our university, were engaged in multiple practices at the student, faculty and policy level (many not adequately captured by the IDEALL model), saw ourselves in a more complex educational environment that required adaptation and flexibility, and with an impending quality audit for May 2005, we needed to illustrate how we saw ourselves engaging with the quality cycle in regard to the teaching and learning environment as a whole. In essence, the time was ripe for a shift in truth claim(s).

In effect, the IDEALL model had lost its fluency. Not because the model itself is flawed as such, but because the dynamic and often unstable environment in which we work continues to press for solutions to problems that are now not easily captured by its conceptual reach. In theoretical terms, we found ourselves standing at the brink of impasse or *aporia*: we

had come to a figurative moment when the way forward became unclear. The model we were working from had been overwhelmed by the complexity of our multiple practices and the way in which these worked together as a whole. We discovered that, by framing itself so inflexibly around the remedial - developmental binary, our earlier conceptualisation was unable to allow for reflexivity. It was unable to adapt to a more complex teaching and learning environment or speak coherently to the organisational role we could play in the quality enhancement of student learning.

**The ‘reflexive’ model**



*Figure 2: Diagrammatic model of practice (Percy et al., 2004). Learning Development, University of Wollongong.*

The ‘reflexive’ model of practice was developed in 2004, again in a particular historical moment. In the simplest terms, the model was designed to provide a framework for representing the complexity of our practice in an inclusive way, to facilitate communication and reflexivity between practices, and most importantly, to highlight the role Learning Development lecturers are able to play in organisational learning as it relates to the quality enhancement of student learning. In the shift from the old to the new, it dismantled the

binary of the IDEALL model, recuperated the value of student-centred practices, anchored student learning at the heart of all practice, and sought to represent the learning adviser as a key player in 'organisational learning' (see Figure 2).

### Reflection

The circular nature of the reflexive model, a structure which provides a holistic and potentially flexible view of learning advising practice, is loosely derived from organisational learning theory (Schon, 1973; Argyris & Schon, 1978) and systems thinking (von Bertalanffy, 1976). Systems thinking allows us to see learning advising as a discrete and dynamic system, itself operating within a larger dynamic system, where the field of practice adapts and changes through its interactions with its environment (Carter, 2004).

Importantly, the central circle of the model anchors learning advising practices to what has been long considered as their core aim. It may be, however, that this historical vision is currently being (re)visioned and requires future conversations within the LAS community. Nevertheless, given that learning advising knowledge and practice *are* subject to institutional and policy exigencies, such a model allows for shifts in knowledge and practice that do not lose sight of what has been, historically, a foundation stone for the LAS field. By situating 'student learning' at the centre, this model recuperates Ballard's (1994, p. 17) insistence that 'it is our common focus on the student as a complex learner that underpins our varied practices and differentiates us from other teaching, administrative and professional staff within our institutions'. This act of recuperation is partly a response to our own concern with the over-privileging of integrated work specifically in terms of the risk it poses to losing sight of the contribution student-centred practices make to our professional knowledge and identity. It is also partly a response to the direct and indirect caution of Ballard (1994, p. 16) and Craswell (1994) who advise that taking an approach that privileges curriculum-integration or involves a shift in focus to academic discourse alone, would indeed be 'taking a part for the whole'.

The outer circle in the model identifies the 'student', the 'faculty' and the 'university' as the core elements of the larger system within which learning advising practice finds itself constituted. They also represent the three 'levels' at which learning advisers are able to make a significant contribution to teaching and learning (e.g., Percy & Skillen, 2000). The emphasis, however, is on the importance of the articulation of knowledge and experience between these various levels which constitute the way the learning adviser is able to contribute to organisational learning.

Finally, the multiple practices listed around the outer circle classify those practices currently in use at the University of Wollongong. The student-centred practices will be familiar to all readers, but the faculty-based practices require a little explanation. Jones, Bonanno, and Scouller (2001) provided a useful paper classifying the range of discipline-based practices specific to their institution. This insight was then used to consider how we might classify our own practices at the University of Wollongong. We have used the terms 'independent', 'networked', 'integrated' and 'embedded' (for more detail, see Appendix) as an attempt at inclusivity among our varied practices. These conceptual representations are not static and are likely to be subject to ongoing revision, particularly in relation to changes across the core elements.

## Critique

This model must be seen as historically contingent. In speaking to the quality agenda, the reflexive model prioritises the truth claim that the Learning Development lecturers are able to make a significant contribution to organisational learning with regard to teaching and learning. It also provides a reflexive framework for the profession to interrogate more closely just how we might see this occurring.

While the authors would agree that a greater depth of analysis and discussion regarding approaches to quality management and the role of the learning adviser would be of some benefit here, this paper is not necessarily the place for it. However, if we, at least for the moment, accept that the multiple approaches to quality management might be captured on a continuum (read binary) between accountability and quality enhancement, or as Carmichael, Palermo, Reeve, and Vallence (2001) argue, the technical-rationalist perspective and the self-reflective perspective; it is the latter on both counts that the reflexive model aims to address.

Carmichael et al. (2001) describe the technical rationalist perspective as embodying a scientific model of quality based on behaviourist principles which emphasises technical performance and an efficient system. On the other hand, the self-reflective perspective embodies a professional model that is more holistic and values learning and creativity, innovation and exploration. It is the latter perspective that is said to be most conducive to quality enhancement: it appreciates the dynamic, ambiguous nature of education and fosters relationships and dialogue as a means for organisational learning and improvement. In these terms then, the 'argument' behind the reflexive model is that if, for example, our university sees itself as 'achieving excellence in learning and teaching' (UOW *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 2003-2006*), then the knowledge, research and expertise developed by learning advisers working at all levels of the institution must be understood in terms of their distinctly valuable contribution to this end.

Organisational learning theory tells us that the knowledge of each member of an organisation has its own specific relevance to particular organisational 'problems' (Lu, 2004). For organisational learning to be successful and the 'knowledge-cycle' (Senge & Kim, 1997) to remain both current and relevant, it is crucial that within the organisational loop effective communication systems be established and maintained. Building relationships, fostering dialogue, and improving knowledge and practice at all levels are key to this outcome. This process, however, begins with the imperative for Learning Development to develop more cohesive links between the knowledge and expertise gained at all levels; that is, a practical and theoretical development of the narrative and practices around the model.

Simultaneously, it also requires ongoing interrogation. This latter point leads to what could be considered the most important aspect of this model; its reflexivity. It is the potential for reflexivity inscribed in the model that allows us to track interactions within and between each aspect. In the Learning Development model represented by Figure 2, the interrelationship between the core elements is referred to as 'needs analysis', but further consideration is required here. This model sees information feeding both back and forth between each element – not merely in any one direction as a hierarchical model might imply. For the authors, this means that learning advisers do not uncritically accept at

face value institutional exigencies (e.g., 'remedial' language tuition), institutional agendas (e.g., development of Graduate Attributes), or the normative categories (e.g., lifelong learner, autonomous learner, international student) with which we are often required to work without question. Rather, the model signifies a capacity to use our intellectual and practical technology (praxis) to work towards the 'best interests' of the student as a learner – or at least, in doing our work, take the time to unpack and challenge what we are called upon to take for granted (see Chanock, 1999, 2003), and indeed what we expect others to take for granted.

## Conclusion

In arguing that models of practice are powerful signifiers around which learning advisers can narrativise their professional identity and prioritise particular truth claims in response to institutional agendas, the paper has also sought to emphasise the importance of an ongoing interrogation of the assumptions that underpin them and their delimiting effects. Indeed, the limitations of the model provided in Figure 2 are yet to come into focus. Our reflection and critique of the two models of practice of Learning Development at the University of Wollongong has sought neither to validate nor invalidate either model but show them as historically and contextually contingent. Foucault (1984b, p. 343) reminds us that if we remember 'that everything is dangerous', which should not be confused with 'bad', we can never settle in apathy, but always remain actively and critically engaged with the effects/ costs of the ideas, the knowledge, the technologies we use in the name of 'learning advising'. Opening up these critical spaces can only contribute to our 'growth' as a profession.

## Appendix

### Classification of faculty-based practices (UOW, Learning Development, 2005)

#### Collaborating with Faculty

Faculty level work is a vital element to the overall Learning Development program in that it enables us to deliver needed, contextualised and timely learning assistance to more students. However, faculty level programs are more complex to operate than student level programs because they require similar levels of commitment from the faculty, and often involve the coordination of a large number of staff and students, and the development and implementation of integrated instruction and resources across a number of campuses. Collaborating with faculties occurs in various ways. As each teaching/learning situation is different, LD designs and delivers programs and resources to suit specific disciplines, timetables and student cohorts.

#### Networked

In response to a request from the faculty, LD develops resources and teaching activities alongside faculty programs that have no core subject, such as Honours or PhD Programs. While the materials are usually devised, produced and delivered by LD, the coordination of delivery is managed by the faculty.

## Integrated

LD and the faculty academic collaborate closely over a period of time, drawing on their respective experience and expertise to best meet the learning needs of the particular student cohort. This may involve minimal or quite extensive discussion and redesign of the curriculum or specific resources or assessment tasks. This type of work leads to a shared ownership of ideas and resources, and students generally experience literacy-focused teaching as part and parcel of the subject delivery.

## Embedded

The faculty academic assumes full responsibility for curriculum development work initially done with LD: for example, subject design, learning activities and resources introduced by and/or fine-tuned in collaboration with LD have become so much a part of the subject that neither students nor faculty see them as distinct from the 'content' of the subject.

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# A web of interconnectedness: The implications of coordinating a peer mentoring program

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**Abstract:** *A multifaceted approach to evaluating the peer mentoring program at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) enables the Learning Skills Unit staff involved in this program both to sustain an appropriate training program and enhance their skills base. The approach taken to coordinating this program follows the action research cycle: observation leads to reflection, which informs planning, and then action. There are substantial pedagogical implications for Learning Skills staff working on this program as the teaching practices employed during mentor training inform and enhance their work with students in other teaching contexts. Regular meetings between the coordinators, trainers and School academics, along with debriefing sessions with mentors, provide insights which are applied to inform an evolving and dynamic program and create a web of interconnectedness which not only promotes cross fertilisation of ideas but also leads to exciting collaborative projects.*

**Key words:** *reflective practice, evaluation, peer mentoring*

## Introduction

Substantial literature has examined the benefits of participating in peer mentoring (PM) programs for students in their first year at university as well as for the students who mentor them (Arendale & Martin, 1993; Wood, 1997; Rubin & Herbert, 1998; Playford, Miller, & Kelly, 1999; Bruffee, 1999; Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Dook, 2002). While such benefits for students are the hallmark of success for a PM program, benefits accrue also to the staff involved in PM, and these benefits are the focus of this paper. Our experiences

of coordinating the University of Western Sydney (UWS) PM program, initially while novice LAS advisers, have been a significant factor in our professional development, and the staged and embedded cycles of reflection, evaluation and action that underpin the program have enhanced our roles as reflective practitioners. Moreover, the insights we have gained from involvement in this program have extended into our more specific work, with consequent pedagogical implications such as the application of the training technique of facilitation to our teaching practice. Additionally, this involvement has created a network with academics and has provided fertile ground for collaborative projects and research. As such, working on the PM program has woven two novice LAS advisers into the web of academic community at the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

## **Peer mentoring at UWS**

Peer Mentoring, introduced in 1998 at UWS, is a preferred means employed by many schools to assist in the integration of first year students into their discipline at university. PM sessions are run by experienced and trained students who facilitate 'group interaction in relation to university study activities amongst small groups of less experienced students' (Farrell, Pastore, Handa, Dearlove, & Spalding, 2004, p. 1). Focussing predominantly on the learning processes of first year students, the program is based on the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model from the University of Missouri-Kansas City where this program has been running successfully for the past 28 years. It has been found to be an effective way of improving the first year experience of students in many educational institutions (Arendale & Martin, 1993; Parker & Montgomery, 1998; Watson, 2000; Farrell et al., 2004). By focussing proactively on at-risk classes rather than reactively on at-risk students, SI fosters systemic improvement and avoids being stigmatised as remedial (Gardiner, 1996). Since its foundation, the PM program at UWS has evolved into a comprehensive, wide ranging program. The authors have been co-coordinating the program across the six campuses of UWS since July 2003. In that time PM has been run in diverse subjects representing a wide range of faculties, and in both voluntary and compulsory modes. Potential mentors are usually recommended by their subject lecturers, the main promoters and supporters of the program within their school. Lecturers who are committed to PM have been instrumental in the success of this program in their subjects. The training sessions for mentors are organised and conducted jointly by the Learning Skills Unit (LSU) and Counselling staff. The main aspects of training include reviewing and discussing the mentors' first year experience, sessions on group dynamics and roles and responsibilities and practice mentoring sessions. Training is substantially based on the principles of SI so that student involvement is maximised - sessions are facilitated, not instructed, and small group activities are used where possible.

## **Our framework**

Action research, as defined by its systematic and participatory nature and its underlying focus on improvement of practice through action and reflection (Ebbutt, 1985), is compatible with the scope of our work as coordinators of the PM program. Action research, which is usually recognised by its collaborative core (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) and is context specific, again complements our work, as PM is premised on the power of collaborative work as well as is adapted to a diversity of contexts across UWS. Although most educational

practitioners recognise the need for consistent reflection, flexibility and adaptation in their work, they are usually challenged by workload pressures and time constraints. The action research approach can address such constraints by providing the possibilities and means to integrate research and practice. It also allows practitioners an opportunity to address the gap between their espoused theory and theory in use (Kember, 2000) and as such addresses 'the binary between [their] research and practice' (Moller, 1998, cited in Bretag, Horrocks, & Smith, 2002, p. 66). Within the PM program the cycles of planning, acting, evaluating and reflecting that comprise action research are systematically implemented. As is the nature of action research, these stages overlap and are at times messy but nevertheless are integrated. Planning occurs multi dimensionally so that on one level it involves the ongoing institutional and organisational aspects of the program such as recruiting interested lecturers and subsequently students to be trained. On another level, which is more reflective, planning relates to the adaptability and flexibility of the program and the two-day training. The reflective nature of our inquiry is more focussed on the training aspect of our program as the site in which we have some 'control' and ability to implement change. Implementation, as the acting stage of the research cycle, follows the planning stage, which is conducted at a series of both formal and informal meetings, and then a series of evaluative processes ensue which feed into reflection, which again informs the next planning stage.

Using each phase of the program as a learning experience we engage in the process of reflection both individually and collectively. Our adherence to reflection has helped us build and increase our learning (McAlpine & Weston, 2000) and improve our practice because we constantly 'examine and construct, evaluate and reconstruct' (Grundy, 1986, p. 28) our practice. As coordinators of this program we are continuously questioning our procedures, redefining our assumptions and reviewing our policies. As reflective practitioners we recognise the inherent interconnectedness of means and ends and value the process of learning while doing (Schön, 1983). Therefore, through enabling us to critique our practices and subsequently provoke change, reflection allows us a 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow, 1981, cited in Kember, 2000, p. 29). As reflection is not carried out in an ad hoc manner but as a structured part of the program, we have become more attuned to a reflective practice in our other work as LAS teachers. We concur that reflective practice in teachers benefits their students (Zeichner, 1994; Brookfield, 1995) and creates opportunities for their own personal and professional development as it confers a scholarly status on them (Pratt, 1997).

Reflective practice however needs to move beyond the subjective and undergo rigorous evaluation to review its effectiveness. The evaluation of personal and professional practices may lead to decisions to improve, adjust or discount them. However, as the discourse of higher education is shifting from 'scholarship' to 'efficiency, productivity . . . [and] accountability' (Bean, 1998, p. 497), often in evaluative practices it is the quantity rather than the quality that is measured. Consequently, practitioners consider evaluation an unwelcome and 'unnecessary intrusion' (Smith, 2005, p. 1) in their practice, and not an invaluable tool for reflection. Evaluation of the PM program rather than being an impediment is actually embedded in our practice. As a process of 'looking, thinking and acting' (Everitt & Hardiker, 1996, p. 129), it has two main purposes: to ensure an effectively functioning and contextually appropriate program and to sustain a dynamic and responsive training program. We do collect quantitative data for providing statistical evidence of the progress of the program, such as the numbers of mentees who attended

sessions and their outcomes compared to students who did not attend sessions trained (Carmichael, 2004). However, evaluation of our program is not only 'counting and measuring' the numbers; it involves valuing the outcomes (Gitlin & Smyth, 1989, p. 161). Therefore it is our qualitative approach that most effectively feeds into the reflective action cycle of the program. The qualitative evaluation methods are varied and continual throughout the year ranging from informal to formal. These methods include discussion at the steering committee meetings, structured feedback and discussions among trainers and more formal evaluation via debriefing sessions with students, recorded focus groups and questionnaires. Hence planning, implementation and results, the three aspects of teaching requiring evaluation in a developmental teaching process (Pratt, 1997), are the three phases of our program which undergo evaluation presenting excellent opportunities to reflect and to evaluate our practices and then providing an impetus to learn from the insights gained.

Once the semester has begun, the running of the program is essentially the province of the subject lecturers and the mentors. Throughout the semester our role is particularly to monitor mentors, as a form of both support and evaluation, and to maintain a WebCT discussion site which enhances supervision of the program and more importantly is often a trouble-shooting or support forum for mentors. However, it is in the training realm that we feel our involvement is most meaningful and aligned with the radius of professional development. In our trainers' meetings we are informed by feedback from the debriefing sessions and focus groups, evaluative forms completed at the conclusion of training by mentors and trainers, end of semester evaluations and any anecdotal feedback that may have been recorded throughout the semester. In terms of the action research cycle our meetings are the site of reflection which leads to planning and it is here that either amendments or substantial changes are made to the training program and/or literature. As noted, action research is contextual, and this is very much recognised in the planning process that occurs at each trainers' meeting. In planning the next training the different cohorts are considered and the order, priority and time given to elements of training as appropriate. For example, the upcoming training program for a subject requiring 40 mentors for a compulsory program has been substantially reduced time-wise and redesigned to encourage mentors to give input into the focus and content of sessions.

The qualitative aspects of the evaluations are further enhanced through the power of group dialogue. This intellectual engagement of discussing the responses and implications of students' comments as a group has provided many learning opportunities to all PM trainers and has benefited the program. These opportunities to learn through dialogue (Bruffee, 1984, 1999) have enriched the skills base of the staff, particularly since trainers have begun to record and structure their reflective processes more consciously. Due to our collaborative and constructive discussions over the past two years, the training program has altered in a number of ways. These changes in our program are also critically examined in our meetings, thus bringing the power of 'collective, self-reflective enquiry' to our practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 5). An outcome of the developing nature of the program has been two documents which inform the training process: the trainers' manual and the students' workbook. These documents are significant in that they are evolving documents and modified or enhanced as we reflect on our training program, as we respond to feedback from students and as the program responds to the requests of the UWS community. For example, changes in the last two years to the training program include the format and length of time devoted to different aspects of the training as well

as the level of input required from mentors in terms of constructing their knowledge of mentoring.

Possibly the most significant change to the training program that has arisen from reflective practice is the challenge to model the skills of facilitation which are so integral to the philosophy of peer mentoring. Modelling skills rather than explicating them through direct instruction has been at the core of the training process since its inception at UWS. However, the degree to which this can be practised has been incrementally realised as trainers have reconceptualised the possibilities. This is an element of reflective practice enabled through the action research framework that allows the envisaging of the 'influence of past assumptions and constraints so as to permit a movement towards actions more consistent with new understandings' (Kember, 2000, p. 29). The action research project undertaken by one of the trainers for her master's degree into the effectiveness of the training program has encouraged ongoing improvement of the training (Armstrong, 2004). For instance, in 2004, reflective post training forms informed intensive discussions about trainers modelling the facilitation process. As a result, in 2005 we have shifted our focus onto more experiential learning, so that students begin to have mentoring opportunities from the first morning of the two day training.

### **Implications for practice**

The approach to learning as a process of constructing knowledge rather than receiving it has long had currency (Vygotsky, 1978; Andresen, 1994; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Abbott & Ryan, 1999). However the University learning environment does not necessarily support this process, particularly as cost effectiveness drives the educational agenda. With large classes and lectures tending to supplant smaller tutorial size classes the opportunities for discussion about subject matter are limited. Discussion is a powerful factor in the construction of knowledge and 'an investment in quality learning' (Andresen, 1994, p. 7). Of course discussion may occur spontaneously among students in study groups that they initiate but equally students may not necessarily have these opportunities; our role as coordinators of the PM program is to facilitate the creation of space and structure for such discussion. Furthermore, an interaction between faculties, students and Learning Skills staff can ensue which is an important dialogue to take place in universities for students in terms of developing their learning (Hardin, 1994).

Since a reflective, evaluative and active cycle of learning occurs in this program, potentially everyone involved in peer mentoring becomes a reflective practitioner. Learning where the purpose of reflection is to improve the practice and procedure (Usher & Bryant, 1989) without questioning one's role involves only individual learning and is considered single loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974). However, in peer mentoring learning happens at both individual and organisational levels. While reflecting on the program the trainers, the mentors and the lecturers jointly bring insights into both the area of first year experience and their own practices. By questioning the rationale and validity of their own actions and joined in a common mission they act as a 'community of practice' playing an important role in organisational learning (Lave, 1993, Gerhardi et al., 1998, Seely-Brown & Duguid, 1996 cited in Mathieson, 2003, p. 4).

The insights that we have gained from involvement as co-ordinators in this program have

extended into our more specific work as LAS advisers. As we conceptualise our teaching as a process and not as an end product, our shared pedagogical approach is very much focused on facilitation of knowledge rather than knowledge transmission. Consequently, the skills that we have developed as facilitators of students' learning experiences during mentor training are directly transferable to our work in teaching academic skills where actually practising facilitation in one context makes it more practicable to consider its use in the teaching context. As such we are provided with the opportunity to actually reflect on and prepare for innovative or untried methods of teaching. As a LAS adviser stated:

the experience has given me a stronger understanding of facilitation of student learning and the importance of students helping each other to sort through the issues, which has enhanced my own role in the workshop teaching situation.

Another trainer has written:

what we see in peer mentoring is the power of the group in terms of output: intellectual energy, quality of discussion and decision making plus the good will and collaboration among participants . . . . This observable result of peer mentoring then gives me confidence to try it in other situations - I have been convinced by the evidence again and again. What is valuable is that in-class group activities allow students to engage with learning and practice articulating it, hearing it and constructing it to suit their purposes.

A counsellor involved in the training has also commented that it has 'provided experience and skills in working with large groups of people which usually is not the norm in my job as a counsellor which is working more on a one on one basis with students'.

Additionally, the peer teaching and peer feedback aspects of our training are a rich opportunity for professional development that is again applicable to the other work that both LAS staff and Counsellors perform. As it is a relatively rare occurrence to spend two intensive days teaching/facilitating with colleagues in our profession, we aim to derive as much benefit as possible from this experience. Training also addresses the issue of isolation that can occur in our work and the team teaching can benefit us by providing opportunities for peer feedback as well as insights into peers' teaching strengths. The new trainers themselves experience the mentoring process by gradually watching other trainers, assisting them and then running their own sessions. Learning from our collaborative engagement with our colleagues in the program, both Counselling as well as LSU staff 'model how knowledge is generated, how it changes and grows' (Bruffee, 1984, p. 635). A trainer reflected that the collaborative mode of training:

provided me with the opportunity to see the power of colleagues' teaching strategies and approaches and adapt them to my own style. I have realised how quickly I had fallen into habitual modes of teaching and now feel inspired to explore my teaching in greater depth.

The pedagogical implications of the program are not confined to the trainers but are also enjoyed by those lecturers who engage in the discourse of mentoring. One of the lecturers involved in the program for some time has reflected that 'my involvement in peer mentoring is one of many influences upon me in my practices as a teacher at university. Peer mentoring has been a positive influence'. Another has commented that:

mentoring has given me insight into first year large group teaching issues. The most useful part of my involvement was to attend the training session for the trainers – this was fantastic.

Contact lecturers who come to meet with their mentors usually attend some sessions on the second day of training. One lecturer commented: 'With the atmosphere of the training room and the synergy emitting from the group it felt as if something magic was happening there'. The dynamic and open nature of PM training is an excellent example of an ideal process of education, as according to Bruffee, 'education is not a process of assimilating the truth, but . . . a process of joining the conversation of mankind (sic)' (1984, p. 635). The basic premise of mutual respect encourages trust building amongst participants; staff and students alike and provides many insightful and informative interactions. As such, trainers are privy to relatively uncensored and open discussions about a wide range of aspects of university life. The insights gained inform our work in a number of ways particularly in being attuned to the actual experiences of students firsthand rather than via research literature. This may manifest in ways such as the selection of areas in which we direct our focus either in terms of collaborative work or more directly with students. Essentially the understanding we gain from the training experience enables us to receive direct student input in to the efficacy of our services and to understand and respond to the needs of our 'client base' rather than imposing our perceptions and assumptions onto them.

Significant networking opportunities with discipline academics stemming from involvement in the PM program can bridge 'the professional "social" distance that sometimes exists between LAS advisers and discipline academics' (Chanock, 2003, p. 72). Relationships built upon a foundation of a shared experience can enhance the success of collaborative work. Such work when intensive and embedded can then be a significant factor in both enhancing student engagement with the discipline area and addressing retention issues (James et al., 2003). For instance, connections with other lecturers through peer mentoring have resulted in contextualised literacy support for TAFE articulated students in Early Childhood Education. An example of the web of interconnectedness woven through such interactions is a successful collaboration between the LSU and the School of Engineering and Industrial Design. PM was initially implemented in this school as a retention strategy and it has experienced a series of formats since its inception. In 2005 the involvement peaked with a compulsory timetabled program in a first year unit of 400 students. This feat was accomplished due to the relationships that had been developed through previous years' involvement in the peer mentoring program and some collaborative work with the School. The targeted unit was a core unit which was innovatively redesigned to address the need for a bedrock of understanding for first year students of the professional development and communication needs of engineers and industrial designers. From the beginning, Learning Skills staff had substantial input into the unit and developed an embedded academic literacy resource book, lectured within the unit and trained mentors specifically for the context of this unit. PM complemented the significant teamwork component of the unit and provided a forum for students to develop the skills required for working collaboratively. Such holistic involvement has meant a well integrated and exciting learning and teaching opportunity for all stakeholders.

## Case studies from the 2005 program

The aforementioned unit embedded peer mentoring as a compulsory component that was timetabled into the tutorial program. Given the large number of students enrolled in the unit it was a logistical challenge to train enough mentors and match them with sessions that fitted in with their timetables. Initially, a separate training was run for students mentoring in this unit which addressed the specific features of a compulsory program. Later training sessions included students from both voluntary and compulsory program modes. This created a new dimension to the training, as aspects such as recruiting mentees, promotion and content of sessions differed according to which mode students were mentoring in. While trainers and some students found this to be an enriching blend of experiences other students were frustrated by the need to discuss both modes rather than focussing on their own circumstances. A positive outcome of this blended training was the willingness of the 'voluntary mode' mentors to mentor in the compulsory unit when a shortfall of mentors occurred. These students had participated in the blended training and felt they had some understanding of the situation they would be encountering. One of the mentors reported that she really enjoyed the experience and felt she was a better mentor in the unit which was not in her discipline. She explained that this was because she was unavoidably not in the expert role and therefore could only facilitate students' discussion. These factors will be considered and explored further as we move into the planning phase of again integrating peer mentoring into this unit in 2006.

In alignment with the SI principles, PM is usually a voluntary program at UWS. When it is run over a consistent period in a unit it becomes integrated as part of the culture of the unit. For instance, in a certain law unit PM is discussed in the unit outline as well as promoted in weekly lectures. The lecturer is very supportive of the program and assists mentors where necessary. At the same time she respects the confidentiality required of the mentors and it is not until after the students receive their semester grades that she is aware of who participated in the program. This lecturer has completed accredited SI training as a supervisor and has an in-depth understanding of the principles of the program and is a strong advocate of the benefits of participation in PM. She is an active contributor in the steering committee meetings that oversee PM at UWS and she attends training sessions to become acquainted with her mentors. PM tends to attract small but steady numbers in this unit and students' valuations attest to its usefulness in assisting them in both engaging with the subject matter and creating a sense of academic community in the unit. Each unit has an individual quality and subject specific approach to mentoring and consequently we are challenged to address a diverse range of situations in our training program. Our reflective practice ensures that our responses are proactive rather than reactive.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we suggest that the approach that we have taken to coordinating this program has inherently encouraged us to reflect on and evaluate our work as LAS advisers, teachers and coordinators which has resulted in substantial and continual professional development. For educators, opportunities for their continuing professional development such as attending workshops and conferences, conducting research and writing reports are important but these formal occasions (Ming, 1999) cannot be organised at the drop

of a hat. However, informal discussions with colleagues which are equally profitable opportunities for such development (Ming, 1999; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001), can be arranged and utilised more often, especially involving colleagues who teach and work on the same programs. The collaborative nature of the peer mentoring program therefore has presented opportunities for us to work together, which otherwise are not available on a daily basis considering the nature of our work as LAS advisers in a multi-campus university. For most of the trainers, as we meet and discuss our reflections on the program quite regularly, it has been a significant learning process. As knowledge is a social construct and learning a social process (Bruffee, 1999), our meetings have been a profound forum in which to learn from each other, share thoughts, develop research ideas and write papers. Writing this paper has been an evolutionary process as it has enabled us to articulate and appreciate the richness of our experience with peer mentoring.

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# Should students acknowledge significant learning assistance with their assignments or theses?

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**Abstract:** *In light of increased institutional focus on the issues of academic integrity and plagiarism, this paper asks the question of whether students should acknowledge any significant assistance with their assignments or theses provided by a Learning Adviser (LA). It is argued that given that academics and other writers consider it right and proper to acknowledge significant help (e.g., thanking colleagues for ‘fruitful discussions’ or for ‘helpful feedback on the manuscript’), then it is somewhat anomalous that students generally do not acknowledge significant assistance from LAs. It is further argued that lack of acknowledgements also leads to a ‘muddying of the waters’ regarding academic integrity because on the one hand course profiles tell students that individual assignments must be ‘entirely their own work’, but on the other recommend students seek help with assignment writing from LAs. While student acknowledgement of learning assistance would force an explicit resolution of such seeming contradictions in policy, and have the added benefit of making the work of LAs and its value more visible to the wider university community, it does appear to be at odds with learning assistance being offered as a confidential service. It is argued however, that confidentiality can still be maintained to a large extent even if students are required to write acknowledgements. Other issues, such as how the required policy changes might come about and the possibility of students giving inappropriate acknowledgements like thanking a LA for ‘proof-reading’ their assignment, are also addressed.*

**Key words:** *plagiarism, acknowledgement, learning assistance*

## Introduction

Learning Advisers (LAs) work with students on various aspects of their academic writing from first year essays through to PhD theses. Such work can include helping students conceptualise the task; explaining academic expectations, such as referencing conventions and what constitutes a critical review; helping to clarify arguments and expression; and working on improving overall structure and the logical flow of ideas. The value of writers at all levels getting feedback on their writing, including the kinds mentioned above, has been widely discussed (e.g., Grierson, 1996; Koprowski, 1997; McLaine, 1997). Furthermore, the work of LAs with students is consonant with universities' goals to develop 'generic skills' in their graduates (such skills go under the name of 'graduate attributes' at the University of Queensland (UQ, 2004)). However, because such work is usually done on student work that is still to be assessed and can have a considerable impact on the quality of the final product, several ethical questions arise. First, how much and what kinds of help with work that is still to be assessed is acceptable to the lecturer of the course and to the institution as a whole? Second, if the help is significant, should such help be acknowledged by the student on their writing? And finally, consequent to the second question, what of student confidentiality if they are required to acknowledge significant help?

In the absence of institutional answers to the first question, it and variants are regularly debated within our Learning Assistance Unit and elsewhere (e.g., Grierson, 1996; McLaine, 1997; Scott, 1998, as cited in Bartlett, 2002, p. 1; Bartlett, 2001, as cited in Bartlett, 2002, p. 1). What might or should be acceptable interventions by LAs in student work is a contentious issue, however (e.g., McLaine, 1997, p. 456; Chromik, 2002), and will not form a focus of this paper. Rather, we will take it as given that many LAs or their equivalents around Australia and further afield do work with students on texts that are still to be assessed, and so will focus mainly on the second and third questions raised above. We argue that this is possible to do even without a precise and detailed exploration of all the ways different LAs might work with students because the question of acknowledgement is relevant to a wide variety of forms of assistance.

The second question raised above regarding acknowledgement of assistance does not seem to have received much attention. Of the literature that does discuss it, McLaine (1997, p. 453) raised the question in the context of how lecturers and LAs should deal with increasing numbers of requests for the English grammar and expression of NESB students' assignments and theses to be 'checked' in a 'policy vacuum' about what 'extent of intervention [is institutionally] acceptable in the assessable written work of students.' However, while this paper proposed the possible recommendation that editing interventions should be formally acknowledged (p. 458), the main focus was to present arguments on why there is a need for editing services and for whom these services should be provided, how they should be provided, and to what extent they should be provided. That is, the issue of acknowledgement was not explored to the same extent as it will be in our paper. In addition to McLaine (1997), Bartlett (2002, p. 3) has also addressed the question of acknowledgement briefly in a paper arguing against LAs doing any editing/proofreading, and Gunn-Lewis (1998, p. 7) has raised it as an issue for LAs to consider. A Unilearn discussion on the topic initiated by one of the authors of this paper in early 2003 (Symons, personal communication, 20 March 2003) generated only very limited comment. In a related area where the question might also have arisen, namely

what is called 'peer editing', a Google search revealed that while the practice seems to be quite widespread, the available on-line literature tends to only discuss how it is done and its value for students (e.g., Clifton, n.d.; Koprowski, 1997). Despite this seeming lack of attention, we argue that the issue of acknowledgement is an important one for institutions and LAs to address. As this issue is central to all three questions we have raised above, it will form the focus of this paper. We also argue that while much of the material we use to support our arguments is of University of Queensland (UQ) origin, on the basis of discussions with colleagues at other universities and the papers presented at Language and Academic Skills conferences, we believe that this material is representative of what prevails in many Australian universities.

## Acknowledgement as normal academic practice

As the following examples will attest, it is somewhat anomalous that coursework students do not, as a rule, acknowledge significant assistance with their assignments. Consider first that one of the reasons for the insistence on correct academic referencing in student assignments is to induct students into academic practice. Yet if an academic were to get the kinds of help with one of their papers as students often do from LAs with their assignments, they would at the end of their paper acknowledge, 'benefiting from fruitful discussions with colleagues,' or 'thank X for helpful comments on the manuscript.' This is done to 'give credit where credit is due.' In addition, while a research thesis is supposed to be an original piece of scholarship, it is rarely produced without any form of assistance at all. Consequently, research students in their theses often have quite extensive acknowledgements of significant assistance given by different people, such as their supervisors, providers of technical assistance, and sometimes LAs. While research students have always done this, UQ's Graduate School has gone further and it is now UQ policy to have a formal 'Statement of the Contribution of Others' at the beginning of a thesis. As the following excerpt from the policy statement shows, this includes contributions to the written work to which LAs sometimes contribute significantly:

Research . . . may be done and/or written with the technical, theoretical, statistical, editorial, or physical assistance of others. A statement precisely outlining the contributions of others to the intellectual, physical, and written work must be set out at the beginning of every research higher degree thesis. (UQ Graduate School, 2004)

In accord with this policy, it is also the policy of the Council of Australian Society of Editors (CASE) that 'when a thesis has had the benefit of professional editorial advice, of any form, the name of the editor and a brief description of the service rendered . . . should be printed as part of the list of acknowledgements' (CASE, n.d.). LAs do not generally provide professional editorial assistance as such to research students. Nevertheless, by working with students on language issues, their work may overlap with what editors do, and in discussing matters of substance and structure, go beyond what some editors do (CASE, n.d.).

The above observations raise the question: If academics and research students do it with their work and research students are also *expected* to do it with their work, why do coursework students not acknowledge significant assistance with their work? Although

not commonly done, in some cases they are expected to. For example, in the instructions (unpub.) for the requirements for Assignment 1, a 2500 word report for LPWM2003 Principles of Wildlife Management at UQ, the students are told that their report should have an acknowledgements section which 'is to tell the reader who else helped you along the way, and to give those people just recognition.' In addition, the sons of one of the authors of this paper (MS) are expected to acknowledge in writing any help given with grade 11 projects/assignments. Gunn-Lewis (1998, p. 4) also reports that of a survey of 62 tutors at the UNITEC Institute of Technology, New Zealand, 45 believe that proofreading assistance should be acknowledged, though only 6 of the tutors actually asked their students to do so. These examples appear to be the exception rather than the rule though, and so the questions of why coursework students do not acknowledge significant assistance, and what are the possible ramifications if they did, still need to be addressed.

## Student misconduct and plagiarism

An issue of relevance to the discussion is that of academic integrity because acknowledging significant help from others in the preparation of a piece of writing is a question of integrity as argued above. The issue of academic integrity, and in particular the issue of plagiarism, has received considerable attention worldwide in recent years. For example, the First Australasian Educational Integrity Conference (University of South Australia, 2003) was held in Adelaide in November of 2003, and The Center for Academic Integrity (n.d.) in the US came into being in the early 1990s, and is now a consortium of over 320 institutions. One result of this attention is that most if not all students at UQ have to sign a 'statement of original authorship' or equivalent when submitting their assignments (e.g., UQ Ipswich, n.d.; Faculty of Business, Economics and Law, n.d.), as is the case at other Australian universities (e.g., Monash University, 2003; University of Adelaide, 2005, p. 3), and UQ course outlines/profiles are required to include information on plagiarism and academic integrity. As noted by McLaine (1997, p. 453) though, such statements and policies rarely seem to take into account the work of LAs, and consequently apparently contradictory messages like the following appear. In the course outline for LTCS1000 Issues in Contemporary Asia (Hartley, 2005), assignment marks are allocated to 'presentation, spelling and grammar' (p. 3) and yet despite being formally assessed on these aspects, the course outline also encourages all students, and particularly NESB students, to not only proofread their assignments themselves, but to get someone else to proofread their essay for them as well (p. 3). In the course outline for EDUC2060 Literature in the Secondary School Context (Moni, 2004), the marking criteria specifically mention that the markers will be looking for 'logical, convincing and well-supported arguments' and 'written communication [that] demonstrates professional control and use of language' (p. 12) and yet also refers students to LAs for help with assignment writing, including help with 'improving logical coherence and flow' (p. 11).

How can the apparent contradictions outlined above be reconciled? One possibility is that lecturers consider the 'real' work of an assignment to be the research and analysis and that the marks for 'written expression' are just 'carrots' to encourage students to take such matters seriously. Hence, helping a student to 'explain myself more better' as a paper by Chanock (1999) was partially titled, is apparently acceptable, at least to some lecturers, despite the fact that marks are awarded to these aspects of student work. We would also argue that since it appears to be generally acceptable for the writers of text books

and journal articles to claim authorship of their work even if they have had considerable substantive (i.e. focussing on whether the paper fulfills its intended purpose, is logically coherent and flows well, and is clearly presented) and copy (i.e. is grammatically correct and punctuated and referenced correctly) editorial help, it seems reasonable that students should be rightly able to claim ownership of their work even if they have had significant help from a LA, an argument also made by Grierson (1996). However, the statements of originality on the cover sheets of assignments would need to be reworded to acknowledge that.

More difficult to reconcile with learning assistance are policy statements like the following: 'the written work you submit must be *entirely* your own' [emphasis added] (UQ Business School, n.d.); 'students can discuss assignments with other students and their tutors' but 'should, however, write their assignments independently' (Academic Development Unit, La Trobe University, 2005); and as noted on University of Adelaide assignment cover sheets: 'Collusion: another person assisting in the production of an assignment for submission without the express requirement, or consent or knowledge of the assessor' (Centre for Learning and Professional Development, University of Adelaide, 2005). Can a student say that the written work is *entirely* their own or that they have written their assignments independently if a LA has helped them to improve logical coherence and flow, or has helped them to think more critically about the issue than they had done so to that point in time, or in the case of students who have completely misinterpreted the assignment, helped them to understand what was really required? Again it can be argued that the 'law' is not to be taken too literally, as lecturers often provide students with a list of questions to consider in addressing a topic, so guiding students in their thinking through of the topic. And we have seen some UQ Business School course outlines where the instructions on what is expected in each section of a report are spelled out in such detail as to fill two or more pages with a small font text! However, having to make arguments about which 'laws' are to be taken literally and which ones not is an invidious position to be in for both students and LAs and one that therefore it would be desirable to address.

The questions of what constitutes both acceptable and effective kinds of help are ones regularly addressed within our unit, and presumably within other learning assistance units as well. The recent developments discussed in this section, however, have in our minds made these questions more difficult, since maintaining our current practice seems to require us in some instances to work according to what we *believe* to be the 'spirit of the law' rather than according to the *literal* 'letter of the law'. If students were required to acknowledge the assistance of LAs, then a resolution to this conundrum would need to be achieved, making our work somewhat easier. Before pursuing this idea further though, a consideration of student confidentiality is in order.

## Confidentiality

Another significant issue that arises if students are required to acknowledge assistance with their assignments is the issue of confidentiality, for if students had to acknowledge significant help, the fact that they had seen a LA and the broad terms of what they saw the LA about would no longer be completely confidential. We would argue that whether this is an important consideration or not depends on the reasons for confidentiality. The ethical considerations underlying confidentiality are to cause no harm to the client and to

respect privacy, and one work practice issue has to do with creating an environment in which the student feels 'safe' to discuss their issues or reveal their lack of knowledge or competence. Certainly for some aspects of the work of a LA, confidentiality is essential. For example, when it comes to cases of a research student wishing to discuss problems with a supervisor, the student's very real concern is the potential damage to the relationship with that supervisor if confidentiality were to be breached. Hence the unquestioned need for confidentiality in cases like this.

What of help with essays, reports or theses however? What are the potential harms that might result to a student if confidentiality were to be breached in these cases? From the student's perspective there are at least two. One is the perception (real or imagined) that they would 'lose face' by perhaps appearing incompetent, stupid or 'needy' if it were to be known that they had sought help from a LA. Even if such fears are unfounded, they nevertheless both deserve and need to be respected.

The second possible harm that students might fear is that they might be marked more severely if the help given by a LA on an assignment were known to their lecturers; or research students might fear their supervisors would think less of them if they knew about similar help with their theses, thus prejudicing their future career prospects. As stated above, such fears, even if unfounded, deserve some measure of respect. However, the fact that some journals have a blind refereeing process indicates that it is not just students who fear that humans can not (always) be trusted to give completely unbiased evaluations of a piece of work independent of external factors. And, if such fears are grounded in reality, that lecturers really would look askance at students receiving help with their assignments from LAs, then that raises serious questions about the ethics of what we do and, we would argue, of the difficulty of balancing the conflicting goals of formative and summative assessment.

With regards to the possible fears mentioned above, the question arises as to why the writers of books, theses and journal articles are not afraid to acknowledge the valuable help they receive from colleagues, editors and so on (though not always that from LAs in the case of theses). One probable reason is that such acknowledgement in these forums is the norm, and because it is the norm, this consequently makes it 'safe' and acceptable to do and so nothing to be concerned about. This suggests that if most lecturers normalised both the getting of help from LAs ('look at it as professional development training') and the acknowledging of significant but acceptable forms of help from LAs or others ('look at the acknowledgements section of the journal articles that you read'), then the problems would be resolved. This could be done both verbally and in course outlines. In doing this, lecturers would also need to make clear to all concerned which pieces of assessment students could get help with and which not, and the types of assistance acceptable and those unacceptable. That is, they would need to make clear which pieces of assessment were both formative and summative, and which summative only. As an example, our Unit's policy is to treat take home exams as being purely summative and so we do not provide learning assistance to students with these.

To some extent though, acknowledging help from a LA on an assignment is only a very limited violation of confidentiality. Even if students had to acknowledge the assistance given by a LA, LAs could still tell students that they would not discuss the details of any

of their sessions with anyone else without their express permission, thus protecting their privacy in large measure.

## Institutional implications

The issues raised in the section on confidentiality mean that requiring students to acknowledge significant help with assignments or theses is not something that LAs themselves could require; any change would have to be institutionally driven. For a start, institutional policies on academic integrity and plagiarism would need to explicitly acknowledge and sanction, in general, the kind of work LAs do. This is not commonly done as evidenced by the fact that an online search of several Australian universities' plagiarism policies revealed that, if Language and Academic Skills Units are mentioned at all in such policies, it is in the context of where students can go to be educated about acceptable referencing practices (e.g., Australian National University, 2004, Section 2.3). The situation does not appear to be any different in the US either. A search of a sample of more than a dozen academic integrity policies of tertiary institutions in the US found through The Center for Academic Integrity's (n.d.) website located only one site, that of Brandeis University, which explicitly acknowledged the existence and work of the equivalent of LA units. The relevant part of this University's policy states: 'Aid from personnel associated with University-sanctioned tutoring services [these include their 'Writing Center' which appears to offer similar services to Australian Language and Academic Skills Units (Brandeis Writing Center, 2005)] is acceptable; tutor-assisted work submitted for a grade should be done with approval of the instructor' (Brandeis University, 1999).

While such explicit sanctioning of the work of LAs would go far in addressing our concerns, we would, however, argue that rather than requiring students to seek approval for getting help, lecturers should provide blanket approval (or explicit disapproval) with assessment items on their course outlines. We see this as necessary to remove any ambiguity in the acceptability of our work in each instance (as opposed to 'in general'), and because it would remove two psychological barriers to students seeking help. The first barrier is simply the time and effort required to get explicit approval, and the second is that students may not want to draw attention to the fact that they want help for fear of 'embarrassment' or 'losing face'. Thus, we see it as necessary that university policy also requires each lecturer to explicitly state on their course outlines which pieces of assessment students can or can not seek help from a LA with. For example, the lecturer of a course with 100% assignment-based assessment might consider it acceptable for students to get help with their first assignment(s), but not their last one so that the last one effectively becomes like a final exam. Another, perhaps less satisfactory solution, would be for assignment cover sheets to have an acknowledgements section added, with the general policy being that students can assume it is acceptable to seek help from a LA unless explicitly told otherwise. The existence of an acknowledgements section, with perhaps a brief policy statement with it, would go some way to normalising the practice and hence make it 'safe'. Such a policy statement might state something like the following:

Acknowledging significant assistance from others in the preparation of a piece of writing is standard scholarly practice. If you have consulted with or received significant help from a lecturer, tutor or Learning Adviser with this assignment,

or if you had someone proofread it for you, or if you had technical or other assistance with a practical project, then please acknowledge all such help here.

## Possible implications for LAs

A possible benefit for LAs that might arise from greater acknowledgement by students would be that our work with them and its value would become much more visible to the wider university community, though it could also lead to an ‘explosion’ in demand that would be difficult if not impossible to meet. Another benefit would be that it would force the resolution of some inconsistencies within course policies, thus removing some of the ambiguity in how LAs work with students.

On the other hand, as argued by Bartlett (2002, p. 3), there is a danger that poorly worded acknowledgements could undermine our work and standing in several ways. For example, if a research student were to thank a LA for ‘proof-reading’ the thesis (as has happened to one of us), then this might suggest to the reader that the LA aimed to turn the final draft into a word perfect document. If the final document were still quite flawed in many ways, then this would not reflect well on the LA’s competence, even though this is not what was done. In addition, describing as ‘proof-reading’ a close, careful and critical reading of parts of a thesis, together with many suggestions on how to clarify wording, structure ideas and so on, could perpetuate misconceptions amongst both students and staff that LAs are little more than ‘grammar checkers,’ which could lead to a devaluing of our work by staff and an increased number of students seeking our help to check their grammar. These potential problems could be addressed though, by providing ‘training’, at least in the form of some proforma acknowledgements from which a student could choose, or from which to model an acknowledgement. Examples might be:

‘I acknowledge X (a LA from ...) for valuable feedback on an early draft of this assignment.’

‘I acknowledge X (a LA from ...) for help with structuring the ideas in this assignment.’

‘I acknowledge X (a LA from ...) for help understanding what was expected for this assignment / stimulating thinking on the topic.’

In addition, for a research student with whom a LA has worked extensively and built up a close relationship, the LA might *request* to see the acknowledgements so that more appropriate phrasings might be suggested if what the student has written does not accurately reflect the work.

One other possible negative consequence of students having to acknowledge the assistance of LAs is that students do not always believe what they are told and so may not believe that their work will not be marked more severely if they acknowledge the assistance of an LA. If that is the case, then there may be a decline in the number of students seeking

individual appointments, at least initially until the practice of acknowledgement becomes commonplace.

## Conclusions

So should students acknowledge *significant* help from LAs with assignments? Yes, because it is standard scholarly practice to acknowledge such help (because it is the right and proper thing to do) and so it is anomalous for them not to do so. Yes, because it would lead to greater institutional valuing of the work LAs do to improve students' generic skills/graduate attributes. Yes, because it would bring greater transparency to the work that LAs do and would encourage academics to clarify what is acceptable practice and what is not. This would be fairer to students because both they and LAs would not have to guess the 'intent of the law' as opposed to its literal meaning. Can we expect students to acknowledge the assistance of LAs as matters currently stand? We argue 'yes' for theses, but not for coursework assignments unless both institutions as a whole and lecturers individually take account of LA work in their assessment policy statements. Is this likely to happen? It may happen, though perhaps LA units should take the initiative in raising the issue as a policy development item with their institution's teaching and learning committee. Certainly PhD rules appear to have moved this way, and there is some isolated evidence of moves in this direction at lower levels.

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# Truth games / Truth claims: Resisting institutional notions of LAS as remediation

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**Abstract:** *Michel Foucault argues that the technologies of identity – whether professional or institutional – rely on what he calls ‘games of truth’. He argues that these truth games comprise ‘an ensemble of rules for the production of truth . . . which can be considered in function of its principles and its rules of procedure as valid or not’ (cited in Gauthier, 1988, p. 15). Moreover, we can only become subjects by ‘subjecting’ ourselves to selected truth games because there is neither selfhood nor truth outside of these games. For Foucault, the subject’s power in this process is to decide on what terms to play the game. By examining the ‘truths’ of LAS practices and engaging in an examination of common assumptions about our practice, particularly the institutional view of LAS centres as sites of remediation and of LAS practitioners as remedial teachers, this paper will explore ways of opening up new spaces for thinking about and theorising the work that we do. The authors will argue that this needs to be an ongoing process if we are to take responsibility for (re)inventing ourselves. We see this paper contributing to current discussion about LAS professional identity.*

**Key words:** *professional identity, truth, subject, remediation.*

## Introduction

You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don’t, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said. (Trinh, 1989, p. 80 in St.Pierre, 2004, p. 328)

In keeping with the themes of the 2005 Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) conference, this paper explores ways of theorising LAS practice in the 21st century university with the aim of considering how LAS identity is currently being formed and understood. The rationale for taking the approach that the authors have chosen here is to suggest possible ways of further empowering the LAS community as decisions are being made about professional identity and practice. Professional identity for learning advisers has been a key site of struggle since the community's emergence in its many and varied guises in Australian higher education. This struggle is often at its fiercest around the intellectual location of the work that learning advisers do and the status, knowledge and practice of the learning adviser as a teaching subject (see, e.g., Bock & Gassin, 1982; Taylor, Ballard, Beasley, Bock, Clanchy, & Nightingale, 1988; Samuelowicz, 1990; Webb & Bonanno, 1994; Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone, & Devlin, 1995; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Melles, 2002; Webb, 2002; Chanock, 2003; Zeegers, 2004). As many universities gear up to weather the consequences of recent government policies affecting higher education institutions and, in some cases, redress significant budgeting deficits with staff cuts (e.g., Newcastle University's 2005 decision to slash 20% of its general and academic positions), for some of us the struggle to locate ourselves securely within an increasingly unstable work environment can only become more fraught with uncertainty. Given these conditions, the question becomes one of how to best care for ourselves as a profession.

Michel Foucault argues that 'care of self' is central to understanding what one is and what one is capable of. He claims that 'Taking care of oneself requires knowing (connaître) oneself' (Foucault, 1997, p. 285). In expanding on this theme, he adds:

if you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city, . . . if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you . . . if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others. (Foucault, 1997, p. 288)

Rather than being merely an intellectual diversion, for Foucault this care of self is both political and oriented towards governance. Moreover, the 'care of self', he argues, involves developing a deep understanding of what he calls 'games of truth'. He is at pains to specify how the term 'game' is intended in this context: 'when I say "game," I mean a set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of an amusement; it is a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid' (Foucault, 1997, p. 297). Indeed, we can only produce the truths that allow us to make claims about our knowledge and identity by complying with the rules and procedures of designated truth games (Peters, 2004).

Nevertheless, one can also slip the bonds of domination of a truth game by demonstrating its negative consequences. By 'playing the same game differently' (Foucault, 1997, p. 295), it is possible to exercise agency in such a way that other, more reasonable options become available. Foucault acknowledges (1984, 1997) that although his earlier thinking examined regimes of truth as they involve coercive practices (such as those processes by which certain religious, medical and pedagogical regimes construct a static or fixed subjectivity), his later thinking focused on how games of truth shape practices of self-

formation. In contrast to the earlier 'regimes of truth', this latter view suggests a dynamic rather than static subjectivity and accounts for how we as agents constitute and reconstitute identity and subjectivity according to the games of truth that we choose to participate in.

The key argument explored in this paper is that the critical approach suggested by Foucault's notion of truth games presents a useful strategy for thinking through how learning advisers are recruited (and positioned) by institutional policy and how the profession strives to position itself. To test the idea, this paper examines one of the truth games relevant to LAS practice. The central questions at stake in this process are: what kinds of subjectivity does this truth game demand and what are the implications for self governance; how are LAS professionals invited to become 'subjects' by this truth game; does this truth game facilitate the practices that we want to claim as integral to LAS identity?

Lest the thought occurs as you work through the paper that you have inadvertently stumbled upon a LAS version of the film *Groundhog Day*, the authors wish to emphasise that by no means can it be said that the paper is covering new ground. The terrain being examined will be very familiar to most in the LAS community: perhaps a professional instance of a return of the repressed. What the authors are attempting to do is reconceptualise the terms of engagement.

### **An institutional truth game: Learning advising as remedy**

One aspect of LAS identity, in particular, that continues to haunt the learning adviser is the persistent view of our work as remedial. Just when it seems that this perception has been shaken, it finds its way back into the LAS remit with a vengeance. A public example of this perception appeared in the print media earlier this year. In February, 2005 a short article published in The Sydney Morning Herald snagged our attention. Although the article was not really saying anything so very different from other media reports published in recent times, it did crystallize an element in current debates about higher education that has exercised those working in academic skills units for some time. Beneath the headline banner 'Fears low entry scores could leave students struggling', journalist Andrew Norton observes of current university student populations: 'Many people with low scores may have trouble passing their courses without strong support . . . you might not be doing them any favours' (Norton, 2005, February 10). Responding to this concern in the same article, a senior Australian academic reassured the worried journalist of his university's capacity to cope: 'We have an academic skills unit which assists students in numeracy skills, writing skills - because they usually need help with assignments, how to structure their thoughts and how to put them on paper and so forth' (Hill, as cited in Norton, 2005, February 10). The view expressed in response to Norton's concerns - and it is a view still widely held by many in the upper echelons of university academic administration - has significant repercussions for LAS practice, student subjectivity, and for the university.

The article invokes (yet again) an old saw in debates about learning standards in the Australian university system: that is, the simplistic yet pervasive trinity of 'deficit - remediation - academic skills units'. This is not to say that we do not encounter students struggling to make sense and learn in the unfamiliar environment of the university. Rather, the argument that extends from this paper is for the need to pursue a more productive view of these students beyond the current model. What is being suggested here is that the

trope of the 'deficit student' is deployed strategically in narratives of higher education crisis: on the one hand as an 'outing' device by the media and other stake holders, and, on the other, as an obfuscatory device that deflects attention and energies away from university recruiting policies and practices. The discourse (and language) of student deficit and remediation is not only disabling for the student, but anathema for more innovative forms of curricula development and learning support. Indeed, this model is already redundant for most, if not all, learning advisers.

It is reasonable to argue that the conceptual location of academic skills units as merely a therapeutic response to an ailing higher education system is regressive for the university. This mindset, however, is so stubbornly persistent – particularly from the top down – that it is as though no-one can hear the long LAS sigh from academic skills units. Like Lady Macbeth, those who would question the efficacy of the model appear doomed to wander the halls of academe muttering 'Out, damned spot! Out, I say!' (*Macbeth*, V.i.37, in Muir, 1962) in an effort to rid themselves of the stain of remediation. This version of the learning advising truth game recuperates those processes that construct the kind of fixed or static subjectivity that Foucault identifies in his earlier work as deriving from certain pedagogical regimes. It is a subjectivity that precludes self governance for the LAS profession.

In the following section we attempt to identify and better understand the principles and rules of procedures that permit the institutional truth game about the remedial role of the learning adviser to appear as valid, at least to some within the institutional hierarchy.

## **Conditions of emergence: The remedial tag**

Learning advising as a profession is regularly invited to understand its emergence in relation to the shift from an 'elite' to a 'mass' higher education system; a shift that entailed both expansion and diversification of the student population (McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone, & Devlin, 1995; McInnis & James, 1995). This expansion and diversification of the student population was to eventually give rise to the figure of the 'non-traditional' student: a learner within the higher education system who – at least notionally – required specialist intervention to bring him or her into line with traditional university standards. In one sense, it seems quite straightforward to accept this view without question. Certainly it appears to find verification in research (e.g., Williams, Long, Carpenter, & Hayden, 1993). However, perhaps this idea is worth some further reflection. When did this 'shift' to mass education actually occur? And what, exactly, is a 'non-traditional' student? What are these truth games that we have been playing into, particularly in relation to student subjectivities and the identity of the learning adviser; and at what cost?

Narratives around the massification of higher education tend to focus on the marked changes to universities in the 1980s. However, rather than coalescing around the reforms of the 1980s, the expansion and diversification of higher education in Australia were, in fact, components in a gradual process of uneven development over the last half of the 20th century (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2003). A notable diversification of the student population began as early as the post WWII era (Sinclair-Jones, 2000, p. 147) with an influx of adult students in the form of returned service men and women (Eaton, 1980). The Colombo Plan in the 1950s brought international students in significant numbers into our universities (Auletta, 2000). The decline in school leavers attending university in the 1970s

was countered by an increase in mature age students (Hore & West, 1980). The 1980s, however, did mark a period of 'accelerated transformation' (Marginson, 2000); an intense period of change and a confluence of conditions that fuelled cries of 'falling standards' and located a perceived quality deficit with the 'non-traditional' student. Interestingly, there is little acknowledgement that even in 1957, only 58% of enrolling students managed to complete their degree (Murray, Clunies Ross, Morris, Reid, & Richards, 1957).

So how is it that the 'non-traditional' student became such a disturbing element in this rhetorical environment, and to the point of being targeted as a symptom of decline that required remedy?

The 1980s marked a period of increasing problematisation of the Australian higher education sector in general. Initially, this critical evaluation of the sector was not necessarily because non-traditional students were deemed deficient as such, although discursively that is precisely how they were to be eventually framed, but because participation and retention rates had become an area of intensifying concern for the Hawke government and the higher education system alike (e.g., Power, Robertson, & Beswick, 1985; Dawkins, 1988). As the government's Higher Education (Dawkins, 1988) report initiatives developed, however, focus was to finally settle on the 'non-traditional' student and in particular ways. The reasons for this can be traced back to the 1960s when the Martin Committee (Martin, 1964), in the name of expansion and cost efficiency, invoked a binary system that created what was arguably an unnatural and imaginary (Davies, 1989) division between theoretical and applied knowledge, or more simply, theory and practice. This process resulted in the creation of a two-tiered system of education. It was a policy decision that was to have a profound effect on the subjectivity of both the university and college student.

Effectively, the Martin Report constituted all college students as being academically less able than their counterparts in the university:

The objective of the education provided by a technical college is to equip men and women for the practical world of industry and Commerce . . . The university course, on the other hand, tends to emphasise the development of knowledge and the importance of research; in so doing it imparts much information which is valuable to the practical man but which is often incidental to the main objective. Both types of education are required by the community, and in increasing amounts, but it is important that students receive the kind of education best suited to their innate abilities and purposes in life. (Martin, 1964 Vol.1, p. 165, as cited in Sinclair-Jones, 2000, p. 143)

As Sinclair-Jones points out, the Committee's conclusions indicated that 'these graduates would not be responsible for affairs of the state or decisions of national importance, but needed to be expert in certain fields of specific skills' (Sinclair-Jones, 2000, p. 141). It was understood from the Martin Report that college students were more suited to 'applied' knowledge, and university students groomed for the more esteemed professions and research based activities. A further legacy of this conceptual dichotomy also has implications for the way universities continue to privilege the research academic over the teaching academic. It was, perhaps, therefore unsurprising that by the time Dawkins' unification was endorsed (Dawkins, 1988), the higher education psyche was conditioned

to the view that universities were opening up to a significant population of students who simply did not belong in that environment.

Despite the fact that the diversity of the higher education student population has continued to intensify in the Australian system, there persists an ideal(ised) notion that there is a higher education equivalent of the gold standard: a 'normal' student, against which all others are measured. Symbolic ideals notwithstanding, in reality what is the normal student? Some might argue that it is the school leaver. Nevertheless, this still leaves an unanswered question about the precise characteristics that constitute this student as the 'norm'. Given the diversity of standards within our secondary school system, it must be that in some salient way this is an unanswerable question. At the level of representation, however, the so-called normal student only begins to emerge once you peel away the layers of characteristics that define the 'non-traditional' student. Yet such is the narrowness of this norm, that once that is done, there is very little left.

At best, all we can claim about the 'normal' student is that this paragon of learning capabilities is not of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, is not mature age, is not defined by low socio-economic status (which is calculated according post code), does not hail from a rural working-class background, is not a woman, is not long term or permanently disabled, does not come from a non-English speaking background and is not an international student. By process of elimination then, our 'normal' student is white, 'abled', young, male, directly out of secondary school, and from a middle class, professionally-oriented, English speaking, urban background. In terms of current student populations, this is clearly an absurdity and it might be argued that this figure, in fact, has come to represent the 'non-traditional'. The absurdity of centralising the figure as a higher education equivalent of the gold standard is further reinforced by research that has suggested that at least two groups of so-called non-traditional students, females and older students, 'perform better than males and school leavers in most countries and institutions' (Power, Robertson, & Baker, 1987, p. x).

It is arguable whether or not the normative nature of social statistics and the discursive regimes which employ them to govern the higher education population do our students any meaningful service, regardless of where they are positioned on the spectrum of identity. The student norm sketched above does not generally reflect the reality of our current student population, yet this is still the stock figure marking the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional student subjectivity.

Unhappily, the discursive regimes of normalisation utilised in higher education can also be deployed to gloss over (and, at times, erase) the learning needs of one part of the population while they conceptually skew the needs of those populations who enter university through non-orthodox pathways (and, as we have suggested above, orthodoxy here is a constructed and rigidly narrow band of possibility). An over investment in these discursive regimes of normalisation can lead us astray. For example, in targeting mature age students for special treatment (as the university defines what that 'treatment' should be) or in using NESB statistics to develop strategic plans for faculties, we risk losing any meaningful connection with the living, learning subject of these initiatives, instead working merely at the level of hypothesis and perceived representation of their learning needs. This is not to say that the sort of information yielded by these processes is without value.

What the authors are arguing here is that too often this information becomes irreconcilably disconnected from students functioning in real time and in real learning contexts.

If we accept that the entity, 'student', in its many possible incarnations, is continually constituted and transformed through discourse (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), it is possible to consider this situation from another perspective. In reviewing the effects of mass education on the British university system, Leathwood and O'Connell note that:

the construction of a 'normal' student persists, and is reinforced by the classification of others as 'non-traditional'. . . . In the move from an elite to a mass education system, it is these students that represent 'the masses': homogenized, pathologized and marked as 'Other' compared with existing students who are perceived to be there 'as a right, representing the norm against which the others are judged and may be found wanting' (Webb, 1997: p.68). Within this discursive framing, mass equals lower standards and 'dumbing down'. (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 599)

The observations of Leathwood and O'Connell touch on a key symbolic point in this truth game that has both practical and professional ramifications for those of us working in the Australian system: that is, the pathologisation of difference in the student population. Somewhere in the processes outlined above, an untheorised rhetorical slippage from difference to deficiency to deviancy (from the norm) occurred. It is a slippage that now presents us with unresolvable tensions for teaching and learning advising and constructs an unnecessarily disabling and static, or fixed, subjectivity for the 'non-traditional' student. This disabling subjectivity may well be further compounded by the moves to rhetorically centralise yet another normative figure: the 'independent learner'. As Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) note, this figure is constructed through a repertoire of discourses that assume much about shared cultural views of learning, autonomy and pedagogical responsibility (see also Chanock, 2003). They argue that the idealised dream of the 'independent learner' erases the realities of class, gender and cultural diversity within student populations. Clearly, a diverse student population demands a radically different pedagogical response to the remediation – read normalisation – of the so-called deficient (deviant) student.

The rhetoric of 'falling standards', we argue, would appear to be symptomatic of a slow-growing institutional dis-ease with the 'non-traditional' student. However, if this dis-ease is in fact located within the university system rather than with the student, the problem surely requires a therapeutic response other than the one currently being privileged by that system. Perhaps Bock and Gassin (1982, p. i) best encapsulate the issue being considered here with their comments:

It can be summed up as the belief that what we are dealing with is a deficiency in the student, a problem of incompetence and of remedial needs. Yet this view is contradicted by another simultaneous and just as firm belief that all we are dealing with are surface problems, cosmetic blemishes on otherwise bright intellectual minds; nothing, in fact, that a prefabricated, mass-produced aid kit would not solve. These beliefs imply that being incompetent, or being a remedial case, is an absolute state which exists independently of context and can therefore also be redressed independently of context.

These observations reveal the unresolvable internal contradictions at the heart of the deficiency/remedial model. Despite the identified inconsistencies, however, a long history of repetition has endowed it with a law-like presence in the institutional consciousness.

The matter at hand, then, becomes one of how learning advisers are best able to care for themselves – and by extension, for their students – in this kind of discursive environment. Foucault argues that it is only by understanding the technologies and care of self that we can then begin to care for others. Understanding how the remedial truth game emerged from a disparate set of conditions suggests a way forward in this process. By interrogating the terms that define this truth game, it becomes possible – at least theoretically – to disturb its play across institutional policy and strategic planning. Learning how to ‘play the game differently’ opens up new spaces for thinking about and theorising the work done by learning advisers as it also allows for a dismantling of the unnecessarily delimiting subjectivities that this particular pedagogical regime assigns to learning advisers and students.

### **Playing the same game differently?**

Perhaps we in the LAS community resist the notion of the ‘remedial’ so vigorously because we understand that it stands in place of – displaces – more innovative attempts to identify and address the complex learning needs of a diverse and complex student population. In fact, the pall cast by the deficiency/remedial model too often prevents us from even beginning to examine in any sustained way what these learning needs might be beyond the rhetorical - and counterproductive – construct of deficiency. However, if we continue to work with categories of deficit and deviance rather than attempting to interrogate and deconstruct the myths surrounding these terms, our intellectual technology will continue to be used to reinforce already existing notions that require remedy. We will continue to be recruited as the therapeutic regime for an ailing system that projects its dis-ease onto the student population and although we might argue that prevention is preferable to cure, it is not always clear how the bonds of this particular truth game can be prevented from continually debilitating our more progressive initiatives.

To be sure, many of the discourses framing the shift from elite to mass higher education have invited us to conceive and develop rafts of practice around these particular student identities according to the various ways they have been problematised at various junctures in history. Our practice has found itself targeting the ‘equity student’, the ‘mature age student’, the ‘international student’. For many of us, work in these areas has offered a certain security of place within our universities. Most recently, there has been a shift to develop the lifelong learner and the marketable graduate as an emblematic, enterprising, independent, self-regulating individual: proof positive of the success of the university system. Again learning advisers find themselves recruited to police the transition from student to independent learner, and, by extension, the transition from dependence to autonomy. The reality for most of us is that regardless of how far our own thinking has moved beyond the deficit/remedial truth game, we will continue to find ourselves – at least in the short and medium term – subjected to its rules of procedure.

However, it is worth recalling here an earlier point in our discussion: that one can slip the bonds of domination of a truth game by demonstrating its negative consequences - by

playing it a little differently we can often demonstrate preferable options. Kate Chanock's work provides us with just one example of how institutional truth games can be reframed: in the first instance to involve an interrogation of the defining (and delimiting) terms, but perhaps, ultimately, this kind of approach suggests ways to subvert, with aim of the dismantling, the more onerous or redundant games of truth that affect LAS identity. In critically reviewing aspects of her own practice, Chanock questions the wisdom of those categories that call so many of us into particular kinds of LAS work:

Diversity does not reside in categories, but in people; every student in a university is diverse, by virtue of unique character and life experience, and we need to avoid binaries like 'mainstream' and 'other' in order to help each student we have do the best s/he can. (1999, p. 2)

Elsewhere, Chanock (2003) points to the ethnocentricity at the centre of much of the policy language dealing with higher education learning. She observes that it is only by continuing to rigorously test and question the cultural assumptions encoded in this language can we begin to move from rhetoric to some recuperated reality of student subjectivity. Her work reminds us of the value of critically engaging the foundational principles that underpin our practices – both as we define them and as they are defined by the wider system – and the relations of power that bind these practices to stock institutional models.

## Conclusion

We stated at the beginning of this paper that its primary function was to attempt to reconceptualise the terms by which we subject ourselves and are subjected to the imperatives of mass higher education. Of course the reality of working in LAS units in the 21st century Australian university is that we will continue to be vulnerable to directives from above that will often run counter to our own professional agendas. Many of these directives will have immediate and long-term material consequences for our professional security and career development. This has not prevented our professional community from pushing at and, in many cases, reconfiguring the boundaries that define our field in the past and nor should it in the future. As we continue this project of self-formation as a profession, our truth claims about who we are and what we do become evermore cogent and cohesive. To recall Foucault's words: we are coming to 'know ontologically' what it means to be 'citizens' of the university system, what it is that we 'should and should not fear', what it is that we can 'reasonably hope for' (Foucault, 1997, p. 288). It is these knowledges that will help us make future choices about what 'games of truth' best serve our continued maturation as a profession.

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## Embedded information literacy: A collaborative approach

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**Abstract:** *Many undergraduate students come to tertiary study directly from school, an institution with very different aims and pedagogical practices. As a consequence new students often struggle to adapt to a new set of learning skills and expectations. The structure of a core subject for the Charles Sturt University Criminal Justice and Policing degrees was revised to incorporate a module designed to assist students in the acquisition and practising of a number of key research and information literacy skills to assist their transition to tertiary study. The project was the outcome of a process of critical reflection and collaboration by academic, learning skills and library staff. Beginning with the Council of Australian University Libraries (2001) model, specific attention was given to the*

*relevance of Information Literacy skills to new tertiary students with the aim of tailoring the provision of these skills as a pre-requisite for life long learning. The review process embedded information literacy as a central component of the subject curriculum. The learning and library science disciplines were drawn together rather than being treated as discrete specialisations. Topics addressed include referencing of sources, critical thinking, the use of on-line citation and full-text databases and the evaluation of on-line and other sources of information. The subject structure will be subject to a continued process of qualitative and quantitative evaluation by students and teaching staff to maintain relevance in a dynamic learning environment.*

**Key words:** *Interdisciplinary, Information literacy, Lifelong learning, Academic skilling, Evaluation, Critique, Embedding*

## **Introduction**

The concept of embedding generic skills or contextualising learning is not new, nor does the value of this direction appear to be questioned (Hicks & George, 2001; Jones, Sin & Singh, 2003; Kokkinn, 2000; Skillen, Merton, Trivett & Percy, 1998). The challenge however, is 'how to operationalise what has been accepted in theory' (Smith and McGowan, 2004). Issues of interest are thus not only what practices are occurring but also, who is involved and whether such developments can be sustained and are scalable. Of particular interest to Charles Sturt University (CSU) is applicability across internal and distance education study modes.

Skillen et al. (1998) provide a comprehensive overview of the changes over the last 20 years of the ways in which universities have responded to the learning needs of their ever increasingly diverse student populations and the shift to greater accountability. Such approaches ranged from a time when universities focused on content only, to the remedial model with the focus on 1:1 intervention and then to a more integrated approach emerging in the late 90's where Learning Skills Advisers (LSAs) for example, would be invited into lecture theatres to speak on topics such as 'how to write an essay'. This latter approach, while a shift in a positive direction, has also been described as piecemeal, inequitable and still generic in nature (Skillen et al. 1998) and tends to rely on the personalities and energies of individuals. A further

shift along the continuum is being promoted as a more equitable and effective model of operation referred to in the literature as 'the partnership model' (Catterall, 2003; Charnock, 1995, in Catterall, 2003; Hine, Gollin, Ozols, Hill & Scoufis, 2002; Young, McCarthy & Hart, 2003) and involves more than interaction between LSAs, academics and other university staff, rather it is a collaboration between such colleagues in a partnership leading to a transformation of learning and teaching. It is believed that such partnerships provide for sustainable contextualised practices leading to life long learning within an environment of increasing pressure on limited resources (Skillen et al. 1998).

Complementing this shift in learning skills practice is the concept of information literacy. Information literacy is founded on the belief that a significant characteristic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is abundance, if not overabundance, of information. The existence of this information does not necessarily create more informed citizens unless there is a complementary understanding and capacity to use the information effectively (Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy [ANZIIL], 2004). ANZIIL (2004, p.3) has developed a set of standards that describe the characteristics of an information literate person. These characteristics describe the information literate person as one who:

- Recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed
- Finds needed information effectively and efficiently
- Critically evaluates information and the information seeking process
- Manages information collected or generated
- Applies prior and new information to construct new concepts or create new understandings
- Uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information.

The standards are therefore grounded in generic skills, information skills and values and beliefs (ANZIL, 2004). It is recognised that information literacy skills enable the students to not only better address the requirements of their tertiary environment, but that they also synchronize with the concept of lifelong learning (Hine et al., 1998) and

generic attributes. It is further recognised that the educational setting is an ideal place to acquire these skills. The standards provide a framework where academic expectations and conventions are made explicit, which needs to occur if students, particularly first year students, are to participate in their new discourse communities (Cope & Kalantzis 1993, cited in Kokkinn 2000). Importantly Hine et al. (1998) assert that a collaborative partnership between academics, librarians, and LSA is needed in order to facilitate the implementation of successful information literacy programs.

Another field of emergent literature also informs the work of the LSA. This literature refers to the concept of the *Generation Y* student – today's student. Krause (2005) asserts that as educators we are still to learn who our current generation of students is. Nonetheless, Krause in her analysis of current research identifies a number of characteristics of the Y Generation. These include: they see themselves as 'clients'; they are looking towards multiple career paths and expect resources to allow them to achieve their goals. In addition, she says, they are in paid employment for a significant number of hours per week, spend less time on campus and make considered decisions about the use of their leisure time or their time spent outside lectures and tutorials. Manuel (2002) relates the literature on Generation Y students to learning style preferences. However, she adds the caution that the Generation Y group displays the varying characteristics of any group and that learning preferences will fluctuate across time. Thus the significance of concept of Generation Y to educators is still emerging. However, 'marketers that capture Gen Y's attention do so by bringing their messages to the places these kids congregate' (Neuborne & Kerwin, 1999, para.11). If this is so, what does it mean to LSAs as we develop models of service delivery that involve Generation Y students? Where are our 'messages' best placed?

It is within the context of this literature on embedding, information literacy and Generation Y, that this paper is written; to share with you the critique and reflections of three professionals from three discipline areas at Charles Sturt University and to illustrate how these reflections have transformed their practices.

## Individual Reflections: Catalyst for Change

### The Learning Skills Adviser

The description of the role of the CSU LSA is well encapsulated in the 2005 Language and Academic Skills conference website which states that 'we work independently, with academic staff ... and other professionals. We provide a range of services ... at different levels of the system ...' (Australian National University, 2005, Who are learning skills advisers/lecturers? para. 1). Such developments are a credit to the staff within the CSU Learning Skills Unit as the unit faces the challenges of addressing the diversity of needs of, not only the on-campus student population across campuses geographically separate from each other, but also a much larger distance education population. The CSU Office of Planning and Audit (2004) identified that 70.8% of CSU students choose to study by distance.

Over approximately the last 10 years the role of the LSA at CSU has shifted from largely (but not only) a one-on-one consultation process to a role that today encompasses the many approaches described above. However, the shift from the integrated to the partnership model referred to by Skillen et al. (1998) is in its infancy. Upon reflection CSU LSAs remain, as expressed by Hine et al. (2002, p.103), "sectors of the university who have traditionally played important yet largely separate supporting roles for students and academics". The resultant processes are often piecemeal and non-systemic, perhaps integrated, and often provided *in addition to* student course work rather than *embedded into* student course work.

The concerns expressed by Skillen et al. (1998) and Reid & Parker; Marcello; and Ramsden (cited in James et al., 2003) when they speak of the issue of inequity within our service are shared. At the end of the day, only a small percentage of students overall are assisted. The provision of support to students also varies between subjects and courses and is inconsistent in its application relying on the working relationships between individuals. One response is to make resources available to all students through the online environment. However, making materials available to students and facilitating student engagement are separate issues, with the latter being the more challenging.

Thus despite all that CSU does to reach its students, there are still many who do not access learning skills services. There are significant numbers who would benefit from doing so, yet do not. The following comments are not uncommon: 'I didn't know you existed'; 'I heard from another student'; 'I wish I had known last year'; 'I didn't come to your workshops because I didn't think I needed them'; or 'I didn't know about the website', 'No, I haven't looked at the website', to name just a few. Such comments also underlie the suggestion that generic skills are seen by many students as quite separate to their university learning.

The CSU Senior Executive Group has 'signalled high level support for a change in focus of learning skills' (Smith & McGowan 2004). As a LSA it is felt that there is a need for change; that there has to be a more effective way to reach students and to facilitate their engagement with the generic skills that LSAs offer. The challenge is how to achieve this.

### **The Academic**

As educators we make many assumptions about students and their learning. Students are not an homogenous group and encompass a diverse cross-section of society in terms of age, ethnicity, experience and ability. Part of the innate challenge of adult education is trying to encourage the development of learners at both ends of the bell curve – high achievers and less competent students – as well as accommodating those who view university in a purely instrumental sense – that is, those for whom the object is to get a degree and get out. A large number of students fall somewhere between these extremes.

In terms of the academic aims and outcomes of the subject JST104 Foundations in Criminology and the Bachelor of Social Science (Criminal Justice) degree generally, the outcomes desired from students were clear. The intention was to foster and encourage independent study, to facilitate the development of a critical attitude and to enable students to develop the ability to make sense of the information encountered. However, the question of what the students themselves wanted was less clear. The important question of whether the agendas of students and academics coincided had not been raised. The basic operating assumption was that students wanted to do as well as they could, but teaching experience has

demonstrated that this assumption is problematic. It is fair to say that academics value learning for the sake of learning; however, it became rapidly apparent that many students saw a university degree only in terms of its instrumental value in the pursuit of employment.

Students were often outspoken in their dissatisfaction with the experience of adapting to tertiary education. There were “no books in the library”, and students regularly complained of “hard marking”. It seemed that the majority of students wanted prescription – many wished only to be given the requisite information to pass the assessments in individual subjects and no more – “tell me what I need to know to pass”. Their frustration was mirrored by that of teaching staff. Often, coaching individual students through to pass level involved lengthy individual consultation, a steady flow of resubmitted essays and, concomitantly, constant re-marking. This process was as time consuming as it was frustrating. Many hours providing feedback resulted in the reappearance of the same mistakes, and often the same students.

At the same time, a widespread problem in terms of academic skilling and academic ethics on the part of students became apparent, particularly in regards to the acknowledgement and evaluation of sources. Of particular concern was the question of plagiarism, which was discovered in work submitted by students at various stages in their university careers, ranging from first year undergraduates through to honours students, Masters students and doctoral candidates.

Over the six years from 1999 to 2004, a wide variety of techniques were trialled in attempting to address and remedy these issues. These included one and half-day workshops, lectures on writing a university essay and research skills, sending students to university LSAs and a database exercise which formed a component of the major essay and which assessed the ability of students to operate citation and full-text databases. However, these attempts seemed unable to produce the desired results, particularly in terms of remedying the problem of plagiarism and other academic misconduct. These experiments were all underpinned by the assumptions of the traditional model (noted earlier) and seemed to fail for that very reason.

It became clear that there was a need for adaptation and innovation if there was to be change. In 2004 the decision was made to think far more systematically about teaching practice and subject development. In particular, there was a shift in focus to the fostering of deep or strategic learning rather than just surface learning. Rather than the ability to merely recite learned material by rote, the desired outcome was to develop the capacity of students to understand and to think critically. In the process of working through the practicalities of attempting to foster change within student attitudes and practices, it became apparent that what had been interpreted as active resistance in the past was in fact a lack of suitable tools and techniques. The manner in which students had previously been presented with material now appeared counter-intuitive.

### **The Librarian**

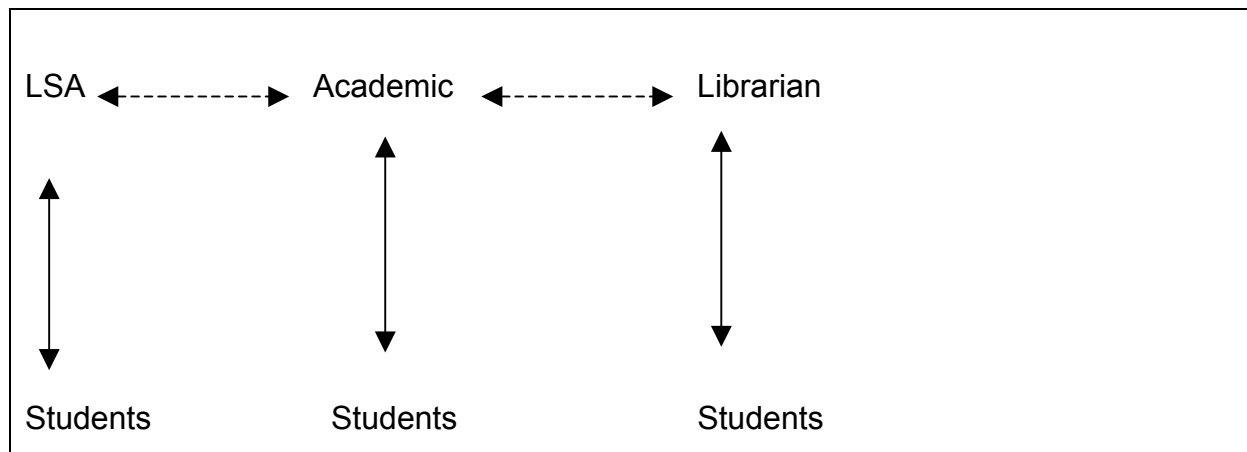
At the same time, the way in which Information Literacy was being implemented was being questioned. The Information Literacy model is a vision for imparting generic and information skills. It aspires to developing these skills within the educational process that will later be transferred to the workplace and all areas of lifelong learning. In an ideal world, the model is embedded as part of the education process, and because it focuses on information it has been embraced by librarians. It informs the 'client service' attitude of most librarians, particularly in university settings. Information literacy has been embraced by librarians, but the wider university community needs to be committed to it if successful outcomes are to be achieved (ANZIIL 2004; Hine et al., 2002; Lupton, 2004 & Rockman, 2002).

Currently library skills classes or other activities are always associated with an assignment or real information need. This encourages the students to engage with what is being taught. Where possible, to increase effectiveness of classes or tutorials a mark is associated with an activity related to the assignment; for example, students may hand in an activity related to finding academic articles and other information for an essay. The aim is always to help the students engage with the process by making it relevant to their current needs. However, until recently, they were held in isolation to other generic skills processes and the focus has been on information retrieval, rather than the wider information literacy picture.

Although the information literacy model has been adopted by librarians, the main focus of their teaching is on information retrieval and information seeking. This is because of a lack of time, and as a rule librarians are not qualified to teach areas of the information literacy model such as writing and using the information (Standards 4 and 5 (ANZIL, 2004)). An approach was needed to alleviate this problem and offer students a more complete approach to learning how to be information literate.

## A meeting of like minds

Note that these individual reflections were occurring in isolation, in *important yet largely separate parts of the university*. The following model illustrates this approach.



*Diagram 1: The Traditional Model*

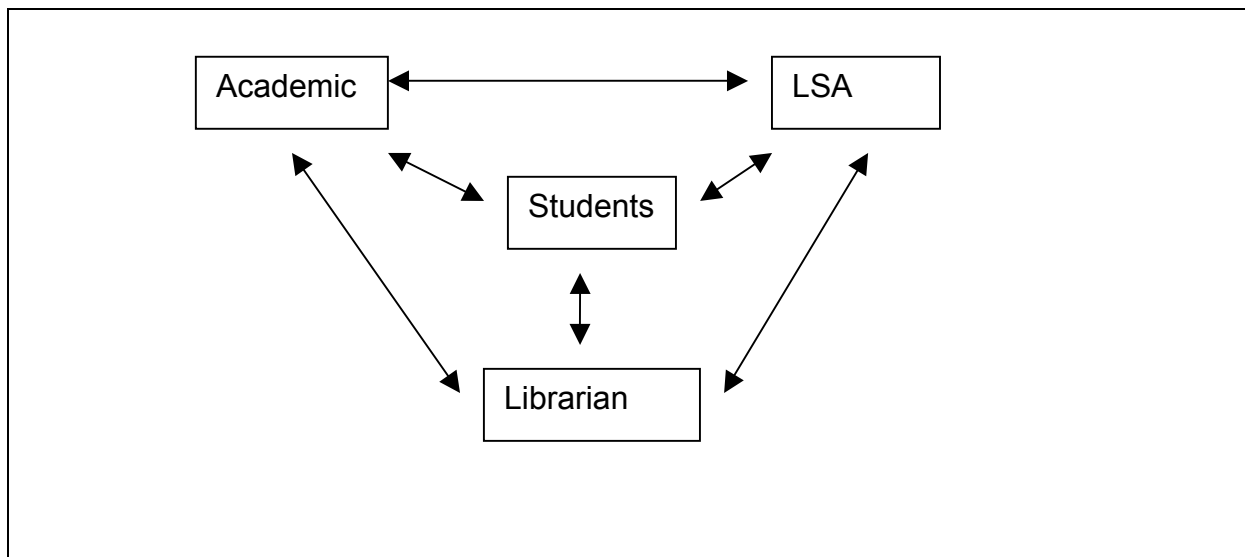
How did the thinking of three individuals from different parts of the university come together?

One change already introduced into the work of the LSA was to physically position the LSA in the library for part of the working week– the hub of Bathurst CSU campus. From this grew a close working relationship with library staff and a better understanding of the way we worked and wanted to work. We learnt that we had similar beliefs with respect to information literacy and collaborative partnerships. The academic, also recognising a need and wanting to address that need, had contact with the librarian with a view to embedding the information retrieval component of information literacy into JST104. This was the beginning of a three way partnership

and the development of a model that united and embedded information literacy and generic skills processes.

### **A New Direction: The partnership model**

This new approach was then trialled within a core first year, first semester subject JST104 in the Bachelor of Social Science, Criminal Justice which operates from the Bathurst Charles Sturt University Campus. The course is offered to both on-campus (internal) and off campus (distance education) students but this approach was trialled with the on-campus student cohort in this first instance. The aim was to create a systemic partnership model involving a LSA, librarian and academic, in which the students were central and in which generic skills were embedded within an information literacy framework. This is illustrated in the following diagram.



*Diagram 2: The New Model*

JST104 had two lectures and one tutorial each week. One lecture per week was allocated to the new model.

The first step was to negotiate the generic skills students needed to successfully meet the expectations of the subject and to relate these to what it means to be an information literate person in that subject. It was always the belief that such skills went far beyond this one subject but across subjects and beyond university studies.

A summary follows:

<b>Information Literacy Model</b>	<b>Subject Skills &amp; Knowledge</b> <i>*assessment attached</i>
Recognise when information is needed	Understanding what lecturers expect Analysing assignment questions Thinking critically*
Locate information	Finding journal articles * Thinking critically
Evaluate information	Recognising different information forms Thinking critically
Use information (to meet the requirements of the subject)	Thinking critically Avoiding plagiarism * Referencing * Essay writing Exam preparation

(Note critical thinking underlies all aspects of the model)

A semester program was developed. The program and rationale were discussed with the students and an outline of lectures disseminated. The librarian and LSA delivered the lectures alongside the academic who was present and actively involved in the discussions. Lectures were referred to as workshops.

Assessment included four tasks which were explained in the lecture and posted on the subject forum. The tasks attracted a mark in the subject (5%). A fifth 'task' consisted of a series of reflective questions allowing students to comment on the overall process. These four tasks were to be compiled into a portfolio submitted by the students to the lecturer at two points in time. They were viewed by the lecturer but marked by the librarian and LSA. The first submission date was set at the mid semester break to allow the 'markers' to view student progress and comment. It was believed that timely feedback was important. The portfolios were not graded at this submission point and students were encouraged to address any feedback prior to final submission of the portfolio. Overall feedback was provided in the next workshop.

Some tasks were heavily scaffolded, as the aim was that students would be successful. Students were also encouraged to seek help with any of the tasks to enable student learning. The portfolios were submitted for marking in week 12.

## **Evaluation Overview**

Evaluation took a number of forms.

- UAIs for entry into the 2005 course were the same as 2004. Thus a comparison of the performance of students on the major assignment (an essay) across the two years was possible. Although it was acknowledged that there would be many confounding variables, it was thought this might be an interesting indicator to investigate, although not possible at this time.
- Students provided qualitative feedback through their own reflections on the workshop process.
- A comparison between student attendance at the JST104 workshops (optional) and the generic workshops (optional), offered on campus but in addition to lectures during the same time period, was possible.
- Informal observations were possible. Student interest was observed noting where students sat and whether they participated. This is insightful since the lecture was unfortunately timetabled in the largest tiered lecture theatre on Bathurst campus. Students are often seen seated in the top tiers despite many empty seats in the lower tiers.

## **How did attendance compare with optional generic workshops?**

Attendance at the optional generic workshops held in addition to subject lectures varied. Possible maximum numbers were 30. Initial workshops attracted close to anticipated numbers with attendance waning significantly and quickly as the session progressed, with numbers dropping to 50% and lower. It was also noted that a core group of students attended the full range of topics.

Attendance at the JST lectures (n=65) was consistently high in all sessions at approximately 85-90%. It was also observed that the students sat at the front of this

very large theatre, and there was participation even though the venue made this very difficult.

## **What did the students say?**

Following is an overview of student reflection and feedback in which themes could be identified. It was first thought that perhaps students might be selective and guarded in their comments as they would be viewed by the lecturer, but an analysis of the responses allayed this concern.

### **Transition to University**

- I found that the majority of topics were useful as I begin my first semester at university and was having difficulty adapting to what the university expected.
- I found the university to be more approachable ...this workshop identified people within the university whom I could approach when having problems with my study.
- Allowed me to see the standard of what was required in university papers.
- I appreciated the efforts made by a class to assist new students in getting to grips with essay writing at university, as it is a much different process to essay writing in secondary school.
- They allowed us to ask questions and feel more comfortable with university work. They also aided in the transition to university.
- I was scared about writing essays, but they built up my confidence in my writing skills

### **Transfer across other subjects**

- They provided information on referencing and plagiarism, and that they had application across all subjects.
- Helped me understand what was expected of me when writing the essay and all university grade assignments.
- I found the workshops helped me in the communication skills area in not just criminology but all the subjects I am currently studying.
- I am able to use the explanations provided by library staff in completing searches ... in all my subjects.

- I found the topics on essay writing really helped me to understand what lecturer's wanted in essays not only for this subject but for all of my subjects.
- I found this [essay writing] helped me a lot, especially in my PSY111 essay.
- The workshops allowed me to adjust the assignments that I have already written so that I could get the best marks I could.

### **Concept of embedding**

- It allowed us to gain a practical understanding of referencing, something I previously didn't understand and probably still wouldn't if not for the workshops.
- I learnt skills I would have otherwise found difficult as I wouldn't have gone to a library workshop.
- We were told all through our first week of Uni that plagiarism is a serious offence, yet no other subject offered much support in TEACHING us how to reference properly.
- I liked it when they made the workshops relevant to our course, especially when we learnt how to write essays.

### **Thinking Skills**

- I have always taken things at face value. Now I ask why ...
- It made me think about the wider picture and not just accept whatever I read as the only truth.
- I think the workshops were very helpful in assisting me with my critical thinking, as although it's not something new to me it is somewhat different than it was in high school.
- I have started to understand my subjects more and am starting to look at things in a different context now.
- I didn't have clue what it [critical thinking] was until I attended the workshop.
- They forced me to think about my assignment earlier than I usually would have.
- I enjoyed the information it [the workshop] gave me about finding journal articles; without this information I wouldn't have been able to find the articles I wanted.

## **Other comments**

- I found the workshops to be repetitive of the stuff I learnt at school and learnt in other subjects ... but then again I have been to a good school and been to university previously.
- Things we learnt in workshops had been covered by other teachers and classes, but that is not a bad thing.
- ... the workshops seemed to go on a little long and seemed that many things just keep getting repeated.

## **What did students say they wanted?**

### **Students wanted**

- A workshop booklet for future reference
- More in depth exercises
- More interaction
- More weekly exercises
- A different venue
- A condensed period
- More hands on
- More topics
- More coordination with other subjects –writing different assignments
- Timing – Weekly? Block?? Earlier?
- More library input.

## **Further Reflection**

It was recognised at the outset that this was a trial which would require modification if continued. Initial thinking was that this process was different and new for CSU, but wasn't necessarily different and new for other universities. This model is used within 'Writing across the Curriculum' in various universities in the United States ( Elmborg, 2003; Jacobson & MacKay, 2004; Samson & McGranath, 2004) and in some universities in Australia (Hine et al. 2002). However, it seems that generally the collaboration in other models tends to be between academics and the library under the banner of information literacy (which was really information retrieval), or

academics and LSAs under the banner of embedding generic skills, rather than collaboration between the academic, library and LSA within the true intent of the information literacy model.

Upon reflection what was significant?

- The decision to document the process proved to be critical to what has resulted from this trial. The documentation process forced a deep reflection and critique, which also involved listening to student feedback.
- A real partnership, bringing together three important sectors in the university, has been forged. As a result the teaching and learning in JST104 is being transformed.

### **Where to from here**

- A new model is being developed which will be expanded to include both on campus and distance education students.
- Scalability is being addressed. The development team is mindful of the need for flexibility within the new model to allow for embedding within other disciplines.
- Interest across the CSU campuses has been generated. CSU senior management, through the CSU Student Experience Strategy, has indicated support.
- A product that is flexible, sustainable and scalable will soon be possible to offer academics when they respond to the question, 'Are you happy with the quality of your students' work?'
- Finally, within this new model generic skills are now placed within an information literacy framework enhancing the relevance of generic skills to

students by placing such learning within the context of an information rich world into which graduates will soon enter.

## Conclusion

Many CSU academics share the views expressed in this paper and recognise the need for an integrated approach to generic and information skills. The time appears ripe for such a model.

It is hoped the reflections, critique and developments discussed in this paper may help others when reflecting on the direction of their practices.

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## Email in a 'thirdspace': enhancing intercultural communication

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**Abstract:** *Intercultural communication has traditionally focussed on knowing other cultures and finding ways to bring about more harmonious interaction but it can also be considered as taking place in a dimension where participants make use of their different cultural positions to negotiate better understandings that reduce any power differentials that might exist between them. This idea raises the possibility that, rather than an us/them binary which tends to position one side of the binary as dominant and the other deficient in some way there is a 'thirdspace' (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996) that can allow for deeper understandings between those who are in positions of power and those who may be marginalised. It has been suggested that email has the potential to include previously marginalised groups and close the gap between staff and students in educational settings (Thomas 2003; Cope & Kalantzis 2000). This paper is an initial exploration of how a study of email interactions between academics and international research students might lead to better understandings of what is happening in intercultural communication and offer insights into how it could be enhanced. In an environment where one of the challenges for Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers is to look for ways to enhance intercultural communication in the university, the notion of 'thirdspace' provides an important source for exploration and reflection.*

**Key words:** *Intercultural communication, electronic communication, lecturer-student relationships*

## **Introduction**

Communication in the context of higher education is often of an intercultural nature and this is due in part to the fact that international students make up a significant proportion of the student body. Much of this communication takes place via email with little attention given to the cultural expectations and levels of linguistic competence that users may have. Email has rapidly established itself as a major aspect of everyday life in universities. It has become accepted as a neutral medium and its limitations glossed over as irritations rather than analysed in order to improve communication. This tendency to 'take it for granted' can lead to an underestimation of the effect that misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication might have on relationships between academic staff and international students. Although the use of email is rarely a new experience for the international student, unfamiliarity with linguistic and cultural practices has the potential to leave students feeling alienated and less confident about taking their place in the academic community.

LAS advisers have a pivotal role in improving communication between academic staff and international students. They are well placed to help bring about more effective communication as their work includes mediating between academic staff and students and interpreting the discourses and practices of the academy (Melles, 2001). As a diverse group traditionally marginalised in universities where content is privileged over skills, LAS advisers are beginning to take a more strategically productive position (Percy & Stirling, 2003, p. 59). This unique position enables them to act as instigators of change engaging in discussions with academic staff, unpacking cultural differences and assisting in bringing about improvements in learning and teaching for different groups of staff and students.

A staff-student relationship for which LAS involvement in intercultural communication is particularly relevant is that between supervisors and international research students. This relationship relies on intensive negotiation and collaboration over time and its development can be relegated to a minor position as participants focus on the

task of completing research and producing a thesis. Yet neither party is necessarily prepared for the process of intercultural communication required. Supervisors, who are likely to be untrained in intercultural awareness, may be influenced by discourses that position international students as deficient (Bullen & Kenway, 2003). International students may lack confidence in language use and be unsure of what to expect in the relationship. Miscommunication can result from assumptions that are thought to be shared but are not and misunderstandings of politeness strategies that are culturally determined (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Misunderstandings like these can lead to altered perceptions about the skills and abilities of the international research student (Cargill, 2000). For many international research students the supervisor is the only contact with the academic community and this isolation is exacerbated by the requirement that they adjust to what may be an unfamiliar academic and cultural context (Knight, 1999). In addition to these potential areas of difficulty in the relationship, an added dimension is introduced when some or all student-supervisor interactions take place through email.

An understanding of intercultural communication from the perspective of a 'thirdspace' (Soja, 1996) can lead to more conscious and careful interaction in the spaces between different cultural positions, resulting in more satisfactory email relationships between academic staff and international research degree students. In order to look at how this intercultural relationship could be strengthened it is first necessary to explore the notion of 'thirdspace' and its role in enhancing intercultural understandings before discussing email in the university setting and its potential for assisting or inhibiting relationships between academic staff and international research students. Some reflections are also provided on the role of LAS advisers in enhancing these intercultural interactions.

### **Intercultural communication**

Much of the research in intercultural communication has focussed on establishing and finding ways to mitigate cultural differences and is based on the belief that improving knowledge about a culture can bring about harmonious interaction. Cultural knowledge is an element of successful intercultural communication but when it promotes a focus on difference, implying the strengthening of boundaries between cultures, it can create an us/them binary which tends to position one side or category

as dominant and the other deficient simply because it is different. The us/them binary puts in place boundaries that leave no space in between, no potential for a 'we' in which working with cultural difference can produce new and creative meanings. When cultural interaction is perceived in terms of a binary there is the potential for stereotyping and ethnocentrism. Opening up the binary and perceiving intercultural relations as taking place in a space that recognises and respects the boundary positions seems to be an approach that is more equitable and empowering for all.

### **Space and identity**

Once thought of as neutral and unrelated to the social world, 'space' has come to be conceived of as a complex and contradictory notion (Usher, 2002). However, it is one that is useful for extending our understanding of social relations. One of the first to recognise the renewed importance of space was Lefebvre who developed a 'trialectic' of space which included, the perceived or 'real' space, the conceived or 'imagined' space and the lived space, a combination of both the 'real' and the 'imagined' (Soja, 1996, p. 10). This multidimensional perception of space focuses on the process of the production of space rather than space itself (Shields, 1999, p. 167). These considerations of the complex relationships of spatial perception opened up different ways of thinking about space particularly in terms of social relations. Conceiving of the production of space as involving a 'breaking down' of boundaries between different cultural positions allows for attitudes and thinking that work productively with binaries. Because it is able to transcend binary categories, space has the potential to 'draw selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives' (Soja, 1996, p.5). Thus categories that are very different can work together to generate new knowledges and understandings in a 'thirdspace'. Thus 'thirdspace' acts as a scaffold, a way of seeing connections and empowering the inhabitants of social spaces. It is not a static or fixed space but one which is continually open to challenge and change.

A related understanding of this 'thirdspace' is as a 'contact zone', a social space where cultures meet and make contact with each other in asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination (Pratt, 1992, p.4). A hybrid space is produced that resists essentialised stereotypes which suppress difference and mask power

hierarchies (Bhabha, 1994). This hybrid space is also a site of struggle as subjects attempt to develop a strong sense of self while responding to an 'other'. The 'other' is not outside or beyond the participants but emerges within the intercultural interaction. (Bhabha, 1990, p.4) It is in this struggle for identity that 'newness enters the world' and the productive nature of the third space is realised (Bhabha, 1994, p.212). It is in this hybrid, dynamic space that communication between academic staff and international research students can be positioned. Both the academic and the international research student are 'othered' to a degree as each attempts to create new understandings. Rather than stereotyping and making assumptions about how the 'other' should act, the 'thirdspace' allows each to search for an understanding of the world of the 'other'. This process frees the mind to explore new possibilities for relating that rely on mutuality and reciprocity.

### **Virtual space**

Much has been made of the enabling aspects of the electronic world where virtual connections between people can function to produce community in the same way as a real world community exists (Rheingold, 2000). The virtual environment has the potential to function as 'town square', a place where the voice of the underrepresented can be heard more frequently (Ma, 2000). Research in education has also been influenced by the spatial theories of Lefebvre and Bhabha showing the virtual to be a cultural space where the knowledges of students from different cultures can be shared in a separate 'thinking space' beyond the usual learning environment (Williamson & DeSouza, 2002; Moje et al., 2004). The positive nature of the virtual space is also understood to enhance the learning experience by helping to engage students, by opening up an affective channel thus providing a new dimension not found in face-to-face communication (Sunderland, 2002). It may allow students and academics more freedom to construct a range of possible selves that actually enhance their roles as student and teacher (Moran & Hawisher, 1997, p.92). New versions of the self can be developed and participants can share their thoughts 'without being distracted by other social cues' (Ma, 2000, p.97). Thus technological or virtual space can be characterised as a space where there are 'a multiplicity of possibilities and potentialities' rather than as an empty space (Usher, 2002, p.51). Because of the lack of audio and visual cues available to communicators, virtual

space is seen more as neutral territory that allows additional identity positions to be explored.

In discussions of the virtual world as a site of community and in some education research there has been a tendency to emphasise the positive aspects of virtual communication but recent studies are less enthusiastic about the potential offered by virtual space. They claim, for instance, that the absence of extra-linguistic cues, rather than being neutral territory, leave the potential for communication breakdown and alienation from meaningful interaction (Mann, 2005). In addition, the equality suggested by the online community is not necessarily present in educational institutions where disparate power relations often exist (Hodgson & Reynolds, cited in Mann, 2005). A more useful model for intercultural interactions involves the notion of dialogue and discussion about the differences and inequalities within the learning environment (Mann, 2005). This model can be likened to the approach that might be taken by those interacting using a 'thirdspace' understanding. Virtual spaces then, have the potential to allow the boundaries between those with power and those in a marginalised position to be negotiated and differences appreciated, but are by no means automatically bestowed with this quality. It is how the virtual space is used by participants in interaction that will decide if a virtual space is also a 'thirdspace' interculturally.

### **Email in the university setting**

Email has become just one of several different forms of virtual communication assisting the business of learning and teaching in the University and as such, tends to be taken for granted. However, while the email mode seems neutral, it does, like any technology, affect the process of communication. Perhaps most obvious of these is how to manage increased volumes of mail as it comes to be used by more people (Hawisher & Moran, 1993; Thomas, 2003). For some, email has been recognised as an invasive technology that produces additional invisible work for academics (Hawisher & Moran, 1993). Students too can easily be overwhelmed by the volume of mail they are required to read that is generated by their classmates or lecturers. Issues of email overload are important because they can lead to users becoming dissatisfied with the medium and abandoning it or not using it to its best advantage.

It is in the area of language learning that much research into email use has taken place. While not all international research students are language learners or non-native speakers, a discussion of their email use has many parallels with this research because of the relationship between language and culture. An intercultural relationship is often also one where at least one participant is a non-native user of the language involved. Non-native speakers are considered to have a preference for email use because it is perceived to be a less confronting channel than spoken interaction (Bloch, 2002). By writing the message the non-native speaker can avoid the embarrassment of mistakes or misunderstandings. Because there is time to craft the message and correct mistakes before sending, it is a 'safer' channel. However this advantage can also be a disadvantage for the non-native speaker as the absence of extra-linguistic cues such as facial expression and feedback in the interaction can amplify misunderstandings and lead to communication breakdown. Non-native speakers may be unaware of instances of communication breakdown or lack strategies to deal with breakdowns when they do occur (Stockwell, 2004). They may be unable to interpret the extra-linguistic aspects of the communication such as management of 'chronemics' or the length of the pause between email messages (Wood & Smith, 2001, p.37).

Despite these difficulties that non-native speakers may have with email there is enthusiastic support for the use of email to assist in the task of language learning. Email use may have value in providing an additional opportunity to practice written forms. Thorne (2003) found that language learners in a peer collaboration context showed development in language proficiency simply because of the extra opportunity to use the language. However, more practice does not alone guarantee success in developing writing skills. There is a need to understand and produce an appropriate style for each writing context. While informal emails are like a personal letter, they also have more formal purposes particularly in the academic context. Email is often thought of as speech written down or as a hybrid linguistic form and thus it requires online written conventions that do not apply in other writing contexts (Moran & Hawisher, 1997). These conventions are not always clearly defined for non-native speakers. While Warschauer (1999) suggests writing email messages as an example of an authentic writing task and Swales and Feak (2004) include email communication in their academic writing text, there is little general acknowledgement

of the different genres of email and how they should be used. This is some justification for using email in language development activities as it requires that the writer decide from the range of linguistic choices available which is suitable for the particular situation (Crystal 2001 cited in Bloch 2002). This research points to some of the issues where intercultural communication in the academic context is by email and has relevance for international research students who are learning academic culture and often language as well.

### **The role of email in relationship development**

Email does not have an automatic association with the development of relationships and is most likely to be of value in strengthening one that already exists. For a relationship to grow suggests that dialogue is developed and many exchanges take place over time. This is not the expectation in the majority of email communications between academic staff and international students. Rarely is there an expectation that a relationship will develop. In many email exchanges the focus is on information and there may be only one or two exchanges on a topic. Research on email has tended to focus more on the purpose of email messages such as whether they were for requesting, negotiating or reporting. (Lee, 2004; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). Friedman and Currall refer to the isolation of the sender and describe much email as 'profoundly anti social' (2003, p.7) claiming that it can escalate disputes in a way that would not happen in face-to-face interaction. These studies can be useful in terms of describing for what purposes email is best employed but they do not offer much in the way of understanding how relationships develop.

In other studies there is a focus on the informal interaction that is possible in email and how it can help develop relationships (Swales & Feak, 2004; Bloch, 2002). This implies improved educational outcomes, as students are able to build relationships with academic staff. The potential for a more personal communication style can serve to challenge the hierarchical relationship between academic staff and students (Moran & Hawisher 1997). Much of the research in this area involves researchers examining their own email interactions with students and is concerned with the impact of email communication on the roles of student and academic (Thomas, 2003; Sunderland, 2002; Bloch, 2002). There is an attempt to show how the email exchange has provided an additional space that adds an affective dimension to the

relationship. One reason that this social, non-hierarchical aspect is possible is because the medium allows direct access to individuals without requiring a 'gatekeeper', as would have happened in the past (Ma, 2000, p.96).

How can this knowledge of email and its potential to affect relationships influence interactions between academic staff and international research students? In the research degree context a hierarchical relationship is taken for granted and has been likened to a 'familial model' which places the supervisor as parent and the candidate as child (Bartlett & Mercer 2000). However, there is an emerging understanding of the relationship as being just one in the student's research network and thus much more than 'an isolated dyadic relationship' (Green, 2005, p.153). Nevertheless the unique features of the relationship mean that it lends itself to an electronic dimension which could assist in reducing the effect of its hierarchical nature. The association is generally sustained, lasting from two to four years which allows time for a relationship to develop. The relationship usually also includes a face-to-face dimension which can function to moderate some of the negative aspects of electronic communication. If there is a commitment to building a successful intercultural relationship, one that builds on the strengths of each participant, one where there is 'shared understanding and mutual respect' (Sandeman-Gay, 1999, p.41), then this would seem to be a suitable location for an investigation of the potential for interaction in the 'thirdspace'.

### **Email analysis**

If 'thirdspace' can be a useful concept in understanding intercultural communication what can it offer to an examination of email texts? An examination of the texts created by academics and international research students can indicate what is happening in intercultural communication. Studies of how users have adapted to the medium (Sunderland, 2002); or the topics they choose (Bloch, 2002) provide some insight into the development of relationships especially in the role of social and informal language but this can be extended by using a more detailed discourse analysis of texts. The analysis can indicate if participants are attempting to break down the boundaries between their different cultural positions or reinforcing power differentials that exist in the relationship such as instances of academic staff speaking as 'us', as 'legitimate knower instructing the cultural 'other' (Doherty, 2004, p.9). The analysis can search for any attempts to subvert these disparate power

relations and explore the potential provided, both by the virtual space and by 'thirdspace', to enhance email communication.

The results of an investigation of what is taking place through email interactions and the potential for elements of 'thirdspace' interaction can inform a more inclusive climate for interactions between supervisors and international research students. The process can be assisted by LAS advisers in their unique position on the margins of the disciplines. They can be instigators of research into intercultural email interaction and as language specialists and academic skills experts they are ideally placed to apply their knowledge to a close textual analysis. The results of such research could point to practical strategies for email users that would assist them to communicate beyond the binary model that imposes an us/them dichotomy and thus to enhance intercultural communication in the university.

## Conclusion

The notion of 'thirdspace' can be used to inform an investigation of email interactions between academic staff and international research students. By understanding how binary thinking strengthens boundaries between participants and has the potential to marginalise, those engaging in intercultural communication in the university can enhance their communication via email. The role of LAS advisers, as supplemental to the relationship between academic staff and the international research students they supervise, can be to initiate changes and mediate between staff and students so that improved email communication can assist intercultural relationships and benefit learning and teaching in the university.

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## **Creating a Rich Environment: Co-operation between academic support and disciplinary teaching staff**

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**Abstract:** *The emphasis on quality in higher education learning and teaching has heightened appreciation of the role of academic support staff and resulted in increased co-operative efforts between subject teachers and academic support staff. Other researchers have investigated various forms of co-operation, and examples include Murphy and Stewart (2002): subject content assistance; Ramburuth (1999): language development; and Zhu (2004): academic writing. This paper explores the vital role that collaborative relationships can play in the development and presentation of effective student learning programs. There are clear benefits for student learning from contextualised and relevant programs that emerge from these co-operative ventures. At the same time, there are also benefits for staff from both areas. When working with each other in program development staff are introduced to each others' ways of looking at the world, or 'literacies' (Street, 2004). As both perspectives are presented (Lave & Wenger, 1991) a new environment is created, which combines*

*both the academic support and the disciplinary view. This rich environment impacts positively on students, contextualising instruction in the academic support program. The outcome is that students understand the situated nature of successful interaction and communication, and learn that no one approach is suitable for all situations. Thus, students develop understandings at a 'meta level', preparing them for future work in unknown settings. In this paper, we explore some facets of the new collaborative environment that meld learning approaches with unstated disciplinary assumptions and expectations. We investigate these relationships and outcomes in relation to some established programs.*

**Key words:** *learning enhancement cooperation*

## **Introduction**

Higher education is currently subject to strong accountability pressures, some of which can be attributed to the pursuit of quality assurance. In their turn, teaching and learning have come under greater scrutiny, partly in response to a changing student demographic. The phenomenon of a diverse student profile including large numbers of international students studying on shore in Australian universities, is a significant factor that has impacted on higher education. One result is that disciplinary teachers and academic support staff have been drawn into a closer peer relationship because they find themselves sharing a common need; namely, to provide quality teaching and learning to a diverse student population.

In practice, this may mean that disciplinary staff will refer students in need of study assistance to an academic support unit where the programs and advice may be generalised in nature, while others may offer a range of programs to support study in the disciplines. In other settings, academic support operating alongside faculties is able to provide programs and advice that supports learning in the disciplines. This work is carried out in an even more disciplinary-focussed context when academic support staff are located in the faculty, integrating their programs, and advice into the disciplinary setting and working collaboratively with disciplinary teachers. We believe that these latter 'in faculty' programs are the most advantageous for student learning

in that they make a clear link between disciplinary knowledge and its underpinning academic approaches and skills. Furthermore, the process of students seeking study assistance is normalised as academic support is perceived as just another facet of the faculty's operation.

In this paper, we emphasise the value of student learning programs that arise from collaboration between disciplinary and academic support staff. As the world views of both these parties overlap in collaborative work, a forum is created, which is richly impregnated with disciplinary values and assumptions, and those of academic support with its focus on student learning. The result is that in the collaboratively-developed programs, study approaches in the form of thought patterns, learning and writing are contextualised and perceived as a social practice. Thus, the disciplinary values and assumptions are understood by students as shaping their learning and writing. We also highlight in this paper that a most important benefit from this approach is students developing understandings of the unique properties that shape communication and learning in different contexts, so that they develop what may be seen as 'meta level' modes of operation. The outcome of this, we argue, is that students are better positioned for their lives on graduation, when they will operate in new and yet unforeseen situations.

Firstly, we outline previous research on academic support-disciplinary collaboration, and then discuss the productive and therefore rich environment that characterises our approach. We present a conceptualisation of the collaborative environment, and then provide examples from established practice, including 'Legal Language for Commercial Law', 'First Year Management' and an Academic Transition Program.

## **Reviewing Collaborative Programs**

We recognise that collaboration between academic support and disciplinary staff is not a new concept, and some of its advantages for student learning have already been proclaimed. For example, Murphy and Stewart (2002) used evaluation processes to determine the value of a collaborative program and subsequently as justification for integrating academic support into the formal faculty teaching material.

They argue that there is a link between academic support input and increased student understanding of subject content. Similarly, Webb, Zhang and Sillitoe (2000) explain that the development of a stand-alone guide for students, to circumvent problems of students missing language support classes due to pressure of contact hours and clashes, arose from the collaborative work of academic support staff and faculty lecturers. Ramburuth (1999) in discussing graduate students, is concerned with the diversity of student language and how that impacts on learning. She notes that where language support is within faculties, it is more attractive to students, is seen to have a higher status and more likely to be supported by academic staff.

Collaborative programs are also claimed to have a positive impact on the affective aspects of student learning. Brackley and Palmer (2002) in reporting on a post graduate nursing course in which academic support advisers worked both alongside subject lecturers in an integrated program, point out that, for students, the results were an improved academic experience with an increased likelihood that work would be submitted on time.

Advantages of collaboration for academic support and disciplinary staff are also noted in the literature. Brackley and Palmer (2002) cite the positive outcomes from integration, based on collaboration. They make the point that devoting time to developing a relationship with the faculty lecturer can enable a better understanding of each other's expertise; for the faculty lecturer this can mean adopting new teaching methods, developing a better-structured class and learning to understand students' need to understand assessment. They suggest that this collaboration means a deepening of understanding of learning and teaching for faculty, including a broadening of responsibility to include sociopolitical dimensions of the subject. For the language adviser, collaboration has meant learning about evaluating courses and their impact on students (Brackley & Palmer 2002).

Similar advantages of collaboration are reported by Catterall (2002, p.37) who sees the language adviser as 'sounding board', 'collaborator', 'learning expert' and 'outside expert' and in turn cites Shulman (in Catterall, 2002) who claims that through these teaching partnerships, there is a break from the isolation experienced in the classroom. This partnership provides advantages for the language skills adviser because it allows for listening and learning about the content, and for the faculty

lecturer, it is an opportunity to learn how to be more focussed on a student centred teaching methodology.

The transformative nature of the relationship for both parties is discussed by James et al. (2003). Through integration, the sharing of knowledge and understanding produces feelings of collegiality. Collaboration occurs through informal discussion and when freed from constraints, both parties needs can emerge from the discussion. Stressing the importance of being exposed to other examples of collaboration in order to understand possible strategies, James et al. (2003) highlight the point that the art of collaboration includes respect for the other's contribution. Lee (as cited in James et al. 2003, p.134) speaks of 'co-production of knowledges', and Harper (as cited in James et al. 2003) claims the conditions for collaboration are reflection and discussion. Using an adaption of Kolb's learning circle to explain the transformation through knowledge to negotiation, implementation and reflection, they refer to Harper's term 'the arts of the contact zone' (James et al. 2003, p. 136). These ideas remind us that collaboration is more than a set of steps; it is transformative of people's practices and values (James et al. 2003). We share the perspective expounded by James et al. (2003) of collaboration for transformation. We make the point that the optimal mode for developing programs that meet student needs is indeed one that creates conditions for transformation and it is this rich environment that allows the transformation in terms of understandings of student learning that we intend to explore further.

### **The Resource-Rich Environment of Disciplinary and Academic Support Staff Collaboration**

The collaboration that arises in faculty-embedded settings has multiple benefits. It is a particular strength for institutions and disciplinary teachers as they strive to enhance the quality of student learning. For students, collaboratively-developed programs reveal both the assumptions and expectations of study in the disciplines, at the same time as making relevant and meaningful the skills and expertise they require for successful negotiation of the discipline. The disciplinary staff member learns about the different ways their students learn through insights into the expertise of academic support staff, while the latter learn about the prevailing disciplinary values and assumptions that shape students' approaches for successful learning in those disciplines. In sum, such rich resources arising from the melding of the

understandings of academic support and disciplinary staff establish a forum from which learning for both the academic support and disciplinary staff can occur, and from which highly- contextualised student learning programs can develop.

Through student learning programs that arise from this setting, students' academic operations function as social practice (Bazerman, 1988; Myers, 1989; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Crosling & Pavlidis, 2002). This approach may be compared with a generic, skills-based approach, where academic writing (including any underpinning cognitive pattern) is assumed to be 'simply objective, impersonal and informational' (Hyland, as cited in Crosling & Pavlidis, 2002). Students are encouraged to operate with their eyes open to the practices privileged by their disciplines, are able to develop a deeper understanding of how to take part in these, and how to demonstrate these in disciplinary communication.

When students have appropriated approaches privileged within the disciplines and thus implicitly appreciate the variation of preferred approaches across disciplines, they are positioned to be better able to function successfully in new and yet unimagined future situations. The differences or similarities across disciplines may also be made explicit and explained in terms of disciplinary value systems in student learning programs. This underpins the development of students' understanding at the 'meta level', 'equipping them with skills that will enable them to decode' the norms and modes of operation in new situations (Crosling, 2004, p. 9). In this way, our views expressed above concur with those of Street (2004) expressed in relation to student writing. Street (2004) explains that in 'the new communicative order' (p. 18) study skills and academic socialisation of students may need to be viewed in a wider context. Rather than a situation of either study skills or academic socialisation, a model needs to include the multimodal dimensions of communication in use in a faculty. Street's (2004) views also align with our concern that what is implicitly understood in faculties needs be made explicit.

For academic skills units there are flow on benefits from working in 'in faculty' programs because our expertise becomes readily accepted as a facet of faculty offerings, thereby countering the argument that academic skills work is limited to one of student learning 'expert' (Zhu, 2004), or to remedial work with students who are somehow deficient. We suggest that in situations where disciplinary and academic

support staff truly collaborate, they create a collegiate relationship rather than one that sees the academic staff member as a service provider.

## **Framing Academic Support and Disciplinary Collaboration**

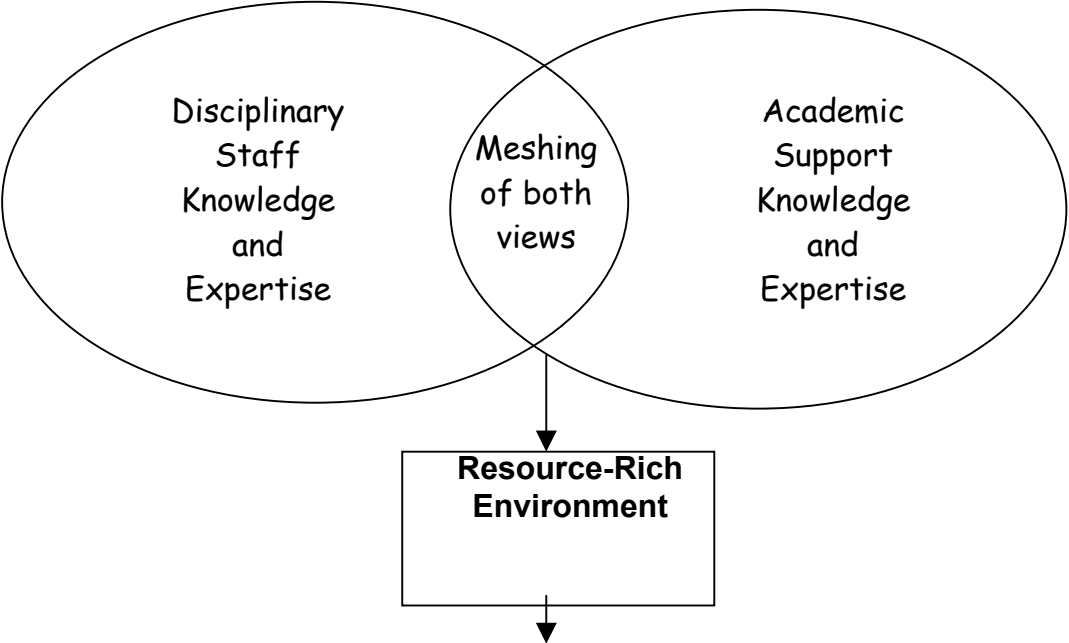
In the process of collaboration, the academic support and the disciplinary teaching staff bring together their own views of the world as ways of achieving the enhancement of student learning. This is clearly articulated in the view that cultural groups perceive reality through a lens that reflects their values. That is, their world view is shaped by these values, assumptions and modes of operation (Bizzell, 1992; Beaufort, 1997), and these are often subconsciously adhered to. While Gee (1994) refers to the patterns that encapsulate these as 'discourses', Street (2004) speaks of these as literacies, wherein ways of looking at the world are legitimised and formalised. Becher (1989) investigates the cultures of academic disciplines and identifies particular knowledge forms which together become a way of being part of a specific academic culture. Insights from academic writing theory further explain that academic writing reflects disciplinary practices. For instance, Swales' understandings of a discourse community provide tools to assist the academic support staff member to decode the writing practices of the particular discipline. Swales (1990, p.25) explains that a discourse community embodies a common set of goals as well as "mechanisms for intercommunication and that these include preferred genres and specific lexis. While the disciplinary staff member is able to identify and articulate the goals of the disciplinary community, the academic support staff member has the resources to interpret and therefore explain these as writing practices.

Indeed, a deepening awareness of these different academic cultures is perhaps most clearly identifiable when working in a collaborative relationship. Participating academic support staff usually find themselves working with disciplinary teachers whose perspectives may be shaped by different influences and affiliations and by the values and assumptions of their particular discipline. The values that drive academic support *vis`a vis* student learning can be encapsulated as assisting students 'to develop as independent learners and enhance their academic achievements' (Crosling, 2005, p. 7). More specifically, academic support may be seen as enhancing students' capacity to

develop as successful learners in their disciplines, and to be able to transfer core language and learning skills into other settings (Carmichael, Hicks, McGowan & Vanderwal, 1999). But the task confronting those who would work in this close environment is how to accommodate disparate understandings that bring various pedagogical and professional affiliations together, with the express purpose of focusing on students and their learning.

In the joint venture of enhancing student learning *in relation to* a discipline's values and assumptions, an intermingling of world views of disciplinary and academic support staff occurs, as shown in Figure 1. In the common, overlapping sector, the values of both worlds are meshed, creating what may be seen in some respects as new understandings, or transformations, as James et al. (2003) explain. The result, not often achieved without negotiation, is an initiation of both parties into each other's world. The exposure reveals how particular values and assumptions underpin cognitive approaches and communication in a particular discipline. Programs that result from these discoveries of the other's values and assumptions not only unravel the values and assumptions for each staff member, but embed for students in learning programs the ways of the disciplines of their study, and interpret them in ways that impact on students' approaches to study. The quality learning programs developed and the learning that occurs is the result of this rich environment.

Figure1: Academic Support World Disciplinary Perspectives



## Effective Student Learning Programs

The overlapping section in Figure 1 represents the productive environment that we have discussed. The common focus for both parties is one of improving student learning and assisting students to function independently in their studies. In the development of student learning programs, the stage represented by the overlapped section is where disciplinary values and expectations are counterposed and interwoven with those of academic support. As seen in Figure 1, the result is a 'resource-rich' environment that enables the unpacking of academic and disciplinary assumptions and expectations, in ways relevant to the students and their learning needs. It is also the site for the translation of these as thought patterns and styles of writing, including disciplinary preferences for genre and lexis. Thus, the teaching strategies that emerge in the student learning programs take into account student backgrounds and current realities in learning in the particular discipline.

To encapsulate the situation, the collaborative relationship can be conceptualised along the lines of the situated learning and cognition approach of Lave and Wenger (1991) where learning develops from experience and social action. Shared meanings are developed as newcomers move into particular communities and develop understanding of the appropriate way to communicate and thus how to be understood by other community members. In relation to the common area in Figure 1, staff are moving towards each other and in so doing and as mentioned previously, common, intermingled values are developed. In Catterall's (2002) words, through the transformation of both parties' understandings and perspectives the disciplinary teacher grows in understanding of student learning and communication, and the academic support staff member increases their understanding of the discipline's values.

### **Discussing Collaboration and Student Learning Programs**

A range of academic support programs that have been developed through collaborative activity and which have impacted positively on student learning outcomes have been presented and discussed in the literature. In this section we

demonstrate the rationale for and outcomes of programs in which the authors have been involved. From the staff perspective, we explain the way that the disciplinary and academic support staff collaboration that underpinned the development of the programs enabled learning for both parties; their respective approaches to student learning were broadened and therefore transformed by the sharing of expertise. From the student perspective, we discuss the way that academic processes can be imbued with meaning through positioning them and thus making them real within disciplinary practices, and the way that, implicitly, students' understandings of communication at the meta level can be developed through this approach.

### **'Legal language for Commercial Law'**

One of these programs is an adjunct program for students in their studies of Commercial Law, as part of a degree in Business. Entitled "Legal Language for Commercial Law", the program operated at Monash University (Crosling, 1997). A major objective of the program was to improve students' learning and writing in the subject. Students learnt to appreciate the shape of appropriate cognitive patterns, as well as the practice that shaped them. In turn, they were familiarised with the representation of these values in the preferred disciplinary writing.

In achieving this objective in the development of the program, faculty staff explained the cognitive patterns that are privileged, and the role that they play in the discourse. These are based on the adversarial legal system which is at the core of, and a basic assumption of, Australian law. Successful outcomes in communication tasks required students to reflect this adversarial approach through the structure of their responses and legal arguments (Crosling, 1997). Arising from the collaboration, the underpinnings of macro structure and rhetorical conventions are thus unearthed and explained, and students have practice in developing, structuring and writing legal arguments. In so doing, approaches that students need to engage in for successful written communication in their assessment tasks are contextualised and made meaningful, rather than being taught in isolation as techniques to be applied to some indeterminate written context.

Consequently in the resulting student learning program, the academic support staff view of student learning broadened as they perceived appropriate approaches to thought and writing in the context of the discipline's practice, in which the approaches

enabled representation of the practices. Their understanding of the preferred writing genre in terms of its structure and purpose was deepened through interpreting it as a reflection of disciplinary practice. Furthermore and most importantly in terms of meta level learning, the process of aligning thought and writing practices with the disciplinary culture alerted students to the changeable nature of preferred forms, depending on the particular context. Indeed, the teaching emphasised that the preferred forms were a realisation of the disciplinary values and contrasted these with those of other disciplines.

The disciplinary staff, through learning that the particular genre for the subject differed and in some way, contrasted with those for other subjects could appreciate more deeply the bridge to be traversed and the transition required for students to study the subject successfully. The academic support staff also expanded the disciplinary staff understandings of student learning by explaining, for example, that for some students, making judgement about the actions of parties in a legal dispute may be problematic, given their cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences. Transformation of the perspectives of both staff parties regarding contextualised student learning thus occurred.

### **First Year Management**

The next example concerns the teaching of writing in a first year Management subject at Monash University (Crosling & Pavlidis, 2002). The faculty staff member reported that students experienced difficulties with Management due to issues of language competence. Thus, the academic support staff member examined examples of successful and less successful students' assignments supplied by the staff member. These indicated that, while non standard grammar and expression contributed to that assessment, and while some students did appear to lack strong English language skills, a difficulty appeared to be that some students were not demonstrating the control of referencing required by the discipline. Following discussion with faculty staff to identify values and assumptions privileged within the discipline, it became clear that a major role of managers and management in an organisation is to gather information, and on this basis, to make decisions. Such a role, translated as a value that is fundamental to the discipline, implied a sense of

authority and could be seen as reflected in the writer's control of referencing through the writer's voice and comment in relation to the supporting citations used in the text.

As discussed in relation to the previous program, the major benefit for the student learning program of the collaboration was that the instruction of the preferred genre for the discipline was embedded, and took on meaning in, the disciplinary practice. Students were thus positioned to function with understanding in the academic tasks, in some ways reflecting a manager's leadership role as they marshal and cite sources as evidence for their points in their written texts. Furthermore, because of their awareness of the reasons why the preferred thought and writing took their particular forms in the discipline, they were prepared to expect variation across settings.

In the collaborative environment from which the program arose, the academic support staff member explained the communication conventions embedded in the cultural backgrounds of some students, as well as their positions as newcomers to the Australian higher education system and Australian society in general. Further collaborative examination of the student writing samples indicated that the students who produced what were deemed as successful writing examples positioned themselves authoritatively in their use of citations; that is, as they introduced and discussed information that supported the viewpoints, or decisions, they made in their simulated role of a manager.

The outcome of such collaborative discussion which was based on the sharing of values and assumptions as learning programs were discussed and developed, was that disciplinary staff came to appreciate the importance of investigating their own positions, making them explicit to others and revealing to students the need to take up positions and roles in their writing, and the rationale for this. Transformation of perspectives for the academic support staff can be evidenced in understanding the discipline's assumptions and values, which contextualise writing conventions. They pave the way for deeper analysis of the genre. For the disciplinary staff, transformation takes place through appreciating more fully students' difficulties, as well as features of their previous cultural and educational backgrounds that may impinge on their studies.

## **Academic Transition Program**

The final example of such work was the collaboration that occurred through participation in a Business faculty's academic transition program. The "Success at Monash" program was developed and presented in cooperation with Library, Faculty and academic support staff. The nature of collaboration involved a team of Library and academic support program presenting students with the opportunity to take a guided walk in preparing an essay style assignment. The seminar began with question analysis, moved to database search and back to integrating referencing into the essay. At the same time, the purpose of these steps and their outcomes were contextualised to meaningful processes within academic culture.

There are clear, documented benefits of this program for all participants. Firstly the collaborative approach has meant that students are lead through an academic reality, through what may seem initially a bewildering set of manoeuvres involving the requirements of a university assignment. By the end of the session, the research and writing process has been integrated, and students have participated in question analysis therefore diminishing some of the fear in the first assessment. They have seen how searching the library database is connected to the results of their question analysis and they have in front of them their first attempts at choosing appropriate academic references. Students begin to see a part of what university study will require of them in terms of appreciating that there are no absolutes in knowledge and that a range of views and perspectives, and thus a vast amount of literature, surrounds issues and topics.

The program evaluations assert that students see value in this time investment because it reveals the complex and integrated mysteries of the academic world which they are about to enter, and supports them as they experience it in the program.

Staff evaluations (including those by both authors who have participated in the planning sessions and materials preparation) show that the model of presenting the essay writing process as a complex interaction of reading and thinking, researching and writing has its merits. For the staff of the library and the academic support teams, they came to understand each other's work, to appreciate how staff from each area of expertise interacts with students and to see the benefits to be gained from an

integrated teaching of writing essentials. Thus, the approaches of each is contextualised, learning and transformation occurs for each as the mysteries of the other's discipline are unravelled.

## Conclusion

In our focus on collaboration between academic support and disciplinary staff, this paper has elaborated on the resource-rich environment from which effective student learning programs can be developed. The programs that arise from this setting are well-fitted to transform students' disciplinary understandings so that they function with meaning in their academic tasks. Furthermore, the collaborative development phase for programs of the form considered in this paper allows for the broadening and transformation of the understandings of both sets of staff. Our conceptualisation of the resource-rich collaborative environment included in this paper provides a visual representation of the way that both parties enter, to some degree, into each other's world. Emerging out of the 'mingling' of both staff' views and understandings, the overlapping of the worlds, academic approaches can be truly grounded in the particular discipline, thus ensuring their relevance for student learning. An outcome is that students' motivation is enhanced as they are not performing isolated academic operations, functioning with meaning and understanding. In these times when higher education institutions are seeking ways to improve the quality of their learning and teaching, we have discussed an approach through which students can not only be assisted to improve their academic performance, but also develop meta level understandings. Through appreciating implicitly and explicitly the variation of values and their realisation in thought, learning and writing across disciplines, students are well-positioned to decode and therefore cope, in future and yet unknown situations. This is for the benefit of the students, their teachers, and their institutions.

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## **Making a difference and self-efficacy: Interviews with Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin**

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**Abstract:** *This paper is based on the assumption that we as Language and Academic Skills advisers aim to make a difference to student learning. Many of us do this work with individual students and so develop insights into what facilitates or hampers student learning. With these insights we could be involved in developing learning opportunities for many students. In this paper I consider that developing personal agency is one way that LAS advisers could increase opportunities to positively influence the teaching and learning at our universities. In order to learn more about the attitudes of those whose work has been influential in developing the learning environment both within their own universities and also the academy as a whole, I interviewed Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin. During the interviews these women reflected on who has influenced them, their mistakes and their achievements. The interviews were analysed using Bandura's theory (1986) that self-beliefs and in particular self-efficacy can explain achievement behaviour. In most cases the women demonstrated attributes of self-efficacy. They provide models of vicarious learning for LAS advisers who need to be resilient if they want to make a difference to university teaching and learning.*

**Key words:** *academic skills advising, self-efficacy, university, learning,*

## **Introduction**

Underpinning recent discussion about whether language and academic skills (LAS) advisers should be classified as academics (Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2003; Zeegers, 2003) is the concern that learning assistance and the development of learner skills is undervalued in academe. This matters for the continued development of academic skills and whether or not language and academic skills advisers are able to use their knowledge to make positive differences to the teaching and learning practices at their universities. It is the latter point that is the focus of this paper. And while I do advocate this development at an institutional level, in this paper I have pursued the notion of personal agency. For many of us making a difference has involved a few students; for others it has meant improving the learning experience of many. With insights and knowledge gained by working down at the student level we have much to contribute to the understanding of those in our universities who work at higher levels removed from hearing students' perceptions. My discussions in this paper rest on the claim that, while we as LAS advisers do important work, developing personal agency is one way that we could increase opportunities to positively influence the teaching and learning at our universities.

In order to learn more about how the attitudes of those whose work has been influential in developing the learning environment both within their own universities and also the academy as a whole, I have interviewed three such women. The insights of Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin provide a vicarious learning opportunity. Vicarious learning, when we learn from others by thinking about what they do, is an important principle of Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1986). This concept explains why some people achieve more than others.

In this paper I briefly discuss Bandura's concept of self-efficacy. Then I introduce the three protagonists and present extracts from their interviews which have been categorized and analysed using the principles of self-efficacy. Finally I discuss what we can take from this in the context of our individual development and the role that LAS advisers could develop in the academy.

## **Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a theory about human behaviour that takes into account 'self-beliefs' (Pajares, 2002, p. 1) and most particularly the effect of people's thoughts on what they actually do. Bandura defines people's self-efficacy beliefs as being their 'judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances' (1986, p. 391). These self beliefs affect the processes leading to capability and action (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175), so that those who believe themselves to be capable of achieving a certain task will be motivated to find out what to do and how to do it in order to succeed in that action. It can be concluded from this that our self-beliefs and thoughts are very powerful in terms of our cognitions and behaviours.

Bandura argues that thought is the most powerful factor in human performance. He explains that this is why people can have skills and knowledge yet still not achieve; just as people with limited skills can achieve remarkable outcomes. 'Thought can thus be a source of human failing and distress as well as human accomplishment' (Bandura 1986, p. 19).

Thoughts enable those who have high self-efficacy to make positive constructions of likely outcomes, so that even when faced with the reality of obstacles, the highly self-efficacious will persist. Bandura explains 'The stronger their perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goals people set for themselves and the firmer their commitment to them' (1989, p. 1175). Being robustly confident as opposed to being self-effacing is an important key to this, and those who are aware of their strengths and are optimistic will access thoughts that in turn self-refer to these. On the other hand, being low in self-efficacy influences emotional reactions to situations so that a person might see things as harder than they really are (Pajares, 2002, p. 5), and further distress themselves with continued anxious thoughts (Bandura, 1989, p. 1177).

Bandura (1986, p. 369) perceives that humans can have control over their thoughts, and so in the interaction of thoughts and behaviour have some control over their environment. On the one hand, this emphasis on self-process is powerful because self-beliefs and self-reflection enable humans to make their environment more fortuitous (Bandura, 1998). On the other, there is the danger that the individual bears

responsibility as the agent of change, when in fact, social and environmental conditions constrict opportunities. In the case of universities, these conditions can be obvious and formidable, for example the hierarchy of position; and they can also be invisible and powerful, for example how some work is unseen and unrewarded (Eveline, 2004). Bandura does not claim that self-beliefs are the only factor determining what we do and how we do it. In his social cognitive theory, he argues that people do what they do because of an interaction between environmental, behavioural and personal factors (Bandura, 1986, p. 23). This allows for a number of influences, which for the LAS professional could include the environment in which we work, our ability to understand that environment, our work preference and our belief in our own capabilities.

Using Bandura's notion of self-efficacy as the framework for the following interviews has given me the opportunity to learn from these women whose work I have admired. Pajares (2002, p. 7) points out that 'people seek out models who possess qualities they admire and capabilities to which they aspire'. Jude, Kate and Marcia provided a vicarious learning experience for me, and in presenting their comments and reflections I hope to share this experience.

### **The Models (in alphabetical order)**

**Jude Carroll** moved from midwifery to university work and is now an educational developer and course leader for the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education at Oxford Brookes University, UK. She is highly influential both in the UK and internationally as an educator and consultant on deterring and reducing plagiarism. Her work has achieved changes in policies and practices in the area of academic integrity in a number of universities. She has written extensively on this topic and is well-known for her book 'Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in HE' (2002).

**Kate Chanock**, named in this conference as 'the pioneer of the Australasian LAS profession', is the head of the Humanities Academic Skills Unit, La Trobe University, Australia. Her work has ensured that formative learning tasks are built into a number of first year undergraduate subjects in the Humanities & Social Science Faculty. Her writing has been highly influential and acclaimed; she was the winner of the 2004

Dialogica award (Chanock, 2004). She writes for students and lecturers on a variety of topics including language, first year experience, plagiarism, identity and disability.

**Marcia Devlin** studied primary teaching and psychology and now works as an educational consultant teaching lecturers about student learning. Her workshops and publications have changed practice for a number of lecturers. She has published widely and notably and was the winner of the 2003 Dialogica award (Devlin, 2003). Her publications include 'Assessing Learning in Australian Universities' (James, McCinnes & Devlin, 2002) and numerous university guides for staff about teaching and encouraging student participation.

## **The Interviews**

Bandura (1994) describes a number of ways in which people can be understood as self-efficacious. Such people will make great use of vicarious learning, so they not only learn from others, they will seek proficient models who are skilled in areas they aspire to. They will also be able to cope with setbacks and mistakes, which is vital for the perseverance that is needed to succeed. This coping requires a resilience and the ability to reflect and then have positive foresight, so that positive future performances can be visualised. Self-efficacious people also have a sense that they can make a difference and that what they are doing is effective and worthwhile. Using these characteristics and the key features of the interviews, I have categorized the interviews under the following headings: Vicarious learning, Making mistakes, Ability to reflect and have forethought, Attainment and the environment and Self-efficacy perceptions.

### **Vicarious learning**

In response to the question, 'Have there been people who have been an influence?', all three women had no trouble in referring to models who had been important to them.

**Jude Carroll:** 'There have certainly been influential people and people that I've worked with that have taught me a hell of a lot... I suppose [an important influence is] Sally Brown who is a really well known education developer in the UK. I run workshops a lot like Sally does.'

**Kate Chanock:** ‘Hannah Bock who was doing this kind of work in the Faculty of Social Sciences when I first started was very much a model because she was a very strong advocate for students...also Dawn Mendham, my predecessor in the job. I always remember that she told me that there were quite a few students that she would have given up on and in every case she would have been wrong to do so, and I’ve always felt that she was right and, however much I think something is not going to work well, not to give up.’

**Marcia Devlin:** ‘Lorraine Ling who’s the Dean of Education, she taught me to teach, and has stayed in touch with me ever since I was here about 14 years ago. And her husband Peter Ling gave me my first job on her recommendation...he marked my Masters thesis. So those two, they’ve got very very high standards, and they’re very interested in quality and quality in writing, and [from them] I’ve got really good attention to detail and, sometimes when I’m writing something I think what would they think if they read it. And that’s my way of editing...And a lot of senior women, women who have kind of made it up to the top echelons. I’ve informally interviewed lots of them, because I’m really interested in how women manage with children...I’ll go to a talk they’re giving, even if it’s on a topic I’m not interested in. And I sidle up to them at the end and I ask them, you know not all of them, but the ones who are approachable...’

### **Making mistakes**

Like everyone, these women had made mistakes. In this part of the interview there was a lot of laughter, gesticulating and even blushing. Jude talked about how she had confidently taken on a job which at the time had been beyond her capability. Kate admitted that she quickly recovered from feeling bad about the mistakes she made in her job, even though in general she had a tendency to ‘brood’ on her mistakes. Marcia was frank in admitting where she had done a poor job, and talked about her plans to learn how to be a better manager.

Although the women were ‘mortified’ by their mistakes, as Jude and Marcia put it, they were not overwhelmed by their errors. Bandura explains that everyone feels bad when they make mistakes but ‘those who are assured of their capabilities heighten their level of effort and perseverance, whereas those who are beset by self-doubts about their capabilities are easily dissuaded by failure’ (Bandura, 1989, p. 1180).

**Jude Carroll:** 'I've made spectacular mistakes!! ...People see me as a confident articulate person and they assume that I'm competent. Well, I'm bold and people endlessly ask me 'Jude will you do this?' and I say yes I can do that...I walked into this national voluntary organization at the local level and I thought I can run this place in two years, and virtually I did. They handed me their in-house magazine to edit. I'd never edited anything in my life and I suddenly found myself with a staff of six and a budget of 45,000 pounds and a world wide readership, and the first edition I edited had three spectacular mistakes in it. But nobody died. I didn't die. It all went away... It was mortifying, and for quite a long time.'

**Kate Chanock:** 'All the time! I wish I hadn't done them. Look I try to learn something from them if I can...There's usually a good reason for doing the wrong thing, so if I can think what the good reason was then I don't feel bad about it. If I've done it for a bad reason, then I feel crummy about it. '

**Marcia Devlin:** 'I made huge mistakes when I was managing staff ... I look back on some of the things I said and did to people and I'm absolutely mortified... If I continue to have a career in academia I'll do a management training course...it's not just something I can do naturally. It's not something I'm good at.'

### **Ability to reflect and have forethought**

It was particularly interesting that the women used their experiences from the past to access the symbolic capacity of forethought and so deal with the discomfort of the present. In other words, they had reflected on their concerns and had developed strategies that worked for them.

**Jude Carroll:** *(Here she articulates her self-talk)* 'I think: you know you could have been a bit more humble, you could have been a bit more listening, you could have been a bit more helpful. You know better than that. And then you move on. You get used to it. I mean when I have done something that really really makes me cringe inside I now know it hurts a lot for a day and less the second day and by the third day something usually takes my mind off it. I just think, just wait. So if I'm driving back from an event where something's happened or somebody's done something and the tape in my brain is just going round and round, I just know that by the time I get home something else will be beginning to take my mind off it. And I'll live to tell the story to a few people. I might need to write it down, I might need to write it down and screw it

up and put it in the fire. But by tomorrow or the next day a new crisis will have come up. And it'll just go away. And the trouble is sometimes it goes away without learning, but usually it just goes away.'

**Kate Chanock:** 'I don't feel crummy for very long, usually in the next half hour something else comes up that I really need to put my mind on. You can't brood on anything in this work...really even just to make up for the thing you did before; you've got to give your full attention to what ever problem comes up...I am something of a brooder in life, yes I am. But in this job it wouldn't be helpful.'

**Marcia Devlin:** 'Maturity's a great thing you know. To stand back and think, I've got to be strategic about this, do I care enough about this to get something done? Yes, OK, what's the best way to do it...And it's not always pleasant, like you sometimes have to deal with people who you don't like and who don't have the same ideas as you.'

### **Attainment and the environment**

In response to the question, 'How much effect do you think an individual can have on improving the teaching and learning at a university?', the women were well-aware of the environmental effects of working in a university. They knew the limits and were not unrealistic reformers, yet all three saw ways of attaining influence and so were able to persist in the face of obstacles.

**Jude Carroll:** 'I learned long long ago there is no point in pushing on closed doors, you have to push on open doors. So you find somebody who's got a problem you can be helpful with...You put a team together, try and look for some fun, you boast a lot, you just boast like mad. You find anything that's working well, and then you try and say, 'have you heard about the good things they're doing in architecture?' with x or y or whatever and those sorts of conduits would be the best. But you can't do anything on your own.'

**Kate Chanock:** 'I think you can have a lot of effect, but it may have to be really slow and gradual...On the way that the institution operates I think there's no point exaggerating the effect you're likely to have, but there's also no point in thinking that you can't and therefore not doing it, because you know even what I have managed to do I think is significant, although it's not huge.'

**Marcia Devlin:** 'I think in a university you have to work collegially and you have to work with committees and all the structures that are in place. One person can be really inspiring I think, and one person can make a big contribution, but I know one person can't do it all. What I tend to do is try and find people of like mind, who have a similar teaching philosophy to me.'

### **Self-efficacy and the environment**

The self-efficacious can remind themselves of their successes. The three women were aware of where they had made a difference. Jude and Marcia expressed a strong sense of personal efficacy, while Kate was far less spontaneous in conjuring up positive judgments of her ability.

**Jude Carroll:** 'Sometimes it takes a long time to know whether you are having an effect. I had a person come back to me about a month ago who talked about an incident that happened over 10 years ago. And so sometimes you have to wait. Sometimes what you do, the effect that you do is to remove a negative rather than to build a positive. You can't always judge your effect by the positive actions but I used to think that if I get rid of where the shoe pinches that would be a good thing and if people could walk without a shoe pinching then they wouldn't say how comfortable these shoes are they'd just get on with things. But I think one of the ways the world measures input is by reputation. And there are lots of things I could cite that have given me a reputation, and I guess at the moment plagiarism is one of the most striking ones because 'Oh you're Jude Carroll' is one of those things that people say to me all the time.'

**Kate Chanock:** *(Kate talked about her experience of helping a student with dyslexia, setting up study skills lectures and, with prodding, her work on dealing with plagiarism.)* 'One of the first students that I had was quite dyslexic and I didn't know much about dyslexia at the time but I was really interested...I taught her to read phonically...and she pulled herself up into Ds and then Cs, and six years later she graduated. And we were both rapt...'

During the first year that I'd worked here it seemed to me that offering lectures on common questions and common problems would be a good way to reach more people...it made a difference in the way that academic skills are tackled. Before this it hadn't been done in my unit.

The university has been revising its academic misconduct policy and I got involved in this ...because most of the thinking [about plagiarism] is kind of moral outrage that the students are doing it on purpose...I didn't wait to be asked, and I think that the important thing about trying to influence university policies is that if you are in a structurally unimportant position, which academic skills advisers are, you are not going to be asked to most things, so if you can think of a way to put your oar in without being asked it's useful...I spoke to the chairperson of the working party on plagiarism and said that I'd like to have some input and then wrote up what I wanted the working party to consider, and they did, and it has made its way into the policy in the sense that the policy recognizes that the university has an obligation to educate students [about using sources]...'

**Marcia Devlin:** 'The first [experience of making a difference] I can think of was when I wrote the book on assessment with Richard and Craig McInnes... that was a DEST project and when that got launched the reaction to that was amazing...You know I couldn't believe people found it so useful and were so grateful for it, and would ring us and email us. Every time I go to university people say this book's fantastic, or you know it's really helped me, and I really like this bit and that bit, and I was a bit blown away by that. I felt really good about it, good but also shocked - I just didn't think it was any great shakes. I mean I wrote it, I wrote the guides the five guides for academic staff - that was my bit and I wrote them really carefully, but.... I kind of thought it was commonsense. I obviously knew more than I thought I did, and was able to communicate it. So it was really exciting.'

The three women did not all meet the descriptions of the self-efficacious. Certainly, Jude Carroll and Marcia Devlin reflected on their behaviour and attributes in ways that indicate they could be self-efficacious. By articulating their capabilities, they symbolically affirm their strengths. Jude reported that others see her as competent and gave examples of how she had been able to take on big jobs. Marcia recalled positive comments on her work and talked about how she had been successfully strategic. Having this capacity to remind themselves of their efficacy is valuable. Bandura argues that this is because

ordinary social realities are strewn with difficulties. They are full of impediments, failures, adversities, setbacks, frustrations, and inequities... Some people

quickly recover their self-assurance; others lose faith in their capabilities. Because the acquisition of knowledge and competencies usually requires sustained effort in the face of difficulties and setbacks, it is resiliency of self-belief that counts. (Bandura, 1989, p. 1176)

In Jude and Marcia's case this resilience also allowed them to be insightful about their own shortcomings. Jude was open about her pleasure in being 'a big cheese' and open about her need to control this. Marcia was open about her impatience in dealing with staff and open about her need to do better, and at the same time she spoke generously about the virtue of the people she had worked with.

When asked to recall her achievements, Kate Chanock referred to the work she had done with individual students, hardly the stuff of public acclaim. And while she has made important contributions to policies and practice which have changed behaviour and teaching in her university, she only spoke about one such example after I reminded her. Kate was able to clearly detail the work she does, and why she thinks it is important; for example, she explained that making a difference for an individual student is 'not just a matter of somebody getting a better grade, it can change their whole life prospects, their understanding of themselves, the way they feel about themselves...' She also explained that her work is 'about -ographies, the ways that academic communities write to fulfill their particular purposes...that brings all sorts of problems with it which are to me intellectually interesting...' However, nowhere in the interview did she refer to accolades she has received, nor did she describe herself in ways that suggest success and achievement. In fact, rather than being self-efficacious she could be described as self-effacing. Despite this, Kate has persisted to make a difference in an environment where change can meet any number of obstacles. I suggest she is able to do this because, rather than concerning herself with her capabilities she focuses on the needs of the students and perceives the intellectual exploration of academic skills as a worthwhile and engrossing pursuit. Interestingly, this is reflected in her admiration for the advocacy work of her role model (see above).

## **The practice of making a difference**

The interviews demonstrate that Jude, Kate and Marcia see themselves as competent practitioners who have made positive changes and who will continue to be influential. And while I chose to interview them because they are influential, I also learnt that they have a perception of themselves as people whose work is worthwhile and influential.

For those who are new to language and academic skills advising it is not always easy to gauge the value and impact of our work. Jude, Kate and Marcia had a body of achievements that they could call on to affirm their efforts and to demonstrate that others valued their efforts. Marcia said she felt really good about people saying her book was 'fantastic' and it helped them, but before such praise she was unsure that she had anything to say of value and worried that what she knew was just common sense. Kate pointed out that a major obstacle she had confronted was the negative perceptions of others about the academic value of the work academic skills advisers do. This indicates that LAS advisers, in particular, need to be resilient in the face of impediments and frustrations. In Kate's case her strongly held opinion about the academic value of the work of academic skills advising, which she supports with reasoning and research, assures her in the face of ignorance from others. These examples indicate that newcomers to the LAS profession could be dealing with insecurities about the value of their work and whether or not it has any academic standing in the eyes of others. In order to advance self-efficacy and belief in their work, LAS advisers could find someone who will encourage their actions, and they can develop an awareness of the academic value of knowing about academic skills either through a mentor or research about the discipline of academic skills.

On the other hand, there are limitations in relying on the appraisals of others. If you are not sure of what you want to achieve or how much effort a task requires it is hard to judge your expectations of your performance. You then have to rely on what others have done and the assessment of others (Pajeres, 2002, p. 6). In trying to meet the expectations of others, one is then more vulnerable to negative assessment of outcomes, and unfortunately, negative appraisals can have major impact on one's self-belief. This is particularly so if one has a self-effacing or pessimistic bent on life (McCormick & Martinko, 2004).

Reduction of self-doubt and negative emotion is vital for a LAS adviser. According to Bandura's research, the higher the self-doubt the lower the ability to analyse and make difficult decisions (1989, p. 1176), so to improve analytical thinking one needs to put aside 'self-doubts'. Jude, Kate and Marcia all spoke about their capacity not to dwell on their mistakes. After having made a mistake, rather than doubting all their abilities, they had developed ways to effectively deal with their negative thoughts. Jude not only used foresight to reduce discomfort, she described her way of writing about the situation and symbolically expunging it in a fire. Kate, despite 'brooding' in other contexts, was able to quickly recuperate from the pain of a mistake by focusing on the next person's problem, and Marcia focused on how to fix her own shortcoming. Such strategies help to 'reduce negative emotional states' (Pajares, 2002, p. 7), although as their reaction in the interviews demonstrated, making mistakes led to very uncomfortable emotional states for all the women.

Making a difference in environments such as universities requires a (realistic) awareness of what cannot be changed and at times an (unrealistic) optimism that one can set up possibilities for change. Rather than seeing a situation as hopeless, in the face of adversity the self-efficacious will persevere and will change their efforts. 'The successful, the innovative, the sociable, the nonanxious, the nondespondent, and the social reformers take an optimistic view of their personal efficacy to exercise influence over events that affect their lives' (Bandura, 1989, p. 1177). Jude revealed that she no longer bothers to knock on closed doors, but she finds new ways of presenting her message and even play acts to communicate her message. Kate, the LAS adviser, was the least enthusiastic of the women about her ability to improve teaching and learning in her university saying, 'I think there's no point exaggerating the effect you're likely to have but there's also no point in thinking that you can't and therefore not doing it'. In contrast, Marcia was adamant that one person can be 'inspiring', but pointed out the need to work 'collegially' and to be strategic about how you work with others.

People like Jude, Kate and Marcia have learnt from experience and so are in a position to offer advice about how to make a difference to university teaching and learning. Their advice includes:

- finding like-minded people to work with,

- educating other lecturers about the nature of academic skills advising,
- working in conjunction with other lecturers in the faculty,
- being interested in the research of other lecturers in the faculty,
- producing learning guides for students and lecturers,
- promoting your learning materials,
- publishing your research so it is accessible to other lecturers
- taking up and/or making opportunities to be involved in policy making and,
- finally, from Jude Carroll 'find something that's fun. If it's all a slog, if it's all hack, if it's all too much, just stop. And go and find something that nurtures you'.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper three models, Jude Carroll, Kate Chanock and Marcia Devlin, talked about how they have been able to make a difference at both the individual level and the institutional level of academe, and they gave examples of how to be resilient and persist with valuable work.

Although not all the women perceived themselves as efficacious in all contexts, they have all made a difference to university learning and teaching. Certainly, as well as being persistent, they are self-reflective and confident that the work they do is worthwhile, but Kate, unlike Jude and Marcia, presented little account of her own capabilities. This could be Kate's disposition or it could be indicative of the institutional realities of working as a LAS adviser. Jude and Marcia exemplify the power of self-belief coupled with a realistic grasp of how to work within an institution, while Kate, who provides a more self-effacing view of her achievements, still manages to achieve on behalf of her students and her work. This is reassuring for those of us who are less than self-efficacious but still want to be able to use our knowledge to make differences to the teaching and learning practices in our universities.

It may not be possible for all language and academic skills advisers to be self-efficacious, especially in the face of environments that can be resistant to our perceptions, but we can take on some of the attributes of self-efficacy. We can learn vicariously, by listening and learning from others who are like us and who have achieved. In order to be resilient in the face of obstacles, we can use the power of thought to persuade ourselves that it is possible for positive change to happen in universities, so not only can we seek change, we can observe where we would benefit from change, and importantly where others would benefit. Bandura (1989, p. 1176) advises that there are benefits in being self-efficacious and that a 'well-developed sense of our own worth leads to positive speculation, and in turn such speculation increases our sense of efficacy'. On this positive note, I conclude that the valuable work LAS advisers do with individual students provides a basis for increasing opportunities to make a difference to learning and teaching in academe.

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## Leadership in LAS: Beginning a conversation

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**Abstract:** *As a person new to the university and to the position of team leader of the Learning Advisers it has become clear that there are real challenges yet many potential opportunities for Language and Learning Advisers. Although there is an abundance of available literature on the roles, responsibilities and directions of LAS advisers across the nation to critique and reflect upon there appears to be none on the leadership of LAS. Therefore, the intention of this paper is to start a tentative beginning conversation about this. The paper looks at the role of leadership of LAS at a university in South Australia and identifies some of the practices that needed to be addressed at the beginning of my appointment. Two leadership theories are considered as potential operational frameworks, some initial actions and their limitations outlined. Tentative conclusions that could be drawn are that with leadership a team can be influenced, motivated, stimulated and mentored. The vision for the future should be based on the fundamental values and culture of Learning Advisers as part of the university but also reflect powerful personal motivators such as values, aspirations and hopes.*

**Key words:** *leadership, professionalism, learning advisers*

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the importance of leadership of academic Learning Advisers at a university in South Australia and to describe how I began in the position of leader of this team in early 2005. The intention is to begin a conversation about leadership in LAS that will hopefully be expanded in the future. Although I am writing from the perspective of one university, most Australian universities employ either academic or general staff in either centralized services, alone or in faculty-based positions. The very nature of their roles is diverse, developmental not remedial and different to the role of other academics. The multiplicity of the role includes working with academic staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students and with personnel from other disciplines such as counsellors, disability officers and international student advisers in a variety of ways.

From an historical perspective the first Study Skills tutors in South Australia were employed at South Australian College of Advanced Education (SACAE) in 1985 and similar positions established later at the South Australian Institute of Technology (SAIT). The tutors were all on short-term, part-time contracts at that time but later reclassified as Lecturer B. After amalgamation in 1991 to form this university, the new team were called Study Advisers and continued with that title until 1999. In 1999 the positions were rewritten, redefined and retitled Learning Adviser. The new team of Learning Advisers from 1999 consisted of staff who had had all worked together previously and had to win their positions in a restructuring process. Currently in the team there are 9 full time academic Learning Adviser positions and 3 casual staff for approximately 30,000 students in the university.

The structure of the university comprises four metropolitan campuses and two rural campuses. Because of the multi campus nature of the university the organizational structure is a matrix management system that was introduced in 2003. Matrix management gives each team member two or more leaders and means that Learning Advisers might report to a team leader as well as a Coordinator of Teaching and Learning although the team leader has primary responsibility for the team. There are approximately two learning advisers on each campus and their roles and expertise are diverse. Each has a leadership specialization that includes on-line, language, international and Non English Speaking Background (NESB) and equity.

Most Learning Advisers are currently engaged in study ranging from Graduate Diploma to Doctoral studies.

As a newcomer to the team it was evident that Learning Advisers have significant expertise in areas such as language, international and NESB, production of online resources and developing course specific resources and are progressive in the work they do with students and staff. Some of the practices that I observed that needed to be addressed included the included improving the morale of the team, strengthening the research profile to attract funding and continually improving teaching and learning performance. An accurate and appropriate strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of the work of learning advisers will need to be developed. Rhoden and McLean (2002, p. 234) write that evaluating effectiveness, efficiency and success to enhance performance and ensure survival can prove challenging but it is necessary to do. Although Learning Advisers do work together with different teams in the university a more concerted effort is achievable. This includes, for example, Learning Advisers and Professional Developers jointly attending meetings with school personnel or jointly delivering professional development sessions together. More opportunities need to be sought for Learning Advisers to work with academic staff to embed inclusive teaching and learning methodologies, jointly develop resources and deliver workshops. In this way Learning Advisers may become academic partners and dislodge the 'remedial' or 'fix-it' tag that is still prevalent (Craswell, & Bartlett, 2001; Jansen, 2001). This may be ameliorated by the imminent inauguration of a LAS professional body at the 2005 LAS Conference in Canberra (Chung, 2005; Zeegers, 2003) the development of which will potentially provide significant opportunities for the LA profession as a whole.

## **Role of leader**

The role of leader of the team within the university is important on many levels. Leading a team within this environment requires an awareness of both internal and external pressures and constraints and the ability to deal with and lead in an environment of continuous change. External and pressures include a renewed emphasis on teaching and learning outcomes, and a framework for research in which all Australian Government funding is either competitive or performance-based

(Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). Although there are constraints 'a leader should not be an unthinking agent of a corporate agenda but use a variety of strategies to question and reshape' the way things are done (Sinclair, 2005, p. 14). The following characteristics were taken from a recent discussion with the Learning Advisers and reveal some of their thoughts as well as mine about what a leader should bring to the job. On a practical level the leader needs to link with what is happening on committees across the university to ensure that what is on the university's political agenda is known. Work can then be proactive rather than reactive and remedial. The leader needs to be a visionary, confidently lead change that is linked to university priorities in close collaboration with the Learning Advisers.

At the campus level the leader needs to be the link person for the multi-campus, but for the team, represent the team as academics on mixed general staff/academic management committees and defend or promote the team in such forums. At the team level the leader should be a contact person for the team who is respected and who respects the team members. The leader coordinates the energies, keeps the team on track and keeps the members looking at the horizon for new directions. The leader must know the strengths and areas that need strengthening of all the Learning Advisers and know how to motivate and encourage so that the team feel valued, are productive and encouraged to achieve a high potential. There can be a tendency for staff with a strong campus orientation and workload to just see what is happening on their particular campus. Therefore, it is helpful and constructive to have a nominated leader to counter that although it could be argued that the term team leader for academics is in itself problematic. On every level the leader needs to advocate for and promote the team.

In a review of the LAS literature many articles outline the roles and responsibilities of Learning Advisers (Caterall, 2003; Hicks, & George, 2001; Jones, Bonanno, & Scoulter, 2001; Morgan, 2001; Zeegers, 2003) yet there appears to be none on the professional leadership of LAS. Since starting at this university from a background in public education, I have been able to delve into collegial theory and transformational leadership theory and decide which will underpin the work of the team and provide an operational model.

## **Collegial theory and transformational leadership theory**

Leadership is different to management. By definition management seems to be transactional where managers are in a position of authority. Many in the university seem to be wary of managerialist approaches and are concerned about the shift from collegial to more hierarchical models of operation (Hellawell, & Hancock, 2001, p. 185). In a 2001 study of the changing roles of middle managers these authors found that managers reported that although it has its down side, collegiality is the most effective form of decision making. More autocratic styles of management do not suit higher learning because of their directive nature can cause lowered morale and general inhibition (Southeast Missouri State University, 2002). Collegial theory is dynamic, self-regulating and self-organising with peers working together to share expertise balancing individual curiosity with the common goal of advancing knowledge (Fister, & Martin, 2005, p. 5). The premise for this sounds very positive but it could potentially be fraught with difficulties and lead to people becoming cloistered and inward looking instead of sharing with colleagues. One factor that may cause this fragmentation is physical location or separation of staff (Hellawell, & Hancock). As well, in any organization there are; those who push their own agendas, those that are reluctant to confront those not pulling their weight, and meetings held that are held infrequently or too often with a lack of purpose. The concern is that without discipline on the part of all involved and a leader designated for the task, dysfunction may result. There are dysfunctional departments in universities that show that the collegial, democratic structure does not always work because it relies on trust, professional expertise and people working for the good of the organization as a whole (Polanyi, as cited in Fister, & Martin). I believe positive collegial decision making can operate well in a Transformational Leadership framework.

Transformational leadership, the literature tells us, has proved most successful (Bennis, & Nanus, 1997; Walumbu, Wang, Lawler, & Shi, 2004). I like the emphasis on commitment, raising one another to a higher level of motivation, building and enjoying good relationships with the team over the long term based on the values of the team and the university. Commitment to shared values often overcomes resistance to change. With this type of leadership, supervision is less important because there is trust in the competence of others and professional development

available when it is needed. In this type of collegial environment change occurs because there is often a change of attitude. Although it might sound trite to say it, the change in attitude comes when people are valued. Research has shown that transformational leadership is positively related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction and that there is a high degree of trust and loyalty leading to a willingness to stay with an organization (Walumbu, Wang, Lawler & Shi).

Although not perfect, and some would say 'grossly theoretically undernourished...with 'all the hallmarks of a religious crusade' (Gronn, 1995, p. 14), Transformational Leadership theory, has evolved over the last 30 years beginning with the work of James McGregor Burns (1978) a pioneer in the leadership field. His work has since been built on by researchers such as Bass (1985) and Bennis and Nanus (1985). Burns believes that a leader acknowledges and deals with immediate wants but also 'elevates people by vesting in them a sense of possibility, a belief that changes can be made and that they can make them' (Burns, 2003, p. 239). For Burns motivation is key. This theory has been challenged by critical post modernists who call for 'interpretative, narrative and existential methods to be used to explore the transformations' i.e. dialogue (Boje, 2000, p. 29). I have and will continue to provide opportunities for dialogue in teaching and learning so that we can debate issues, come up with new ideas and solutions, challenge and provoke thinking and ask questions.

In choosing a model it was critical to choose one that was ethical, enabled responsiveness to developing people, building communities of practice, building capacity and setting directions. Transformational leadership theory promised to be appropriate for this, although to be used without with the religious zeal mentioned by the critics. It was also important to acknowledge how emotional intelligence complements effective leadership. Goleman (1995) built on the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990) to develop five characteristics of emotional intelligence which complement the four leadership strategies described below. These include: understanding one's emotions, knowing how to manage them, emotional self-control (including the ability to delay gratification), empathy and managing relationships. It has been suggested by Barkling et al., (2000) that people with strong emotional intelligence are more likely to use transformational behaviours.

By trialling the four leadership strategies that Bennis and Nanus (1997) identified in a study of ninety top leaders a provisional framework was provided that has enabled me to work collegially to earn trust and credibility as a new leader. To be specific these strategies include:

1. attention through vision
2. meaning through communication
3. trust through positioning
4. the deployment of self.

I have used these strategies to identify actions that will build relationships, understand issues, identify peoples' strengths, passions and areas where they need strengthening. In reflecting on the use of this model it has been possible to focus on immediate needs and wants and begin to think of possible changes that may be made. The challenge is to take on the institutional agenda and as a team we are thinking creatively about that.

Some of the beginning actions that have been taken are outlined below as well as a reflection of the some of the limitations of working in this way.

### **1. Attention through vision**

The creation of a vision is the building of a bridge from the present to the future of the team within the university. Because the team needed a clear sense of purpose and direction a team planning session was held soon after I began in the position. The purpose of this session was to envisage a two year plan, challenge thinking, create team spirit and develop strategies for change. An attractive off campus venue was found and speakers invited including the Director, the Coordinator Teaching and Learning Services and the Coordinator International Staff & Student Services who were able to inform the team of the future directions of the university. This was critical to set the scene for planning.

Team values were established by the team at the outset of the session and included:

- **Respect** for:

- each other
- students
- different ideas and perspectives
- **Creativity/Innovation**
  - positive response to change
- **Collegiality**
  - celebration
  - sharing expertise
  - support
  - work valued and recognised
  - sense of humor
- **Honesty, integrity, ethics.**

Then a story boarding technique was used to capture the team's interest and attention. Although this highly interactive and visual technique is used to build animations and movies it was clear that the underpinning principles would promote creative and analytical thinking and could be adapted really well for our purpose. The process is based on brainstorming and demands a high level of participation where the views of every participant are valued. It is a conversation of possibilities and realities (Arizona Department of Commerce, 1995, p. 1).

The first step was to define the task and it was decided by the team that we were developing a two year plan or map of our work which was responsive and relevant to the university, the students and to us. It was decided that planning was crucial and as a team we agreed on the maxim 'fail to plan - plan to fail'.

The second step was to gain clarity about why we were doing what we were doing. Clear direction, shared goals, aligning our goals with that of the university leading to

the strengthening of the team, strengthening the status of the unit in the university and envisaging new possibilities were all agreed reasons for planning in this way.

The limitations of planning in this way included the possibility of planning to do too much or nominating things that sounded good at the time and then not following through. As well, it could be easy for the plans to be forgotten in people's busy lives. Therefore, as a team we have decided to report against the progress of the plan at our team meetings and make adjustments if needed if workload becomes an issue.

## **2. Meaning through communication**

Without effective, open communication even the best plans may not eventuate. Communication is vital in leadership and a leader must be an excellent listener and a perpetual learner (Bennis, & Nanus, 1997). The vision articulated at the team planning session has been communicated to others to gain support for our work from those at a higher level.

On another level, as soon as possible after my arrival individual interviews were conducted with each team member, partly to begin building relationships but also to identify what was happening. The questions were taken from David Langford's (2004) 'Parking Lot' and they were: what is going well, what needs improvement, what are the issues and what are some questions that you may like to ask? The themes that emerged from the interviews were consistent with the LAS literature and clearly showed that the Learning Advisers were a strong and supportive team who had some concerns but many ideas for improvement and innovation. The information gave me a strong base on which to build.

Limitations of this strategy could be that people do not actually say what they really want to but what you might like to hear or if they have been frank they may not wish the findings to be disclosed. Issues that arise may not then be resolved.

Other communication areas that needed improvement were between the team and staff external to the team. Therefore, regular meetings with other teams and their leaders have been set up to work out ways of working together and communicating with each other. The problem there is that people are already busy and therefore meetings need to be purposeful and kept to a minimum. Since the meetings with

other teams have begun, however, there appears to be more cohesion with the wider unit and there is more streamlining of work where before there was overlap. For example two sessions have been planned on assessment and Internationalisation. All the teams will attend and share what they do so that work is not replicated but combined where possible.

### **3 and 4. Trust through positioning and Deployment of Self**

This third strategy could be restated as 'practice what you preach' (Fairchild, 1990). By positioning myself as predictable, reliable, persistent and consistent and acting in a manner consistent with the professed goals of the team I believe I have earned the trust of the colleagues with whom I work both within and without the team. I have also committed to 'stay the course' in the position. The final strategy Deployment of Self relates to the development of self through positive self-regard. Self-deployment could be restated as 'do as you would be done by' and relates to accepting people as they are, learning from mistakes, treating people courteously and trusting others. The leader must be a good communicator and confident of success. The way a leader responds to failure or setbacks is critical

### **How are staff responding?**

So far the staff appears to be responding positively to this kind of leadership but it is still very early days. I intend to take an objective, longitudinal and considered approach to evaluation and will seek advice about how best to go about this. At the end of the year though I would like to ask of the team the David Langford questions that I asked at the beginning to gauge whether there has been any improvement for the team. For the purpose of this paper I asked the team if they would like to make comments on how they are responding to leadership based on Transformational Leadership strategies after 5 months and have included some below and aligned them with the four strategies.

**Attention through vision** - *You provide opportunities for our professional voices to be heard - particularly at planning day where our visions for learning advice now form the 'spine' of our operations for the next two years.*

**Meaning through communication** - *I feel valued as a staff member and equitable colleague because I am being listened to, know can discuss any issue, and know that opinions being sought all contribute to the valuing of staff.*

**Trust through positioning** - *Your collaborative and dialogic, honest leadership and demonstrating a sense of humour has an affect of creating a vision, building a cohesive team, and respecting other positions. It is Important to work within the institutional constraints to provide solid experiences of team building - and this has already happened!*

**Deployment of Self** - *I feel valued like I haven't felt in ages and I feel energised by the positive attitude you exude. I feel I have short term and long term goals and feel supported enormously in reaching them.*

## **Conclusion**

How does this relate to the LAS profession as a whole? The intent of this paper was to begin a conversation about leadership in LAS and ask questions such as: how does open communication play a part in leadership? what is leadership? what would influence your choice of leadership theory? what leadership models do others use? are there more valuable alternatives to this way of working? and what are some responses to Collegial and Transformational leadership? I look forward to discussions about some of these questions at the 2005 LAS conference in Canberra with LAS professionals. In the next two years with the team I will endeavour to influence, motivate, mentor, evaluate and present progress in a paper written for the 2007 LAS Conference.

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## The poetics of writing instruction

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**Abstract:** *As Gordon Taylor pointed out in several seminal articles on our discipline, language and academic skills practitioners are faced with a dilemma. Dealing solely with the form, or structure of a student's text, leaving questions of content (and presumably, the student's understanding of that content) to subject or discipline lecturers, the language and learning adviser risks only scratching the surface, of seeing the symptom but not the cause of a student's difficulties. Similarly, the content specialist who does not have an insight into the discursive element of the student's work may know when a piece of writing is inadequate, but may be unable to help the student progress or develop. That is to say, a sharp division between form and content cannot be maintained and exclusive focus on grammar may be of limited help to the learner. The task for the language and academic skills adviser is to find a balance between form and content, without assuming the role of discipline expert, or ignoring the influence of language (grammar or discourse). The paper reviews previous discussions of the philosophical foundations of writing and academic skills instruction (Taylor's, in particular) and considers the potential value of an approach based in poetics. As opposed to a hermeneutic response, which considers only what a text means, or a formal approach, which might look at grammar or rhetoric, poetics considers how a text is made, and thus offers insight into a student's writing process.*

**Keywords:** *writing instruction, form, content, poetics, practise*

At the risk of straying outside the borders of our discipline, I want to begin by reading a poem. Some of you may be familiar with the poem already; no doubt you will also realise that my choice of this poem in particular is far from innocent. Over the years since its first publication it has increasingly been taken as an index of the problem of reading and interpretation, or the limits of interpretability (Caraher, 1991; Jones, 1995). As such, with some careful qualifications which I will make in a moment, I think that the poem highlights some issues we face in working with student writing, specifically, the issue of how to negotiate the tension between form and content, competence and performance, or in another guise, the interconnection of skills and knowledge:

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The untitled poem is by William Wordsworth; it first appeared in 1800, in the second edition of the groundbreaking book he published with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*. For some, knowing this context might be sufficient cause to accept the strangeness of the verse without question, enabling the reader to paper over the more obvious gaps in the text. That is, the fact that it is written by a canonical poet, is rhythmical and rhymes, and appeared in a book full of poems is sufficient to forestall any further concern about its field, tenor or mode. If this putative reader also shares a cultural expectation that obscurity is a key feature of the genre, or mode, then he or she needn't trouble any longer over the lines, except perhaps to savour that mystery or to enjoy their music.

However much the text might be appreciated as a kind of music, an incantation, if the prejudice (literally, the pre judgment) that poetry is permitted a degree of vagueness, these eight lines could be said to lack both coherence and cohesion: Who is speaking? Who are they speaking to? Who or what are they speaking about? Why?

To get more specific, what is the relation between the speaker of the first two lines and the 'she' of the next six? The points of reference indicated by the pronouns of the poem are withheld. But this is not the only grammatical problem. The irregular syntax of the first line leaves the relation between subject and object uncertain, giving us a choice: did the spirit seal the slumber, or the slumber seal the spirit? The adjective 'human' in the next line raises questions too. Were the speaker's fears something other than human, or did the speaker have no fears at all? For the latter reading it has to be assumed, at a minimum, that the speaker is human – but can the same be assumed of the 'she' of the next line, a 'thing' who could not feel the touch of earthly years? If not human then what? Animal? Spirit? Statue? Or dead?

The fact that the remainder of the poem is relatively straightforward, grammatically, has to be set against the fact that it does little to resolve this uncertainty. A kind of parallel may be discerned here: we don't know if the 'she' is beyond the reach of earthly years because she has died (could no longer feel), or because she is immortal (never could feel) just as we can't be sure whether the speaker woke or fell asleep. Here, I am beginning to fall prey to the natural impulse to find cohesion in a text which one supposes should be cohesive, or to recuperate the meaning of the text on a thematic or figurative level.

However, to give in to this impulse any further would stretch the analogy I want to draw between the difficulties of reading this poem, and the situation of language and learning practice. For now, I would simply note that in order to 'read' Wordsworth's poem, it would seem necessary either to supply information for which there is scant textual evidence, or look beyond the text itself to a context or category in which such uncertainties cease to matter. But this step beyond the text is not entirely without peril. The satisfactions of poetry are not purely formal, though some critics and poets have acted as though they were. Any formalist reading of 'a slumber' which sidestepped the question of sense by looking solely at prosody too quickly turns the text into nothing more than a trinket. In short, in strictly formal terms this fragment doesn't stack up particularly well. Rhythmically, it poses too little challenge to be of much interest. This was no less true in Wordsworth's time than our own, though for different reasons: the late Augustan audience had the complexities of Pope's Alexandrines, or Milton's blank verse to compare this bit of common, or ballad meter

against, while modern ears expect a little less regularity in the beat, and regard rhyme with suspicion, if not derision.

In this way, these eight lines present us with a dilemma. As I have already mentioned, we can reject the text as irredeemably obscure, or treat it as an example, and perhaps not the most interesting example at that, of a relatively simple poetic form. No doubt many of you might be happy at this point with either choice, so long as I stop talking about it, but I want to urge caution. The dilemma faced here is not unlike the dilemma we face each time we sit down to read a student's text which has gaps or seems incoherent, lacks cohesion or as the student's marker might put it, is simply 'unreadable – often with the rejoinder, 'go see language and learning to have your grammar fixed'.

It is at this point that some qualifications become necessary. It seems, first, that in order to show some respect for the law of genre, or the proper borders of the disciplines that we ought to treat a poem differently than a student essay. Poetic license should no more be extended to student essays than we should set about 'correcting' Wordsworth's poem (not even the odd punctuation). The difference, it might be said, lies in a presumption about the source and status of the confusing elements—as I mentioned, the presumption with a poem is likely to be that the indeterminacy is a deliberate strategy, whereas with the student essay, ambiguous syntax, pronouns without antecedent, and indeterminate propositions might be classified as 'simply' mistakes. Insofar as this equates to a presumption about authorial intention it is not really a problem for the analogy I want to draw. It has been argued by literary theorists of many stripes, from the 'new critics' to the 'deconstructionists' that to invoke 'authorial intention' is simply to invoke another text, an 'unreadable' one at that, and thus cannot resolve confusion in a text with any finality. On the other side, I think LAS practitioners would generally agree that to assume a student's incapacity as a starting point is fraught with pedagogical and ethical problems.

The difference is also not a matter of what one does with the text: it might be said that with the poem the reader must respect and accept uncertainties, whereas with the student text the advisor is 'bound' in a sense to 'correct' it. However, to step too quickly around an interesting question about the ethics of reading, the reader of a

difficult text always, inevitably 'corrects' the text to some degree, as I have done even in the simple act of trying to specify more clearly what 'confusion' there is in 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal'. Call it paraphrase or interpretation, reading is rewriting – an act of recovery that seeks to bring latent meanings to the surface, or a species of translation whereby the meaning of the text is carried over into a new 'language', or more accurately, a new genre or context.

The analogy, I think, lies in the fact that the reader of the difficult poem does not have access to a 'meaning', intended or not, which would enable them to 'correct' the text with any certainty, just as the writing instructor who stands outside and presumably does not possess disciplinary, content knowledge can't necessarily know how to 'correct' the student's text. Wordsworth's poem, in short, raises a question about how to read without recourse to an 'authorised' meaning. What I have been trying to demonstrate in smuggling some poetry into a language and academic skills conference is nothing less than the limit of a purely 'grammatical' or 'formal' response to textual indeterminacy.

In this, I am following Gordon Taylor who defined this limit with particular clarity in at least five articles published over two decades from 1980 to 2000. I'm not going to try to summarise any of the articles in detail (partly because I expect many of you are familiar with them anyway, and partly because it wouldn't be possible to do justice to them for those who aren't) but I hope to draw from them some key points about how we might approach our practice, insofar as they relate to what could be called 'poetics'. What I would argue is that Taylor's approach to student writing in fact does correspond quite nicely with 'poetics' as 'an account of a literature's construction, its provenance, purposes and strategies'. I'll say more about what 'poetics' is and how it might offer a useful model / theory of writing instruction following that.

The first point is that while Taylor would probably say 'error' rather than 'indeterminacy' I am sure that he would agree generally with the view (widely held in literary studies) that indeterminacies of the kind we find in Wordsworth's poem are neither to be ignored, nor to be treated lightly or quickly. The closing paragraph of Taylor's 1988 essay, 'The Literacy of Knowing: Content and Form in Students' English' makes this clear:

The deficiencies in students' writing, it should now be clear, are in some measure due to confusions or vaguenesses about content. What students' writing does is furnish us with evidence of these confusions and vaguenesses. We should treat it as we customarily treat evidence – not, so to speak, as a self-evident conclusion about poor grammatical knowledge and training, but as the documentation of some perturbation that needs interpreting or explaining. (Taylor, 1988: 64)

In his earlier essay, 'Errors and Explanations,' Taylor had set out seven principles around interpreting and explaining 'the evidence' as such. The first one is really an assumption that grounds the other principles and is that 'Student's writing errors must be assumed to be explicable; errors are not random.' His next principle concerned the need to respect the individuality of the student, and the student's text – that is, that generalisations based on surveys of a large number of texts are less productive than detailed analysis of single texts. His third principle explicitly refers to literary criticism in stating that the 'primary datum for analysis is the essay itself, not what the student may say about the text or the process of composition'. None of these principles, as I have already intimated, would jar with an approach to texts based in poetics.

The broader point of connection with poetics here is that the gaps, or lacunae in Wordsworth's text are 'productive', interesting in their own right. The goal moreover with *poetics*, as opposed to interpretation or aesthetics, as such, is not to resolve them, but to keep them open as long as possible. Resisting both the rush to judgment (is it any good?) and the demand for 'meaning', final and authoritative. Poetics is a 'negative capability' ('to be capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason') to borrow Keats' term.

Taylor goes on to present a few more principles which it would be good to pause (rather than pass) over, particularly his careful distinction of errors requiring analysis and those which do not, but I want to jump ahead to his eighth point – perhaps the most complex – which is that explanations of errors which consider the 'paradigmatic' rather than syntagmatic are to be preferred.

What Taylor suggests is that when we are looking at 'errors' deemed to be 'significant' then we should start by looking at the writer's choice in terms of 'meaning' rather than syntactical choices. Taylor does add that this should apply unless a relationship between paradigmatic choices and the particular error can't be established. That is, while there may be cases where an error is evidence of the student's having not learnt 'a particular structure', the possibility that errors are indications of a difficulty or confusion with a particular concept or idea must be explored.

The broader point to which this relates is that any approach to teaching 'better' writing which ignores 'content', focusing only on form or grammar, or which looks only at content (such as ED Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* in which it is argued that 'knowing facts' in and of itself will improve writing) is inadequate. This point, is in fact the crux of most of Taylor's arguments, his aim being to find points of intersection and overlap between form and content, as well as other apparent dichotomies which, in his view, have restricted our understanding of the nature of the relationship between understanding and composition itself. These include most prominently the dichotomies between universal and particular, knowledge and skills, thinking and speaking, parole and langue, competence and performance, all of which are susceptible to mediation along the lines Taylor suggests.

The approach Taylor takes to resolving the dilemma is to focus on language: for instance in exploring the dichotomy between (knowing) subject and object (known) as a contemporary version of the ancient battle between rhetoric and dialectic, Taylor (following the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer) argued for a third term 'language', through which both knower and known are mediated (Taylor, 1995). But for this to work, it is essential to have a theory of language, or a grammar, which doesn't focus exclusively on the internal structure or logic of the language in question – which can be a species of formalism, and also tends to ignore both speaker and hearer of the language. I doubt that I need to mention in much detail here that Taylor consistently refers us to Halliday's Functional linguistics as a grammar which 'hooks on to the world', or one which considers the relation between language, speaker and world.

It is at this point that I want to depart from Taylor, not because I think the recourse to Functional grammar is problematic, but because I think that poetics offers an alternative way to resolve, or reconcile, at least to work around the dichotomies and dilemmas which are Taylor's point of departure.

The sense of 'poetics' that might be most immediately familiar is as one of the three branches of classical study, alongside rhetoric and ethics. In this sense poetics could be summarised as an account of poetic forms, and that is in large part what Aristotle provides. The modern equivalent of this kind of poetics is *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which gives what seems an exhaustive survey of forms.

The sense of poetics that I am drawing attention to here is slightly different: the word comes from the greek verb *poein* 'to make' and the idea of poetics that is useful retains this 'active' sense. This sense is captured by Mark Jones, who writes that poetics is 'an account of a literature's construction, its provenance, purposes and strategies.' (1995, 3) For many literary scholars the rule of thumb, not elucidated except in practice is that poetics is concerned with how a text is made, or *how* it means, not what it means. In this way it is akin to a structure, or grammar of literature, or perhaps more accurately, 'a grammar of composition', which is a phrase that would resonate with Gordon Taylor's writings. Two qualifications are necessary at this point. The first is that poetics is not a theory, or one theory among others, as such, but a 'mode' of reading which is practiced in a variety of ways. The second is that despite being largely associated with literature, this mode of reading is not limited to literary (creative) texts in the sense that all texts are 'made'.

Thus, in respect to LAS practice, in particular, I am not suggesting that poetics is simply a way for advisors to approach reading student texts. I think it is, in fact, a way of thinking about what it is we aim to teach students – not the content of their course or their texts, and not simply teaching empty forms (formulas), or grammar. That is to say, it gives both students, and ourselves, something to do with difficult, 'unreadable' texts other than coming directly at an unknown 'meaning' (which is unproductive) or focusing on something that is ultimately irrelevant to the problems at hand (such as 'grammar' or form). More generally, an interest in poetics might shift

the emphasis in our teaching from attention to writing, to attention to reading (both the student's reading of their own texts and reading of content).

By way of summary then I would argue that there are four key principles upon which a 'poetic' reading of a text can be built. These in turn are closely aligned with the sorts of principles upon which Taylor thought LAS practise could stand, as elucidated in particular in his 1986 essay in *Applied Linguistics*, 'Errors and Explanations'. The first principle is that gaps and indeterminacy are always significant and interesting. The second is that rigid distinctions between form and content can't be sustained. Third that the reader should be concerned with how a text 'means' in relation to writer and reader, and to other texts and contexts rather than simply seeking to judge the text against a predetermined 'meaning' or 'standard' (aesthetic or grammatical) and finally, the aim is to open, and hold in 'suspension' various textual possibilities, rather than to 'end' the discussion. On the last point there are clear implications for LAS practitioners as well as students. Among the primary goals of higher education (even if our university administrators have forgotten this) is encouraging the opening of questions. If lifelong learning means anything it has to begin with the ability to recognise that the answers we have now are not the only ones, and that there is always room for more questions.

That is to say, we as LAS advisors should not necessarily be satisfied with the answers we have now about why students write in the way that they write, and should, as Taylor advises, critique simplistic or positivistic accounts of students' writing deficiencies wherever we encounter them. Secondly, in answer to the question about what it is we can do if not teaching content and not simply correcting form: I would argue we should be seeking to teach students the art of slow reading, call it *poetics* if you like, which is not simply a skill, but a critical attitude toward the readings that constitute their 'subject', whatever that might be.

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# Learning and the Net Generation: Are LAS advisers helping or hindering?

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**Abstract:** *While university teachers are being exhorted to rethink their teaching in the context of diversity (Northedge, 2003), in this paper it will be argued that LAS practitioners need to reassess aspects of our practice in the context of new and emerging technology. Is the lecture still central and symbolic to the culture of learning at university (Benson, 1994) or are listening and note-taking antiquated means of gaining information (Ling, 1993)? Is note-taking merely a time-honoured institution (Todd, 1996) or is note-taking central to academic literacy (Badger et al 2001)? What impact is the new technology having on learning and teaching? To what extent are we complicit in the perpetuation of ineffective means of teaching and learning? In examining these questions it will be argued that we are in danger of being left behind by the new technology which may be making some of our current practices irrelevant to students' needs.*

**Key words:** *critical EAP, technology, learning, lectures, listening, Net Generation, note-taking*

## Introduction

In the spirit of the conference sub-title 'critiquing and reflecting' this paper aims to focus on our role in teaching and learning in higher education in order to stimulate

discussion about our work and its future. This paper is based on twenty years of experience as an academic and LAS adviser, and influenced by work in critical EAP (Benesch, 2001), critical pedagogy (Pennycook, 1999), reflective teaching (Brookfield, 1995) and writing pedagogy (Lea and Street, 1998; Lea and Stierer, 2000). It is essential for LAS advisers to develop the habit of critical reflection as it enables us to 'question and shape' (Benesch, 2001: xvii) the education we offer, and to turn a 'critical and sceptical eye towards assumptions and ideas that have become naturalized' (Pennycook, 1999:343). According to Brookfield (1995:1-27), critical reflection assists us among other things to question the 'common sense' of our work, make informed decisions, and develop the rationale for our practice. As Haggis (2004) has pointed out, notions of increased access, the knowledge-based economy, and lifelong learning have focussed attention on teaching and learning processes in higher education, and the emphasis in this paper is on changes in the undergraduate cohort.

Lea and Street (1998) distinguish between three inter-related perspectives on writing at university: the study skills approach, the academic socialisation approach, and the academic literacies approach. The study skills approach sees writing as a technical skill at which students are deficient, and programs based on this approach emphasise assisting students to correct surface errors. The academic socialisation approach sees writing as the acculturation of students to academic discourse, and programs focussing on this approach introduce students into the new disciplinary cultures. The academic literacies approach incorporates both the study skills and academic socialisation approaches but sees academic literacy as social practice and the student's task as the negotiation of often conflicting literacy practices. Both the academic socialisation and the academic literacies approaches recognise that students bring their own expertise to the new study environment. This paper will argue that, because of generational differences between university students and staff, LAS advisers may not be fully aware of the expertise the students bring with them to university, and we are thus at risk of hindering rather than helping our students.

It is vital for us to take stock of our role in higher education because in Australia, Britain and the US, the sector is going through a process of unprecedented change.

As Carew (2004:1) points out in reference to the American context, the current education system was created at the end of the 19th century when 90% of the population left school after Grade 8 and at a time when the industrial revolution was replacing an agricultural economy. As Lea and Stierer (2000:3) point out, the student body is increasingly linguistically and culturally heterogeneous, student numbers are expanding, new routes to higher education are becoming available, interdisciplinary and vocationally-oriented programs are increasing, and assessment methods are diversifying. Although it is usual to think of the increasing diversity of the undergraduate cohort in terms of ethnic background, age, and social class (Northedge, 2003), according to Hartman, Moskal and Dzubian (2005: 6.1) the greatest challenge facing higher education today is for staff to understand the 'Net Generation' learner and through this understanding provide the learning environments, services, and facilities needed to help these students achieve their potential.

## **Who are the Net Generation?**

The Net Generation (also known as Generation Y (Manuel, 2002) or Millennials (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Casey, 2004)) refers to those young people born between 1982 and 1991. These young people are now attending university, where they are being taught mainly by baby boomer lecturers and advisers, born between 1946 and 1964. Casey (2004:13) puts the problem succinctly as follows:

An aging, predominantly Baby-Boom professoriate now finds their former Generation X students finishing PhDs and returning to college as faculty. Occupying the current student role are the so-called Millennials (or Generation Y, to some).

Before turning to an examination of some of the challenges the Net Generation poses for our work, some of the research relating to our 'common sense' assumptions about learning and teaching in higher education will be considered. The academic lecture and note-taking will be discussed as they have long been considered central to learning and teaching at university, and therefore to our work.

## **The centrality of the lecture**

The academic lecture is a teaching technology invented over 2500 years ago (McLeish, 1976:252), and although Hartley and Davies (1978) called for research into the behaviour of students in authentic academic lectures nearly 30 years ago, there has been surprisingly little, possibly because lectures are so taken for granted as being vital to teaching and learning at university. Benson (1994: 196) has noted that 'listening to lectures constitutes a central and symbolic act in the culture of learning' but there are a number of indications that it is time that the privileged position of the academic lecture in learning and teaching at university is questioned.

Hyde and Flournoy (1986) have shown that it is quite possible for students to learn the material necessary to pass subjects without attending lectures, which hardly indicates that lectures are central to learning. Lectures have long been a source of complaint by students (Ramsden, 1997) and figures extrapolated from a study by Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000) indicate that 66% of ESB students and 91% of NESB students did not believe that they understood their lectures very well. At a time when enrolments are becoming increasingly diverse, these figures should be a concern to all involved in higher education.

A naturalistic case-study of learning from lectures by international students (McKnight, 1998) showed that the recall of key information presented in lectures by NESB international students was quite limited, and students often knew less about the key information after the lecture than before it, indicating that the input from the lecturer had impeded what little they already knew. However, students who appeared to have recalled least from the lectures as measured by weekly tests of lecture content nevertheless succeeded in passing the subject.

In a South African survey of over 1000 students who attended lectures, Irwin, Euvrard, Radloff and Boughey (2002: 20) found that 59% of their respondents missed up to three lectures per week for a variety of reasons and over 25% felt that the lectures were of no value or were 'so boring as to be not worth attending'.

Research such as that cited above appears to indicate that lectures are not central to learning, but their persistence may be explained in other terms.

## **The value of note-taking**

It has been noted that students value well-presented lectures because they present the opportunity for students to take notes (Irwin, Euvrard, Radloff & Boughey, 2002) and this is supported by psychological theory. From the information-processing point of view (Clark & Clark, 1977) note-taking from lectures has been seen as important for learning as it serves two functions: encoding and storage. The encoding function is said to be important since the process of interpreting the input and creating notes helps students to attend to and remember the information presented, and the storage function is important as the notes provide a written record for review and revision at a later date. This is intuitively appealing to LAS advisers, but although the utility of note-taking from lectures appears to have achieved the status of a 'naturalized idea' (Pennycook, 1999: 343), there is a body of research which indicates that the relationship between note-taking and learning may not be as clear-cut as is often thought.

Dunkel (1985) argued that notes improve learning because they enable review and revision of content. However, Clerehan (1992) has shown that the notes taken by second language students were not useful for either encoding or storage purposes. While non-native speakers are particularly disadvantaged in lectures in English because of limitations in language proficiency and short-term memory (Dunkel, 1988; Dunkel, Mishra & Berliner, 1989), the utility of note-taking for lecture comprehension has been shown to be marginal or questionable. For instance, Dunkel, Mishra and Berliner (1989) found that note-taking does not affect immediate recall of content, and Chaudron and his co-researchers (Chaudron, Cook & Loschky, 1988; Chaudron, Loschky & Cook, 1994) have argued that quality of notes is not an indicator of comprehension. The taking of notes may interfere with learning as it distracts attention from the content of the lecture (Dunkel & Davy, 1989) and taking notes may impede comprehension if the information content of the lecture is high (Todd, 1996). Kirby, Woodhouse and Hadwin (1999) found that learning was maximised when students listened to a lecture without taking notes and then reviewed a set of notes

provided to them by the lecturer. Kiewra (1985) takes the position that learning is maximised if students review the lecturer's notes rather than attend lectures, make their own notes and review them, and Todd (1996) argues that the encoding hypothesis is incorrect and that we should therefore stop teaching students the 'time-honoured institution' of note-taking.

McKnight (1998) showed that the informants saw their task in the economics lectures, not as note-taking in the way it is usually thought of by LAS advisers, but as the verbatim transcription of the lecturer's overhead visuals, and it was noticeable that frantic transcription continued even when the lecturer stated that it was unnecessary to copy the overhead as the material was in the set text. As the transcripts of the lecturer's visuals became the basis of their revision strategy, the informants had confidence in the transcriptions of the lecturer's overheads and one referred to them as 'strong notes'. The lectures were not central to learning in Benson's (1994) sense, but the lectures provided the means by which the informants could obtain full transcriptions of the lecturer's overheads, which were highly valued by the students. However, the informants did not actually listen to the lectures as they could not listen and take notes at the same time. As one informant stated:

You know our brain can't do two ways. We have to copy and we have to listen. I think I can't do that. I don't know if the others can. (McKnight, 1998: 243)

Since ten out of the twelve informants in McKnight's (1998) study passed the subject without listening to the lectures and taking notes as this activity is usually understood, it is likely that they would have achieved similar results if they had accessed the lecturer's visuals in another way and had not attended the lectures. Sutherland, Badger and White (2002) also found that the international students they surveyed took notes from the lecture in order to gain an accurate record of the lecture to assist them with later essays and examinations, which leaves open the question whether an accurate record might have been more easily achieved in other ways.

Ling (1993) argues that listening and note-taking are antiquated means of gaining information, and since there have been major changes in the technology of teaching and learning and the university cohort in the past decade it is likely that this

statement is more true now than when it was originally made. While Badger et al (2001) argue that note-taking is central to academic literacy, the evidence against this claim appears to be mounting. Although lectures continue to be widely used as a method of teaching, their effectiveness for learning is increasingly doubtful and it may well be the case that lectures may not be 'optimal learning environments' for today's students (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005b: 2.16). It may be that lecturers and LAS advisers cling to this vestige of traditional approaches to learning at university because we feel comfortable with it. However, resistance to change may be to the detriment of our functioning in this new era (Clayton-Pederson & O'Neill, 2005: 9.3). Some aspects of this new era will be considered in the next section.

## **Studying at university in 2005**

LAS advisers and parents of Net Generation students are well aware that studying at university is not the same enterprise as it was for baby boomers. Whereas previous generations of university students attended lectures and tutorials, today's students (who are likely to have work and family commitments in addition to their study) are much more selective about lecture and tutorial attendance. One reason for this is that they can access lectures on-line, and subject chat rooms may take the place of tutorials. While note-taking was important for baby boomers because once the lecture had been delivered it had gone forever, the on-line lecture can be accessed many times enabling personal notes to be taken. However, for many subjects note-taking is not necessary as many lecturers provide PowerPoint slides on the web. While baby boomers went to the library to research, the Net Generation uses the internet. Whereas baby boomers bought set texts from the university book shop or borrowed them from the library, today's students access selected readings and study guides on the web. Baby boomers sat at their desks to work with few distractions, and wrote essays on the basis of their reading of books and journals using a manual typewriter. The Net Generation student sits at the computer listening to her iPod with several different screens open enabling instant access to the assignment in progress, the library, the subject chat room and e-mail. Working in this way the Net Generation student produces reports, literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, posters and essays on the basis of their reading of e-books and e-journals as well as print books and journals. She uses hardware such as the personal computer, digital camera, and

scanner, together with software such as word processor and Endnote to prepare her work. Baby boomers' essays were submitted on paper with carbon paper being used to make a copy, and the final version was hand-delivered to the lecturer's pigeon-hole. Net generation assignments are submitted electronically and copied on a memory stick. Baby boomers prepared for examinations by re-reading lecture notes and studying past exams. Net Generation students prepare for examinations by making CDs which include downloaded questions from past examination papers, extracts from lectures, PowerPoint slides and reading notes.

The impact of new technologies on student learning can be seen in university buildings around the country. For instance, at Monash University 80 lecture theatres are now equipped with facilities which enable digitised audio recording of lectures which are made available to students on the web. 350 hours of recordings are made each week during semester covering 200 undergraduate subjects across all faculties. The popularity of this service can be gauged from the fact that 500,000 live audio streams were delivered to users in 2004 (Monash Memo, 2005).

If such rapid changes have occurred in learning at university, the question to be faced by LAS advisers is whether the skills we bring to our work are appropriate to the needs of the new generation of university students who approach study and writing in such different ways.

### **A generation gap?**

While it has always been the case that there is a generation gap between students and their teachers, and that lecturer and student perspectives have always been different (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005b:2.10), at no previous time has that gap been as wide as it is now. According to Casey (2004:20) the world into which the Net Generation was born was so different to the world their parents entered that they could be on different planets. For example, even compared with ten years ago, the average first year student in Australia is more likely to be online for study and recreation for at least 8 hours per week, to expect a range of learning materials to be available online and to work with other students in group settings (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005).

According to Prensky (2001a) the Net Generation are the first generation to have spent their entire lives using computers, video games, mobile phones, and other technologies. For him they are 'digital natives', who have 'hypertext' minds and highly-developed visual-spatial skills, are intuitive visual communicators, who prefer to learn through discovery rather than reading or being told, who shift attention rapidly, produce and expect fast response times, and are adept at multitasking and interacting with others to complete tasks. Contrast these attributes with those of the baby boomers, or as Prensky (2001a) labels them 'digital immigrants', who have a preference for learning through being told and reading text, through interaction and practice, step-by-step, one thing at a time, working individually. While it is important to be cautious about sweeping statements about generations, and Dede (2005:11) points out that students in any age cohort will present a mixture of preferred learning styles, Prensky (2001a:2) suggests that

Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language.

Prensky (2001a:2) also points out that even if digital immigrants learn to adapt to the new environment they retain their 'accent', that is, their preferred ways of doing things. For example, they may turn to the Internet for information as a second option rather than the first, print out their emails, and edit from hard copy rather than the screen.

The impact of the new technologies may be much broader than we digital immigrants suspect. According to Prensky (2001b) the Net Generation has been socialised in a way very different from their parents with the result that their brains may be physically different. This means that 'today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors' (Prensky, 2001b: 1). If Manuel (2002) is correct that reading from the Net involves scanning rather than reading, approaches to study skills learning and teaching may need fundamental reconsideration.

While changing technologies mean that traditional learning and teaching methods are no longer appropriate, there is little evidence that lecturers are prepared to face the new challenges. Despite the impact of information technology on the Net generation, university teaching has changed little (Wager, 2005: 10.1), and university teachers are reluctant to adopt Internet technology and use it in the classroom (Jones, 2002:9). Such findings are supported by a small-scale study of British lecturers (Sutherland & Badger, 2004) which found that lecturers' perceptions varied between 'total resistance' to the modern technology available to 'total adoption' of the available technology including the world wide web, PowerPoint and videos. Whatever their views about technology in the classroom, most lecturers surveyed saw the lecture as the one-way transmission of information, indicating no change in the basic function of the lecture since medieval times (Sutherland & Badger, 2004: 289). While it may be clear to Net Generation students that 'Faculty must toss aside the dying notion that a lecture and subsequent reading assignment are enough to teach the lesson' (Windham, 2005: 5.9), it may not be so easy for lecturers to make that change. Even if they do make the change, new technology is no guarantee of good teaching if it means only that 'death by PowerPoint' replaces 'death by lecture' (Clayton-Pederson & O'Neill, 2005:9.1).

### **Are we perpetuating ineffective teaching and learning?**

Concerns have long been expressed about the gap between preparatory programs such as those offered in EAP programs and the main study context (Jones, 1999), and Lea and Street (1998) have expressed the concern that students are being marginalised rather than being drawn into the university academic culture. The recent developments in the technology available to students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century appear to create similar gaps between the support we offer as LAS advisers and the ways in which students actually learn in academic writing and in other study areas. For instance, while baby boomer LAS advisers may prefer to access information through print, the Net Generation accesses information digitally (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005b: 2.2). The result is that although reading text may be the preferred mode of learning for academics and librarians, it is not the preferred mode for most of the present university population (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005b: 2.15). If a particular mode of learning is relatively unfamiliar to us, how can we improve our students' command of

that mode of learning? If as Prensky (2001a: 1) comments 'Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach', and traditional teaching methods are less effective with Net Generation students (Moore, Moore & Fowler, 2005: 11.6), LAS advisers are placed in an increasingly difficult position.

### **Will technology leave us behind?**

Technology in learning and teaching is here to stay and developments will continue at a faster and faster pace. The new generation of students possesses skills and learning styles which are unfamiliar to many lecturers but which have profound implications for teaching and learning. Although lecturers and LAS advisers may feel insecure in the face of the new technology and the jargon which accompanies it, it is clear that learning styles are undergoing a process of rapid change, and teaching styles will need to change to keep pace. In the process of change some of our cherished traditions may have to change or disappear. Barone (2005:14.3) considers that some of the 'sacred cows' of higher education such as the academic lecture may not transfer successfully to the new context of learning and teaching, and learning will be based increasingly on 'mediated immersion and distributed learning communities' (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005a: 2). At the very least it is likely that some of our current practices such as note-taking and study skills training may no longer be appropriate.

In order to close the generation gap between students, lecturers and learning advisers, changes at all levels are necessary. According to Moore, Moore and Fowler (2005), university staff must develop awareness of the changing nature of study at university, the changing learning styles of the new generation of students and the developing technology to assist learning and teaching. Large scale professional development is necessary to enable staff to develop skills in the new technology and to implement curriculum changes to make the curriculum offerings more attractive and accessible to the student cohort, and integrated changes are necessary at the levels of teaching and support services, architecture, technology, and policy to enable successful learning. Dede (2005:1) states that university staff must themselves experience 'mediated immersion' and develop 'neomillennial learning

styles' if they are to teach the changing cohort of students effectively as the nature of students alters, and this will present challenges for all involved in higher education.

## Conclusion

Haggis (2003) states that we are still in a situation where we know little about how students learn, or fail to learn, through their interaction with texts and writing, but in this paper it has been argued that we are even further from understanding how students learn or fail to learn through their interactions with digital literacies. We cannot assume that the current students are the same as we were when we were students, or that we know how students learn best in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we need to take steps to find out. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005b: 1) point out that although we routinely collect demographic information on our learners, 'we may not be asking the questions that will help us design and deliver programs that are optimal for current learners'. In this respect LAS advisers are in a privileged position as our work enables us to have regular contact with students and to develop good working relationships with them. LAS advisers could learn from the suggestion of Chanock and Vardi (2005:4) that we should use our experience of reading the documents that construct students' learning, and talking with students about what and how they learn in order to develop our understanding of the new generation of students. If we do not take steps to question some of our common sense assumptions about our work, we may be hindering rather than helping our students.

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# The perils of skills: Towards a model of integrating graduate attributes into the disciplines

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**Abstract:** *The notion of graduate attributes - a surprisingly enduring idea in Australian higher education over the last decade or so - has been useful as a way of requiring academics and administrators to reflect seriously on the nexus between university learning and the demands that graduates will face in their subsequent professional lives. A potential danger of this movement however, is that increasingly these attributes will be thought of as discrete skills to be developed on courses, with a concomitant downgrading of the role of disciplinary content. Manifestations of such a trend are the emergence in recent years of a variety of extra-disciplinary courses such as 'professional writing' and 'critical thinking', as well as a lingering interest in the idea of generic skills testing prior to graduation (e.g., Graduate Skills Assessment test). The main argument of this paper is that if the graduate attributes idea is to continue to be a useful one in the*

*framing of university curricula, it is important that effective ways are found to integrate the development of these attributes within the context of the disciplines. We outline one such method – a possible framework for the analysis and creation of assessment tasks – which, we think, has general applicability to learning in any disciplinary setting. The key element of this framework is the notion of ‘role’ – which can be used to explore with students (and also confer on them) a range of academic and professional identities.*

**Key words:** *graduate attributes, generic skills, assessment, assignment tasks*

## **Introduction**

The graduate attributes idea – which conceives of university education largely in terms of the development of certain, transferable and generic skills – has continued to gather momentum in recent years. As Language and Learning professionals we find ourselves increasingly having to engage in some capacity with this initiative, principally because many of the attributes identified by universities as important relate so much to the work we do as advisers – developing students’ written and spoken communication, their capacity for critical analysis, and the like. The connection between our field and the broader graduate attributes idea is attested to in part by the fact that some of the more influential papers on the subject in the Australian literature have been produced by several of the more venerable figures in our ranks – Brigid Ballard and John Clanchy (1995) and Gordon Taylor (1990; 2000) – more of whom later.

But despite the continuing influence of the broad attributes idea, the literature suggests that it has been implemented in institutions in only very limited ways. Sumison and Goodfellow (2004) attribute this mixed record of success mainly to a failure to bring academic staff on board. They note the scepticism that many academics have for this particular episode of curriculum reform, seeing it manifestly as a “top-down”, managerially-driven agenda. Another obstacle is a perception that the ‘generic concept’ does not fit well with the diversity of knowledges and practices

found in the disciplines, or that the professional flavour of many of these putative attributes makes the idea more relevant to vocational, as opposed to higher education (Crebert, 2002).

In this paper, we argue that if the graduate attributes idea is to have any continuing validity, then it is important that effective ways are found to integrate the development of these attributes within the context of academic disciplines. We outline one such method here – a possible framework for the analysis and creation of assessment tasks – which, we think, has general applicability to learning in any disciplinary setting. In proposing such a framework, we hope to demonstrate the specific contribution language and learning professionals can make in these broader educational debates – one that draws both on the philosophical position that underpins our work, and also on the practical *in situ* experience we have assisting students to develop these capacities in relation to quite specific academic tasks.

## **Graduate attributes**

Ballard and Clanchy's (1995) paper referred to above, locates the graduate attributes movement within a larger shift in higher education thinking and policy around the early 1990s which saw a move away from 'inputs' (efficiency and productivity) to a focus more on 'outcomes' (quality). Central to this project has been the imperative "to describe the attributes that graduates should acquire if exposed to a high quality education system - including all its processes" (Australian Higher Education Council, 1992). This emphasis on outcomes has come arguably from several sources – an increasing demand from employers for graduates to possess certain abilities, and a more general accountability pressure from the community to have the purposes of university education more clearly articulated (Hager *et al.*, 2002). Thus, in the last decade, universities have applied themselves energetically to analysing their particular teaching and learning 'processes', and to come up with an account of what it is their students will possess (or what it is hoped they will possess) at the end of their degrees.

The outcome of many of these efforts at institutions has been the compiling of lists of graduate attributes (usually consisting of up to about 10 items) intended both to

summarise extant practices, and to guide processes of curriculum development. For the purpose of illustration only, we provide the most recent list created at our institution:

1. *Effective spoken and written communication skills for proficient interpersonal and professional interactions*
2. *Enthusiasm and capacity for enquiry and research*
3. *Capacity to articulate a sound argument*
4. *Insight to identify a problem and introduce innovative solutions*
5. *Effective problem solving skills*
6. *Capacity for critical thought, analysis and synthesis*
7. *Ability to work collaboratively and to assume appropriate leadership roles*
8. *Information literacy*
9. *Socially responsible and ethical attitudes*
10. *International outlook, cultural sensitivity and inclusive approach to differences*

Not surprisingly lists like this one have been the object of a certain amount of critical scrutiny. A number of problems have been identified including the often imprecise and arbitrary nature of the categories they describe – ‘skills’, ‘capacities’, ‘values’, ‘outlooks’ etc. (Ballard and Clancy, 1995); ambiguity about whether they actually specify guaranteed outcomes, or have the status only of objectives – or even just ‘consummations devoutly to be wished’ (Oppy & Moore, 2003); and the tendency for them to look rather similar across institutions - leading some to see them as instances of the type of shallow technocratic rhetoric so disdained by social critics like Don Watson (2003).

But to recognise these problems is not to suggest a fundamental deficiency in the attributes ideas itself – the criticisms perhaps point more to certain failings at the institutional level in the way that local educational practices have been investigated and described. Ballard and Clanchy, in defending the broad idea, suggest that “a university ... really ought to be able to say with reasonable explicitness what its objectives are with respect to its students” (p. 156).

## **The rise of skills**

Our chief concern is not with the content of the lists themselves, but with the tendency they have to emphasise - indeed increasingly to reify - the 'skills' component of university education. This is attributable in part to the increasing accountability pressures exerted on institutions by government and employer agencies, and also to the intense market pressures that faculties face in making their offerings as attractive as possible to prospective students. Inevitably, in this approach, there has been a de-emphasising of the role of disciplinary content. In Arts faculties for example, the continued existence of an area of study can no longer be justified purely on the grounds that it is of intrinsic interest - or that it should be preserved as a result of having acquired some 'heritage' status. Instead academics are required more and more to justify their disciplinary offerings in terms of the specific 'skills' they can guarantee their students will acquire - especially those that will be relevant to students' future employment. In the skills-oriented approach, content is viewed mainly as the vehicle by which these skills can be taught. In the more extreme versions, the content element of programs is seen as merely incidental.

We shall give an example of how the skills agenda has increasingly insinuated itself into thinking about academic curricula. Several years ago, the Arts faculty in which we work hired the services of an outside consultant to investigate ways in which it could make its programs more attractive to international students. In the report that followed, it was concluded that the main obstacle to recruitment was a perception across the community that Arts qualifications generally are not sufficiently vocational, and "that the financial returns that will follow from an investment in these degrees are at best uncertain". Many of the report's subsequent recommendations were aimed at dealing in some way with this perception difficulty. Central among these was a call for a 'core curriculum', to be made up of skill-based units that would have 'clear vocational relevance' - including 'Communication', 'Problem-solving', 'Critical thinking' and 'Teamwork'. The report was insistent that such subject offerings not be thought of as 'support', but be areas of study 'in their own right' designed, as it suggested, "to excite, to motivate and to inspire".

At the time, these recommendations were rejected, mainly because it was thought that insufficient market research data had been presented to justify the claim that such programs would be attractive to students. A spirited critique was also made from other quarters – from some whose interests lay beyond the pragmatic concerns of recruitment. The view expressed here was that such programs could in fact undermine the very strength of the faculty – which lay, it was held, in the content-rich nature of its core disciplines – history, literature, politics, anthropology, linguistics and so on. Indeed it was thought that the faculty’s capacity to attract students was largely contingent on it being able to make this content as ‘exciting’ and ‘inspiring’ as possible. Such a view, it must be said, is in no sense a radical one. Indeed as Langer (1992) points out, both teachers and students are naturally inclined to “think about their learning predominantly in terms of discipline knowledge, and not skill development” (p. 83-84).

But although these ‘extra-disciplinary’ skills offerings were rejected at the time of the tabling of the international student report, more recently the faculty has shown itself less vigilant in resisting the skills lure. Among its newer subject offerings are units in Professional Writing, and a Graduate Diploma course in Professional Studies – taking in communications, professional ethics, and critical thinking<sup>1</sup>. A cursory survey of subject offerings in Arts faculties at other Australian universities suggests a similar trend towards the stand-alone skills program.

It would appear that additional impetus for such skills offerings – especially those that deal with the skills of writing and thinking *per se* – has come from a push from several quarters for a graduate skills assessment (GSA) test to be introduced as a method of measuring the acquisition of key skills. This test, commissioned by DEST, and developed by the Australian Council of Educational Research has been trialled fairly extensively over the last five years, and has been the object of intermittent enthusiasm from the current Minister for Education. With no apparent obvious rationale, the test has opted to focus on four skill areas – ‘Written communication’, ‘Critical thinking’, ‘Problem solving’ and ‘Interpersonal understandings’.

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<sup>1</sup> With a low uptake rate, the Graduate Diploma program appears to have been short-lived.

Apart from having questionable validity - particularly the matter of how a mainly multiple choice format can properly assess the diverse skills, knowledge and techniques acquired by students on their degrees, the GSA has prompted concerns about its potential to have undue influence on university programs. As Chanock *et al.* (2004) explain:

The most serious concern is the negative effect that the test, as a quality assurance instrument, could have ultimately on the quality of university programs. If the test is mandated in the system, universities for reasons of their survival will want to ensure that their students do well on it. In such an arrangement, it is hard not to envisage valuable time being given over in already overcrowded curricula to training students in the ultimately trivial skills of test preparation (p.24).

Significantly, in the consultant's report quoted above, the GSA was seen as "creating opportunities" for Arts faculties in the teaching of dedicated skills programs.

## **Insights of language and learning**

Despite the recent encroachments of a skills-based pedagogy, the majority position in higher education continues to hold – mercifully - to an integrated approach to the teaching of generic skills. As a recent report on the progress of introducing graduate attributes at one university puts it:

A preference for teaching graduate attributes in the context of the disciplines has been mentioned in the literature often ...but it cannot be emphasised too strongly. (Chapman, 2004: p. 23)

Such statements resonate strongly with the type of conceptions that language and learning professionals have developed about such matters in the relatively short history of our field. As a group intensely engaged with issues of language, skills, content, and contexts - in the work we do with our students - we are perhaps as well placed as any to understand the relationships that inhere between these different entities, including the impossibility of imagining the acquisition of skills (or attributes) occurring in any meaningful way separate from content. Indeed, Ballard and Clanchy's (1995) assertion - that "such skills cannot be learned *in vacuo*" – might be regarded as the closest thing we have to a core belief in the field. Such a notion is rooted in the phenomenological axiom – first advanced by Brentano a century ago –

that “thinking is always of necessity thinking about something” (cited in Gardner, 1985), a formula that applies to all of the core activities that our students are engaged in – writing, reading, researching.

Perhaps the thinker in our field who has done more than anyone else to articulate a theoretical relationship between notions of skill and content in our work is Gordon Taylor. In his paper ‘The notion of skill – a hermeneutic perspective’, Taylor (1990) draws on Aristotle to elaborate on two well-understood types of ‘knowing’ – ‘the ‘knowing that’ (*episteme*), which in the university context refers to disciplinary content, and the ‘knowing how’ (*techne*), which equates with what are nowadays called generic skills. Taylor suggests it is now accepted in most serious traditions of the study of learning – like cognitive science or phenomenography – that these two types of knowing are of their nature inextricably related. There is broad agreement, he insists, that “there are no generalised transferable skills of any consequence which exist (or can be taught) independent of content” (p. 8).

But this is not the sum of it, Taylor suggests. Any account of learning that takes in only *episteme* and *techne* – and which sees learning and scholarship simply as the unproblematic application of generic techniques to particular bodies of knowledge – is for Taylor a seriously limited one. Significantly in Aristotle’s schema, Taylor explains, there is a further category – *phronesis* – which translates variously as ‘practical knowledge’, ‘moral knowledge’ or simply ‘understanding’. *Phronesis* brings in an additional dimension of ‘knowing’ – a kind of executive knowledge (or a “knowing what to do”) that comes into play in the quite specific situations in which we find ourselves. As Taylor explains, *phronesis* is concerned with:

doing what is best in the circumstances – on dealing with content and context of immediate and highly variable practical situations which demand action from us (1990: 4).

It is the ‘content and context’ of practical situations that create the variability – and indeed the great potential for creativity – in the different forms of academic engagement required of students. On this issue, Taylor points to an understanding that we as language and learning professionals all have, but often our students lack - that the so-called generic academic skills, like essay writing, or being able to think

critically, will often assume very different guises in specific learning contexts – whether these be related to level of study, or discipline area, or even specific academic tasks. It is helping students towards this practical understanding (*phronesis*) – a mediating of the generality of skills (*techne*) and the particularities of disciplinary knowledge (*episteme*) - that Taylor believes should be the principal concern of a higher education.

In a later paper, Taylor (2000) relates these understandings to the special place he sees language and learning professionals occupying in the academy. Although in many respects our positions in institutions are marginal – administratively, professionally, even geographically, Taylor thinks we need to see ourselves as integrally engaged in the mediating of these two broad domains – that is the development of students’ abilities in relation to the quite specific tasks and contents that they bring to us for advice. Taylor sees our role – perhaps somewhat grandly - thus:

It is my view that the most important function of the language and learning professional in the university is to be a catalyst for reconciling the top-down (deductive) beloved of administrators, and the bottom-up (inductive) which lies at the heart of teaching in the disciplines (Taylor, 2000; p.160).

We have to acknowledge that our limited status within universities often prevents us from fully assuming the type of ‘catalysing’ role envisaged by Taylor here. However our *in situ* work with students certainly enables us to recognise that there is an amount of ‘reconciling’ work that needs to be done.

## **Attributes and assessment**

This gap between the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ – that Taylor speaks of - is particularly apparent, we think, when one tries to ‘reconcile’ notional lists of graduate attributes, with the realities of student work in the faculties, especially the work they need to complete as assessment requirements on their courses. To take the example again of our own institution, whilst the graduate attributes outlined earlier suggest a broad and diverse range of abilities – ones as relevant to the workplace and community, as to the academy (eg. *the ability to introduce innovative solutions; to work collaboratively, to be socially responsible* etc), our experience is that

assessment practices continue to be oriented towards the development of quite specific discipline-related skills. This observation is borne out in research one of us was involved in several years ago that looked at assessment practices across a range of courses at two universities (Moore & Morton, 2005). In a corpus of approximately 150 tasks collected from both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs, it was found that about 80% of writing assessment prescribed distinctly academic genres (*literature reviews, research proposals*), and of these more than 60% prescribed the traditional academic essay. Whilst one certainly does not want to dismiss the value of these discursive forms – nor indeed to entertain the possibility of any ‘dumbing down’ of assessment requirements – there is a need to consider how assessment regimes like this might relate to (and be ‘reconciled with’) the broader attributes agenda. On this point, Chanock (2003) notes that traditional academic genres are well-attuned to making students aware of the ‘complexities’ of issues, but that such an outlook may not necessarily be valued in some of the workplaces our students enter – where rhetorical activity is often oriented towards “swift decision-making and action”.

A benefit of our *in situ* work - and our permanent access to the ‘bottom-up’, as it were - is that every so often we come across quite innovative assessment tasks, ones that require students to engage with academic knowledge in interesting, and distinctly non-academic ways. The following from a Women’s Studies subject is a good example.

*In April this year, the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, launched a report ‘Valuing Parenthood’, on options for paid maternity leave that is available on-line. (Hint: You can locate their link to this report on the unit portal page). On that same site, there is a request for the public to submit responses to the report. Reflecting on your readings this semester on topics such as equality versus difference, heterosexuality, and gender in the workplace, draft a response to the issue and options raised in the report. Work with a partner.*

The interest of this task is not just its prescribing of a non-traditional written genre – a ‘submission’. We can see that there is additional variability here, both in the role that the student must assume - not so much a student identity here, but more that of

interested citizen - and also in the intended audience for the text - not an academic, but a public governmental one.

In putting together a response to a task like this, there would appear to be challenges for the student beyond the usual ones of composing a coherent and well-researched piece of academic writing. We can see that the shift in audience means that students will have to be judicious about the way they make use of extant knowledge – their ‘semester’s readings’. For example, will they need to make explicit reference to theoretical materials, or should they make their pitch at a more practical level? Even the normally straightforward matter of citation is potentially problematic here. How much will they need to cite these readings? And indeed in their writing, would it be more strategic to project an identity of academic authority, or rather to present as an informed citizen only. In short, the student has to exercise a good deal of judgment about how they will apply disciplinary knowledge to a new and possibly unfamiliar context. We are reminded here of Taylor’s account of *phronesis* quoted above: “doing what is best in the circumstances – on dealing with content and context of immediate and highly variable practical situations which demand action from us” (1990: 4).

Authentic tasks like this one from the Women’s Studies subject are particularly interesting for the way that they provide a context for the enacting of many of the abilities typically found in graduate attribute inventories – as well as managing to do this without being too self-conscious and pre-determined about the process. In relation to the attributes in the list referred to above, we can see that the task takes in at least some of the following:

- *Capacity for critical thought, analysis and synthesis*– in evaluating the draft report, based on one’s readings
- *Effective communication skills*– in preparing a written submission
- *Capacity to articulate a sound argument* – in commenting on options canvassed in the report
- *Information literacy* – in accessing the report online

- *Socially responsible and ethical attitudes* – in being engaged in an issue of clear social importance
- *Ability to work collaboratively* – in the co-authoring of the submission

Tasks like this seem to us particularly useful. The impression one gets however, is that they are usually set for students on a somewhat *ad hoc* basis – and are motivated mainly by the need to provide ‘novelty’ in assessment practices. The writer of the women’s studies assignment, for example, mentioned that she created the task mainly to give students “a bit of a break from the usual run of essays in the subject” (and also interestingly to find formats that would be “plagiarism-proof”, as she described it). It seems to us however, that there is the opportunity to subject tasks like this to some systematic analysis, and also to explore ways in which they might be effectively utilised within the graduate attributes framework.

## **A model of assessment tasks**

It is our view that the assessment task is as good a construct as any to use as the focus for the development of graduate attributes. This is for the reason outlined by Crookes (1986) that “much if not most of human activity, whether in employment or in education can be seen as a series of tasks – most, although not all, having some communicative aspect to them”. In Figure 1, we outline a possible schema for thinking about variety in assessment tasks in a particular discipline area. The example used is history, but the same analysis can be

Figure 1: Possible analytical schema for assessment tasks - using history as example

AUTHORSHIP	ROLE	GENRE	MODE	DISCIPLINE	AUDIENCE
<b>Individual</b>	<b>student</b>	<b>essay</b>	<b>writer</b>	<b>in history</b>	<b>writing for lecturer</b>
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
	<u>Academic</u> -historian	-research proposal -grant application -research project -refereed article -conference abstract/paper			discipline
collaborative	<u>Professional</u> -journalist -teacher -textbook writer -biographer -museum curator -activist -editor -script writer	-reportage -lesson -textbook -biography -exhibition program -debate/press release -publication -film script	speaker		general public students specific client group
	<u>Other</u> eg. historical actor (politician, public figure etc.)	-speech -document			historical audience

conducted, we believe, for any discipline area<sup>2</sup>. At the top level of the figure we have sought to characterise what continues to be the ‘archetypal task configuration’ in many discipline areas – ‘the individual student essay writer in discipline X writing for the lecturer’. From this, we have generated a number of analytical categories – *authorship* (ie. individual vs. collaborative); *role* (a range of academic, professional and other identities); *genre* (a range of possible ‘communicative events’ associated with these identities); *mode* (written vs. spoken); *audience* (academic, professional, public etc.). The only category that is invariable in our schema is that of discipline. This relates to our belief, stated earlier, in the centrality of ‘content knowledge’– and the importance of being able to adapt this knowledge for a range of socio-rhetorical purposes and contexts.

The schema has clearly been influenced by theoretical work done in the fields of rhetoric and genre studies (eg. Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990). But where much of this work takes as its starting point the notion of ‘discourse community’, from which a range of communicative purposes and genres can be derived (Swales, 1990), we approach the identification of genres from the perspective of the student, and the range of possible ‘roles’ that may be relevant to them in their present and future lives. The list of roles provided in the table, which includes *journalist*, *teacher*, *curator* etc. is a notional one only, but one that could be validated without too much difficulty through reference to graduate destination surveys, or simply finding out from students what their interests and prospects might be. It is important to stress too that all the ‘roles’, ‘genres’ etc. considered need not be exclusively ‘functional’ ones (professional and academic), but can take in more ‘poetic’ and ‘expressive’ forms (Britton, 1970) including for example, the preparing of film scripts, or the creating of imaginary historical documents.

The rationale for such a clearly discursively-based organisation of assessment comes from observations frequently made nowadays about the overwhelmingly linguistic and semiotic nature of contemporary work. For Jean Baudrillard (1980), this is one of the defining characteristics of the condition of postmodernity – a shift, as he explains, from a former ‘age of production’ – based on industry labour and

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<sup>2</sup> The table was developed for a professional development session on ‘Assessment and graduate attributes’ run for staff in the School of Historical Studies.

accumulation, to one of 'simulation' – based on media, computerisation, and information processing. Norman Fairclough (2002) makes a similar observation. There is a sense, he suggests:

in which language (and more broadly semiosis) is becoming more central in the New Capitalism than in earlier forms of capitalism ...implied for instance in descriptions of the New Capitalism as 'knowledge-' or 'information- based' (p. 163).

## **Applications and caveats**

In setting out this range of possible 'roles', 'genres' etc in the model, the suggestion is certainly not that an academic program would seek to provide instruction in how each might be successfully enacted by students. Indeed this would amount to just another type of skills learning. The aim instead would be to draw on a select number of task types, as a basis for exploring the variable ways in which written and spoken knowledge needs to be shaped and adapted to circumstances, as well as a consideration of the different discursive processes and forces that will have a bearing on this shaping. Drawing on the history samples, students might be asked to reflect, for example, on how the same field knowledge (eg. aspects of the Vietnam War – a popular history subject in our faculty) would be realised differently as an essay, as a textbook extract, or as a sequence from a documentary.

Such an exploration need not be a technical one. It would be inappropriate, for example, to impose on students any theoretical account of text-context relations – for example, the systemic functional linguistic constructs of 'field', 'tenor' and 'mode'. Instead one would want to rely on a more organic view of context and circumstance - perhaps of the type suggested by Charles Bazerman. Bazerman (1988) suggests four different contexts – the object under study, the relevant literature, the anticipated audience, and the author's own self – which can be used as a basis for understanding knowledge-making processes, as well as to recognise how variable textualisations often constitute 'different moves in quite different games' (p. 46).

Central to the model we have proposed is the idea of students being called on to assume a variety of roles – academic, professional and others. It has to be

acknowledged however, that as a pedagogical method, the notion of role–conferral and task simulation in the classroom is not without its problems. Freedman, Adam and Smart (1994) note the lack of ‘exigency’ (Miller, 1984) in the classroom simulation – that is, the absence of specific social purposes, motives, interests and investments that typically inhere authentic communicative situations – which both give them their substance, and shape the way they will proceed. As Bourdieu and Passeron have noted on this point – “it is [principally] the speaker’s anticipation of the reception which his/her discourse will receive (its price) which contributes to *what* is said and *how*” (p. 154). Thus, when these roles - both producer (speaker/writer) and receiver (audience) - are not real, but only simulated, it is difficult for students to have a genuine grasp of what the consequences of their rhetorical actions might be, and thus the choices they need to make will seem less compelling.

It has also been noted that the learning contexts in universities and workplaces are also different. Freedman and Adam (1996) note for example, that the processes of knowledge production that go on at university are best understood as a form of ‘facilitated performance’ – wherein the activity is undertaken primarily for the learner - and where performance is assessed mainly in terms of the achievement of certain learning objectives. This contrasts with the workplace, where there is little deliberate facilitation of individual abilities, and where attention is directed almost entirely to “the task at hand and its successful completion” (p.410). Performance in the workplace context thus is gauged ultimately in relation to the achievement of organisational goals. On this point, Freedman and Adam (1996) suggest that the transition from university to work involves not only learning new genres of discourse, but also learning new ways of learning these genres (p.42)<sup>3</sup>.

Clearly there are important differences between university and workplace contexts, and between student and graduate/worker identities, and these point to certain limitations in the approach we have outlined. What needs to be stressed however, is that the objective of this type of program is not towards the successful enactment of particular roles as they relate to certain prescribed socio-rhetorical situations.

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<sup>3</sup> The important issue of disparities between university and professional discourses is an issue taken up in additional papers at this conference by Jan Pinder and Steve Price.

Instead, we see the aim more modestly – to help students recognise that they will need to take on a variety of personae and social roles in their future lives, and help them to understand in some basic way how these roles will have a bearing on the approaches and practices they adopt.

## Conclusion

Ronald Barnett, in a recent and evocatively titled article ‘Learning for an unknown future’ stresses, after Baumann (2000), the ‘fluidity’ and ‘fragility’ of contemporary life, which demands he says new pedagogical responses. In a world that has become ‘radically unknowable’, Barnett suggests “knowledge and skills can no longer provide a platform for going on with any self-assuredness”. What is needed he suggests is a focus on ontological qualities – an instilling of the qualities of ‘confidence’ and ‘self-belief’ that will enable our students to go forth into a challenging world” (p.254). Such ideas recapitulate our earlier discussion of Taylor’s work (1990) and the priority he thinks should be given to Aristotle’s *phronesis*, over other forms - *episteme* and *techne*.

Elsewhere Taylor (2000) describes the desired quality as simply one of judgement: “What students stand most in need of”, he suggests, “is help to develop ... the faculty of judgement ... It is only judgement that truly enables people to make appropriate use of the knowledge and skills they have built up in the many different situations” of their learning. (p. 162). Taylor goes on to point out that such a faculty, like Barnett’s ontological qualities, cannot be taught in any systematic way. But what we can do, he explains:

is to create the conditions under which judgment in our students is given a chance to flower, to chance their arm or pen. ...What their education needs to put before them is as wide a variety of experiences, situations, circumstances, language games as possible (p.162).

The suggestions outlined in this paper may be one modest way to provide this variety of experience.

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## Chasing Pokemon – in pursuit of the LAS ideal

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**Abstract:** *A 'remembered' moment from a lecture given by James Gee (2000) at the University of the Witwatersrand in which he compared the infinite possibilities of creating Pokemons to the infinite options for Language and Academic Skills (LAS) units became the catalyst for an interrogation of my current LAS model. Does it, in fact, promote 'equity of access and ... enhance learning' (Leibowitz, 2004: 35), or had I merely become a LAS advisor who had embraced the shadow world of academic compromise? This paper describes the three stages of my reflexive and reflective Pokemon chase. In part one I reflect on my initial employment at Monash South Africa (MSA) in 2001 and the 'ideal' model I planned to implement. In part two, I explain the current 2005 model. A reflective, comparative table presents the complex circumstances that shaped my practice as I explored the question 'What insights have I gained from this reflection?' In the third part, I describe and explore 'selected' insights with reference to isolation, sole provider, complex and complicated South African LAS contexts and facilitator versus lecturer versus LAS advisor. I conclude by suggesting that LAS models tend to be the result of our continuous*

*struggle to integrate and incorporate what we hope to create (the ideal) with the constraints of the real.*

**Key words:** *Reflection, LAS contexts, academic literacies*

## **Introduction**

In 2001 Professor James Gee delivered a lecture titled – ‘Academic Languages and Identities’, at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), South Africa. He compared academic literacy to the Pokemon (Pocket Monster) phenomenon. Pokemon began as a children’s video game, a game which has now ‘invaded our televisions, disrupted our lives as parents, obsessed our children and created paranoia and anger amongst teachers around the world’ (Tzelepis, 2001:4). Pokemons are creatures that evolve. The aim of the ‘master Pokemon trainer’ is to build a creature that is able to survive and destroy the ‘dangerous’ monsters in their world.

The possible options for developing alternate Pokemons are infinite. Although, unlike Pokemon, academic literacy initiatives have not developed into a \$5 billion international industry, they are initiatives in tertiary institutions that constantly attempt to evolve into powerful instruments of access and opportunity for all students entering tertiary institutions for the first time. In many cases such initiatives can develop into ‘tyrannical monsters’ as the Language and Academic Skills (LAS) staff desperately attempt to discover, unearth or create academic literacy curricula that will challenge the collective higher education categorisation of the LAS unit as a remedial unit (Zeegers, 2004). I realise that Pokemon and the recent Pokemon cards are the subject of intense debate, both positive and negative. However, it is not the intention of this paper to enter into this debate. This ‘remembered’ moment was merely the catalyst that began my looking backwards to understand how I had

inadvertently abandoned my ideal Pokemon programme and enthusiastically embraced the compromise.

This paper documents and critically reflects on my attempts to develop the 'ultimate Pokemon curriculum' for my LAS work at Monash South Africa (MSA). It describes the three stages of my reflexive and reflective 'chase'. In part one I look back to the 2001 beginnings, to my reflection before practice, to a description of my teaching and learning philosophies, my perceptions of the MSA 2001 context and the resultant initial 'ideal' programme. In part two, I explain the current model, the result of my reflexive practice over the past four years. This stage includes a comparative tabulation of the evolution from 2001 to 2005. This reflective exercise enabled me to identify issues that shaped and influenced my practice as I tried to negotiate and reconcile what I aimed to achieve with what I did achieve. In part three, reflection for action, I explore my future options – what should I retain and why, if I am to provide a LAS service that truly promotes equity of access and enhances learning.

I do not claim that I have found the 'recipe' for any particular LAS unit but rather hope to open up debate about the possibilities of developing LAS programmes from, and for, a particular context.

## **Part 1: Looking backwards – reflection before action**

'There are 150 different kinds of Pokemon, and it's the trainer's job to catch as many as possible' (<http://www.wizards.com/pokemon>).

### **Teaching and learning philosophies**

As I prepared for my interview (April 2001), for the position of lecturer in Language and Learning Services. South Africa (LLS.SA), I read the Monash University pamphlets (Monash University Student Resource Guide 2001; Monash Course Guide 2001) with interest. As I analysed the information on content and assessment for each faculty, I asked myself the following questions

- What should the structure of this course be? Should it be credit bearing, optional or compulsory?
- Who is the audience? What are the features of the current student population?
- What are the needs and perceptions of students and lecturers in relation to LAS?

I then studied the teaching and learning philosophy of the University ([www.monash.edu.au](http://www.monash.edu.au)) and found that it closely approximated my own beliefs about teaching and learning. The documents suggested that any teaching and learning environment should develop a spirit of innovation, progressiveness and intellectual and cultural curiosity – essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Gibbons, 1998). This curiosity, supported by meticulous research, should be encouraged within the context of real life situations that engage with and benefit the community. Ultimately the acquisition of any process or knowledge should occur in an integrated, collaborative environment and should instil the principle of *ancora imparo* – I am still learning.

I had previously been teaching on the Foundation in English Language: Academic Literacy A and B for the Department of Applied English Language Studies at the Wits (1997–2001). These courses are one-year credit-bearing courses for first year students entering Wits on an extended or special curriculum. The aims of the Foundation in English Language are to ‘learn the language requirements of university level work in the Faculty of Humanities’ and ‘introduce students to academic research ... to learn how to conduct a small-scale research project on a language topic of their own choice, in teams with other students’. Working with these students in these credit-bearing courses had not only provided me with knowledge of possible LAS topics, skills and content but it had also highlighted the need for ongoing adaptation and reflection. It was not enough to deliver programmes: it was also essential to continually refer to, explore and revisit the theory that underpins and defines academic literacy. I therefore reviewed articles and notes in the area

of academic literacy from my own Honours and M Ed studies at Wits and found the work of Lea and Street particularly helpful.

According to Lea & Street (2000), 'Academic literacies' can be broadly classified into three approaches: Study Skills, Academic Socialization or Academic Literacies. The Study Skills approach views 'student writing as a technical and instrumental skill' (Lea & Street, 2000:34). One problem with this approach is that it embraces the idea that 'we can fix it': students are viewed in deficit terms. It also assumes that students are able to transfer what is 'fixed' to other contexts. Academic Socialization concentrates on introducing and inculcating students into the culture of the academic discourse. This approach views student writing as 'a transparent medium of representation' (Lea & Street, 2000:34). One problem with this model is that it assumes that all students 'fit into' and are part of a homogeneous culture. The Academic Literacies approach views student writing as a 'process of meaning making and contestation' (Lea & Street, 2000:34). This approach is based on the belief that students' writing and learning are 'issues of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialization' (Lea & Street, 2000: 34). Issues of discourse and power are acknowledged as factors that have a direct influence on what is taught and how and on who is considered. After this refresher reading, I began to explore my options. What approach should I follow? What approach could I or should I develop? Could I integrate these approaches in innovative and appropriate ways to promote the achievement of equity and access? Which approach would most closely approximate my ideal approach? Could I capture and create the ultimate Pokemon programme?

### **The perceived context of MSA 2001**

I knew that it was not enough to study the literature, it was also essential to learn more about the potential clients, the students. Franks (as cited in Warren, 2001: 310) argues that in any learning situation, we are dealing with 'real persons, with histories of their own, with identities constructed through family, social life and schooling'. This view of identity is similar to that of Gee (1996) and foregrounds one of my main beliefs: each student is

multisubjectival, a 'unique blend' (Armstrong: 1994: 2). All students are, therefore, products of their social histories which they express through their use of language, symbols, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values and actions (Franks, 1995 & Gee, 1996).

But who were the MSA 2001 students? What were their cultural, historical, social, economic and political identities? What educational, social and intellectual experiences would they bring to the classes? As the first group of students had only been on campus for three months, would anyone really have a good idea of their 'identikits'? I could not access this information and so visualised the group based on the demographics of the area in which MSA is built and my knowledge of previous foundation groups at the Wits. I assumed that the MSA students would not be very different from the groups of students I had taught for the past five years; 17–25 years old, multilingual, multicultural, from diverse political, economic, social and educational sectors.

### **The initial 2001 LAS course**

**'... never underestimate a basic Pokemon'**  
<http://www.pokemonelite2000.com/sgbuilding102.html>

On my first day, I brought to campus a programme I had named 'A Vision for Monash South Africa Language and Learning Service'. This programme was loosely based on an Academic Literacies approach and a proposal I had just submitted (2001) in collaboration with CA Gildenhuys: School of Education, Wits to the Pan South African Language Board (PANSLAB). The programme drew on all my previous knowledge, experiences and beliefs as it integrated a variety of subject matter, encouraged co-operation between disciplines, promoted a multidisciplinary approach, focussed on the holistic development of the learners and encouraged collaboration between the professionals, the schools and the community.

This 'basic Pokemon' programme began with a single task set for all students irrespective of area of study or language competencies, a task which involved

creating a storybook for young children. All students would arrive at the first lecture to brainstorm the group project and identify the contribution they could make. My intention was to actually create this book and publish it – so there would be real sense of audience and satisfaction in completion of the task. It was easy to envisage how each of three schools (Business and Economics, Information Technology & Arts) could fit neatly into the real project:

- Business and Economics – Advertising, marketing, needs analysis, community involvement, surveying storybooks currently on sale, pricing of the process and the product etc.
- Information Technology – Internet information, current initiatives and thinking about children’s books, designing the book, layout (fonts, graphics), chat rooms with children etc.
- Arts – South African official languages, appropriateness and register, media surveys about similar projects, the psychology of the age group, interviews etc.

Once the project had been brainstormed, action plans would be drawn, working groups constituted and goals set. Relevance would be established during a discussion on how this would benefit and develop students’ academic literacy competencies through opportunities for

- Notes taking and making
- Exploring genres
- Progress reports
- Research
- Oral presentations of work in progress and “book launch”
- Group work and team building
- Reflection and evaluation
- Writing academic articles for submission to various faculties (perhaps built into faculty/course assessment?)

This 'storybook' approach, I felt, was unique and embodied a spirit of innovation, intellectual and cultural curiosity within the context of real life situations supported by meticulous research. The necessary academic processes and knowledge would be acquired and would occur in an integrated, collaborative environment, instilling simultaneously and incidentally the Monash principle of *ancora imparo* – 'I am still learning. In my view, the 2001 model would have resulted in graduates who had acquired the 'essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills of computer literacy, knowledge reconfiguration, information management, problem solving in context of application, team building, networking, negotiation/mediation competencies and social sensitivity' (Gibbons as cited in The National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa, 2001:25). I did realise however, that in this approach would place an additional academic burden on the students as it involved a non-credit bearing task outside the requirements of their degree.

I failed to implement this initial model as academic development work was then viewed by Monash South Africa as an 'add-on support service' rather than a credit-bearing discipline-specific foundation course. However I still believe that the potential of this basic Pokemon model cannot be underestimated as its fundamental purpose was to ensure that 'all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community and economic life' (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough & Gee, 1996:60).

## **Part 2: Reflection in action**

### **The 2005 model**

**'I will travel across the land  
Searching far and wide  
Each Pokemon to understand  
The power that's inside  
Gotta catch them all'  
Pokemon song. Television programme**

Four years after the conceptualisation of that first course, the current course is far removed from my ideal of LAS as 'a process of meaning making and contestation' (Lea & Street, 2000:34). I had 'travelled across the land

searching far and wide' but how true had I remained to the LAS ideal of promoting critical thinking, problem solving, self management, independent thinking and reflective learning (LAS Conference Proceedings, 2003)? In 2005 students were grouped according to their study unit and assessment task. The assessment task became the central focus of exploration and the vehicle for the acquisition of the necessary LAS skills. Preparation involved comprehensive discussion with the academic staff members who delivered the unit. Together we analysed, argued and debated the expectations of the assessment task with the aim of ensuring that we had a similar interpretation of it. Both the academic staff and the LAS staff member then developed criteria and guidelines for the students. Tutorial sessions were identified within the unit timetable and academic staff indicated which sessions they are able to attend.

Throughout the implementation and delivery of these sessions, I met with staff to ensure that there was ample time set aside for individual and small group consultations. The academic staff member coped with the content questions and I concentrated on the acquisition of LAS. The initial session focused on the task. It was discussed, analysed and unpacked with students – what did it mean, what did it involve, where should we begin? The students were taught the analysis process - identifying the process words (action required), the content words (what do I write about?), the requirements (the non-negotiable aspects of task) and the hints and cues (guidelines to assist the successful completion of task).

As the task unfolded, skills and practices were discussed, facilitated and developed (e.g. if set readings was a requirement - the 'skill' of reading – skimming, scanning, intensive etc was explained and practised prior to and during this stage). Attendance was not compulsory and pacing was dependent on the learners. They could also exit at any point or return when necessary.

The staff and student satisfaction with the programme is reflected in their comments

*'... this exercise was very successful. Your input was excellent and the sessions were carefully presented and well received by the students. I definitely want to be part of the programme next year (2004) but perhaps we should start sooner' (Dr Linda Venter, COM 1010 unit lecturer).*

*'Very relevant and useful'; 'Time spent needs to be extended'; 'I had time to ask questions and Chris was very patient with me'; 'The course offered an alternative and more effective way to plan, think about and write essays'; 'It was a positive learning environment' (Selected student comments).*

Attendance increased as students realised the value of the tutorials as a way of developing relevant, fundamental academic literacy competencies. At the end of the six tutorial sessions, these students and I mapped what they had learned and what they could then transfer to other tasks. This included pre-planning (discussion and analysis of the task); planning (developing mind maps from this discussion and analysis); demystifying key readings (extending the map and cross referencing the readings); selecting and evaluating relevant data; composing; integrating quotes (paraphrasing and summarising); referencing and citing; draft writing (reviewing, monitoring and editing). This current programme, in contrast to the 'ideal', has been implemented and its 'success' has been documented.

In higher education institutions there is an assumption that the necessary academic discourses must be attained. At MSA, it is the responsibility of the Language and Learning Services unit to design and create programmes that enable learners to enter and acquire these discourses quickly, easily and with the minimum of stress. The majority of the students felt that this approach had provided them with a sound foundation in the essential language and academic skills (Table 1).

Item	5	4	3	2	1
What is your overall assessment of the programme?	40	54	8	4	0
Acquisition of essential Language and					

Academic skills	32	51	23	0	0
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*(5 being excellent and 1 being unsatisfactory)*

**Table 1**      ***Data gathered from evaluation forms completed by students at end of a programme. n = 106***

Success was further enhanced by the close and careful collaboration between LAS and academic staff. There was an added advantage of staff growth and involvement as they participated in the development of their students' academic skills. Participation in the programme also provided an opportunity for lecturers to assess their own teaching and learning practices as they were encouraged to question their assessment methods and their content delivery. This element of collaboration, a partnership involving the 'co-production of knowledge ... workshops and one-to-one consultations' is widely accepted as a 'rich [and successful] model of practice' (James, Skillen, Percy, Tootel & Irvine, 2004: 136).

The major weakness of the 2005 current programme is that its focus is on learning and teaching for only one purpose, the best mark. It is assessment-driven and thus might be referred to as a 'survival' programme. Winch and Gingel (1996: 179) argue that 'assessment is not an unnecessary and unpleasant addition to the educational process of teaching and learning but something that is a necessary and vital part of such processes'. However, in attempting to provide a 'recipe' for students' success, I taught to the task, in the process 'ignoring any item of knowledge that [was] not directly relevant to passing the task' (Winch and Gingel, 1996: 179). It is possible that this approach was popular with students because 'many students perceive degree studies as being about learning the rules and playing the game in order to get good grades rather than about developing and expressing their own views' (Peters & Sutton, 2001: 1). I inadvertently created a programme which encouraged students to 'take the least line of resistance in a context where lecturers are the acknowledged repositories of knowledge and power' rather than students 'who challenge both power and convention' (Peters & Sutton,

2001: 2). Have I silenced the true voices of the students and constrained their 'possibilities for self-hood' (Ivanic, 1997:32) by focusing on their assimilation into the mainstream norms?

## **A reflective comparison**

**'Many Pokemon evolve naturalistically to become other Pokemon'**

<http://www.godandscience.org>

Table 2 (Appendix 1) illustrates the evolution of the programme from the 'ideal' to the 'real'. It was an interesting and enlightening exercise and I feel it clearly demonstrates my struggle to retain elements of what I wanted to offer to students with what is currently offered. The most devastating aspect of the table was how quickly I reverted to the Study Skills Approach. In the desire to 'fix the immediate 2001 problems' being highlighted by academic staff, I attempted to create immediate solutions. Henning, Mamiane & PHEME (2001: 121) suggest that 'although the 'skills' approach is limited on its own, it should not be neglected' as it could provide 'a foundational academic literacy'.

However, I was concerned and disturbed by the decreasing numbers and the lack of interest amongst many of the students. Henning et al. (2001: 122) also suggest that study skills should be taught in 'non-generic workshops within the discipline [to ensure] that the discourse emerges slowly as well.' Although I had not read this paper at that time, I began to introduce discipline specific workshops in 2002; a shift to a more academic socialization approach. I would like to believe that these shifts were conscious but they were not. It was more of an intuitive, reflexive reaction to the dissatisfaction of my students and myself with the initial generic 'skills' approach.

As I continued to study this table, I realised just how far I had moved from what I believed. I needed to find ways to return to some of the principles of best practice and to reflect on the changes that had occurred in my approach in order to understand what had effected these changes. Had my current LAS

programme evolved naturalistically? Was it derived from real-life situations or was it merely a reflexive response to real-life demands?

### **Part 3      Looking forward – Reflection for action**

In this final part of the paper I offer insights that resulted from this reflection on and critique of my practice - what had prompted and restrained my choices. These insights include working in isolation, being the sole provider, the complex South African LAS contexts and the need to consider who I am and want to be, my possible alternatives.

#### **Working in isolation**

**'If they exchanged a Pokemon with another player, the communication cycle would be wider and wider' (Tajiri, cited in Tzelepis, 2002: 2)**

Reflection is a 'special form of thought' (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Synonyms for reflection include think about, ponder about, consider, contemplate, mull over, and muse about. But these imply 'thoughtfulness' without any actual action. Schon (as cited in Hatton & Smith, 1995: 3) suggests that reflection should be intimately linked to action as professionals frame and reframe their often 'complex and ambiguous problems, test the various interpretations and modify their actions as a result'. Therefore if reflection is to have any value, it has to become critical and be symbiotically bound with action. Schon (as cited in Hatton & Smith, 1995: 3) refers to reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, both involving 'demanding rational and moral processes in making reasoned judgements about preferable ways to act' (Hatton & Smith, 1995: 3). Farrell (1988) extends on this theme by including reflection-for-action, emphasising that the reflective process must include ways of planning and acting for future frameworks. McKee (2001: 138) warns that many methodologists '...tend towards a kind of 'transgressive' methodological approach, where we do whatever takes our fancy'. He suggests that we now need '... to think honestly about the epistemological possibilities and limits of this methodology - what we do and why we do it' as any methodology must be dissected to 'reveal the limits to the kind of knowledge it can produce ... our own central

methodology is woefully under investigated, and still largely intuitive' (McKee, 2001, 138).

While self-reflection is valuable for interrogating one's own practice, it tends to be subjective and limited by the boundaries of one's own knowledge, experiences and mindset. If reflection is to bring about change, then it should include multiple perspectives. I work alone. There is no other LAS staff member and choice of outcomes, interpretation of task; content and methodology are my sole responsibility. Academic staff accept my decisions with very little or no opposition. However conflict, collaboration and interaction with others of diverse skills, backgrounds and perceptions are essential elements of growth and development. This lack of challenge resulted in a 'lack of choice' as no opposing alternatives arose from our interaction. Perhaps this reflective chase has highlighted the urgent need for more than discussion – an urgent need to find, invite and include divergent voices from the current academic and support staff on this campus.

### **Being the sole provider**

**'As a trainer grows, they will become stronger, learn new attacks and sometimes even evolve into new and different people'**  
**(<http://www.wizards.com/pokemon>,)**

Being the sole LAS provider assumes that one has all the knowledge and skills to serve all stakeholders equally and adequately. MSA currently has three main focus degrees – Arts, Business and Economics and Information Technology. As the sole LAS provider, I am expected to have adequate knowledge of each of these areas. Percy & Stirling (2004: 54) suggest that having a foundation 'in language, literacy, learning and pedagogical theory [only] provides us with the tools to negotiate and 'unpack' the variety of discourses and teaching practices'. It does not however mean that we have understanding of the specific needs of a discipline in which we have no experience. Cazden et al. (1996: 9) suggest that replication of and assimilation into these varied discourses 'only really works if one already speaks the language of the mainstream. If one is not comfortably a part of the culture and discourses ... it even gets harder to get into and operate in these

networks'. I can communicate and replicate the Arts discourses easily; the Business & Economics with some competence but the world of Information Technology is still a major challenge..

This personal confidence (or lack of it) affected how keenly I became involved with a particular group of lecturers. I subconsciously avoided interaction and involvement with those areas where I was not comfortably part of the culture or discourses.

School	Total no of lecturers in each school	No of lecturers who incorporated the model into their teaching and learning (First semester 2005)	Time spent/ hours
Arts	16	8	32
Buseco	16	5	10
Infotech	13	3	7

**Table 3** 2005 lecturer contact time/ interaction across schools.

Although I have evolved into 'a different person', I am not sure if this resulted in 'new or stronger trainer'. Groups of students have failed to benefit from the LAS programmes because of the 'sole LAS provider' could perhaps not 'speak the language of the mainstream discourse' (Cazden et al., 1996: 5).

### **Complex LAS contexts in South Africa**

**'Each different Pokemon has different powers and abilities, ... they come in many shapes and sizes' (<http://www.wizards.com/pokemon>)**

The MSA context has changed radically over the past four years. Student and staff numbers have grown from a mere 60 students and 20 staff members to 780 students and 65 staff members. The sixty 2001 students were fairly homogeneous – white South Africans from affluent families. Many were from schools with good educational records. The 2005 context however, is vastly different from this homogeneous group.

MSA now has a student community of almost 800 students from 25 different countries. The largest group are from Botswana followed by the South African and Zimbabwean groups: 80 percent of the students are Black and 20 percent

are White. I have learned that many of our students are HIV positive, that they are international students who feel isolated and alienated, that there are issues of xenophobia and that they constantly struggle to withstand peer pressure. The world in which they study is foreign and frightening. I now have a better and more comprehensive 'picture' of the 'clients' and their needs. I know that they are indeed a complicated, unique and complex combination of multiple social histories. Has this affected my choices? Am I truly cognizant of their situations, of the fact that they are simultaneously members of 'multiple lifeworlds, with identities that are multi-layered' (Cazden et al., 1996: 8)?

Cazden et al. (1996) argue that to be relevant, learning processes need to recruit and use as resources, the different subjectivities (interests, intentions, commitments and purposes) and the students attendant languages, discourses and registers. On reflection, the 2001 course would have integrated and acknowledged the students' subjectivities and multiple identity layers of 'being-doing-thinking-valuing-speaking-listening-writing-reading' (Gee, 1990:174) better than the 2005 course with its focus on the institutional discourses. Granville and Dison (2005: 105) argue that any LAS programme should not only prepare students to join 'the multiple activities of the academic community', it should also ensure that it is 'deeply situated in students' past and current experiences'. Although many students would argue that I provided them with academic discourses that were essential for their success, I believe that I effectively ignored these students' different powers and abilities, shapes and sizes as I prepared and developed new programmes. I had unintentionally become a 'promoter' of the dominant discourse.

### **Multiple roles of LAS staff**

**'Certain special people in this world decide to become Pokemon trainers'**  
(<http://www.wizards.com/pokemon>)

The 2005 LAS conference preamble states that it is directly relevant to LAS researchers, professionals, advisers, academics and practitioners. These constituencies were also addressed at the 2003 LAS Conference: LAS advisor (Catterall, Martins, Handa, Chanock, East & Maxwell), LAS staff, LAS lecturer (Percy & Stirling) or LAS practitioners (Chanock, East & Maxwell).

Zeegers (2004: 25) asks three questions ‘Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?’ but he does not ask the question ‘Who are we?’ Each of the labels implies a certain status, a level of power, a depth of knowledge, a specific role – researcher versus advisor; trainer versus facilitator; staff versus academics. I realise when I examine the approaches and programmes I developed from 2001 – 2005, that I have transformed myself several times. Prior to 2001, I viewed myself as an educator involved in the collaborative acquisition of multiple higher learning competencies. However the initial programme I implemented in 2001, relegated me to the position of ‘fixer of problems’. I offered advice and simple and immediate solutions to problems. I now realise that I no longer want to find or claim a single, exact or ‘correct’ label. I am and need to be all of these. I am a designer of learning processes and environments who strives ‘constantly to design and redesign my activities in the very act of my practice’ (Cazden et al., 1996). Decisions should result from careful deliberation and investigation of the needs of the students not the time-consuming scrutiny of names or labels. I believe that this reflective chase is an attempt to recapture my original philosophy and remain a ‘facilitator in the process of change and ... intellectual growth’ (Zeegers, 2004: 28).

## **Conclusion**

**‘Nothing is permanent and some day Pokemons will give their place to another toy’ (Tzelepis, 2002: 3)**

Cazden et al. (1996) insist that people do not ‘learn anything unless they are both motivated to learn or believe that they will be able to use and function with what they are learning’. These are not new thoughts. As LAS facilitators, we want to produce students who are able to speak up and speak out, who are able to negotiate and engage critically with their life worlds. In South Africa, where the school sector fails to provide many students with the necessary baseline skills and quality education, higher education institutions, must and should provide innovative LAS programmes to enhance learning and guarantee students’ prospects of success (Faller, 2004). LAS programmes should therefore constitute an arena in which all learners are

secure in taking risks, are able to build on and then constructively critique, apply, revise and innovate what they know and learn (Cazden et al., 1996).

Wenger (1998: 149) suggests that in order to decide 'where we are going', we need to 'define who we are by where we have been'. This reflective 'chase' has been invaluable as it made me realise it is the struggle, the pursuit, the process that is important. There is no LAS recipe, no single appropriate campus programme. Each year, each course, each group of students will result in the adaptation, creation, evaluation and revision of the ephemeral LAS ideal.

## Appendix 1

	<b>Pre 2001 The ideal</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005 The reality</b>
<b>Model</b>	Academic literacies	Generic study skills	Generic study skills & Academic socialisation	Academic socialisation Subject specific facilitation	Academic socialisation Subject specific facilitation	Academic socialisation Subject specific facilitation
<b>Content &amp; topics</b>	Inter disciplinary	Generic	Generic	Subject related	Joint faculty tutorials	Joint faculty tutorials
<b>Timetable arrangements</b>	Set times envisaged	On need - random	Set times per school (2 periods per week)	Set times per school (2 periods per week)	Academic course tutorial times	Academic course tutorial times
<b>Numbers</b>	60	+/-120	+/- 180	+/- 250	+/- 380	+/- 750
<b>Evaluation</b>	Evaluation forms	Evaluation forms	Evaluation forms Student interviews	Evaluation forms Student interviews	Evaluation forms Academic staff interviews and feedback of result	Evaluation forms Academic staff interviews and feedback of result
<b>Influences</b>	Previous knowledge, experience, anticipated context, teaching and learning philosophy	Staff requests and expectations, Remediation – ‘fix it’, perceived student needs	Staff requests and expectations, Remediation – ‘fix it’, perceived student needs, reaching all students, continued mindset.	Staff requests and expectations, Remediation – ‘fix it’, perceived student needs, reaching all students, continued mindset, decreasing student attendance Relevance of material to student needs	Need for collaboration with staff and students, attempt to ‘return’ to ideal philosophy, Status established thus able to resist’ pressures’ of fix it model, resistance to pressures	Real understanding of immediate needs of students, working towards success, increasing numbers, attempt at scholarship, too assessment driven

**Table 2: From ideal to real – change over four years**

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# Who am I writing for? Potential and problems of writer roles in assessment tasks

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**Abstract:** *Assessment tasks are a potential means to integrate the development of graduate attributes within the disciplines, since they can provide students with the opportunity to adopt a range of academic and professional identities, and to apply what they have learnt in ways that will prepare them for their future professional roles. Taking as a starting point the framework for the analysis of assessment tasks outlined by Tim Moore and Brett Hough, in this paper I look at current practice in a number of Business and Economics disciplines, firstly to see what range of tasks and possible roles are drawn on, and secondly to identify some implications for LAS advisers in dealing with such tasks. I have analysed a sample of 20 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year assignment tasks in Business and Economics subjects, looking at authorship, role/status, genre, mode, discipline and audience. In this paper I focus on those tasks that assigned an expert/professional role to the student and discuss some potential problems related to the contextualisation of the question, the framing of the instructions, and the possibility of conflict between the authorial stances of professional and student. For LAS advisers working with tasks of this sort, it is important to know what knowledge the student needs to carry out the task and where that knowledge comes from; they are also uniquely positioned to give*

*feedback to faculty teaching staff on students' representations of the tasks.*

***Key words:*** *assessment, assignment tasks, graduate attributes*

## **Introduction**

Universities are being called on increasingly to prepare students more explicitly for the world of employment, and the notion of graduate attributes has proved to be a useful way of thinking about this. How to develop these attributes in practice, however, continues to be a challenge for university teachers. One way is by designing assignment tasks that call on students to apply disciplinary knowledge in ways that are congruent with the professional roles they are likely to take up. Kate Chanock (2004) remarks that it is easier to integrate graduate attributes—which are often derived from employers' requirements—into vocationally-oriented courses that contain an element of professional training. In these courses role-play and simulation are commonly used techniques. In business courses, relating the theory that is taught to situations that will be encountered in the workplace has a long history, starting with the development of the case study method at Harvard Business School in the early twentieth century (Stewart, 1991). While the extent to which the classroom can simulate a professional context has been questioned, (Freedman *et al.*, 1994) assignment types whose major function is 'to socialize students into the business world' by making them assume business roles, write for business audiences, and adopt business communication styles (Zhu, 2004) are a feature of most courses offered in business faculties.

The experience of LAS advisers suggests that for students, the interpretation and carrying out of such assignments is not unproblematic. The contextualisation of the task, specification of writer role and audience, and the implications of these for content and form leave plenty of room for the 'gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing' referred to by Lea and Street (1998, p. 159). This paper looks at a sample of such

assessment tasks from some Business and Economics subjects in a large Australian university in an attempt firstly to understand how they are constructed, and secondly to pinpoint some of the potential problems in communicating expectations.

## **The study**

The research I describe here was to be part of a planned set of studies of assignment questions across several faculties aiming to see which of the range of available genres are chosen by lecturers, and how often the identity they call for the student writer to adopt reflects a professional role the student is likely to assume in later employment. It represents an initial, pilot study, only looking at the text of the assignment instructions, not at student productions, and at this stage does not attempt to investigate student or lecturer understandings of the instructions, although this would clearly be a desirable avenue for future research. In this paper I am only concerned with the part of the sample that did assign a professional role.

The original sample consisted of a total of 20 assignment questions from 10 subjects, provided by six lecturers from the Faculty of Business and Economics who responded to a direct request by email for samples of assignment questions from second and third year subjects.

The framework used to analyse the tasks was adapted from a model developed by fellow LAS adviser Tim Moore and Brett Hough. Grounded in genre theory, it was conceived as a tool to help academics to develop variety in assessment tasks in a way related to roles students may fulfil in their future professional lives. This model derives a set of analytical categories from the conventional essay task (where an individual student in a particular discipline writes an essay for the lecturer): authorship (whether individual or collaborative); role (academic, professional and other identities); genre (possible types of 'communicative events' associated with these identities); mode (written or spoken); audience (academic, professional, public etc.). This framework can then be used by the lecturer to generate sets of instantiations of each category that are relevant to the particular discipline and to the possible future pathways of the students. (For example in History, the roles

generated might include historian, journalist, biographer, museum curator, etc.)(Moore & Hough, 2005)

For the purpose of this research I have used this generative framework as an analytical tool, creating a grid on which I plotted the features of each assignment. After this preliminary analysis I selected the questions that assign a professional role to the student. These results are presented in Table 1. Two of the assignments (4 and 5) do not go quite this far—they evoke a professional situation without explicitly placing the student in the role—but I have included them because they step beyond decontextualised demonstration of knowledge. I then examined the way the instructions for these assignments were framed: how they presented the role and its context to the student, how explicit they were, and what assumptions they made about student knowledge about the role.

Assignment code	Authorship	Role	Genre	Mode	Discipline	Audience
1	Individual	Professional (unspecified) Writer of article	Journal article	Written	Accounting (financial modelling)	Readers of <i>Australian CPA</i>
2	Individual	Professional—international manager of an Australian business	Report	Written	Management (international business)	CEO
3	Individual	Professional—HR manager of a homewares retail firm	Report	Written	Management (human resources)	CEO
4	Individual	Student, but knowledge linked to a professional role	Short-answer questions including calculations	Written	Data analysis	Lecturer
5	Individual	Student, but knowledge linked to a professional role	Short-answer questions including calculations	Written	Data analysis	Lecturer
6	Group	Professional—Fund manager trainee	Business report	Written	Accounting (investments and portfolio management)	Supervisor of fund management department? Investors?
7	Individual	Professional—contracted to large international organisation	Formal business report	Written	Management	Lecturer
8	Group	Professional—members of a research and advice company	Report	Written	Management (Tourism)	Consultancy company? Not clear
9	Individual	Professional—member of a research and advice company	Report	Written	Management (Tourism)	Not clear
10	Individual	Professional—member of a research and advice company	Report	Written	Management (Tourism)	Stakeholders? Not clear
11	Group	Professional—members of a research and advice company	Presentation Written summary	Spoken Written	Management (Tourism)	Stakeholders

*Table 1: Analysis of assignment instructions*

What emerged from the analysis of the task instructions for these assignments was a variety of ways of presenting the elements of role, audience and genre to the student, along a continuum from explicit instructions regarding each element to description of a scenario in which one or more of the elements were implied.

## **Role**

In a number of assignments the role to be adopted was foregrounded. Three of the assignments (2, 3 and 6) presented a professional role explicitly at the beginning of the instructions, e.g. “You are the manager of...”. Two of these specified the audience; the third, which involved a much more complex task than the other two, with a number of parts, was less explicit about the audience for the final product. Two other assignments (1 and 7) were framed in a similar way, but did not assign a named role to the student; the role was in some way embodied in the task: “You have been contracted to...” “You have been approached to write an article...”.

In one group of assignments (8 – 11) the role was not foregrounded at all, but embedded in the context: this was a subject in which the whole course (Tourism management) was geared towards the production of four assignments. The students were presented with a scenario, in the course of which they were told they work for a ‘research and advice company’ contracted by a local council and tourism authority. While the project itself was a classroom exercise, the project area was real, and the stakeholders, with whom the students had contact, actual representatives of the local tourism bodies.

Another set of assignments (4 and 5) were interesting because they incorporated a role at one remove. These were discrete problems in business data analysis and, very much in the style of ‘word problems’ in school mathematics textbooks, they presented a scenario with actors and then asked the student to solve the problem, without however identifying the student with the actors in the scenario. For example, the student is told that auditors of a bank want to compare certain sets of values, and is instructed to explain how they might proceed. What is being required of the student is demonstration of knowledge, but a demonstration that is related to a real-world context.

In all of the instructions the academic context of the assignment was also very present, through information about marking criteria, submission procedures, and disciplinary matters such as warnings about plagiarism.

## **Genre**

None of the assignments relied on the student's knowledge of what genre(s) might be an appropriate to the designated role and audience: the genre to be produced was always specified, sometimes with detailed instructions on content and/or formatting. These genres were generally congruent with the role and audience where stated: for example, a business report for a CEO, an oral presentation of research findings for project stakeholders, a journal article for readers of a particular journal. However, some of those solicited could not be described as professional genres: short-answer questions (4 and 5), tutorial presentation with written summary (12).

## **Audience**

Six assignments indicated an audience, either by directly naming the audience or the person who had commissioned the report (2, 3, 7, 11), by or by implication (1, 6). Assignments 8 - 11 were part of a contextualised project in which the student/author was a member of a 'research and advice company', but while assignment 11 was specifically directed towards the major stakeholders of the project, the audience of the other three was not explicitly stated.

The characteristics of the audience which might have a bearing on the way the assignment was written were not elaborated, although sometimes indications were given. In assignment 2, the students were told: 'the CEO wants to see a report which is extremely well written and backed up by wide and relevant research, both current and historical'. One of the instructions for assignment 1 was: 'Your article must use *appropriate language* and spreadsheet examples for the intended "readership"' (my emphasis), but it was left to the students to work out who exactly that readership was and what language would be appropriate.

## **Discussion**

Looking at these assignment questions from the point of view of an LAS adviser who might meet them for the first time in the course of a consultation with a student, a number of questions arise about what is being asked of the student, how those requirements are communicated, what knowledge the student needs to carry out the task and what the sources of that knowledge are.

## **Purpose**

One source of difficulty is the inevitable dual nature of assignments like this. While on the one hand requiring the student writer to adopt a professional role, and produce a text that at least has the form of a business genre, with the communicative purpose that the genre and role entail, they are clearly at the same time requiring the student to display knowledge acquired during the course in a way governed by academic conventions. Negotiating this dual role can be difficult for the student. In their comparative study of student and professional discourse in the field of financial analysis, Freedman, Adam and Smart concluded that it is the institutional context that determines the rhetorical purpose of writing, so writing done in a university course will always have the primary rhetorical purpose of knowledge display (Freedman et al., 1994).

This would suggest that for an assignment to be at all effective in focusing the student on aspects of professional practice and thinking, the institutional context should not be allowed to intrude too much. In the assignments considered here, it is often very much to the fore. Some of the instructions direct students to the lectures where relevant concepts have been discussed and many set out the number and type of information sources to use (for instance a minimum of five refereed journal articles). The academic institutional context is further made present by accompanying material on formatting and disciplinary matters. In one of them (Assignment 6) this accompanying material is quite voluminous and risks overshadowing the scenario completely, making it difficult to focus on the actual instructions. In this assignment instruction package, the extent and detail of the procedural matter and warnings about penalties for late submission and plagiarism tend to create a disjunction between the role specified by the task (trainee fund manager in an investment company) and the role of student undergoing a test, needing to comply with conditions that bear no relation to the circumstances set out in the scenario.

Some of the assignments tried to manage this disjunction by incorporating the disciplinary requirements into the scenario: Assignments 8–11 have a number of administrative procedures that are designed to ensure that students complete all tasks, which are described as stages in the contract. Failure to carry them out results in getting no mark for the assignment, and this is presented as cancellation of the

contract. Assignment 2 found an ingenious way of connecting the requirements of knowledge demonstration to the scenario, saying that the report should constitute ‘a solid justification for the recommendation . . . , which would convince the CEO that you are a well-informed business manager, whose services and ideas are extremely valuable’, thus invoking a secondary communicative purpose of much professional writing—impressing one’s superiors. If the role of such assignments is indeed, as Zhu (2004) has said, to socialize students into the business world, then this kind of linking is likely to make them effective.

### **Knowledge**

One area of difficulty for students with this kind of assignment, as LAS advisors know, is with the knowledge of the role, genre and audience (as opposed to the subject knowledge that is to be demonstrated) needed to carry out the task successfully. Ideally, such knowledge is transmitted in class, whether by explicit instructions or by modelling (Freedman & Adam, 1996). This was clearly the case of Assignments 8-11, which were part of a project simulation which included meetings with stakeholders. The project was also supported by classes on report writing and project management. In the LAS context however, when all one has access to is a student and an assignment question, it is often difficult to know whether this has been the case or not. Many of the assignment questions in this study made the generic features of the required product very explicit, for example with instructions on how to write a formal business report. However, several of them appeared to assume that the student would know enough about the designated role or audience to make appropriate choices about content or style. This was particularly true in the case of Assignment 1, where the students were instructed to use language appropriate to the readership of a particular journal, but it was apparently left to them to work out who exactly that readership was and what language would be appropriate.

Such assumptions of knowledge about particular groups, or about kinds of workplace culture, can be a particular problem for overseas students. Even when this knowledge is not assumed, but is be provided through other channels, it may be more implied than stated, and students’ ability to pick up inferences is dependent on their cultural knowledge and prior experience. Here

further research on student understandings of assignment questions triangulated with lecturer assessments of the students' products would be useful.

## Conclusion

This preliminary examination of instructions for assignments that require students to adopt a professional role has pinpointed some potential difficulties for students, and suggests some paths for further research into this kind of assignment.

One area of difficulty that should not be underestimated is balancing of the sometimes conflicting demands of the professional and student roles, and if this kind of assignment is to provide a pedagogical tool for the development of graduate attributes the way these demands are integrated needs to be paid close attention. The reading of this small sample of task instructions also suggests that assumed knowledge about the communicative demands generated by certain types of audience or workplace situation could be a problem for some students.

Both of these observations, however, need to be tested by further research, ideally looking at both student and lecturer understandings of the task and its purpose, as well as student productions and lecturer assessments.

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## Role conflation in the writing of undergraduate Law students

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**Abstract:** *In the course of their study, undergraduate Law students are often asked to assume professional roles when writing their assignments. For example, students may be asked to assume the role of a Judge and write a decision on an appeal, or they may be presented with the facts of a problem situation and then asked to assume the role of a professional lawyer and provide legal advice to one or more persons involved in that situation. Students are aware, however, that while the assignment attempts to simulate a professional task, the assignment is set within the university and they are writing for their lecturer. Demonstrating the heteroglossia Bakhtin recognised in all language use, there is a jostling of the student and professional voices, with the positioning of the writer as student bearing on the text in two ways; not only does it find representation in the text in its own right, but it is also the condition necessitating the production of the professional voice. Drawing on the schema established by Tim Moore and Brett Hough (see paper 1 above) this paper will briefly outline instances of such role conflation in set assignments. It will then comment briefly on the judgments made by students as they decide in what ways and the extent to which the written assignment should reflect these different roles. In particular, it will attempt to give a brief account of the constraints that seem most compelling for the students as they make their judgments.*

**Keywords:** *assessment tasks, roles, Law*

## **Introduction**

This paper is the third of three papers (the other two being Tim Moore and Brett Hough “The perils of skills: towards a model of integrating attributes into the discipline” and Jan Pinder “Who am I writing for? Potential and problems of writer roles in assessment tasks”) and refers to the analytical schema for assessment tasks developed by Moore and Hough [see LAS 2005 conference papers]. This paper considers aspects of the role [and identity] of the student writer, genre, discipline and audience.

Undergraduate Law students are presented with a number of tasks in their first year of law study. In addition to the more conventional ‘essay’ type assignment, where they might be asked to engage with policy issues related to the Law in whatever area, they can also be asked to produce case notes [of a court case designated by the lecturer], write a letter of advice to a client [based on a hypothetical situation details of which they are provided with], to produce a plea in mitigation of penalty [a written form of what is normally presented orally by a lawyer in court on behalf of his/her client] and so on. These usually involve a student assuming multiple roles and addressees. For example, a letter of advice requires a student address both lecturer and imaginary client, and write as student and lawyer. As lawyer they attempt to assume the authority, outlook and ways of thinking appropriate to a lawyer, which can be at odds with the sense they have as students of lacking any authority. It is precisely then the constitution of and the dynamic between the ‘lawyer subjectivity’ and ‘student subjectivity’ (Kamler and MacLean 1997 p179) that is the concern of this paper.

This paper therefore looks at the complexities that arise for students as they engage with and manage these roles and associated identities, as evidenced in both the production and form of their text. Ivanic (1997) suggests students can choose which of four identities available to them they will privilege in their writing. I shall suggest that the enactment of identities is more subtle than choice suggests, that the

heteroglossic nature of student texts (Bakhtin's concepts, see Vice 1997) point to identities that are less well-bounded and stable than Ivanic's formulation suggests.

## **Subject writing positions of students**

The blending of roles and discourses that student tasks require creates a 'hybrid' discursive space (see Allen 2000 p25). As both lawyer and student, as they address their respective audiences, the writer must demonstrate mastery over law-specific skills and in this respect both are disciplined by the discourses of Law. However, the interpersonal relationships are very different, in some respects contradictory, and this can create difficulty in deciding the stages and form such a text should follow.

Swales (1990) argues that "the principle criteria feature that turns a collection of communication events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes" (p46) but in this case there are two distinct communities involved [academic, and law-professional] with quite different purposes, and the relative weighting given to either one [or others] can vary, having implications at least for the form such a text will take. Anecdotal evidence suggests that lecturers are not always clear about which role to privilege and whether the text should be organised around addressing the client, or around demonstrating the student's understanding of legal skills to the lecturer. Yet this has considerable implications for the writing of the text. A text primarily addressing the lecturer would explicitly track research carried out, show the skill entailed in that, cite sources in support of the substance or direction of one's close detailed analyses of cases, provide detailed demonstration of one's reasoning, and so on, but these would not be shown to a client. Thus register and text structure would vary according to who is being addressed.

Contradictions also exist in the relationship the writer assumes with respect to authority. Both lawyer and student share a deferral to the legal authority certain text types have. However a lawyer is expected to deal with such material with authority, whereas the student is not, or not in the same way. Also, the relationship of student-lecturer is one in which a student necessarily defers to the expertise and authority of the lecturer, while in the lawyer-client relationship the lawyer assumes authority. This assumption of authority or deferral to authority clearly marks texts differently, for

instance in mood at the level of the interpersonal function. Managing identity and mood differences at different points in the text would seem more manageable, but where both identities converge in the same utterance or word (the heteroglossia Bakhtin speaks of – see Vice 1997) in a contradictory way, then of course the student writer is faced with a dilemma, as we shall see.

In concluding this section, I shall present a brief outline of positions often entailed by the identities students bring to the writing task. This is an intuitive list but I think it fairly represents some of the positions these identities involve, even though they vary in intensity and extent from context to context and person to person. These include the following:

*As students:*

- Deferral to the authority of the institution and in particular its representative for them, the lecturer setting and marking their assignment
- Deferral to the legal authority certain texts possess, and to the secondary source materials they engage with and from which they learn, to which students sometimes attribute an oracular like authority.

*As lawyer:*

- Assumption of an expert and authoritative position towards the client for whom one is writing
- Engagement with a 'dependent' client
- Assumption of an authoritative position in the conclusion or position one reaches after analysis of texts, or in case notes one makes
- Acknowledgement of and respect for the legal authority/force that certain documents possess, such as statutes, court reports, legally binding Resolutions, and so on
- Respect for the authority of commentary and other secondary

source materials, but not deferral to any imputed superiority and certainly not deferral to them as though they were in possession of oracular authority

*The personal identities forged in personal histories:*

- Reasons for studying law [inherent interest; mercenary interests; family pressure, etc]
- Cultural issues such as 'face', 'reputation', and so on
- Personal background pressures [expectation by family, community, personal standards etc].

I shall now present a fairly brief commentary on the first page of a letter of advice written by a first year international undergraduate law student, before proceeding to a more general discussion of issues raised.

### **Student text**

A student whom I shall refer to as "Benson" was asked to write a letter advising a client about the charges to be laid against him and how he should plead to each. This typical Law School exercise requires students to demonstrate to their lecturer competency in quite specific legal skills and simulates a task common for many practicing lawyers. The first page of Benson's text is reproduced in Appendix A.

A preliminary point that needs to be made is that the client in such tasks is a rather attenuated entity. He embodies legally relevant facts, but no more. In professional life, the interview with the client during which the client's account of the facts is established, police interviews at which the lawyer is present, and other biographical information that becomes known will inevitably broaden and deepen a sense of who the client is and who the lawyer is addressing. Because the context of writing provides only an attenuated sense of who one is addressing, one can suppose that the sense of the relationship with the client will be similarly diminished, which will impact on the interpersonal and rhetorical functions enacted in the letter of advice and which are central to generic structure (see Threadgold 1997 p96). Indications of

such impacts can be found, I think, in Benson's text.

Immediately noticeable on this first page is the absence of any introductory paragraph. Benson's reason for omitting such a paragraph was that the client would know why he was writing. This kind of comment is frequently given by students when explaining why they do not provide full details in assignments: "the lecturer knows this and I feel it is insulting to tell them something they so clearly know". Yet conventions in business letter writing [and this student admitted knowledge of such conventions] involve an opening paragraph stating the purpose or subject matter of the letter. In the example in Appendix A, something like the following would typically open such a letter: "Dear Jason, Subsequent to my discussion with you on [such and such a date] I am writing to inform you of the nature of the charges being brought against you and to provide advice on how you might plead". It would seem that in this case neither the weight of convention in letter writing nor the common gambit of establishing a new or a previously existing link with one's interlocutor before moving onto substantive issues is felt by Benson in this context, and this could be because the sense of who he is writing for is weak. Benson's reason for beginning his letter in this way does not suggest a cultural explanation, but rather points to a practice (not necessarily a good one) associated with writing for a lecturer. If this is what is at stake, the student appears at this point to be engaging with this task primarily as a student, rather than an advising lawyer. The move made at this point of the text appears to be dominated not by the interpersonal relationship with the client but by the institutional demand placed on the student and this positioning has led to change in at least one move typical of such a text.

A further interesting aspect of this student's letter of advice concerns the three criminal charges outlined. It is generally accepted that when providing advice to a client, one does not *instruct* the client what to do, but one outlines "issues of evidence that must be proved by the police, including an analysis of the elements of the relevant offences and the evidence required to prove each element" (quoted from the instructions given to students for this task) and provides advice on the basis of that analysis. That is, the client him/herself is provided with sufficient information to understand what is at stake, and consequently to make, with advice from the lawyer, an informed decision about whether, for example, a plea of 'not guilty' to a charge is

likely to succeed. Clearly the information Benson provides in the first two instances is not sufficient for this purpose. For example, in the 'resisting arrest' charge, no explanation is given of why the jury/judge would believe the client Jason rather than the police, of what circumstantial evidence might incline the jury to believe Jason against the police officers, or why, for example, under rules of proof the police would be unable to adequately justify their claim, and why therefore Jason should be able to confidently plead 'not guilty' to that charge. These are reasons both the client needs to know to make an informed decision, and also reasons the lecturer wants the student to demonstrate an understanding of. In this instance then, there is a coincidence between the demands placed on the student as student, and as lawyer, yet this student fails on both counts. Why might this be?

The reason Benson gave was that he wanted to "keep things simple". This instruction is commonly given to students, partly in line with the 'plain English' movement that urges legal documents be written in English more accessible to the lay reader, but more importantly to guard students against transferring legalese into communication with their clients who have no legal training. Benson has followed that instruction but provided an everyday 'lifeworld' (Fairclough 1992) interpretation of 'keep it simple', rather than a law 'disciplined' interpretation that would have included, in 'simple English', an explanation of the kinds of things that the instruction sheet informed students were necessary.

One way of explaining this is that Benson occupies the 'lawyer subject positioning' in that he attempts to do what he knows a lawyer does [keep it simple] but does not enact the 'lawyer subjectivity' (Kamler and MacLean 1997) that such a position normally entails. We have as it were a projection of lawyer subjectivity from the position of student but with the everyday lifeworld being drawn on to give substance to that projected subjectivity, and in this we see a jostling between student, lawyer and everyday identities and associated voices (Bakhtin, see Vice 1997) as the student engages with his situation to produce a particular textual feature that can be described therefore as heteroglossic.

Lea and Street (1998) have argued that literacy issues evident in tertiary student writing arises not because students have a deficiency in literacy per se, but because

the forms of literacy particular to disciplines and their discourses are unfamiliar to them.

Proficiency in a specific academic literacy requires students have an understanding of the disciplinary contexts and practices that give meaning to such terms as 'keep it simple'. However, I suggest that in Benson's case there is more at stake than such understanding. The student had in this case been provided with an explanation of what was required and in other tasks had demonstrated considerable legal skills. It doesn't seem to be his lack of understanding of relevant disciplinary practices that dominates here. The 'keep it simple' is an imperative imposed by an authority (lecturer, institution) to be submitted to (as student) and this positioning as [a non-authoritative] student dominates over the nascent lawyer subjectivity to which, when fully developed, the incorporation of the legally disciplined interpretation would be second nature.

This suggests a lawyer subjectivity that can be distinguished from a student subjectivity, and this precise distinction is made by Kamler and MacLean (1997 p179) in their study of the development of legal 'habitus' by first year students. Following Bourdieu (1990) they argue that discursive practices "are accomplished not only through language, but also through bodies, through ways of moving, dressing and talking, and through ingrained bodily dispositions or habitus" (p178). The lawyer subjectivity is therefore a function not only of cognitive understanding, but primarily of a way of being and of practices, from which forms of cognition follow. However, I am suggesting here that the discourse produced, and the subject producing it, is hybrid and heteroglossic (see Allen 2000, p25, on Bakhtin's understanding of these concepts). While I would concur with Kamler and MacLean that the development of such skills and understanding involve the development of relevant practices, and of the subjectivity [eg lawyer subjectivity] that enacts such practices, the jostling between the different identities and voices in play, and the relative *force* they have on the enacting subject also needs to be accounted for as s/he produces discourse. Appeal to 'lawyer subjectivity' alone does not explain the relative force exerted by the various discourses that bear on the moment of discourse enactment and the hybrid nature of the discourse resulting from that.

There is one further observation to make concerning this text. Benson states categorically with respect to the charge of “threats to kill without appropriate excuse” that “Based on the evidence supplied, you were not intending to threaten Mr. van Dreyer of killing, and he also agreed that he was not being threatened to be killed.” He then adds that “Therefore it is *unlikely* that you will be [found] guilty of this offence.” This ‘unlikely’ reads rather strangely after stating quite forcefully that according to the evidence no such threat was made. Several possible explanations for the choice of this word are possible. First, Benson may have felt uneasy as a student assuming the authority to make a categorical prediction about a court decision, even though inferential logic would support such a prediction being made. Secondly, it may be that he felt [although not in a way he could have articulated clearly] caught between the force of logic that would have led him to be categorical and a feature typical of legal discourse, that it speaks in terms of likelihood and probability or possibility.

Phrases qualifying the degree of likelihood are common because on matters such as interpretation of legal documents or principle, or on matters concerning admissibility of evidence, or the force of specific circumstantial evidence and so on, defence and prosecution will often take up and argue contrasting points of view, and the judge is required to rule on how to proceed in light of such arguments. As such, a lawyer is unable often, on such matters, to anticipate with certainty how they will be decided, although s/he is, of course, expected to indicate in which direction s/he thinks things will go, in light of his/her expert reading. However, where the facts are established and agreed on, what logically follows from such facts can be stated with confidence. The reasons for Benson’s uncertainty are not evident. I suspect Benson is imitating the kind of qualification typically found in legal discussion, but has failed to understand the reasons for it and therefore where it is called for, and where not. Through imitation he attempts to project himself into the position of being a lawyer and assume ‘lawyer subjectivity’. But imitation fails because the perception of what is to be imitated is not disciplined by the discourses of law. This suggests imitation cannot be a means of discourse acquisition because one must already be disciplined by the discourse to apprehend what is to be imitated! This of course would make the need for imitation redundant! We do, nevertheless, see here I believe an instance of a student who feels compelled as a student to attempt to engage with the disciplinary

discourses, but unable as yet as a disciplined subject to respond to the positions the discipline typically constructs for subjects engaging with it. This engagement therefore is sustained and consequently shaped in important ways by the institutional discourses, and not by legal discourses alone.

## **Discussion**

A question that so far I have not addressed is whether the example I have presented of a first year international student from a non-English speaking background, as he struggles with the discourses of Law with which he is presented and must engage, provides any general insight into the production of legal discourse by students as they become more law-literate. I referred earlier to a dilemma the student faced when deferral to [institutional-lecturer] authority and assertion of [lawyer-professional] authority coalesce in the one utterance. I have suggested that to the extent multiple discourses are present in the production of any text these sort of dilemmas are likely to be present, and there is little reason to suppose discourse is ever free of such interdiscursive processes. Ivanic (1997 p49) suggests academic writing is inherently intertextual. However, not only the text but the subject also is positioned by interdiscursive dynamics (see Fairclough 1992, p104 for a distinction between intertextuality and interdiscursivity), and this reduces for students the availability of the kind of choice Ivanic advocates, and also shapes the variations on a generic theme that emerges. By emphasising the significance of the relative *force* discourses have, and not simply their presence on any given occasion, I have also emphasised the hybrid nature of the enacting subject and the discourse produced. Thus genre too under these circumstances is better viewed not as product, but as process (Threadgold 1997, p97).

I suggested above that Benson's use of 'unlikely' may have arisen from an attempt to imitate something he had noticed in legal discourse. Bourdieu argues that habitus and the practical and embodied dispositions that regulate the production of discourse are not formed through imitation, but through a practical mimesis (see Butler 1999, p116). Butler points out that imitation requires an already formed subject that is capable of perceiving the object or action to be imitated. That is, we could add, the subject perceiving must already be 'disciplined' so that is 'sees' in an appropriate

[discipline specific] way. Benson shows how undisciplined imitation can be. In contrast, mimetic identification *forms* the subject. However, if this is so, then the subject being formed, I have suggested, is never a purely legal one [a 'lawyer subjectivity'], for other discourses such as the institutional one which compels the student as student to engage with the discourses presented to him is indispensably present, and thus what is acquired is hybrid. The habitus formed at law school is not the habitus pertinent to professional activity, even though relevant skills are developed. Once again, I am suggesting that it is the relative force discursive elements have at any given moment that is significant, and it is this force that constrains the judgments made by a subject, rather than the autonomous choice Ivanic (1997) suggests informed awareness makes possible.

## **Conclusion**

I have suggested that the texts students produce are hybrid and heteroglossic and I have attempted to show some of the ways in which this is so. I have suggested that on occasions the convergence between different voices is unproblematic; on other occasions incompatibility or contradiction may exist, and on such occasions judgments must be made. However, I have also suggested that such judgments may be unwitting, and one way of accounting for this is to appeal to habitus, where judgments are consequent upon embodied dispositions. As such, Kamler and MacLean argue, acquiring a discourse is a matter of acquiring relevant dispositions. However, I have also suggested this too is not sufficient to account for what goes on, since such habitus presupposes a relatively stable discourse and context to which it belongs, but I have argued these are rather more dynamic than such a view supposes. An alternative way of understanding the dynamic that operates and positions subjects is in terms of the relative force of discourses, not solely their substance.

## Appendix A

Mr. Jason Bloch  
43 Ventnor street,  
Fitzroy, Vic. 3119

5<sup>th</sup> May 2005

### Police prosecution

Dear Mr. Bloch.

#### **1. Evidence relating to the charges against you**

Regarding your three criminal charges, the police must prove the following to the court:

- *threats to kill without appropriate excuse*

The police will need to prove that you intended to or carelessly caused Mr. van Dreyer fear that you were going to kill him

Based on the evidence supplied, you were not intending to threaten Mr. van Dreyer of killing, and he also agreed that he was not being threatened to be killed. Therefore it is unlikely that you will be guilty of this offence.

- *Threats to inflict serious injury without appropriate excuse*

Although you might not be intending to threaten Mr. van Dreyer of serious injury, it would still be enough if the police can prove that you carelessly caused him to fear of serious injury

Evidence indicates that you admitted of intimidating Mr. van Dreyer and in result he believed that you were going to seriously injure him. The evidence seems unfavourable to you, and unless you have any appropriate excuse for your conduct, such as urgent necessity or self-defence, otherwise you will probably be guilty of carelessly threatened Mr. van Dreyer.

- *Resisting arrest*

The police will need to prove that you resisted arrest when they were executing their duties. However, as they were off-duty when arresting you, they were not executing their duties, hence it is unlikely that you will be guilty of this offence.

Even if the police officers were exercising their duties in the arrest, as you honestly believed that they were not police officers until you saw their ID, your genuine mistake is a legitimate defence to this charge.

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# While they were learning, what was I doing?

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**Abstract:** *Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Units offer a range of programs and classes to support student learning. These can include individual consultations, adjunct classes and specific assignment preparation seminars. Alongside these focused offerings, there is often a conversation and discussion class. In times of stretched resources, is there still a place for this provision? What teaching and learning environments could be created around conversation and discussion classes that would complement and enhance the learning offered in other LAS programs? To address these questions, this paper uses reflective practice to identify the rationale for the development of such a conversation and discussion class. The reflection traces the work of an LAS adviser in this environment and examines the methodology that informs the teaching. It explores an environment in which students participate in conversations and discussions which promote critical thinking, relationships in learning (Brockfield & McGill, 1998) and pleasure in the classroom (Prendergast & McWilliam, 1999). While this paper makes claims about one particular teaching and learning setting, it also suggests that conversation and discussion classes which develop what is taught in other LAS programs are also worthwhile, particularly when they model attitudes and dispositions appropriate to higher education learning.*

**Key words:** *teaching, learning, pleasure*

## **Introduction**

As a Language and Academic skills advisor, I work with students in the Faculty of Business and Economics. Some classes are initiated after consultation with faculty staff about where they want to concentrate student development, while others are offered after consultation with an LAS colleague with substantial experience in the faculty. But there remains some latitude at the margins, in a week otherwise dedicated to one to one consultation and lectures targeting particular units. If a group of students shows interest in a particular class, then it seems appropriate to determine whether steps can be taken to meet that request. This is the genesis of the Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class around which this study is located. But on what grounds can we justify small group teaching more particularly in the case of Conversation/Newspaper Discussion classes, which seems to be very much at the margins of our work, when there are increasing demands on us to provide adjunct classes, and collaborative assistance to many more students? Clerehan (1996) and Chanock (1999) ask a similar question about one to one teaching and argue for a place for it among our core LAS provision because of what that relationship can mean for learning. In this paper then, I argue for space for Conversation/Newspaper Discussion classes where they aim to develop relationships for learning and encourage students to see themselves as critical thinkers.

## **Background to the study**

### **My stance**

This paper aims to communicate a dimension of the work of an LAS advisor in a small group setting and to determine its contribution to students learning. My intentions in wanting to take part in and provide a Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class are in line with my belief in the importance of critical citizenship (Giroux & McLaren, 1996) relationships in learning (Brockfield & McGill, 1998) and pleasure in the classroom (Pendergast & McWilliam, 1999). Salmon (as cited in Brockfield & McGill, 1998, p.67) makes the point that 'how we *place ourselves* within any given context...is fundamental'. My involvement in this research can be seen in three ways: as lecturer, participant and researcher.

## **Positions and Allegiances**

As a lecturer, with interests in life long learning and critical pedagogy and a background in secondary schools and Access Education in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector, I am now working in a Business and Economics Faculty which aims to contribute to business and the professions and positions itself as a leader in providing employees for the broad disciplines of business. At the same time, I am part of an LAS unit that aims to develop student learning and specially targets first year students through Transition Support Programs (Language and Learning Services Operational Plan 2005). This intention is shared elsewhere in the university and is summed up by Ward, Crosling & Marangos (2000) who see what happens in the early stages of transition to be important factors in students' attitudes to and values within higher education and beyond. My own rationale for wanting to include a conversation and discussion class can be seen as reflecting these multiple allegiances while meeting the needs of the students.

## **The students and their intentions**

The students involved in this study were two male and two female first year Business and Economics students. One was a local Non English Speaking Background (NESB) student whose first language is Chinese. The other three International Students arrived in 2002 and completed the Victorian Certificate in Education (VCE) in different schools while the local student completed most of his secondary schooling in Australia. All four students completed English as a Second Language (ESL) in Year 12 and met for the first time in this Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class setting.

Student intention was instrumental in the formation of the class and from the evaluations of this small group, it is clear their intentions in participating in retrospect remained the same: to speak English and to socialise. For a semester, these students planned to meet weekly using newspaper readings as the stimulus for conversation and discussion. The sessions were advertised and open to any students, but attendance patterns in previous years suggested that they would attract only NESB students and this semester was no exception. Some postgraduate students came to a few classes. Although their intentions may have been similar to

the undergraduates, they did not become anything other than occasional participants and I did not include them in the evaluation.

## **The relationship between teaching and learning**

Entwistle, N., Skinner, Entwistle, D., & Orr (2000), reporting on phenomenological analyses, suggest that the way a lecturer thinks about knowledge is reflected in the ways that she teaches. While there is certainly no consensus within the research community, there is a body of research that suggests there is a close relationship between one, what a lecturer believes about teaching and learning and the ways those beliefs are translated into approaches to teaching (Trigwell & Prosser, as cited in Bright, 2002) and secondly between the ways he/she approaches teaching and the ways he/she sees the teaching environment. (Prosser & Trigwell, as cited in Bright, 2002). Heidegger (as cited in Gibbs, Angelidis, & Michaelides, 2004, p. 183) sees teaching as 'even more difficult than learning'..... The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than learning.'

Heidegger's (as cited in Gibbs et al. 2004) definition moves this survey of the literature into the arena where the teacher is no longer equated with expert and abandons the claim that the teacher has the final word about what constitutes subject knowledge. A view which sees the teacher sharing responsibility for learning necessitates a shift to including the self, peers and experts in learning (Bennet, as cited in Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2003) and emphasises the role of structuring information to make it accessible and useable (Biggs, as cited in Fry et al. 2003). The onus is however, according to Fry et al. (2003), on teachers to select methods of teaching, course design and evaluation to bring about the learning we desire. A typology of teaching from several researchers identifies three theories of teaching: as transmission, as organising student activity and as making learning possible (Fry et al. 2003).

## **The research**

To determine what I was doing in my role as Language and Academic Skills Advisor when a group of students chose to attend a number of Conversation/Newspaper

Discussion classes, I answered a number of questions aimed at evaluating my intention, activities and interaction.

The three themes that emerge from my evaluation show me taking two distinct, but necessarily integrated positions. The first theme is participation characterised by moderate pleasure and the other two positions are teaching and leadership characterised by a moral imperative to facilitate learning on behalf of the Unit I am employed by and the Faculty I work in. Participation also includes leading the group to meet our shared expectations of speaking, reading and socialising.

### **Discussion of Pleasure and ethics**

From this point, I take the discussion into Foucault's (1985) understanding of pleasure and ethics to see how they can inform my work. To investigate what I was doing in taking moderate pleasure, I follow Pendergast and Mc William (1999) in using Foucault's distinction between moderate and immoderate pleasure. According to Foucault (1985), an individual's rationale for behaviour is not a simple matter of acting from received knowledge, but from reasoned principles, hence Foucault understands the relationship between pleasure and ethics in a particular way. Foucault (1985) shows how the texts of Plato, Aristotle and others can be seen as training their readership in knowledge about the limits of taking proper pleasure and so provides the individual with tools to 'question their own conduct to watch over and give shape to it and to shape themselves as ethical subjects' (Foucault, 1985, p.13). As Pendergast and Mc William (1999) note, pleasure, according to these descriptors is neither about emotional outpourings nor about immediate gratification.

For me, the taking of moderate pleasure as participant in the class sits within an ethics that is mindful of my other positions of leader and teacher and the rationale for the establishment of the group, namely the development of critical citizenship, relating for learning and student intention to speak English and to socialise. Therefore these relationships and positions reflect my rationale for the class and the students' intention in participating. In turn, these intentions fit within the Faculty's interest in the transition of students into higher education. The Faculty's understandings generated from research (Crosling & Ward 2000) are expressed in the claim that developing oral

communication and interpersonal skills in first year, is the basis for social interaction both at peer and staff levels.

But my aim to show pleasure in learning, leads students away from a setting in which the practices fostered by the Faculty of critical thinking, reading and group work are held as serious and mostly examinable. From an environment where the relationship with the lecturer may be one to some hundred and where the tutor is marker, students move to a setting which is necessarily *not* serious in tone and students find themselves in a relationship with the lecturer which may be one to four and where the lecturer is never the examiner. In this place, the aim is always to engage in discussion using critical questioning of texts and to interpret positions (all of which is encouraged by the Faculty), but also to be able to laugh and share snacks and get to know each other as learners, teacher and people and to extend our reading into a critical reading of the world as text (Comber & Kamler, 1997).

### **Discussion of 'place' in learning**

Learning, that takes account of the affective as well as cognitive domains, according to Fry et al. (2003), provides the conditions for effective learning. Jamieson (2003) sees place to be important in the teaching and learning process because it plays a vital role in how the process is experienced. Edwards (as cited in Jamieson, 2003, p. 121) claims that 'the university environment is part of the learning experience and buildings need to be silent teachers'. Following from this, Jamieson (2003) argues the importance of the physical setting in the educational debate because 'place' is experienced both functionally and viscerally.

The learners in the Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class enjoyed a space of physical comfort. Let me put you in the picture. The room used to be a professor's room. It's big! It's my room now. The door is always open and one window is open (as far as it will) weather permitting. It's got a large table in the middle that can seat ten comfortably. There are always books and papers on the table just where I am using them, (not neatly piled) and then there is the large cookie jar with the lid off filled with assorted wrapped lollies and lollypops. There is a lived in feel about the place. Tables lining the perimeter bring the room in a little closer. When

there are no students, I sit at my computer on one of the tables around the perimeter, or sit at the table, reading. Windows make up one side of the room with a view of the lawns and campus below and away far into the distance are the Dandenong Ranges. There are pictures on another wall and notices opposite that one. The final wall is a book case with books arranged sparsely along its shelves. Some are leftovers from the professor. The room has a 'make yourself at home feel.' (Wilson, 2004).

It is to this space that students came once a week for conversation and snacks, to move out of formal learning situations into something which they chose to attend. The physical comfort and the way we arrange the learning environment has implications for teaching and learning (Radloff & Radloff, 1999). A space such as this which allows freer movement, where students can sit around a table is conducive to conversation and to 'getting to know each other'. It invokes convivial situations of people who gather freely to spend time, talking and eating. My participation may be 'a playful (sub) version of academic work' (Morgan & Mc William, 1995, p.122) but it is only so because of the way it allows moderate pleasure for learning. By modelling pleasure in my work and allowing others to take part in it, I break from commonsense understandings of academic work. This (sub) version should not be interpreted as counterhegemonic although it may be argued that by encouraging learning in a different environment I implicitly question why learning has become routinely and unnecessarily serious in many settings.

### **How moderate pleasure and teaching work together**

To interrogate the positions of leadership and teacher in this setting I need to ask how my position of leader and teacher, (which I group together) plays out when I am also prizing moderate pleasure. I need to consider how leader and teacher work in this context. To do this I intend to address three issues.

Firstly what teaching styles were privileged in this class? To do this I stress that students' stated reason for attending the class was to speak English and to socialise. This indicator together with my intention to use critical questions and coupled with my desire for methods which fit with a critical stance (Giroux & McLean 1996), suggest

the beginnings of a community similar to that described by Gibbs et al. (2004, p.184). ) as one that 'practises the scholastic processes of conversation, involvement and engagement as modes of revealing knowledge' But just how did we engage in this work?

Working with questions that I have used over many years in Access Education and which have become part of my everyday teaching as an LAS advisor, I was surprised to find how closely they sit alongside the questions given to students to assist them to critically analyse articles in a first year Management unit. An example of one such questions is: 'What are the underlying assumptions in the article?' Argument about the relative merit of the different positions the Faculty takes up or LAS units adopt towards student learning, would seem to be put to one side, when it appears that using critical questions aligns Faculty, Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class and the rest of the Las unit in questioning the neutrality of texts. In this way the work of this class seems closely aligned to what may be seen as 'core LAS business'.

In our readings from *The Age* (Letters to the Editor and Issues in the News) and other texts, I made deliberate connections about how the questions we asked ourselves about the text and the world, were related to questions students are asked to use in analysing articles in a first year compulsory Management unit. This was a way of ensuring that the students saw a connection and also the differences between 'doing the same work' of analysing an article for an assignment under some pressure and may be at the eleventh hour, compared with sitting together around the table.

This leads to the second question of how relationships for learning were fostered. Students involved in the class evaluations explained that when they felt comfortable they were prepared to study together, but when they were still getting to know each other they felt some reserve about sharing their vulnerabilities and their ideas. The academic and the social forms the interactivity (Tinto, 1997) which Smart, Volet and Ang (2000) claim as the crossroads and the site at which to look for clues to student persistence and retention. According to Fry et al. (2003, p.23), 'what we do as teachers must take into account what we know about how students learn'. Like Lawson (2003), I think that this suggests that creating an environment of comfort, made up of a suitable physical setting and shared understandings, is likely to be

beneficial. It mirrors the same supportive environments described by Jones, Bonnano and Scouller (2001) that LAS advisors create in similar and in more formal teaching and learning programs.

Thirdly, I address the question of how I can determine that what I was doing created conditions for worthwhile pleasure. The themes which I established from the students' evaluation, suggest agency, understandings about their own learning and enthusiasm in the intention towards their own study. Responses to the question about what they liked about the class reveal some of the ingredients for worthwhile pleasure for these students. These can be summed up as: learning outside the curriculum, speaking English, meeting other students outside the formal classroom, seeing familiar faces and finding out about how other students think. These outcomes find echoes in the research of others including Volet (2003) and Lawson (2003).

There is value in learners being able to answer 'why' questions and explain their answers (Fry et al. 2003) and in teachers and learners taking responsibility for learning. Discussion about how learning takes place in a peer small group can be a powerful learning experience in itself. These learning 'moments' are not as 'dry' as they sound when they are brought to life by passionate participants struggling to make sense of 'the word and the world' (Friere & Macedo, 1987). Nor are they marginal activities because they are at the core of critical practices in the Faculty and adopted by LAS advisors in many classes.

## **Learning as change**

The discussion environment which creates space for a short time each week is deliberately constructed free from content restrictions to open up wider understandings of the world through critical questioning of current affairs texts. An educational vocabulary for teacher to teacher dialogue about this teaching situation would include 'notions of being, value, self-understanding and dialogue' (Barnett 1997, as cited in Gibbs et al. 2004, p.186). If learning is defined in its broadest terms as change (Jamieson, 2003) therefore there should be the possibility of experiences that are transformative.

It is this concern about transformation and what students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to accommodate, that has lead Lambert (2002) to describe four models of learners and learning. My intention here is to map some of the practices which my teaching in this class might encourage students to exhibit.

## **Learner models**

Collaborative Learners (Lambert 2002) find sources for learning among networks. They seek settings such as the Conversations/Newspaper discussion class because they provide a place to make and maintain links, to exchange ideas with others including experts, to develop people skills and a sense of personal value in a cooperative environment. Free Agents (Lambert 2002) are accommodated while wanting to link into open ended and life long possibilities. They find these needs met in discussion topics which can be free ranging while still meeting their objectives. They can learn to use questions to explore new ideas while developing transferable communication skills. They can come and go in a 'not for credit' class. Wise Analysers, (Lambert 2002) who are already keen to be reflective and critical have these needs met and legitimised while developing communications skills. They can look for connections between situations and contribute these insights. Creative Synthesisers (Lambert 2002) flourish in this class environment where complexity is explored and interrelatedness is made explicit.

One qualitative measure of a class such as this Conversation/ Newspaper Discussion class, can be achieved by mapping student behaviours onto the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner Model (Lambert 2002). These indicators are not discrete characteristics appearing in one individuals and therefore not another. Lambert (2002) makes the point that the skills in combination will be emergent in many learners, but it is clear that no matter the preference for learning, learners need conditions which enable these possibilities to become realities. While student behaviours, in the class under discussion, exhibited some aspects of the ideal model, the students are neophytes in academic life. Uneven performances are to be expected, as they learn what their discourse communities expect of them and they decide how they will accommodate those demands.

## Conclusion

Drawing together what I set out to achieve in the paper, I was engaged in moderate pleasure, leadership and teaching to show my own enjoyment in collaboration with students, to model reading and thinking where academic and social lines are deliberately blurred in a room off a Faculty corridor. Fry, et al. (1999) make the point that the onus is on us to be discriminating about the types of teaching, and course design that will produce the kind of learning we want. I refer to the model of an epistemological continuum to further explain my intentions (Entwistle et al. 2000).

What I was doing was engaging students where they were along the continuum from dualism to relativism and attempting to encourage them to consider and reconsider their stance towards the world. I hope it will lead them to apply critical thinking in their own discipline and finally to integrate it into their personal and professional repertoire of graduate attributes. So then, I argue for a place for our more marginalised work where thinking and speaking and reading are a priority, not just for the sake of students' academic development, but for their development as citizens and future leaders and for their own pleasure.

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