

Deleuze's philosophy of *difference* and its implications for ALL practice

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An ongoing challenge facing Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners is to make sense of residual tensions in the field such as the 'generic vs. specific' debate, as well as responding to the different teaching and learning situations they encounter in their work. This paper introduces the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze as a philosophical ground for understanding language and learning, in all its diversity. The paper argues that while Deleuze's ideas provide philosophical support for some ALL practices over others, it does not limit the ways in which ALL practitioners can promote learning, but can rather help to expand these ways. The paper first explores Deleuze's philosophy of difference and his ideas on language and learning, then discusses the implications of these ideas for ALL practice, including the teaching of 'generic' skills, approaches to integrating academic literacy skills in the disciplines, and the delivery of 'non-discipline specific' academic writing programs.

Key Words: Deleuze, difference, language, learning, ALL practice.

1. Introduction

The field of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) has evolved around a diverse range of activities with the common aim of promoting language and learning in higher education. Ranging from one-to-one student consultations to larger scale collaborations with disciplinary staff at the curriculum level, these activities involve many different aspects of tertiary teaching and learning. ALL activities have also been categorised according to binary oppositions, such as 'generic' versus 'specific', or 'integrated', and 'non-discipline specific' versus 'discipline-specific' (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Bartel, 2013). Rather than mere labels, these oppositions designate real tensions in the field, and have also been used to identify the opposing terms in debates around best practice. A good example is the so-called "generic vs. discipline-specific debate" (Moore, 2007, p. 4) around the question of whether skills such as academic writing or critical thinking can be learned as 'general' or 'generic' skills, or whether they can only be learned in the context of disciplinary study. Such debates have been a highly productive catalyst for creative renewal and the gradual move towards 'integrating' or 'embedding' ALL activities within disciplines, which has revitalised the field. However, the categorisation of activities as either 'integrated' and 'discipline-specific', or 'generic' and 'non-discipline specific' (see, for example, Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012, p. 40) can also lead to polarisations that tend to oversimplify the diversity in ALL practice and the complexities involved. From the perspective of an ALL practitioner currently involved in both 'integrating' academic literacy support within the disciplines and teaching a 'non-discipline specific' academic writing unit for EAL students, these oppositions also seem to create false divisions in a continuum of language and learning with multiple possibilities.

This paper provides an alternative perspective on ALL practice that is based on the ideas of the late French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, including his collaborative writings with psychotherapist and political activist Felix Guattari. Deleuze's philosophy embraces difference in all aspects of life, including language and learning, avoiding 'either/or' thinking in favour of a more inclusive form of thinking that embraces "and ... and ... and" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 25). Deleuze's ideas offer rich insights into what language and learning are. For Deleuze, learning always emerges from experimentation with the real, rather than from generalised instruction, but this view of learning is open to many different forms of practice. Therefore, Deleuze's philosophy can help ALL practitioners come to terms with tensions such as the generic versus the specific, while still engaging in a diverse range of practices.

2. Deleuze's ideas on language and learning

Deleuze was a polymath and hugely prolific. His opus, including his work with Guattari, has great breadth and covers a wide range of different fields, spreading "across the whole spectrum of the humanities from philosophy itself, and from philosophy to art, literature, ethics, politics, cinema, architecture, music, science and indeed life and learning through the embracing of problems" (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007, p. 434). Although Deleuze's philosophy of *difference* is very complex and beyond the scope of this paper, it does contain several ideas that are particularly relevant to language and learning, and to the relations between the general and the specific. In fact, Deleuze's approach seeks to understand all things according to the *immanent* (specific) relationships they manifest, rather than promoting *transcendent* (general) principles or categories by which things and events can be ordered.

In their collaborative work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1988) use biological metaphors to oppose transcendent and immanent images of thought, language and writing. One image, which Deleuze and Guattari suggest is characteristic of Western thought, is a hierarchical, classifying *arborescent* image. An example they give of this image is generative linguistics: "Chomsky and his grammatical trees, which begin at a point S and proceed by dichotomy" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p.5). Through this method, Chomsky creates an 'abstract machine' of language that proceeds through the identification of syntactic relations. For Deleuze and Guattari, the problem with such linguistic models "is not that they are too abstract but, on the contrary, that they are not abstract enough, that they do not reach the abstract machine that connects a language to the semantic and pragmatic contents of statements, to collective assemblages of enunciation, to a whole micropolitics of the social field" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 7). Therefore, in opposition to hierarchical, tree-like models, Deleuze and Guattari propose the image of *rhizome*, after the more chaotic root systems of tubers and grasses. Unlike Chomsky's trees, rhizomatic thinking has no pre-determined structure, connects with everything, breaks off and starts up again, and takes many forms. The factors that determine the sense of linguistic utterances are never purely syntactic or semantic relations, but "semiotic chains of every nature" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 7). Although one of Chomsky's arguments for his own method was the 'intuitive' ability of native speakers to identify correct sentences, Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 83) suggest that "true intuition is not a judgment of grammaticality but an evaluation of internal variables of enunciation in relation to the aggregate of the circumstances". The real challenge for language teachers, therefore, is to enable students to appreciate the meaning of grammatical variables in relation to concrete situated problems of expression, just as the challenge for ALL practitioners is to provide students with the kind of "practical understanding" that Gordon Taylor has suggested: "doing what is best in the circumstances" (Taylor, 1990, as cited in Moore & Hough, 2005, p. 80).

Importantly, however, in contrasting immanent and transcendent images of thought and language, Deleuze and Guattari reject neither. Although they clearly prefer more fluid, immanent ways of thinking, they do not reject norms, rules and logical forms, but rather seek to understand how these operate with rhizomes as forces in tension. This is because both forms of thought and language are inextricably linked: "there exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may burgeon into a rhizome" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 15). All forms of writing, for example, no matter how free they are, contain structures

at different levels which help to drive the creative process, just as sentence and essay writing models can help writers to generate new ideas, so long as they connect with meanings that exist beyond their own boundaries. For Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 20), “the important point is that the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models: the first operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even as it engenders its own escapes; the second operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies”. They add that “what interests [them] in operations of smoothing are precisely the passages or combinations; how the forces at work in space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation [transcendence/arborescence] it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces [immanence/rhizome]” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 500).

Like his approach to language, Deleuze's perspective on learning also emphasises difference and the primacy of immanent relations, rather than transcendent ones. In his magnum opus, *Difference and Repetition* (1994), Deleuze (1994) writes:

The movement of the swimmer does not resemble that of the wave; in particular, the movements of the swimming instructor which we reproduce on the sand bear no relation to the movements of the wave, which we learn to deal with only by grasping the former in practice as signs. That is why it is so difficult to say how someone learns, which means that there is something amorous - but also something fatal - about all education. We learn nothing from those who say: ‘Do as I do’. Our only teachers are those who tell us to ‘do with me’... (p. 23)

For Deleuze, learning takes place through encounters with specific problems, rather than through the acquisition of general rules or skills. He writes that “learning is the appropriate name for the subjective acts carried out when one is confronted with the objectivity of a problem...whereas knowledge only designates the generality of concepts or the calm possession of a rule enabling solutions” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 44). Learning always results from encounters with unforeseen problems that shock us from our habitual thinking and force us to think new thoughts: “learning to swim or learning a foreign language means composing the singular points of one's own body or one's own language with those of another shape or element, which tears us apart but also propels us into a hitherto unknown and unheard-of world of problems” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 192). Learning a foreign language, or a disciplinary language, is always a series of encounters with another world, in which we need to move with the waves, just as we do in the ocean. Practical use of language, including academic language, can never result from studying language as a decontextualised system because knowledge of general rules is no substitute for practical encounters with real problems of language in actual contexts of use. Any knowledge of rules must always be accompanied by an intuition of particular circumstances and their constraints and possibilities, which is why general skills programs may fail to adequately promote learning. While arborescent thinking excels in generating internal logic and rule-driven structures, rhizomatic thinking is necessary to cope with the chaotic reality of life, which is an endless series of encounters in a chaotic world of problems.

These encounters with real world problems, in which learning takes place, are also encounters with signs. In dealing with the waves, we have to grasp their movements as signs (Deleuze, 1994, p. 23). How we understand the world depends on the way we read it, which is why, for Deleuze, “the essence of learning...is essentially concerned with signs” (Deleuze, 2000, as cited in Bogue, 2004, p. 332). Deleuze's understanding of signs builds on the ideas of Peirce, who Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 531) acknowledge as the true inventor of semiotics. Unlike Saussure's dualistic approach (signifier and signified), in which different words such as ‘tree’ and ‘arbor’ signify the same concept, there is always a third element in Peirce's triadic approach to signs, not just objects and the signs that represent them, but also what Peirce calls *interpretants*, other signs that determine particular meanings in an endless chain of *semiosis*. A full explanation of Deleuze's semiotics is beyond the scope of this paper, but the following example from von Uexkull (1957), whose work Deleuze refers to in several places, is illustrative of the way in which signs engender universes of meaning. In his classic book, *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men*, von Uexkull describes the entirely different

meanings of an oak tree for an ant, a fox, an owl, a woodcutter, and a young girl (imagine a scary face in a gnarled knot in the trunk's bark). A tree is never just a tree, but always something else as well, according to the *umwelten* or lifeworlds of the different creatures that inhabit or interact with it. For humans, in particular, lifeworlds evolve through encounters with signs, so that "one becomes a carpenter only by becoming sensitive to the signs of wood, a physician by becoming sensitive to the signs of disease" (Deleuze, 2000, p. 4).

Throughout the millennia of human encounters with the chaotic world in which we live, philosophers, scientists and artists have come to see the world in very different ways, to read it according to vastly different sets of signs. Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 197) write that "what defines thought in its three great forms - art, science, and philosophy - is always confronting chaos, laying out a plane, throwing a plane over chaos." But each of these forms of thought confronts chaos in very different ways by constructing different blocks of "space-time" (Deleuze, 2006). Philosophy deals only with concepts; it "lays out a plane of immanence that...takes events or consistent concepts to infinity" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 197). Science, on the other hand, deals only with functions; it "lays out a plane of...coordinates that...(define) states of affairs, functions or referential propositions" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 197). Scientists take the flow of life and fix it in observable states of affairs; they seek to set limits on infinity, through finite measurements, to accurately measure fault lines and predict movements in the Earth's crust, for example, or measure the exact strength of an Earthquake that has just occurred. Finally, art deals only with affects; it "lays out a plane of composition that...bears monuments or composite sensations" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 197): the use of colour in a painting by Klee, for example, to create particular affects that exceed the material form of the painting itself. Just as philosophers, scientists and artists encounter the world in different ways, they also learn in different ways, according to the particular problems and materials in their domain. As Drummond and Themessl-Huber (2007, p. 430) write, for Deleuze, "all learning is essentially a direct apprentice-type engagement with the problematic nature of the material or project under consideration".

In every domain, learning is an open-ended process of becoming. Deleuze (1994, p. 165) writes that "we never know in advance how someone will learn: by means of what loves someone becomes good at Latin, what encounters make them a philosopher, or in what dictionaries they learn to think." This is because learning is a constant dialectic of experience and becoming that emerges from experimentation with the real. According to Deleuze and Parnet (1987):

To become is never to imitate, nor to 'do like', nor to conform to a model ... There is no terminus from which you set out, none which you arrive at or which you ought to arrive at. Nor are there two terms which are exchanged. The question 'What are you becoming?' is particularly stupid. For as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as he does himself. Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double capture, or non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns. (p. 20)

As Masny (2006, p. 3) writes, "becoming is the effect of experience that connects and intersects on different planes that fold, unfold and enfold in time and space". Learning a foreign language, for example, is never a matter of proceeding from one stage of competency to another, and finally arriving at fluency. Neither is it a matter of imitating native speakers, developing a 'personality' in the target language, or exchanging one cultural identity for another. Rather, learning a foreign language is a perpetual process of becoming in which learners bring their own hybrid personalities, cultural dispositions and learning styles into contact with the problems they encounter. Learning is a lifelong process, for Deleuze, an endless series of encounters with the problems of life.

3. Implications for ALL practice

A Deleuzian perspective on language and learning clearly rejects programs that attempt to teach generic skills as if they are transferable to any discipline. What is true for the great forms of thinking identified by Deleuze and Guattari – philosophy, science and art – is also true for all academic disciplines, which confront chaos and construct reality in their own distinct ways. Therefore, although many disciplines may share common practices, such as essay writing or critical thinking, the way in which these practices are carried out differs considerably. As Carter (2007) points out, while many disciplines practice research from sources as “a general way of doing”, they are also characterized by “distinct ways of knowing” (p. 406). Across disciplines, the purpose of research from sources ranges, for example, from understanding literature from “historical, cultural and theoretical perspectives” in literary studies to “understanding religion itself as more than a confessing experience” in religious studies to “shifting from seeing a question from the perspective of one discipline to seeing it from the perspective of more than one discipline” (Carter, 2007, p. 400) in multidisciplinary studies. Moore (2011) also found significant differences in academics’ perceptions of what critical thinking is and what students need to be critical about across the disciplines of philosophy, history and literary/cultural studies. He concludes that “the future of critical thinking in our institutions lies not in any efforts to skate around difference but, instead, to embrace it” (Moore, 2011, p. 273) and that “such tuition would be aimed not at having students learn a pre-determined set of thinking skills but, rather, to help them become the flexible and versatile thinkers they surely need to be in these most challenging times in which we live”.

Deleuze’s ideas also support embedding or integrating academic language and literacy development in the disciplines and for ALL practitioners to take immanent, rather than transcendent approaches in such endeavours. Reporting on a collaborative project between language lecturers and disciplinary specialists to integrate the teaching of academic literacies (ALs) within disciplinary curricula, Jacobs (2007) stresses the need for both parties to appreciate the primacy of disciplinary perspectives and the inherent relationship between disciplinary knowledge and academic literacy. She writes that “when disciplinary specialists, rather than language lecturers, initiated and produced integrated teaching materials, there were deep levels of integration”; however, “where language lecturers assumed the role of primary writer, the integration was more superficial and the texts lacked authenticity” (Jacobs, 2007, p. 70). For language lecturers, the challenge is not to try to dominate the process themselves:

Deep levels of integration are achieved when language lecturers, rather than inducting themselves into the discourses of the disciplines, ‘lift’ the disciplinary specialists outside of their discourses by asking questions that a novice to the discipline would. In this way they are able to shift disciplinary specialists to making explicit the rules governing their disciplinary discourses. (Jacobs, 2007, p. 76)

For both parties, the crucial step is moving from “understandings of AL as a body of knowledge comprising an autonomous set of generic skills transferable to any discipline of study, to understandings of ALs as embedded within the discourses of academic disciplines” (Jacobs, 2007, p. 71). In such contexts, Deleuze’s philosophy of learning certainly supports the idea that ALL practitioners should say “do with me”, rather than “do as I do” in helping both students and disciplinary specialists to grasp disciplinary problems in practice as signs, rather than adding general prescriptions that may actually hinder the learning that occurs. The success of such collaborations also depends on the extent to which disciplinary lecturers are able to view their own disciplines as “semiotic domains” or “dynamic spaces inhabited by people and their meaning-making interactions through words, sounds, gestures and images, rather than static objects defined as a body of content knowledge” (Jacobs, 2007, p. 61). Jacobs (2007) writes that “those lecturers who understood knowledge as discursively constructed, and the curriculum as how the discipline intersected with the world, were inclined to understand ALs as being deeply embedded within the ways in which the various disciplines constructed themselves through language” (p. 70). Such lecturers are more likely to be engaged in collaboration, with more successful results.

However, Deleuze's philosophy can also inspire 'non-discipline specific' approaches that provide the kind of encounters and opportunities for becoming that he describes. The credit-bearing first year academic writing unit I teach as an elective to EAL students, which is designed to engage students in meaningful encounters with global challenges and big questions, is partly influenced by this idea. Students are introduced to global challenges through the Millennium Project's (2009) *Global Challenges for Humanity* and James Martin's (2007) 'Mega-problems', and discuss challenges of their choice through a 'Global Challenges' online forum. All written assignments, leading up to an argumentative essay, are based on the controversial global issue of climate change. Many students have only a cursory understanding of this topic at the beginning of the course and a number have commented that learning about this important issue was one of the most interesting aspects of the unit. What they write about in the argumentative essay is not just an essay question; it is a real question that affects all human beings: Should climate change be the priority for urgent action from the world's governments? The readings are not just readings but an actual debate that is currently playing out across the planet between scientists such as James Hansen and economists such as Bjorn Lomborg. In weighing their arguments, students contrast scientific discourses of 'feedback loops' and 'turning points' and 'What ifs', with economic discourses of 'costs and benefits'. They also appreciate the meaning of variables in relation to concrete situated problems of content and expression. Why does Hansen talk about his grandchildren in his TED talk 'Why I must speak out about climate change'? Why does he use the personal pronoun 'I' in his *Washington Post* article (Hansen, 2012), but not in the co-authored scientific article (Hansen et al., 2012)?

Although many aspects of the unit could only be described as arborescent, they are intended to enable more rhizomatic thinking. Students are presented with a fairly standard set of learning objectives for an academic writing unit (critically analyse assignment questions; make effective notes and outlines; summarise, paraphrase and quote information and so on). Each assignment is assessed according to marking rubrics that incorporate the same criteria: task fulfilment and organisation, content and vocabulary, voice and use of information from other sources, coherence and style, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation. Access to a range of generic online resources is presented in connection with these different characteristics of academic writing, including essay, paragraph and sentence structure models. However, rather than fixed models or templates, these generic forms and structures are provided to help students to develop their own ideas and create their own arguments. In fact, many students are unfamiliar with the characteristically Western, arborescent thinking that underlies many of these resources. Those who have encountered such forms in previous learning have not needed to use them in connection with the kind of contextualised questions and authentic readings they encounter in the unit. Therefore, the generic materials function as enablers for more contextualised, specific and immanent uses of language.

Rather than developing a set of generic skills transferable to other disciplines, the unit simply aims to enable students to develop as academic writers in English, and as global citizens capable of expressing their ideas in another language. The extent to which this occurs and how it occurs varies greatly from student to student. While some students write fairly unimaginative assignments that follow the models and sources too closely, others are clearly inspired by their encounters to explore their ideas and words more creatively. This has been particularly apparent in posts to the 'Global Challenges' forum and in the face-to-face class discussions that follow. Many of the topics students have chosen – peace-making, racism and discrimination and the status of women – have been extremely sensitive in a time of global conflict and in mixed cohorts of students with different values, but they have also enabled students to develop their spoken and written voices in English in ways that are equally sensitive to the context in which they are uttered. In any case, a major goal of the unit is to promote the kind of open-ended capacities that Deleuze's philosophy suggests, which are likely to be more beneficial to students as life-long learners than particular sets of skills.

Similar approaches have been adopted at other universities. Garner and Borg (2005) report on a "purpose-built discipline environment" focused on global challenges, in which students can engage in "genuine, academic investigation of issues" (p. 119). Arnó-Macià and Rueda-Ramos

(2011) discuss the development of an online learning environment for engineering students, which “integrates EAP with interdisciplinary content” (p. 19). Suggesting that EAP teachers “can offer more than English language teaching”, the authors question the assumption that “EAP teachers can only teach language and that specialist lecturers have to teach content” (p. 20). They also suggest that the interdisciplinary content and humanistic approach that EAP lecturers can provide can contribute as much as the specialised content that engineering lecturers teach to the “global education of engineers” (p. 20). Providing programs like these are based on the use of authentic texts, real questions and contextualised language use, they can provide teaching and learning environments that promote real learning. Without attempting to deliver sets of prescribed generic skills, such courses can follow Barnett’s (2012) suggestion to develop students’ capacities as human beings, at the same time as developing their academic writing and language abilities.

4. Conclusion

This paper has introduced Deleuze’s philosophy of learning as an insightful perspective that can help ALL practitioners to navigate through the complexities in the field, without limiting the ways in which they can help students to learn. On the one hand, Deleuze’s ideas provide philosophical support for engaging closely with the disciplines and with disciplinary experts in embedding academic language and learning support within the disciplines. On the other hand, they also provide philosophical support for non-discipline specific, or interdisciplinary, programs taught by ALL practitioners, so long as these aim to create teaching and learning encounters, blocks of space-time, that engage students with real problems and signs, rather than attempting to promote sets of universal skills.

Ultimately, Deleuze’s ideas suggest that the relation of ALL itself to language and learning in higher education should be *immanent* rather than *transcendent*. Rather than adopting fixed identities or terms or reference, such as ‘discipline-specific’ or ‘non-discipline specific’, ALL practitioners should view their own work as an open-ended process of becoming. Were he alive today, Deleuze’s advice for ALL practitioners would perhaps be to experiment: “make a rhizome. But you don’t know what you can make a rhizome with, you don’t know which subterranean stem is effectively going to make a rhizome, or enter a becoming, people your desert. So experiment” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 251).

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