AALL
Association for Academic
Language and Learning

Introduction to special issue: *Key thinkers, key theories: The contribution of theory to academic language and learning practice* (Part 1)

The work we do as academic literacy practitioners is guided by ideas we have acquired about such matters as the nature of language, of learning, of knowledge, of our institutions, and of society and the world in general. The pressures and exigencies of our work, however, often mean that there is limited time to reflect on these ideas, and it is often too easy to lose sight of the broader scholarship that shapes our practice.

This special issue has emerged out of a two day symposium that was held at Swinburne University of Technology in November 2012 – *Key thinkers, Key theories: The contribution of theory to academic language and learning practice*. The purpose of the symposium was to provide an opportunity to explore some of the major theoretical ideas and interests that have been drawn upon by academic language and learning (ALL) practitioners in their work, and which have served to advance academic literacy teaching in our universities. Over the two days a total of 44 papers were presented, including four keynote papers. In this volume – and in a second volume to be published later in 2014 – we are pleased to present a selection of the papers delivered over the two days.

We see the two volumes of *Key Thinkers, Key Theories* fitting well with several earlier efforts to explore the role of theory in ALL practice in Australia. One of these was the publication of *Literacy by Degrees* (1988), prepared by the first generation of ALL practitioners in Australia (Gordon Taylor, John Clancy, Brigid Ballard, Hannah Bock and others). This volume has been highly influential in the development of the field, especially in its establishing of a number of first principles in ALL practice: for example, that the development of students' academic language is inseparable from the disciplinary content with which they are dealing; and that patterns of language use (or discourse) differ in significant ways across the disciplines.

Another important Australian-based initiative was the publication in the following decade of *Academic skills advising: Towards a discipline* (Garner, Chanock & Clerehan Eds., 1996). The view taken in this volume was that academic skills advising is fundamentally an interdisciplinary activity, drawing its strength from a number of related fields, such as education, linguistics, philosophy and psychology. The work sought also to position ALL work theoretically, with the referencing of a number of broad paradigms: hermeneutics; systemic functional linguistics; communication theory; and counselling theory.

Since those earlier times, we have seen a progressive maturing of ALL as a discipline and a profession. Notable developments have been the establishment of the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL), and following this, the creation of the Association's journal – JALL. The period has also been marked by a strengthening of the research dimensions of ALL work, with many practitioners now holding PhD degrees (or studying towards them), and many building credible research profiles. Much of this work has been concerned with exploring the theoretical dimensions of ALL work, and especially to find out how the ideas from a variety of intellectual traditions can be put to creative use in the fundamental mission of ALL work: to improve and develop the educational experiences of our students. The Swinburne symposium in 2012 was an excellent opportunity to find out about some of the interesting and innovative work currently being pursued in the field.

We are excited about the range and quality of articles that make up the present volume. They include pieces on such schools of thought as Genre Theory; Ethnography; Activity Theory; Hermeneutics; and thinkers such as Vygotsky and Bakhtin; Pierre Bourdieu; Judith Butler; Gilles Deleuze; Ludwig Wittgenstein and Raymond Williams; Paul Ricoeur; and Theo van Leeuwen. In each article, an effort has been made to explain the sometimes difficult ideas associated with these different thinkers and positions, and also to suggest how such ideas can

shed light on the nature of language and learning in the academy, and on the ways we might go about doing our work.

Opening the volume is a framing piece by Gordon Taylor which seeks to relate the various theoretical strands covered in the volume to the broad history and development of ALL practice in Australia and beyond. The subsequent pieces have been organised roughly according to some central themes identified by Taylor:

Identity and difference
- Rethinking what it means to write: A contribution from Judith Butler (Bronwyn James).
- Feedback on writing in the supervision of postgraduate students: Insights from the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin (Janne Morton, Neomy Storch, and Celia Thompson).
- Conversing with subjects: applying Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics to pedagogical and academic language and learning practice (Glenda Ballantyne).

Knowledge/Power regimes
- How do postgraduate students recontextualise "doing research" as a social practice? A critical analysis using Van Leeuwen's socio-semantic model (Antoon de Rycker).
- Deleuze's philosophy of *difference* and its implications for ALL practice (Steve Johnson).
- Using Bourdieu to think about the tertiary learning advice consultation (Mary Roberts and Kirsten Reid).

Linguistic determinism: System and structure
- Rhetorical genre theory and academic literacy (Anthony Paré).
- Wittgenstein, Williams and the terminologies of higher education: a case study of the term "critical" (Tim Moore).
- Engeström's activity theory as a tool to analyse online resources embedding academic literacies (Monica Behrend).

Practice to theory
- "Telling" insights from experience: Establishing resonance with readers, theory, and participants (Kate Chanock).

We are sure that an exploration of ideas, such as those presented in this special edition, is essential to our being sustained in the work we do. And it is perhaps equally important as a means of countering a shallow utilitarianism that is increasingly a feature of contemporary debates in higher education, and which seems to intrude more and more on the way that ALL practitioners are expected to carry out their work.

But as Gordon Taylor suggests in his introductory piece, whilst the present volume is greatly to be welcomed, there are additional ways that we might think about pursuing the theoretical dimensions of our work. Along with discussing how theory is relevant to ALL practice, there is also a need, Taylor suggests, to engage in "robust debate and critique about each other's writing", and the positions we choose to advance. Also essential is engagement with the disciplines, and the need always to explore how the perspectives from both areas can be brought into a productive relationship. It is hoped that the present volume – and the companion issue to follow – can provide a solid basis for pursuing such discussions.

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