

“Language staff lose academic ranking”: What’s new managerialism got to do with it?

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The Language and Learning Services Unit at Monash University, a site for the research-based practice of our profession since 1996 and before that, for a previous ten years at the Caulfield and Peninsula campuses, closed at the end of May, 2007. This paper explores why that happened. It examines the apparent lack of managerial understanding and insight into the nature of academic work – our own and, by extension, that of the students and staff with whom we deal – associated with these events. Crucially, the paper draws on a conception of disciplinary learning as representing for students a complex ecology – an ecology in which we, as Academic Language and Learning practitioners, find our place, and to which we bear witness. The paper argues that management ignored the workings of this ecology to its detriment and, in viewing language as a skill separable from disciplinary learning, devalued the understanding which is necessary for an institution to help students to learn. The implications of this for communication in our practice will be discussed.

Key Words: language and learning, new managerialism, writing, ecology.

1. Introduction

“Language staff lose academic ranking”, as the title to the *Australian Higher Education Supplement* (21 March 2007) proclaimed when Monash University made the decision in February, 2007, that Academic Language and Learning (ALL) work would no longer be considered academic. The Language and Learning Services Unit (LLS) at Monash University, a site for research-based practice in our profession since 1996 and before that, for a previous ten years at the Caulfield and Peninsula campuses, closed at the end of May, 2007, and the function of providing academic support to students was reorganised and reclassified as “non-academic”. Of approximately 24 academic staff in the unit, most departed. Two Clayton and two Gippsland campus staff took up general staff positions in the new unit in the Library; four staff were offered ongoing positions in staff development by the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT); and four were offered ALL positions in the faculties.

To explain what happened in ways which may shed some light for future generations of ALL staff, I will in this paper invoke an approach to institutional governance which has been called “new managerialism” and link the problems with this to the view of language as a skill separable from the conceptual activity of learning, and “skills” themselves as measurable on the basis of simplistic kinds of “evidence” of attainment. To this reductive view, I oppose a potentially fruitful framework with which we can account for the complexity of our intellectual work in our particular interdisciplinary field of educational linguistics: this is the notion of an ecology of student writing, in which ALL advisers occupy an essential niche.

2. New managerialism

Bronwyn Davies (2003) defined new managerialism as the removal of power from practising professionals and the placing of it in the hands of auditors, policy makers and statisticians, “none of whom need know anything about the profession in question” (Davies, p. 91). Peer review historically underpinned the work of academics; now their autonomous professional practices are considered insufficient. In an era where institutions desperate for public monies must defend their claims to these funds to an unprecedented degree, the desired “evidence” of performance across all levels of the institution becomes fetishised. In Davies’ view, what can be termed the new panopticon operates through a watchfulness at every level as a consequence – such that the omnipresence of mechanisms of measurement comes to seem natural to the inmates. The new managerialist systems of our universities can appear, in the name of “quality”, to be moving towards separating individual practitioners from their sense of their own value. Individual staff are valuable insofar as they accept the ways that managerial values such as customers, accountability, outcomes and “continuous improvement” are implemented. Scarce educational resources are ploughed back into surveillance, survey administration and analysis: “as long as objectives have been specified and strategies for their management ... have been put in place, the nature of the work itself is of little relevance to anyone” (Davies, 2003, p. 92). At the same time as “teaching and learning” is being given currency at the federal level as the new research field, teachers and learners are more surveyed and less resourced than they have ever been.

Much is lost in the translation of teaching into the language of production, as we can see from an example of language transfer documented by David Dennis (1995). Back in the 1950s, for businesses faced with the problem of variation in products which resulted in some deviation from customers’ requirements, W. Edwards Deming recommended that all processes should be identified and measured. He created a diagram (Plan-Do-Check-Act) to illustrate this idealised cycle, variously called the Shewhart Cycle (from the statistician upon whose work he drew), the PDCA cycle, and the Deming Cycle (Deming, 1988). In 1995, Dennis, in his paper, “Brave new reductionism: TQM as ethnocentrism”, cites an excerpt from the Total Quality Management electronic Discussion List, TQM-L (10th January 1993):

David, we at Keller Graduate School of Management use the TQM principle of continuous improvement process to improve teaching and learning in individual classes serving adult, graduate-level students. We apply the Shewhart Cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) to our instructional process by: 1) establishing very specific course objectives (plan), 2) having our instructors teach to those objectives (do), 3) assessing the learning of the students and the effectiveness of the instruction, and 4) using the data on the outcomes assessment to improve the process (act).

The field of education is similar to the field of business. We in education supply a service (education), start with a raw material (students), apply a process (teaching), and turn-out a finished product (graduates). Schools must become more customer-driven, as business is.

The reduction of the sum of academic expertise and creativity to the Shewhart cycle is familiar to anyone who has experienced the AUQA (Australian Universities Quality Agency) exercise in Australia or comparable exercises overseas. Institutions manoeuvre to show that they are efficient like businesses, adopting the new managerialist language and values of competition.

Unthinking valorisation of “evidence-based practice” has attracted critique in higher education, as in medicine and other fields (Dennis, 1995; Greenhalgh, Toon, Russell, Wong, Plumb, Macfarlane, 2003). Hammersley (2001, p. 5) cited in Davies (2003), characterises managerialism’s view of professional practice as “specifying goals explicitly, selecting strategies for achieving them on the basis of objective evidence about their effectiveness, and then measuring outcomes in order to assess their degree of success”. Where this is an institutional enterprise, the

defining of effectiveness is the provenance of the institution: the problem arises when the professional judgement of faculty academic staff themselves about their own practice is rendered unimportant and generally excluded from the discourse. To put this in the context of the work of ALL, not only who counts the evidence, but what is considered to be evidence, is removed from the hands of the practising professionals.

The notion, then, of an “evidence basis” for improvements in practice hangs in a limbo between centralised services paid to administer the system without the requisite “local knowledge” (Geertz, 1983), and the observed practitioner trying to make sense of this rating in light of what they themselves know and understand about their own practice.

The frame of reference of this paper is, then, partly philosophical and partly organisational. I shall now give a brief account – all of which is available on the public record – of the series of events Academic Language and Learning staff at Monash University experienced prior to the closing of their unit.

3. A case history

Reflecting in 2002 on the multi-campus work of the Language and Learning Services Unit (Clerehan, Wilson & Orsmond, 2002), one of its achievements at Monash, as it seemed then, was to have managed the organisational context such that, while the Unit’s staff provided a coherent and unified service across the University within the considerable budget constraints, each campus presence was built with “local knowledge” and continued to be developed in response to local needs. The esteem and good-will which flowed from this, seemingly at all levels (see appendix for a list of monitoring and evaluation strategies used), seemed to guarantee the continuation of the Unit’s operation indefinitely. At the Senior Management Retreat in 2005, the unit’s work was described as “core business”. With the disbanding later in the year of the unit’s larger organisational structure, the Centre for Learning and Teaching Support (CeLTS), LLS staff were initially told that the disbanding would mean more funding for “Language and Learning”.

Then, in a meeting requested by Language and Learning staff towards the end of that year, staff were informed, in response to a specific question, that Language and Learning was to receive no more funding, and that the additional funding was in fact to be directed to the Monash University English Language Centre (MUELC). In December 2005, the staff were given a presentation in which they were told that CeLTS had been “a-strategic” and that the “new strategic approach” for the replacement Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) in which they found themselves was to involve the “opportunity [for them] to work in multi-functional teams and new relationships with MUELC and Monash College”. In the first CALT “senior staff” meetings, any discussion of language and learning concerned only MUELC and the desirability of the MUELC contribution (to provide “broad-based” support). The ALL staff eventually had to request that a “learning support” item be included on the agenda as the meetings made no reference to the occupation of what still amounted to two-thirds of the staff in CALT. It was as if much of the actual work of the staff was to remain invisible. In a highly surveyed workplace, this was a worrying anomaly.

At the first CALT staff meeting in 2006, ALL staff were told that, as of the following morning, their current jobs would change. Their role would be to work in teams to address the problems of units (subjects) which had been poorly rated by students. Their research would be devoted to evaluating the outcomes. Faculties, they were informed, had already been consulted about the changes. The ensuing staff discussion of this went unrecorded in the minutes of the meeting. The staff’s request to send a global email to all University staff regarding this change to Language and Learning was declined: they were told it was “up to them” to advise the changes through their daily work role. Next, the university-wide Language and Learning Advisory Committee was disbanded.

While some of the newer members of the former unit's staff were called upon to take on roles and responsibilities in the new organisational unit, others were not, and, in spite of repeated requests, staff comments and questions in CALT staff meetings remained un-minuted. Of the five "core activities" in the CALT Operational Plan – first of which was to "increase performance of Monash University in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund" – not one mentioned language and learning (or, indeed, students). In the CALT organisational chart, no roles were assigned to ALL staff and no performance management was initiated. Staff continued to await their assignment to unit response teams.

In August, a paper "Advancing Learning Support" was produced by CALT management, in which a number of unsubstantiated assertions were made about the previous Language and Learning service, for example: "What we do not know is whether we were reaching the students in greatest need, how many times students used the services and what impact the invention [sic] /programs had on their learning". The new "strategic" approach and the putative collaboration with MUELC were the way forward, according to "Advancing Learning Support": "From a quality assurance point of view we can now document and demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of the various elements of learning support provided across all Monash campuses". Many of the staff wrote to the Director, CALT, expressing their concern at the inaccuracies and misleading statements in this document. The staff subsequently expressed their concerns again, at the apparent invitation of management, in a session at the CALT Staff Retreat in September, 2006. These were documented as: 1) problems with leadership; 2) lack of respect for, or understanding of, Language and Learning work and marginalisation of Language and Learning staff; 3) an ill-defined change agenda and ensuing confusion for faculties; 4) rejection of LLS senior staff advice and expertise; and 5) conflict of interest.

Shortly after this, a round of "voluntary" separation packages was offered to certain Language and Learning staff, including one who had just been promoted to Associate Professor. In February, 2007, a meeting on the future of learning support at Monash was announced, and staff were told that a new unit would be established as part of a "learning commons", to be set up in second semester in the Library, comprising a number of HEW7 (a professional and administrative designation) positions for which existing staff could apply. Those who did not could apply for voluntary separation packages. Strong representations were made by the NTEU to the University and in the press (and by the President, AALL, also in the press) to the effect that no review process had taken place; that the ALL staff were teaching staff and therefore academic; that there was remarkably scant evidence of any faculty consultation in the decision; and that the Monash move appeared incongruous beside increasing national concern about international student issues. Despite the level of these and other – principally student-initiated – objections, the decision was ratified by the University's Academic Board. In public announcements by senior Monash staff, learning services were to be "transformed", the loss of academic status for the work "a by-product of moving to the Library".

4. Naming and silence

The reclassification of ALL work from academic to general is not merely an administrative measure, but reflects deeply held assumptions in higher education that are problematic for the work that is done. The discourse in which we as ALL staff are embodied, and the specific language used to characterise us in any communicative act, positions us and our work in certain ways; and there are deeper reasons why this has been, and continues to be, problematic for our operation. While language is something that can raise the highest passions in senior academics (see, for example, Psychology's commitment to the APA rules), in Australian universities, as elsewhere, it has traditionally been separated from "content" in the minds of management and of some faculty, and given little status (Russell, 1991). To put it another way, "while knowledge about language is seen as academic, knowledge about how to use it is not" (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004, p. 45). We are unwitting accomplices in – to use Mike Rose's (1985) telling coinage – "the myth of transience". This refers to the assumption, common in institutions of

higher education, that a student’s writing issues are a temporary problem rather than a necessary aspect of the learning process and, insofar as they form part of students’ induction into a discipline, a necessary aspect of teaching as well. Russell (1991) has documented successive cycles in the history of this belief in American higher education in the 20th century which resulted in universities failing to establish permanent and properly resourced approaches to developing students’ understanding of academic writing.

According to the logic of the myth of transience, writing skill can be judged in terms of absence of error. As writing is seen as a skill or tool, it can be remediated and so, Rose (1985) suggests ironically, “our remedial efforts, while currently necessary, can be phased out once the literacy crisis is solved in other segments of the educational system” (p. 341). There is clear appeal for institutions to prioritise a scientific view of correct writing which reduces complexity to simple understandable processes. And those whose work, in part, is to assist students who may be perceived as marginal (by reason of “skill levels”) need not be anything other than marginal themselves. Rose maintains that, despite some progress, writing *qua* skill (see also Taylor, 1990) is still central to institutional discourse, enabling institutions to talk about it as separable, technical, quantifiable (“the four skills”, “writing skills assessment”), safely removing it from any congress with thought and research (p. 347). Referring to the nature of the discourse at high levels of the educational and policy hierarchy, Alison Lee (2005) highlights the

puzzling lack of uptake and even deliberate refusal of general dialogue with the field of Learning Assistance, where practitioners attend to the break-downs in the writing-learning relationship and the consequences of the silence about this relationship in teaching, learning and assessment discourses within Higher Education. (p. 44)

Our (inter)disciplinary area has at last been “fixed”, named as Academic Language and Learning. But niggling issues of language and communication remain: what of our position titles, the subject still of perennial debate? In our different institutional contexts, we use “staff”, “academics”, “professionals”, to name the most common. While the term “adviser” is often used in preference to “lecturer”, in our work contexts we are often loath to use it for the reason that, while we advise in the course of what we are doing, what we are doing is teaching. Even the word “support” is of concern for some: too “adjunct” in its connotations, not close enough to “integrated” or “embedded”, leaving us vulnerable. For reasons suggested by Russell (1991) and Rose (1985), what is surfacing here are deep-seated issues around language, its place in learning and the attitude of institutions to the challenges inherent in that.

5. An ecological approach to the support of student writing

ALL staff in universities play an essential role in what can be conceptualised as an “ecology” of learning, and institutions’ failure to understand that role risks the very sustainability of the ecology, despite the centrality of the role to institutional concerns. Lee (2005) underlines this as follows:

Sophisticated recent practice in this field can be represented as moving from a remedial, clinical approach to harm-minimisation for at-risk students of one kind or another, to a dialogic, consultative, co-productive, developmental approach based theoretically in large part on research into the centrality of language and literacy in learning and the production of curriculum knowledge. (p. 35)

Arguably, ALL practitioners need to figure strongly among those researchers interested in questions of academic learning and curriculum. As this area becomes increasingly internationalised in university systems typified by Australia’s, the cultural diversity of the student body makes it more, and not less, imperative that ALL researchers undertake work in the changing patterns of student learning. The “myth of transience” still needs to be dispelled.

The “ecological” approach to thinking about student writing proposed in this paper (see Clerehan, 2005 for an extended account), draws particularly on Cooper (1986), Barton and Hamilton (2000), and van Lier (2000, 2002, 2004). A metaphor of ecology is used as a way of conceptualising the literate activity within the context in the university, emphasising the situated and dynamic nature of the literacy practices to be found there. It is offered here in part as a response to Kerry O’Regan’s (2005) call for us all to advance our profession by foregrounding and making clear to others those theoretical frameworks which inform our work. In this approach, the layered interrelationships of text and context are posited as analogous to an ecological system where the student’s relationship to the environment at a range of levels is negotiated and where sustain-ability is sought, so that adaptation and survival may take place. The notion of a contact zone, drawing on slightly different conceptions in Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Pratt (1991, cited in Bizzell, 1994) among others, I put forward as a refinement of the familiar notions of “discourse community” or “community of practice”. I use the notion to denote that border of the discourse community where students interact with faculty staff, where interactions – both written and spoken – centre, crucially, on writing. Within an ecological approach to writing support, the notion of a contact zone facilitates a focus not solely on the student text, but on capturing the tensions inherent in the processes and practices of academic staff-student interactions around writing tasks.

The key participants and participant relationships in this zone involve the student (with their prior educational experiences and expectations); and their relations with the academic staff as teacher (-researcher) and gatekeeper of the discipline, as well as representative of the department, faculty and institution. The contemporary cross-cultural environment means that the undergraduate student in higher education engages in a highly complex range of contact situations in a space or zone where, if the student is from a different background culture – especially an international student – the ecology becomes even more complex and diverse.

Students (especially international) can be seen as engaging in a range of critical interactions with staff in a contact zone where expectations are by no means always clear.

The metaphor of an ecology of written language itself is not new (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The notion of an ecology of student writing affords a deeper conceptualisation of, and thus of support for, student writing and learning in the university. Cooper (1986) has described the dynamic reciprocal relationship between individual writer and milieu, where “anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole” (p. 370). Writers and pieces of writing both determine, and are determined by, other writings in the system: the ecological model “postulates dynamic interlocking systems which structure the social activity of writing” (p. 368). The “systems” include purposes, consequences accompanying interactions, and cultural norms. In a “pre-genre” era of scholarship, Cooper speaks of textual forms which by their nature are “at the same time conservative, repositories of tradition, and revolutionary, instruments of new forms of action” (p. 370). The ecological model, she says, focuses our attention on the real social context of writing in which, like a web, anything that affects one strand does indeed vibrate through the whole. Writing is thus one of the activities by which we locate ourselves in the “enmeshed systems” that make up the social world, “constituted by and constitutive of” these ever-changing systems (p. 373). In reality these are sometimes not easily accessible by particular groups, and not amenable to change. The ecological model enables us

to diagnose and analyse such situations, and it encourages us to direct our corrective energies away from the characteristics of the individual writer and towards imbalances in social systems that prevent good writing. (Cooper, 1986, p. 373)

Similarly, in relation to language learning, the ecological-educational linguistics propounded by van Lier (2000; 2002; 2004), drawing on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) and others, argues for a definition of linguistics where the roles of language and social activity are the core of the definition of language (van Lier, 2004, p. 20). For van Lier, the ecological approach looks at the entire situation and asks, “what is it in this environment that makes things

happen the way they do?” (p. 11). A key concept for him is “affordance”: what the environment offers the participant, whether for better or worse. For language learning, van Lier maintains that a “deep” ecological approach, with context-specific methodologies, adds “a sense of vision ... and an overt ideology of transformation (a critical perspective)” (p. 4), pointing out potential broader implications, in that language pervades all of education.

Van Lier (2002) claims that ecological-educational linguistics has a substantial set of tasks: “conceptual clarification, the location of new forms of evidence through description and analysis, the elaboration of contextual research procedures, and plausible documentation” (p. 149). Viewing the macro-system (the institution) organically, it can be seen that important research questions for the educational linguist working in a university lie at the meeting points of individuals and groups and sub-systems and where these impact upon student writing, and thus learning. The questions revolve around the academic discourses in their disciplinary garb and the discourse community – comprising writers with shared purposes, settings and audiences.

Any theory of literacy implies a theory of learning (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Both take place in particular social contexts and involve discursive processes between teachers and learners. The notion of “literacy practices”, as expanded by Barton and Hamilton (2000), offers “a powerful way of conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape” (p. 7). Practices, “cultural ways of using literacy”, they claim, are an abstract notion which cannot wholly be contained in observable activities and tasks. They also make use of a term – *literacy events* – which they define as activities where literacy has a role, where there is usually a written text, and where there may be talk around the text. These are “observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them” (p. 8). The full study of written language, therefore, can be seen as the analysis of both texts and practices.

With literacy as with ecology, the study of the interrelationship of the activity and the environment is about how the activity is part of the environment: it both exerts influence and, in turn, is influenced by it (Barton, 1994). To apply Barton’s thinking to tertiary literacy, its terms can speak to a range of dimensions: the ecosystem of higher education itself; ecological niches of departments/disciplines; diversity in the student (and staff) body; sustainability of curricular and pedagogical approaches. In literacy as in ecology, the structure of practices is the product of processes at the level of the individual. In place of the static and limited categories of process/contextual models (Burke, 1969, cited in Cooper, 1986, pp. 367-368), an ecological model has as its fundamental tenet, that writing is “an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (Cooper, 1986, p. 367). An ecological model of student writing is responsive to the student’s perspective.

In a university, any specific writing activity can be seen as a literacy event enmeshed in other activities of the contact zone, where interdiscursivity involves roles and identities for participants set against, but implicated with, institutional practices. Understanding the ecology in order better to see what is going on in the texts, and thus in students’ learning, is one kind of approach to framing, for the audiences with whom we communicate, the subtle and complex nature of language and learning work. It represents an antidote to the “skills” discourse and, I hope, suggests some directions for language and learning academics to further their contribution to knowledge production. It offers a framework for examining assignments, students’ approaches to these, and lecturers’ reception of their efforts. It also offers a framework for institutions examining the role of ALL advisers in mediating these processes. That the essential intellectual and academic component of such mediation is not well understood by university management must be inferred from Monash’s decision to reclassify its ALL positions.

6. Managerialism and simplicity

Managerialism, as exercised and evidenced in a case study such as outlined in this paper, depends on avoidance of subtlety and complexity. It depends on acceptance of the myth of transience. Dennis (1995) coins the term, “Totalized Quality Management” (a play on Deming’s Total Quality Management), to denote a “philosophy of due obedience” which can operate through administrative and management systems to blanket any practice of critical thought or expression of responsible dissent:

it is a political technology of detail that works to standardize fields of human identities and thought. That is, in the universe of Totalized Quality Management, everybody is either a customer, internal or external, or a provider. There is another category, the “resistor”. But s/he is a dark and furtive presence that is acknowledged as the true dangerous other, the skeptic, the unbeliever ... (Dennis, 1995).

Language and Learning staff at Monash University lost their academic ranking – and their jobs – and there was no dissent which counted. University managements generally would aver that they are always genuinely seeking ways of providing evidence-based improvements to teaching and learning. However, the evidence pertaining to ALL advisers’ work at Monash (see appendix) was ignored. New managerialism, as I have suggested, inhabits a land of great simplicity where learning is there to be measured. The complexities inherent in living ecologies of learning are not even on the horizon. To return to where we started: the new unit in the Monash University Library is called the Learning Skills Unit. This tells us much about the managerialist view of our work. Learning is no longer bound up with language, and at the same time has been reduced to skills – something that the institution is confident of being able to measure and report to AUQA.

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Appendix A. Language and Learning Services monitoring and evaluation strategies

Key Performance Indicators

1. *Breadth of Service* – measured by range of services provided as outlined in mid-year Progress Reports for each faculty and campus and Annual Report, including teaching; development of specialised hard copy and online resources; provision of resource centres, Clayton campus lab and seminar room.
2. *Quality of Teaching* – measured by questionnaires and surveys each semester assessing student satisfaction, administered to students attending classes and individual consultations (or questionnaires for staff attending professional development workshops); annual structured interviews with representatives from three faculties assessing standards of teaching provided to their students; student referral feedback forms returned by faculty staff.
3. *Staff Expertise* – measured by annual report on staff qualifications, training, experience, scholarly activity, awards.
4. Annual *statistical analysis of Student Progress Units* (SPUs) for coursework students attending three or more individual consultations
5. *Informal benchmarking* with Victorian and other universities with large proportions of international students
6. *Formalised feedback* through Language and Learning Advisory Group; and via university and faculty committees of which staff were members

7. *Informal feedback* from students via the LLS Resource Officers, and through student associations.

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