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 2)

Part 2 of this JALL Special Issue draws again on papers from the *Key thinkers, key theories Symposium*, held at the then Lilydale Campus of Swinburne University of Technology, in September 2012. The introduction to Part 1 reminds us of the early (1996) collection of ALL papers, *Academic skills advising: Towards a discipline*, and it is telling that the current two-part issue of JALL skips away from the language of that publication in many directions. No longer simply 'skills', not so much merely offering 'advice', and no longer concerned to make its way towards a discipline: our teaching informs (and is informed by) a multitude of disciplines. It can scarcely afford to do so theoretically empty-handed and, in any case, as Karl Maton reminds us, "In any practice, there is always theory" (p. 2). This is our institutional challenge – and that is the intellectual challenge these two issues of JALL take up.

Part 2 comprises papers which can be linked in all kinds of thought-provoking ways. We have elected to group them in broad divisions as follows.

1. The subject/subjectivity in academic writing (Freadman, Price, Fenton-Smith)

Anne Freadman, in her keynote paper, can be seen to sum up the pleasures of the volume by citing a "lesson" she learned from William James: "that our answers, our theories, are not the end of our road of enquiry […], they are not stopping points, but resting places, points where we take stock of where we are in order to see what new questions might arise there" (p. 2). Freadman's taking stock involves a reconsideration of where the writer sits (or stands) within rhetorical genre theory, using a text of Helen Garner's to investigate subject position as a matter of addressivity. Stephen Price recruits Bakhtin and Derrida to confront what is for Bakhtin an ambivalence and for Derrida a paradox – that language is both mine/not mine – a central concern for the student writer and for those assessing their work. Price wrestles with the difficult philosophical questions raised for him by the work of the two theorists to arrive at a position which is practically very useful, revealing how a student's "patchwriting" can be seen as a struggle to construct a discursive self within the discipline.

As an EAP teacher, Ben Fenton-Smith's focus on Benesch's critical EAP re-visits a question which has presented a stumbling block and point of contention for the fields of EAP and language and learning since at least the early 1990s. Fenton-Smith's self-reflexive account confronts the contradiction in the literature, in our institutions and even within the AALL Position Statement, that students are characterised as novices who need help; but asks should we be taking much of our (i.e. academics') traditional teaching to task "for treating them in just such a patronising manner?" (p. 6).

2. Student learning and the curriculum (Maton, McCormack, Ramiah)

The other keynote presenter in this volume, Karl Maton, confronts the challenge of how ALL work might relate to students' learning within their curricula. He outlines his Legitimation Code Theory (building principally on Bernstein), which he sees as a sociological framework and conceptual toolkit for exploring the organising principles of educational practice. He takes up one of its five dimensions, Semantics, specifically the concepts of semantic gravity and semantic density, and demonstrates their relevance and usefulness for curriculum – including ALL – practice. Semantic gravity and semantic density are analytic categories which refer to the degree to which meaning relates to its context, and the degree of condensation of meaning, respectively. These can be mapped in terms of gradation and change over time, creating

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semantic waves which can then be analyzed for both research and pedagogic interventions. Also with a focus on curriculum, Robin McCormack provides us with a careful thinking through of the relevance of the philosophical work of Gadamer to academic language and learning, clarifying in the process Gadamer's hermeneutics in Truth and Method and its key terms: common understanding, horizons of understanding, prejudices, openness to new experiences. Like some of Maton and colleagues' work on knowledge blindness and Price's student case study, the engaging with "what is at stake" is seen as a fusion of horizons – the author's and the student's – with our task as helping the students to join that "hermeneutic conversation" (p. 5).

The concept of the inherently dialogic individual draws us back to Bakhtin and Bourdieu. Reva Ramiah draws, not on philosophy or the social sciences, but on the physical sciences in her exploration of what Complexity Theory can offer ALL practice. She points to the tension, already a theme of this issue, between pre-determined objectives in a curriculum and the desideratum of 'co-constructed knowledge"' (teacher-student, student-student). According to Complexity Theory, the reality of higher education systems can be seen to mitigate against both of these. Recalling McCormack, Ramiah urges us to create "emergence" in our classrooms, based on understandings of knowledge as partial and always in flux, and our students as ready to participate in collective knowing, based on each other's prior knowledge and on newer understandings.

3. ALL and student diversity (Nicholas, Priest, Wilson and Devereux)

In thinking about our work with diverse student groups, Anne-Marie Priest speaks to us of an absence – the feminine – as interpreted by Luce Irigray. In Priest's view, we see ourselves as needing to work with, at times, fractured student texts; but lapses of sense and meaning are particularly valued by Irigray who (heaven forfend!) in her own writings, "does not seem to have heard of topic sentences" (p. 1). Irigray, according to Priest, is engaged in subverting the masculinist discourses that dominate Western culture, which value the abstract over the concrete, objectivity over relationality, and direct their attention to demolishing other arguments. Priest connects this to the students she sees who "do not know how to speak their truth in any way which can be heard by the academy" (p. 4), leaving us with the question of how we accommodate this in our practice.

Student learning in its diversity is also taken up by Kate Wilson and Linda Devereux, illustrating how scaffolding and its gradual withdrawal may operate, using the metaphor of a building under construction to represent the ultimate goal of independent learning. Invoking several theorists who build on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, they – like other of our contributors – argue for the notion of agency in learning, with set tasks viewed by academics and students as opportunities for engagement. Using examples from Koorie and ESL learners inter alia, they describe the optimal "high challenge, high support" approach which deploys both "designed-in" and "contingent" or opportunistic scaffolding, including productive feedback. Wilson and Devereux see opportunities for task design, integrating reading activities into courses and collaboration with discipline lecturers to scaffold student writing.

Lucy Nicholas, in her paper "Academically literate/queerly literate", is similarly concerned to "trouble the exclusionary nature of dominant conventions" in the valued discourse of the academy (p. 1), drawing on Judith Butler, among others. Contra essentialism in identity politics, she argues that identity should be taken as a verb rather than a noun, with "queer" as a mode of critical perception, allowing for the celebration of widening participation for "non-traditional" students in higher education. Putting her principles into practice, Nicholas developed a course to prepare such students for university by using the very topics of inequality and the interrogation of knowledge as the subject-matter of the curriculum. Her discussion then turns to a preoccupation of Fenton-Smith's and others, exploring how it might be possible to reconcile preparing students to succeed and equipping them to "de-centre the authority of dominant modes" (p. 3).

4. ALL and explicit teaching of academic language (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, Gunawardena, Purser)

The last two papers address ALL and explicit teaching of academic language. Following Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and his notion of genre, Meeta Chatterjee-Padmanabhan explores what she sees as descendants of this work: approaches to plagiarism and citation practices in student writing, Appraisal theory, and genre pedagogies focusing on students' writing of academic texts. Using Fairclough, Pennycook and others, she contends that to see a text as heterogloss enables us to explain intertextuality and context to students. She outlines the contribution that may be made by Appraisal theory in the development of critical evaluation, and finally considers the contribution of the so-called three traditions of genre theory and pedagogy, in all of which she traces Bakhtinian influence. Maya Gunawardena focuses directly on the teaching of grammar for thesis writing, arguing for Sfard's "two metaphors of learning" (p. 1) as a potential framework. She sets out to canvas the practical, policy and pedagogical issues which arise with the writing of complex research texts by students for whom English is a second or other language. Following Sfard's acquisition and participation metaphors of learning, Gunawardena proceeds to explore the potential relevance of flow theory for developing a state of extreme consciousness in order to enable optimal language learning, particularly for grammar. She concludes by arguing for both explicit and implicit techniques for grammar learning, with the proviso that tasks must be relevant, challenging and engaging for "flow" to be attained.

The collection draws to a close with images as well as words – provoking, we hope, further thought, debate and critique. While Purser insists "This is not a Key Thought", her neo-Lichtensteinian poster persuades us graphically that yoking language and learning together could yet be a key vision for linguistically informed disciplinary teaching.

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