

Pinned to the margins? The contextual shaping of academic language and learning practice

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The formation of the Association for Academic Language and Learning in 2005 was a significant move, not only towards a greater cohesion among Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners in Australia but also for the recognition of this group as a professional entity by both academic and broader communities. In a paper presented to the 2005 national conference O'Regan identified the development of theoretical frameworks as characteristic of any profession. She presented a number of frameworks used in the past decade to describe the work of ALL practitioners. However, the origins and evolution of all professions are also shaped significantly by their contexts. This paper foregrounds the contexts within which academic language and learning practice was formed and the ways in which these contexts continue to shape both the practice and theoretical frameworks. The contexts examined include those of higher education and academic literacies; specific institutions; specific student cohorts and student expectations. This discussion about the contextual shaping of ALL practice is needed to focus and expand our communication with each other and with the academic and broader communities and is essential to the survival and direction of ALL as a profession.

Key Words: academic language and learning; theoretical frameworks; contexts.

1. Introduction

Concomitant with, perhaps even anticipating, the formation of the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) in 2005, has been the increase in attention given at Language and Academic Skills (LAS) conferences to the theoretical frameworks of ALL practice. At the 2005 LAS conference, O'Regan reviewed a range of papers on theoretical frameworks (Lundell & Collins, 1999; Pittman, 1999; Ryan, Powell, Cartwright, Hacker, McArdle, & Reidy, 1999; Taylor, 1999; Wambach, Brothen, & Dikel, 2000; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Gluck, Draisma, Fulcher & Worthy, 2004; Chung, 2005) before contributing an additional model around the notion of defamiliarisation. These papers and the formation of the professional association raise at least two significant issues: the role of context in framing and shaping ALL practice and the implications of referring to ALL as a profession.

O'Regan's 2005 paper is one of the first attempts to draw together these theoretical frameworks. We are not suggesting that ALL practitioners should prefer one framework over another. A close analysis and comparison of them is yet to be undertaken. It may be that it is possible to use a combination of these frameworks to inform ALL work. However it is our concern that these discussions of theoretical frameworks decontextualise the framing and shaping of ALL practice. This decontextualisation creates the illusion that ALL practice was framed and has

developed unconstrained and that ALL practitioners are free to choose any theoretical framework.

The argument of this paper is that context, at a number of levels has been, and continues to be a major influence on both the initial framing and the ongoing shaping of ALL practice. These contextual elements have represented and continue to represent both opportunities for and constraints upon the development of the practice. The strengthening of the communication among ALL practitioners through the formation of a professional association offers a timely opportunity to challenge those contextual factors which are constraining. Without such a concerted effort there is the real possibility that the constraints will remain a major shaping force for ALL practice and we will remain pinned to the margins of universities.

2. Analysing the context

To identify and analyse the constraining contextual factors on ALL practice we have drawn on our combined 33 years of experience in academic language and learning practice as well as linking with publications of other ALL practitioners. Our own experience is used as a case study as this method is ideally suited to the investigation of real, ever-changing contexts and situations (Burns, 2000). Case study as a method has been criticised on the basis that the analysis of one situation does not provide a sufficient foundation to generalise the findings. In reply, a number of authors have argued that case studies can contribute to a process of “naturalistic generalisation” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Stake, 2000). “Naturalistic generalisations” are arrived at when readers recognize the similarities between the objects, issues and happenings in the case study and their own circumstances (Stake, 2000, p. 22). Hence the following analyses of the contextual factors which have shaped our experiences since 1989 are likely to contain sufficient similarities to our readers’ contexts to enable “naturalistic generalisations” to occur. Although the local responses and reactions may have varied, the same broad contextual factors have shaped ALL practice across Australia.

The main features of our ALL context are as follows. We have always worked as ALL practitioners in a student services unit alongside counselling, careers, international and disability advisers as well as academic development staff. Our classification has always been academic. We have worked on the different metropolitan campuses of a five campus University. This means we have worked with students and staff in a range of disciplines including business, art, architecture and design, education, engineering, health sciences (including pharmacy, nursing, and physiotherapy), communication studies and journalism, social work and psychology. We have worked with different cohorts of students including undergraduate, postgraduate coursework and research students; international and transnational students; local and distance students. We both have qualifications in the humanities and education, and both completed postgraduate studies in applied linguistics while working as ALL practitioners. Both have conducted research and published on aspects of ALL theory and practice.

3. The contextual framing of ALL practice

In Australia the contextual factors which have shaped ALL practice include those which initially framed the practice in the 1980s and those which have shaped it since. In 1982, as part of the Evaluative Studies Program for the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, Roe, Foster, Moses, Sanker and Storey prepared a report on the state of student services in tertiary education in Australia. This report had a pervasive influence on the establishment of early ALL practice. In the 1980s, student services in tertiary education institutions were:

- Personal/emotional counselling
- Vocational/careers counselling
- Course planning advice
- Educational training
- Accommodation advice/service
- Emergency loans/financial assistance

Contraception/pregnancy counselling
 Employment interviews/placement
 Personal development
 Health services
 Student employment services
 Special programs for the handicapped
 Legal aid/counselling
 Chaplaincy pastoral/spiritual care
 Fitness/recreation programmes
 (Roe et al., 1982, p. 19)

There is no clear organisation to this list, nor are the individual items, such as “educational training” defined. Despite the mention of “educational training” the overall emphasis is on “counselling services”, that is, services which are related to students’ personal rather than educational “needs”. In another chapter on the individual services, only counselling, health, careers, accommodation, financial aid, childcare, legal aid and chaplaincy are considered. Significant by its absence is any mention of “study skills”. Indeed it is not until a later chapter titled “Some special considerations” that “study skills” services are mentioned (Roe et al., 1982, p.97).

However the Roe report was instrumental in separating study skills work from counselling and in employing staff with educational qualifications to take the role of study skills “specialists”. In the report there are also major assumptions made about the purposes and conduct of academic language and learning advising which were not questioned and which have continued to substantially constrain the practice since.

These assumptions concern the placement of ALL within tertiary institutions; the identity of ALL practitioners; the organisation of ALL practice; the content of ALL practice; and the positioning of students in ALL practice. Although the authors of the report acknowledge the existence in some institutions of study skills programs which are not part of general student services units, they assume that these programs will develop from within these units. This assumption confirmed the separation of this aspect of education from “mainstream” university studies and reinforced it as ancillary, an optional supplement (Percy & Stirling, 2003, p. 55). So although both authors joined a student services unit in the late 1980s/early 1990s as educational specialists providing study skills programs, the units on each campus were separated from the faculties both organisationally and geographically.

The spill over of counselling practice to the practice of these early study skills specialists has often been commented on (see for example, Webb & Bonanno, 1994; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002). It is interesting that the authors of the Roe report did question whether counsellors were the most appropriate group to conduct the study skills program:

The major activity in student services in the study skills area has been by counsellors ... It appears, however that the major thrust of study skills programmes is in the specific, practical skills ... essay/assignment writing, organisation of time, reading and note-taking, for example. Such skills are not obviously related to a counsellor's expertise ... they are educational skills (Roe et al., 1982, pp. 107-8).

However it is clear that they still assumed that the new specialists in study skills would come from the ranks of student services staff, possibly counsellors with additional training. It is clear also from the study skills topics listed in the report (with essay writing and seminar presentation alongside motivation and relaxation/stress management) that the content of “study skills programs” was regarded as an extension or expansion of counselling services (Roe et al., 1982, p. 107).

So with these assumptions unchallenged it is not surprising that a fundamentally clinical, remedial model for ALL practice was established or confirmed. In most places students were booked in for hour long appointments additional to their standard class timetable and away from their usual class location. Our early practice involved 5-6 individual consultations each day with

the occasional lunchtime session on essay writing, referencing, report writing or examination preparation. Although the pattern of work has changed for us since, there are still signs that this clinical model is dominant. For example, in our unit's reporting systems there are currently elaborate systems for reporting on one-to-one contacts with students, but far less detailed reporting on group sessions and virtually none on negotiations and collaborations with academic staff. This is because one-to-one is the most common form of practice adopted by the other service providers in the unit.

Another element in this clinical model is the way in which it positions the students. The students are presented as having "problems" and in "need" of "services":

Many student services staff would claim that present pressures on students have increased both the demand and the need for all services; that more students than ever before are in difficulties and in need of help and advice (Roe et al., p. 142).

The authors of the Roe report did not include considerations of developing academic teaching as a means of improving student learning. In fact, in their comments about linking with academic staff, they appear to assume that academics are experts in teaching in higher education which 20 years later is still not necessarily the case. This contributed further to tying the early study skills programs to a discourse of student deficiency and remediation (Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005). Even in the late 1990s a survey of academics in Australia showed that they "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" (Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005, p. 89).

Despite this construction of students as "problems", the authors of the Roe report did raise the question of whether study skills programs should be remedial or provided for all students:

Sometimes, the study skills activity is an extension of normal response-to-demand service, and caters for students who present with learning difficulties; that is, its orientation is remedial (Roe et al., p. 103).

However they did not recommend that this separation should be realised organisationally:

A study skills programme directed at the improvement of learning throughout the institution is different from the diagnosis and correction of individual learning weaknesses. Nevertheless to allocate the remedial role to student services, the developmental/educational role to someone else, is to deny the aspirations of some student services people (Roe et al., p. 109).

Ironically, Roe et al. (1982) also pointed to the importance of developing programs around "educational skills" in collaboration with academic teaching staff:

People working in the study skills area, as "specialists", have become increasingly convinced that success is dependent upon the interest and active involvement of academic staff. Development and improvement of learning skills are essentially jobs for teachers, though availability of expert help to teachers and learners is obviously important. The crucial bottleneck is that few academic staff are prepared to put the time and effort into study skills programmes, and, since the pressures on them are increasing and since the rewards in the area are meagre or non-existent (at least in universities), their numbers may well become even fewer. (p. 109)

Again, however, they did not follow this idea to its logical conclusion in operational terms. The links between counselling and the work of ALL practitioners on a number of levels remained unchallenged for many years. Even recently, in a call for staff to fill casual ALL positions, an Australian University gave examples of degrees suitable for the work. Significantly, degrees in Behavioural Studies, Social Work and Psychology were listed before Education (Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) Forum 2007).

4. The contextual shaping of ALL practice

Most aspects of this initial framing of ALL practice have remained substantially unchallenged by the wider university communities. However, there have been over the past 18 years a number of developments which have significantly shaped the direction that our work has taken. The most significant of these developments are changes to higher education funding, the increase in the number of international full fee-paying students at our University, changes in technology and operational changes within the University itself. In retrospect these contextual developments perpetuated the constraining elements in the initial framing of ALL practice. However, there were occasions where they opened new possibilities and opportunities.

The decrease in funding of universities in Australia (Marginson, 2000) in the mid-1990s led at our University, as at many others, to a marked reduction in staff including ALL practitioners. The number of ALL staff was reduced from 11 in 1997 to 7 in 1999 and is at present 8.4, with a likely drop to 7.4 in 2008. The decrease in funding was also a major incentive for the University to market its programs overseas and recruit international fee-paying students. The number of international fee-paying students increased from just below 500 in 1991 to approximately 4,700 in 2006, a nine fold increase. From 1991 to 2005 the total number of students studying at the University increased from 20,267 enrolled students to 32,456 enrolled students (Learning Connection, 2006).

This was a critical period in the University's development. For us it meant not only an overall increase in the numbers of students seeking individual contact with diminishing staff numbers, but also an increase in the complexity and multiplicity of the situations students sought to discuss with us.

One of the major tensions at this time was related to the role of the ALL practitioner in working with a student's writing and was part of the inheritance of the 1980s remedial construction of ALL practice. As ALL practitioners we took a developmental approach to student writing, with the goal of the student's independence as a writer and learner. Academic staff had expectations of high levels of English proficiency and academic literacies in student assignments and saw the role of ALL practitioners as "fixing" students' writing. Students responded in turn by approaching us for what they believed was a "quick fix" with the request to "fix my grammar". In the same period the increasing publications about English for Academic Purposes (EAP) by researchers such as John Swales, Ken Hyland, Ann Johns and John Flowerdew were beginning to reveal the complexities of EAP and the first questionings of ALL practice as gatekeeping in the academic world (Kramer-Dahl, 1995; Benesch, 2001) were indicating a more complex reality. The "quick grammar fix" approach is based on a simplified view of language acquisition and involves a lack of awareness of the differences between formal and informal English, spoken and written English and of the complexities of academic English.

One of our responses to these challenges was to focus more on the production of resources and group workshops in order to reach more students and to produce subject, even assignment specific resources rather than generic ones. At that time there was a significant increase in the number of resources and face-to-face workshops which focused on specific assignments, particularly at first year level. Generic workshops except on topics such as referencing and avoiding plagiarism and exam preparation became rare. This strategic approach (Kokkinn & Stevenson, 2004) dovetailed with the University's response on how to manage the increased student numbers and decreased staff. This was an emphasis on online delivery in its programs, resources and administration and in the late 1990s the University set a goal of having a component of all its subjects being taught online by 2005.

The technological changes that accompanied this focus represent further contextual developments which had a significant role in shaping our work as ALL practitioners. This impact was not so much from the implications of having a computer on our own desks but the pressure to produce resources in online format and to adopt instructional methods appropriate to online teaching and learning, with little training or time to learn the required software. As mentioned previously, the constraints at times presented opportunities and in this situation the online

student resources developed were recognised with an Australian Award for University Teaching in 2002.

The period from the mid-1990s to the present has also contained a number of operational shifts in the student services unit at the University. At one stage the ALL practitioners and the academic development staff were combined to form a centre for teaching and learning, although still located geographically in a student services unit. The collaborations which followed and extended beyond the life of the Centre as an operational unit were based on close collaboration between academic teaching staff, academic developers, and ALL practitioners to embed the development of academic literacies in the curriculum of subjects. A number of these collaborations had tangible effects in terms of student retention rates and pass rates (see for example Feast, Barrett, Head, & Kokkinn, 1998) along with the more intangible effects from sharing of perspectives and expertise between the content specialist, teaching specialist and language and learning specialist. This shift towards embedding also occurred at a number of other Australian universities, and is recorded in publications by ALL practitioners such as Hampton, Skillen, Russell, Robinson, Rodgeron, and Rivett (2003). Although the embedding approach survives in pockets of our work, it did not survive as the major thrust for a number of reasons. It was time consuming for all involved and was only successful when the academic staff had the motivation and time to commit to the approach (Catterall, 2003). The increased casualisation of academic teaching staff, itself a response by many universities to decreased government funding, led to frequent changes in teaching staff and the embedding of academic literacies often did not survive staff changes.

However, perhaps the most powerful factor was the persistent belief by many university staff, and indeed many students, that the only role of ALL practitioners was to “fix” wayward grammar. While academic staff and administrators believe that students automatically become familiar with the thinking processes of their disciplines, with the genres and concepts used in them and the intricacies of the academic English used to realise them, there are major risks for the future of ALL practice. For, if the situation is seen as one which can be remedied by individual editing of students’ writing occasionally supplemented with sessions on formal grammar, there remains the real possibility that ALL practitioners will be replaced by English language teachers who would also be less expensive to employ. The recent restructuring of ALL practice at a major Victorian university is an example of this.

So, following a restructure at the end of the 1990s we again became members of a multi-professional service unit which still included the academic development staff. It was decided that the increase in student demand was to be met by increased group work, increased resource development and the adoption of shorter contacts with students. A system of “drop-in” sessions and short appointments was implemented. A “drop-in session” was the first point of contact for students whereby an hour each day was set aside when students were seen without appointment, for 10 minutes, on a first come first served basis. The assumption was that if the students’ “problems” were more complex than could be managed in 10 minutes they would be referred to short appointments. Aside from the difficulties in responding to complex questions in ten minutes and a limited number of short appointment times, this system reinforced the remedial, clinical assumptions about ALL practice and made the development and practice of alternatives more difficult. In effect the clinical model added an emergency service component.

The 1990s saw additional approaches being added to the repertoire of ALL practice, but these were superimposed on the initial fundamentally clinical, remedial model established in the 1980s. The developments around embedding were recognised by a number of ALL practitioners as significant. In fact, they may have been the first time that the potential of ALL practice became clear and the first time that the practice was conceptualised as anything other than clinical and remedial.

5. ALL practice as profession

Initially we proposed that the recent discussions of theoretical frameworks for ALL practice raised two issues for us, of which the contextual factors which have framed and shaped the practice was the first. The second issue is the implications of referring to ALL as a profession. ALL practice has been variously described as a “discipline” (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995), “a community of practice” (Webb, 2002; Milnes, 2005) and now a profession. Whether these definitions are synonymous, contiguous, or distinct is a discussion that needs to occur. For the purposes of this paper we want to focus on the implications of referring to ALL as a profession.

Wilensky (1964) and Nunan (2001) have suggested a range of criteria for a job to be considered as professional. Both agree that for a group’s work to be seen as professional it must be “built on systematic knowledge” (Wilensky, 1964, p. 138) or “have an agreed theoretical and empirical base” (Nunan 2001, p. 4), and be the result of lengthy and prescribed training (Wilensky, 1964, p. 143) or “advanced education and training” (Nunan 2001, p. 4).

At the 2001 Language and Academic Skills conference, Webb (2002) listed a number of generalised assertions that she argued helped to explain the marginalised position of ALL practice. These were:

- No commonly accepted name for the professional role
- Roles poorly understood by others (as “the remedial tutor”, “the English lecturer”, “that person who helps students”, etc)
- No agreed standards for staff awards and levels
- Rarely a clearly identified career structure
- Few groups with anything approaching effective critical mass
- A disproportionately high level of staff casualisation
- Few jobs advertised at more senior levels
- Generic institutional promotion criteria insensitive to LAS work
- Few staff successful in being promoted to higher level positions
- No professional association
- No professional journal or newsletter (although the discussion list Unilearn has been an unparalleled success)
- In some contexts, explicit exclusions from rights and entitlements conferred automatically upon others undertaking academic work.

Although some of these conditions have altered (notably those altered by the establishment of the professional association) most of the remaining items in this list can be categorised under the nature of the role of ALL practitioners and their work and the job status and career opportunities for those who hold these positions. The overall picture presented is one of an area of work that is not understood by either those who use the service or those who manage it; that lacks autonomy and is segregated from the mainstream of teaching and learning. The 1995-1999 *Position Statement: academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers in Australian Universities* (Berghout-Vanderwal, Hicks, McGowan, & Carmichael, 1999) which addressed the role, values, principles, core objectives, qualities, qualifications, experience and research of ALL, also skirts around the idea of a body of knowledge and substitutes goal statements (such as student independence in learning) and a list of generic skills as the content of the work.

Wilensky's criterion (1964) of a profession as being built on systematic knowledge and Nunan's (2001) criterion of a profession having “an agreed theoretical and empirical base” are linked to Webb's concern (2001) to establish a clear body of knowledge for ALL practice. Some progress has already been made by ALL practitioners (for example, Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004; Percy & Stirling, 2003) to identify a body of knowledge for academic language and learning practice. Chanock, East, and Maxwell (2004) refer broadly to education and linguistics. Percy and Stirling (2003, p. 58) locate pedagogy at the core of their model and this core comprises aspects of “language”, “literacy” and “learning”. This lack of an identification of systemic

knowledge with agreed theoretical and empirical base is a fundamental and ongoing cause of the marginalisation of ALL practice and without it we are limited in our ability to challenge the prevailing clinical, remedial model.

Without an agreed systemic knowledge, it is not possible to specify what training is appropriate for ALL practitioners which is another of Wilensky's and Nunan's criteria.

Wilensky (1964) points out:

Medicine, since its "reform" in the United States some sixty years ago, has emphasized its roots in the physical and natural sciences along with high, rigorously defined and enforced standards of training designed to impart that body of knowledge. (p. 138)

The 1995-1999 *Position Statement: academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers in Australian Universities* (Berghout-Vanderwal et al., 1999), rather like the recruitment advertisement mentioned earlier, identifies:

tertiary qualifications in a *relevant* discipline such as education, language tuition, linguistics, psychology, numeracy, information literacy, *or any other discipline*, provided that the other criteria are met [emphasis added]. (p. 3)

It is not inconceivable that the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL), after appropriate deliberation across the membership, could develop its own training and certification of ALL practitioners as other professional groups have done. The alternative is likely to be "that we will continue to be vulnerable to directives from above that will often run counter to our own professional agendas" (Percy & Stirling, 2003). However they do add:

This has not prevented our professional community from pushing out and, in many cases, reconfiguring the boundaries that define our field in the past and nor should it in the future. (p. 185)

Wilensky's comments (1964) about medicine emphasising its roots in the physical and natural sciences point to an additional challenge for AALL in such an undertaking. Spanning the social sciences of linguistics and education means that the ALL knowledge base is far less empirical and less likely to be regarded as specialised. For example, it is often assumed that any native speaker of a language can teach that language without significant training. Nunan (2001) in writing of TESOL expresses a similar notion:

A challenge for education in general, and TESOL in particular, is to define, refine, and articulate its disciplinary basis. Education is a hybrid, drawing on a range of disciplines such as psychology and sociology. In addition to these, TESOL is influenced by linguistics (both theoretical and applied), psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive science and numerous other disciplines. Partly because of this, we don't have a shared set of rules of the game. In fact we don't even come close. (p. 4)

This is one explanation for the persistence of the attitude that "anyone with a modicum of intelligence" can do the job of an ALL practitioner (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002).

Another difficulty in determining the ALL knowledge base is the separation of "content" in academic studies from the discourses, cognitive processes and conventions used to realise that content. Or as Percy and Stirling (2003) comment, there might be no need for ALL practitioners if we could:

expect the average academic ... to have a conscious understanding and be able to articulate for teaching and learning purposes the discourse and conventions of their discipline, or to teach students how to learn and /or communicate effectively. (p. 55)

Christie (1985) succinctly put it as:

Issues, content or ideas are realized in language; they do not have an identity apart from language patterns, any more than the skills of concern have an

identity apart from the behavioural patterns in which they find expression.
(p. 25)

6. Conclusion

The origins and evolution of the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) have significantly shaped the work of its practitioners and the services still are situated largely in the early model of remediation. The changing national context of higher education with the reduction in funding and the resultant increase in international fee-paying students led to some changes in practice that were creative and underpinned by research findings into English for academic purposes and academic literacies in general. Institutional changes involving new technologies affected the delivery of subjects and mode of communication generally among the university community. These too had an impact on the provision of ALL at our university and other universities around Australia and pushed the boundaries of ALL work such that ALL support became available to all students, no matter their mode or location of study. However, the overall picture is of a group of practitioners whose work is understood at best obscurely by those who employ them and those who use their services. They are often in the front line when cracks appear in their institution's most recent student recruitment strategy and are often downsized and downgraded when belts are tightened. Yet despite inheriting a practice which was formed within the inhibiting boundaries of a deficit view of student learning, they have forged a practice which shows their ability to contribute to a learning environment in which students are engaged and enabled to participate in and contribute to their disciplines.

With its own association the ALL community is well placed to push towards recognition as a profession. At present it is more of a proto-profession. It lacks an agreed body of knowledge and clear training pathway. It is possible that under the umbrella of the newly formed Association, members can emerge from the silos of individual institutions and with deliberation articulate and promote a unique body of knowledge and provide accredited training. Through this shared understanding they will be in a position to communicate more effectively with their institutions and change how others perceive their work. Without these directions, ALL practice will remain pinned to the margins of individual institutions.

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