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Truth games/truth claims : resisting institutional notions of LAS as remediation

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Abstract

Michel Foucault argues that the technologies of identity – whether professional or institutional – rely on what he calls ‘games of truth’. He argues that these truth games comprise ‘an ensemble of rules for the production of truth . . . which can be considered in function of its principles and its rules of procedure as valid or not’ (cited in Gauthier, 1988, p. 15). Moreover, we can only become subjects by ‘subjecting’ ourselves to selected truth games because there is neither selfhood nor truth outside of these games. For Foucault, the subject’s power in this process is to decide on what terms to play the game. By examining the ‘truths’ of LAS practices and engaging in an examination of common assumptions about our practice, particularly the institutional view of LAS centres as sites of remediation and of LAS practitioners as remedial teachers, this paper will explore ways of opening up new spaces for thinking about and theorising the work that we do. The authors will argue that this needs to be an ongoing process if we are to take responsibility for (re)inventing ourselves. We see this paper contributing to current discussion about LAS professional identity.

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Truth games / Truth claims: Resisting institutional notions of LAS as remediation

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Abstract: *Michel Foucault argues that the technologies of identity – whether professional or institutional – rely on what he calls ‘games of truth’. He argues that these truth games comprise ‘an ensemble of rules for the production of truth . . . which can be considered in function of its principles and its rules of procedure as valid or not’ (cited in Gauthier, 1988, p. 15). Moreover, we can only become subjects by ‘subjecting’ ourselves to selected truth games because there is neither selfhood nor truth outside of these games. For Foucault, the subject’s power in this process is to decide on what terms to play the game. By examining the ‘truths’ of LAS practices and engaging in an examination of common assumptions about our practice, particularly the institutional view of LAS centres as sites of remediation and of LAS practitioners as remedial teachers, this paper will explore ways of opening up new spaces for thinking about and theorising the work that we do. The authors will argue that this needs to be an ongoing process if we are to take responsibility for (re)inventing ourselves. We see this paper contributing to current discussion about LAS professional identity.*

Key words: *professional identity, truth, subject, remediation.*

Introduction

You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don’t, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said. (Trinh, 1989, p. 80 in St.Pierre, 2004, p. 328)

In keeping with the themes of the 2005 Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) conference, this paper explores ways of theorising LAS practice in the 21st century university with the aim of considering how LAS identity is currently being formed and understood. The rationale for taking the approach that the authors have chosen here is to suggest possible ways of further empowering the LAS community as decisions are being made about professional identity and practice. Professional identity for learning advisers has been a key site of struggle since the community's emergence in its many and varied guises in Australian higher education. This struggle is often at its fiercest around the intellectual location of the work that learning advisers do and the status, knowledge and practice of the learning adviser as a teaching subject (see, e.g., Bock & Gassin, 1982; Taylor, Ballard, Beasley, Bock, Clanchy, & Nightingale, 1988; Samuelowicz, 1990; Webb & Bonanno, 1994; Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone, & Devlin, 1995; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Melles, 2002; Webb, 2002; Chanock, 2003; Zeegers, 2004). As many universities gear up to weather the consequences of recent government policies affecting higher education institutions and, in some cases, redress significant budgeting deficits with staff cuts (e.g., Newcastle University's 2005 decision to slash 20% of its general and academic positions), for some of us the struggle to locate ourselves securely within an increasingly unstable work environment can only become more fraught with uncertainty. Given these conditions, the question becomes one of how to best care for ourselves as a profession.

Michel Foucault argues that 'care of self' is central to understanding what one is and what one is capable of. He claims that 'Taking care of oneself requires knowing (connaître) oneself' (Foucault, 1997, p. 285). In expanding on this theme, he adds:

if you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city, . . . if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you . . . if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others. (Foucault, 1997, p. 288)

Rather than being merely an intellectual diversion, for Foucault this care of self is both political and oriented towards governance. Moreover, the 'care of self', he argues, involves developing a deep understanding of what he calls 'games of truth'. He is at pains to specify how the term 'game' is intended in this context: 'when I say "game," I mean a set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of an amusement; it is a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid' (Foucault, 1997, p. 297). Indeed, we can only produce the truths that allow us to make claims about our knowledge and identity by complying with the rules and procedures of designated truth games (Peters, 2004).

Nevertheless, one can also slip the bonds of domination of a truth game by demonstrating its negative consequences. By 'playing the same game differently' (Foucault, 1997, p. 295), it is possible to exercise agency in such a way that other, more reasonable options become available. Foucault acknowledges (1984, 1997) that although his earlier thinking examined regimes of truth as they involve coercive practices (such as those processes by which certain religious, medical and pedagogical regimes construct a static or fixed subjectivity), his later thinking focused on how games of truth shape practices of self-

formation. In contrast to the earlier 'regimes of truth', this latter view suggests a dynamic rather than static subjectivity and accounts for how we as agents constitute and reconstitute identity and subjectivity according to the games of truth that we choose to participate in.

The key argument explored in this paper is that the critical approach suggested by Foucault's notion of truth games presents a useful strategy for thinking through how learning advisers are recruited (and positioned) by institutional policy and how the profession strives to position itself. To test the idea, this paper examines one of the truth games relevant to LAS practice. The central questions at stake in this process are: what kinds of subjectivity does this truth game demand and what are the implications for self governance; how are LAS professionals invited to become 'subjects' by this truth game; does this truth game facilitate the practices that we want to claim as integral to LAS identity?

Lest the thought occurs as you work through the paper that you have inadvertently stumbled upon a LAS version of the film *Groundhog Day*, the authors wish to emphasise that by no means can it be said that the paper is covering new ground. The terrain being examined will be very familiar to most in the LAS community: perhaps a professional instance of a return of the repressed. What the authors are attempting to do is reconceptualise the terms of engagement.

An institutional truth game: Learning advising as remedy

One aspect of LAS identity, in particular, that continues to haunt the learning adviser is the persistent view of our work as remedial. Just when it seems that this perception has been shaken, it finds its way back into the LAS remit with a vengeance. A public example of this perception appeared in the print media earlier this year. In February, 2005 a short article published in The Sydney Morning Herald snagged our attention. Although the article was not really saying anything so very different from other media reports published in recent times, it did crystallize an element in current debates about higher education that has exercised those working in academic skills units for some time. Beneath the headline banner 'Fears low entry scores could leave students struggling', journalist Andrew Norton observes of current university student populations: 'Many people with low scores may have trouble passing their courses without strong support . . . you might not be doing them any favours' (Norton, 2005, February 10). Responding to this concern in the same article, a senior Australian academic reassured the worried journalist of his university's capacity to cope: 'We have an academic skills unit which assists students in numeracy skills, writing skills - because they usually need help with assignments, how to structure their thoughts and how to put them on paper and so forth' (Hill, as cited in Norton, 2005, February 10). The view expressed in response to Norton's concerns - and it is a view still widely held by many in the upper echelons of university academic administration - has significant repercussions for LAS practice, student subjectivity, and for the university.

The article invokes (yet again) an old saw in debates about learning standards in the Australian university system: that is, the simplistic yet pervasive trinity of 'deficit - remediation - academic skills units'. This is not to say that we do not encounter students struggling to make sense and learn in the unfamiliar environment of the university. Rather, the argument that extends from this paper is for the need to pursue a more productive view of these students beyond the current model. What is being suggested here is that the

trope of the 'deficit student' is deployed strategically in narratives of higher education crisis: on the one hand as an 'outing' device by the media and other stake holders, and, on the other, as an obfuscatory device that deflects attention and energies away from university recruiting policies and practices. The discourse (and language) of student deficit and remediation is not only disabling for the student, but anathema for more innovative forms of curricula development and learning support. Indeed, this model is already redundant for most, if not all, learning advisers.

It is reasonable to argue that the conceptual location of academic skills units as merely a therapeutic response to an ailing higher education system is regressive for the university. This mindset, however, is so stubbornly persistent – particularly from the top down – that it is as though no-one can hear the long LAS sigh from academic skills units. Like Lady Macbeth, those who would question the efficacy of the model appear doomed to wander the halls of academe muttering 'Out, damned spot! Out, I say!' (*Macbeth*, V.i.37, in Muir, 1962) in an effort to rid themselves of the stain of remediation. This version of the learning advising truth game recuperates those processes that construct the kind of fixed or static subjectivity that Foucault identifies in his earlier work as deriving from certain pedagogical regimes. It is a subjectivity that precludes self governance for the LAS profession.

In the following section we attempt to identify and better understand the principles and rules of procedures that permit the institutional truth game about the remedial role of the learning adviser to appear as valid, at least to some within the institutional hierarchy.

Conditions of emergence: The remedial tag

Learning advising as a profession is regularly invited to understand its emergence in relation to the shift from an 'elite' to a 'mass' higher education system; a shift that entailed both expansion and diversification of the student population (McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone, & Devlin, 1995; McInnis & James, 1995). This expansion and diversification of the student population was to eventually give rise to the figure of the 'non-traditional' student: a learner within the higher education system who – at least notionally – required specialist intervention to bring him or her into line with traditional university standards. In one sense, it seems quite straightforward to accept this view without question. Certainly it appears to find verification in research (e.g., Williams, Long, Carpenter, & Hayden, 1993). However, perhaps this idea is worth some further reflection. When did this 'shift' to mass education actually occur? And what, exactly, is a 'non-traditional' student? What are these truth games that we have been playing into, particularly in relation to student subjectivities and the identity of the learning adviser; and at what cost?

Narratives around the massification of higher education tend to focus on the marked changes to universities in the 1980s. However, rather than coalescing around the reforms of the 1980s, the expansion and diversification of higher education in Australia were, in fact, components in a gradual process of uneven development over the last half of the 20th century (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2003). A notable diversification of the student population began as early as the post WWII era (Sinclair-Jones, 2000, p. 147) with an influx of adult students in the form of returned service men and women (Eaton, 1980). The Colombo Plan in the 1950s brought international students in significant numbers into our universities (Auletta, 2000). The decline in school leavers attending university in the 1970s

was countered by an increase in mature age students (Hore & West, 1980). The 1980s, however, did mark a period of 'accelerated transformation' (Marginson, 2000); an intense period of change and a confluence of conditions that fuelled cries of 'falling standards' and located a perceived quality deficit with the 'non-traditional' student. Interestingly, there is little acknowledgement that even in 1957, only 58% of enrolling students managed to complete their degree (Murray, Clunies Ross, Morris, Reid, & Richards, 1957).

So how is it that the 'non-traditional' student became such a disturbing element in this rhetorical environment, and to the point of being targeted as a symptom of decline that required remedy?

The 1980s marked a period of increasing problematisation of the Australian higher education sector in general. Initially, this critical evaluation of the sector was not necessarily because non-traditional students were deemed deficient as such, although discursively that is precisely how they were to be eventually framed, but because participation and retention rates had become an area of intensifying concern for the Hawke government and the higher education system alike (e.g., Power, Robertson, & Beswick, 1985; Dawkins, 1988). As the government's Higher Education (Dawkins, 1988) report initiatives developed, however, focus was to finally settle on the 'non-traditional' student and in particular ways. The reasons for this can be traced back to the 1960s when the Martin Committee (Martin, 1964), in the name of expansion and cost efficiency, invoked a binary system that created what was arguably an unnatural and imaginary (Davies, 1989) division between theoretical and applied knowledge, or more simply, theory and practice. This process resulted in the creation of a two-tiered system of education. It was a policy decision that was to have a profound effect on the subjectivity of both the university and college student.

Effectively, the Martin Report constituted all college students as being academically less able than their counterparts in the university:

The objective of the education provided by a technical college is to equip men and women for the practical world of industry and Commerce . . . The university course, on the other hand, tends to emphasise the development of knowledge and the importance of research; in so doing it imparts much information which is valuable to the practical man but which is often incidental to the main objective. Both types of education are required by the community, and in increasing amounts, but it is important that students receive the kind of education best suited to their innate abilities and purposes in life. (Martin, 1964 Vol.1, p. 165, as cited in Sinclair-Jones, 2000, p. 143)

As Sinclair-Jones points out, the Committee's conclusions indicated that 'these graduates would not be responsible for affairs of the state or decisions of national importance, but needed to be expert in certain fields of specific skills' (Sinclair-Jones, 2000, p. 141). It was understood from the Martin Report that college students were more suited to 'applied' knowledge, and university students groomed for the more esteemed professions and research based activities. A further legacy of this conceptual dichotomy also has implications for the way universities continue to privilege the research academic over the teaching academic. It was, perhaps, therefore unsurprising that by the time Dawkins' unification was endorsed (Dawkins, 1988), the higher education psyche was conditioned

to the view that universities were opening up to a significant population of students who simply did not belong in that environment.

Despite the fact that the diversity of the higher education student population has continued to intensify in the Australian system, there persists an ideal(ised) notion that there is a higher education equivalent of the gold standard: a 'normal' student, against which all others are measured. Symbolic ideals notwithstanding, in reality what is the normal student? Some might argue that it is the school leaver. Nevertheless, this still leaves an unanswered question about the precise characteristics that constitute this student as the 'norm'. Given the diversity of standards within our secondary school system, it must be that in some salient way this is an unanswerable question. At the level of representation, however, the so-called normal student only begins to emerge once you peel away the layers of characteristics that define the 'non-traditional' student. Yet such is the narrowness of this norm, that once that is done, there is very little left.

At best, all we can claim about the 'normal' student is that this paragon of learning capabilities is not of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, is not mature age, is not defined by low socio-economic status (which is calculated according post code), does not hail from a rural working-class background, is not a woman, is not long term or permanently disabled, does not come from a non-English speaking background and is not an international student. By process of elimination then, our 'normal' student is white, 'abled', young, male, directly out of secondary school, and from a middle class, professionally-oriented, English speaking, urban background. In terms of current student populations, this is clearly an absurdity and it might be argued that this figure, in fact, has come to represent the 'non-traditional'. The absurdity of centralising the figure as a higher education equivalent of the gold standard is further reinforced by research that has suggested that at least two groups of so-called non-traditional students, females and older students, 'perform better than males and school leavers in most countries and institutions' (Power, Robertson, & Baker, 1987, p. x).

It is arguable whether or not the normative nature of social statistics and the discursive regimes which employ them to govern the higher education population do our students any meaningful service, regardless of where they are positioned on the spectrum of identity. The student norm sketched above does not generally reflect the reality of our current student population, yet this is still the stock figure marking the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional student subjectivity.

Unhappily, the discursive regimes of normalisation utilised in higher education can also be deployed to gloss over (and, at times, erase) the learning needs of one part of the population while they conceptually skew the needs of those populations who enter university through non-orthodox pathways (and, as we have suggested above, orthodoxy here is a constructed and rigidly narrow band of possibility). An over investment in these discursive regimes of normalisation can lead us astray. For example, in targeting mature age students for special treatment (as the university defines what that 'treatment' should be) or in using NESB statistics to develop strategic plans for faculties, we risk losing any meaningful connection with the living, learning subject of these initiatives, instead working merely at the level of hypothesis and perceived representation of their learning needs. This is not to say that the sort of information yielded by these processes is without value.

What the authors are arguing here is that too often this information becomes irreconcilably disconnected from students functioning in real time and in real learning contexts.

If we accept that the entity, 'student', in its many possible incarnations, is continually constituted and transformed through discourse (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), it is possible to consider this situation from another perspective. In reviewing the effects of mass education on the British university system, Leathwood and O'Connell note that:

the construction of a 'normal' student persists, and is reinforced by the classification of others as 'non-traditional'. . . . In the move from an elite to a mass education system, it is these students that represent 'the masses': homogenized, pathologized and marked as 'Other' compared with existing students who are perceived to be there 'as a right, representing the norm against which the others are judged and may be found wanting' (Webb, 1997: p.68). Within this discursive framing, mass equals lower standards and 'dumbing down'. (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 599)

The observations of Leathwood and O'Connell touch on a key symbolic point in this truth game that has both practical and professional ramifications for those of us working in the Australian system: that is, the pathologisation of difference in the student population. Somewhere in the processes outlined above, an untheorised rhetorical slippage from difference to deficiency to deviancy (from the norm) occurred. It is a slippage that now presents us with unresolvable tensions for teaching and learning advising and constructs an unnecessarily disabling and static, or fixed, subjectivity for the 'non-traditional' student. This disabling subjectivity may well be further compounded by the moves to rhetorically centralise yet another normative figure: the 'independent learner'. As Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) note, this figure is constructed through a repertoire of discourses that assume much about shared cultural views of learning, autonomy and pedagogical responsibility (see also Chanock, 2003). They argue that the idealised dream of the 'independent learner' erases the realities of class, gender and cultural diversity within student populations. Clearly, a diverse student population demands a radically different pedagogical response to the remediation – read normalisation – of the so-called deficient (deviant) student.

The rhetoric of 'falling standards', we argue, would appear to be symptomatic of a slow-growing institutional dis-ease with the 'non-traditional' student. However, if this dis-ease is in fact located within the university system rather than with the student, the problem surely requires a therapeutic response other than the one currently being privileged by that system. Perhaps Bock and Gassin (1982, p. i) best encapsulate the issue being considered here with their comments:

It can be summed up as the belief that what we are dealing with is a deficiency in the student, a problem of incompetence and of remedial needs. Yet this view is contradicted by another simultaneous and just as firm belief that all we are dealing with are surface problems, cosmetic blemishes on otherwise bright intellectual minds; nothing, in fact, that a prefabricated, mass-produced aid kit would not solve. These beliefs imply that being incompetent, or being a remedial case, is an absolute state which exists independently of context and can therefore also be redressed independently of context.

These observations reveal the unresolvable internal contradictions at the heart of the deficiency/remedial model. Despite the identified inconsistencies, however, a long history of repetition has endowed it with a law-like presence in the institutional consciousness.

The matter at hand, then, becomes one of how learning advisers are best able to care for themselves – and by extension, for their students – in this kind of discursive environment. Foucault argues that it is only by understanding the technologies and care of self that we can then begin to care for others. Understanding how the remedial truth game emerged from a disparate set of conditions suggests a way forward in this process. By interrogating the terms that define this truth game, it becomes possible – at least theoretically – to disturb its play across institutional policy and strategic planning. Learning how to ‘play the game differently’ opens up new spaces for thinking about and theorising the work done by learning advisers as it also allows for a dismantling of the unnecessarily delimiting subjectivities that this particular pedagogical regime assigns to learning advisers and students.

Playing the same game differently?

Perhaps we in the LAS community resist the notion of the ‘remedial’ so vigorously because we understand that it stands in place of – displaces – more innovative attempts to identify and address the complex learning needs of a diverse and complex student population. In fact, the pall cast by the deficiency/remedial model too often prevents us from even beginning to examine in any sustained way what these learning needs might be beyond the rhetorical - and counterproductive – construct of deficiency. However, if we continue to work with categories of deficit and deviance rather than attempting to interrogate and deconstruct the myths surrounding these terms, our intellectual technology will continue to be used to reinforce already existing notions that require remedy. We will continue to be recruited as the therapeutic regime for an ailing system that projects its dis-ease onto the student population and although we might argue that prevention is preferable to cure, it is not always clear how the bonds of this particular truth game can be prevented from continually debilitating our more progressive initiatives.

To be sure, many of the discourses framing the shift from elite to mass higher education have invited us to conceive and develop rafts of practice around these particular student identities according to the various ways they have been problematised at various junctures in history. Our practice has found itself targeting the ‘equity student’, the ‘mature age student’, the ‘international student’. For many of us, work in these areas has offered a certain security of place within our universities. Most recently, there has been a shift to develop the lifelong learner and the marketable graduate as an emblematic, enterprising, independent, self-regulating individual: proof positive of the success of the university system. Again learning advisers find themselves recruited to police the transition from student to independent learner, and, by extension, the transition from dependence to autonomy. The reality for most of us is that regardless of how far our own thinking has moved beyond the deficit/remedial truth game, we will continue to find ourselves – at least in the short and medium term – subjected to its rules of procedure.

However, it is worth recalling here an earlier point in our discussion: that one can slip the bonds of domination of a truth game by demonstrating its negative consequences - by

playing it a little differently we can often demonstrate preferable options. Kate Chanock's work provides us with just one example of how institutional truth games can be reframed: in the first instance to involve an interrogation of the defining (and delimiting) terms, but perhaps, ultimately, this kind of approach suggests ways to subvert, with aim of the dismantling, the more onerous or redundant games of truth that affect LAS identity. In critically reviewing aspects of her own practice, Chanock questions the wisdom of those categories that call so many of us into particular kinds of LAS work:

Diversity does not reside in categories, but in people; every student in a university is diverse, by virtue of unique character and life experience, and we need to avoid binaries like 'mainstream' and 'other' in order to help each student we have do the best s/he can. (1999, p. 2)

Elsewhere, Chanock (2003) points to the ethnocentricity at the centre of much of the policy language dealing with higher education learning. She observes that it is only by continuing to rigorously test and question the cultural assumptions encoded in this language can we begin to move from rhetoric to some recuperated reality of student subjectivity. Her work reminds us of the value of critically engaging the foundational principles that underpin our practices – both as we define them and as they are defined by the wider system – and the relations of power that bind these practices to stock institutional models.

Conclusion

We stated at the beginning of this paper that its primary function was to attempt to reconceptualise the terms by which we subject ourselves and are subjected to the imperatives of mass higher education. Of course the reality of working in LAS units in the 21st century Australian university is that we will continue to be vulnerable to directives from above that will often run counter to our own professional agendas. Many of these directives will have immediate and long-term material consequences for our professional security and career development. This has not prevented our professional community from pushing at and, in many cases, reconfiguring the boundaries that define our field in the past and nor should it in the future. As we continue this project of self-formation as a profession, our truth claims about who we are and what we do become evermore cogent and cohesive. To recall Foucault's words: we are coming to 'know ontologically' what it means to be 'citizens' of the university system, what it is that we 'should and should not fear', what it is that we can 'reasonably hope for' (Foucault, 1997, p. 288). It is these knowledges that will help us make future choices about what 'games of truth' best serve our continued maturation as a profession.

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