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Learning advising practice and reform: a perspective from the University of Wollongong, Australia

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Learning advising practice and reform: a perspective from the University of Wollongong, Australia

Abstract
The claim made in this paper is that higher education reform and learning advising practice are not simply part of a natural progression; rather, they are discursively constituted. To illustrate this argument we draw on the work of Michel Foucault to reflect on two iterations of learning advising practice in Learning Development at the University of Wollongong, Australia over the last decade. Our discussion will demonstrate how a multiplicity of discourses underpin educational reform and privilege particular learning advising practices in the Australian higher education context.

Keywords
learning advising, educational reform

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Learning advising practice and reform: a perspective from the University of Wollongong, Australia

Alisa Percy, Bronwyn James, Jeannette Stirling and Ruth Walker, University of Wollongong

Abstract

The claim made in this paper is that higher education reform and learning advising practice are not simply part of a natural progression; rather, they are discursively constituted. To illustrate this argument we draw on the work of Michel Foucault to reflect on two iterations of learning advising practice in Learning Development at the University of Wollongong, Australia over the last decade. Our discussion will demonstrate how a multiplicity of discourses underpin educational reform and privilege particular learning advising practices in the Australian higher education context.

Currently, all Australian universities employ specialised professionals devoted to 'supporting' student learning, language, literacy and numeracy; a profession we will refer to in this paper as 'learning advising'. Learning advising as a discrete profession in Australian higher education emerged unevenly from disparate origins - counselling, educational psychology, linguistics and literacy education - during the late 1970s and 1980s. This emergence took place within a climate of social liberalism, where the national agendas of mass education, equity of access and student retention were dominant (Webb, 2002). In these early days, most learning advisors found themselves in small and often marginal units working directly with students on a one-to-one basis. By the late 1990s, however, a significant number of learning advisors found themselves increasingly committed to working with Faculty staff to integrate discipline-specific learning, language, literacy and/or numeracy instruction (which are commonly referred to as tertiary literacies, generic skills, key skills or graduate attributes) directly into subject curricula, a practice that, out of sheer necessity, has begun to sever the profession's earlier direct link with the students and their concerns. Nevertheless, the shift in focus from students to Faculty was what many learning advisors had, perhaps inadvertently, been making a case for by persistently arguing that literacy could not be taught independent of disciplinary content (Taylor, Ballard, Beasley, Bock, Clanchy & Nightingale, 1988). In many ways it was perceived as a 'natural' and 'progressive' reform based on sound pedagogical argument; that is, that tertiary literacy and

learning are core pedagogical issues rather than marginal ones. What perhaps is not explicitly acknowledged is that this reform in learning advising practice was an epistemic shift rather than a natural progression. By this we mean that the arguments put forward by the Australian learning advising community only became intelligible within the context of, and to some extent were appropriated by, a policy shift at the higher education level that reflected the dominant discourses of the knowledge economy and life long learning; discourses, one might say, of neo-liberalism (Apple, 2001) and its counterpart in the Australian political context, economic rationalism.

In this paper, we critically engage with the notion that learning advising practice results from a naturalised hierarchical progression. Instead, we would suggest that learning advising practices are historically and discursively shaped. Our discussion, which focuses on a reflexive engagement with our own learning advising practices in Learning Development (a unit of learning advising professionals within the University of Wollongong), is framed within Michel Foucault's notions of history and discourse.

Theoretical perspectives

When considering Foucault's engagement with historiography, Thomas Flynn argued that one of the (many) productive possibilities suggested by the work is that it allows us "to uncover discursive and nondiscursive practices in their plurality and contingency, in order to reveal the *fields* that render intelligible an otherwise heterogeneous collection of events" (Flynn, 1994, p.39). A recurring claim in much of Foucault's work is, after all, that it is only by understanding the multiple ways in which knowledge comes into being that it then becomes possible to understand the relations of power operating between the multiple axes that generate any system of power / knowledge (see Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969; *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 1980; *Power/Knowledge*, 1980). The value of using a Foucauldian approach in our project is that it has allowed us to think more analytically about what constitutes our practice by examining the deeper relations between learning advising knowledge / practice and the university culture in which we are situated. Drawing on Foucault's concept of discourse in his own work on higher education policy and reform in the U.K., Stephen Ball (1994, p.21) points out that at the level of policy, discourses shape and regulate the production of truth and knowledge as they also exercise power. He argues that "We are the subjectivities, the voices, the

knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows … In these terms we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies" (p.22). What this kind of theoretical approach to our field reveals is that the production of learning advising practice is not an unproblematically centralised or linear process, but rather a more complex consequence of the convergence of multiple and sometimes competing agendas.

The current climate: neo-liberalism and the Australian higher education context

The convergence of multiple agendas to which we refer was described almost a decade ago by The New London Group (1995) in terms of a global shift involving a "transformation of public institutions such as school and universities so that they operate according to market logic" (p.8). This transformation involves the apparent alignment of the goals and agendas of education and business and means that "institutions of higher education [have] come increasingly to operate under government pressure, as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers" (Fairclough, 1995, p.141). The dominant discourse in the higher education sector is currently concerned, or "even obsessed" with the marketization of knowledge as a commodity to be purchased and traded (Danaher, Gale & Erben, 2000, p.55).

This global phenomenon is played out in the Australian higher education context in a number of ways, for example, in the weaning of Australian universities from government financial resources and an increased emphasis on self-sufficiency and entrepreneurialism. This in turn has led universities to compete fiercely, both locally and internationally, for alternative sources of funding, such as full-fee paying and international students. Australia has been highly successful in building higher education as an "export industry" (James and Mok, 2003, p.116), becoming the third largest provider of international degrees in the world, ranking only behind the U.S. and the U.K.

The nexus between knowledge and entrepreneurialism is represented diagrammatically in *Figure 1* below by the 'knowledge intensive triple helix relationship' model (Etzkowitz & Leyersdorff, 2000, cited in McWilliam, Taylor, Thomson, Green, Maxwell, Wildy & Simons, 2002, p.4). This model not only recognizes the broadening out of responsibilities for knowledge production, allowing for steerage by the state, but also the role of different professions in shaping educational

policies and priorities. As McWilliam et al (2002) point out, "in this hybrid space there are strong relationships, shared interests, and mutual influence" (p.4).

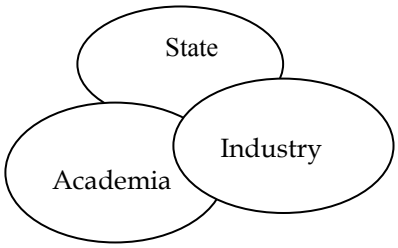

Figure 1: The knowledge-intensive triple helix relationship

The triple helix model also draws attention to the notion that the overlap across the spheres of higher education, industry and government is subject to change, and that any such change can lead to a re-prioritisation rather than displacement of different approaches to knowledge production:

> while historically all forms of knowledge production have coexisted within society, particular conditions associated with a specific historical moment lead to the privileging of one approach over the alternatives. (McWilliam et al, 2002, p.4)

This last point is apposite for our argument that changes in learning advising practice are not the result of a natural progression but rather occur at specific historical moments.

Reflexivity take 1: confluences and epistemic shifts

As part of an ongoing and reflexive process, Learning Development is currently involved in a critical re-evaluation of practice. This has been driven, in part, by an impending compulsory quality audit by the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA, 2004), which has been set up by the Australian Federal Government to assess the academic standards of each Australian university every five years. Unlike the vetting processes of the quality assurance mechanisms in the U.K. and the U.S., Australia does not rank universities' performances relative to each other or

against specific benchmarks, nor does it use a panel of experts to rank each university's performance in research and teaching against a checklist of criteria. Instead, AUQA's "narrative style reports" weigh up whether a university has met its own stated goals (Morris, 2004 p.18).

Learning Development is increasingly implicated in this process, particularly in relation to the University of Wollongong's commitment to meeting a number of its strategic priorities, as outlined in its *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan, 2004 - 2007* and *Internationalisation Strategic Plan, 2004-2007*. For instance, Learning Development is not only cited in policy documents as an assurance of high academic standards, it is actively used to market the University of Wollongong, most recently in recruitment literature targeting international students. While the net effect of this recognition threatens to put increasing pressure on the dispersal of Learning Development activities, it does have the advantage of centralising and valorising our learning advising practice within the University.

In addition to the AUQA-driven review of practice, Learning Development's current critical re-evaluation is also, and perhaps more significantly, driven by a growing uneasiness with the hierarchising of activities that we would call our 'core business':

- working with students to identify learning issues and assist them in their negotiation of academic literacy, language and learning;
- collaborating with discipline staff and Faculty to enhance student learning and the development of tertiary literacies;
- linking individual learning issues with the University's teaching and learning policies.

One aspect of this re-evaluation entails an examination of both the discursive and material conditions that combine to produce what we refer to in this paper as epistemic shifts of Learning Development's core business. Rather than being a linear or developmental process, these shifts emerge from a complex web of historical events, political agendas, power relations and knowledge production.

The first epistemic shift in Learning Development's practice represented below in *Figure 2* involved a privileging of curriculum integration as an ideal model for addressing graduate attributes and their related tertiary literacies (see Appendix 1). By curriculum integration we mean that the language and tertiary literacies associated with successfully completing a subject are taught within the curricula alongside subject content. This has become known as the IDEALL model (Integrated Development of English and Academic Language and Learning) and is based on the philosophy "that the diverse student population entering university at first year level requires support with the transition process from previous education contexts to that of tertiary education" (Skillen, Merten, Trivett & Percy, 1998, p.1). This model represented a shift of the coalface away from working directly with students external to subject curricula, to working within subject curricula. Such a shift provided students with context and subject-specific tertiary literacy instruction and, just as importantly, transferred the responsibility for developing expertise in the tertiary literacies away from being the sole responsibility of the student, to being a responsibility shared by the wider university, as played out within the classroom, on subject and university websites, and at the policy level. While this shift had obvious benefits, not least by impacting on a wide cross-section of the student body, to some degree it isolated the full-time learning advisors from what had originally been considered the source of our unique knowledge: an immediate access to the student perspective.

This first epistemic shift privileges curriculum integration in a number of ways: by constructing a binary relationship between the systemic and generic arms; by labelling the systemic arm 'developmental' and the generic arm 'remedial'; and by representing the generic arm as inefficient and inequitable. This model was used faithfully, although with some new interpretations of what constituted curriculum integration, by Learning Development at the University of Wollongong from 1997 to 2003.

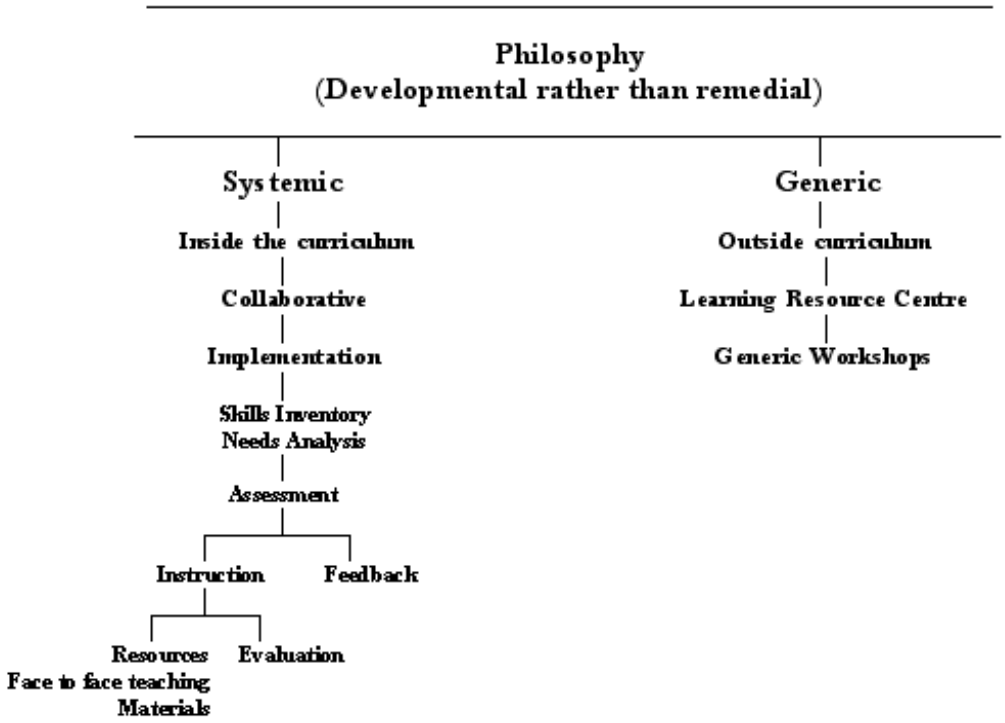

Figure 2: First epistemic shift of Learning Development practice (the IDEALL model)

The acceptance and legitimation of this model at the University of Wollongong and elsewhere in Australia (George & O'Regan, 1998) came about for a range of reasons, some of which were pragmatic, and some of which arose from research conducted around teaching and learning. Essentially, though, it was constituted by a confluence of discursive conditions related to higher education reform, subsequent policy formations, and ongoing research into higher teaching and learning.

This first epistemic shift in the core business of Learning Development at the University of Wollongong (*Figure 2*) took place within a particular historical moment. In the 1990s, a number of Government commissioned reports that dealt with education reform and policy formations in Australia were published. These reports were to have a profound influence in shaping policy at the institutional level, particularly as they advocated a type of educational reform that repositioned student learning to the heart of the University's core business and emphasised a shift in focus from content-driven curricula to one that was more learning and skills focused as well as

outcome-based. Much of the report literature of the 1990s in both the U.K. and Australia addressed factors of employability, internationalisation, notions of lifelong learning and the learning society, as well as the need to be globally competitive

There were other similarities to be noted in the ways that British and Australian universities were reviewing higher education agendas. Despite different national contexts, both the Dearing Report from the U.K. (*Higher Education in the Learning Society*, 1997*)*, and the West Review from Australia *(Learning for Life*, 1998) effectively defined the graduate as an 'end product' of the pedagogical process. The "quality of education" of each institution would then "be measured in terms of what students know, understand and can do at the end of their educational experience" (West, 1998, p.49). Such a reconstitution of the graduate student as product was achieved by explicitly outlining the essential outcomes of a higher degree. In the U.K. context, these essential outcomes were defined as knowledge and understanding, key skills, cognitive skills and subject-specific skills. In Australia, knowledge, skills and values were captured by the formalisation of the term 'Graduate Attributes', which in turn were to be underpinned by a range of specified tertiary literacies. These ideas became powerful motivators in shaping curricula and pedagogy because they were deployed as a means for regulating both, as components of the productive process. One important regulatory strategy now used by the University of Wollongong, for example, is the compulsory specification of the tertiary literacies developed by each subject taught. Pedagogy has overtly become part of the process of production of a particular type of graduate.

In Australia, the Graduate Attributes now function internally as a benchmarking device in the development of curricula, and externally as a way of nominally differentiating between the tertiary packages being marketed by individual universities. The University of Wollongong, in common with all other Australian universities, has a teaching and learning strategic plan which clearly lists the Attributes of a Wollongong Graduate and outlines a range of strategies for realising this ideal. The *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997-2005* endorsed curriculum integration as the primary means to support students' acquisition of these attributes and implicated Learning Development as a key contributor to this process. To this end, the University's *Tertiary Literacy Policy* (2003, p.10) states that "the incorporation of tertiary

literacy within curricula requires collaboration between Faculty staff, educational development and Learning Development lecturers, librarians, career practitioners and administrators".

Reform policy and research do not occur in isolation from each other. Indeed, the literature dealing with university teaching and learning in general, tells a similar story. As early as 1982, when the major strategy of learning advisors involved working one-on-one with the student often in isolation from the Faculty, the literature being produced from within the field contested the notion that learning, literacy and language development could be seen as remedial and taught effectively independent of context (Bock & Gassin, 1982; Taylor et al, 1988). Increasingly, it was being widely acknowledged that tertiary literacies were inseparable from disciplinary knowledge and practice and, therefore, perhaps most effectively taught within mainstream curricula (Golebiowski, 1997). Commentary from the field of teaching and learning argued strongly for a pedagogical logic or integrity to teaching tertiary literacies inside a discipline's curricula. From an institutional point of view, the value of this pedagogical model for addressing tertiary literacies was enhanced by its efficiency: it allowed for maximum ratios between students and learning advising staff.

In 1994, a National Language and Academic Skills Conference organised around the theme 'Integrating the Teaching of Academic Discourse into Courses in the Disciplines' was hosted by La Trobe University, Australia. Despite the cogency of the arguments prioritising integration in at least 40 separate conference papers addressing the conference theme, there were those who remained wary about the perceived unlimited efficacy of this model. Striking a dissident note, Gail Craswell (1994) questioned the adoption of curriculum integration to the exclusion of all other learning advising practices. She argued that "the literature has provided the necessary corrective to any notion that generic skills can be taught in ignorance of discipline-specific practices, but this does not mean that integration is the best way to proceed in all situations" (Craswell, 1994, p.41).

By 1996, the political climate beyond the university had undergone yet another radical change. An unsympathetic Federal budget saw an overall reduction in funding for higher education. This event was reflected as a material consequence in staff cuts and unit restructuring affecting many

learning advisors and centres and resulted in their struggle to counter the increasing "casualisation, marginalisation and inadequate numbers of academic skills advisors" at Australian universities (Bartlett, 2001, p.23). It also appears to have manifested as a discursive shift in the way that learning advising was discussed by those working in the field. The theme of the 1996 National Language and Academic Skills Conference, then, was 'What We Learn from Teaching One-to-One that Informs our Work with Larger Numbers of Students' (Chanock, Burley & Davies, 1996). This conference attempted to reclaim the value of one-to-one work and to resist further funding cuts that were perceived, in part, as the consequence of the push to privilege integration at the cost of other practices.

In flagging what appear to be discursive shifts within the learning advising field, it is worth recalling our earlier point, that learning advisors' core commitments were also being subjected to an institutional push towards evermore efficient pedagogies in the increasingly corporatised university (Miyoshi, 2000). In other words, there were multiple and complex discursive formations converging to direct learning advising efforts. From the mid 1990s on, and despite some reservations, integration still represented a positive way forward. This approach to teaching and learning provided the opportunity for learning advisors to apply their accumulated knowledge about student learning and student writing within a disciplinary context. At the University of Wollongong, this translated into the focus of Learning Development activities on working within Faculties and subject curricula.

Reflexivity take 2: accidents of history and (dis)continuities in practice

Over the past year, Learning Development has undergone a further disturbance to its internal order. A range of factors, such as increasing student numbers at both the main and remote campuses, a growing commitment to the flexible delivery of subjects, changes in the University's marketing and recruitment strategies, as well as the impending quality audit by the Australian University Quality Agency, have all generated increased demand on available learning advising resources. Furthermore, Learning Development itself more than doubled its size with a recent intake of new staff from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds. It has also become a field of research inquiry in and of itself, with learning advising attracting the attention of at least one recent PhD project (Percy, 2004). These combined factors have called into question the

'naturalised' order of existing practice with the logic of that order not always immediately apparent to the new staff members. This questioning has in part been a consequence of the diversity of perspectives brought to Learning Development by staff from different disciplinary backgrounds, adding literary theory and cultural studies perspectives to the more traditional linguistics, education and ESL approaches. The impact of all these factors has been that the taken-for-granted continuities between Learning Development philosophy and practice - that had seen the privileging of an 'integration' model over other aspects of learning advising activity - have been opened to contestation.

As we have argued, this integration model came with its own demands. In contrast to the more student-centred practices common before the 1990s, the curriculum integration model required learning advisors to negotiate multiple subject positions, some of which were not always conducive to easy engagement with the student perspective. When focusing on curriculum integration, for instance, our primary alliance could appear to be with subject teaching staff. Furthermore, with the resources and energy of full-time staff directed to integration projects, student-centred practices such as generic workshops and individual consultations became, out of the necessity of managing effective workloads, the purview of casual staff. This resulted in an unwanted fragmentation of key components of our core business as it disrupted the lines of communication necessary to the role of learning advisors in the nexus between teaching and learning.

In an attempt to recuperate the insights gained by direct access to the student perspective, as well as to bring this perspective to the attention of the wider university, we are currently developing a second iteration of our practice. The conceptual overview of this second iteration is illustrated in *Figure 3* and highlights, non-hierarchically, the range of programs and strategies employed by Learning Development to achieve its vision, engage in its core business, and assist the university in meeting its strategic priorities. Quite simply, *Figure 3* is a visual representation of the interconnectedness of Learning Development's programs and strategies which engage the student, faculty and institution. While many of these programs and strategies, such as workshops and online resources, will be familiar to those working within the learning advising profession, the terms 'independent', 'integrated' and 'embedded' perhaps need some explanation.

'Independent' refers to workshops or tutorials that are tailored to discipline-specific assignments, but taught outside the subject's timetable and delivered by Learning Development lecturers, requiring little commitment from Faculty. While these workshops are optional for students, the 'Integrated' program refers to curriculum integration that is often team-taught by Faculty and Learning Development staff within the subject timetable. 'Embedded' programs are similar to integration in that they are collaboratively developed by Faculty and Learning Development staff, but the language and learning resources and/or instruction become the responsibility of Faculty staff alone.

This second iteration achieves three vital aims. It destabilises the current hierarchy of practices by equally valuing all strategies that contribute to our core business. It also provides the necessary corrective to previous claims that non-Faculty practices are remedial, inefficient and inequitable by demonstrating the value of attending to the student learning experience and applying that understanding to Faculty work and wider university agendas. Finally, it eliminates the problematic binary of the previous model by recognising the dynamic nature of the practices and their inevitable and necessary articulation into one another.

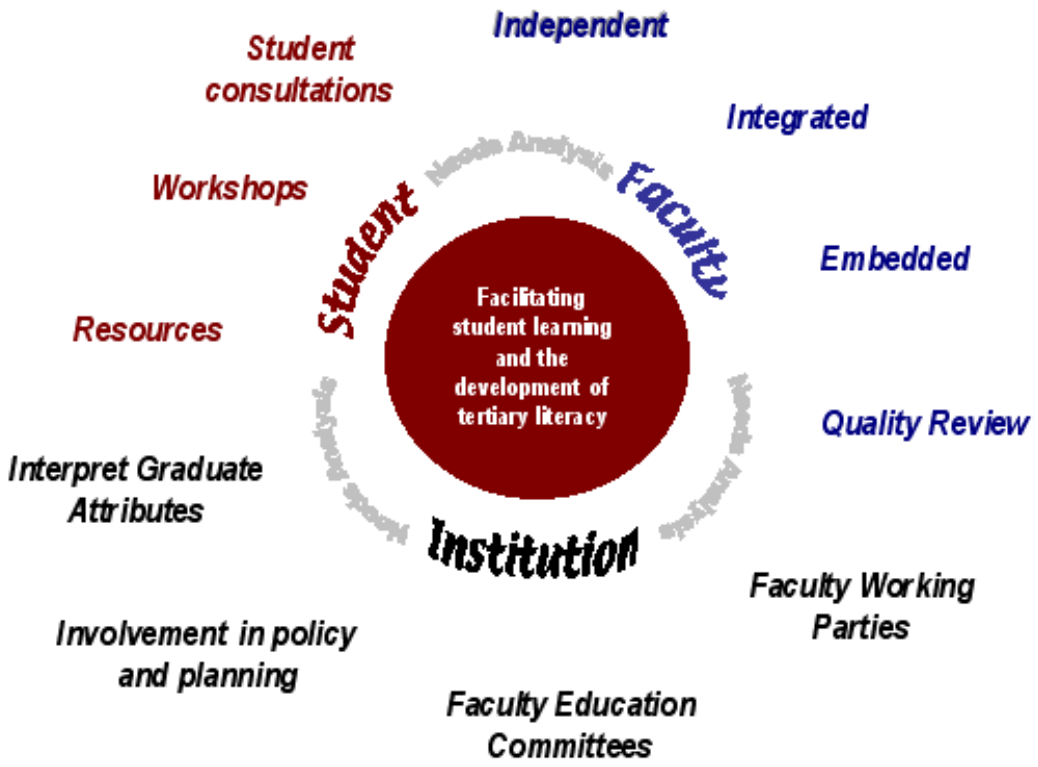

Figure 3: The second epistemic shift in Learning Development practice (the current model)

While the various programs and strategies shown in *Figure 3* are classified broadly under 'Student', 'Faculty' and 'Institution', in practice the distinction between them is not rigid: the experience and understanding gained in working with one articulates into work being done with the others, as feedback and insight flows between them to better inform practice across the institution. In this way, Learning Development promotes student learning, academic literacy and language development across the University.

Learning Development's current membership, contribution to and participation in a range of university policy-forming committees is an invaluable opportunity to disseminate student perspectives on learning across the wider university. It must of course be noted that this access was made possible by the engagement with curriculum integration activities that are integral to

the IDEALL model (*Figure 2*), and which provided the foundation for the current shift in practice.

Conclusion

The point that we make in this paper is that there is value in engaging in a reflexive process about both practice and reforms in practice. By doing so, we are not papering over the notion that educational practice and reform is an inherently political event, linked to wider social, historical, economic and political discourses. Our options for agency within these discourses might be limited but that is no excuse for unreflexive acquiescence to them. If we are to engage usefully with these discourses in the context in which we operate in the higher education sector, our response - whether modelled on the first, second or any subsequent iterations of Learning Development practice - must be mindful of Popkewitz and Brennan's (1998) claim that "resistance is not about replacing a new set of universal truths with an alternative, but about a methodological approach to continually making problematic the stories we are given and those we tell" (p.27).

Appendix 1

A sample of Graduate Attributes and their related tertiary literacies at The University of Wollongong. A full display is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/about/teaching/attributes/

University of Wollongong

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

Tertiary Literacies

1. **A commitment to continued and independent learning, intellectual development, critical analysis and creativity**
   - observes, describes, documents, interprets, makes decisions
   - articulates, justifies, argues, negotiates and distinguishes fact from opinion
   - challenges assumptions and takes risks in developing responses
   - discusses, applies, reflects on and evaluates their learning
   - critically consumes and evaluates information
   - takes initiative and innovates, is self directing
   - matches needs to resources
   - reasons logically
   - demonstrates willingness to learn
   - demonstrates positive orientation to career and life long professional development
   - appreciates statistics as they apply to their discipline

2. **Coherent and extensive knowledge in a discipline, appropriate ethical standards and, where appropriate, defined professional skills**
   - develops a command of existing knowledge in a chosen discipline
   - identifies and devises a series of questions about an issue or phenomenon that would be adequate to initiate a research project
   - willingness to explore the existing body of knowledge
   - explores issues with existing knowledge, including written and oral analysis
   - understands the principles, laws and formulae to use knowledge to solve academic problems
   - develops a command of existing knowledge in a chosen discipline
   - knows how to update knowledge and where to do so
   - understands not only the theory of the discipline but also the practical implications and applications of the acquired knowledge
   - appreciates their discipline in a wider social context

3. **Self-confidence combined with oral and written communication skills of a high level**
   - formulates clear concise questions based on information needs
   - organises and synthesises information, in a logical format, for various applications
   - summarises current understandings, explains the main ideas in the field, articulates the current controversy in the discipline
   - uses all forms of expression to communicate knowledge to others- spoken, written, graphic and other non-verbal forms appropriate to context
   - understands the importance of audience and the relevant registers

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