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Coming of Age: Developing a genealogy of knowledge in the LAS field

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Abstract
Quality teaching and learning in higher education has become a mantra in the rhetoric of university policies, and, increasingly, assuring successful student learning is seen as the core business of the modern university. Ironically, this comes at a time when academic staff are faced with unprecedented demands on their teaching repertoire while being expected to function with fewer resources. Not surprisingly then, many LAS staff find themselves, their knowledge and their skills central to ensuring the university’s aspirations, yet in many ways still under threat of intellectual erasure. A contributing factor to this threat, it is argued, is the lack of a clear articulation of the knowledge and skills on which our discipline is based, and therefore, the intellectual contribution that we make to the wider university. This paper suggests that the LAS field, in order to come of age as a discipline, needs to conduct a genealogy of knowledge. It also goes so far as to suggest a basis for discussion in what is an ongoing dialogue about LAS identity.

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Coming of Age: Developing a genealogy of knowledge in the LAS field

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ABSTRACT Quality teaching and learning in higher education has become a mantra in the rhetoric of university policies, and, increasingly, assuring successful student learning is seen as the core business of the modern university. Ironically, this comes at a time when academic staff are faced with unprecedented demands on their teaching repertoire while being expected to function with fewer resources. Not surprisingly then, many LAS staff find themselves, their knowledge and their skills central to ensuring the university’s aspirations, yet in many ways still under threat of intellectual erasure. A contributing factor to this ‘threat’, it is argued, is the lack of a clear articulation of the knowledge and skills on which our discipline is based, and therefore, the intellectual contribution that we make to the wider university. This paper suggests that the LAS field, in order to come of age as a discipline, needs to conduct a genealogy of knowledge. It also goes so far as to suggest a basis for discussion in what is an ongoing dialogue about LAS identity.

Keywords: Genealogy, pedagogy, supplement

Introduction

In a plenary address to delegates attending the Changing Identities conference held at Wollongong University in 2001, Carolyn Webb suggested as one of the areas for future research in the field of Language and Academic Skills (LAS) a need to develop “enduring theories and concepts to explain LAS knowledge” (Webb, 2001, p.13). A newcomer to this field of scholarship and teaching might well respond to Webb’s recommendation with a yearning and heartfelt ‘yes, please’. While experienced LAS staff seem to draw on a range of systematic approaches to practice, as well as theoretical frameworks to shape that practice, the foundational principles and theories informing LAS expertise are by no means apparent to a newcomer to the field. Indeed, they may be utterly mysterious to the newcomer from a non-educational background. Webb’s meditation on the professional ‘ontogenesis’ of Language and Academic Skills Advisors marks a productive point of intervention for a paper that strives to identify and engage with some of the more urgent challenges facing LAS staff in the current university climate. The mumbled mantra of the neophyte LAS lecturer, “exactly what is it we do and why?” (Garner, Chanock & Clerehan, 1995, p. 5), is used to problematise the nature and positioning of LAS practice and the way that this practice is communicated to lecturers / advisors new to the field and to potential academic collaborators in other disciplines. Dialogic¹ in structure, the paper revisits a recurring theme in LAS

¹ Justification for the valuing of this approach to an academic paper can be found in Kate Chanock’s (2000, p.8) Preface to the Sources of Confusion Conference Proceedings where she cites Zamel & Spack (1998) arguing
discussions and is a version of the outsider / insider narrative. Like all compelling
narratives it has drama, tension, humour, a touch of pathos, and an occasional flash of
identity crisis for one of the protagonists. Show tunes are optional. In essence, it is a dialogue
between an experienced LAS lecturer (the insider) and a relatively new LAS lecturer (the
outsider) who persists with the age-old and often existential question “Who am I and why am
I here?”

Dialogue: Who am I and why am I here?

Imagine a lecturer with extensive research and teaching experience in the Humanities, a
background in Nursing, Biomedical Ethics, Post-colonial Literature, Cultural Studies, and
absolutely no background at all in Education. Imagine this mutant creature of
interdisciplinary explorations and multiple border crossings wandering into the realm of LAS
looking for a place to put down pedagogical roots and ply her craft. Momentarily
disorientated, she turns to the friendly folk of this new, and for her, unchartered terrain and
asks for assistance. “This feels like an interesting place to be” she observes. “What must I do
to become one of you? What are the founding principles of your community? What are
appropriate ways of being and where are your boundaries? I must know these things if I am
to belong and contribute.” At first the inhabitants of this new realm look at their most recent
interloper with some confusion. Eventually, however, the response comes. “We are a
* community of practice” (Webb, 2001, p. 10) they say, “through our practice we share
knowledge and expertise with the other communities of Academe”. “What is this practice?”
asks the newcomer. “How might I work towards developing this knowledge and expertise for
myself so that I can become part of your community?” “Well ... that’s kind of hard to
explain”. “Then how do your neighbours understand and value your practice?” the newcomer
“Ummm”.

After a prolonged period of contemplation and many tentative attempts to solve the
pedagogical perplexities of her new life, the LAS neophyte again approaches those wise in
the ways of Language and Academic Skills advising.

“I understand that there is a richness and complexity to your practice. What is this special
LAS knowledge?”

I wish there was an easy answer to this question. In responding, I might be able to begin to
pin this down to some extent, yet I expect I will not be able to satisfy everyone’s
understanding of what constitutes LAS knowledge. Perhaps to avoid answering the question
directly, I might explain that each of us enters this practice in a unique way from various
backgrounds, and with specific knowledge and experience that is in no way homogeneous.
The diversity of our knowledge and the variety in our practice is what gives us our richness.
We arrive here from a range of disciplines, some with specific knowledge about language and
literacy, others with knowledge about learning and pedagogy, many with a combination of
both. But within each of these broad categories, there are particular areas of knowledge and
skills in which we might specialise. With language, one might be an applied linguist, another
might specialise in systemic functional linguistics, while another might focus on critical
discourse. Being able to articulate a particular set of knowledges is virtually impossible, or at
the very least, an inexhaustive task. What could be said, however, is that we all have a level
of expertise in understanding and developing pedagogy based on these knowledges. Having

*that the personal voice, the well-crafted story, exploratory and introspective pieces, not only can but do play a
critical role in how knowledge is made in a discipline*.
some foundation in language, literacy, learning and pedagogical theory provides us with the tools to negotiate and ‘unpack’ the variety of discourses and teaching practices that we are expected to deal with on a daily basis. And on this basis, we are central to the goals and core business of the university.

“Will I have acquired this knowledge as part of my experiences as an academic and teacher in Humanities?”

It depends. Expecting an academic from the disciplines to have a developed understanding of what constitutes good pedagogical practice is one thing. To expect the average academic (not saying you are average) 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, is quite another. If acquiring a postgraduate degree and having teaching experience in higher education (see ANU 1996, job advertisement in Craswell & Bartlett, 2001) did provide an academic with the language and knowledge to do what LAS staff know and do, then we simply wouldn’t exist: there would be no reason for the contribution we make to teaching and learning in higher education. But this is not the case.

“How then does one acquire this knowledge?”

For those who enter the LAS field via degrees that deal with language, literacy, learning and/or pedagogy, the foundations for practice in the LAS field are fairly well established. Most of us then broaden our knowledge and practice through experience and research. Coming from a non-Educational background, I can see that what we do might seem a bit mysterious to you given that we appear to act on implicit knowledge and understanding that is rarely expressed in theoretical terms on a day-to-day basis. To get an overview of our knowledge and practice, I would suggest you read proceedings from our various LAS conferences. Reading these will achieve several things: it will highlight the major issues concerning us as a discipline; it will give you some idea of the diversity of practice in the LAS field and suggest strategies that you might apply in your own work; and it will direct you to the theory that underpins our practice. It will also provide you with an overview of how we have developed as a discipline.

What I would like to emphasise, however, is the need for you to value the theory and knowledge that you have already gained from your experience as an academic in the Humanities. Just as LAS staff have a valuable contribution to make to teaching and learning practice in the disciplines because of our positioning as ‘outsider’, and therefore, our ability to see things a little differently, so too do you come to LAS as an outsider with that ‘lens’ and a contribution that is invaluable to our evolution both as a unit and as members of a broader discipline. Using your own knowledge and experience as a base point is essential in developing your own understanding of how you function in the LAS field: there isn’t a particular canon of knowledge that you should necessarily be looking to in order to renew yourself as a ‘Learning Developer’; however, there are a range of readings that might help you to acquire the tools you need to be part of our community.

Reflection

As an insider, the above dialogue was confronting in that I was challenged to articulate the range of knowledge that represents our field. The challenges I found were threefold: firstly, the knowledge and practice in our field is so varied and complex that articulation is an in-
exhaustive task and not possible from a single point of view; secondly, there is not a set of
knowledges per se that constitutes ‘LAS knowledge’ that can be acquired in order to
‘become’ a LAS practitioner; finally, the LAS field is so practice-based that the bodies of
knowledge on which we draw to inform our practice often tend to become invisible, even to
ourselves. This is problematic because it means we may have difficulty explaining what we
do and why, not only to the ‘newby’, but also to the discipline staff we work with. This has
implications for how we are perceived and how we are able to evolve as a discipline.

As an outsider, I am reminded by the ‘newby’ confusion that we have just performed -
and please know that this is a performance that faithfully mirrors a personal professional
identity crisis - of the epistemological struggles that marked the early days of Cultural Studies
as a new and discrete discipline within Australian universities. Very basically, the early
Cultural Studies debates organised around what, precisely, this new discipline sought to know
that was not already available through research in literature and / or film studies or already
being examined within the disciplinary frameworks of History, Philosophy or the Political
Sciences. While many were arguing for the positivity of the ‘free trade’ environment that
marked those early days - that is, an environment where those who identified as Cultural
Studies scholars were free to move across disciplinary boundaries as necessary and utilise
whatever was valuable to the varied projects being undertaken at that time - at a conference in
Melbourne in 1997, Frow argued that if those of us working in this new field were going to
be able to effectively communicate our growing range of research and practice, we had to
develop a repertoire of shared theoretical perspectives and practices. The discipline had to get
a handle on what represented the core of its knowledge base. These early Cultural Studies
debates have, we think, relevance for the conversations currently engaging the LAS
community. For example, what is it that we know that is not readily available via training in
English literature, Communication and Cultural Studies, or indeed, many of the other
disciplines that comprise the tertiary system? Furthermore, how does this LAS knowledge
figure in the intellectual landscape of academe? The precedence for and merits of an
engagement of this type of professional introspection is also suggested by Webb’s
observations about recent positive changes to the institutional status of academic
development and instructional design units (Webb, 2001, pp. 6-7).

Discussion

So how do we proceed from Webb’s (2001) advice, and Craswell and Bartlett’s (2001) call
for a LAS pedagogy? Furthermore, how do we begin to develop ways to effectively
communicate the specificities of LAS knowledge to the non-initiated? Craswell and Bartlett
They argue that the academic diversity many bring to their work in the LAS field lends itself
to an enriching cross-pollination of ideas and practices that will, in the best of all possible
futures, translate into a “multi-disciplinary research base that is academically coherent”
(Craswell & Bartlett, 2001, p.11). This argument is not dissimilar to the Cultural Studies
debate referred to above. Exploring ways of achieving this next step in our development
towards a discipline is one of the tasks of this paper. We seek to explore the ‘specialist
knowledge and skills’ that are so often referred to, but rarely unpacked. Specifically, we aim
to begin an analysis of “the distinctive nature of LAS pedagogical knowledge” (Webb, 2001,
p.13).

Foucault’s work suggests a way forward here. He has cogently argued for the value of
epistemological genealogy. That is, the value of delving into the history of a knowledge
system in order to better understand its genesis and evolution. This genealogy, he argues,
unites “erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical
knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically" (1980, p.83). A genealogy allows one to ‘recall’ how and why various ways of knowing unite to form a discrete and coherent system. The genealogical work on LAS development as a unit within the university environment is already in progress (for example, see Craswell & Bartlett, 2001; Webb, 2001). Craswell, Bartlett and others have argued that the time is now ripe to extend our explorations to identify and examine the shape and form of LAS knowledge, to understand (again, borrowing from Foucault here) the archaeology of that knowledge. To begin this process, a preliminary and incomplete attempt has been made to ‘map’ the variety of theoretical knowledge that underpins our practice, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 places pedagogy at the centre of LAS knowledge with language, literacy and learning (and the various theories encompassed within these) as core aspects of that knowledge. The second concentric circle represents theory that is peripheral to the core knowledge, and the final concentric circle represents our research methodologies. Elementary in nature and by no means complete or accurate, we decided to include the ‘map’ in Figure 1 in this paper to act as a basis for discussion about what exactly constitutes our collective knowledges and how they can be represented. Developing such a map might prove useful not only as a guide to the LAS field of knowledge2, but also as a tracking device for our development and expansion as a discipline. Dynamic in nature, the map can develop as we as a discipline evolve.

What it fails to do, however, is explain the complexity of how these theories interweave in our practice. Perhaps this is where LAS practice extends into the ‘arts of the contact zone’ (see Pratt cited in Skillen et al., 2003), that conceptual space where the real mystery is said to begin. Or perhaps this is where the pedagogy of practice, such as that proposed by Craswell and Bartlett (2001) comes into play. Clearly, this is where further research and writing needs to occur.

The crucial point arising from the work done to date, however, is that if we are going to continue to evolve as a discipline and continue to ‘tactically’ secure our place within the university, we have to develop a shared base of reference. Developing our pedagogy via a genealogical delving into the knowledge that does circulate through our community, albeit in tacit or partially articulated ways, is essential to managing our role as we continue to slough off the ‘remedial tag’ (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001). This is particularly important if we are to have our intellectual contribution valued and recognised by the wider university community.

**The role and positioning of LAS: the outsider looking in**

There can be no doubt that in today’s economic and pedagogical climate within most Australian universities, LAS staff are not only valuable but, we would argue, absolutely essential to a successful realisation of current institutional aspirations to standards of excellence in relation to tertiary literacies and graduate attributes. Moreover, this value is exponential to a university’s competitive success in the global market place to attract full fee paying students (usually international) and offer as part of the corporate package, guaranteed language and academic skills support of a professional standard (Kennedy, 1995; Leask, 1999). However, the necessary and valuable contribution that LAS units make to the culture of most universities is, at least potentially, always under the threat of intellectual erasure. There is still too often a troubling and systemic disavowal of the key part our practice plays in the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate student learning and academic skill acquisition.

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2 One example of how it might function as a tool for LAS is by using a developed version of Figure 1 as an interface (html) that links to a ‘traveller’s guide’ to each particular theory with further links to seminal and associated readings.
LAS units are still largely viewed as ancillary, or an optional supplement, to the 'real' business of academia, despite the fact that in the university culture of the new millennium, at least rhetorically, we play an increasingly centralised role (e.g. Candy et al., 1994). As Professor Julius Sumner Miller asked: "Why is it so?" The answers to this question are complex, multi-faceted, and, to a larger degree, beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, we will begin an examination of some of the symbolic conditions that have brought about this state of conceptualised marginalisation. For a comprehensive discussion of the historical
conditions that have shaped LAS experience in the academy to date, see Craswell and Bartlett (2001, pp. 2-5).

Symbolic history and contested curriculum

As imagined spaces, universities have traditionally viewed themselves as cultures concerned with ‘higher learning’. The phrase ‘higher learning’ suggests an intellectual environment that has evolved beyond the need to grapple with the nitty gritty of language and writing skills – tertiary literacies – the assumption being that all students will have somehow become proficient in these areas as a prerequisite for academic study. That this idea still holds many discipline academics in thrall despite the daily realities of having to address student learning needs in these areas became evident at a recent curriculum planning day at the University of Wollongong. The LAS advisor at this meeting was invited by the Head of the Department to work with discipline academics to develop subject-embedded strategies to support student learning and skill acquisition. All lecturers and subject designers at the meeting were in complete accord about the necessity of proactively addressing what has become an increasing problem in the department. The majority of these lecturers were very receptive to LAS collaboration, seeing this integration work as enriching their own subject delivery and teaching practice. However, some lecturers found the need to specifically address this aspect of their pedagogical practice threatening in the extreme and argued that teaching tertiary literacy and academic skills was ‘not their job’ (AEC Planning Symposium, June 2003). This anecdote demonstrates a core issue for LAS staff: on the one hand what we do (and it will serve us to be able to articulate that in precise terms) has become increasingly essential to effective academic teaching and learning in today’s university; on the other hand, there is still that residual impulse to maintain the myth of our marginality.

Despite the symbolic residues of the ‘ivory tower’ days of higher learning, universities are inexorably moving towards evermore-corporate models of tertiary education. Just as the university is in transition from its traditional imaginary of institutional identity, so too are LAS units at a crucial point in their own transition from the remedial models identified by Craswell and Bartlett (2001), Webb (2001), and others, to a developmental and richly defined LAS pedagogy. As we have already suggested, LAS units and LAS staff have been viewed in the symbolic university as being somehow supplemental, surplus in the ‘real’ business of academia, only tolerated because they deal with those aspects of learning disavowed by the dominant symbolic model which privileges content over skills. We have also argued that despite this traditional marginalisation, LAS units are becoming increasingly important in the day-to-day teaching and learning environment of the 21st century university with its corporate overtones and fiscally-driven pedagogies. Our stock is on the rise. Understanding this, the problem for us is how to rethink the conditions of LAS existence, how to begin the work of negotiating, at least theoretically, a more strategically productive position. Jacques Derrida’s notion of the supplement is a useful place to begin. Very simply, the logic of the supplement, as he develops the notion, contends that the supplement – something added to the whole from beyond its boundaries – can only be successfully accommodated where there is already and necessarily a deficiency. To take this idea a little further, the successful accommodation of the supplement must indicate that the whole has somehow been lacking something integral to its holistic function. Following on from this logic, it is possible to argue that LAS presence in the university of the 21st century is not a luxury, an afterthought, or a pedagogical indulgence. It is absolutely essential to the function of the academy.

3 This is now partly being addressed at UOW by Skillen et al., 2003.
The need for us to claim this notion as a strategic position was recently graphically illustrated by a question Bartlett posed to the LAS community attending the last SIG meeting at ANU (2003). At this meeting she asked us “How low will you go?” in relation to working with students who had language proficiencies incompatible with successful progression in an Australian university degree. The round-table discussion arising from the question reminded all of us at that meeting of our professional vulnerability to current university recruitment practices. It is only by systematically articulating the value of our work, and by drawing on a reviewed perception of our role in the university, that we can begin to move, if only by increments, towards deeper involvement in policy. An important step in this process is the development of the proposed genealogy, through which a shared understanding of our core knowledges and practices can begin to provide us with a subtle way of articulating to ourselves and our institutions the intellectual contribution we make. It is, after all, our knowledges and services to academia that allow universities to, at least notionally, live with their current policies of massification, internationalisation and rationalisation.

**Conclusion**

In summary, we argue that two issues arising from this paper require our future attention. These issues are intimately entwined. On one level, we need to continue to work towards developing a repertoire of shared theoretical perspectives and practices in order to foster our place within the university and our future research; and on the other level, we need to develop a strategic awareness of the pedagogical and corporate politics that drive Australian university cultures into the future. One example of this latter type of work is Jones’ (2001) paper, *Graduate Attributes: An agenda for reform or control*. By developing strategic awareness of the theoretical and pedagogical bases of our practice as well as the agendas that impact upon us, LAS staff will be better placed to renegotiate their professional and intellectual status in tomorrow’s academic environment.

**References**


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