'Knowingly constructing' our future: Reflecting on individual LAS practice

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Abstract: There has been considerable debate amongst Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners via Unilearn and LAS-related conferences as to who we are, what we do, why we do it and how we should go about it. The debates have centred on whether there is a particular pedagogical framework that best describes our work (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002), whether we are part of a discipline or a profession (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; Milnes, 2005), whether we should be classified as academic or general staff (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004) and so on. This debate reflects our diversity and an active engagement with our future. LAS practitioners are evolving, as Webb (2002, p. 10) would have it, 'towards the destinies [we] jointly construct, whether knowingly or unknowingly'. But while there is considerable progress towards knowingly and jointly constructing a LAS discourse and destiny, in this paper I reflect on the degree to which, as individuals, we are unknowingly constructing our destinies. I argue that because our profession is our practice, and vice versa, as individuals we must knowingly construct our roles and create perceptions of what we do with students within the academic community and within the institutions in which we work. Unless we do so, LAS professionals risk perpetuating the view that they are 'just' teachers, working at the margins.

Key words: LAS professional identity; knowingly constructing

Introduction

Increasing debate about our professional roles as Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners reflects a maturing professional consciousness and has centred on whether there is a particular pedagogical framework that best describes our work (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Percy & Stirling, 2004), whether we are part of a discipline or a profession (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; Milnes, 2005), whether we should be classified as academic or general staff (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004), and so on. Such debate reflects our diversity, and our active engagement with our future, culminating at this conference with the launch of the Association of Academic Language and Learning. We

are evolving, as Webb (2002, p. 10) would have it, 'towards the destinies [we] jointly construct, whether knowingly or unknowingly'.

Nevertheless, I am conscious of an underlying unease in terms of the shadow that falls between our professional rhetoric and our individual professional practice. Arguably, our individual practice forms the basis of our profession, and this means we must be acutely conscious of how we construct our roles and create perceptions of what we do. Here, I argue that, while professionally we may have matured, as individuals I suspect we may be reinforcing perceptions of our roles within institutions as remediators, 'just' teachers, working at the margins, not doing 'real' work. In making this argument I use Vanderwal, Carmichael, Hicks and McGowan's (1999) 'Position of Academic Language and Learning Skills Advisers/Lecturers in Australian Universities' ('Position Paper') and the new Association of Academic Language and Leaning's (AALL) draft 'Mission Statement' (Barthel, 28 July 2005) in order to reflect on individual practice with students, with disciplinary staff and with the institutions within which we work. In making the argument I also reflect on conversations with LAS practitioners since 1989 when I first began working in the area. Conversational evidence is not hard evidence – and I am aware of this shortcoming in making my argument – but it is indicative of how we as individuals, and how others, may be perceiving what we do, and where such perceptions undermine our practice, my view is that we need to knowingly challenge them.

Background

LAS roles are complex and have developed in highly particularised institutional settings which have often shaped the LAS professional role to 'fit' with the institutional resources available. Thus, it is not always possible to draw a sharp line around work that we *all* do. Nevertheless, at one level, as outlined by Andresen (1996, p. 40), our role may encompass academic staff development, teaching/learning consultancy, instructional design, educational evaluation, academic management/leadership, and research into student learning. At another level, most recently outlined by Zeegers (2004, p. 28), our joint role may be to develop students' learning, language and academic skills, assisting students in the development of key strategies including literacy and numeracy, critical and analytical thinking, problem solving, information literacy and research skills, written and oral communication, self-management of time, resources and tasks, and the ability to engage in independent and reflective learning. Given this diversity of LAS roles, it is imperative to establish what we hold as core professional values for individual practice. In other words, given that *our individual practice* – and the perceptions we and others have of that practice – *is our profession*, we need to focus on the degree to which we knowingly construct our roles and the perceptions that students, colleagues and the institution have of these roles.

Knowingly constructing our role with students

Knowingly constructing our roles with students relates to the ways in which we value their diversity, work with them in a developmental manner, and challenge the institutional myths that characterise linguistically diverse students as primarily having linguistic difficulties. Vanderwal et al. (1999, p. 3) persuasively made the case that we value 'cultural diversity,

in which all students are encouraged to contribute equally to, and benefit equally from, the skills and knowledges available at tertiary level', a value reinforced in the AALL draft Mission Statement (Barthel, 28 July 2005). This suggests our role with students is founded on inclusivity, and implies that we actively value and knowingly construct our roles with students, regardless of how different they are from us or from each other.

Yet, in reflecting on individual practice, anecdotally I hear relationships with students constructed on the basis of 'us and them' – 'them' being international, not local – and a conflation of cultural differences. In discussion, diversity often applies to 'them', not 'us', overlooking, in the first instance, diversity among local students and, in the second, diversity amongst 'them'. The expression 'Confucian cultural heritage students', for example, implies a cultural experience which excludes diversity in students' approaches to learning and their educational experiences – whether they speak Standard Chinese or Hokkien, whether they are from a local suburb or Shanghai. The term 'Asian students' also implies a monoculture and, if not used alone, it is often taken to mean 'international students', itself often an assumption that 'international' refers to students from countries in Asia – not students from Germany, Canada, or Argentina. The 'us and them' binary also promotes expressions such as the 'the West', 'Western approaches to learning' or similar, which are used in ways that suggest 'Western approaches' are privileged, better, and all the same. The assumption that there is a 'Western approach' would, on the basis of my experience, suggest that rote learning, descriptive writing, and non-acknowledgement of sources are as commonly practised amongst students as are critical analysis, synthesis, evaluation and so on.

If we knowingly construct our role with students on the basis of stereotypes, we undermine a core value of our work – that of accepting diversity and recognising that students' experiences lead them to learn in different ways. Student Michelle Wiranto (1999, p. 6), in considering the sum of her parts, noted she was:

> 50 percent Javanese-Indonesian; 25 percent Manadonese-Indonesian; raised in Australia for 40 percent of [her] life, Indonesia for about 50 percent; educated 80 percent at the Jakarta International school, 15 percent at the University of New South Wales and 5 percent at the University of California, Berkeley.

We need to recognize that all our students are as diverse in their backgrounds and experiences as Michelle Wiranto and to knowingly and explicitly construct our individual relationships with students on the basis of 'respect for what they bring to us' (Fitzsimmons, 22 July 2004). We must treat them as unique individuals, bringing to us their own sets of needs, fears and confidences.

A core principle of our work, identified by Vanderwal et al. (1999, p. 3), is that our work with students is 'developmental and intended to enhance academic potential rather than remedial', a point iterated in the AALL draft Mission Statement (Barthel, 28 July 2005), and this is a principle to which, rhetorically at least, we adhere. Yet often in practice – implicitly and explicitly – we construct relationships with students on the basis of the twin pillars of 'remediation' and 'support', both of which undermine a developmental approach to students' learning. This is not to suggest that we do not support students – we do – but it is only one aspect of a complex set of activities LAS professionals undertake. Further, is this how we would wish to characterise that undertaking in our own minds and the minds

of those with whom we work? The terms 'remedial' and 'support' have been addressed in earlier papers (e.g., Chanock, 1994; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002). Nevertheless, as recently as twelve months ago I heard a colleague say, by way of introduction, 'I am just a remedial teacher' – a comment which suggests that, as individual LAS practitioners, we can be our own worst enemies.

We can also work against ourselves in relation to working with linguistically diverse background (LDB) students. Over time, LAS professionals have jointly challenged the view that LDB students' problems are primarily linguistic, and we see evidence of this challenge in our naming and in our conference discussions. Undoubtedly, there are students who struggle because they lack the language proficiency tools they need for academic success – and this applies to native speakers, too. It was common ten years ago, at the beginning of the boom in LDB international students coming to Australia, to encounter university staff who attributed academic progress problems to 'a problem with English' (May & Bartlett, 1995). Ten years on, I still hear individual LAS professionals attributing LDB students' academic progress issues to 'a problem with English'. If we define LDB students' – or for that matter, native speaker students' – LAS issues as being primarily linguistic, we risk misconstruing the complexity of the students' needs which may well include lack of academic preparedness, lack of mastery of disciplinary discourse, lack of background knowledge and so on.

We need to challenge the 'problem with English' view via our individual practice. When we work with a student on text, are we explicitly focusing on English language issues, or on the use of appropriate genre, clear focus, wide and critical reading, reasoning, style and presentation? When we work with students preparing oral presentations, are we focusing on the skills and strategies that develop students' confidence, their facility with answering questions, or are we focusing primarily on English language proficiency issues? To what extent do we provide to students – because we are pushed for time or because it is 'easier' – 'quick fixes', editing and proofreading? Unless we carefully construct what we as individuals do, we risk unknowingly constructing a relationship in which all other aspects of students' academic capabilities and achievements are conflated into linguistic ability.

Some students do lack the English language proficiency they need in order to operate successfully in an academic context, but we should not attribute the cause of the lack to the student – it may be a lack of institutional judgement in admitting the student in the first place. Moreover, we should not implicate students with comments such as 'he/she has/must have circumvented university protocols/testing protocols'; or 'he/she has come in through a backdoor'. If students come to our institutions ill-prepared and ill-equipped for academic performance and success, and have circumvented the processes our institutions have established, our role is not to judge the students, nor their practice, but the institutional processes and practices. We must assume the students have used an existing, legitimate pathway into the university – however problematic this pathway may be. It may be that that admissions decisions have been poorly informed, or that there are aspects of a student's application which have not been interrogated, but in such cases we need to use our knowledge to educate staff, not blame the student. If there has been a mis-judgement, we should challenge it in appropriate ways.

Knowingly constructing our individual relationships with students also extends to how we work with them in individual consultations. There are persuasive reasons for offering individual consultations, best put by Chanock (1996, p. 50) who argued they are 'a basis for communication and . . . collaboration with lecturers in the disciplines'. Yet, in constructing our relationships with students, consultations can become, I suspect, 'safe', non-transparent places not just for students, but also for us. It is difficult to see inside a consultation. There is very little public scrutiny of what should or should not happen in them – and in this we are not necessarily different from other university staff. But consultations are a key professional LAS mechanism. Accepting that there will always be a need for flexibility, I would argue that there is a need for much greater induction into and professional scrutiny of individual consultations. If our individual practice is our profession and if consultations are a key, and jointly defended, form of LAS delivery, we need to knowingly construct them and be accountable for them, such that our relationships with students, and the ways in which we work with them, in these fora are explicit.

Consultations can work against jointly constructed LAS practice by 'de-skilling' or 'de-strategising' students, such that a relationship of dependency is constructed. I reflect on statements such as: 'I don't encourage [students] to approach their lecturers and tutors for assistance because they are not comfortable doing so'. This attitude implies that students' questions are 'better' answered in a safe, secure place by us, the inherent risk being that we are constructing an environment which is isolationist, disengaged and non-developmental. De-skilling and/or de-strategising can also equate with 'mothering' or 'nurturing' – there is a clear connection to our feminised LAS profession – both of which connote a pastoral focus, rather than a professional LAS focus. Although there are elements of pastoral care, our work is not counselling *per se*, nor should we describe ourselves as mothering or nurturing, or allow such perceptions of our work – by students or staff – to develop. We need to individually challenge such perceptions.

Knowingly constructing our individual roles with students thus implies that we do not stereotype, we work developmentally, we challenge the myths – particularly those associated with linguistic proficiency and institutional practice – and we carefully evaluate our individual work with students.

Knowingly constructing our role within the academic community

Returning to Vanderwal et al.'s (1999, p. 3) Position Paper, a core professional principle is that we 'collaborate with faculty staff on curriculum, teaching and assessment issues', and that our role is 'integral to the ongoing process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions', a point foregrounded in the draft AALL Mission Statement (Barthel, 28 July 2005). Thus, it is incumbent on us to constructively engage with the academic community – in its entirety – in order to promote quality teaching and learning. Nationally, there are some innovative examples of this: discipline-specific work, the embedding of academic skills within the curriculum, working with professional staff to embed information literacy, tutor training and so on.

Yet, there is often an underlying, implicit rejection of engaging and working with disciplinary staff, captured by the comment addressed earlier: 'I don't encourage [students] to approach their lecturers and tutors for assistance because they are not comfortable

doing so'. Not only is there an assumption that it is 'better' for the students to have their questions and LAS needs dealt with by the LAS professional, but such a view mitigates against engaging with the broader academic community. It can effectively sequester LAS practice and knowledge, and de-strategise the student. It prevents LAS expertise from being recognised and valued in the academic community and, further, mitigates against our professional mission, that is, 'foster[ing] . . . recognition of the academic nature of our work' (Barthel, 28 July 2005).

Individual consultations can also work against LAS practice, particularly if they are used in ways which mitigate against negotiating with disciplinary staff for better outcomes for students. Martins (2004, pp. 76-77) puts it well: 'To have students engaging with us does not [necessarily] increase their interaction with their peers in class or with their lecturers or tutors'. Our professional role is to induct students into ways of approaching disciplinary staff in order that students develop the skills and confidence with which to engage and interact. If we sequester students, there is less likelihood of them becoming what we value – independent and responsible for their own learning.

If we take a developmental approach to learning, we operate from the basis that all students can gain the knowledge, skills and strategies they need in order to successfully operate within the academic community. It may not be – for the students or us – an easy process. Rejection, intimidation, and exclusion are no strangers to the relationships students have with university staff. But there are in every institution, policies and procedures designed to assist students in the process of engagement. Students have rights, and the academic community has responsibilities, and *vice versa*. Our role is to ensure that the students know about and have recourse to the knowledge, skills, and strategies that will enable them to successfully navigate the hurdles that affect their academic progress.

Sequestering our professional practice in individual consultations may also reinforce a sense of individual marginalisation, a phenomenon about which we complain in terms of our overall professional status, and reinforce a deep professional psychosis, that is, academics do 'real' work (see Lee, 1997; Webb, 2002). There is again a sense of 'us and them' and a severe undermining of our professional expertise. Communicating what we do and how we do it benefits us by providing more opportunities for our work to be known and recognised. It also benefits students: rather than fishing them out of the river, we stop them falling in. And there are key points at which they fall in, including transition points, course delivery, and assessment practice. Unless we feed back into the academic community what we know - about how well students are prepared for university, how well they are taught, how assessment tasks are confusing or problematic, difficulties in supervisory relationships and so on - we exacerbate students' struggles and dependence, and a sense of LAS marginality.

Knowingly constructing our role within the university community, then, needs to begin with holding up an academic community mirror and analysing what is reflected in it. Is our work known? In what ways is our work described? How often is our expertise sought? How often do we stand beside disciplinary staff in the lecture theatre/tutorial room? As individuals, we need to knowingly construct how we are reflected in the mirror. When we see scrawled on a marked essay 'Go to the LAS Centre – you have a problem with English', and this is not the problem, we must feed this knowledge back into the academic community. When we realise there is a 'problem' in a particular faculty because students

are staying away or coming in droves, we must also feed that back. If we are hearing from the academic community – implicitly or explicitly – the terms 'remediation', Chinese/Confucian cultural heritage students', 'study skills', 'linguistic difficulties', then there is a problem with what or how we are communicating about what we do to the academic community, and what we know about students' academic skills and learning experiences. And if, at the same time, our professional role and expertise is relatively invisible to the academic community, then we are unknowingly constructing a destiny which is at odds with our core principles.

Knowingly constructing our individual roles with the academic community thus implies that we do not sequester the knowledge we have of students' LAS needs; rather, we actively engage with the academic community, feeding back information and challenging the myths about what we do and why.

Knowingly constructing our role within the institution

Disseminating information to the 'wider academic community through publications, and in the practice of the profession within tertiary institutions' was in 1999, and is currently, a core objective of the LAS profession (Vanderwal et al. 1999, p. 5; Barthel, 28 July 2005). How we knowingly construct our relationship within our institution is a key LAS concern. As alluded to earlier, our individual practice is our profession. Thus, if we profess to be experts on LAS issues – from time/project management, through to professional journal article writing, to online resources development and consultancy work – we have to match our claim with exemplary practice. Yet, were the academic community to critically assess our individual practice vis-a-vis our rhetoric, what would it note?

The academic community may note that at conferences, for example, we struggle with time management – given fifteen minutes, we want more. They may note that often our workshop programs do not include aims and objectives. They may note that we do not always know the outcomes we want or the criteria by which we evaluate what we do. They may note the quality of our overheads (readability and clarity) and our mastery of technology. They may note our editing prowess – not something in which we profess to be expert, but which is associated nevertheless. I recall Chanock's concern after refereeing the 2001 LAS conference proceedings: 'we have still got some way to go in the area of proofreading. . . . And inconsistencies in references were only the tip of the iceberg'. She expressed her chagrin, given that 'we're supposed to teach other people to control their writing' (Chanock, 2002). Zeegers (18 May 2004) iterated this concern with *'In the future . . .'*, the proceedings of the 2003 LAS conference: 'the quality of the writing and the academic merit of some [a few] of the non-accepted papers was woeful, when one considers that the authors are those who assist students in the development of their academic skills'. The academic community may also note our struggle with creating posters, writing reports, writing abstracts, speaking in small and large groups and so on. Students watching us 'strut our professional stuff' on time management may note how we may not prioritise, think ahead, prepare in advance, start and finish on time, synthesise and distil, acknowledge sources, obtain feedback and so on. In all these ways we are knowingly or unknowingly creating perceptions of our role within the institution.

One of the other key ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly construct our relationships with the institution is through our writing. If we are tasked with teaching students how to take control of their writing, we must work towards mastering our own – understanding the nature of the task, what guidelines exist and what strategies we must incorporate, and we must seek review and feedback. When we take on a professional task, we need to demonstrate – individually – our mastery of that task, be it an abstract, an introduction, a conclusion, a particular kind of report, or a poster. We need to use this mastery to knowingly construct perceptions of our role within the institution. As an example, occasionally disciplinary staff approach us, as higher degree students, wanting advice on writing a conference paper or journal article, developing a literature review and so on. The advice we give rewards us twofold. We may have worked with a student, but we have also demonstrated our professional expertise to a disciplinary staff member. If they are impressed with our work, they are more likely to value and promote what we offer their students. Their perceptions of what we do, how we do it and why will contribute to them knowingly constructing a perception of our work with their colleagues and their students. If this is positive, and they can see that we are integral to their learning, it is for us invaluable. We can demonstrate – individually – that we are doing *real* work.

On a broader scale, within the institution, when we present cross-institutional or faculty-based programs, we must be exemplary too – we are the individual faces of our profession. We need to have mastery of our 'brief'' as it relates to the students with whom we work and their teaching and learning needs. In other words, we need to do our homework. We cannot be all these things if we perceive ourselves to be *just* teachers or, even worse, *just remedial* teachers. Some of our best teaching experiences in relation to understanding LAS issues as they apply to students is through having to undertake – and unpack – our own experiences of working in a new area, in a new forum, with very little prior learning.

We could well take heed of our own advice to students in terms of knowingly constructing our relationships within our institutions. If students conceptualise themselves as *just* students, without rights and with no real power, professionally our role is to negotiate the problem and identify the resources, strategies and skills they can use to seek redress. It is self-defeating to imagine oneself without power. Too often that 'imaginary power' is associated with being classified as either 'Academic' or 'General' staff – yet, in the latest survey of LAS classifications in Australian universities (Barthel, 26 July 2005), it is clear that the profession is relatively evenly balanced across the classifications, and there have been some significant and powerful examples of LAS collaboration, regardless of LAS staff classifications. Our individual power to change practice within our institutions is not necessarily limited – unless we choose it to be. And if we regard ourselves as *just* teachers, marginalized from the academic community, choice does not operate at all.

Knowingly constructing our role within the institution also relates to how we network, undertake committee work and contribute to university policy. In networking we need to convey to others our professional worth and the academic nature of the work we do, and be prepared to professionally deliver. We need to research the university community – know where its strengths and weaknesses are, know where the power lies, and knowingly negotiate and construct strategies and solutions. It takes time, energy, preparation and research, but if we want to break out of the '*just* teachers, at the margin' paradigm, and bring ourselves and the work we do into the centre, it is essential. Committee work is an opportunity to take networking to a different level, and to ensure that our voices are heard

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within the university community. If we believe that our students are disadvantaged – in whatever way – not only should we be aware of policy as it relates to these matters, but we should also contribute to new policy formation.

Conclusion

The launch of the Association of Academic Language and Learning provides yet another important mechanism with which we can communicate to others what we do professionally. The Association, its finalised Mission Statement, its goals, and its nascent website and journal are tools we can use to knowingly and jointly construct perceptions of what we do. Used well, these mechanisms will assist in profiling and communicating our work, provide professional leverage, perhaps enhance our professional status. But these tools are only as powerful as we, as individuals, make them. Having a professional profile will not necessarily change our perceptions of ourselves and the perceptions that others have of us. As individuals, we must work to knowingly construct our relationships with students, with academics and with the institutions in which we work. In this, our professional rhetoric must match our individual practice. Our practice is our profession, more so than in disciplinary areas, and how our individual LAS practice is reflected in the academic community mirror will determine how well we are reflected in the core business of universities.

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