

# The John Grierson Keynote: Critiquing and reflecting

**Kate Chanock**  
La Trobe University  
[c.chanock@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:c.chanock@latrobe.edu.au)

**Abstract:** *To begin this conference by remembering John Grierson feels exactly right. In his career and in himself, John combined the qualities that we, as LAS practitioners, would most like to bring to higher education: a passion for teaching, combined with a critical perspective; and a commitment to developing a collaborative community around our work. We can only hope to do these things with the gentle humour, and sense of proportion, that his colleagues remember in John. This conference has been dedicated to examining the progress we have (and have not) made, as a professional community, over the last ten years, and the ways in which we would like to consolidate and advance our position. We have been invited to reflect critically on all aspects of our work and on our institutional roles and relationships; and we hope to emerge with an association, a name, and a journal. The process of debating these matters over the last year or so has revealed dissatisfaction with the identities assigned to us by our institutions, though it has not produced unanimity about the identities we would prefer to project. The concerns expressed have been less about the work we do than about the ways that others perceive it. In this address, I would like to explore the implications of these discussions, for ourselves and for the kind of association we want to take into the future.*

**Key words:** *professional, community, identity*

## What we are here for

I want to start this address with a cliché. In my experience, clichés are clichés because they have proved true and appropriate again and again, and it is in this spirit that I wish to say how honoured I am to be asked to give this keynote address. It would be an honour, in any case, to be asked to open the LAS Conference, but this is more special still, because we are coming together to remember John Grierson. John's death in 2003 ended a working life whose trajectory resonates, in one way or another, with so many in this room. His enthusiasm for experiencing and appreciating cultures not his own; his movement into teaching ESL, and from there into a university learning centre; his involvement in teaching, in producing learning materials, in collaborating with faculty staff

in the disciplines; his concern for students who faced more than the usual challenges to make equal opportunity a practical reality: we share these enthusiasms and these concerns, and John has been an inspiration to us in our work. His personal qualities, his ideas and their implementation were a gift to the colleagues who worked with him, and his efforts to establish a professional community in our region, through his moderation of the Unilearn discussion list, are a valuable legacy to all of us in LAS.

Although it recalls our sadness at losing John, therefore, it feels most appropriate to begin this conference by remembering him. John combined the qualities that we, as LAS practitioners, would most like to bring to higher education: a passion for teaching, combined with a critical perspective; and a commitment to developing a collaborative community around our work. We can only hope to do these things with the gentle humour, and sense of proportion, that his colleagues remember in John.

This conference has been dedicated to examining the progress we have (and have not) made, as a professional community, over the last ten years, and the ways in which we would like to consolidate and advance our position. We have been invited to reflect critically on all aspects of our work and on our institutional roles and relationships; and we hope to emerge with an association, a name, and a journal. The process of debating these matters over the last year or so has revealed dissatisfaction with the identities assigned to us by our institutions, though it has not produced unanimity about the identities we would prefer to project. The concerns expressed have been less about the work we do than about the ways that others perceive it. In this address, I would like to explore the implications of these discussions, for ourselves and for the kind of association we want to take into the future.

## **What we are trying to address**

The concerns brought to the surface by our collective decision to form an organisation have been present since the early days of LAS in our region. Well before the first LAS conference at La Trobe, there were annual Australian Study Skills conferences, at which many of these concerns were aired, including the difficulty of getting our work recognised and understood beyond our circle, and the very modest material rewards for doing it (see, e.g., Samuelowicz, 1990). Professional identity, institutional status, inadequate resources, and misconceptions about the nature of our work are discussed year after year, in our tea rooms, our conferences, our publications, and on Unilearn. Many of our publications have been exercises in self-definition, aimed at sharing, questioning, clarifying, elaborating, and extending the nature of our work, for each other as well as for outsiders, for we have had to work hard at building our field at the same time as working within it. A key moment in this collective exploration of what LAS is and should be about was the publication, before most of us were active in LAS (and, indeed, before LAS had a name), of *Literacy by Degrees* (Taylor et al., 1988).

The first LAS Conference, held at La Trobe in 1994, was not, therefore, the first conference of LAS practitioners, but it was a revival of collective activity after several years during which, though meetings had been shelved, the number of LAS positions in the region was quietly expanding. When we convened the first conference, in fact, we had no idea how many of us there were across Australia, and our surprise at the attendance (by

around 150 people) was echoed by other participants. Many of us had felt isolated and uncertain, in some respects, about what our work should entail, and the chief benefit of that first conference was to establish a large and lively community of interest, a social and intellectual reference group for what we do.

A year later, we felt strong enough to start squabbling amongst ourselves. The Working Conference at Bendigo in 1995, which produced the very useful 'Position Statement: academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers in Australian universities' by Vanderwal, Hicks, McGowan, and Carmichael (1999), was not so much a meeting as an ordeal. I mention this because we are here to critique as well as to reflect. On the one hand, the document that resulted from that conference shows that we should not be afraid to disagree, for its apparent consensual quality belies the heated discussions from which it emerged. On the other hand, I would be sorry to go through such an experience again, and it is possible to identify some of the reasons for the difficulties that, at the time, the organisers did not in the least expect. First, some of the participants expressed suspicions about the agenda, and possible hidden agenda, of the conference organisers. This was partly because it was a small gathering, by invitation. The organisers had thought this likely to be more efficient, for co-drafting a document, than a larger free-for-all, and no doubt they were right about that; but to some, it suggested an intention to impose decisions that had not been democratically arrived at, and that is something we will be wise to avoid now and in the future. The other source of tension was that the working conference focussed on industrial matters which might affect our livelihood. In defining our values, our principles, and our objectives, we were in broad agreement; it was the section on 'Qualifications, experience, and research' that exposed the differences among our visions of who we were and how inclusive our profession ought to be. Could anybody come into LAS work, from any intellectual background? Or must they be qualified in education, ESL, or linguistics? How far must they have gone up the ladder of postgraduate qualifications? How much experience must they have accumulated already? This section was eventually drafted to accommodate demands for greater inclusiveness, and this is something I hope to see maintained as we consolidate our professional identity.

In the end, we emerged with a statement of enduring usefulness, the main features of which (briefly summarised) were LAS practitioners' commitment to:

- Equality of opportunity for all learners, and appreciation of cultural diversity
- Enhancement of students' skills and strategies for their courses and for lifelong learning
- Use of a variety of teaching modes, and collaboration with discipline staff on curriculum, teaching, and assessment issues
- Recognition that our role is developmental rather than remedial, academic rather than auxiliary, and 'integral to the ongoing process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions'
- Research and professional development of LAS practitioners (as individuals)
- Development of LAS as a profession
- Secure funding for LAS services 'appropriate for the student population'
- Development of appropriate working conditions and methods of performance appraisal that recognise the 'unique nature of the work' and reward it fairly (quoted passages are from Vanderwal et al., 1999).

In most of these goals, we have made considerable progress. With respect to funding, equitable working conditions, and opportunities to participate in research and professional activities, however, much remains to be desired, and some units have even experienced setbacks (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004). This underlines the urgency that many of us feel about the need to form a national organisation to collect and make available the ideas, experiences, and information that may help us to resist erosion of our working conditions and perhaps to secure improvements. Vanderwal et al. (1999) put very succinctly the concern of LAS advisers, that:

Effective work with undergraduate and post graduate students and other academic staff requires that academic skills lecturers are personally engaged in academic work, both to advance the theoretical basis of their field and to have advisory credibility within an academic environment. It is essential that academic and learning skills advisers are integrated within the academic structure of their institution.

Despite the gains we have made, it is clear from themes of the last two LAS conferences as well as this present one, and from Unilearn discussions throughout the time that the discussion list has run, that we continue to have problems in relation to our professional identity, and I would like to look at these more closely in the remainder of this address.

## What's in a name?

Many of our discussions have been about the words we do not want to use in describing ourselves and the work we do. The words most likely to be shunned include 'skills', 'language', 'English', 'support', and 'advisers'. There are, I think, three reasons for our desire to distance ourselves from the denotations and connotations of these terms. One is that we are a diverse crowd, hailing from ESL, from linguistics, from counselling, from education, and a host of other disciplines, and terms like 'English' and 'language' seem to foreground some of us and background others. A second reason is the simple inconvenience of having people ring us up because they think we are the English or linguistics or foreign languages department, and having to transfer their calls; or else not having people ring us up for LAS advice because they think we are one of those other departments, and missing out on appointments that they really need. The most important reason, however, is our fundamental misgivings about the silent 'mere' that accompanies words like 'skills' and 'support': that is, we worry that these words will be understood to mean that if we teach skills, we *merely* teach skills, or if we support students, we *merely* support them.

The first problem should just remind us, I think, that any form of words we settle on should be encompassing rather than apparently exclusive. Our diversity is a source of richness in our field, and should not be a source of division. The second problem is trivial, but real. Perhaps it is futile to try to buck against Bock's Law (as enunciated by Hanne Bock, my colleague at La Trobe in the late 1980s) – 'Whatever can be misunderstood, will be; and whatever cannot be misunderstood, will also be'. However, it would be more efficient to have a name that generates less confusion, and perhaps we can accomplish this today and tomorrow.

The third problem, however, is not at all trivial; it is at the heart of many problems we experience in our work, as well as the problem of finding a satisfactory public face to project. Nor are we alone in this dilemma of the silent 'mere', for writing tutors in the United States have been struggling with it for decades. In 'The idea of a writing centre', published in 1984, Stephen North complained, 'My colleagues . . . do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center' (p. 433). Six years later, this problem was reiterated by Muriel Harris, who noted that 'There seems to be a long and tenacious tradition of not understanding or misunderstanding what writing centers are about' (1990, p. 18); and Hemmeter (1990) wrote that 'To read the publications of writing center teachers and administrators is to listen to a disenfranchised voice from the margins telling a tale of painful marginality' (p. 35).

Ironically, we owe our jobs to the very misconceptions about the nature of academic skills that we deplore. The LAS profession would not have been established were it not for the perception, widespread among discipline lecturers, that many students arrive at university deficient in skills they should have learned at school, and that remedial work focusing on the correct use of language can make up this deficit. Ann Johns (1997) has found that lecturers across a range of disciplines believe there is a single set of academic values:

good writing, effective reading, careful listening and note-taking, and sound critical thinking . . . . Most faculty believe quite sincerely that literacy instructors can teach students some generalized approaches to each of these academic values, which will serve the students in every context and disciplinary culture (p. 34; see also Odell, 1992, pp. 86-87).

These 'generalized approaches' are the 'skills' from which we have come to distance ourselves as our experience of LAS advising has deepened. Immersed in the textual practices of higher education, we have come to realize that literacies are multiple, situated, and contested, as Lea and Street (1998) have argued, and that the common view of literacy as an autonomous set of mechanical skills (Street & Street, 1991) is quite inadequate. On the one hand, it underestimates the novelty and complexity of the challenges our students face, such that their struggles to express themselves effectively for academic purposes are ongoing and developmental, rather than remedial. On the other hand, it fails to recognize the intellectual interest inherent in the work that we do (Johns, 1997, p. 73); and this is frustrating both personally and also professionally, if we are denied funding for scholarly activities.

Perhaps it would be useful to explore the nature of skill more thoroughly, but our inclination has been rather to reject the label of skills adviser. We do not wish to be identified with a dualistic way of thinking (Russell, 1991) that artificially separates research from teaching, theory from practice, knowledge from skill, content from form, ideas from language, and thought from expression. It is the dualistic idea that language serves as a 'vehicle' for thought which generates the familiar images of the 'fix-it shop' (North, 1984), or the 'grammar garage' working 'on the sentence-level problems of underprepared student writers' (Waldo, 1990, p. 75). Our students are poorly served by such a limited understanding of the nature of skill, and we have been held back by it professionally. In each pair of terms above, the first is valued and privileged over the second, to which a silent 'mere' becomes attached. Nor is it always silent, for as Squires (1990, pp. 42-43)

,has pointed out, the academy defines itself in terms of research, theory, and knowledge, as distinct from 'mere' practice and skill. Because of this dualism, lecturers

often fail to understand their responsibilities in promoting literacy in every class through the active teaching of reading and writing as related to 'ways of being' in the disciplines, . . . [and] the entire responsibility for student literacy, and its intricate relationship with communities of practice and their genres, falls, in many cases, on marginalized literacy units within an academic context. (Johns, 1997, p. 153)

As we have come to understand the limitations of the dualistic conception of skills, we have gone beyond our original brief as LAS advisers to look at these 'ways of being', and to look at the 'intricate relationships' between students' literacies and the discourse communities to which they submit their work (e.g., Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Ivanic, 1998; Chanock, 1998, 2004; Moore, 1999). Not only our thinking but our modes of teaching have developed accordingly so that, as Vance and Crosling (1998) have noted, our offerings of 'generic courses in academic skills' have been giving way, increasingly, to 'more context-specific instruction . . . [and] integrated programs run in collaboration with discipline specialists, to the benefit of the entire student cohort' (p. 362). Involvement in such programs has, in turn, raised our profiles in our institutions, but a residual misunderstanding of our work persists in many places.

It is this misunderstanding that makes us want to dissociate ourselves from any terms which may suggest that our work is basic rather than advanced, autonomous rather than imbricated in the intellectual mosaic of academic endeavour (terms such as 'language' or 'English'); that it is mechanical rather than intellectual (terms such as 'skills'); or that it is auxiliary rather than central (terms such as 'support', 'service', or 'adviser'). As I noted earlier, the contestation and rejection of such terms has formed a large part of the discussion about the nature and naming of our professional association, suggesting a preoccupation both with our own identity and with the way that others in our institutions perceive us.

I would like to suggest that these two aspects should be disentangled, in the interests of clarifying our thinking as we consider the names and aims proposed for our institution. There is nothing wrong with supporting and advising students, and there is nothing wrong with language or skills. Language is something that we value and enjoy, or we would not be in this line of work. A skill is an idea in action, an intention fulfilled, an ability to join action to thought that is no more divisible, despite the pervasiveness of dualism in Western thinking, than mind is divisible from body. It is possible to analyse and make visible the ways in which forms work with contents, but that is not the same as separating them out. Nor is it 'mere'; it is, after all, what art historians do with paintings, what sociologists do with institutions, what literary scholars do with poetry, what historians do with events. I am sure that you can supply a great many more examples from fields beyond my area of humanities and social sciences.

Nor are support and assistance unworthy activities. A large part of our job satisfaction comes from helping students to understand the contexts and cultures within which they work, and helping them to shape their performances in ways that make sense to them as well as finding favour with their audiences. Our problem is not with the roles and activities

of LAS advising, but with the 'mere' that others have attached to these; and if we collude by repudiating these roles and activities, we risk suggesting that they *are* inherently less worthwhile than the work of people in the disciplines.

In combating the misperceptions that others have about our work, however, it may well make sense to use language that sidesteps these. The proposal that we name our association the Association of Academic Language and Learning, which we are presently considering, has been arrived at after much discussion both of what we are and of what we are not, with a view to representing ourselves to our institutions and the wider public. At the same time, the enunciation of the association's aims in the draft mission statement – a document chiefly for ourselves -- does not shy away from mentioning skills and support, but contextualises these as part of the development of learning. Similarly, the LAS Conference website this year describes the work of LAS advisers in the following terms:

Our primary role . . . is to assist students to understand the cultures, purposes and conventions of different academic genres and practices. In this respect, our work is developmental, not remedial. We don't 'fix' problems - rather, we teach students the strategies and skills with which they can achieve the outcomes to which they aspire. This objective of teaching students how to take control of their academic writing and learning is fundamental to our pedagogic philosophy. (Academic Skills and Learning Centre, 2005)

## What benefits may a professional association bring?

As we embark on incorporation as an Association, we start a new chapter in our collective narrative; and this seems like a good time to ask ourselves what it is important to carry over from earlier chapters. I think our great strength, up to this point, has been our commitment to mutuality: with our students, with our colleagues in our institutions, and with one another. We have shared ideas and resources without reservation, and contributed to conferences without rivalry and without diffidence. I think it is important to keep this in mind as we expand and develop more formal procedures, to ensure that increasing professionalism will support, rather than undermine, our sense of community.

We have achieved a great deal in the way of professional development without a formal association, but we have reached a point where our numbers are large enough, and our activities and interests various enough, to be able to benefit from a greater level of organisation. It will be good to have a website where we can lodge our resources and draw upon materials created, and information collected, by colleagues all around our region. Announcements of conferences and other professional activities will be easier to locate, and publishing opportunities should increase. But we will be wise to resist the temptation to establish our credentials by simply raising the bar for our members. It is all too easy for editors and reviewers to take on the mantle of gatekeepers, when their expertise is more usefully employed in helping less experienced writers to shape their papers for publication. It is easy to privilege theory over lore, and statistics over stories; but more useful to explore what kinds of insights can be gained from all these sources.

## Conclusion

The momentum that has brought us to this point of forming an Association has been developed by valuing our work and the people who do it. Our purpose in forming a professional organisation is to promote this work and demonstrate its value, as well as to improve the conditions under which we do it. At the same time, professionalism carries with it a responsibility to reflect critically on our own performance, so it is appropriate that the organisers of this Conference have asked us to address the theme, 'critiquing and reflecting'. In this address, I have tried to critique and reflect upon some aspects of the process that has brought us here; but mine is only one perspective, and I very much look forward to hearing many others over the next two days.

## References

- Academic Skills and Learning Centre. (2005). Who are LAS advisers/lecturers? Retrieved 25 May 2005, from The Australian National University Academic Skills and Learning Centre website: [http://www.anu.edu.au/academicskills/las2005/las\\_who\\_are\\_las\\_advisers.php](http://www.anu.edu.au/academicskills/las2005/las_who_are_las_advisers.php).
- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1988). Literacy in the university: An 'anthropological' approach. In G. Taylor, B. Ballard, V. Beasley, H. Bock, J. Clanchy, & P. Nightingale (Eds.), *Literacy by degrees* (pp. 7-23). Milton Keynes: SHRE and Open University Press.
- Chanock, K. (1995). Disciplinary subcultures and the teaching of academic writing. In K. Chanock (Ed.) *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines: Proceedings of the Conference held at La Trobe University November 21-21, 1994* (pp. 9-15). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units, La Trobe University.
- Chanock, K. (1998). 'The only native speaker in the room'. In J. Tapper & P. Gruber (Eds.), *ACSC '98: Teaching communication skills in the disciplines: The proceedings of the Australian Communication Skills Conference* (pp. 45-59). Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
- Chanock, K. (2004). A shared focus for WAC, writing tutors and EAP: Identifying the 'academic purposes' in writing across the curriculum. *The WAC Journal*, 15, 19-32.
- Chanock, K., East, J., & Maxwell, J. (2004). Academic and/or general? How the classification of LAS advisers affects us and our institutions. In K. Deller-Evans & P. Zeegers (Eds.), *'In the future . . .': Refereed Proceedings of the 2003 Biannual Language and Academic Skills in Higher Education Conference, 24-25 November 2003* (pp. 43-52). Adelaide: Student Learning Centre, Flinders University.
- Harris, M. (1990). What's up and what's in: Trends and traditions in writing centers. *The Writing Center Journal*, 11 (1), 15-26.
- Hemmeter, T. (1990). The 'smack of difference': The language of writing center discourse. *The Writing Center Journal*, 11 (1), 35-48.
- Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discursive construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Johns, A. (1997). *Text, role and context: Developing academic literacies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lea, M., & Street, B. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23 (2), 157-171.
- Moore, T. (1999). Novice and expert writing in the medical sciences: Report of a program of language assistance for a PhD medical student. *Monash University Linguistics Papers*, 1 (2), 11-20.
- North, S. (1984). The idea of a writing center. *College English* 46, 433-446.
- Odell, L. (1992). Context-specific ways of knowing and the evaluation of writing. In A. Herrington & C. Moran (Eds.), *Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines* (pp. 86-98). New York: MLA.
- Russell, D. (1991). *Writing in the academic disciplines, 1870-1990: A curricular history*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Samuelowicz, K. (1990). Profession, emerging profession or . . . A bag of tricks? Learning skills counsellors in Australian tertiary education institutions. *Eighth Australasian Language and Learning Conference Proceedings* (pp. 99-118). Brisbane: QUT Counselling Services.
- Squires, G. (1990). *First degree: The undergraduate curriculum*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

- Street, J., & Street, B. (1991). The schooling of literacy. In D. Barton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Writing in the community. Written Communication Annual: An international survey of research and theory. Volume 6* (pp. 143-166). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Taylor, G., Ballard, B., Beasley, V., Bock, H., Clanchy, J., & Nightingale, P. (1988). *Literacy by degrees*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Vance, S., & Crosling, G. (1998). Integrating writing skills into the curriculum of the disciplines: A social constructionist approach. In J. Forest (Ed.), *University teaching: International perspectives* (pp. 361-392). New York and London: Garland Publishing.
- Vanderwal, A., Hicks, M., McGowan, U., & Carmichael, E. (1999). The position of academic language and learning advisers/lecturers in Australian universities 1995-1999. Retrieved 25 May 2005, from The Australian National University Academic Skills and Learning Centre Website: [http://www.anu.edu.au/academicskills/las2005/homepage/position\\_statement.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/academicskills/las2005/homepage/position_statement.pdf).
- Waldo, M. (1990). What should the relationship between the writing center and writing program be? *The Writing Center Journal*, 11 (1), 73-80.

