LAS and its disciplinary ambitions

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Abstract: Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners have been vitally interested in legitimating LAS knowledge, practices, and academic identity, primarily to counter institutional marginalisation and institutional misperceptions of who we are and what we do. In the quest for legitimation we have become involved in the process of organising our professional lives (Becher, 1989, p. 1) to improve our profile, status, and visibility. The emergence of the Unilearn discussion list in 1995 (Barthel, 2004) as a forum to share information and resources is one example of this process. Other examples include the organisation of the Language and Academic Skills Conferences, beginning in 1994 at La Trobe University; the 2005 launch of our own professional body, the Association of Academic Language and Learning; and, finally, the claim by some LAS practitioners that LAS is a discipline (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; McLean & Webb, 2002). This paper interrogates the 'disciplinary ambitions' (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993a, p. 19) of LAS, suggesting that the narrative of LAS as a discipline, while pragmatically necessary (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004, p. 45), is conceptually difficult to sustain. The paper concludes by considering LAS as a 'community of practice' (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Webb, 2001) rather than a discipline.

Key words: discipline, socialisation of LAS practitioners, community of practice

Introduction

Being a Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioner involves, to invoke the words of literary theorist Fredric Jameson (1984, p. viii), 'its own kind of legitimation'. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, we have been vitally interested in legitimating LAS knowledge, practices, and academic identity, primarily to counter institutional marginalisation and institutional misperceptions of who we are and what we do. In the quest for legitimation we have become involved in the process of organising our professional lives (Becher, 1989, p. 1) to improve our profile, status, and visibility. Examples of this process of organising

our professional lives include the inaugural Language and Academic Skills Conference at La Trobe University in 1994 and the ones that followed, particularly the 2001 LAS conference, which focused on Identity rather than, as did previous conferences, Language, Learning, Student Needs, or Working with the Disciplines; the emergence of the Unilearn discussion list in 1995 (Barthel, 2004) as a forum to share information and resources; the 2005 launch of our own professional body, the Association of Academic Language and Learning; and, finally, the claim by some LAS practitioners that LAS is a discipline or in the process of becoming one (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995; McLean & Webb, 2002). This paper will interrogate the last of these, the 'disciplinary ambitions' (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993a, p. 19) of LAS.

By the mid-1990s the narrative of LAS as a discipline began to be articulated for historically contingent reasons. I use the term 'narrative' because narratives are what 'communities tell themselves to explain their present existence, their history and ambitions for the future' (Malpas, 2003, p. 21). The narrative gathered momentum at a time when LAS practitioners were beginning to overcome professional isolation via conferences, publications, and the development of Unilearn, when LAS practitioners sought to extricate the work we do from counselling and 'confirm our field as an academic one' (Chanock, 1995, p. 29), when postgraduate qualifications were becoming increasingly important in terms of 'the professional expectations of LAS advisers' (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, p. 8), and when we insisted that our work with students was not remedial but developmental in nature, as stated in *The position of academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers in Australian universities 1995-1999* (Vanderwal, Hicks, McGowan, & Carmichael, 1999). Taken together, these factors have contributed to a strong sense of professional and academic identity. The narrative of disciplinary ambitions that emerged at this time has a positive function, suggesting we, like the rest of the academic community, have mastery over particular content knowledge, that we share an understanding of particular core concepts and ways of reasoning, and that we are involved in the core academic activities of research and teaching.

On the issue of the disciplinary status of LAS, however, Chanock, East, and Maxwell (2004, p. 45) intimated that the 'question of whether we belong to a discipline is perhaps less important conceptually than pragmatically'. This paper suggests that both are equally important: pragmatically, the narrative of LAS as a discipline works to draw attention to the academic nature of our knowledge and practices and to garner institutional credibility; however, that strategically pragmatic function will be compromised if the narrative draws on a conceptually narrow understanding of discipline. This paper first defines discipline, recounts the emergence of the narrative of LAS as a discipline, and, in exploring the processes associated with disciplinary socialisation and reproduction, argues that the idea of LAS as a discipline, while pragmatically necessary, is conceptually difficult to sustain. The paper concludes by considering LAS as a 'community of practice' (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Webb, 2002) rather than a discipline.

Defining discipline

The concept of a discipline encompasses knowledge, organisation, and reproduction. *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines discipline as knowledge, 'a branch of instruction'. Following that, it defines discipline as the system put in place to produce and organise

LAS

that knowledge – 'a department of knowledge' (Onions, 1969, p. 519). For knowledge to be passed on, subjects must be disciplined: 'The training of scholars and subordinates to proper conduct and action by instructing them and exercising them in the same' (Onions, 1969, p. 519). Therefore, in addition to referring to knowledge and its production and organisation, the term discipline refers to power (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991, p. 202).

Recent academic work on the nature of disciplines resonates with the above meanings. First, disciplines produce knowledge and epistemological niches. They do this by identifying 'the objects we can study . . . and the relations that obtain among them' and by 'provid[ing] criteria for our knowledge . . . and methods . . . that regulate our access to it' (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993b, p. vii). Second, to exercise control over this knowledge, disciplines are 'organized and organizing'. Each discipline is situated within an institutional framework and has its own professional associations, publications, hierarchy, and language, all of which enable disciplines to 'assemble, direct, and monitor the processes essential to its functioning' (Messer-Davidow, 2002, p. 20). Finally, in order to function, disciplines must perpetuate themselves, their knowledge and their practices. They do this by 'socializing practitioners' (Messer-Davidow, 2002, p. 20). Disciplines require something to work on and control: they need subjects. As Becher (1989, p. 143) notes, 'The viability of a discipline is also closely bound up with its capacity to attract students'.

Before examining the limitations of the way in which the term discipline figures in the narrative of LAS as a discipline, I will trace the emergence of the narrative.

The emergence of the narrative of LAS as a discipline

Prior to the mid-1990s, the idea of LAS as a discipline had not emerged. There are two possible reasons why it had not. First, LAS practitioners were often isolated, working alone or in small centres, and institutionally positioned within a non-academic context. While some LAS staff were attached to academic development centres or to particular departments and schools, many LAS units or LAS individuals were originally located within general staff locations such as student services, health, counselling, and careers (Quintrell, 1985; Samuelowicz, 1990; Webb & Bonanno, 1994; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Jessup, 2004). Second, in an early study of the situation nationally of 'learning counsellors', Samuelowicz (1990) presented a picture of a group with little sustained experience of disciplinary socialisation, particularly when compared to academics working in a discipline. In terms of the formal academic qualifications of 'learning skills counsellors', Samuelowicz (1990, p. 100) found that of the 57 respondents, 11 had undergraduate qualifications, 25 had had one year of graduate experience (3 with a Diploma in Teaching and 22 with a Graduate Diploma), 19 had a Master's degree, and 2 held a PhD. Of this small sample, more than 60 percent had not experienced the sustained disciplinary socialisation ordinarily associated with having an academic career, that is, a career in a discipline.

In an early paper on LAS identity, Webb and Bonanno (1994) presented a similar overview of LAS marginality, in terms of LAS practitioners lacking professional and disciplinary status. Comparing the professional status of LAS staff with academic staff based in

the disciplines, Webb and Bonanno (1994, p. 130) situated LAS staff in a subservient relationship to the disciplines:

> Subject teachers are typically experts in one discipline, and sometimes have a foot in several other disciplines. Their work is directed towards the same discipline(s). By contrast, although language and learning staff have expertise based in one or a few disciplines, their work is directed towards all disciplines. In this sense, their work *serves* the disciplines.

Their emphasis on the verb 'serves' locates LAS not as a discipline but as an ancillary. Indeed, throughout the paper a master/servant dichotomy maps the differences between academics in the disciplines and LAS practitioners located either in the disciplines or elsewhere.

Developments within LAS that addressed the issue of marginalisation and the lack of disciplinary socialisation created conditions conducive to the emergence of the idea that LAS is a discipline. The 1990s saw the beginning of a regular series of LAS conferences, the establishment of Unilearn, the development of a position statement (Vanderwal et al., 1999), and wider communication among LAS practitioners. On the issue of disciplinary socialisation, the situation seems to have changed. As Craswell and Bartlett (2002) noted in their chronological analysis of advertisements for LAS positions, greater emphasis is being placed on the postgraduate qualifications of potential LAS professionals. More and more LAS practitioners, it would seem, have had intensive disciplinary socialisation, though, as I will suggest later, this socialisation has occurred in a variety of disciplines. In late 2004 I sent out a survey to all Academic Language and Learning Centres, asking for the formal qualifications of staff. Sixteen LAS centres responded, providing information about the qualifications of 137 people. This number of individuals is higher than Samuelowicz's sample of 57. In that survey, 37 percent of respondents had undergone intensive disciplinary socialisation. With my survey, 62 percent of respondents had undergone disciplinary socialisation, with 20 having a PhD and 64 people having a Master's degree (research or coursework).

From the mid-1990s onwards, LAS practitioners began to float the idea of LAS as a discipline. Famously, the Victorian Language and Learning Network meeting in November 1994 inspired a collection of essays whose subtitle made explicit the direction some LAS practitioners saw the profession moving: *Academic skills advising: Towards a discipline* (1995). In the introduction to the volume, Garner et al. (1995, p. 2) made the following, and relatively brief, justification for their use of the term 'discipline':

> We included the word in the title to this collection because we believe that the practice of ours is formed by perspectives from a number of parent disciplines – philosophy, applied linguistics, education, psychology. Perhaps one of the marks of a maturing discipline is the passion and urgency with which it identifies and grapples with a series of key issues. If so, then language and academic skills bids fair to be included among the disciplines in higher education.

Similarly, the term 'discipline' figures in the introduction to *Academic skills advising: Evaluation for program improvement and accountability*, the second volume in the series. Referring to the earlier volume, McLean and Webb characterised its essays as 'scoping

some of the issues confronting the then relatively new discipline of academic skills advising' (c2002, p. 1). Indeed, the idea of LAS as a discipline brackets their discussion of the volume's essays. At the conclusion of their introduction, McLean and Webb mention that the essays in the second volume extend the aim of the first volume, that is, 'to share current practice and encourage debate on issues that affect our discipline' (c2002, p. 4).

The idea that LAS was a discipline, though not developed extensively by Garner et al. (1995), gained currency. At the start of the 21st century, more and more LAS practitioners have begun to perceive themselves as belonging to a discipline. In the proceedings of the 2003 LAS conference, *'In the future . . .'* (Deller-Evans & Zeegers, 2004), for example, various authors refer to LAS as a discipline. Zeegers saw the development of a LAS professional organisation as a necessary first step for LAS 'to be seen as an academic discipline' (2004, p. 31). Elsewhere, Chanock et al. connected the number of publications produced by LAS practitioners 'to a strong desire for LAS advisors to build on our discipline knowledge' (2004, p. 47). Percy and Stirling (2004, p. 53) invoked a metaphor of efflorescence when speaking of LAS coming of age as a discipline. Similarly, Unilearn postings on that perennial issue of academic versus general staff classification in LAS units have been framed in relation to the disciplinary status of LAS. For example, McLean argued that '[t]he classification issue IS vital for our discipline' (2004), a view echoed Clerehan (2004).

Interestingly, the narrative is characterised by a tentativeness that works to undermine the claims being made for LAS as a discipline: '*Perhaps* one of the marks of a maturing discipline is the passion and urgency with which it identifies and grapples with a series of key issues. *If so*, then language and academic skills bids fair to be included among the disciplines in higher education' (Garner et al., 1995, p. 2, my emphasis). These qualifications create a sense of uncertainty about the very notion of LAS as a discipline. Similarly, Maxwell, Chanock, and East (2003) hedge on the issue of whether or not LAS is a discipline. After quoting the above-mentioned quotation from Garner et al., they follow it with: '*If that is true*, a cursory glance at some of the key issues identified and discussed within the academic publications of LAS advisers leaves us in no doubt that they have been written from within an engaged and self-conscious academic discipline' (p. 2, my emphasis). This, I argue, is a big if.

The emergence of this narrative has not gone unchallenged, though objections to the use of the term 'discipline' to characterise LAS as a profession have, overall, been few. When the term 'discipline' figured in Unilearn discussions in 2002, the use of the term was debated. In a series of posts over the issue of the reclassification of academic skills advisers from academic to general staff experienced by advisers at Edith Cowan University, various writers used the term. Zeegers (2002), for instance, linked the reclassification issue to the fact 'that we are not regarded as a discipline in our own right'. This viewpoint carried no favour with Davies (2002), who stated categorically: 'To view our area as "a discipline in its own right" is folly'.

Terms other than 'discipline' have been used to refer to LAS, the most common of which would be profession. While at the start of the 1990s Samuelowicz (1990) deployed the term to interrogate whether LAS practitioners as a group could be characterised as a profession or an emergent profession, by the end of the 1990s the assumption that we were a profession informed the development of our position statement. Indeed, the

position statement concentrates on issues related to professional status, integration into the institutional community, tenure, funding, and so on. In formalising aspects of LAS practice and representing a professional identity for LAS practitioners, the position statement had a pragmatic purpose. It sought to repudiate one identity that had been bestowed on LAS practitioners, that of remediators, and put another in its place, one that emphasised the 'knowledge, professional insights, and expertise' (Vanderwal et al., 1999, n. p.) of LAS practitioners. In her plenary address at the LAS 2001 Conference, Webb (2002) consistently viewed LAS practitioners as belonging to a profession, referring to LAS as a 'profession' (p. 2) and to us as a 'group of professionals' (p. 3) and 'LAS professionals' (p. 15).

LAS and its disciplinary ambitions: a critique

As mentioned earlier, Chanock et al. (2004) remarked in passing: 'The question of whether we belong to a discipline is perhaps less important conceptually than pragmatically' (p. 45). While the pragmatic work associated with the narrative of LAS as a discipline is important, the narrative needs to be underpinned by a robust conceptual understanding of what makes a discipline a discipline. If the narrative of LAS as a discipline relies on an insufficiently developed and narrowly argued understanding of discipline, then the pragmatic force and effectiveness of the narrative will be diminished. To be successful in a pragmatic sense, the narrative of LAS as a discipline should forward a view of a discipline that is consistent with the way in which the university generally conceptualises disciplines. The narrative, therefore, needs to account for knowledge, organisation, and reproduction.

In relation to the first meaning associated with discipline, that of knowledge, there is little dispute that LAS practitioners produce knowledge of an academic kind; for those in doubt, consult Maxwell et al.'s (2003) list of LAS publications or refer to any of the LAS conference proceedings. With regard to the notion of a discipline being 'organized and organizing', LAS is currently in the process of doing this, as the launch of the Association of Academic Language and Learning attests, but there is still much to be done. This paper concerns itself with an aspect of discipline that the narrative of LAS as a discipline has not addressed: reproduction. It is in this area that the limitations of the narrative can be critiqued.

The first limitation of the narrative of LAS as a discipline, its emphasis on knowledge, is paradoxically one of its strengths. While the concept of a discipline centres on the interconnections between knowledge, organisation, and reproduction, the narrative of LAS as a discipline primarily focuses on the first meaning associated with discipline. With this pragmatically narrow focus, the narrative convincingly demonstrates that LAS practitioners produce academic knowledge, and this is consistent with what disciplines do. Garner et al. (1995), for example, focus on the object of study and the production of knowledge. Others emphasise LAS research and teaching (Maxwell et al., 2003; Clerehan, 2004). Garner et al. (1995) forward two reasons for LAS being seen as a discipline – first, that LAS knowledge draws on various disciplines and, second, that it grapples passionately and urgently 'with a series of key issues' (p. 2). However, this is a conceptually narrow representation of what constitutes a discipline. Disciplines do more than produce and control knowledge, share discourse and ways of reasoning, and

LAS

engage in research and teaching; they also induct others into the discipline, that is, they reproduce subjects.

The second limitation of the narrative of LAS as a discipline is that it does not address the issue of power, that is, the role disciplinary socialisation plays in reproducing a particular disciplinary identity. To maintain their presence and function within the institution, disciplines need disciplinary subjects, commonly known as students. Without subjects, disciplines would have nothing to organise, no bodies or minds to shape. As Lenoir (1993, p. 72) notes in relation to science: 'Disciplines are institutionalized formations for organizing schemes of perception, appreciation, and action, and for inculcating them as tools of cognition and communication'. To arrive at some sort of disciplinary competence, the student 'has to learn the central concepts and theories, certainly; but also the tacit rules of reasoning, and the unspoken criteria for making inferences . . . [T]he governing paradigms and their exemplars have to be understood, and accepted as the way of doing things' (Barnett, 1990, p. 177). To practice in a discipline, an individual has to be disciplined, a process that usually takes three or more years of graduate study and involves voluntary submission to the relations of power embedded in the way a discipline produces knowledge, what Lenoir (1993, p. 73) calls 'the internalization of patterns of discourse, structures of knowledge, and modes of practice'. This process of internalization requires, as most graduates would attest, compliance. Reflecting on his graduate student experience, Cohen (1993, p. 406) highlights the cost an individual pays when being subjected to disciplinary reproduction: 'my institutional vulnerability subjected me to the somatic effects of normalization'. At the end of disciplinary training, normalised subjects are then ready to think and act in a specific disciplinary framework. The narrative of LAS as a discipline has to consider such questions as: Whom does LAS discipline? Who are our subjects? How do we reproduce LAS knowledge?

Finally, in situating LAS practice and knowledge in relation to 'a number of parent disciplines – philosophy, applied linguistics, education, psychology' (Garner et al., 1995, p. 2), the narrative of LAS as a discipline does not sufficiently account for the heterogeneity of LAS practitioners and their disciplinary backgrounds. For LAS practitioners educated in these parent disciplines, epistemological continuity may exist between the disciplinary socialisation of their graduate experience and LAS knowledge and practice. For LAS practitioners educated in other disciplines, for example, Biology, English, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Engineering, or Anthropology, there may be a disconnection between their disciplinary socialisation and their present position in LAS. Zeegers (2002) articulated this sense of disjunction: 'I am a chemist by training but now an educational psychologist through practice'. Similarly, when Percy and Stirling (2004) considered the situation of a neophyte LAS practitioner with a background in the Humanities, they identified two types of LAS practitioners: those disciplined in one of the parent disciplines and those disciplined in other disciplines. Neophyte LAS practitioners with a background in 'language, literacy, learning and/or pedagogy' (Percy & Stirling, 2004, p. 55) would be unlikely to wonder 'exactly what is it we do and why?' (Percy & Stirling, 2004, p. 53). In contrast, neophyte LAS practitioners disciplined in other disciplines would most likely be forced to contemplate that question.

An alternative to seeing LAS as a discipline is to see it as a community of practice. Developed by Etienne Wenger and invoked by Webb at the LAS 2001 Conference, the concept of a community of practice refers to a group of people 'who share a concern,

a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). We could in fact characterise the process of developing a professional LAS identity during the 1990s, as documented by Craswell and Bartlett (2002) and Webb (2002), as the process of becoming a community of practice:

> Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice. (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5)

Likewise, Webb (2002) views LAS practitioners as sharing 'a common set of goals and interests . . . [and] a common language about their work' as well as having 'relatively close agreement about what topics and issues are of greatest relevance at particular times . . . [and] a sense of belongingness' (p. 3).

Superficially, similarities exist between the concepts of a discipline and a community of practice; for example, both overlap in terms of sharing a passion for a topic and for extending knowledge. However, in terms of the organisational structure required to reproduce knowledge and socialise subjects, a community of practice is 'more loosely connected, informal, and self-managed' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 41) than a discipline. LAS minds and bodies are shaped, but this, as Zeegers (2002) suggests, occurs in practice in a professional context rather than through training in a disciplinary context. For some LAS practitioners, the development of a professional identity through practice enables them to understand, develop, and further LAS knowledge.

Knowledge production, organisation, and reproduction are central to the way disciplines are conceptualised in the university. The narrative of LAS as a discipline has not yet established that LAS can be conceptualised in the same way. Structurally, however, LAS does share the three elements necessary for a community of practice to exist: 'a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27). As a profession, we work on a set of issues. In relation to those issues, we have developed and will continue to develop practices that allow us to make a difference.

Conclusion

To rephrase Chanock et al. (2004), whether we belong to a discipline is important pragmatically and conceptually. Any limitations on the conceptual underpinnings of the argument that LAS is a discipline will ultimately hamstring the pragmatic imperative of the narrative. To date, the narrative of LAS as a discipline represents an inchoate example of 'boundary-work', a rhetorical style that Gieryn (1983), in analysing the way in which scientists constructed a boundary between science and non-science by attributing to science unique and special characteristics, describes as essentially pragmatic in character and political in intent. Boundary-work marks the point 'in which scientists describe science for the public and its political authorities, sometimes hoping to enlarge the material and

LAS

symbolic resources of scientists or to defend professional autonomy' (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782). From Gieryn, we can contextualise the narrative of LAS as a discipline as consistent with the overall aims of boundary-work: to legitimate LAS knowledge and expertise to others and our political authorities, that is, the university, with the aim of increasing our resources and defending our status and autonomy. For LAS, this process of legitimation will be an ongoing one.

While the emergence of the narrative of LAS as a discipline has a legitimate and useful pragmatic function, the content of the narrative does not address other important issues related to the roles of disciplines.   Significantly, how does LAS discipline, socialise and authorise LAS practitioners, particularly those who come from a disciplinary background not ground in the so-called 'parent disciplines' (Garner et al., 1995, p. 2)? Do we control 'the apparatus for training future practitioners and admitting them to [our] ranks'? (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991, p. 207). In short, LAS does not in an institutional sense organise its future practitioners into a disciplinary culture. The narrative, to have credibility, needs to address issues associated with knowledge production, organisation, and reproduction.

The limitations of the narrative of LAS as a discipline, as it is presently articulated, can be avoided if we see ourselves as a community of practice. We have, I believe, established that we are a community with a particular interest in a domain of knowledge and, with our publications, conferences, and Unilearn discussions, we are developing practices that help us to be effective. Some have sought for LAS an institutional identity located within a traditional framework. The notion of community of practice, in contrast, offers for LAS practitioners an identity and organisational features more consistent with our heterogenous disciplinary origins and with the heterogenous and dispersed nature of our institutional situation.

Acknowledgements

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LAS

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