

Theorising what we do: Defamiliarise the university

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Abstract: *Language and academic skills (LAS) work in Australian universities was initially provided from within counselling services and so had its roots in counselling models of practice. In the 1980s, 'study skills' personnel began to be employed as such by universities and so other models of service provision started to develop. Since then, there has been a gradual evolution of work practices by LAS providers. While there has been considerable variation in the classification, location and designation of LAS practitioners, there have also been significant commonalities and a growing sense of ourselves as an identifiable profession, as evidenced by current plans to form a professional association and produce a professional journal. A key characteristic of a profession is the development of theoretical frameworks to inform its work. One of the tasks, therefore, for us as a profession, is to devise such frameworks and this process is underway. This paper adds to that process by taking the concept of 'defamiliarisation', as proposed by the 1920s' Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, and applying it to the work of language and academic skills advisers, presenting it as one framework for describing and informing the work we do.*

Key words: *LAS profession, LAS theory, developmental education theory, defamiliarisation*

The evolution of our profession

The Language and Academic Skills (LAS) profession had its beginnings in Australia only twenty or perhaps thirty years ago, depending on when you start counting. It was in the mid-1970s that Clanchy and Ballard began their work at the Australian National University, and perhaps there were others elsewhere. However, it was only as a result of the Roe report in the early 1980s (Roe, Foster, Moses, Sanker, & Storey, 1982) and his identification of 'study skills' as a service in its own right that LAS became a distinct part of university life rather than an activity carried out primarily by counselling staff. Our

work and status within universities have evolved considerably since then and we now see ourselves emerging as an identifiable profession, with all that that entails.

The evolution of our profession has been documented in various ways. In part, the story has been told by a trail of conference papers written, over the past twenty years, by practitioners reflecting and reporting on their own and their colleagues' practice. Among the first of these was one by Neil Quintrell in 1985. He was a counsellor at Flinders University and his paper anchors the beginnings of 'study skills' within counselling territory. His paper set out explicitly to locate 'language and learning skills' provision in Australian universities, verifying that most of them were, in fact, positioned in counselling centres (Quintrell, 1985).

More recent papers by learning development professionals have reflected our awareness of our path towards professional identity. This is exemplified by the keynote address from a recent LAS conference. In 2001 Carolyn Webb spoke of our 'professional ontogenesis' (Webb, 2002) in spatial terms; of a profession characterised by insiders and outsiders and those 'on the edge'. She identified the 2001 conference as being particularly significant in that it 'foreground[ed] the concept of professional identity', an endeavour which she claimed had been little pursued prior to then. Included in the list of signs she considered relevant to 'understanding the status of LAS and LAS professionals in universities' in Australia was the fact that our role was 'poorly understood by others' (Webb, 2002). In fact, as Craswell and Bartlett (2002) pointed out, there is, or at least was, a prevailing attitude that 'anyone with a modicum of intelligence can do this job'.

According to Wilensky (1964), this belief that anyone-can-do-it is one of the threats to an occupation acquiring the status of a profession. There is a problem, he claims, if an occupation's 'technical base . . . consists of a vocabulary that sounds familiar to everyone' (p. 148). Rather, he says that '[t]he optimal base of knowledge or doctrine for a profession is a combination of intellectual and practical knowledge' (p. 149). Greenwood (1966) is even more explicit on this point, claiming that 'the skills that characterize a profession flow from and are supported by a fund of knowledge that has been organized into an internally consistent system, called a *body of theory*' (p. 11).

Writing specifically of the US context, Chung (2005) identifies a lack of 'overarching, shared theoretical framework' as a major contributor to the situation where 'developmental education and learning assistance programs will continue to be undervalued and vulnerable' (p. 11). He maintains that, without such a framework, 'developmental educators and learning assistance professionals will have a hard time articulating a clear professional identity . . . legitimating their work in the face of ongoing criticism . . . communicating effectively among subgroups, and enhancing the overall quality of both practice and scholarship' (p. 3). This need is identified also by Casazza and Silverman (1996) when they argue that '[w]e need to have a full understanding of our professional behavior, to be able to predict outcomes on the basis of sound principles and know why some outcomes are more successful than others' (p. 177).

It would be useful to know the extent to which our work is founded on a sound theoretical base and how that has been documented. Lundell and Collins (1999) carried out an extensive survey of the developmental education literature with the aim of getting 'an understanding of what the profession's common assumptions and what the extant [sic] of

unarticulated theories might be'. On the basis of their findings, they concluded that 'the primary body of literature in developmental education remains focused on under-theorized curricula practice and traditional disciplinary models' (p. 7). In the US literature, at least, there seems to be little documented evidence of a professional LAS body of theory.

This concern has been reflected on the Australian scene. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) observed that 'little attention has been given to developing a comprehensive framework for LAS pedagogy' while Webb (2002) similarly noted that 'the surface has barely been scratched of the LAS profession's epistemologies and practices'. Percy and Stirling (2004) asserted that, for someone beginning work in the field, 'the foundational principles and theories informing LAS expertise are by no means apparent' (p. 53) and argued that 'the crucial point . . . is that if we are going to continue to evolve as a discipline . . . we have to develop a shared base of reference' (p. 57).

Theoretical frameworks

The question then arises as to how a fledgling profession seeks to go about developing or articulating its distinctive body of theory. Chung (2005) advocates the formulation of 'an overarching, authentic, common theoretical framework' (p. 4). He rejects the notion of adopting or adapting pre-existing theories, claiming that the 'top-down, import model . . . simply hasn't worked' (p. 4). He proposes, instead, a bottom up approach whereby theory is derived from 'the foundation of practice' (p. 4). He suggests that this process start at an individual level, with practitioners articulating their own personal theories and that these be aggregated and scrutinized at various levels, with commonalities being identified and thence formulated into one overarching theory, presumably acceptable by all.

Lundell and Collins (1999) express some concern at any attempt to identify the 'tacit theories' underlying our practice, in that these are typically based on 'deficit models and normative practice' (p. 12). My concern with each of us articulating our own personal theory and agglomerating these is not that I believe our practices to be based on inappropriate models, but rather that Chung's process has a rather homespun quality to it and is antithetical to the academic principle of locating oneself within and contributing to a field of scholarship. It buys into Duderstadt's (2000) notion of higher education as a 'cottage industry' (p. 300) with us as cottage workers. What I consider more valuable is to reflect on our practice in the light of our knowledge of relevant existing theory and try to map our practice against this theory so that we can begin to build up the theoretical base which describes and informs the work we do.

Like Lundell and Collins (1999), I too carried out a survey of relevant literature, though my search was much more modest than theirs. Mine, however, resulted in different findings. I identified a number of theoretical frameworks explicitly identified by LAS (or educational development) practitioners as underpinning their practice. These represent a diverse range of perspectives and I present them as an assorted collection, without attempting to organise or categorise them in any way, but rather just to give an indication of the spread and diversity of theoretical approaches used within our profession:

- Lundell and Collins propose *Gee's Discourse theory* as providing the theoretical basis for their work. They interpret it in terms of Discourses being

'comprised of interpenetrating patterns of values, "knowledge", language, beliefs, roles, and relationships' (Lundell & Collins, 1999, p. 13). An appreciation of the processes by which new Discourses (particularly academic ones) can be facilitated or impeded by existing Discourses can, they say, inform the work of the development education teacher.

- Wambach, Brothen, and Dikel (2000) suggest a theory of *Self-Regulation*. They identify attributes of authoritative parenting, namely demandingness and responsiveness, as qualities which most appropriately represent the skills students need for success in higher education. These qualities allow students to be self-regulating, that is, to 'identify areas where their skills must improve and seek the means to improve them'.

- Ryan et al. (1999) identify a process of *Modelling* which they consider best describes the work they were reporting on in their research paper. Their approach is based on the belief that 'students will be assisted in their learning when we make explicit to them the skills, conventions and expectations of academic reading and writing in the particular discipline in which they are operating' (p.20) and involves a consideration of the social purposes as well as the textual features of discipline-based writing genres.

- Taylor (1999) proposes two models for his practice, one for work with individual students, the other for work with student groups. His individual model is *The Concrete Universal*, in which the student represents the concrete realisation of 'academic and broader social forces, those of thought and language patterns', resulting in a situation which the practitioner must read and be 'absorbed into its frame, just as when we view a painting (p.160).

- To the group situation, Taylor (1999) applies Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances between games' (p. 160). The literacy tasks required of students have overlapping similarities, but are never completely identical and *Games Theory* provides a model for the slippage and fluidity involved. Our insights into these games, he says, provide us with a dual responsibility - to communicate our perceptions to academics and to undergraduates.

- This notion of unperceived differences is fundamental to Pittman's (1999) model of LAS development. She uses Becher's metaphor of *Academic Tribes and Territories*, maintaining that students need to develop tribal knowledge; 'to have some understanding of their disciplinary culture, its epistemology, what is valued as ways of working and acceptable as evidence, and have at least a basic understanding of the discourse of their field' (p. 224). Not only students, but also the language and learning specialists who work with them, need to have this discipline-specific understanding.

- Craswell and Bartlett (2002) also draw on the diversity of academic literacies in the theory of *Multiliteracies*. They apply the notion of designs of meaning to enhance students' understanding, claiming that the student thereby 'acquires both improved understanding of discourses generally and greater textual control in context'.

- Gluck, Draisma, Fulcher, and Worthy (2004) explain their work with students in terms of *Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development*. They theorise their work in terms of providing the expert guidance that enables the student to cross over the zone or terrain to achieve the relevant learning goal.

To go back to the US scene, Casazza and Silverman (1996) do not actually describe their work in terms of a particular model. Rather, they consider a learning development scenario and analyse it in terms of five common approaches to learning – behavioural, cognitive, social learning, motivational and adult learning – maintaining that ‘it is important for us to be familiar with a broad range of theories’ and to ‘synthesize ideas from a variety of perspectives’ (p. 35). Drawing on each of the approaches in turn, they consider practical implications of their analysis and devise appropriate action plans. They then take an eclectic approach devising an integrated plan which draws on elements of all five theories.

I have identified ten different theoretical approaches which LAS practitioners have explicitly documented over the past ten years. It appears that we are building up a professional body of theory. I would like to add to that body by proposing another theoretical perspective.

Defamiliarisation

When I came across Shklovsky’s (1917) notion of ‘defamiliarization’, it occurred to me that it encapsulates much of what we do with staff and students; we defamiliarise the university, and many of its constituent parts, making the familiar strange. We reverse the process of familiarisation (or, in Shklovsky’s terms, ‘algebretization’) by which the conventions, processes and language of academic life become commonplace and taken for granted; at least for those who work with them on a daily basis.

Viktor Shklovsky was a Russian literary theorist and leader of the Russian Formalist movement in the early 20th century. He wrote of art, of poetry, of life, asserting that ‘as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic’ (Shklovsky, 1917). He called this ‘algebretization’, akin to the process in algebra where complex mathematical variables are represented by single letters. Complexities of life can, similarly, through familiarity and habituation, become commonplace and abstracted, represented by single words, so that we are totally inured to, and dissociated from, them. In Shklovsky’s terms: ‘We live as if coated with rubber . . . We must first of all “shake up” things . . . We must rip things from their ordinary sequence of associations. Things must be turned over like logs in a fire’ (Shklovsky, 1917). In another context, he says that this ‘[h]abitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war’ (Shklovsky, 1923) and quotes from Leo Tolstoy’s diary ‘if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they have never been’.

The reverse process, the turning over of the logs, Shklovsky (1917) calls ‘defamiliarization’. He says it of the Impressionist painters who used dots instead of blocks of colour, ‘They perceived the world as if they had just suddenly awakened’ (Shklovsky, 1923), and particularly of the novelist Leo Tolstoy, who typically, deliberately, removed the labels from things: ‘He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time’ (Shklovsky, 1923). For example, in ‘Shame!’ (1895),

an essay against corporal punishment, Tolstoy gives an account of a flogging, a common enough occurrence at that time. He does not name it as such, and thereby removes the protective coating provided by a known and familiar word. Instead he describes the event as if it were something strange and unfamiliar.

I see this as what we do in a university context. We help make the university familiar to newcomers by peeling off its labels and probing its strangeness; we turn over the logs. In order to help others who are seeing it for the first time, we too need to see it as if for the first time. At the most macro level we have the big label 'university'. In fact, one of the Orientation sessions we offer at Adelaide is called *Doing University*, wherein we attempt to give some meaning to what 'university' is; to defamiliarise some of the contexts, processes and conventions that help to make up 'university' – lecture, lecturer, tutorial, practical, seminar. We play a dual role; we attempt to see 'university' as if for the first time, yet we also bring our knowledge of that which has been algebetised. We simultaneously take positions of wisdom and naivety and use the one to illuminate the other. We consciously and deliberately unpick our familiarity, remembering or imagining what it is like to be unfamiliar and the implications of that.

We also tease out, for new students, what lies under labels like 'essay', 'oral presentation', 'referencing', and 'plagiarism'. However, defamiliarisation is not something that happens once, at one level. A colleague recently described her work as 'unpacking layers of hidden expectations' (Helen Fraser, personal communication, 18 August 2005). Removing one layer of algebetisation exposes new layers to be defamiliarised in turn.

Not only are there multiple layers, but what lies behind any one layer may not be uniform. A few years ago, a colleague and I sought to defamiliarise the term 'article review', our purpose being to produce an online guide on 'Writing an Article Review' (O'Regan & Johnston, 2000). We were perplexed at the confusion we found lying behind that term, that task. When we analysed the guidelines students had been given to help them write an 'article review' (or some close variant) in different subject areas, we found that they represented a range of tasks which differed from each other in critical ways, the expectations for each being more or less explicit in the guidelines. The algebetising of 'article review' had familiarised, for each group of teaching staff, one of many sets of expectations. Students were then presented with one label 'article review' perhaps unaware of the confusions which lay behind it. Our defamiliarisation involved identifying and, at least partially, untangling some of the multitude of meanings clustered behind the term. Our guide made explicit the fact that there were multiple possibilities. That insight, at least, was brought into the public arena for staff and students to deal with if and how they chose.

Our work also involves us dealing with the algebetisations that are specific to particular discipline areas. Last year, for the first time, I was asked to give a workshop to Law students on how to write a Law essay. I needed to defamiliarise that term, 'Law essay'. So I engaged in a process of gentle interrogation with the lecturer concerned: What is it that's distinctive about a Law essay? What are the students setting out to achieve? How do they do that and demonstrate that they have done that? What are the particular conventions, in terms of form and language, that apply? What does a good Law essay look like? It was only as a result of this defamiliarising that I was able to give the workshop for those students, which I did in conjunction with the Law lecturer.

So, it is by calling on this process of defamiliarisation that we may prompt mainstream academics to see the strangeness of their familiar ways and the need for this strangeness to be explicated to newcomers. Let me illustrate this further through a recent example. We had a stream of students referred by the English 1 staff. These students had not done well in their first literature essay, and one of the consequences was for them to be sent to us. As none of us in the Language and Learning Services has a background in literary criticism and as we did not know, in specific terms, why the students were being sent to us, we asked the English staff to specify their expectations for our assistance. The staff were quite explicit about what they had wanted the students to do and about the nature of academic argument as it relates to literary criticism. In addition to that, they provided an example of the kind of structure appropriate to an argument in literary criticism. None of this had been made explicit to the students. When they then came to see us, we were able to say 'This is what your lecturer wants when she asks you to write a literary criticism'. One of them actually said to me (seemingly without irony) 'I'm really looking forward to re-writing my essay now that I know how I'm meant to do it'.

A subsequent email from the course coordinator included the following:

Several students told me about the usefulness that attending the [Language and Learning service] would have for future work across several subjects.

The discipline has added a couple of lectures on essay writing and argumentation for the courses at level 1 in the light of the problems we have encountered.

The review of level 1 teaching during last semester also remarked on the need to rethink the kinds of questions we ask students to write about in assignments.

In this case, students as well as LAS and content area staff, were involved in the process of defamiliarising 'essay' as realised in literary criticism. The students had started off with one algebreitised understanding of 'essay'; the content lecturer was immersed in the familiarity of her discipline-specific algebreitisation. We, by asking the naive 'what do you mean by "essay"?' question, were able to uncover the mismatch, which the three groups, students, LAS and discipline staff, together untangled through a joint process of defamiliarisation.

I started off talking about defamiliarisation at the macro level, but it applies right down to the micro level of individual words. Nearly twenty years ago, Rosalind Meyer (1988) identified misunderstandings that occur with the specialised academic use of words which have other meanings off campus; words like 'argument', 'critical', 'discuss', 'opinion'. These misunderstandings still occur. In Shklovsky's terms, these words have been algebreitised in different ways in the different contexts and both uses need to be defamiliarised so that a common understanding can be reached. Our awareness of this means that we can initiate and facilitate the process.

Conclusion

We LAS practitioners in Australia see ourselves as coming of age as a profession. One of the aspects of this is the development of a distinct body of theory which both describes and informs our work. In this paper, I have proposed that Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation provides a model for understanding and explaining the work we do. We have begun the process of identifying, applying and developing theoretical frameworks to describe and inform our work and it is important that we continue this. Equally important is the documentation, collation and dissemination of such theory. We need to consciously set about establishing processes by which this can happen.

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