

Representation for (re)invention

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Abstract: *In response to the suggestion that in comparison to other educational developers, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners in Australian universities have been less strategic in addressing their identity and practice ‘to secure their place in the landscape of university work, [and] to reinvent themselves for securing future places’ (Webb, 2002, p. 14), this paper suggests that models of practice provide LAS practitioners with powerful signifiers around which they are able to (re)invent themselves in response to institutional agendas. Models of practice, however, must also be understood as historically and contextually contingent with both constraining and enabling effects and, therefore, require ongoing interrogation. This paper illustrates its points through a reflection and critique of two models of Learning Development practice at the University of Wollongong. Seeking neither to validate nor invalidate either ‘model’, the purpose of the paper is to highlight how learning advisers might be more strategic about how they represent their practice.*

Key words: *models of practice, learning advising, professional identity*

Introduction

In her plenary address to the 2001 Australian Language and Academic Skills Conference, Carolyn Webb (2002, p. 7) suggested that in comparison to other educational developers in the university context, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) practitioners had been less strategic in addressing their identity and practice ‘to secure their place in the landscape of university work, [and] to reinvent themselves for securing future places’. She concluded with the suggestion that LAS practitioners might wish to see themselves as ‘facilitators of organisational learning’ (Webb, 2002, p. 17). Both of these points will be addressed

in the following discussion. This paper argues that models of practice can be understood as powerful signifiers around which learning advisers are able to (re)invent themselves in response to institutional agendas. The point is illustrated through a reflection and critique of a shift in representation of Learning Development practice at the University of Wollongong, with the most recent representational model attempting to capture the notion of the LAS practitioner's role as making a significant contribution to organisational learning as it relates to the quality enhancement of student learning in general. The reflective process in this paper is informed by the quality imperative currently in circulation at the University of Wollongong: that is, to plan, act, review and improve.

Models of practice

Models of practice can be understood as 'representations' encoded with specific cultural meaning. Post-structural theory contends that systems of representation constitute reality rather than merely reflect it in some way. Stuart Hall (1997, p. 3) argues that because these systems are saturated with the values of culture, they have the capacity to 'organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects'. Representational systems, then, tie meaning to specific cultural contexts and regulate connections between concepts and reality, theory and practice. We use this idea here to better understand how models of practice (understood as linked systems of representation within a specific cultural framework) provide a necessary and coherent logic for what are otherwise seemingly *ad hoc* sets of practices. This logic is essential to an intelligible narrative of LAS identity and practice. However, the link between any representation and the thing it represents is not immutable: it is culturally negotiated (Hall, 1997) and, as such, can always – at least potentially – be renegotiated. Thinking of models of practice in this way configures them as dynamic signifiers around which learning advisers are able to (re)invent themselves within their institutions.

If we accept the notion that the learning adviser is positioned by multiple and often contradictory discourses, a point which both Webb (2002) and Melles (2002) allude to, then we can be seen to be in constant dialogue with those discourses which seek to constitute us, as we attempt to constitute ourselves. Our models of practice might, therefore, be understood as occurring in an unstable conceptual space between these discourses and subjectivity (Bacchi, 2000): in other words, between techniques of domination and practices of self-formation (Burchell, 1996). Within this framework of understanding, a model of practice can be seen as actively prioritising particular 'truth claim(s)'¹ regarding professional identity and practice.

The IDEALL model

The first model of practice this paper will discuss is the Integrated Development of English and Academic Language and Learning (IDEALL) model (Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1998). This model emerged within a particular historical moment, and closely reflects the

1. This notion of 'Truth claim(s)' derives from the work of Michel Foucault (see Foucault 1984a, 1997; see also, Stirling & Percy, 2005) and refers to those ways we are able to speak the 'truth' about ourselves in relation to the way we operate as subjects within multiple and sometimes contradictory discursive economies.

'developmental and necessarily contextual' truth claims made around learning advisers' work. This model, as with all others, can be understood as historically and contextually contingent, and while providing a range of benefits, it also had delimiting effects.

The (inter)national context

During the 1990s, with the help of international bodies such as the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank (Currie, 1996), neo-liberal political rationality and its attendant discourses were well into the process of permeating research, policy and practice at all levels of society in the 'Western' world (Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1999). The discourse(s) and educational demands of the 'learning society' and 'knowledge economy', combined with 'free-market theory' (Marginson, 1995), reconstituted universities as globally competitive enterprises producing globally proficient and enterprising 'lifelong-learners' or 'Graduates' (Edwards, 2004).

By the mid 1990s in Australia, the push to develop the 'lifelong learner', particularly within the framework of 'Graduate Attributes', had become the 'mantra' of higher education reform (Allport, 2000). This reform agenda located the 'learner' and the development of 'generic skills' (nee Graduate Attributes, tertiary literacies) at the heart of pedagogical initiatives (e.g., Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994). The formalisation of such reform manifests in Government commissioned policy papers such as the Dearing Report in the UK (*Higher Education in the Learning Society*, 1997), and the West Review in Australia (*Learning for Life*, 1998). To some degree, it could be argued that learning advisers, as with other educational developers, were the beneficiaries of these reforms in higher education, particularly where these practitioners found themselves constituted, not entirely to their dissatisfaction, as 'full partners' in the education process (Candy et al., 1994, p. xii).

Candy's acknowledgement of the learning advisers' potential contribution, and this new way of thinking about teaching and learning, had to be generally welcomed. It appeared to harmonise with, if not reinforce with some measure, what learning advisers had been making various arguments for since their emergence in Australian higher education. As early as 1982, the literature being produced from within the field contested the notion that learning, literacy and language development could be seen as remedial and taught effectively independent of context (Bock & Gassin, 1982; Taylor, Ballard, Beasley, Bock, Clanchy, & Nightingale, 1988).

Increasingly, it was being widely acknowledged that tertiary literacies were inseparable from disciplinary knowledge and practice and therefore most effectively taught within mainstream curricula (Chanock, 1994; Golebiowski, 1997; Golebiowski & Borland, 1997). Commentary from the field of teaching and learning argued strongly for the pedagogical integrity of teaching tertiary literacies inside a discipline's curricula. From an institutional point of view, the value of this pedagogical model for addressing tertiary literacies was enhanced by its efficiency: it allowed for maximum ratios between students and learning advising staff.

The institutional context

The institutional impact of the educational reform agenda mentioned above shaped the 1995 restructure of the Learning Development Centre at the University of Wollongong. Prior to the restructure, the Learning Development Centre had been functioning as an independent

academic unit operating within the Library since 1992. However, during the restructure, the Centre was dismantled. 'Learning Development' was moved physically and reorganised becoming a sector of Student Services within the University; thus it became aligned with Counselling, Disability Services, International Student Advisers and the Dean of Students.

Aligning Learning Development with student support services that were largely seen as 'remedial' and dealing with student 'problems' marked a potential regression in the unit's symbolic 'positioning' within the academy. The shift could be seen as reinvoking notions of the medical model of student support and the pathologisation of student learning. Ironically, however, the restructure occurred in the context of a broader institutional and policy shift in teaching and learning that sought a curriculum-integrated approach to proactively developing tertiary literacies/Graduate Attributes (*Generic Skills Working Party Report* [UOW], 1997), and cast the newly created Learning Development playing a key role.

It is important to note here that this was not a seamless progression; rather, it was a multiply influenced and uneven process that was finally formalised in the institutional publication of the *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 – 2003* (UOW, 1997). At the 'end' of this process, Learning Development lecturers had maintained their academic status, which made them an anomaly within the Student Services Division, while they were also formally considered a part of the Academic Services Division which also combines the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), the Library and the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre. This positioning of Learning Development as having 'one foot in each camp' saw learning advisers constituted as both student and curriculum (if not staff) developers, and unofficially as both 'remedial' and 'developmental'. This effectively created a fragmentation in professional identity. This positioning among other factors, it will be argued, influenced the structure of the IDEALL model and its attendant narrative.

Reflection

The IDEALL model, shown in Figure 1, marked the formalisation of a philosophy of practice underpinned by the pedagogical logic that prescribed the development of tertiary literacy within the disciplinary context (Skillen et al., 1998). The model privileged curriculum-integrated practice over the more traditional student-centred practices. It achieved this by constructing a binary relationship between the systemic (curriculum-integration) and generic (student-centred practices) arms; by labelling the systemic arm 'developmental' and the generic arm 'remedial'; and by representing the generic arm as inefficient and inequitable (Percy, James, Stirling, & Walker, 2004). This model was used to represent Learning Development practice at the University of Wollongong from 1998 to 2004.

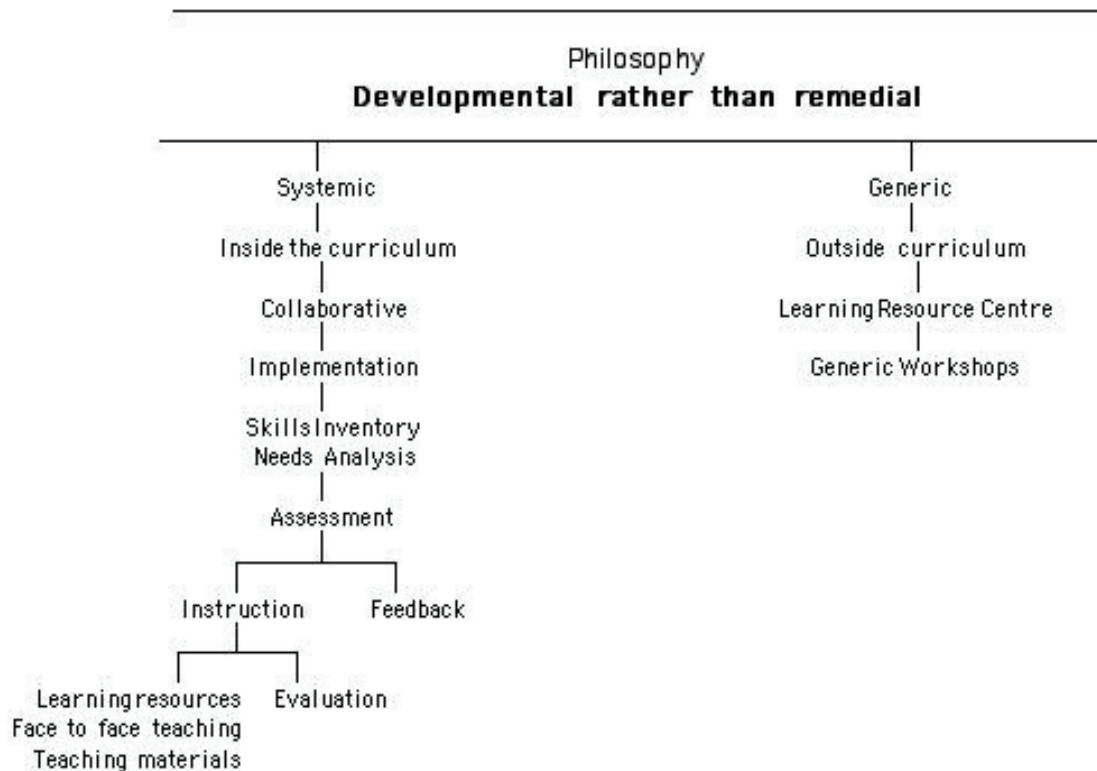


Figure 1: The IDEALL Model (Skillen et al., 1998).

Although with some hindsight the apparent disavowal of student-centred practices would appear to be a case of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, when understood as both historically and institutionally contingent, for the Learning Development lecturers, the IDEALL model represented a progressive approach to student learning development. It also prioritised a necessary truth claim with regard to the Learning Developers’ work; specifically, one which insisted on the developmental and necessarily contextual nature of our work, and vehemently resisted the ‘deficit - remedial - decontextualised’ understanding of student learning support. The prioritisation of this truth claim can be seen to be contingent on a range of factors: the already existing ‘remedial’ view of Learning Development amongst staff and students at UOW; the historical struggle of LAS advisers to have their work recognised as ‘developmental’; the evidence- and theoretically-based conviction that curriculum-integration represented the most progressive and pedagogically sound approach to students’ tertiary literacy development; and perhaps subconsciously, the problematic positioning of the newly instituted Learning Development.

As a powerful discursive representation of a particular truth game, the model and its relationship to policy and practice across the university formed the crux around which the Learning Development lecturer was able to narrativise her/ his professional identity. Importantly, it provided the discursive conditions for the lecturers to constitute themselves as ‘full partners’ in the teaching and learning process. It relocated the development of tertiary literacy to the heart of the curriculum. It saw responsibility for fostering tertiary literacy as a collaborative effort between Learning Development lecturers and discipline staff and, as such, provided the opportunity for learning advisers to apply their knowledge about student learning and student writing within a disciplinary context. Perhaps most

importantly, it was seen to provide more students with context and subject-specific tertiary literacy instruction as a seamless part of their disciplinary studies.

The model was based on the principles of fostering ownership of literacy pedagogy within the disciplines, transforming the knowledge and practice of the discipline lecturer, and generally improving teaching and learning practice across the university. It was also based on a range of assumptions: particularly, that there was an ideal way for collaboration and integration to occur; that collaborative efforts could necessarily result in the discipline lecturer assuming responsibility for the integrated activities and resources; and that collaborative efforts and ongoing work at the discipline and institutional level would result in the necessary cultural change to meet all students' needs.

Critique

While the IDEALL model had obvious benefits, not least by impacting on a wide cross-section of the student body, its limitations in a dynamic and increasingly complex system began to show. Almost immediately the idea of what counted as 'collaboration' and 'integration' became far more varied than originally conceived in the model. The systemic arm as it was originally conceptualised focussed specifically on a written assignment and assumed curriculum-integration would occur where two similar written tasks could be used as pre- and post- assessment of students' academic literacy development. Although a pedagogically sound approach, in the current economic climate, two written assessment tasks in one subject is a luxury that cannot be afforded in most disciplines. Further, the required tertiary literacy development in some subjects was not always tied to writing or an assessment task. Significantly, different forms of collaboration and integration were brought into play from the outset.

The binary model also dislocated the flow of knowledge between the student and discipline-based experiences of learning advising staff (Percy, James, Stirling, & Walker, 2004). By privileging the systemic arm, the full-time Learning Development lecturers dedicated the majority of their 'teaching' time to their work with discipline staff while casual staff '(wo)manned' the Learning Resource Centre and engaged in the more student-centred practices. In effect, it isolated the full-time staff from what had originally been considered the source of their unique knowledge; that is, direct access to and an understanding of the complexity of the individual learning experience. It is this knowledge, we argue, that is vital for the LAS practitioner to develop greater insight into how integrated work can be improved (Chanock, Burley, & Davies, 1996). It is also a constant reminder of the inevitable and persistent limitations of integrated work.

The basic assumptions underpinning the model also proved to be far more unstable than originally envisaged: in the majority of cases, collaborative efforts tended to be problematic for a wide range of reasons; although collaborations always involved enthusiastic individuals, they did not always result in the discipline lecturer assuming responsibility for the materials; expansion of integrated activities across a degree program could often be closely followed by a reduction, again for a wide range of reasons; faculty ownership of the process is highly dependent on the leadership of particular individuals; and while discrete 'transformations' have been evidenced at all levels of practice, the extent to which these have managed to penetrate in any significant way the cultural fibre of faculty teaching and learning practice in general is highly questionable.

The pedagogical logic embedded in the theoretical notion of collaboration and integration (e.g., Lee, 1997; Skillen et al., 1998; Cartwright & Noone, 2000; James, Skillen, Percy, Tootell, & Irvine, 2004) tends to be impeded and distorted by multiple factors. These include: practical constraints, such as time, resourcing, casualisation and staff turnover; political constraints, such as competing agendas, faculty priorities and discipline boundary issues; pedagogical constraints, such as delivery, timetabling and technology; and not in the least, the basic flaw in the assumption that discipline staff will (willingly and unproblematically) learn and adapt their teaching as a result of our collaborative efforts. This is not news. Garner (1997, p. 41) had previously signalled a clear discomfort with the efficacy of integrated practices specifically in relation to the assumptions we make about the willingness and the abilities of the staff with whom we collaborate (not to mention our own – see Taylor, 1990). Indeed, Ballard (1994, p. 23) had already suggested that students would always be ‘more willing and flexible learners than staff’. Furthermore, Catterall (2004, pp. 40-41) reminds us of the research around the power relationship in the collaborative effort, where the desire for ‘interpersonal harmony’ generally impedes the kind of dialogue required for qualitative change to occur.

It is important to emphasise that despite the critique provided here, the authors are not arguing against collaborative practices and integrated activities *per se*. There can be no doubt that Lee’s (1997) ‘co-production’, Cartwright and Noone’s (2000) ‘flexible collaborations’, and James et al.’s (2004) ‘transformation’ represent honourable aspirations for the learning adviser to pursue. However, it has become uncomfortably clear that even the ‘best’ theoretical understandings of what ‘ought to be done’ *will* be constrained by the real and dynamic institution within which we work most of the time. It is difficult, then, not to agree with Gail Craswell (1994, p. 41) who argued that while ‘the literature has provided the necessary corrective to any notion that generic skills can be taught in ignorance of discipline-specific practices, this does not mean that integration is the best way to proceed in all situations’. Her argument is perhaps becoming more intelligible as the university environment becomes increasingly complex and unstable. In a similar vein, Jones, Bonanno, and Scouller (2001) testify that although collaboration is a core component of their role, the notion that there can only be ‘one way’ or even a hierarchy among practices is untenable in a dynamic system that requires flexibility.

The notion of increasing complexity, the inclusive valuing of all LAS practices, the need for flexibility, and the facilitation of a necessary reflexivity are at the heart of the shift to the second model, which will be referred to in this paper as ‘The reflexive model’ (Percy et al., 2004; Percy, Skillen, & James, 2005). A wide confluence of factors provided the imperative to develop this model. As a unit, we were delivering services to the many satellite campuses of our university, were engaged in multiple practices at the student, faculty and policy level (many not adequately captured by the IDEALL model), saw ourselves in a more complex educational environment that required adaptation and flexibility, and with an impending quality audit for May 2005, we needed to illustrate how we saw ourselves engaging with the quality cycle in regard to the teaching and learning environment as a whole. In essence, the time was ripe for a shift in truth claim(s).

In effect, the IDEALL model had lost its fluency. Not because the model itself is flawed as such, but because the dynamic and often unstable environment in which we work continues to press for solutions to problems that are now not easily captured by its conceptual reach. In theoretical terms, we found ourselves standing at the brink of impasse or *aporia*: we

had come to a figurative moment when the way forward became unclear. The model we were working from had been overwhelmed by the complexity of our multiple practices and the way in which these worked together as a whole. We discovered that, by framing itself so inflexibly around the remedial - developmental binary, our earlier conceptualisation was unable to allow for reflexivity. It was unable to adapt to a more complex teaching and learning environment or speak coherently to the organisational role we could play in the quality enhancement of student learning.

The 'reflexive' model

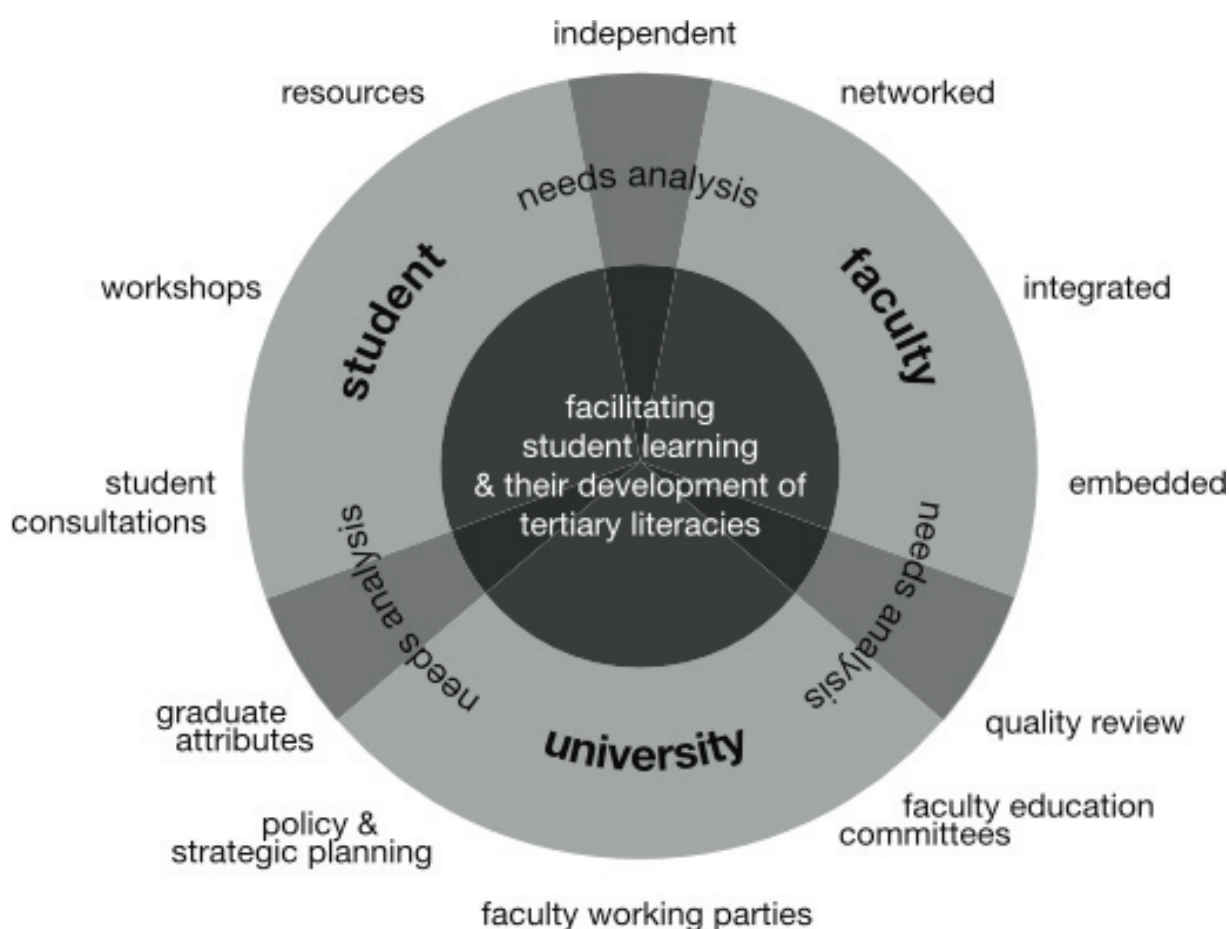


Figure 2: Diagrammatic model of practice (Percy et al., 2004). *Learning Development, University of Wollongong*.

The 'reflexive' model of practice was developed in 2004, again in a particular historical moment. In the simplest terms, the model was designed to provide a framework for representing the complexity of our practice in an inclusive way, to facilitate communication and reflexivity between practices, and most importantly, to highlight the role Learning Development lecturers are able to play in organisational learning as it relates to the quality enhancement of student learning. In the shift from the old to the new, it dismantled the

binary of the IDEALL model, recuperated the value of student-centred practices, anchored student learning at the heart of all practice, and sought to represent the learning adviser as a key player in 'organisational learning' (see Figure 2).

Reflection

The circular nature of the reflexive model, a structure which provides a holistic and potentially flexible view of learning advising practice, is loosely derived from organisational learning theory (Schon, 1973; Argyris & Schon, 1978) and systems thinking (von Bertalanffy, 1976). Systems thinking allows us to see learning advising as a discrete and dynamic system, itself operating within a larger dynamic system, where the field of practice adapts and changes through its interactions with its environment (Carter, 2004).

Importantly, the central circle of the model anchors learning advising practices to what has been long considered as their core aim. It may be, however, that this historical vision is currently being (re)visioned and requires future conversations within the LAS community. Nevertheless, given that learning advising knowledge and practice *are* subject to institutional and policy exigencies, such a model allows for shifts in knowledge and practice that do not lose sight of what has been, historically, a foundation stone for the LAS field. By situating 'student learning' at the centre, this model recuperates Ballard's (1994, p. 17) insistence that 'it is our common focus on the student as a complex learner that underpins our varied practices and differentiates us from other teaching, administrative and professional staff within our institutions'. This act of recuperation is partly a response to our own concern with the over-privileging of integrated work specifically in terms of the risk it poses to losing sight of the contribution student-centred practices make to our professional knowledge and identity. It is also partly a response to the direct and indirect caution of Ballard (1994, p. 16) and Craswell (1994) who advise that taking an approach that privileges curriculum-integration or involves a shift in focus to academic discourse alone, would indeed be 'taking a part for the whole'.

The outer circle in the model identifies the 'student', the 'faculty' and the 'university' as the core elements of the larger system within which learning advising practice finds itself constituted. They also represent the three 'levels' at which learning advisers are able to make a significant contribution to teaching and learning (e.g., Percy & Skillen, 2000). The emphasis, however, is on the importance of the articulation of knowledge and experience between these various levels which constitute the way the learning adviser is able to contribute to organisational learning.

Finally, the multiple practices listed around the outer circle classify those practices currently in use at the University of Wollongong. The student-centred practices will be familiar to all readers, but the faculty-based practices require a little explanation. Jones, Bonanno, and Scouller (2001) provided a useful paper classifying the range of discipline-based practices specific to their institution. This insight was then used to consider how we might classify our own practices at the University of Wollongong. We have used the terms 'independent', 'networked', 'integrated' and 'embedded' (for more detail, see Appendix) as an attempt at inclusivity among our varied practices. These conceptual representations are not static and are likely to be subject to ongoing revision, particularly in relation to changes across the core elements.

Critique

This model must be seen as historically contingent. In speaking to the quality agenda, the reflexive model prioritises the truth claim that the Learning Development lecturers are able to make a significant contribution to organisational learning with regard to teaching and learning. It also provides a reflexive framework for the profession to interrogate more closely just how we might see this occurring.

While the authors would agree that a greater depth of analysis and discussion regarding approaches to quality management and the role of the learning adviser would be of some benefit here, this paper is not necessarily the place for it. However, if we, at least for the moment, accept that the multiple approaches to quality management might be captured on a continuum (read binary) between accountability and quality enhancement, or as Carmichael, Palermo, Reeve, and Vallence (2001) argue, the technical-rationalist perspective and the self-reflective perspective; it is the latter on both counts that the reflexive model aims to address.

Carmichael et al. (2001) describe the technical rationalist perspective as embodying a scientific model of quality based on behaviourist principles which emphasises technical performance and an efficient system. On the other hand, the self-reflective perspective embodies a professional model that is more holistic and values learning and creativity, innovation and exploration. It is the latter perspective that is said to be most conducive to quality enhancement: it appreciates the dynamic, ambiguous nature of education and fosters relationships and dialogue as a means for organisational learning and improvement. In these terms then, the 'argument' behind the reflexive model is that if, for example, our university sees itself as 'achieving excellence in learning and teaching' (UOW *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 2003-2006*), then the knowledge, research and expertise developed by learning advisers working at all levels of the institution must be understood in terms of their distinctly valuable contribution to this end.

Organisational learning theory tells us that the knowledge of each member of an organisation has its own specific relevance to particular organisational 'problems' (Lu, 2004). For organisational learning to be successful and the 'knowledge-cycle' (Senge & Kim, 1997) to remain both current and relevant, it is crucial that within the organisational loop effective communication systems be established and maintained. Building relationships, fostering dialogue, and improving knowledge and practice at all levels are key to this outcome. This process, however, begins with the imperative for Learning Development to develop more cohesive links between the knowledge and expertise gained at all levels; that is, a practical and theoretical development of the narrative and practices around the model.

Simultaneously, it also requires ongoing interrogation. This latter point leads to what could be considered the most important aspect of this model; its reflexivity. It is the potential for reflexivity inscribed in the model that allows us to track interactions within and between each aspect. In the Learning Development model represented by Figure 2, the interrelationship between the core elements is referred to as 'needs analysis', but further consideration is required here. This model sees information feeding both back and forth between each element – not merely in any one direction as a hierarchical model might imply. For the authors, this means that learning advisers do not uncritically accept at

face value institutional exigencies (e.g., 'remedial' language tuition), institutional agendas (e.g., development of Graduate Attributes), or the normative categories (e.g., lifelong learner, autonomous learner, international student) with which we are often required to work without question. Rather, the model signifies a capacity to use our intellectual and practical technology (praxis) to work towards the 'best interests' of the student as a learner – or at least, in doing our work, take the time to unpack and challenge what we are called upon to take for granted (see Chanock, 1999, 2003), and indeed what we expect others to take for granted.

Conclusion

In arguing that models of practice are powerful signifiers around which learning advisers can narrativise their professional identity and prioritise particular truth claims in response to institutional agendas, the paper has also sought to emphasise the importance of an ongoing interrogation of the assumptions that underpin them and their delimiting effects. Indeed, the limitations of the model provided in Figure 2 are yet to come into focus. Our reflection and critique of the two models of practice of Learning Development at the University of Wollongong has sought neither to validate nor invalidate either model but show them as historically and contextually contingent. Foucault (1984b, p. 343) reminds us that if we remember 'that everything is dangerous', which should not be confused with 'bad', we can never settle in apathy, but always remain actively and critically engaged with the effects/ costs of the ideas, the knowledge, the technologies we use in the name of 'learning advising'. Opening up these critical spaces can only contribute to our 'growth' as a profession.

Appendix

Classification of faculty-based practices (UOW, Learning Development, 2005)

Collaborating with Faculty

Faculty level work is a vital element to the overall Learning Development program in that it enables us to deliver needed, contextualised and timely learning assistance to more students. However, faculty level programs are more complex to operate than student level programs because they require similar levels of commitment from the faculty, and often involve the coordination of a large number of staff and students, and the development and implementation of integrated instruction and resources across a number of campuses. Collaborating with faculties occurs in various ways. As each teaching/learning situation is different, LD designs and delivers programs and resources to suit specific disciplines, timetables and student cohorts.

Networked

In response to a request from the faculty, LD develops resources and teaching activities alongside faculty programs that have no core subject, such as Honours or PhD Programs. While the materials are usually devised, produced and delivered by LD, the coordination of delivery is managed by the faculty.

Integrated

LD and the faculty academic collaborate closely over a period of time, drawing on their respective experience and expertise to best meet the learning needs of the particular student cohort. This may involve minimal or quite extensive discussion and redesign of the curriculum or specific resources or assessment tasks. This type of work leads to a shared ownership of ideas and resources, and students generally experience literacy-focused teaching as part and parcel of the subject delivery.

Embedded

The faculty academic assumes full responsibility for curriculum development work initially done with LD: for example, subject design, learning activities and resources introduced by and/or fine-tuned in collaboration with LD have become so much a part of the subject that neither students nor faculty see them as distinct from the 'content' of the subject.

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