PLENARY ADDRESS

LANGUAGE AND ACADEMIC SKILLS ADVISERS: PROFESSIONAL ONTOGENESIS

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It is a pleasure and an honour to be invited to address this conference, all the more so that the theme of the conference is "changing identities", a theme which resounds profoundly with me in my own professional journey.   A conference which challenges us to think about being insiders and being outsiders is also immensely challenging to me, because I feel both inside our profession because of my past, and potentially outside because of my imagined future.   At the moment, however, I feel that I'm standing in the doorway between two rooms, and not wanting to close the door. Indeed I would like to keep this door open for ever, but more about that later.

For now, I simply ask for your tolerance if I slip occasionally between the two rooms. The one room beckons me through my solidarity with the field of practice that I cut my first teeth on, and that will always provide the conceptual and practical grounding

in my work - I've usually referred to this field as "learning development", but let's use the prevailing term of "language and academic skills" here or LAS for short. The other room exerts its constant pull on me towards the responsibilities of my role as a so-called "director of educational development". Let's not dwell here on the appropriateness of that label to describe what I do, and particularly let's leave aside the term "development" to stew over its own self-inflated claims of authority and virtue.

I therefore speak from both inside and outside, or rather poised between. This motif of inside and outside is a very significant one in understanding what a profession is all about. Who's in, who's out, who's on the edge, who's at the centre, who's knocking at the door to come in, who's torn between many rooms at once… It's a motif which is typically invoked by university executives in the almost annual rituals of restructuring as they decide where the tribes will live, where the territories will begin and end (drawing on Tony Becher's 1989 and now legendary metaphor). This inside/outside motif will bubble along throughout my presentation as I attempt to articulate my own view of the professional ontogenesis of the LAS profession.

What is the LAS profession? Who are the LAS advisers? How many lads are there? You may be interested to know that 85% of the delegates at this conference are females. Just how representative is this of the whole profession? What else do we know or not know about LAS professionals themselves?

Prior to this conference, there seem to have been few published reports or papers on LAS professionals themselves. This is particularly surprising given the wealth of published literature generated by LAS advisers elaborating the role of language and literacy in learning, describing the discourses of particular disciplines, and explaining pedagogical practices which foreground language and literacy in university learning.

This conference is a real milestone because it foregrounds the concept of professional identity, and has attracted numerous contributions related directly to the role of the professionals themselves. Prior to this, only a handful of papers seem to have been published about LAS professionals and the evolution of their profession. Reflected in these few papers but, even more so, reflected through my own lived experience within this field, has been a prevailing insider-outsider discourse, and a

sense in which LAS professionals feel they are often isolated from the mainstream of academic life, inhabitants of the peripheral fringes of their universities.

For me, a picture has emerged of a group of professionals who share a common set of goals and interests, who share a common language about their work, who have relatively close agreement about what topics and issues are of greatest relevance at particular times, who come together regularly at professional gatherings such as this one, who have a sense of belongingness – who share the feeling of being insiders.

But at the same time, and in their solidarity with each other, they also share a sense of being outsiders.   Alison Lee encapsulated how this feeling of marginalisation was manifest in the mid-1990s:

> "They often have short term contracts. Tenure is rare and career paths are very limited. There are permanent problems of resources. Opportunities for research are limited due to the institutional funding imperative for these practitioners to provide a service to students and faculties. The structure of the university restricts the activities of the units which are usually outside, and not integral to, the day to day functioning and structures of the mainstream business of the university. Access to ways of forming productive collegiate relations with senior colleagues in various fields is limited." (Lee, 1997: 72)

At the beginning of the '90s, a study by Samuleovicz (1990) of the group she termed "learning counsellors" revealed, through the reported experiences and perceptions of the practitioners themselves, an earlier picture of disquiet. Foremost among the concerns of the staff she surveyed was their lack of professional and career development opportunities, and this they attributed to their marginalised existence within their university.

Let me summarise some of the signs that I think are relevant to understanding the status of LAS and the LAS professional in universities, at least in Australia, but I

have a feeling this list could be expanded to include New Zealand and South Africa at least:

- no commonly accepted name for the professional role

- roles poorly understood by others (as "the remedial tutor", "the English lecturer", "that person who helps students", etc.)

- no agreed standard for staff awards and levels

- rarely a clearly identified career structure

- few groups with anything approaching effective critical mass

- a disproportionately high level of staff casualisation

- few jobs advertised at more senior levels

- generic institutional promotion criteria insensitive to LAS work

- few staff successful in being promoted to higher level positions

- no professional association

- no professional journal or newsletter (although the discussion list Unilearn has been an unparalleled success)

- in some contexts, explicit exclusions from rights and entitlements conferred automatically upon others undertaking academic work

There are some LAS units which are not well captured any longer by these descriptors. But in as much as any of these assertions might be seen as valid generalisations for the LAS profession as a whole, is it any wonder that there has been a pervasive belief amongst LAS professionals that their work continues to reside on the margins of university work, unrecognised and unrewarded?

This theme of separateness from mainstream academic work in universities is one which is reiterated in studies on the status of "writing centers" in the USA. Grimm, in 1996, published a paper called "Rearticulating the work of the writing centre" which

was a polemical analysis of the "subordinate service positions" of such centres. She described these centres as being "neither theoretically nor structurally integrated within the intellectual work of the university". She claimed that "they are marked by social notions of what women provide – refuge, nurturance, emotional support, personal guidance…" (Grimm, 1996: 527). The role of writing centres in US universities shares many similar characteristics with that of LAS units in Australian universities, although I'm not sure that her depiction is entirely applicable to our situation.

I'd like to come back now to the doorway between my two rooms, the LAS profession and the academic development one. There is a growing sense of the proximity between LAS work and that work which is often called "academic development", otherwise known as "educational development", "educational consultancy", and so on. Lee Andresen in 1996 actually depicted academic development as a superordinate term encompassing a plethora of professional roles including LAS. This was his list:

> "academic staff developers, teaching/learning consultants, instructional designers, educational technologists, educational evaluators, academic management/leadership developers and consultants, student learning researchers, and student support personnel (learning skills advisors, literacy and numeracy tutors, equity tutors and the like)."
> (Andresen, 1996: 40)

I'm sure there would be markedly different views on just how appropriate his taxonomy is here, and markedly different views on whether academic developers would be considered the most proximate to LAS. In some universities, these two groups are actually co-located within the one organisational unit (a pattern which is a little more common in the United Kingdom), whereas in some other universities, the two groups operate in worlds apart, hostile or oblivious to each other.

But what is really interesting, however, is the parallels between the two groups in terms of their experiences of marginality. Strikingly similar accounts of feeling marginalised and isolated were reported more than a decade ago amongst academic

developers. Ingrid Moses, in 1987, compared the status of what she termed educational development across four countries including Australia. She included amongst the symptoms of this marginality their lack of a career path, and their difficulties of being promoted on the basis of criteria insensitive to their work and roles. She summed up the mood of the day:

> "The morale of many educational developers seems low –
> some of the reasons are the precarious position of education
> development and educational developers, the low status of
> teaching which is reflected onto their work, the constant need
> to be relevant, needed, to demonstrate effectiveness where
> effectiveness may be hard to prove; the constant need to
> convince, convert, establish and maintain credibility via-a-vis
> a sceptical university environment where status is based on
> research performance." (Moses, 1987: 476)

Ten years on from then, this mood continued to tinge the self-examination of academic developers. David Baume in the UK saw the academic development field as continuing to be buffetted by the winds of change, with some units "surviv(ing) precariously on high narrow ledges, grabbing crumbs and doing good where they may, susceptible to death by attack, starvation or apathy" (Baume, 1996: 4). But, in the same journal issue as Baume's piece, Phil Candy was arguing that there were signs of a clear shift in status for educational development "from the margins to the mainstream" (Candy, 1996: 8).

The journal was the International Journal of Academic Development, published by the Taylor and Francis Group, this was its first issue, and its establishment marked a watershed in the academic development field. From the beginning the journal foregrounded an interest in the professional status and roles of academic developers. It provided a venue for debate and knowledge-sharing across national borders and the dissemination of empirical investigations into the profession. No doubt this journal has played a key role in the consolidation of the academic development profession and its elevation in institutional status, although other

contextual factors such as government-initiated quality assurance demands have probably also been influential.

Let's look at another cognate field – that of instructional design. In this field there has been a similar ongoing interest in the roles of the practitioners themselves, although without as marked a sentiment of exclusion. The origins of instructional design map on closely to the establishment of university distance education centres which were charged with the task of producing packaged learning materials for off-campus students (Allen, 1996: 7). Perhaps because of this beginning, the roles of these practitioners have tended to develop less haphazardly, even if there are continuing concerns about the codification of work and work processes as Inglis (1996) and Young (2000) have attested.

What is common amongst these two cognate fields of practice has been the felt need to organise as a profession, and to clarify roles and responsibilities in order to justify the relevance and value of the contributions that these expert practitioners can make to improving university teaching and learning. These groups have actively inspected their own identity and practice, either to secure their place in the landscape of university work, or to reinvent themselves for securing future places. It seems to me that, by contrast, LAS practitioners have been less inwardly focussed on addressing their own identity and status, and less outwardly strategic about it compared with these other fields of practice.

So let's turn to this idea of organising.   There have been a few calls at different times to formalise the evident solidarity of LAS practitioners into an organised professional status. In 1990, Samuelovicz, for example, urged "learning and language skills counsellors" to consider forming a professional association, and to establish a forum for information and knowledge-sharing. Since then, the insecure and unrewarded status of LAS positions in universities has been a perennial discussion theme. Towards the end of the last decade, one of these LAS conferences enabled a more concerted effort to be made to draw together multiple perspectives about the nature of the LAS practitioner role.

The outcomes of this forum were consolidated into a generic position statement for "academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers in Australian Universities",

prepared by Erst Carmichael and others in 1999. This paper argued that the work itself was essentially academic work and needed to be recognised as such. That such a statement was able to be developed provides evidence of the shared identity and goals of LAS practitioners. That such a statement was believed to be needed provides even more vivid evidence of the pervasive insecurity they experience in the status of their positions within Australian universities.

There had been an earlier call by Mark Garner, Kate Chanock, and Rosemary Clerehan in 1995 to clarify the nature of this field of practice. Their edited collection, "Academic Skills Advising: Towards a Discipline" was the first publication of the Victorian Language and Learning Network, a loose affiliation of LAS practitioners in the universities in Victoria. Whilst this particular collection was focussed for the most part on theoretical and practical accounts of LAS teaching, the introduction to the collection captures the sense of a new field of practice in search of its professional identity:

> "…the development of LAS [language and academic skills]
> teaching has been the richer for the diversity of backgrounds,
> perspectives and areas of expertise that people have
> brought to it. Nonetheless, each new member of the field is
> likely to be asking exactly what it is we do and why…"
> (Garner, Chanock, and Clerehan, 1995: 5).

What characteristics are normally associated with a field of practice coming to be known as such? It seems there are many different ways that individuals approach unpacking their notion of shared identity, as captured in a study about academic developers' views of themselves:

> "Some people chose to approach the question of self-
> definition by the desire to identify a body of knowledge which
> defines what we know, a 'canon' for developers. Others
> preferred to talk about the way we do our work as opposed
> to accepting one canon which defines what we know. This
> approach emphasised the theories we subscribe to, the way

we analyse the discrepancies within our work, and the lessons we learn. Still others talked about looking in from the outside, bridging private critiques of the solitary developer with public measures of our practice and research." (Mintz, 1997: 24)

I have found Etienne Wenger's conceptualisation of the idea of "communities of practice" to be very helpful for this purpose. Wenger sees a community of practice as being made up of people engaged in "practices …(which are) the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (Wenger, 1998: 45).

Wenger's carefully articulated concept of communities of practice is a generic one and, as such, does not engage in depth with the issues of epistemology which are so fundamental to contexts of work in an educational setting. Nonetheless, the concept has strong explanatory potential for understanding and studying more systematically a particular group engaged in doing its work, within a common historical and social context which gives structure and meaning to what they do (Wenger, 1998: 47).

For Wenger, our identity within a community of practice entails the negotiation of our identity within that community, the coming to know ourselves through our recognition of what is familiar and what is not familiar, a knowledge of where we have been and where we are going, our reconciliation of our co-existing multi-memberships, and our ways of resolving our identity in the interplay between our local and our more global communities (Wenger, 1998: 149).

Wenger's conceptualisation of a community of practice is salient in the context of LAS work. In particular, the identification of the boundaries around LAS practice may provide a useful way of examining the nature of LAS work, and articulating what distinguishes it from other work. Equally as importantly, the examination of LAS practice within a "broader constellation of practices and broader institutions" (Wenger, 1998: 168) is likely to offer a useful perspective for understanding the status of LAS work in its various contextual settings.

Indeed, it is possible that the experiences of marginality reported by LAS practitioners may be characterised most persuasively by reference to their co-existing identities of participation and non-participation in their own community of practice, in those with close and sometimes contested boundaries, and in the institutional arrangements which mediate their relations of participation. This is a series of themes articulated by Lee (1996: 7) who attributed responsibility for the low self-concept of LAS practitioners to their inclination to "define themselves by contrast to others" (Wenger, 1998: 168), the others in this case being academic staff in universities as a whole group:

> "Many academic literacy development practitioners come from a background in teaching and do not see themselves as 'real' academics. Indeed, many define themselves in a binary 'us/them' relationship to 'academics', a relationship with a clear hierarchy of privilege and marginality. Many could be said to have significantly internalised such a relation." (Lee, 1996: 7)

I have re-interpreted the kinds of characteristics that Wenger suggested one would need to look for as indicators of whether a community of practice has formed. I have reworked Wenger's essentially process characteristics and represented them in Figure 1 as desirable goals (with apologies to Michael Halliday (1985) whose metafunctions I have very loosely appropriated for this purpose). To these I have added other processes and goals emanating from practitioner perspectives, and characteristics which reflect the institutional situation which mediates participation and non-participation in LAS practice.

The first of these clusters captures what the field itself is about, as would be manifest through the practitioners' perspectives of the substance, history, scope, issues and so on within the field. The second refers to the people relationships within the field: not just amongst the practitioners themselves but also between them and others. The third cluster refers to the way the field of practice is organised.

Integrating dimensions of a field of practice	Examples of characteristic processes and goals of a field of practice
What the field of practice is about	• an understanding of its history and evolution • a shared knowledge base • a common view about the definition and scope of the field of practice • a common view about what are the relevant issues and problems of its practice
How people interact in the field of practice	• sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual • substantial overlap in people's views on who belongs and who does not belong • a common status conferred on it by the institution it serves • a common commitment of service to its "clients"
How the field of practice is organised	• channels to facilitate knowledge sharing across local and global boundaries • an agreed code of ethics and standards of practice • a formal organisation and structure • procedures for licensing and accreditation of members

Figure 1: Characteristics to distinguish the LAS field of practice

What's really important at this point is to declare that I am not leading towards making recommendations about a planned interventionist approach. I am not going to suggest a design intended to alter the trajectories of the LAS field of practice. This could only be foolish to attempt, even if one wanted to. A field of practice is constantly evolving in an organic way towards the destinies its practitioners jointly construct, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Wenger provides a cautionary note about the futility of mandating the shape and directions of practice:

> "Communities of practice are about content – about learning
> as a living experience of negotiating meaning – not about
> form. In this sense, they cannot be legislated into existence
> or defined by decree. …. One can attempt to institutionalise
> a community of practice, but the community of practice itself
> will slip through the cracks and remain distinct from its
> institutionalisation." (Wenger, 1998: 229).

However, what I will say is the LAS profession is ripe for the studying – there is so much that is assumed and felt, but so little that has been subjected to rigorous scholarly enquiry.   Here are some of the studies that might be done.

At a first level, a census could be carried out to find out about the demographics of the profession. Some examples of the kinds of demographics that could be gathered are listed in Figure 2. Such a census would no doubt provide the kind of data that is periodically sought, sometimes frantically, through the Unilearn discussion list, as yet another unit needs to justify its place or existence yet again in its university's landscape. One could imagine some insightful examinations of the field of practice emerging from an interpretation of census data, perhaps along the lines of the small study undertaken by Hicks (1997) of the career paths of academic development directors.

But possibly of greater significance to the LAS field of practice, a snapshot of the profession at a particular point in time could provide a very useful benchmark against which the profession's growth and development could be plotted over the next decades. As a record of the professional contexts of LAS practitioners, however they may define themselves and in all their diversity, this could contribute enormously to the strengthening and consolidating of the field of practice.   Indeed, the undertaking of such a project as a collaborative initiative could provide, in itself, a mechanism for helping to formalise the status of the group as a professional body, and especially if commissioned by a body such as the Australian Universities Teaching Committee.

Categories	Example item topics
Position status	• Position award, level, tenure • Position title
Backgrounds and qualifications	• Educational qualifications • Other professional attainments • Previous positions
Organisational context	• Unit, group, or team name and organisational location • Unit, group, or team mass (critical mass) and constitution • Cognate groups – parallel, related, stratified

	• Unit hierarchy and reporting lines
	• Degree of inclusion in academic and university mainstreams
	• Participation in governance and strategic direction-setting
Professional relationships and participation	• Associations and affiliations
	• Professional meetings attended
	• Communication channels
	• Sources of information and ideas for professional maintenance
	• Types of contributions made to professional discourses
Career progression	• Conditions governing progression and promotion
	• Conditions governing appraisal and review
	• Career structures and succession chains
	• Access to mentors and role models
Work activity	• Types of work activity
	• Distribution of activity (priorities, periodicity…)
	• Degree of autonomy

Figure 2: Demography

At a deeper level, the surface has barely been scratched of the LAS profession's epistemologies and practices. I don't mean this in a derogatory sense as there are actually countless insightful explorations from the LAS field. What I mean is that there is so much more to be discovered. Here are just a few of the areas in which I believe much more study could usefully be undertaken into the epistemologies and practices of LAS professionals:

- enduring theories and concepts to explain LAS knowledge

- relationships to close and distant other knowledge domains

- the distinctive nature of LAS pedagogical knowledge

- the relationships between language and learning (as for example, Taylor, 1995)

- the notion of transdisciplinarity in LAS work

- the notion of "co-production" of knowledge in LAS collaborations within the disciplines (after Lee, 1997)

- LAS professionals' conceptualisations of teaching and learning

- the relationships between LAS professionals' conceptions of and approaches to their work

- legitimate means of evaluating LAS work

In a socio-historical sense, there are probably countless different interpretations of the professional ontogenesis of the LAS field. Here in Figure 3 is my own roughly conveyed sketch of the profession's evolution over the last few decades, beginning in the early 1970s when small units (or often individuals) were set up in a few universities to provide "study skills" or English language support for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. This was exactly the way that my own career began in this field in the mid-'70s, as a response to the steadily increasing flow of NESB students entering the university with lower levels of English language proficiency than was considered sufficient for them to have an equal chance of success.

I've referred to the role that was cast for me, and others like me at that time, as "the remediators". I've depicted the prevailing theme of that era under the rubric of "multiculturalism". In my own experience over the years, I have seen my role change as I have developed my understanding and beliefs, and responded to the context around me, through that of mediator, to integrator, to transformer. Certainly the theme of integrating has generated a plethora of writings during the last decade, with the focus on embedding the development of language and literacy into the curricula of the degree programs and knowledge domains. Over the last few years, and especially among a number of what I would consider leading edge groups, the roles themselves seem to have become more those of "transformers", with the goals of curriculum transformation driving the work, and change agency imbuing the experience.

Prevailing theme	Response by LAS professions	LAS professionals as:
Multiculturalism	• supporting the minority in an elitist system	The Remediators
Massification Globalisation	• ameliorating disadvantage for "non-traditional students" • internationalisation and inclusiveness in curriculum	The Mediators
Generic skills Quality	• integration of skills with content • outcomes oriented monitoring and assessing	The Integrators
Flexibility Interdisciplinarity	• learning as reading and writing • language as transdisciplinary	The Transformers

Figure 3:   Professional ontogenesis – one possible sketch

But the aspect I find most tantalising is imagining the futures.   What might the LAS professional evolve into?   What might be the conditions now and in the future which could alter the trajectory?   What might be the responses which will strengthen and sustain LAS professionals into the future?

In the ever-changing climate of university work, as boundaries between groups shift and merge and sometimes melt, the possibilities of meta-professional convergence between LAS professionals and other groups are exciting.   We would need to discuss who the most closely cognate groups are.   Would they be academic developers, instructional and educational designers, information literacy skills developers, research developers, postgraduate supervising skills developers, professional and organisational developers, and so on?   We would need to explore how LAS roles intersect with these groups.   Just as significantly, we need to understand how LAS roles intersect with those of the academics who teach the disciplines, and thereby elaborate (for them and others) how role convergences can benefit the co-production of new understandings.

As well as exploring work roles into the future, there are numerous aspects of LAS practices that have been only superficially opened to critical debate until now. For example, the issue of confidentiality for students has hardly been broached, but really demands to be critically scrutinised within the context of a university's educational goals and curricula. For as long as access by students to LAS units is considered to demand confidentiality levels akin to those of counselling services, it seems unlikely to me that the work of LAS professionals will be well understood and appreciated for its considerable contribution to student learning. Similarly, the practice of working with students on their assignments prior to submission for assessment needs to be contested as an ethical dilemma of fairness and equity.

Amongst the papers at this conference is one by Gavin Melles which enters into the very critical examination that I believe is needed on the question of ownership and stewardship of knowledge for the LAS profession. He argues that what LAS professionals teach is "not uniquely located in LAS" units, but is really at the heart of what all university teaching is about. If one agrees with Melles' view that the teaching of literacies is dispersed "across institutions with no privileged convergence on LAS" units, then it behoves us to articulate all the more clearly what is the distinctive contribution that LAS professionals can and do make? The LAS scholarship continues to be short on this kind of investigation, and short on scrutinising the congruence (or lack of congruence) between LAS practices and underlying theories about LAS knowledge. One might question, for example, the rationale underlying separate tertiary literacy credit courses in terms of whether the literacy taught is a means of learning (that is, learning something else through literacy), or whether literacy has become itself the object of learning (that is, learning about literacy). From there, one would need to unpack related matters, such as whether literacy capability can or should be assessed separately from disciplinary knowledge. Likewise, some solid fundamental work needs to be undertaken to develop valid indicators of the effectiveness of LAS contributions to student learning, in order to justify that more or deeper learning has taken place.

There are many new areas of work that LAS professionals are beginning to engage in which are opening up the horizons of the field and creating greater awareness of the distinctive contributions they can make. One of these is the role they are

increasingly playing of facilitating a deeper understanding amongst discipline-based academics about their own literacies. Until now, this has tended to have been identified as a serendipitous spin-off of the collaborative LAS teaching they have done with academics, and particularly in the contexts of teaching graduate students about research writing. However, in a world in which learning is increasingly happening without face-to-face contact, the role of literacy and the written text has assumed an even greater prominence than before, and the discipline-based academic has become more dependent on their own literacy skills to facilitate student learning. Thus, the opportunities are abundant for working with discipline-based academics in syndicated writing partnerships to create course materials, with the LAS professional guiding their writing partner towards more explicit understanding about discourse and their own writing process.

How will LAS come to be known in the future? Hopefully not any longer as handmaidens, nor as "intellectual ambulances in the slipstream of the academic disciplines" as Bernard McKenna observed in presenting his paper yesterday at this conference. Perhaps we should be confidently preparing ourselves for the more prominent role that Professor Richard Johnstone outlined in yesterday's keynote address when he spoke of the value of such centralised units in opening things up, introducing cultural change, tackling the boundaries of the larger more stable discipline-based groups in universities. Surely these are the ways we would like to be known: as catalysts for systemic change, as facilitators of organisational learning, as partners in the transformation of university teaching and learning.

For myself, I stand at the door between my two rooms. These rooms could be seen as the self-perpetuating "silos" that Richard Johnstone spoke of yesterday, the resilient edifices erected around fields of knowledge, intended to keep some things in and some things out. Rather than choosing between them, I contest the value of a "silo mentality" for the future of the many fields of professional practice which support a university's educational goals. Instead, I believe we should be engaging in more vigorous partnerships across these converging areas and working towards the co-construction of new knowledge. Certainly, let's be strategic in becoming more visible, and laying claim to those areas of knowledge where we truly are expert. But let's do that from a more consciously and rigorously well-defined understanding of

ourselves and the professional roles we play in transforming university teaching and learning.

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