



HALL OF MIRRORS: REFLECTIONS ON A MULTI-CAMPUS LANGUAGE AND LEARNING PROGRAM.

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This paper presents a broad picture of a multi-campus language and learning program which operates across six Australian campuses and one South African campus, with links to still another in Malaysia. The model of delivery which has been adopted is a “mixed model”, incorporating aspects of all four models identified as operating in the Australian context (McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone & Devlin, 1995). The paper considers how the program has evolved since its expansion to all campuses in 1996, taking into account theoretical, pedagogical, policy, political and strategic




perspectives. The ways external and internal forces act and interact on the service will be examined. A particular focus of the paper is how these forces might shape a language and academic skills program which echoes the Australian model on an “overseas” campus. A language and academic skills program is clearly affected by changing identities of many kinds, but can also be an agent of change. The question is raised as to how a changing identity might be managed to facilitate maximum opportunity for program growth and development. The paper suggests finally that, with our understanding of the relationship of the generic to the specific (Taylor, 2000), language and learning units are well-placed to adapt to the kinds of change described.

Background

For language and academic skills units in Australian universities, while identities change, the structural model selected often remains the same - or at least until the next review. The history of Learning Centres in Australia (Language and Learning Units or Language and Academic Skills Units) has not yet been written, but would reveal a tale both of great hardship and great endeavour. For the current paper, the first author has seen the development of the Unit at the Monash campuses since the mid-80s, while the other two authors have seen what is in many ways a unique development: the first six months of language and learning at the Monash South Africa campus.

While the term “Learning Centre” would, on the face of it, appear to have connections with the US-style “Writing Centre”, such units in Australia, possibly because of their later development, have been from their very early stages based on an understanding of “language as social practice” (Street, 1995), and have insisted on the necessary disciplinary connections irrespective of their structural arrangements within the university. It is surprising to all of us how debate still continues in the United States in some quarters about whether the “writing specialist” can say anything meaningful about the disciplinary assignment.

In Australia, at least four models of delivery have been tried (McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone & Devlin. 1995). These take into account five key areas: location of unit.




nature of support; student population; size of unit and lines of communication between units in the same institution (McLean *et al.* 1995, p. 79). The majority of units in 1995 were located within faculties or student services, with smaller numbers in academic staff development or “other”. The main advantages identified for faculty location were contextualisation of material, academic credibility, a research link and potential for collaboration with faculty staff. Disadvantages were: possibilities of unequal access if not all faculties provided support; possible student unwillingness to use the service if the link with faculty and assessment seemed to be strong; duplication of resources; and insufficient critical mass.

Advantages for units located in student services were listed as: pooling of resources, ongoing professional development; equality of access; independence of faculty, ability to target groups cross-faculty by needs; potential for resource allocation. Disadvantages were possible lack of academic credibility, fewer research opportunities; and that contextualisation and successful operation depended on ability to liaise with faculty staff.

The other two models - within an academic staff development unit, or provision of services, perhaps co-opting faculty staff or providing mentor programs - are models which, arguably can also be *functions* of either of the other two more broadly-used models.

Since that paper was published what has happened in a number of universities is that the development of online learning in tertiary education has resulted in configurations changing somewhat. Previously, units under review were faced with the somewhat exasperated question from university management of “where can we put them?” Now with the embracing of workplace “teams”, the need to provide quality online learning, and the internationalisation movement, Learning Centres seem to be regarded as equal partners with staff development, educational design, multimedia design, library and other key team players in academic support.

At Monash, for example, since 1998 the Language and Learning Services Unit (LLS), previously in Student Services, has been grouped with staff development, educational design, multimedia design, audiovisual services, production and flexible




learning units which comprise the Centre for Learning and Teaching Support (CeLTS).

Review and expansion

Monash has six Victorian campuses: at Berwick, Clayton, Caulfield, Gippsland, Peninsula, Parkville (the Pharmacy College). Two of these (Caulfield and Parkville) can be considered inner-suburban, one suburban (Clayton), two outer-suburban (Berwick and Peninsula) and one rural (Gippsland). There are more than 44,000 students enrolled at these campuses, including some 9,000 studying by distance. There are two overseas campuses (Malaysia and South Africa), together with a number of sites where Monash students study (eg Hong Kong, Singapore).

Determining an appropriate model for a Learning Centre in such an organisation has never been straightforward. A mixed model, incorporating elements, particularly of the first two models outlined above has been the one selected. An historical perspective is required as background to understand the operation of the present Centre. Education minister Dawkins' amalgamations meant that the smaller campuses of Caulfield and Peninsula brought to their 1990 marriage with the larger Clayton campus a model (let us call it the student services model) which had operated for five and three years respectively. At Clayton campus, Gordon Taylor and Rosemary Viete had provided programs funded by their faculties (Arts and Education), but it was becoming clear that there was inequitable provision: time for a review.

The review took two years, and it was important that we had input. While the final document hedged its bets a little hazy about what should happen at Clayton campus, the detail, essentially the recommendation was that the Unit should be centrally organised (from Clayton), with the smaller campuses continuing as small centrally-located operations. Each campus could have – if not a “local habitation and a name” – at any rate its own identity, coloured by its particular location. As Head, I was able to initiate the Clayton campus operation as faculty-based, but with access to central offices which would be built in the following few years (including a seminar room, lab




and resource centre). Not for the first time, we learnt the lesson that, if you are in on something from the beginning, your capacity to shape your identity is multiplied.

Caulfield campus continued (despite having smaller overall student numbers than Clayton - the major campus), to attract the largest number of international students, with the Business and Economics faculty the major focus. After Clayton campus, the Unit's next largest group of staff was concentrated here. Parkville (with small student numbers) was visited one day per week by a Caulfield staff member. Peninsula campus, with Nursing and Education among other faculties, had one LLS staff member, dealing with lower non-English speaking backgrounds numbers, but higher mature-age. Gippsland, had LLS staff job-sharing one position, and had rural students as well as students studying at a distance. Berwick campus support was initiated as a pilot program (at 0.4) in 2000, and in the following year, was the last Monash campus in Australia to be allocated ongoing funding for language and learning - another example of that institutional rule: the institution abhorreth unequal provision.

The reason for the late provision is interesting. I was offered at the end of 1995 - by my then line manager - the opportunity for a small amount of sessional funding for Berwick, very shortly after we were funded for our expansion. I thanked him, but said no. Given the small number of students at that stage, and because I knew that other areas had to set up full-scale student service-type operations on tight budgets, I said I was prepared to wait. Collegial relations with the other areas, I felt, may already have been strained by the fact that already our budget was being increased, while for their core business, they were managing with less. So, I waited five years. At least now, the students at Berwick, have their own "version", mirroring in its own way the Unit's central principles and values.

Happily, most of the principles put forward by McLean et al were permitted by the above implementation. While the original Monash Clayton campus was not quite "sandstone", it was an old enough university in the Australian context for the academics to be wary of anything "central" and of anything which could be seen as non-academic. The links which needed to be developed on the smaller campuses were those of *community*: contacts of many kinds were possible with individuals. But at Clayton campus, while faculties became de facto communities for the staff located



there, it was the staff experience (gained working at Caulfield campus), capacity to conduct (and collaborate in) research, and their ability - for all intents and purposes - to *look like* faculty members, that gained the Unit acceptance.

Unnervingly, just as it was about to be implemented, the review was intending to withdraw from us the one weapon which we regarded as the key to our ability to be successful - our continuance as academic staff. At the last minute, a petition we arranged to have signed by almost 100 delegates from the language and academic skills conference at La Trobe in 1995 was enough to delay the Academic Board decision; a degree of lobbying was undertaken and the review was handed down stipulating that the staff be academic. We were thus able to maintain a strong research link and be credible colleagues for the key campus where we had to be accepted - Clayton.

So, with centralised funding, and a central leadership, the Unit has located the bulk of its teaching in the faculties at Clayton campus and from central locations at the smaller campuses. With the mixed model, it is able to experience most of the advantages of the faculty and student services models,¹ and minimise the disadvantages. Unavoidably, the Unit's ability to develop programs depends on the interest of faculty staff, but as with other units, we have ways of making staff interested.

Even with the development of online learning, the key to a successful Learning Centre is the calibre of its staff. Both at the Unit's inception and again in 1995, the staffing could be built from the ground up. The mix of skills and experience sought has changed little but, since the mid-80s the expectation has risen so that by 1996, it was that staff would have a Masters - probably in Linguistics, or maybe in TESOL or something else.

¹ From 1996 each year until 1999, the Unit's budget was reduced. In the new arrangement under CeLTS we now have the budget to cover our base (1996) staffing. During those difficult years, due to our good relationships with faculties, we were able to keep afloat with additional faculty funding.




Principles for design and delivery

Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) write that the language problem for universities is not about “declining literacy standards but rather is about meeting changed social, cultural and informational requirements and circumstances”(p.257). Therefore, Learning Centres are at the centre - even the epicentre - of changes in learning. We are in a unique position in that, from our anthropological bird’s eye-view, we are able to detect shifts sometimes before those embedded in their disciplines do; and this must mean that we can act to facilitate change where we see the need. Two examples of this are the language of email and special consideration for NESB students in exams. With the former, it is clear to us that the quality of expression in a student’s email should not be a cause for vituperation about the sad state of student literacy. We have to use our linguistic expertise to explain this to staff. A number of universities are nervous about taking the step of allowing dictionaries or extra time for certain student groups; here again, we can use our knowledge and experience to explain how this might facilitate more equal outcomes.

What is quite probably a core value for all Learning Centres in Australia is expressed memorably by Street (1990):

Literacy is a social practice that varies from one context to another and is part of cultural knowledge and behaviour, not simply a technical competence to be added on to people as though they were machines being upgraded (p. 7)

Awareness of literacy as a social practice - and a cross-cultural one at that - is now a commonplace in Australian and overseas research (eg Candlin, 1998); Lea & Street, 2000). There are, undoubtedly, arguments about what that means - and should mean - for universities. Surely, though, an anthropological understanding of academic literacy as embodying “ideological practice” (Becher, 1989 ;Street, 1995) and embedded in specific “cultural meanings and practices” (Street, 1995) is fundamental to our being able to conduct our daily work. And our daily work includes our capacity to influence the way things are done as well as to our capacity to see



that they are done. This understanding of academic literacy, as we shall see, has different implications for different campuses of the one university.

Kaplan and Baldauf (1998) point to the Scylla and Charybdis which the good ship Learning Centre must negotiate: our “student equity” perspective, and our “institutional discourse” perspective“. The first focuses on the needs of individual students, and the second on those things a university requires or has carriage of. These, in a way, mirror each other, and are sometimes cast misleadingly as either a reactive or proactive approach. We need to position ourselves so that we can be making the decision about which perspective to work with at any given time.

One way of securing our position so that we can move confidently in any fresh negotiation of stakeholders’ interests has been the development of a series of key papers so that we have our principles set out for any enquiry. Thus we have a paper justifying our status as academic, a paper outlining the rationale for our staffing distribution to campuses and faculties, a set of staff procedures and guidelines, among others. Some of these need to change; some stand as historical records. With our documenting of the past comes the capacity to move into the future. Our current preoccupation has to be to explore the ways we become “international” or “global”, understanding how the two terms may be at odds.

From the moment interviews were conducted for the new Monash South Africa campus which commenced in February, 2001, it became clear that terms used in Australia did not have a simple reflection in a new place. In Australia, we may have problems with the word “support” in case it does not sound sufficiently “integrated” into mainstream teaching; the South African concern over the word (and their oft stated preference for “academic development”) has its origins in the thinking that “support” means that the problem lies in the student’s coming from a deprived educational background. Academic development is about changing attitudes and structures (Forson & May, 2000), and has been in recent years the valued term.

Here is the story of the two new LLS staff members: Chris Orsmond (a South African) and Anne Wilson (an Australian).



New off-shore campuses: forging new identities


Unlike Monash Australia, Monash South Africa is a private provider of higher education, and as such, the fee structure affects its accessibility for the wider population. However, students can meet the eligibility criteria for Monash entry and, due to their family's financial status, receive a bursary. Because the government requires all higher education providers to submit data indicating the number of Black, White and Asian students (for Asian read Indian), the following information is available: the student population (of under 100 students) is about 50% black and 50 % white with a few "Asian" students.

Who are our current South African students? The data provided by the administrative unit gives us details of these students family names, first names, courses, school attendance, age grouping and race. But if we return to Franks' (1995) and Gee's (1996) explanations of identity, it gives the curriculum designers little insight into how these students use language, think, feel, believe, value or act in order to develop who they are. We have developed our Unit according to the action research spiral of research, implement, reflect, adapt, and act - and view it as a "work in progress". We have had the ongoing support of all academic staff and the time to weave the concerns of each of the participants: lecturers, students, curriculum writers and ourselves into the reflective process. The identity of the unit has seemed in fact to have a "life of its own" as it has slowly evolved into the current model of operation, involving:

Joint Faculty Delivery. Sessions targeted by the academic staff as 'incoming needs' (assignment preparation, presentations, essay writing). These occur on request and during a specific set tutorial, concentrating simultaneously on the development of academic staff and students.

Individual consultations. These 1-hour sessions are student requested. This was our opportunity to consider the individual identity.

Referrals. These are sessions where students have been sent to us for additional help. They usually occur prior to a task.




Workshops on components of assessment relevant across a number of faculties. The focus of these sessions is dependent on the current needs of the overall university community. Again these sessions were driven by assessment and academic discourse. It was difficult to consider the students' identities, as we were never really sure who would attend.

Anecdotal evidence from conversations with lecturers suggests that students from historically disadvantaged schools are likely to find the transition into first year more challenging, due to the severe constraints under which their schools were operating. They cannot – and should not – be separated from their “real identities” in any learning situation. They are products of their social histories expressed through their use of language, symbols, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values and actions. An understanding and appreciation of our learners' histories and identities in the broadest *and* most specific sense would, we believe, provide us with a starting point and the necessary context for teaching and learning, and also ensure that “alienation and miscommunication is avoided” (Delpit, 1995: 24).

In order to enter a disciplinary apprenticeship at university, students have to accept and acknowledge the prescribed and predetermined ways of “being in this world”. This highlights the tension between beliefs about the development of our curriculum and the external forces that have impacted on our decisions. We were lulled initially into believing that we could effectively integrate the two without a sense of compromise. This has been and continues to be our struggle. Have we been able to consider the complex issue of identities as the major factor in the development of effective curricula? Or have we been dominated (although unconsciously) by the powerful external pressures of assessment and academic literacy?

It is becoming apparent to us as we look back on the decisions made during the year thus far, that the identity of the institution has carried more weight than that of other participants. Much of our work has been about “fitting in”, about “mastering or refining” the academic discourse. We have become “tools for and of” this discourse. We perhaps would like to believe that our particular philosophies and knowledge helped to determine our direction, that our identities as teachers was part of the process of development, but we wonder if this is the case.



When we started the unit, we felt that we were being true to our educational philosophies because firstly *the way* we delivered the content “fitted” philosophically with our understanding of *how* learners learn (based on our previous years of experience, of trial and errors, of success and failures. Secondly, we felt we were “doing the job” because we were meeting the apparent demands of the institutions and assessment practices.

We are now asking whether our role is not to accept, but to question, these demands and practices. We would like to challenge the perspective of “appropriate writing” and begin to explore with the students the “processes of meaning-making and contestation around this meaning” (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 35). We believe that our unit should not develop as a “result of a university reacting to a perceived student need” (McLean et al, 1995, p. 78), but rather as a response to the complex issue of our students’ identities.

This reflection has encouraged us to question not only the daily operations of the emergent unit but also the rationale that will ultimately underpin it. We are struggling to reconcile the tensions between the participants’ identities, the demands of institution, the pressures of assessment and academic continuum of study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies.

While Monash South Africa has strong links with Australia, it will develop as an African campus with its own identity, one shaped by its own sense of people and place. Lecturers have shown flexibility in bridging gaps through individual appointments and adapting some material for local use. However, for all staff and students there have been the issues of how to use someone *e/se’s* learning materials and lectures, how to make examples from an Australian context relevant to the South African one, and how to infuse a local South African flavour into an internationalised degree.

For staff and students, the campus with its small first-year intake represents an opportunity to shape a unique identity for Monash South Africa.



Managing the changing identity for growth and development

So, while the teaching practice at Monash South Africa may have slipped into the same outward shape as that of the Centre in Australia, to assume that we are seeing our own reflection would be a grave mistake. One of the most powerful insights we gain as Learning Centres resides in our privileged understanding of the ways the generic and the discipline-specific relate to one another. Precisely because we are aware of multiple frames or reflections, our judgement - that key faculty (Taylor, 2000) - enables us to penetrate the discourses which seek sometimes to be-night or enslave. This means that we have the power - not only to adapt to change - but to find our own directions, supporting our students' search for their own identities.

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