LAS CENTRE IDENTITIES AND PRACTICES WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION: FRAGMENTS FOR NEGOTIATION

Gavin Melles

Faculty of Education, Deakin University and

Centre for Communication Skills and ESOL

University of Melbourne

Gmelles@unimelb.edu.au

The teaching of language and academic skills is diffused across higher education institutions and is not uniquely located in LAS. This means that a discussion about identities and futures of 'LAS' in times of change is itself problematic. Likewise, the discourses around centre identities within faculties, the role of technology and the web, and responses to an increasingly diverse student body float across institutions with no privileged convergence on LAS. So it is necessary first to acknowledge that 'our' identity is still very much open to negotiation and contestation and that the institutional fragmentation of LAS practices has consequences for a workable identity and a coherent response to times of change. I use a recent shift from New Zealand to Australia, some post-structural scaffolding, and current representations of practices and

discourses to try to locate some responses to these questions and their implications for professional identities, practices, and organisation within institutions.

Language and Academic Skills: an abstract reading

"As we enter the 21st century, universities are experiencing a period of unprecedented transformation: globalisation, corporatisation, internationalisation, increased accountability, restructuring and new technologies are among the forces reshaping our institutions. The one constant is change and inherent in this is our changing identities as we grapple with the new demands we encounter daily. These external forces, in combination with developments in our field and related disciplines, cannot fail to impact on our identities as LAS staff within our institutions, on the identities of our students and on the identities of our academic colleagues.

"The point is that it is you that is doing the identifying, and the identity you confer has more to do with your purposes than the 'nature' of the thing itself...masculinity / femininity, hetero- / homosexual, sane/insane...these may be seen as socially bestowed identities rather than essences of the person" (Burr, 1995, p.30)

It seems to me that one of the functions of conferences is to reinforce professional 'solidarity' and recognize disciplinary boundaries through mutual display and conversation. As many of the papers at the abstracts and papers at this conference indicate there is a wide variety of professional positions available to conference participants in situating their response to the question of identities. In the spirit of

'mutual' display and conversation, I would like you to think of my discussion as a continuation of the conversation Carolyn Webb initiated at her plenary. In particular, I am interested in developing the question of research approaches to LAS, appropriate pedagogical philosophies for practitioners, and, in general, a questioning of the language and practices assumed to structure this field. A 'workable' description of LAS staff, our field, our students, is assumed by the conference abstract. I suggest that the 'our' community is far from well-defined.

The conference abstract and title works against efforts to stabilize or describe new identities for language and academic skills practitioners. Just as students do (Bartlett 2000), we come to teaching with diverse backgrounds but unlike them there is no single 'Australian (LAS) identity' to which we can or must conform (Yew & Farrell, 2000). I think if we move beyond the 'LAS' acronym we can begin to see that this question of identities is one that links to the work of a broad group of people mediating a new higher education curriculum. Like Clarke (2000), I see myself involved in advising students on issues that go beyond the mechanics of writing into content and research methodologies. I think the fact that this happens shows that 'we' are no longer involved in fix-it remediation or support but substantially involved in the process of re-defining the tertiary currciulum (Tapper 1999; Aitchison 2000).

I see my own role as a lecturer in ESL within a communication skills and ESL centre at Melbourne University, along with my colleagues, as intersecting with and subsuming, in some instances, the teaching activities of those who identify themselves as LAS staff. The work of staff in transition programmes, foundation studies programmes, and other units across the campus are all concerned with researching and teaching staff and students what is required for academic acculturation. I think that rather than providing help with 'supporting' skills we need to think about what we do as work in academic literacies; a professional research and teaching space with its own content and purposes. And we need to widen linkages and contacts with those concerned with these issues. This implies leaving behind the peripheral 'support' tag used to define what LAS is and grasping at academic literacies as a professional research and teaching field; one which requires a social and professional attention to the consequences of what we teach and who we are.

As Vivien Burr points out in the quote above, the identities we confer on others and those that are conferred on us serve social (and institutional) purposes. We are often designated into binaries such as: academic/general staff, adviser/lecturer, external/internal, language/academic skills, skills/literacy; some of these binaries are implied in the conference description. The designations correspond to historical and political constructions within education and society but are not particularly useful to categorise people whose practices are concerned with academic literacy. One way 'us' (LAS) and 'them' (academic colleagues) breaks down is when one looks at those involved in teaching the literacies required by the academy (Dobson 2000). As this conference attendance list, profesional associations such as HERSA, AARE, and professional forums like UNILEARN attest such simplifications bear little resemblance to the designations, locations and concerns of practitioners in the field who talk about interpreting academic cultures for students.

I must admit to never having worked in a so-called language and academic skills centre. I have worked in high schools, ESL units, language departments, continuing education departments and latterly communication skills centres where instruction in note-taking skills, referencing, time management, and other discretely identified academic behaviours (the standard agendas for LAS centres I have known) have formed part of a broader curriculum. Latterly, I have been working with postgraduate first and second language students on research skills and writing in parallel with undergraduate ESL 'credit' teaching. This teaching is conducted in on-line, face-to-face, workshop, individual and group situations. Students 'skills' in assignment writing, thesis structuring, referencing, self-management, all form part of 'bigger pictures'. Overall, then, the skills focus that continues to define some work on language and academic skills is a somewhat artificial isolation of the mechanics of curriculum processes.

Situating identities in our past and present

Feminist approaches, I believe, have particular relevance for a field such as teaching academic literacies which has a strong female representation and works within largely andro-centric institutional frameworks (Asmar, 1999a; Blackmore & Sachs, 1998; Jackson, 2000) and academic perspectives (Beasley, 1985). Feminist

methodology puts gender, reflexivity, and purposes of research and writing on at the centre (Harding, 1987). As critical feminist writers like Jones (Jones, 1992), Lather (Lather, 1991) and Smith (Smith, 1990) suggest texts - research and other - about experience are ideological by nature. This is true for the discourses of conferences as it is for research articles on or about practice. When we visit or revisit texts about teaching, we are not obliged to read them in ways that sustain the illusion they mirror the Truth (Fraser, 1989). We can and should interrogate pragmatically (Cherryholmes 1993) them as setting up a picture of the world (ontology), of knowledge (epistemology) and consequences for educational practice (methodology) that we find ignores personal, gender, and political blind spots and blank spots (Wagner 1993) we view as critical to what we do.

How we practice teaching is tied up with our sense of awareness of its role and purpose in education in general. This understanding is both personal and social: it is a product of our own past practices in institutional contexts. A 'workable' identity for us as individuals needs to be built on integrating our current understandings of this as mediated by our own teaching experiences. Increasingly I find that the best kinds of conversations about teaching practice are those that begin by acknowledging our personal investment, gender, and other positions we take in the changing climate of institutional politics we work in. These are conversations we often have in staffrooms with those we know and who know us. It is worth unpacking in writing, I suggest, the representations of the institution, ourselves, and others that surface in the close work we do with students. These 'tales from the field' have something of the power of a critical tale (Barone 1992). Critical tales use autobiographical strategies to situate educational understanding and practice and allow political and ethical considerations to come to the fore. They have a central place in feminist educational research, which acknowledge that "our accounts of the world can only be constructions, made up from the language, meanings and ideas historically available to us, the 'I'" (Jones 1992).

Literacy as a socio-historical construction and practice written through critical feminist approaches invites a 'contextualising' of teaching and a challenge to taken-for granted binaries. It involves writing about our practices from particular positions of power with regard to students and other academics. The issues we are increasingly

asked to deal with - research methodologies, plagiarism, advising faculty on teaching practice, are reflections of institutional change. The androcentrics of university management, the gendered nature of 'support' teaching (more females than males), the assumptions about student accommodation to anglo-centric models of the academy, need description in writing as we experience them from our situated teaching perspectives. One of my views is that the language of 'skills' and 'support' contributes to the (already) marginal status some of us have in the institution. Writing 'up' the extent to which our interventions are increasingly important for student success and emphasising literacies as our field are two ways of combatting this.

Why literacies not skills?

Along with others, I am dissatisfied with the term 'skills' as sufficiently well defined and sufficiently broad to cover the functions assigned to academic acculturation (Candlin et al. 1998; Richards 1998). 'Academic literacy', is a term that is sometimes used synonymously with 'measurable' skill levels (Barthel, 1994; Hanrahan, 1997; Holder, Jones, Robinson, & Krass, 1999; Nevile, 1996; see also Willis, 1990). But the sense I want to stress here is successful communication in socio-cultural context. I agree with Percy and Skillen (2000) that the role of learning adviser, or better the support role in universities is in a period of transition and that this translates, on the one hand, into moving from outside to inside the curriculum (Percy & Skillen 2000). For example, faculty construct particular relationships with students through feedback and increasingly, the role of interpretation or even mediation between student and university cultures is being played by teachers like myself and those in LAS and other centres (Jessup 2000). In one sense this is bridging the gap between faculty and student expectations (Killen 1994). In another, it indicates how the burden of academic acculturation as a social process is falling to those outside discipline specific content teachers.

Literacies in plural helps keep the focus on the multiple ways language in context is represented across campus by faculty and students. In its current use it also keeps the focus on the social import of literacies for an increasingly diverse student population (McKay 1993). As such it subsumes 'skills', which often implies a neutral designation for the 'mechanics' of tertiary success. It is a term which applies in a

cross-disciplinary way to academic literacies across campus and beyond 'support' roles (Pearce & Borland, 1997; Reid & Mulligan, 1997). Because it has purchase in all levels of education - primary through tertiary - literacy also helps create a bridge across cultural and historical circumstances for individual students (and teachers). It reminds us that academic literacy is only the tip of an individual and group socio-historical process that begins in early childhood.

Literacies brings into focus the issue of discourse and the academic genres that students must manage. New undergraduates, coursework Masters students, PhD students from different backgrounds are all learning to manage the conventions, sometimes very idiosyncratic, demanded of them by discipline specific faculty. Gone are the days (the golden 'halcion' past) when they could magically be expected to have reached academic maturity through a process of osmosis through their many years in the education system. Internationalisation and accountability have both played a part in ensuring that the taken for granted simply will not do. The discourses and practices of the academy need transparent interpretation (if not modification) for a diverse student body.

Our mainstream 'colleagues' are still grappling with this issue but to a far less extent than we who have moved into the interpreter and mediator role. I increasingly find myself explaining the odd somewhat cryptic questions of my academic 'colleagues' to students. Cryptic because culturally different and sometimes undisclosed. Skills will not do either as a job designation to explain the role I and others find ourselves in explaining research methodologies to students in ethnomusicology, critical and post-modern approaches to law, and educational linguistics. As Percy and Skillen (2000) noted the shift to learner-centred practices in the modern university is a serious challenge for some staff and can only be effectively achieved through 'equal' partnerships between those of us who discipline staff and literacy specialists like ourselves.

The politics of common sense notions of external/internal forces

Corporatisation, technologisation, internationalisation, globalisation, accountability, and restructuring can be seen as a constellation of 'common sense' meta-narratives[1] (Lyotard, 1984) or 'myths' (Holton, 1997) in education which lecturers, students, and' advisers never intentionally wrote. As common sense realities they can be positioned as anonymous[2] forces moulding higher education and 'our' community into new 'shapes'. Gramsci's notion of hegemony[3] is important here because it helps explain how we as educators come to accept as common sense notions that serve political, commercial and industrial ends. They are patently words that those practicing language and skills training do not own nor coin.

These common sense nominalisations are, in fact, extremely politicized notions which connect to other issues such as the commodification of higher education (Roberts, 1998). Curriculum change from an 'international' *policy* perspective means, for example, modifying the curriculum to meet global training objectives. From an *equity* standpoint it is not clear whether curriculum change is actually working and whether, therefore the rhetoric of multiculturalism and internationalised curriculum is having more than financial effects (Dawson, 1998). Language and academic skills connects to the changing needs of international students (Bostock, 1998). Their financial input has been good for business and for multiculturalism on campus (Pittaway, Ferguson, & Breen, 1998). Or at least there is a positive response from management and administration to internationalisation as a 'given' of corporate university life with the added attraction of benefits for campus multiculturalism

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[1] For more on this now standard postmodern term attributed to Jacques Lyotard see 'Introduction to Basic Lyotardian Concepts' at http://www.california.com/~rathbone/lyo3.htm and 'Notes on Jean-Francois Lyotard' at http://www.california.com/~rathbone/lyotard2.htm.

[2] The linguistic tactic of creating a nominalized form such as 'internationalisation' is one of the strategies used in academic discourse to conceal agency and responsibility. Here, we can ask by whom?

[3] Follow it up in the Penguin Dictionary of Sociology, © Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S.Turner (1994) or on-line at http://xrefer.com/entry/105141

(Hampson, 1996). But the multicultural benefits of internationalisation from a management perspective need to move from rhetorical (Barrie, 1997) to grounded statements about what is happening in classrooms and departments (Asmar, 1999b).

The effects on curriculum practice are particularly relevant to what we do. Internationalisation, beyond a management strategy and achievement, is challenging university staff to respond adequately (Mills, 1997; Rizvi & Walsh, 1998; Tootell, 1999; Welch & Denman, 1997) and, in fact, change their teaching strategies (Baker & Panko, 1998). Academic skills like the ability to work in groups (Volet & Ang, 1998) and manage postgraduate study (Stacy, 1999) have taken on special meaning where they are filtered through different linguistic and cultural expectations. Dialogue between faculty and students is one way of closing the gap and moving to the incorporation of different beliefs and behaviours in the classroom (Dawson, 1998).

Internationalisation shows up in threads of conversation on the UNILEARN list. The unilearn list a Special Interest Group forum of the Higher Education Research and Development Society Association which canvasses Australasian[4] comment and discussion on language and learning in higher education. I have been talking and listening to contributors for the last four years. The contributions to the forum emanate from advisers, support officers, lecturers, and others (with unidentified positions) within academic skills units, university programs, polytechnics, support centres, centres and schools of language or ESL and communication within faculties of Arts, Business, Computing and Mathematics, and centres. In my view, this group is an important part of the community whose practices are addressed by this conference.

What is particularly interesting from the point of view of internationalisation as a common sense 'given' is how it surfaces in the list conversations as a political cum rhetorical axis dictating organisation, discourse, and practices of 'our' community. I list below some of the threads

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[4] Occasional contributions also come from the UK, Australia, the US, etc.

- the participation of international students in group work

- IELTS/TOEFL entry requirements and their credibility for postgraduates and undergraduates

- advising academic staff on working with international students

- teaching academic skills to offshore students

- plagiarism: how to teach (NESB especially) students not to do it

These ways in which 'internationalised' teaching situations for support staff are linked to institutional politics is clear in a recent thread on individual tutorials on the list. In the course of this (asynchronous) conversation talk on individual tutorials is linked to the following themes: individual tutorials are …

- used as measures of staff performance and promotion

- limited by university funding and cost-effectiveness

- usefully framed by Vygotskian or Rogerian approaches

- difficult to validate the effectiveness of with faculty management

- less effective (cost and results) than group work

- the best kind of teaching and a source of insights and input into group teaching and research

- can be achieved through use of senior students as peer teachers/mentors

- definitive of the separate (non-academic) profile of learning centre staff

- increasing in number

- not considered university teaching (for award purposes)

- needed because faculty don't do their job properly (and linked to the disappearance of learning adviser if this situation is remedied)

Textual fundamentalism and naivity in teaching and learning

> "Textual fundamentalism is the belief that texts always say just what they mean, so that any honest or decent person ought to be able to understand this perfectly clear meaning without making any fuss about it ". (Scholes, 1989, p.52)

Following Scholes, Richard Rorty, Cleo Cherryholmes and ultimately John Dewey I have taken a pragmatic rather than a fundamentalist approach to reading the conference descriptor and abstracts. In doing so I have tried to highlight some of the assumptions built into the language employed to describe the aims and purposes of the conference. It is the same approach that Cleo Cherryholmes suggests for avoiding naïve approaches to reading research in the social sciences and education (Cherryholmes, 1993). That is, against a 'fundamentalist' or empiricist approach to reading research that stresses its transparent relationship to Reality and Truth[5], we need to attend to subtexts of gender and politics and read pragmatically,

> "Pragmatic readers emphatically deny that facts or narrative plots or theories or metaphors or statistical explanations or formal models ever speak for themselves . . . Pragmatists suggest we clarify the meaning of research by looking to the *consequences* of our findings . . . The point is that the paradoxes, ambiguities and contradictions that readers encounter in their attempts to clarify meanings require that choices be made. Where rational, these choices are pragmatic." (Cherryholmes, 1993, p.3-4).

It is possible to use a similar fundamentalism in the teaching of language and academic skills, and construct a view of 'LAS' as essentially a transparent field. That

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[5] The capitals are used to indicate reference to reified historical notions which operate in certain disciplines; they are not equivalent to 'reality' and 'truth' as debatable labels for untheorized notions.

is, as an identifiable body of practitioners in higher education concerned with supporting students to succeed in content areas by teaching the mechanics of essay writing, etc., on the assumption that our academic colleagues define the content for us.

If like other educationists we want a professional identity (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) then this approach will not do because it defers the question of what field we own preferring to leave it to 'content' faculty and our institution to determine this. Talk about academic 'support' is only possible by viewing (who?) the teaching of language and academic skills as a practice without a field or as a set of practices in search of an identity. Since, as I suggest in this paper, there is no generic geographic location for academic literacies on campuses and since higher education – adult, vocational, academic, professional -itself is a work in progress, this contributes to a dispersal of what we do. Our teaching practices as interpreters, mediators, researchers, and academics in the field of academic literacies take place as 'micro' instances of power/knowledge representations or discourses (Foucault, 1988) that define institutionalised education. The higher education curriculum is changing and increasingly 'we' stand at the crossroads of this change. Negotiating the changes will mean broadening our networks as we move from outside to inside the higher education curriculum.

Appendix: table of designations of 'support' staff from UNILEARN by-lines

Director, Learning Centre	Lecturer in English as a second language, Teaching & Learning Centre	Head, Academic Skills Program
Teaching and Learning Services	Business Communication Skills (NESB)	Staff chair: campus gender policies and practices forum, Department of Academic Development (AD)
Lecturer, Learning Centre	Learning & Language Adviser, The Learning Centre	Teaching and Learning Support Officer

Senior Lecturer School of Languages	Co-ordinator, Intercultural Communication 141/142 units	Lecturer in English Communication, Academic Skills Program, School of Language, Literature and Communication
Coordinator: Teaching and Learning Services, Learning Connection - Flexible Learning Centre	Coordinator, Academic Support Unit, Teaching and Learning Centre	Lecturer, Learning Development
Associate Professor, Head, Student Learning section, Teaching and Learning Centre	Learning Adviser, Learning Assistance Unit	Lecurer in Tertiary Teaching and Learning, Teaching and Learning Development Unit
Lecturer & Subject Convenor. English for International Business, School of Languages and Linguistics	Learning Support, Maia - Maori Development Centre	Director and Senior Lecturer, English Language & Study Skills Assistance (ELSSA) Centre, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Academic Coordinator, English Language Centre	Head, The Learning Centre	Lecturer, Learning Development
Lecturer in Literacy, Office of the Dean of Students	Head, Student Welfare Services	Academic Skills Program
Academic Skills Coordinator	Learning Skills Lecturer, Learning Skills Unit, Student Services	ESL Lecturer, Centre for Communication Skills and ESL
School of Computing and Mathematics	Lecturer, Academic Skills Humanities Academic Skills Unit	Effective Learning Adviser, Student and Staff Support Division

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