




FROM OPERATIVES TO STRATEGIC PARTNERS: CHANGING IDENTITIES OF LAS ADVISERS

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As tertiary education organisations continue to shape themselves within the corporate bureaucratic model, anecdotal evidence suggests that LAS staff are frequently being identified as belonging in the base sector of the managerial pyramid, that is as operatives or first line managers, principally focused on the technical aspects of producing the finished product. This perception also suggests that LAS lecturers work consistently within a behaviourist, objectivist paradigm, as ‘mechanics of knowledge transfer’ (von Glasersfeld, 1995b). The first section of this paper discusses a thesis writing program for a small cross cultural group of honours students from a School of Network Computing. The program aimed at not only developing the academic writing and presentation skills of the students to support them through the thesis writing process, but also establishing within the group a strong sense of collegiate, a sense of identity as young scholars. To achieve this aim, the principles of radical constructivism (von Glasersfeld, 1995b, 1996; Mayer, 1996, Gergen, 1995; Driver et al., 1994) were incorporated into the teaching program. The program concluded with




a formal conference, organised by the students at which they presented their research proposals. The second section of the paper analyses the effectiveness of the program based on the evaluative responses of students, supervisors, other academic staff who had attended the student conference, and the LAS lecturer. The paper concludes with the argument that this model can assist in changing the perception of LAS staff as operatives or technical experts to that of strategic partners working with faculties, departments and schools to develop a sense of community and commitment within their postgraduate students.

Keywords: *radical constructivism, post graduate students, groups*

Introduction

As yet, in Australia, there has not been a broad based investigation into how Learning Skills Advisers (LSA), under their various titles, are perceived by post-secondary and tertiary communities. However, a recent online discussion among LSA members (Unilearn) revealed wide spread differences in both the status of LSA and the conditions governing their employment, at both post- secondary and tertiary institutions.

In some institutions, LSA are categorised as general staff, at other institutions as academic staff. This differentiation, in itself, has implications for the way staff, in institutions where they are categorised as general staff, are perceived. It places them outside the realm of disciplinary knowledge and expertise inhabited by academic 'professionals': those who use language that is 'learned' and 'knowledgeable'; the language that constitutes the academic community (Brufee, 2000, p.149, 152.). And, furthermore, those LSA who are categorised as academics, rarely, it would seem, are afforded full academic status. They may, particularly if they are employed part-time, or on short term contracts, be expected to have six hours




face-to-face contact with students, daily. They may not, for example, have time for research factored into their hours; yet, for promotion, they must fulfil the research requirements specified by their university. Their research, then, must be done in their own time.

Anecdotal evidence also strongly suggests that the role that LSA do play, and the potential that they have for equal participation in academic life, is underestimated and misunderstood. LSA may well identify with a colleague who has been introduced to other academics as 'the person who corrects their (students) English', the language technician, or relate to the situation where a subject co-ordinator when discussing an assessment issue with a LSA commented: 'I'm looking at this from an academic's point of view, you're a teacher and look at it differently', inferring that the roles are mutually exclusive. Such utterances give support to the critique of the power of Elites in a contemporary society found in Saul (1992).

'Our reality is dominated by elites who have spent much of the last two centuries, indeed the last four, organising society around structures designed to produce answers. These structures have fed upon expertise and that expertise upon complexity... Elites quite naturally define as the most important and admired qualities...those on which they themselves have concentrated' (pp.7-8).


The consequence of the strictures in the various models of LSA employment, and narrow perceptions of LSA across many post secondary and tertiary institutions, is that the possibility of LSA being involved in sustained learning relationships with groups of students is limited. Therefore, when the request was made to teach a year long course in thesis writing to a small group of Network Computing Honours students, it was grasped as a political opportunity to demonstrate that LSA could play a significant role in developing not only the written and spoken skills of students, but also, and at the same time, students' understanding of the pivotal role that language plays in their lives. It was a political decision, as all curriculum decisions are, to introduce the principles of radical constructivism into a course, seen by the



faculty in which it was to be taught as a course needing a purely behaviourist approach. The faculty expectation was that students would be provided with information on how to structure and format a thesis proposal, how to produce an acceptable document in academic English and how to make an effective presentation of the information in that document. Those expectations had to be met; the conventions of structure and format had to be explained and demonstrated, but it was possible to go further. Ironically, the process of teaching format and structure in academic documents, is in itself linear and structured. In this instance it was to be taught to an aspiring group of 'elites' in the field of electronic communication. This form of communication flourishes 'on efficiency...speed, formula truths and the appearance of change...it concentrates on how things are done and loses track of why...it removes from individuals their strength as nonlinear beings' (Saul, 1992, p.582). It is the 'nonlinear being', the communicative, collaborative being that is the focus of radical constructivist learning theory. And it was through that theory, applied in the teaching of the written and spoken component of the course, that it was hoped to engender in the students a sense of the value of collaboration in the development of knowledge, to meld them into a supportive group of young scholars.

Radical Constructivism

All who call themselves 'constructivists' subscribe to the notion that 'knowledge is the result of a learner's activity rather than of the passive reception of information or instruction (von Glasersfeld, 1991, p.xiv). However, many different types of constructivism have developed. The names of some of those types that we may be familiar with include social constructionism and social, postmodern, information-processing and radical constructivism. Radical constructivism, championed by von Glasersfeld, is labeled 'radical' in that 'it breaks with the traditional theory of knowledge (creating) profound consequences for teachers and researchers whose objective is to generate particular ways of acting and thinking in ...students' (von Glasersfeld, 1991, p xv). It aligns with the concept of knowledge pioneered by Piaget in the 1930s which defines knowledge as an adaptive function that allows the cognising subject to organise their world of experience and not simply discover an objective reality (von Glasersfeld, 1989). As such, knowledge is actively




received through the senses, through communication with others.

In redefining knowledge, constructivists turn to the processes of assimilation and accommodation described by Piaget. Piaget redefined the concept of knowledge as an adaptive function. For a human being, once a problem has been identified, there is a need to remove the problem, to restore equilibration, to revert to action through sensory-motor and cognitive operations. Then, through the process of reflection the problem solver will determine whether the problem has been solved and equilibration restored. If the problem has not been solved a new cycle of action and reflection begins. 'These intellectual processes are, for the constructivist, the source and content of knowledge' (Confrey, 1991 in von Glasersfeld (Ed.), 1991, p.118). These processes also reflect the pragmatic ideas proposed by Dewey earlier in the twentieth century.

However, from an historical perspective, the aspects of constructivism can be identified in the epistemology, the theory of knowledge and learning, of the earliest educational philosophers, and as epistemology 'is closely related to methods of teaching and learning' (Gutek, 1988,p.2), traced through to contemporary educators. The ideas have a long history, but have not always been accepted.


Idealist philosophy, for example, which argues that ideas lie latent in the mind needing only to be recalled, would resort to Socratic dialogue, verbal communication, to bring those ideas to the student's consciousness. Knowledge, then, becomes the result of a learner's activity rather than passive reception of information. This is a basic principle of constructivism. Pragmatism, on the other hand, resorts to acting and interacting with the environment in a series of problem solving situations to create knowledge. Overriding these epistemologies is that of logic which, through an examination of the rules of valid inference, enables us to frame our propositions and arguments effectively (Gutek 1988, p.4). Basically, the constructivist is aware of the classic conflict of ideas and values between objective and subjective learning theory, and chooses to champion the latter.

Other champions of the subjective stance, in contemporary philosophy, include Bakhtin, Kristeva and Habermas. The central issue for each of them is 'what is emerging as the central preoccupation of our time: language'(Holquist, 1994,p xvii).



For Bakhtin, the dialogic relationship was central. Kristiva's analysis of Bakhtin's linguistic theory (1973, in Moi (Ed) 1986, pp24 – 61) explains his concept of dialogue as not only language assumed by a subject, but rather 'as a writing where one reads the other... Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality...Any text is the absorption and transformation of another.' Habermas (1993, pp.296-7) proposes a 'model of action oriented to reaching (mutual) understanding' found in constructivism. Critical to the development of mutual understanding is 'the performative attitude' of those participating in the interaction. They must coordinate their plans of action in order to come to an understanding about something in the world. These principles are identified in the incorporation of action and reflection within a collaborative speech act, also fundamental to constructivism.

Similar emphasis on action and dialogue to develop knowledge about the world can be found in the much earlier writings of the Swiss educator, Pestalozzi (1746 – 1827) Pestalozzi argued that all that we know comes to us through the mechanism of sensation where sense-impressions are converted into thought and organised into coherent concepts and memories through language. 'My method of instruction...makes greater use of language as a means of raising the child from vague sense impressions to the formation of thought' (Robinson, 1977 p.xxvi) Pestalozzi had in turn been affected by the educational philosophy of Rousseau and his call for reform in 'Emile' (1762). Rousseau also believed in inward growth and argued that school was not a preparation for living, but an exercise in living, itself. (Mayer, 1966, p.256-7) This revolutionary approach continues to influence educational thinking, today, and its reflection can be found in constructivist philosophy. However, an understanding of the value of language, action and reflection in developing knowledge about the world, and life itself, is not confined to literate cultures. It is also revealed in non-literate indigenous cultures. Malinowski (1935), for example, discloses in his Trobriand Island narrative the link between the methods of tilling the soil and agricultural rites in the Trobriand Islands and the teaching and learning of cultural values, and knowledge of the physical world. It was a world where problems of physical and spiritual existence were solved through talk, action and reflection. These same principles apply to all indigenous cultures. They, too, are the principles of constructivist philosophy. The fact that the principles of




constructivism can be found in teaching and learning practices across the ages in both literate and non-literate communities is acknowledged by Von Glasersfeld (1995). He argues that constructivism has not unearthed any mind shattering approaches to education, but it has provided a solid conceptual basis for some of the things that, until now, inspired teachers had to do without theoretical foundation.

The Program

The Thesis Writing program for Network Computing Honours students discussed in this paper is a component of a credit subject: Communication and Research Skills for Students of Network Computing (SNC). The program extends over two semesters. All of the materials for the program, a series of eight booklets, were written and produced by Harriet Searcy, (2000), a colleague in Language and Learning at Monash University. This paper relates to first semester, 2001, only The booklets used in this semester were: Thesis Planning and Structuring (Wk 2); Writing a Thesis Proposal (Wk 4; Literature Review (Wk 5) and Presentation Skills (Wk8)

Officially, the program comprises seven two hour classes; however, this time was extended by an additional three hours to accommodate the two presentation rehearsals and the student conference at the end of semester. In addition, I attended the Introductory Lecture (Wk 1) with the Honours Coordinator to meet students and give a general outline of the course.

It was at this first meeting with the students that I also explained to them, and to the coordinator, the philosophy behind the collaborative approach to learning that I wanted to use to enable the students to effectively reach their goals for the semester in this subject. Those goals were a high quality written Thesis Proposal and a high quality oral presentation of that proposal in a formal conference setting. The conference would be fully organised and run by the students. The audience for that presentation would include the academic staff of the faculty, Masters and PhD post graduate students and the students' peers. It was emphasised that these goals had both an individual and group orientation and that through a collaborative learning approach, the goals of each individual and the goals of the group could be achieved. It was also explained that in the future, whether in a work or academic environment,




they would be expected, consistently, to make formal presentations to peers and wider audiences, either individually or as a group member. Brufee (1999, pp. xii-xiii) argues that through collaborative learning students can learn to work together to achieve set goals 'when the stakes are relatively low, so that they can work together effectively later when the stakes are high'. Honours students in general, would surely consider that the stakes are high in their one year course; never-the-less, their experiences during that year can prepare them for future collaborative experiences where, in terms of reputation or monetary costs and or rewards, the stakes may be very much higher. From a constructivist point of view, the overriding initiative was to encourage problem solving in written and spoken language, through collaboration, so as to increase the students' ability to make reliable judgements interdependently within this program, and in the future (Brufee, 1999, p 264).

The purpose of all this preliminary talk and discussion was not only to establish rapport with the students but also to clearly articulate both the short and long term goals of their first semester activities. Dewey (1916) emphasises the importance of articulating clear aims, of activating 'imaginative foresight' in students.

... it is non-sense to talk about the aim of education – or any undertaking – where conditions do not permit of foresight of results, and do not stimulate a person to look ahead to see where the outcome of a given activity might be ...acting with an aim is all one with acting intelligently.

(pp.118-120)

So, from the beginning of my interaction with the students, I attempted to convey to them that I believed that they were capable of exceptional outcomes, that the capabilities were within them. To dissipate any fears that they may have had about performing at a formal conference, I focused on the fact that, in order to be accepted into honours, they had already in their undergraduate years made many individual and possibly group presentations, and that they had demonstrated their promise in being accepted into a community of young scholars. The use of the term 'young scholars' initially shocked them, then bemused them and finally imbued them with a sense of pride. I believe it caused them to reflect on what they had already achieved




and the positive position they were now in to build on those previous achievements. And it implanted into their consciousness a sense of intellectual community.

At the initial meeting, students were asked to bring to the next class a written statement of why they were doing the research they had chosen to be involved in, and what their aims were for the research. Although they had ideas about these issues, they had not worked at clearly articulating them. It was emphasised that this was a difficult task, and that it was not expected that what they brought to class would be the final version. They were encouraged to discuss their problems among the group. At the next class each student in turn wrote their ideas on a white board, and through a process of discussion, and reflection among the class each student managed to produce an aim that satisfied them and was clear to their fellow students. Their final statements were a verification of the effectiveness of collaborative problem solving.

This process continued throughout the semester as students faced hurdles that needed to be overcome, particularly the completion of their research proposals and the organisation of their conference. The overall success of the process was aided by the informality of the setting, the friendly relationships among the students and a non-authoritarian approach to teaching. This encouraged the intrusion of 'dramatic banter' into the classroom culture. It allowed for what Kristeva (1966 in Moi (Ed) 1986, p41) describes as the 'transgression of linguistic, logical and social codes within the carnivalesque'.

The principle of carnivale played an important part in developing the thinking of the students and their ability to critically analyse texts and to solve problems associated with those texts.

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter... (clears) the ground




for an absolutely free investigation of it...Familiarisation of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientific knowable and artistically realistic creativity ... (Bakhtin, 1975 in Holquist (ed.) 1981 p.23).

This sense of carnivale has been the means of creating an atmosphere within the group where ideas could be freely tested, and was one of the means of instigating the change in the students from members of a group to members of a team. It is interesting to note that within the corporate world, the world into which these students will most probably go, the type of world that administrators are imposing on academic institutions, there is a recognition also of the value of joyful collaboration in problem solving and innovation. Bennis (2000, pp.8-9) argues that business leaders need to develop a more collaborative form of leadership and to realise that those at the top do not hold all the answers. Leaders need a sense of wonder; they need to suspend dis-belief that something can't be done and switch from an authoritative, 'macho' style of leadership to that of the 'maestro' orchestrating the creative output of their employees. This collaborative approach will, according to Bennis, result in both leaders and employees enjoying 'the sound of surprise' at the quality of thinking that has been engendered.

Student Profiles

Eight students were enrolled in the class: 7 F/T and 1 P/T. One F/T student only was born in Australia. The student who lists his place of origin as India in Table 1 was born there of British and Anglo-Indian parents and has lived in Australia since he was an infant.

One F/T student lists his country of origin as Portugal, however, he was born there of East Timorese refugee parents. So six of the seven F/T students have South East Asian heritage. One student from this group lists her 'mother tongue', the first language she learnt, as Bengali, despite the national language of Malaysia, her place of origin, being English. The same situation applies to the other South East Asian students. Whether or not the National Language of their country of origin is English, the first language each learnt was one other than English.



The cultural make-up of the group has, I believe, been significant in developing a sense of cohesion among the students. Hofstede (1993, p.91) compared thirty nine countries, and hence cultural groups, on four cultural dimensions: individualism v collectivism; power distance; uncertainty avoidance; and quantity v quality of life. He found that Australians had the second highest score among all countries for individualism, while the Asian countries, from which six of the students come, had a high rating for collectivism. These ratings suggest that for six of the eight students collaboration would not be problematic. That has been borne out in observations of the group. It applied not only to those students who have been in Australia for a relatively short period of time, but also to the East Timorese student who had lived in Australia for eleven years. The Australian F/T student was initially not as involved in classroom discussions as the students of Asian background nor was he as involved in the organisation of the conference. The P/T student, although he attended all classes, also found it difficult to participate fully in the group. There are understandable reasons for this. He is considerably older than the F/T students, works F/T, has considerable responsibilities outside of study and did not have to meet the same deadlines as the other students. As he has said, he doesn't quite know where he fits.

The Asian students were very strongly motivated and focused on meeting deadlines. Their collectivist attitudes were particularly noticeable when students were involved in organising their conference. All carried out their responsibilities with energy and commitment to ensure that the event was a success not just for themselves, but also for the group.


Student F/T; P/T	M/ F	Age	Country of Origin	1 st Lang	2 nd Lang	Yrs study Aust	Yrs of study at Monash
A. F/T	M	22	Portugal	Hakka	English	10	4
B. F/T	M	24	Singapore	English	Mandarin	1.5	1.5
C. F/T	M	24	Singapore	English	Chinese	2.5	2.5
D. F/T	F	22	Malaysia	Bengali/ English	Malay	1.5	1.5
E. F/T	M	24	Australia	English	N/A	11	5
F. F/T	M	28	Hong Kong	Mandarin	English	1.5	1.5
G. F/T	M	26	Singapore	Mandarin	English	1.5	1.5
H. P/T	M	38	India	English	N/A	13	4

Table 1: Student data

Teaching Environment

The class was taken in the staff meeting room in the Network Computing faculty. As there were only eight students (seven F/T and one P/T) we clustered informally around one end of a large conference table. This helped dissipate the sense of the teacher as authority figure, and encouraged easy communication among students and myself. Ease of communication was a critical aspect of the processes of discussion and problem solving that applied to the students written and spoken tasks.

The first rehearsal for the conference was held in the classroom. It was a familiar environment and non-threatening. The second rehearsal was held in the lecture theatre assigned for the conference. The students made a video of both the rehearsals and the final presentation. The rehearsals were another focus for collaboration where students demonstrated genuine interest in helping each other achieve their best. They were also times of much good humour and laughter, where students felt free to indulge in 'dramatic banter' in search of the right word or the right phrase to clarify their ideas.



The students studied the rehearsal tapes closely, as a group, and individually. In the group situation, students were remarkably supportive of each as they went through what was for the majority of them the unfamiliar experience of seeing themselves perform in public.


The conference was formal and totally organised by the students. Invitations were sent to all staff and post graduate students; programs were printed and students shared the tasks of welcoming the audience and charing presentations.

Evaluation

It is acknowledged that the evaluation of the program presented in this section of the paper has its limitations. The program was not designed as a formal research project. The small group of students in the program were the first to be enrolled in this subject on their particular campus. The evaluation, therefore, is simply based on student and supervisors' responses to a subject evaluation questionnaire, verbal feedback from the Head of School, recorded on video, and from other academic staff present at the students' conference.

Immediate feedback from the Head of School, who formally addressed the students at the end of the conference, was highly complimentary to all of them. He and other staff members commented on the quality of their papers, the confidence and competence of the presentations, the smooth running of the event, and the sense of collaboration among the students. Following the conference, I was asked to address the faculty at their next staff meeting where I was given the opportunity to explain the constructivist approach to both written and verbal tasks that I had taken in teaching the course. This approach was appreciated and endorsed. All written proposals, submitted after the conference were accepted without further revision.

Feedback from the students has also been positive. In answer to a survey question : How satisfied were you with the collaborative style of teaching in the thesis writing class?, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being dissatisfied and 5 being very satisfied, all students rated the teaching style, 5. In answer to the questions: How satisfied were you with your written proposal? How satisfied was your supervisor with your written proposals? all students accorded both questions, 5.



In answer to the question: How satisfied were you with your presentation ? one student rated themselves as 5, other ratings ranged from 2 – 4. These presentation ratings were based on the student's own assessment of their performance on the conference video.

Comments on the question: Do you think the teaching style used helped develop a sense of group cohesion among the Network Computing Honours students?
Included:


Yes. The closeness of the class and the interaction definitely helped join all the students together.

Most certainly we have a very strong bond amongst the group in terms of academic and scholastic interest.

By grouping students with fairly similar research objectives together, they can discuss concepts together. In a sense, they can develop techniques that may benefit their research more .

One student, as well as stating that the classes helped develop cohesion in the group, also said that other factors had contributed. The students had to group together at the beginning of semester to lobby for a satisfactory study environment. They were successful in organising the use of a sufficient number of well equipped, adjoining offices to accommodate all of the group. They had been faced with and solved a real life problem. The need to collaborate on the negotiation process to overcome that problem reflects the constructivist principles discussed in this paper. So, unwittingly, the students had taken a constructivist approach to solving the problem.

I strongly agree with the student's comment. What happened in class, I believe, did contribute significantly to the cohesion in the group, but other factors also played an important part. Working together to solve that initial, difficult problem was a major contributor to developing a team spirit, another was the emergence of a leader amongst them; a student with excellent organisational skills, high energy levels, and very well developed interpersonal skills. It was this student who made the previous comment. Another positive outcome from the students' success in first semester is



that they have, of their own volition, taken on the role of mentors to the second semester group of students. The same collaborative attitude that they developed during the program has been enthused into the second group.

Conclusion

The feedback from academic staff in the Network Computing Faculty and the students supports my view that the program, so far, has achieved its primary aim of developing the academic writing and presentation skills of the students to support them through the thesis writing process. I also believe, on the basis of written feedback from the students, who can best comment on the issue of cohesion, that the program has played a significant part in developing in the students a sense of collegiate and a sense of now belonging to a fraternity of young scholars. Such a group of students is a valuable asset for the faculty. As part of their long term strategies, faculties need to build up strong post-graduate communities.

The situation presented in this paper is only one of many possible situations in which LSA could become more closely involved with faculties. Undoubtedly, similar situations already occur in some universities. But, I believe that this does not happen as often as it should. However, the outcomes of the program discussed in this paper do indicates that, given the opportunity, LSA can be active partners with faculties in developing strong student communities. If this were to occur, it would initiate a welcome change to the identity of LAS in many Australian post-secondary and tertiary institutions.