

CHANGING IDENTITIES: LAS ADVISERS

Gail Craswell and Annie Bartlett
Academic Skills & Learning Centre
The Australian National University

Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advising in Australia has, in the last ten years, emerged as an identifiable profession within the tertiary education sector. That emergence has been the result of intense research and reflection, not only in terms of advisers' roles and status, but also in terms of understanding the students with whom we work and their LAS needs. The resultant changes have challenged and extended our fundamental conceptions of the roles and status of LAS advisers, their practice and profession. However, such changes have been largely undocumented, and, arguably, little attention has been given to developing a comprehensive framework for LAS pedagogy. In tracing the emergence of the LAS profession and evaluating the changing identity of LAS advisers in terms of their roles and status, we attempt to reconceptualise the LAS profession with a view to emphasising its multidisciplinary nature. We also take the preliminary step of outlining, in this discussion paper, a framework for LAS pedagogy.

Keywords: LAS profession, identity, pedagogy




Introduction

Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advising had its humble beginnings in the context of ‘remedial’ English teaching and ad hoc ‘fix it up’ approaches. We were seen as the ‘fixers’, those who with magic strokes of the pen could render a student’s essay readable, acceptable and thus passable. It was generally assumed by the academic community that we worked only with those who had problems, and, in particular, those who had problems with English. We were on the periphery of the ‘real’ academic teaching that went on – too often marginalised and casualised. In this paper we chart the journey towards a 21st century view of the LAS profession that leaves us a recognisable, much stronger entity within the tertiary education sector. In the process we attempt to reconceptualise LAS practice with a view to emphasising its multidisciplinary nature. We also take the preliminary step of outlining a pedagogical framework for the LAS profession based on that laid out in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*.

Dislodging the ‘remedial’ tag

Prior to 1990 there were few well-established academic skills and learning centres in Australia with a national profile. Centres pre-1993 could be characterised by the extremes of a continuum: on the one hand, there were a handful of extremely high profile Centres, such as the Study Skills Centre at The Australian National University (ANU), which was driven by the sheer determination, vision and professionalism of individual staff; and on the other, there were very low profile centres, perhaps staffed by one person, most often on a part-time or casualised basis, who worked with a small number of students. Rarely would these latter centres provide professional, university-recognised and systematic assistance to students. Characterising many of the units that did exist was a counselling approach: one third of the LAS units that existed pre-1985 were located with counselling services (Webb and Bonanno, 1984). What can also be said of the centres was that despite the nature of the profile of some centres, both ends of the spectrum were very much overlooked in terms of the enterprise of the university and certainly not considered part of the core business of the university.




It was characteristic of LAS practice in the late 1970s and 1980s that while there were nationally prominent and published academic skills advisers – e.g. Brigid Ballard and John Clanchy at ANU, John Grierson at Western Sydney, Gordon Taylor at Monash, Hanne Bock at La Trobe and Carolyn Webb at Sydney – there was no strong sense of a distinctive profession of LAS advising, or national consensus about the role of LAS advisers and the nature of their work. This is understandable given the relative isolation of those working as LAS advisers. A quick review of the published proceedings of the Annual Australasian Study Skills Conferences during the 1980s shows that presenters were a diverse group. Some came from academic staff development centres, language centres, health & counselling centres; others from academic schools or departments such as psychology, education, English studies, and one from a School of French; some appear to have been ‘educators’ with administrative roles; very few appear to have been dedicated LAS advisers. Yet all came together under the banner of ‘study skills’, some exercising a long-term, shaping influence on the emerging LAS profession and lending it credibility through their own high professionalism.

In 1978, well before a separate LAS identity had emerged, and advisers were often known as counsellors, ANU staff – Brigid Ballard and John Clanchy of the Study Skills Centre and Geoff Mortimore of the University Counselling Centre – took up the issue of professional status before Justice Mary Gaudron of the then Commonwealth Arbitration and Conciliation Commission. Gaudron (1979) defined a Counsellor working in the study skills or counselling areas as one who

is engaged in work of an educational nature that involves the development and application of knowledge, skill and experience in assisting students to handle their university studies more effectively.

In Gaudron’s ruling, a Principal Counsellor was


...a highly experienced competent individual... [who] is expected to have a significant policy input in respect of the counselling area [or student service] concerned, would have a



high level of creative initiative, supervisory and administrative competence, would be responsible for the guidance of colleagues in that area for the efficient operation of that area and would liaise with appropriate University officers and committees....(Gaudron, 1979).

Thus, under Gaudron's ruling, LAS advisers and Counselling staff at the ANU became recognized as Professional Staff within the General Staff category, and, as such, advisers gained access to some measure of professional development leave, conference leave and travel. For LAS advisers within the General Staff classification, Gaudron's ruling recognized that, unlike administrative staff, advisers were not transferable or interchangeable with other administrative staff.

However, despite this ruling, LAS advisers have always been in an anomalous position, and the nature of LAS positions and their classification as General Staff or Academic Staff has always been contentious. More often than not the duty statements and selection criteria suited to the appointment of General and Academic Staff do not adequately address LAS advisers' work. Working under the General Staff classification, LAS advisers teach, and may or may not be required to run courses for credit, or assess students. They also undertake professional research, write papers and books and attend conferences, none of which is recognized by General Staff descriptors. Under the Academic Staff classification, LAS advisers often do not have regular course teaching and assessment, but they do teach and research. For both categories, promotion is not easy. LAS Advisers who are classified as Academic Staff are often expected to apply for promotion on terms – primarily research and publications – that ignore a significant and important component of their work: teaching. Lecturer Level C positions do exist – at the Universities of Western Sydney, South Australia, Adelaide, Wollongong, Flinders University, and the University of Technology Sydney, to name a few (Morris, 1999), but in the main they are highly contested. Serious thought has to be given to the promotion/selection panels involved, and their ability to respond creatively and flexibly to promotion requests wherein LAS advisers are square pegs in round holes, and panel members are often limited by their inadequate understanding of the nature



of LAS advising. Pre-1990, it would have been the exception rather than the rule had job advertisements for LAS advisers not read:


The appointee will be required to teach classes in study skills and seminar presentation, as well as English as a second language; remedial one-to-one coaching may also be required (Division of Economics, ANU, 1992).

As Casazza and Silverman (1996, p.31) observe: “The term *remedial* has implied a more limited approach toward the student and has primarily described programs that focus on correcting specific skill deficits”. Dislodging the ‘remedial’ tag has been a long process.

Extending the boundaries of LAS advising

In terms of beginning to conceptualise what LAS advisers did, the publication of *Literacy by Degrees* in 1988 brought together leading Australian LAS practitioners, Ballard, Clanchy, Taylor, Vic Beasley, Peggy Nightingale and Hanne Bock, who challenged the notion that the “writing ability of students in our universities is a mechanical problem ‘remediable’ by the disciplined application of mechanical answers” (Taylor *et al.*, 1988, p.i). In re-considering what it is that LAS advisers do, much of which is text-based, it is worthwhile picking up on their view in 1988 that “[w]hile the tasks of academic writing do demand skills of one kind or another, academic writing is not fundamentally a question of applying skills. Rather it demands the creation of meaning and the expression of understanding” (Taylor *et al.*, 1996, p.i). This publication provided a strong challenge to the prevailing notion that LAS advising was fundamentally ‘remedial’, a menial adjunct to the ‘real work’ performed by academics.

LAS advising pre-1990 was mainly characterized by an association with ‘study skills’— loosely viewed as the skills of note-taking, time-management and essay writing; and although this does not sit easily with the LAS profession nowadays, it was the basis for the development of more fully fledged academic and learning skills advising. The texts of this period – e.g. Anderson, Durston and Poole (1970),




Wallace (1980), and Packham, McEvedy and Smith (1985) – were the precursors to a more probing and comprehensive view of LAS advising. By the 1990s it had become increasingly clear that the work LAS advisers did was definitely not remedial, and that it was more than study skills.

The notion that the work LAS advisers did was in any way academic, however, often did not fit with the means by which, and terms under which, LAS advisers have been employed; or with some academics who have tended to regard the work we do as peripheral to the ‘core’ business of the university. In 1994 Webb and Bonanno, in a seminal LAS paper, examined the role of LAS staff and noted that the lack of a recognised LAS identity had implications for status and stability. They called for LAS staff to be more explicit in defining their goals and strategies; identifying measures of effectiveness; establishing position descriptions and standards of professional practice; and ensuring more effective collaboration with subject staff. They began the process of, and called for, greater research into the role of LAS advising. This in essence established the LAS agenda for the 1990s.

Webb and Bonanno’s (1994) paper led to a renewed emphasis on conceptualizing what LAS advisers do – their professional practice. In terms of the nature of the work, Webb and Bonanno claimed that it lay in the development of skills, thus highlighting the ‘developmental’ aspect of LAS advising, so thoroughly articulated in *Learning Assistance and Developmental Education* (1996). At the same time, their paper tended to preserve the distinction between content and skills, with academics teaching content and LAS advisers teaching skills, a distinction we do not find useful as expanded on below.

In 1995 Chanock took another important step in trying to separate, but not necessarily totally dissociate, LAS advising from counselling. Up until then, the prevailing culture that LAS advisers were somehow still ‘counsellors’ had detracted in large part from recognition of the academic nature of our work.


From thence were a number of key developments in the emergence of the LAS profession. The first was the recognition, in which Kate Chanock was instrumental, that there was no professional body with which academic skills advisers could identify. HERDSA catered for academic staff advisers/professional developers, not



the come-lately LAS advisers. Thus, the HERDSA Special Interest Group was established at the LAS Conference in 1994 wherein LAS advisers could meet during the year on a state basis and nationally at the annual HERDSA conference. As we see it, the inauguration of the Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Conferences – first held at La Trobe in 1994 – was an enormous breakthrough for an emergent profession characterized by marginalisation, isolation and casualisation in relation to the ‘mainstream’ – be that General Staff or Academic Staff, and LAS advisers who were characterised as suffering from an inherent lack of professional confidence, status and recognition. For the first time LAS advisers had a dedicated professional forum not shared with counselling or HERDSA.

Subsequent LAS conferences at La Trobe (1996, 2000), and the publication of the proceedings, have led to a plethora of research and publications addressing the kinds of students with whom we work (e.g. first years, graduates, honours, international, ANESB, distinguished scholars, students with disabilities); their complex LAS needs (e.g. disciplinary language, the writer’s voice, developing arguments, mastering genres, critical inquiry, manipulating voice, interpersonal relations), the issues they confront (e.g. understanding lecturers and supervisors’ comments, computer-based technology, equity and access); and the practice of LAS advising itself (e.g. individual consultations, bridging, orientations and inductions, group work, collaborative endeavours with academics and other professionals, dialogic learning, integrating academic skills into the curriculum), all of which have begun to shape and articulate LAS advising as a profession. The national *LAS Newsletter* was also inaugurated in 1994, although this has since been replaced by the services of the UNILEARN Network, for which we have John Grierson’s vision and endless patience to be grateful for. These developments have worked to engender a much greater sense of unity in diversity for LAS advisers.

Two other key events took place in the mid-1990s. One was the Bendigo Working Conference for LAS advising in 1995 which led to calls for the status of LAS advisers to be recognized, and the other was the publication of *Academic Skills Advising: towards a discipline* (1995). These events did a great deal to develop a more explicit recognition of our roles as LAS advisers’ and the nature of our work. From Bendigo emerged the position statement *The Position of Academic Language and Learning*




Skills Advisers/Lecturers in Australian Universities 1995-1999 by Carmichael, Hicks, McGowan and van der Wahl, which outlined the perspectives of advisers from nineteen Australian institutions. It was clearly articulated therein that the work of LAS advisers was developmental rather than remedial, and that the role of LAS advisers was integral to improving the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions.

Reconceptualising the LAS profession

Generic descriptors used in LAS position advertisements over the years provide some insight into how LAS advisers conceive of the work we do. As already noted, a position advertised in 1992 was described as being to “provide remedial one-to-one coaching” (Division of Economics, ANU, 1992). The selected position statements below, in chronological order 1996-2001, illustrate substantive changes in the nature of the professional expectations of LAS advisers:

The appointee will join a small team of professional staff who assist students with their academic work and will take particular responsibility for helping students develop the skills for effective writing and study. Applicants should have a strong interest in students' learning and academic development and be prepared at certain times of the year to work out of hours in the evenings or at weekends. Qualifications for the position include a postgraduate degree supplemented by teaching at tertiary level. (The Australian National University, 1996)

The Academic Skills adviser provides advice by offering learning opportunities for students to develop their language, learning and literacy for specific academic contexts on campus. The applicant must have highly developed interpersonal and administrative skills with at least two years' experience in an academic environment identifying tertiary student learning needs with a focus on text-type analysis. A postgraduate



qualification in applied linguistics, education theory or a related area is also essential

(The Australian Catholic University, 1999)


Applicants need to demonstrate skills in analyzing and assessing the discipline specific tertiary literacy needs of students, and in developing resources such as print materials, workshop formats or interactive resources which aim to develop literacy skills. Evidence of teamwork skills and successful collaboration with faculty academic staff in the area of learning development should also be provided. ...The position is academic and accordingly staff will be expected to participate in research and evaluation of the University's Learning Development programs.

(University of Wollongong, 2000).

Applicants must have a postgraduate degree with a research component, tertiary teaching experience and preferably a qualification in teaching English as a second language. Applicants' experience must include experience in assisting students from diverse backgrounds, including students from a second language background, with the development of reasoning, research and writing skills.

(The Australian National University, 2001).

The appointee will be expected to develop and run discipline-specific and generic literacy and study skills programs in collaboration with Academic Support Program staff and other academics. The appointee will also be expected to see




students on a one-to-one basis and to carry out activities to develop scholarly, research and/or professional expertise relevant to the profession.

(The University of Canberra, 2001).

In 1994, Webb and Bonanno characterised the recruitment of LAS staff as requiring evidence of teaching skills and an understanding of student needs, and qualifications as including a higher degree in a relevant discipline – e.g. education, literature, linguistics, psychology anthropology, sociology and philosophy (p.127). This issue of the diverse academic backgrounds of LAS advisers generated lively debate at the Bendigo Working Conference for LAS advising in 1995. Some of us took the position that such diversity was ‘a good thing’ without articulating very clearly why this might be so; others argued that if we were to achieve full academic recognition, it was necessary to designate appropriate disciplines (e.g. educational psychology and linguistics) from which to draw LAS appointees.


In the case of our own Centre, the cross-fertilisation of ideas and various expertise allowed by diversity has proved essential in providing a quality service to ANU students. Appointees have been from mathematics, philosophy, history, linguistics, literature and the biological sciences; some have had specialist expertise and/or qualifications in English as a second language, information technology, international education and writing. It might even be argued that in drawing together highly trained people from diverse academic backgrounds to work together on ‘learning development’ that the LAS profession was somewhat ahead of its time (perhaps of necessity) in profiling the value of multidisciplinary collaboration. There is now a growing tendency for academics from different disciplines, and remarkably diverse disciplines at that, to get together to work on a major project that requires various bodies of knowledge and expertise not residing in any one discipline. Similarly, the ‘student learning project’ as it manifests itself in different universities and different settings (centralised, faculty, school or discipline), will determine the bodies of knowledge and expertise required of LAS appointees. In short, in this new world, it is the needs of the project that determine, or should determine, what knowledge,



competencies and skills are required from what disciplinary backgrounds when appointing LAS staff.

Webb and Bonanno also stressed that research, although not necessarily required by the selection criteria, was essential in that “without focused, systematic and sustained exploration of knowledge within the field...the nature of the work [LAS] staff do is unlikely to be viewed as truly academic” (1994, p.127). Few would disagree that research is essential to expansion of our knowledge base and improved teaching methods, just as it is in any academic work. Like our academic backgrounds, our research is multidisciplinary in ranging across teaching and learning literature; language and communication literature; textual, genre and rhetoric studies; cross-cultural studies; and studies on special interest groups such as those with a learning disability, or NESBs and Indigenous students; and more not mentioned. We are not suggesting that each and every LAS adviser conducts in-depth research in every area, which would be impossible, but rather that there is a vast, multidisciplinary research base that is academically coherent in terms of student learning, and on which we as an LAS collective draw.

That LAS advisers, like academics, are conversant with the relevant literature, including the theoretical literature, is evident from published conference proceedings and our refereed publications. Like some academics, many LAS advisers also conduct more qualitative research, with their research subjects being particular groups of students. There is then the immense practical knowledge acquired from individual consultations with students that informs both our writing, and our group practice as documented, for example, in the Proceedings of the Conference held at La Trobe University, November 18-19 1996. In an Anthropological setting, the insights and understanding derived from our on-going fieldwork with students (i.e. individual consultations) would be accorded high ethnographic value, which is not always the case for our profession. (There have been many reports over the years of administrative ‘threats’ to replace ‘individual consultations’ with large-group teaching (or drop-ins) because it is more cost effective and/or ensures larger numbers are ‘serviced’ (the quantity versus quality position), including pleas from LAS advisers posted on Unilearn for suggestions on how to counter such threats). At the same time, we are required to develop our knowledge of disciplinary practices, to stay in




touch with the latest developments in tertiary education (no mean feat given that this is a fast moving sector), and with administrative and academic developments within our universities that impact on the students with whom we work.

As implied above, both the alignment of variables and prominence given to specific variables in the student learning project shift according to the different institutional and locational settings in which we find ourselves, and our specific conditions of employment. Nevertheless, all LAS advisers require a substantial body of knowledge about *their* students' learning needs to function effectively, which perhaps explains why we are often called on for policy input. At the Academic Skills and Learning Centre, ANU, for example, researching particular cohorts and their LAS needs, either in a broad general sense (First years, Graduate research students), or more specifically (e.g. Honours students, International graduate coursework students), allows us to develop a profile of their LAS needs such that we can then contribute to policy. This has meant that we have, for example, been part of the University Working Party on Honours, the Management Group for the First Year Experience, the Research Supervision Training Project Reference Group, and have contributed advice to the Admissions Committee, all of which allows for an informed contribution to university-wide policy such that the diversity of students' LAS needs can be more effectively identified and addressed.

Towards an LAS pedagogy

In considering a possible LAS pedagogy, we again bounce off Webb and Bonanno, who have provided so much stimulation in terms of our topic: "Without a relevant theoretical framework or set of frameworks to inform one's pedagogy, [LAS] expertise may comprise mere common sense, a very useful commodity, but not amenable by itself to academic and scholarly enquiry and extension" (1994, p.128). This insightful observation engages a question particularly pertinent at this time in the development of the profession: What type/s of theoretical framework might inform LAS pedagogy, given the complex nature of the practice?

In addressing this question, the pedagogy laid out in the Introduction to *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (Cope &




Kalantzis, (Eds.), 2000) is a useful place to begin. It may be that this pedagogy is not the only appropriate framing of LAS pedagogy, or that careful application of this framework to LAS practice (which is beyond the scope of this paper) would expose gaps and deficiencies. All we are attempting here is a preliminary application of the basics of the pedagogy as laid out in the Introduction: 1.

The multiliteracies pedagogy turns on the notion of “Design”, identifying “six major areas in which functional grammars, the metalanguages that describe and explain patterns of meaning, are required – Linguistic Design, Visual Design, Audio Design, Gestural Design, Spatial Design and Multimodal Design”, with the last-mentioned representing “the patterns of interconnection among the other modes” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.25). This is a pedagogy that operates outside the content/skills division in focusing on “Designs of meaning”, which we consider a powerful part of its attraction.

While content/skills has not acquired the loaded connotations of say, white/black, male/female or young/old, there is nevertheless polarization, with ‘content’ retaining more positive connotations in being what discipline Academics teach (e.g. linguistics, sociology or physics), and ‘skills’ accruing more negative connotations in being what LAS advisers teach – content teaching is the ‘real work’ of the university; skills teaching is the ‘lesser work’, a ‘supplementary’ add on. Of further relevance, given the embedded link between content and ‘knowledge’, is that the content/skills split does not respect that LAS advisers (whether academic or general staff) may have specialist knowledge that discipline teachers do not have, knowledge that is essential for student success. Knowledge is always ‘knowledge of (something)’, and LAS advisers may have specialist knowledge of a type that, for example, allows them to identify precisely what is wrong with a text, why it has gone wrong, and how problems might be addressed so that the student acquires both improved understanding of discourses generally and greater textual control in context. To put this another way, specialist knowledge of textual design meanings is not necessarily a knowledge attribute of discipline teachers, and understandably so we would suggest.

As well, the content/skills division seems to reside in the same muddied waters in which old debates, now sunk, once circulated—e.g. the style/content or



language/content debates. How, for example, are we to demarcate content and skills in academic discourses, written, oral or visual? Can it be said that meaning resides in content but not in skill(s)? If that were the case, why would a skillfully crafted piece of description evidencing sound knowledge of the relevant literature prove unacceptable to a lecturer expecting academic argument? Or why might a student's Report be rejected as having 'an inappropriate style for [discipline named]', as one supervisor commented. Do these examples not suggest that there are indeed "design meanings", and that academic discourses, like all discourses, are simply "configurations of knowledge" (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.21)?

Particularly attractive also is that this pedagogy moves away from a language-centred view of literacy to the more inclusive multiliteracies, which "engages with the multiplicity of communications channels and media" and "with the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p. 5). In the first instance, with the growing use of IT in teaching and research, more students seek assistance with multidesign productions (but not necessarily multimodal as Audio design is often absent), as for example, PowerPoint presentations. Just recently too, a stimulating discussion was generated in a Poster design seminar about meanings generated in the interstices of the Spatial, Linguistic and Visual design elements of the posters being examined. Particularly impressive were the striking meaning effects of one poster that had skillfully used sweeping, curved lines (and colour) to carve up the total space. The overall communicative effect was a logical patterning that allowed both immediate access to core sets of meanings associated with the project being reported on – e.g. the health implications of the study, and the ability to 'free-read' the poster in any direction without feeling lost.

Little needs to be said in this forum about the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity, and the attendant challenges of such diversity; much has already been documented in LAS publications on this subject, which is not to say that more does not need to be done. One recent example of continuing effort in this regard is the research and reflection on the LAS needs of Australian students from non-English speaking backgrounds (ANESB). It became clear in late 1998 that some ANU academic staff were confusing international students with ANESB students, and were at a loss to know how best to address their complex and diverse needs.

The Academic Skills and Learning Centre conducted a pilot research project to chart the distribution of ANESB students on campus and, via a survey and focus groups, identify what they considered to be their most pressing LAS needs (Bartlett and Ballard, 1998). How best to address those needs was the subject of a small working conference in 2000, which brought together LAS advisers for two days in Canberra. The resulting papers are insightful, thought-provoking and challenging (Bartlett, Chanock, Cargill, Gollin, Chase, Percy, Wilson in press). Such research can only strengthen policy responses within the advisers' universities.

Other basics of the multiliteracies pedagogy, as figured below, are now considered:

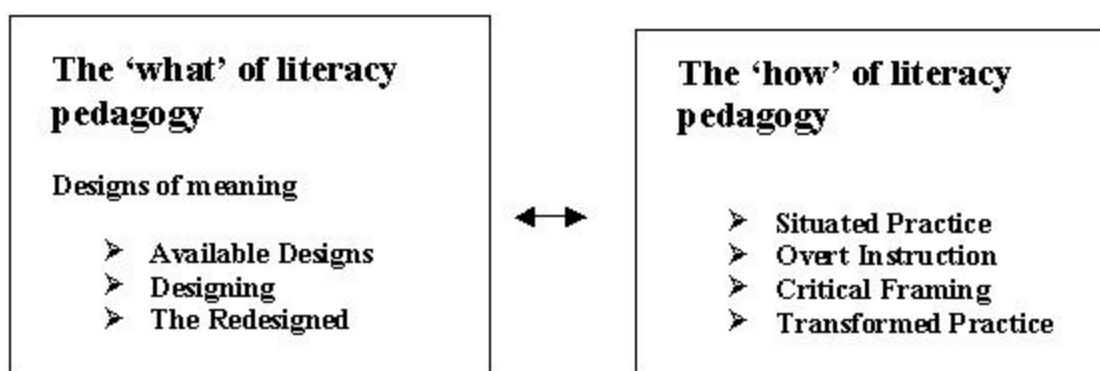



Figure 1: The 'what' and 'how' of literacy pedagogy


There are several appealing aspects about how the 'what' is conceptualised in *Multiliteracies*. First, as implied above, the focus on 'Designs of meaning' is appropriately inclusive of a very broad range of LAS activities (if not all) in that it engages the "idea that learning and productivity are the results of the designs (the structures) of complex systems of people environments, technology, beliefs, and texts" (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p. 20). The notion of "designs" appeals in terms of its freshness – its freedom from the type of emotional baggage evident with content/skills, but the appropriateness of the substitute term "structures" is somewhat questionable. There is also the recognition that all semiotic activities associated with 'Available Designs' 'Designing' and 'The Redesigned' are firmly linked to the generation of meaning. This is important as there is often insufficient recognition by the academic community at large that meaning does not reside in disembodied knowledge(s) (particular discipline content(s)) that exist independently of how we



speak and write these knowledge(s); knowledge(s) which, in turn, order the ways in which learning and research proceed in different disciplinary settings.


Finally, in the multiliteracies pedagogy there is full acknowledgement of the complex array of conventions inhering in the “resources” of meaning-making – the grammars of “various semiotic systems (e.g. languages, film, photograph, or gesture); and the orders of discourse”, which are “socially produced...intermeshing and dynamically interacting” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.20). There is further recognition that the “process of shaping emergent meaning involves re-presentation and recontextualisation”, that it is “never simply a repetition of Available Designs” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.22); and that the “outcome of Designing is a new meaning, something through which meaning-makers remake themselves” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.23). Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, the editors of *Multiliteracies*, are great practitioners of what they advocate. Given the strong semiotic orientation of the ideas behind ‘the what’, these ideas are not really new. But their redesign of old ideas takes on new meaning in a way that helps us to see a new.

Similar care is given by the editors to the scaffolding that constitutes the ‘how’ of learning. ‘Situated Practice’ recognises that mastery in practice involves sociocultural and contextual pattern recognition that occurs only with “immersion in a community of learners engaged in authentic versions of such practice” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.31). Such immersion, however, “does not necessarily lead to conscious control and awareness of what one knows and does” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.32), and this can be a problem. In one such case, a student with a PhD in the experimental sciences, now doing a Master degree in a different science area with a strong interdisciplinary focus and practice, was referred because of ‘serious writing problems’. The student perceived his writing as ‘very concise’ when in fact it was exceptionally dense, did not embody audience needs, provided insufficient detail to support ideas and evidenced very poor paragraph control. While the student suspected that the writing in his PhD must have been ‘very bad’, this is not likely. He said that ‘none’ of his examiners had criticised his writing and they surely would have had they received writing of the type just described. But discussions in consultation did reveal that the student had little ‘conscious’ control of his PhD discourse, had not



progressed beyond situated practice (like so many who learn by osmosis), and so lacked the capacity to re-present and recontextualise available designs in a new writing culture. With some overt instruction, it was possible to introduce explicit metalanguages describing and interpreting different discourse practices in different discourse communities and contexts. With this student (and similar other postgraduates) the high degree of breakdown in discourse control was matched only by the remarkable speed with which he progressed to a more conscious, critical and reflective understanding of the sociocultural and contextual embeddedness of discourses. In just two visits his writing was radically ‘transformed’ from a collection of impenetrable meanings to the reverse, which is not to suggest that transformation occurred in the full sense in which the notion of transformed practice is used in *Multiliteracies*, as discussed below.


It is true that both Situated Practice and Overt Instruction can be “notorious as socialising agents that can render learners quite uncritical and unconscious of the cultural locatedness of meanings and practices” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.32), and that critical framing of “value-centred relations of particular systems of knowledge and social practice” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.), 2000, p.34) is important. Yet there are institutional and time constraints on just how far LAS advisers can take such critical framing, with which student learners, and under what learning conditions (see also Benesch, p.60). Student loads (both individual and group) can be very heavy, at times forcing advisers to prioritise learning needs for immediate outcomes rather than longer-term learning goals; and students can be under great pressure with some showing little interest other than to achieve enough ‘mastery’ in practice to pass their courses, to get that all-important degree. As well, the very nature of a practice in which we, at least, see students on average 1-4 consultations per year can constrain *full* development of our students’ learning potential, though the situation may be different for some of you. Still, prioritising learning needs for more immediate outcomes does not mean that the appropriate underlying principles of the multiliteracies pedagogy cannot be activated in these contexts (see the example of the PhD graduate working in another discipline above). Perhaps what matters most is the type and quality of learning that does take place, rather than the frequency with which students are seen.



Critical Framing appears to underpin the notion of “Transformed Practice”, where, as the authors argue, “theory becomes reflective practice” (p.35), though this notion seems not to be as fully articulated as it might be. It is indeed desirable to ensure learners “gain the necessary personal and theoretical distance from what they have learned; constructively critique it; account for its cultural location; creatively extend and apply it; and eventually innovate on their own, within old communities and in new ones” (p.34). We have been working towards this very end in Centre workshops, such as ‘Effective writing in professional and academic contexts’. But the question still remains: Is this an achievable outcome for *all* learners with whom we work as LAS advisers? In posing this question, however, we do not mean to suggest that LAS advisers cannot be fully active in fostering learning outcomes of the type detailed in *Multiliteracies* in various forums addressing student learning.

Conclusion

In building on the fine efforts of our predecessors, we, together, have progressed far in shaping a recognisable identity for the LAS profession. In this paper, we have tried to push the boundaries of this identity a little further towards academic ‘respectability’ by initiating what we hope will be a long-running conversation about LAS pedagogy(ies). None of this means though that on-going effort is not required to counter the residual effects of ingrained attitudes. Some still think we are about ‘fixing up’ English and grammar; some still see our role as basic ‘study skills’; some still refer to us as ‘support’ services. And some ad-hoc LAS appointments are still being made on the basis of expediency rather than with genuine concern that the specific learning needs of student cohorts will be met. This recalls an old attitude that anyone with a modicum of intelligence can do this job, which is an attitude that downgrades the profession at large. Not only do students lose out here, we also lose if we are unable to engender widespread understanding that this is a job that requires specialist knowledge and skills, great flexibility, hard work and strong commitment to students’ learning development. It is somewhat ironic that by the very nature of our work we are likely to be reasonably familiar with the research directions of many academic disciplines, when very few outside our profession would be familiar with our research and publications. Perhaps one of the challenges we now



confront is how to ensure more systematic dissemination of our knowledge, which is necessary if we are to acquire full professional recognition throughout our universities, and with it a fuller LAS identity.

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