

The three Rs: Academic Language and Learning (ALL) Advisers getting down to basics with academic colleagues

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As academic advisers, how we communicate our role and work to academic colleagues affects if and how they will use the services we provide and how they view us. It also influences how they perceive the value of our work and whether they in fact consider us colleagues in the process of tertiary teaching and learning, or merely adjuncts and “outsiders”. This paper argues that in order for our work to flourish and be highly regarded we need to promote the three Rs: Resources, Room and Respect. The first of these, Resources, is easy to understand – unless we are provided with sufficient well qualified staff and the necessary material resources, it is difficult to provide an excellent service. The second, Room to move, indicates that staff need to be allowed enough room to experiment and grow in their role. The third, Respect for our work, we should both expect and earn through providing an excellent, well-informed and effective service which makes a difference to the quality of the teaching and learning experience of both students and staff. This paper examines the way we pitch our message when we “sell” our services and discusses whether we in fact address the above three Rs when communicating with academic colleagues.

Key Words: role of ALL advisers, language and learning, student support.

1. Introduction¹

The increasing diversity, particularly cultural and linguistic, of the student body in Australian universities, has become a major factor for teaching staff in the development of their teaching and learning programs (Lawrence, 2005). This diversity has coincided with “massification” of tertiary education and with a strong push, largely from employer groups, for graduates to be equipped with transferable generic skills/attributes (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995; James, Lefoe, & Hadi, 2004). These trends and the accompanying growth in international education have, in more recent years, brought with them concerns about maintaining standards and quality, with universities being held to account for “student outcomes”. Thus while Australian universities have become more assiduous in their marketing of tertiary education to international students, there is a growing debate and increasing concern about “standards” (Reid, 1996; McInnis, 2000) and an increasing awareness of the need for student support.

¹ While literature prior to 2006 has tended to refer to a Language and Academic Skills (LAS) area or LAS advisers/practitioners, this paper uses the term Academic Language and Learning (ALL), the name adopted by the newly formed professional body of former LAS practitioners, the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL).

It would be wrong, however, to assume that only international students require support with academic discourse. The student diversity alluded to above also includes large numbers of mature age learners and students coming to tertiary study from a variety of non-traditional pathways. In this sort of context, the role of Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers or, more recently, Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers, has developed (some would say “blossomed”) quite significantly in more recent years. Indeed, a quite sustained discussion around the nature of the role of ALL advisers in Australia and whether we constitute a “discipline” or a “community of practice” indicates a growing confidence and a desire to claim a respected mainstream role in Australian tertiary education (Chanock, 2005). In more recent years, the number and types of language and learning support units in universities around Australia have increased, as has the number of “practitioners”. The operational models vary from centralised, to Faculty-based, to School-based units and in some cases to team-teaching situations.

In this sort of context, a major issue remains the sensitising of colleagues from the disciplines to better understand the needs of local and international students in regard to academic discourse. Academic staff do not generally see their role as encompassing the responsibility for developing students’ academic discourse skills, which they sometimes interpret from a “deficit” perspective (Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001; Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005; Stirling & Percy, 2005); nor do many feel they have the necessary preparation to enable them to contribute to the development of academic discourse skills in any significant way. They are therefore happy to leave this to ALL practitioners. Much research indicates, however, the importance of the development of linguistic and communication skills in the context of the disciplines and in collaboration with disciplinary colleagues (Lee et al., 1995; Bonanno & Jones, 1996; Johns, 1997; Barrie & Jones, 1999; Crosling & Wilson, 2005).

Thus, in order to better serve students, ALL advisers need to promote close collaboration with academic colleagues, and to ensure that their role is both understood and valued within their faculty and university. This paper will focus on the ways we communicate with academic colleagues, and how we consciously or unconsciously influence their perception of our work and our role. It will be argued that we need to carefully monitor such communication in order to ensure that we achieve success in our work and are considered by academic colleagues as equal contributors to the process of teaching and learning, and as an indispensable part of the tertiary landscape. In all of this, as Stirling and Percy (2005) suggest, we need to be vigilant lest we compromise our professional integrity and opt for politics over sound educational beliefs, and expediency over effective student and staff development.

2. Positioning the role of ALL adviser within the university

There has been some ongoing debate about how the role of ALL advisers should be positioned within the university, with views oscillating between centralised units and “embedded” or Faculty-based models (Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001; Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005). More recently, the opinion seems to be that while the organisational structure and the physical location can be either centralised or embedded, what is more important is that the operational structure allows for a variety of models of collaboration with discipline specialists (Hicks, 2005; Percy & Stirling, 2005). In much of the discussion around this issue, however, while some attention has been paid to “constructing” the role of ALL adviser to place it in a more positive light, not enough has been said about how different positioning within the university can allow us to negotiate a more powerful and influential role. Percy and Stirling (2005) present a “reflexive model” which takes into account university and faculty-level politics and influences, and Hicks (2005) examines the multiple allegiances and political tugs of war that sometimes impact on the academic developer’s role. Others (Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001; Smith & Whelan, 2005) more frequently allude to how positioning influences the effectiveness of the ALL adviser role, particularly in regard to student learning.

This paper proposes that the “political” aspects need to be placed at the forefront, and that we need to monitor carefully the messages that we convey to academic colleagues. In particular, it

is argued that when communicating with academic colleagues, we need to give consistent messages which will: indicate to them how we can support them and students in teaching and learning; sensitise staff to the needs of students from our own “language and learning” perspective; and treat academic colleagues with respect by emphasising how we can provide specialist knowledge (just as there are areas where they have specialist knowledge) and that by joining forces in a model of “co-production [we can develop a more powerful] new curriculum seen as a third knowledge” (Green et al., 2005, p. 88). In particular, it is argued that this message should be expressed in terms of the three Rs: Resources, Room to move, and Respect.

3. The three Rs: Resources, Room to move and Respect

This simple 3Rs catchcry describes a three-pronged approach based on some consideration of the variety of models of ALL provision in Australian universities and some analysis of what has worked best in our own context at the Curtin Business School (CBS) of Curtin University of Technology.

3.1. Resources

Although there has been some quite extensive discussion about how the ALL model in operation in a University to a great extent influences what can and cannot be achieved in terms of teaching and learning, a major consideration that has received scant attention is the way the various models are funded. In the final analysis, it may be more important to be in a structure that ensures ongoing financial support, rather than in one which appears to offer more flexibility but less security. Unfortunately, we have this year been reminded of the importance of this principle by the recent cuts and re-structures that have been implemented in some University ALL centres. If ALL units/centres are not seen as central to a university’s or a faculty’s “core business”, then they will be most vulnerable in times of financial constraint and cost-cutting. Therefore, giving out continued and consistent messages internally that reinforce the work of ALL centres and units is most important.

There are no absolute rules about how this might best be done, since the messages need to be constructed to suit the particular context. However, the messages need to: be disseminated amongst students and colleagues in an ongoing way; offer support to both students and staff in a way that will indicate that ALL advisers facilitate learning and development, and quite rightly steering away from connotations of deficit and remediation (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001); and emphasise and highlight the success stories, or “good PR”. Much as many of our colleagues might see having to “sell” ALL services as political spin, and outside their sphere of obligations, it could be argued that this is part of the necessary work of a successful ALL unit.

Although some of the colleagues with whom we have collaborated will know about our sphere of work and what we can offer, there are many more (irrespective of the ALL model we have in operation) who will not know how we operate with students, what we offer, what we can and cannot do, and so on. It is imperative that this message reaches as many students as possible; and it is even more important that such messages reach as many staff as possible, since through reaching staff we can increase our reach to students a hundredfold. There is ample evidence that the role of ALL advisers is “poorly understood by others” (O’Regan, 2005, p. 132; Craswell & Bartlett, 2001). By becoming an integral part of the offerings, culture and “landscape” of a school, faculty or university, we will be in a much better position to ensure that the necessary resources (both staff and material) required for us to do our work well are assured. Furthermore, keeping accurate records of our work and our reach to students and staff will strengthen our case when we require further resources. That is, if we can support our claims with the necessary statistical evidence, we are more likely to be successful in such requests.

While some ALL colleagues abhor the language of marketing, the fact is that much of what we offer could be construed by the ill-informed as an “optional extra”. Our offerings need to be very attractive in order to draw those at whom they are targeted. We need to use every opportunity to publicise our successes and the acknowledgements we receive for our work. This is

just a common sense approach to ensuring that those who make decisions know about the effectiveness of our work. At CBS we produce an Annual Workplan and, at the end of each year, an Annual Report which evaluates our achievements against the Workplan. This is one of our most effective ways of publicising what we do to the CBS Executive which, in the final analysis, endorses the ongoing funding of our Centre.

3.2. Room to move

This aspect of a proposed successful approach refers to the need to ensure that staff in ALL centres/units are not unduly limited in their role. As can be seen by the very lively discussion that has already taken place concerning the role of ALL advisers and the ALL “community of practice” alluded to above, there are a number of operational structures utilising all sorts of creative approaches in Australian universities. Whether we see ourselves as a discipline, or a “community of practice” is not as important, in the end, as how much we are allowed to experiment and grow in our role. For not only has the ALL area grown since the mid 1980s in number and scope, but so also has our own understanding of our role, how our area has developed, how we have acquired a professional voice, and how we have creatively designed different approaches contributing to the multifaceted nature of our work in universities (Chanock, 2005; Milnes, 2005). Our role may, in a sense, be still developing. Parallel developments in Europe (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Ciekanski, 2007) seem to be placing different emphases on the adviser role and offer the possibility of different interpretations.

What is important, in all of this, is that we continue to be perceived as equals by academic colleagues in the disciplines, and our role as equally important for the improvement of teaching and learning. The recent move by some universities to move ALL roles from “academic” to “general staff” classification would seem to be a retrograde step in this regard. And although there has been much discussion about this issue among LAS advisers, at least some see an “academic” classification as essential if the ALL area is to be regarded as a discipline, with “discipline” understood to confer greater status on the area and to characterise it more appropriately (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001; Milnes, 2005). What is perhaps more important is for ALL advisers to see themselves as empowered, able to contribute to “powerful partnerships with faculty” (Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001) or working as equal partners to contribute to the creation of a “third knowledge” born from the collaboration of language specialists and discipline specialists (Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2005, p. 96).

However, one of the constraints on ALL staff, even within the “academic” classification, is that we will always tend to be in a special category of our own: we are academic, but we are also a service, therefore, in a sense, spanning two spheres or “caught in the middle” as Hicks (2005) suggests. Other academics generally have more flexibility than in our case. It is possibly also a little more difficult for ALL advisers to find the time to engage in research, much as we might wish to, since there is more call on our time, particularly from students. And although we have a position that it could be argued has greater freedom than that of the general academic bound by School and discipline politics, we sometimes can be pulled in different directions by the demands of the student, the school, faculty and the university. Nevertheless, research based on our area of work, particularly in collaboration with discipline staff, will not only enrich our teaching and learning but put us in a better light with other academic colleagues.

Irrespective of the above limitations, we can use our “specialisation” to ensure that we influence teaching and learning decisions. Our “room to move” allows us to see outside the particular discipline(s) we may be working with to look more broadly at teaching and learning issues and to sensitise academic colleagues about facile assumptions of student deficit (Stirling & Percy, 2005). It allows us to raise awareness of and contribute towards a discourse of the complex nature of academic literacies (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001). Above all, it allows us, nay indeed obliges us, to sensitise academic colleagues about the nature of student development rather than remediation (Stirling & Percy, 2005) and the responsibility that we all have to contribute towards such development.

3.3. Respect

This third aspect of the three Rs places an obligation on us to both expect and earn respect for our work. In this area, the way we see ourselves and our work and the way we communicate with students and academic colleagues is crucial not only to our perception of ourselves, but also to the way students and colleagues view us. Prior to the 1990s, LAS practitioners were often “isolated” and marginalised and “positioned within a non-academic context” (Milnes, 2005, p. 121). Milnes suggests that much has happened since then to improve the status and position of ALL practitioners. Many of us would agree, although we do, however, still hear of individuals and units operating in comparative isolation or feeling unsupported.

There are a number of things we can do, however, to ensure that ALL work is more integrated into Schools and Faculties, thus earning us a more respected role. Among the strategies we have found successful are the following:

- researching/finding out student and staff needs and responding to such needs
- treating students and staff with respect
- involvement in important school/faculty/university committees and working parties.

3.3.1. *Researching and responding to student and staff needs*

There are formal ways we can acquire information in this area: carrying out staff and student surveys; obtaining evaluations and feedback about our programs; attending relevant meetings, including school and faculty meetings, Teaching and Learning committees, and so on. However, the very nature of our work is such that it lends itself to continual discovery; that is, the more we interact with students and staff, the more we learn about their needs and the ways we can assist student and staff development, provided we are listening. Such “informal feedback” or empathic listening should not be underestimated. Indeed with many of our students, being sensitive to what is meant, rather than what is said, becomes a great learning tool.

Once we have heard and diagnosed student and staff needs, we then need to devise ways of meeting such needs. Repetition of the same strategies, even if successful, is bound to lead to stagnation. The work we do in the form of workshops, seminars, even one-on-one sessions needs to be re-examined and evaluated in an ongoing way to keep our approach fresh and to make us truly alert to the needs of the students we are dealing with. It is just as easy for us to fall into facile assumptions and stereotypes when diagnosing needs, as it is for our disciplinary colleagues. ALL advisers must be ever-alert listeners, in order to be truly useful in assisting students and staff.

3.3.2. *Treating students and staff with respect*

It goes without saying that we need to treat students and staff with respect at all times, even when/if we feel that students, for example, are really pushing our patience and playing on our soft side. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of “editing” students’ work, correcting sloppy writing and bad grammar, rather than analysing with them the structures they need to improve, and working with them to develop the skills they require to help themselves. Although the second course is harder (for both ALL Adviser and student), we know it is more effective, in the long run, and students too will respect us, once they realise this and once they have acquired the skills for self-improvement.

Staff referring students to our Centre always receive a brief “report” from us (often in the form of an email message) which explains to them what we have worked through with the student and any arrangements we have made for follow-up. It should be stressed that this informal report refers to what we have jointly discussed with the student about his/her work, and does not contain matters which could be considered confidential, such as personal problems or interpersonal issues with the lecturer concerned. As a result, we do not feel that we are breaching student confidentiality. We have found this simple strategy to be most effective in informing staff about our work, indicating to them that we are following up on their recommendations and giving them a sense that they can refer students to us for the sort of linguistic or academic skills

support that they feel unable to offer themselves. In some cases, this sort of contact about students has meant that staff have invited us into their class for some more sustained activity within their unit.

The respect of colleagues also needs to be earned in other small ways. Although we usually operate every day during office hours, we also work after hours when necessary. For example, if a colleague would like a class seminar with a late class, we try never to refuse. Our small team rotates such after hours requests so that the burden does not fall on any one individual. However, we also gently let our colleagues know that we cannot, for example, run a seminar in 20 minutes. There are things we can do in 20 minutes, but often not everything they would like us to cover. Gentle negotiation is needed in such cases, for while we give respect, we also expect it for our work.

Respect is also earned when our “clients” can see that what we offer is indeed a worthwhile “product”. We need to gather staff and student feedback to analyse what it is telling us. If we are providing an excellent service which meets student and staff expectations we will soon collect a great amount of positive feedback which will reassure us about the directions we are taking.

3.3.3. *Involvement in important school/faculty/university committees and working parties*

Finally it is important both in a strategic sense and to earn the respect of colleagues to be involved in major committees and working parties at school/faculty/university level, where we can make a contribution from our unique perspective. Apart from providing us with insights into important educational and “political” issues, such contribution makes us a part of the mainstream and earns us the respect of colleagues, avoiding marginalisation and isolation. Nor should we wait to be invited on to such committees – we should volunteer and, if necessary, ask to be included in the membership. Such membership will give our work a higher profile and ensure that we are included in core decision-making.

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that as ALL advisers, we need to carefully craft both our messages to, and our interactions with, academic colleagues, since both will influence the way they perceive our role and indeed whether they will want to interact with us as equal partners in the important business of teaching and learning. It is also argued that we need to proactively advertise and publicise our services to colleagues as well as to students, since the more they understand what we do, the more effective we can be in supporting students and staff. While discussion and debate about the nature of our role and the most suitable operational structures abound, perhaps not enough attention has been given to the way we frame our messages to academic colleagues about who we are and what we do. In this sense it is particularly important that those we report to, and who ensure the funding of our work, understand the nature of what we do and will be prepared to allow us to develop the most effective operational structures for our work. In other words, our approach should ensure that we have the necessary Resources, Room to move and the Respect of colleagues and students.

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