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From Learning Adviser to Coordinator: A Professional Career Arc

[Spring 2010 / Focus](#)

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A professional arc to the writing center



Chad Habel

A colleague and good friend once remarked to me that as a child, no-one ever plans to grow up to be a Learning Adviser. Indeed, our careers are often haphazard and ad hoc, but it is often easier to impose some semblance of order on them part-way through. A professional vision often has 20/20 hindsight, as well.

My progression from student to academic was gradual and unmarked by any archetypal rites of passage. A couple of years into my PhD in English Literature, I was offered some casual tutoring within the department which ended at about the time I completed my **PhD**. I was then fortunate enough to have amassed enough teaching experience to be appointed as an Academic Adviser at the Student Learning Centre at **Flinders University**, and I am now the Coordinator of the Student Development Program at the **University of Adelaide**. A core business at both universities is operating a writing center.

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Before continuing with this narrative and the associated issues of

professionalization, it is probably necessary to outline some of the main features of Australian writing centers. In most Australian universities student development activities are undertaken by staff who are employed precisely for that purpose. Writing center activities delivered by students are the exception rather than the rule, and they would more usually be called Peer-Assisted or Peer Mentor programs. In addition, very few Australian universities have composition topics or anything like them in first year, so students are often underprepared for academic writing tasks.

Furthermore, writing centers are often just one strategy within a university's holistic approach to student development. For instance, at the **Centre for Learning and Professional Development** at the University of Adelaide, the Academic Learning and Language team also runs seminars, orientation activities, and, crucially, faculty-based sessions which are collaborative and discipline-specific. We work closely with other teams in the Centre who run academic development activities, including online learning activities. Therefore the Writing Centre is our core business, but not the only offering we have.

Within this general context, Academic Language and Learning practitioners are constantly undergoing a process of professionalization: it is becoming more and more common for us to refer to ourselves as a profession, or at least a community of practice. This process has been underway for quite some time, and a watershed moment in this process was the formation of the **Association for Academic Language and Learning** (AALL) in November 2005. This is a professional organization devoted precisely to the professionalization of Academic Language and Learning activities.

AALL is crucial to how we see ourselves as professionals, and how we present ourselves to our universities and the wider public. With a total membership of around 300, AALL runs biennial conferences, which usually attract around 250 members. This may seem small but given Australia's population (around 22 million), it is not insignificant. AALL also has a newsletter, online discussion forum, and a peer-reviewed journal for the dissemination of research findings. AALL also has a small grant scheme to support members in undertaking this research. Some time ago, members produced a "Position Statement" which asserted the role of AALL professionals in the context of higher education in this country, and a rearticulation of this professional statement is currently underway.

This wider context is essential to the organisation: higher education in Australia is undergoing unprecedented changes at the moment, changes which are (refreshingly) driven by non-economic considerations. The Rudd Government is undertaking a substantial reform agenda designed to change almost everything about how universities operate, from lifting caps on enrolments, to funding structures, to quality assurance, to research activity. Crucially for us, part of the reform agenda revolves around student participation (including access and equity), and student achievement in terms of completion, retention, and academic success. Further details can be found [here](#).

These changes to higher education have a bearing on our activities (for example in writing centers) in many different ways. This goes further than the increased internationalization of the student body which has affected us in the past few decades. To begin with, the government is heavily promoting wider participation in higher education, especially participation of those with low socio-economic status. This means that demand for our services will probably

increase with further increased diversity of the student population.

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More significantly for the professionalization of our activities, an environment with a stronger insistence on quality assurance means that we have to adopt a more professional approach to our practice. Training and professional development will need to be made more explicit and formal, as compliance with policies such as Occupational Health and Safety becomes essential. Documentation and recording will become more important as reporting structures become more defined and detailed evidence of demand and effectiveness becomes crucial to survival and growth.

This increased transparency and accountability means an increase in administrative activities associated with operating a writing center. For instance, it is necessary for us to record each student who visits the **Writing Centre** on a sign-in sheet; this allows us to both demonstrate demand and to adjust our offerings and organization in response to student needs. It is also essential to conduct full student evaluations of the Writing Centre, both for continual improvement as well as individual professional development of Learning Advisors. This mirrors the increase in the administrative duties associated with academic work more generally, but is just one example of the professionalization of writing center work.

One part of these administrative requirements is to encourage reflective practice in education in order to promote continual improvement. Another aspect of reflective practice is research, which is becoming more and more of a priority in Australia with the introduction of the **Excellence in Research for Australia** (ERA) initiative. The ERA is essentially a new method of assessing research output by individuals and institutions, and it aims to usher in a focus on research quality (as assessed via metrics) rather than just quantity. As with previous systems, the new system is designed to link research funding directly to outputs, as identified in the ERA.

Despite the problems with such systems, there is no doubt that the ERA will further increase the pressure on academic staff to conduct and publish quality research. This pressure is lessened for Learning Advisers who are appointed to professional or general staff positions, since research is not a requirement built into the job description. However, I believe that quality teaching is led by research, and so doing research is part of professionalizing the activities around writing centers and student development generally.

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This understanding of the current environment and the profession was the result of a somewhat haphazard career journey. It seems that one minute I was reading lots of books and writing essays (and then theses) about them, and suddenly I find myself in a minor leadership role, running a writing center and

other student development activities. This unexpected career arc was really impelled by an intrinsic love for learning and personal development in its own right. As a student I had to weather all the “Would you like fries with that?” jokes about Arts graduates, and I pursued my studies simply because I enjoyed them. So when I was offered my first gig as a tutor in the English department I relished the opportunity to facilitate the type of deeply fulfilling learning I enjoyed during my own undergraduate studies.

I have always taught with a lot of passion and enthusiasm, but I quickly became aware that the main focus of teaching within a discipline such as English was on content rather than learning processes. Curriculum was always driven by the need to cover a certain amount of material (“Oh, we must have some Shakespeare!”), but unfortunately many students were left behind because there was little focus on the processes of learning, such as critical reading, argumentation, essay writing and such. In my own way I began to rectify this need by drawing attention to process while still attending to content. A lot of my early teaching was in Professional English, which focussed on communication and other skills to prepare students for the workforce, so this suited my passion for learning.

Economic necessity inevitably drove me to take whatever teaching I could, and so to supplement my income from casual tutoring I began teaching in the Flinders Foundation Course, a pre-entry program for people who had not had the opportunity to study at university before. The Foundation Course enabled me to focus on the transition issues that I was already interested in, as this student cohort was even less familiar with academic discourse. Although I didn’t know it at the time, it was also excellent preparation for my future career.

When I completed my PhD I was fortunate to secure a position as Associate Lecturer/Academic Skills Adviser in the Student Learning Centre at Flinders University. This meant being involved with the Centre’s entire range of activities, and this is where I became familiar with the operations of the Writing Centre. At the same time, I taught in the Foundation Course, and was eventually given the role of Coordinator of the Foundation Course. This was my first major coordination role which really prepared me for where I am now.

Being Foundation Course Coordinator meant that I had to become much more professional in what I did and how I did it. Of course, it meant being highly organized and managing my time effectively; it also meant putting forth a professional demeanour as I was now the “face” of the course; and it meant developing professional networks with other staff (including administrative staff) involved with the Course. During my time as Coordinator, the Course underwent a major external review which certainly helped to professionalize my perspective.

Moreover, my role meant taking an explicitly reflective stance on everything I did: for instance, when it was time to rewrite the curriculum for the first topic, I read a lot about curriculum design and the best way to achieve intended learning outcomes. I wanted to test the assumption that the course increased students’ confidence in their ability to study, so I developed a research project to look at student’s academic self-efficacy through the course. In this way my whole attitude to the work I was doing took on a more professional tone.

What I found through moving into leadership roles is that the effect I used to have on a class of, say, fifteen students, I can now have on entire courses and

larger groups of students, for instance, cohorts of students coming through the Writing Center. By having an overall viewpoint on the Writing Center and how it operates it is possible to improve outcomes for a much larger number of students. This both requires and promotes professionalism in all its aspects.

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