

Bartlett, A. (2007). Anchoring practice: how do we learn the profession of academic language and learning advising? In C. Fraser & L. Ayo (Eds.), *Anchoring our practice: Perspectives, partnerships, projections: Refereed proceedings of the 2006 Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand Conference*. (pp. 90-100). Auckland: ATLAANZ.  
ISBN: 978-0-9582889-0-3

## **Anchoring practice: how do we learn the profession of academic language and learning advising?**

Annie Bartlett  
The Australian National University  
Australia

### **Abstract**

Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advising in Australia has come a long way in the ten years since Garner, Chanock and Clerehan (1995, p. 5) expressed the collective sense of ‘what is it we do and why?’ The profession is much clearer about ‘what?’ and ‘why?’ What is less clear is *how* newcomers to the ALL profession learn what to do. Given that it is still relatively rare to encounter newcomers who have had advising experience, how can they be successfully inducted into their professional role and its responsibilities such that they develop expertise over time? As Percy and Stirling (2004) cogently note, “the foundational principles and theories informing [ALL] expertise are by no means apparent to the newcomer” (p. 38).

This paper argues the need for systematic induction for ALL newcomers such that they develop the professional expertise with which to teach academic language and learning and know where the boundaries lie. Because there is no ALL ‘training’ institute, and no ‘Dos and Don’ts Manual’, the anchoring and development of ALL expertise necessarily relies on the preparedness of supervisor, colleagues and newcomer to take responsibility for making explicit the nature and complexities of the work, and for developing ways of extending professional knowledge, reflecting on practice, and developing a basis on which to make professional judgements in relation to academic language and learning.

### **Introduction**

Academic Language and Learning (ALL) newcomers in Australia are tasked with developing expertise in providing high quality academic language and learning assistance to higher education students, particularly assistance related to learning, communication and reasoning (see for example, Bartlett and Chanock, 2003; Deller-Evans and Zeegers, 2004). Some advisors may be specifically employed to deliver quantitative reasoning and methods advice. Over time, the newcomer is usually expected to become fully informed about the academic demands and expectations of particular disciplines and specific courses, as well as manage the more general skills relating to successful study. They must be capable of working in intense individual consultations, as well as capable of leading small group courses, presenting seminars and lectures, assisting in academic staff development, representing the unit and institution, and initiating and co-ordinating specific courses for specialised groups. Ultimately, it is highly desirable that newcomers develop the expertise with which to contribute to institutional level policy. In essence, the newcomer’s role and practice is to serve as an intermediary between students and academic staff, and as an interpreter of the academic culture of the university and its disciplinary sub-cultures for students (Ballard, 1994).

In developing this expertise the newcomer must simultaneously learn how to provide academic language and learning assistance for students via consultations, workshops and courses, develop professional insight, gain an overview of the academic territory, plus co-operate and negotiate with disciplinary and professional staff. It is not an easy role, as Craswell and Bartlett (2001) note: “[the] job . . . requires specialist knowledge and skills, great flexibility, hard work and strong commitment to students’ learning development” (p. 18). This is complex, demanding work, and it is useful to be reminded of the students with whom we work: they often enter tertiary education with limited expertise in the ways of negotiating disciplinary sub-cultures and traditions, taking responsibility for their own learning, and being able to orient/re-orient themselves. Generally speaking, in their roles and work practices, ALL professionals challenge the assumption that students should do all this by osmosis and/or trial and error. However, osmosis tends to characterise ALL newcomer induction. As Percy and Stirling (2004) point out, the field is “so practice based that the bodies of knowledge on which we draw to inform our practice often tend to become invisible, even to ourselves” (p. 40).

This paper focuses on how ALL principles and practice need to be made explicit to newcomers via systematic induction so that they can be anchored into the ALL community of practice, and develop the necessary professional expertise with which to know *how* to do the job with which they are tasked. Induction into the community of practice at the institutional and unit levels necessarily relies on the preparedness of the supervisor, colleagues and newcomer to take responsibility for making explicit the complexities of the work, extending professional knowledge, reflecting on practice and developing a basis on which to make professional judgements in relation to academic language and learning.

Trowler and Knight (1999) define induction as “professional practices designed to facilitate the entry of [newcomers] to an organisation and equip them to operate effectively within it” (p. 178). However, they argue that traditional approaches to induction - orientation, formal induction programs, mentoring, and handbooks and so on - are insufficient to achieve organisational socialisation, that is, “an accommodative process which takes place when [newcomers] to an organisation engage with aspects of the cultural configurations they find there” (Trowler & Knight, 1999, p. 178). Traditional approaches, in their view, prioritise the overt, the corporate, the formal and the structure, over the tacit, the local, the naturally occurring and action. Their view has resonance for ALL newcomers. Given that ALL newcomers are often employed without prior ALL teaching experience, induction necessarily has two components: that which inducts them into the new institutional environment and its processes, and that which has to develop both post-entry expertise, and engender cultural change as result of negotiating shared meanings. Such an induction is complex, challenging and resource-intensive, and requires careful reflection on the part of all involved in the process.

#### *Induction into the ALL community of practice: shared perspectives and practices*

Australian ALL professionals can be characterised by the notion of a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002): there is ‘a domain of knowledge’ - academic language and learning - which encompasses issues such as writing across the disciplines, genre analysis, multiliteracies, supervision, writing cross culturally, academic progress and so on. Further, there is a community of people who care about this domain, and the shared practice - individual consultations, teaching, research and publication, if not lobbying - that they are developing to be effective in their domain (McGowan, 2005; Webb, 2002). As a community of practice, ALL professionals can be seen as “responsible for the maintenance of the community of practice, for inducting newcomers into it, for carrying on the tradition of the past and carrying the community into the future” (Brew, 2003, p. 12).

Thus, in terms of initial guidance to the newcomer, there needs to be a strong sense that he/she is entering into a community of practice, and belongs to a professional association. Only in 2005 was the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) in Australia launched, and there is still a sense in which some ALL professionals may not see themselves as necessarily part of the Association. Nevertheless, it has been a huge professional step forward, with the AALL Mission Statement establishing the basis for the ALL community of practice. A newcomer reading the Mission Statement would become aware that his/her professional responsibilities include providing

constructive learning experiences for students; supporting the development of core disciplinary academic skills; promoting quality and diversity; contributing to internationalisation; and informing the wider academic community about ALL philosophies and practice (AALL Mission Statement, 2006).

However, whilst we can anchor onto the AALL website, which foregrounds our professional presence, our understandings of ourselves, and the issues with which we have most concern, it does not necessarily describe in ways adequate to the newcomer *how* we do what we do because ALL professional practice is diverse - nationally, within tertiary institutions and within units. Thus in order to induct the newcomer into the community of practice, as a first step we need to be able to direct him/her to ALL conference proceedings which document the development of practice(s) over time, and, specifically, to papers that chart the development of the profession. These, regrettably, are few and far between. We all tend to 'just know stuff' - about how we began; how, over time, we have named what we do; and why we have adopted certain practices - but we rarely coherently communicate this. At past conferences and in publications, there has tended to be a reporting of local ALL practices, rather than the exploration of broader theoretical and philosophical conceptions of our practice and role. There is an important genealogy of knowledge that is yet to be explicitly communicated to ALL newcomers. Yet, even with this, while the newcomer will have a stronger sense of being part of the community of practice, and a stronger understanding of its ways of working, he/she will not necessarily know *how* to advise - individual students, across disciplines (or within) and across the multiplicity of academic tasks and encounters with which students are grappling.

#### *Induction into the broad institutional contexts*

For ALL newcomers, a key induction issue may well be a mismatch between their expectations in relation to their classification and role within the unit. Funding arrangements, working conditions, institutional locations, classifications and payment levels vary, and understanding that variation is critical to the newcomer. In Australia, for example, ALL classifications are split approximately 50/50 between either General or Academic staff (Barthel, 2005). This means that there are very different work, promotion, pay and leave entitlements. Inducting the newcomer into this area of ALL professional work is particularly crucial given that Australian research by Thomas and Bennett (2002) found that lack of research time was identified as 'always' or 'often' a problem by 78% of ALL respondents. Thus, understanding the broad institutional contexts and the different conditions under which ALL advising has taken root in particular institutions is a key anchor point in induction.

Equally, there is divergence as to whether ALL delivery is centralised or devolved, broadly discipline-specific or embedded within the disciplines. This can create confusions and frustrations for newcomers. Much depends on the structure of the institution, its positioning of ALL units/centres, and the ways in which it is possible (or not) to resource expectations. ALL unit position and response papers to institutional demands can help to educate staff about the ways in which decisions are made. Thus, ALL units need to document and communicate their evolution over time - how they became anchored within their institutional contexts, why, and with what interventions, changes, and rationales. Equally newcomers need to familiarise themselves with not only 'what is', but also with 'why it is' such that they can understand the ways in which the unit operates.

Induction into the institutional context must also account for the rights and responsibilities of the newcomer *vis a vis* legislation, institutional policies and codes of practice, and student rights and responsibilities. This mantle of professional obligations governs the ways in which interactions occur - particularly with students - in terms of privacy, confidentiality, discrimination, harassment, occupational health and so on. Privacy concerns, for example, relate not only to gathering data from students and record-keeping, but to email contact, professional diaries, staff offices, discussing student cases with colleagues, and the use of student work for teaching and publishing purposes. Privacy also relates to the need to inform students about what records are kept, students' rights to access them, and the conditions under which student matters are discussed with non-ALL staff. In accord with Trowler and Knight's (1999) conception of traditional induction, induction needs to make

institutional rights and responsibilities explicit to the newcomer as they relate to the institutional context in which he/she is anchored.

ALL newcomers also need to be inducted into the codes of behaviour and practice made explicit by the institution, whether the codes are in relation to teaching and learning, acknowledging sources, being ethical in research practice, using gender-neutral language and so on. In the contexts within which we work, there are strong professional and moral responsibilities, and often wide discretion in dealing with students. Such responsibility and powers of discretion necessarily carry obligations across a range of areas, including standards of professional knowledge, and the observation of appropriate ethical standards regarding our work with students and other staff members in the unit and the institution. If we expect that students will observe their rights and responsibilities in this regard, we must also be aware of our own rights and responsibilities and practise them ourselves. So identifying key institutional documents, becoming familiar with them, and negotiating shared meanings comprises a significant part of the newcomer's induction.

Finally, induction needs to focus on the newcomer getting to know how the institution is structured and where power lies. This is often fraught given restructuring and changing power bases and allegiances, but it is important in relation to understanding why units make the kinds of decisions they do. The institutional structure, history, rights and responsibilities, behavioural expectations, and the underpinning resources provide clear direction as to the fundamentals of induction into the broad institutional context. Such understanding takes time to develop and can be confusing and bewildering at the best of times but, without it, the newcomer will be unable to negotiate appropriate outcomes for students, or deliver appropriate services and resources to them.

### *Induction into ALL unit practice*

The ALL newcomer encountering a unit's practice for the first time might well ask 'But how do you all know what to do?; how do I learn *how* to do what needs to be done?' These are questions managers need to tackle head on.

As with the broader professional practice, it is important to have a unit-negotiated and agreed-to conception of the role of the advisors - a Mission Statement - outlining the unit goals and, within that, an explanation of how the professional work is conceptualised and publicised. The Academic Skills and Learning Centre (ASLC) at the Australian National University, for example, has three key goals: to teach students to take control of their learning, to contribute towards an effective learning environment, and to maintain a high standard of professional practice and expertise. Each of these sets the basis for how we do what we do. Teaching students to take control of their learning implies that we do not edit or proof read; rather we work developmentally with students. A developmental approach starts with what students know and can do; uses modelling (is explanatory); provides positive reinforcement (constructive, manageable, do-able critique); recognises the limits to expertise (e.g., we are not subject/content specialists); and challenges the student to become a responsible independent learner, countering the view that 'your job is to fix this'. Internalising a developmental approach, therefore, assists the newcomer in knowing where to 'draw the line' on academic language and learning advising.

An ASLC newcomer is also expected to contribute towards an effective learning environment, characterised by the Australian Universities Vice-Chancellors' Committee (2002) as "the outcome of a collaborative partnership between teachers and students" (p. 12). This 'collaborative partnership' takes place in an environment organised along institutional lines, structured into degree programs within the ANU Colleges, and is mediated by assessment requirements. In contributing to an effective learning environment, the newcomer is expected to develop and provide programs that assist students to understand and navigate their way through the academic environment, consult with disciplinary and professional staff in the university, and contribute to teaching and learning policy where appropriate. Thus, the newcomer needs to become familiar with students' learning needs, assessment protocols, key disciplinary staff, and university policies as they affect what students can and cannot do.

At the ASLC, familiarity with students' undergraduate learning needs is fostered through maintaining a cross-disciplinary Essay and Assignment File in which copies of marked work, donated by students, are kept. Advisors (and students) are able to review the ways in which markers comment over a range of grades from Fail to High Distinction. At postgraduate level samples of theses, sub-theses and essays provide a similar resource. Each year we collect course outlines that enable us to anticipate and respond to students' assignment expectations and needs. In this, where we are invited to deliver particular sessions for student cohorts, we also consult with the disciplinary staff to identify areas of need, expectations, and the ways in which we can best target academic language and learning needs. Equally, where there are significant changes in university policy - most recently for example, to Academic Honesty - we discuss, consider and respond to it. From time to time, on ALL related issues, we are invited to have input into the development of policy. These are all rich sources of newcomer induction.

Maintaining a high standard of professional practice and expertise - the third plank of the ASLC Mission Statement - also alludes to how an advisor should work with students. Although not as clearly defined as Hafernik, Messerschmitt and Vandrick's (2002) notion of 'right behaviour', ALL professional practice requires adherence to Hafernik et al.'s (2002) four categories of ethics: *respect for an individual's rights, responsibilities and dignity*. In this, for example, the newcomer is expected to actively practise his/her responsibilities in relation to student privacy and confidentiality, as well the student's right to make decisions about what action he/she will take as a result of an individual consultation/academic language and learning session. *avoidance of causing harm, including social harm*. The emphasis here is on the newcomer recognising the importance of respecting what a student knows and can do, as opposed to what they 'ought' to know. It also implies that singling out, gossiping, stereotyping or acting as gatekeepers for the institution are unacceptable practices. *justice/fair treatment*. This can be a particularly difficult area for newcomers working across disciplines who have been or are disciplinary specialists: they must be cognisant of the risk of advantaging students from those disciplines. There must also be a recognition of the boundaries of competence and expertise - difficulties may arise where trained English language newcomers focus predominantly on English language issues to the detriment of, for example, argument and reasoning, or where the newcomer is expected to provide personal counselling, or comment on expected grades. *professional integrity - accuracy, honesty and truthfulness; expertise, preparedness, punctuality and responsiveness*. This almost goes without saying with respect to the newcomer. Yet difficulties can arise, for example, in relation to hearing the 'truth' from students/disciplinary academics as they report what they understand (e.g., on supervision issues), and how they report the 'truth' of their experiences with us to others. Equally, in relation to this category, if our professional practice is to advise students to be prepared, think ahead, time and project management and so on, the newcomer must become an exemplar.

Hafernik et al.'s (2002) categories make good sense and it behoves the staff with whom the newcomer works to demonstrate and model the practice of these professional ethics so as to reinforce induction into the community of practice.

A Code of Conduct can augment ethical practice. The ASLC's Code of Conduct (2006) is a negotiated and agreed-to document. We acknowledge that we are primarily teachers, and that we accept the responsibility that comes with the role of teaching. Equally we accept that there is an administrative responsibility in relation to secure data collection and record-keeping. Importantly too, staff agree to remain up-to-date with university policy (and it changes frequently) with respect to relations between staff and students as they apply to our work (for example, research ethics, discrimination, privacy). The Code of Conduct suggests that acting co-operatively, sharing workloads, negotiating decisions, taking responsibility as a group for induction and training of newcomers, and using one another's strengths for the benefit of students - and ultimately the institution - are key, agreed-to, ways of working.

Further, the ASLC's Code of Conduct (2006) specifically sets out that advisors will

actively seek to improve and extend [their] professional knowledge, teaching ability and skills via appropriate study opportunities (including Professional Development), workshop and conference attendance, professional interchange with other individuals in [similar] area(s) of expertise, and through keeping . . . up-to-date with relevant educational and teaching literature.

Developing expertise, then, is 'part of the job' and most ALL professionals would see it that way. But the tricky induction part is the caveat that often there are not the resources - time and money - with which to undertake research and professional development. In their 2002 survey, Thomas and Bennett found that in terms of work demands, lack of time for research was a key stressor for ALL professionals in Australia. So here we have a paradox: ALL professionals wanting to undertake research and publication, and it being part of the 'job,' but the unit not having the wherewithal to deliver the opportunity. Here a critical part of induction may lie in persuading newcomers that the professional development opportunities 'have to go round' - that a unit can afford, for example, to finance only one staff member to attend a conference per year, or that the institution will not fund unless the staff member presents/publishes. It is incumbent then on units to foreground other forms of professional development - staff 'Think Days,' focus groups with students, cross-disciplinary text analysis, materials development, joint publications, local staff exchange opportunities and so on. While conference attendance and publication have their place, there are other rich veins of professional development with which to anchor the newcomer into the community of practice, including hosting professional development - at the local and national levels.

Yet having a unit level Mission Statement and a Code of Conduct do not account for two other extremely important forms of newcomer induction and professional development. First, daily experience - not just in the initial period of employment, but over time - is an essential, and often overlooked, basis for developing professional expertise. Shadowing staff in their daily practice, not once, but over several iterations and contexts, as well as the newcomer's active reflection (individually, and with colleagues) can assist in understanding what goes on, why, and how, and the ways in which different encounters create questions/complexities with which we all grapple. Successful induction implies then that the newcomer has a reduced teaching/consultation load so that there is more time available for the first six months for shadowing, reflecting on, and negotiating professional practice. In that time it is important that the newcomer researches how academic texts are produced both within and across disciplines in order to develop a basis on which to develop the expertise necessary to advise and teach students, and understand the multiplicity of academic practices with which students may be engaged.

Second, whilst discussion of, and reflection on, daily experience lends itself to understanding the *how* of advising, it must not overshadow the importance of developing a multiliteracies approach. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) have argued elsewhere that academic language and learning pedagogy would benefit from being framed a multiliteracies approach - one that in Cope and Kalantzis' (2000) view "engages with the multiplicity of communications channels and media . . . [and] with the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (p. 5). In other words, this approach "extends the traditional concepts of text and literacy to include meanings constructed in a range of semiotic systems" (Abu-Arab, 2005, p. 21). Such an approach recognises that ALL advisors do not confine academic language and learning advising and teaching to texts - although it is a large part of our work - and that we need to be multiliterate in order to respond to students' academic skills and learning needs, particularly given students' language and cultural diversity.

Students' linguistic diversity can be particularly challenging for newcomers. Thomas and Bennett (2002) found that, in terms of work demands in the Australian context, dealing with students with linguistic diversity - characterised as 'low literacy' - was a key stressor for ALL professionals. This arises from a combination of factors: the student's expectations, the student's difficulty in meeting the demands of academic work, the advisor's skills and expertise, the lack of time and resources and

institutional decisions with respect to English language proficiency. Thus, the newcomer must be inducted in ways that openly acknowledge that interplay of factors, and develop expertise in constructively navigating the interaction. In this, scenario work, discussion, de-briefing, and strategising with colleagues are key components of the induction process for the newcomer.

## Conclusion

If the first aim of induction is, as Trowler and Knight (1999) identify, “to facilitate the entry of [newcomers] to an organisation and to equip them to operate effectively within it” (p. 178), evaluation should focus on how well the newcomer is managing workloads, coping with pressures, adhering to protocols and so on. In a sense this is a quite straightforward analysis. However, if the second aim of Trowler and Knight’s (1999) notion of induction is accepted - and in relation to ALL advising it is the most important - evaluation should also focus on how well the ALL newcomer is engaging with the tacit, the local, the naturally occurring and taking appropriate action. In other words, we would do well as a community of practice to consider how well the newcomer has been socialised into a culture of shared ALL practice; to what extent he/she has been socialised to recognise the need to develop specialist ALL knowledge and skills, and with that to adopt a multiliteracies approach to the ways in which they respond to student academic skills and learning needs. Evaluation should also focus on whether there is a developing confidence in sharing ALL practice and a willingness to reflect, seek feedback and negotiate meaning. Such an evaluation lies at the heart of knowing whether the newcomer has been successfully inducted into the ALL community of practice. In this there must be a willingness on the part of all staff involved, and the ALL community of practice, to reflect, negotiate, and act together with the newcomer.

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