Crozier, S. (2007). “Out damned spot”: Removing the taint of the remedial from learning development. 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. 2-13). Auckland: ATLAANZ.
ISBN: 978-0-9582889-0-3

“Out damned spot”: Removing the taint of the remedial from learning development

Susan Crozier
Unitec
New Zealand

Abstract

This paper examines the problems associated with the view of learning centre work as remedial and reflects on the complexities of seeking to overcome such a view. To see learning centre work as exclusively remedial assumes that the majority of students don’t face any difficulties with their learning, when in fact most students wrestle with the challenges of learning to some degree. A number of learning centres in Australia and New Zealand have sought to promote a mainstream view of learning development that emphasises both the ways in which it is integral to tertiary study and the importance of improving academic skills and understandings at every level. In this paper the problems associated with the notion of remediation are examined and some of the ways that learning centres are now presenting themselves are analysed.

Introduction

This paper examines the problems associated with the view of learning centre work as remedial and reflects on the complexities of seeking to overcome such a view. In naming this paper “out damned spot” I am indebted to some recent work by Stirling and Percy (2005) in which they invoke the notion of remediation as a taint or stain, and summon Lady Macbeth as a figurative representation of the struggle learning advisors have to wash their hands of that stain. Of course, in Lady Macbeth we have a woman who is tortured by guilt over her involvement with a number of murders so, on closer examination, the analogy hardly stands up: learning advisors are notoriously kind and helpful types who are scarcely likely to be involved in any such activities!

What does stand up about the analogy, however, is the fact that remediation is an idea that is terribly difficult to get rid of in the context of institutional understandings of tertiary learning development. Commenting on this, Zeegers (2004) contends that learning centres “are mostly viewed as having a remedial role and existing in the main for the benefit of a minority of students, these being students at risk, those who need extra tutoring in English language, or those who require academic ‘counselling’” (p. 32). As the self-conscious identity of learning development practice has grown, efforts have been made to assert a broader understanding of learning centre work beyond the remedial. Yet, Stirling and Percy (2005) describe the learning advisor as haunted by “the persistent view of our work as remedial” and observe that every time the label seems to have been shaken it “reemerges with a vengeance” (p. 179). Their point is that in the institutional imagination there is a series of connections that link deficits in student abilities with a perceived need to offer remedial education and an understanding that this work is properly the province of learning or academic skills centres.

At my own institution the learning centre is frequently discussed as a ‘support’ service, which helps students who have problems with their studies, although we officially removed the word support from our name some years ago. The implicit assumption behind the construction of the learning centre as a

support service is that only a minority of students have problems with their learning, when in fact most students wrestle with the challenges of learning to some degree. After all, if learning at tertiary level were easy it would hardly be worth doing. However, there are reasons why the notion of the problem student persists in the institutional imagination with such tenacity: Stirling and Percy (2005) argue that locating deficits within students "deflects attention away from university recruiting policies and practices" (p. 180). By making such remedial work the province of learning centres, the flaws and failings of tertiary education are partially quarantined from the academic disciplines themselves. This, however, as a number of authors have noted, has consequences for the status of the learning development profession itself, which is engaged in a long standing struggle to emerge from the margins of academic life (Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2004; Zeegers, 2004). The conceptual link between problem students, remedial education and learning centres, signalled by Stirling and Percy's work, merits more detailed consideration.

How the notion of remedial instruction positions students

The student who is deemed to be in need of learning support is pathologised by the idea that this support is remedial, rather than integral to an effective engagement with learning in higher education. A consideration of some definitions is revealing of the conceptual associations that circulate around the work that learning centres do and the students who access learning centre services. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the term remedial in the following way:

> Designating or pertaining to special classes, teaching methods, etc., in basic educational skills to help school children who have not achieved the proficiency necessary for them to be able to learn other subjects with their contemporaries (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006).

This definition tells us much about the problem with the remedial label in the context of tertiary learning development. To begin with, it is associated with children and it implies therapeutic interventions that figure the student who accesses learning services as inadequate in some way. To the degree that the remedial is an infantilising concept, as the definition suggests, it may well be the case that in the institutional imagination those in need of remedial help at tertiary level can be seen as less competent as adults.

There are also socio-cultural judgements behind the setting apart of learning centre work as remedial. Another much used term for the student deemed in need of remedial instruction is 'at-risk' (Wingate, 2006, p. 457; see also Zeegers, 2004, p. 28), which has overtones of psycho-social and behavioural problems and would thus seem to be an extremely unfortunate term to attach to learners. The fact that those termed 'non-traditional' students (mature students, students from minority cultural groups, those with English as an additional language, as well as those from less affluent social groups) have been the targets of learning centre work adds to the conceptual weight that learning centres' focus is to work with those who are somehow outsiders to mainstream education. The marginalising effect of such conceptualisations is evident in Northedge's (2003) description of the way in which those in need of remedial help are viewed as "'charity' cases". He writes that tertiary institutions provide a special "paupers' wing" added on to "the stately home of elite education" and continue to see "'proper' students" as those who are not in need of the same kind of assistance (p. 17).

The persistence of the remedial label, and the associated presumption of incompetence or otherness on the part of service users, has damaging effects in terms of access to learning services. If it is imagined that there are two groups of students, those who need remedial help and those who don't, it is entirely understandable that students would like to see themselves as belonging to the latter group. For this reason it is essential to address the ways in which services are framed and promoted within the institution. Attewell, Lavin, Domina and Levey (2006) note that the term 'developmental' is preferred over the term 'remedial' by many educators. In a discussion of the term 'developmental education', Boylan, Bonham and White (1999) argue that it "reflects an emphasis on the holistic development of the individual student and is rooted in developmental psychology" (p. 87). The idea behind developmental education is that instructional activities are targeted, specific to the learner and based on a comprehensive assessment. While remedial courses are intended as catch-up courses to

get students to an entry level, development instruction is about developing a wide range of learner competencies across the tertiary setting (Boylan et al., 1999).

Even the notion of developmental education is problematic, however, because it contains the remedial within it. As Boylan et al. (1999) put it "developmental education is the whole of which remediation on the one end and learning assistance on the other end are both a part" (p.88). Nevertheless, it seems possible to deploy 'developmental education' in conceptually different ways to 'remedial education.' Developmental education implies a process in time that any learner might be involved in, as opposed to the special case of those needing remedial instruction in order that they might be able to cope in higher education. Zeegers (2004) positions learning development as utterly central to the competencies and qualities that higher education should develop in students. He writes that:

> the principal role of student academic support is developmental, that is, the development of the key skills of literacy and numeracy, critical analysis and professional communication, which are the cornerstones of higher education, as well as for successful life-long learning (p.27).

Furthermore, a developmental, rather than remedial, view of the services learning centres provide is informed by an understanding that a mass education system cannot trust that the cream will rise and allow the rest to fall by the way (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004). Instead, approaches to teaching and learning have to be responsive to the needs of a globalised and mass education system without pathologising learners (Northedge, 2003).

Remediation and institutional understandings of teaching and learning

Another problem with charging learning centres with the particular responsibility for working with struggling students is the way that it tends to leave institutional practices and even educational policies unexamined. Such practices include, for example, loose interpretation of admission criteria so that ill-prepared students are allowed to enrol on courses that they cannot succeed in. Behind this, of course, is a funding policy that links dollars to numbers enrolled, so that departments are driven to stretch their own admission criteria in ways that produce the very effects they supposedly want to avoid.

Policy aside, at the more local level of instruction, the notion that those who do not automatically succeed are in need of special, remedial help may enable the refusal, or inability, of discipline teaching staff to improve or amend their teaching practices in order to assist students to develop as learners within their subjects. It would appear that the recognition that it is unacceptable to corral the acquisition of the academic literacies that all students need to acquire into the remedial pen has been relatively slow to dawn. Ideally, discipline staff should take up responsibility for the identification and transmission of academic literacies so that students are inducted into the disciplines through the naming of, and training in, the often tacit activities that each discipline involves. This would facilitate the process of students achieving membership of the discourse community that shares exchanges of, and discussion around, specialist knowledge.

In this sense, developing the skills and understandings that one needs to succeed in tertiary education should be integral to one's course of study, rather than an extra, remedial dimension. This is the argument that Wingate (2006) asserts and although the sentiment is laudable, the reality is that the teaching offered by some academics doesn't always live up to the ideal. Students often struggle because of the lack of such effective teaching, so they are forced to deal with problems that do not entirely reflect a deficit in their skills or understandings, but are a function of poor academic acculturation within the disciplines. At least some of the work that learning centres perform involves dealing with learning problems that originate in failings within discipline teaching.

However, it would appear that the very fact of existing outside of the disciplines is what contributes to learning centres' marginal status. Wingate (2006) sees stand alone study skills instruction, in which

students are sent outside of the discipline for help, as remedial (as well as unhelpful). Indeed, the fact of being outside of the discipline appears to be the definition of 'remedial' that she is working with. She argues that the acquisition of disciplinary understandings and practices should not be a 'bolt-on' phenomenon, but should be integral to teaching in the disciplines (Wingate, 2006). As I have already signalled, this is a worthy ambition, although in Wingate's case it is based on a poor understanding of the quality of generic instruction offered by experienced learning development practitioners. The best forms of such instruction will be linked to a context, even a hypothetical one, or involve activities that allow students to provide the context by working with examples from their own studies.

The difficulty, however, of Wingate's requirement that all study skills and learning development be delivered within the disciplines is that it doesn't allow for a variability in the capacity of discipline staff to engage in the kind of metacognitive reflection that would make them good at passing on such understanding. In the interests of providing students with an equitable encounter with the disciplines, the best kinds of instruction offered by learning centres should provide students with some conceptual and practical tools to tackle the difficult project of mastering disciplinary practices and conventions.

The concept of remediation and the status of learning centres

Thus far it has been argued that a view of learning development as remedial belittles and pathologises the students who would use our services and it leaves both teaching and institutional practices unexamined and unchanged. It is, of course, true that there are students in tertiary education today who do need some substantial help to be able to survive in their studies. In this sense, as was noted above, developmental education may often have a remedial component within it. However, there are problems for learning centres in being seen as the providers of remedial instruction. Most discipline staff and most students do not understand the niceties of the distinction between remedial and developmental education, so that learning centres can find themselves relegated to a marginal place in the ambitions of the institution as a whole. However, the association of learning centres with remedial education also has consequences for learning centres and for the learning development tutors who work in them.

To begin with, a view of learning centre work as remedial does not value the specialist knowledges that we as learning development tutors bring to our work. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) link the remedial view of learning advisors as those who correct mechanical errors in students' work with a notion that "anyone with a modicum of intelligence can do this job" (p. 18). One senior academic of my acquaintance insists that he defers to me in all matters of grammar, as though my main function was to render his postgraduate students' writing comprehensible by correcting their English, when in fact I do very little of that and work with students in a much more inquiring way, making interventions that are much more to do with the development of critical thinking and an understanding of what makes arguments work. Yet so far I have been unsuccessful in communicating this idea to my colleague.

Some might argue that the sorts of interventions I make in my work with students should come from the discipline lecturer or supervisor. However, those people are not always able to do this work. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) point out that learning development tutors "may have specialist knowledge that discipline teachers do not have" (p. 13). In fact, much thinking and writing in the disciplines is acquired as though by osmosis and highly successful academics may lack the kind of meta-knowledge that would enable them to identify and to teach disciplinary practices and conventions to their students.

Our work involves knowledge of a range of disciplinary conventions, but may also involve a sound grasp of "textual design meanings" (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, p. 13). The best kind of intervention that we make on a piece of writing is not the remedial correction of errors. It demonstrates, rather, an ability "to identify precisely what has gone 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" (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, p. 13). As Craswell and

Bartlett observe, academics don't necessarily have this kind of knowledge. They add that "there is often insufficient recognition by the academic community at large that meaning does not reside in disembodied knowledge… that exist independently of how we speak and write these knowledge(s)" (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, pp. 15-16). The point is that most students are inexperienced writers in the disciplines and they must learn how to create arguments that work, and the academic specialists who can assist them with that task are housed in learning centres. Yet, rather than validating learning development as an academic specialty, institutions frequently see their learning centres as service units, akin to a counselling service and sometimes housed in the same offices and employed on general, rather than academic contracts.

Promoting a post-remedial view of learning centres

There is a growing body of scholarship that signals efforts to claim the specialised work of learning advisors as a distinct and unique contribution to the academy (Bartlett, 2005; Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2004; Melles, 2002; Webb, 2002). Webb (2002) indicates some of the ways that learning centres could be understood: "as catalysts for systemic change, as facilitators of organisational learning, as partners in the transformation of university teaching and learning" (p.17). It is an understanding that moves us a long way from the remedial. In the last part of this paper I want to suggest that the scholarship dealing with the unique contribution that learning advisors and learning centres make is reflected in developments in the ways that these centres define and describe the work they do within the institutions in which they are located. This contention is based on an analysis of promotional material that learning centres produce about themselves at a number of tertiary institutions from both Australia and New Zealand.
The first example is the Student Learning Centre at the University of Auckland, whose website clearly signals a move away from a notion of the remedial:

> The Student Learning Centre (SLC) provides professional development for University of Auckland students. The Centre facilitates the acquisition of effective academic learning and performance skills in students, and helps those who encounter difficulties in their studies. Academic tutors teach process skills that are crucial to academic success. The Centre's programmes cater for the learning needs of all students from first year undergraduates to postgraduates (Student Learning Centre, 2006).

A key term which is interesting in this example is 'professional development', which indicates that students coming for assistance are, rather than incompetent and infantilised, implicitly figured as sensible nascent professionals who need to up-skill. Indeed, the centre documentation states that it teaches "effective academic learning and performance skills" (Student Learning Centre, 2006).

Although the centre "helps those who encounter difficulties in their studies" it is clear that the centre seeks to position its work as integral to the tertiary environment when it claims to "teach process skills that are crucial to academic success" (Student Learning Centre, 2006). Similarly, offering to work with students at every level, from first year undergraduate through to postgraduate level, is a key marker of the fact that the centre's work is fully embedded in learning at each stage and is not limited to those who are struggling to make the adjustment to tertiary study. Further exploration of the site indicates that the Student Learning Centre still appears to focus on the provision of generic skills and workshops, but seeks to position its work as integral to learning and teaching at the University of Auckland.

The second example to be considered is the ELSSA Centre, which is the learning centre at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). The centre is clearly pursuing a model of integrated, contextual delivery and moving away from generic workshops to focus on delivery within faculty-specific groups wherever possible. This is evident in the Centre's mission statement, which signals an intention to work on integrated, custom-designed forms of delivery. At the same time the mission statement claims the professional, academic status of the centre's staff through an emphasis on "research" and "intellectual contributions" in the areas of teaching and learning:

Mission statement
The ELSSA Centre enhances teaching and learning at UTS through a focus on academic literacy, which involves reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking and cultural knowledge.

We do this by:
- collaborating with faculties to integrate the development of students' academic literacy in their area of study
- teaching custom-designed programs to meet the specific requirements and changing needs of students and staff
- offering consultative advice to academic staff on language-related matters
- fostering interest in, and knowledge of, literacy and learning through research, intellectual contributions and professional development
- valuing quality, diversity, internationalisation and flexibility as we serve the wider academic and professional communities (ELSSA Centre, 2006).

In 2005 the ELSSA Centre launched a university-wide project to promote integrated and collaborative teaching of academic literacies and communication competencies. A closer examination of the material relating to this project indicates the ways in which staff development across the university, along with developmental and remedial components of student instruction are involved (ELSSA Centre, 2005). The project draws together embedded forms of delivery that are aimed at all students on a given course, as well as targeted intensive delivery to those who are assessed as being in need of remedial instruction. The intention behind this approach has been to increase the number of students who receive developmental input, while more visibly and more actively reaching those in need of academic support, and all of this at no extra cost. Interestingly, personal communication with one member of the ELSSA team indicated that increasing the visibility of the service through embedded forms of delivery, which might be expected to be a more efficient way of reaching more students, had actually increased the demand for one-to-one services.

What the ELSSA Centre approach seems to achieve is to promote learning services as integral to the development of the wide range of competencies that graduates should be expected to attain, as well as identifying and addressing the needs of those most in need of support in order to be retained in their courses. In other words, both developmental and remedial ends of the learning continuum are addressed in the context of a collaborative and embedded approach. This approach emphasises the professionalism of the ELSSA team and its potential impact on teaching and learning across the institution.

Finally, I turn to consider the centre where I work, Te Tari Awhina, Learning Centre at Unitec New Zealand, where I think we are struggling to distance ourselves from the most damaging associations of remedialism. To begin with, it should be acknowledged that our Centre has a very limited web presence, which we do not control ourselves and it is a key objective of our centre to create and maintain our own web presence. At present, staff and students can get to our online materials and information about our services through a limited access electronic teaching system called Blackboard. However, from the Unitec corporate website visitors can access Te Tari Awhina through the heading 'Unitec experience', then they have to choose 'Support'. Here Learning Support is listed with together with the Conciliator, Disability Support, Financial Support and Gay Support. By choosing Learning Support, a searcher will find that Te Tari Awhina, Learning Centre is one of four services, including the library that support learning at Unitec. It is fair to say at this stage that Te Tari Awhina, Learning Centre is not considered a key marketing feature for the institution.

This marginal web presence may be because of the centre's association with remedial learning. Once a visitor finally reaches the web page devoted to Te Tari Awhina, there are several mentions of help and helping:

Make time for us in your study schedule! Te Tari Awhina offers a free service for Unitec students at all levels. You may have general concerns about tertiary study or maybe you are looking for *help* with a specific task.
Whether you are returning to study after a long break, studying in New Zealand for the first time, or need *help* developing new skills relating to your studies, *help* is available at Te Tari Awhina.
Our experienced learning development teachers are committed to *helping* you develop the skills you need to study independently and succeed in your chosen programme (Te Tari Awhina, 2006, italics added).

Clearly what is required here is a conceptual shift that would enable us to position ourselves within the institution as professional academics with a significant contribution to make to the development of excellence in teaching and learning. The emphasis on helping in our promotional materials reflects a desire to be accessible to those students who are most in need of assistance. However, the emphasis on helping is unhelpful in so far as it exacerbates the tendency to see Te Tari Awhina as a remedial service, with all the problems this paper has signalled could follow from that. What the developments in the other centres I have mentioned seem to indicate is that access might be improved by positioning the centre as integral to the experience of higher education, so that our services are seen as something that any student who hopes to do well might take advantage of. This is the direction I hope that Te Tari Awhina can take.

As it stands, at present Te Tari Awhina is still offering a full range of generic workshops, as is Auckland's Student Learning Centre, while UTS has moved away from the generic to focus on faculty specific delivery wherever possible. However, at Te Tari Awhina we're taking every opportunity to offer contextual forms of delivery, offering custom-built workshops focused around the specific learning challenges or assessment tasks that students are involved with. This requires extra research and preparation on the part of our staff and because of this we need to be involved in ongoing professional development to broaden our understanding of the generic conventions and practices across a range of disciplines. It is potentially a resourcing challenge, but given the merits of moving towards an understanding of our service as integral rather than remedial it seems a worthwhile project.

The basis on which the shift towards an integrated, developmental understanding of learning centre work needs to stand is an understanding of the specialist status of learning development lecturers as interdisciplinary academics (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002). Learning development work, at its best, involves knowledge of a range of disciplinary conventions and of the way that writing and thinking in the disciplines is developed. Students may benefit from a broadened appreciation among discipline staff of the fact that learning development academics have knowledge of how discourses are produced that may give us a unique insight into how academic literacies are acquired. Such appreciation may be hard won in many institutions, and it may have to be repeatedly negotiated, especially where there are challenges to the value of our work. However, it is worth continuing to attend to the ways that we are understood in the belief that it might help to prevent learning centres' relegation to a marginalised, remedial service.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that there are costs associated with the view of our work as remedial. It has pointed out the pathologising and infantilising view of students it promotes, the way that it leaves institutional and teaching practices unexamined and the way that it downgrades the expertise of learning development professionals. Learning centres are increasingly striving to position the contribution they make as integral to the experience of learning in tertiary education. This may improve access because it doesn't require students to frame themselves as needy and helpless in order to take advantage of services. It is also based on an understanding that learning centre work is academic, scholarly, professional and integral to teaching and learning in tertiary education today.

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