

Creating a place at the table or getting a seat on the boat: Reflections on a strategy to position Academic Language and Learning work in relation to national agendas

Bronwyn James¹
University of Wollongong
Australia

Abstract

In 2010, The Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) took the direction of explicitly linking the work of academic language and learning (ALL) educators across Australia to current national higher education agendas. This direction has resulted in a number of AALL funded national events that involve collaborations among higher education institutions in regional groupings. To date, these events have focused primarily on English language proficiency and assessment, and on social inclusion. This paper begins with a look back at these events and their outcomes over the last 18 months. The paper then reflectively and reflexively examines one of these events as a provisional moment in which AALL was able to create ‘a place at the table’ in the constantly moving feast of higher education. The material effects of language in describing ourselves and our work as ALL educators is a central theme in this paper. My intention here is to use this Australian experience to invite further dialogue with our ATLAANZ colleagues about their own experiences of navigating the Aotearoa/New Zealand tertiary education waters.

Introduction

Ironists ..[realise] that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called ‘meta-stable’: never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves. (Rorty, 1989, pp. 73-74)

It might seem strange to begin a paper about a strategy to position the work of academic language and learning (ALL) educators in the Australian higher education system with Richard Rorty’s quotation about ironists. I first came across this quotation in an article by Alison Lee and Erica McWilliam (2008) in which they

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address the positioning of academic developers within the academy. Lee and McWilliam make a case for the real effects that language has in describing, redescribing, constraining, making possible, and making visible or invisible what it is that academic developers do, who they see themselves to be and who they are seen to be. While Lee and McWilliam address most directly the work and identity of academic developers, the argument they develop in their paper has many parallels for the identity and work of ALL educators.

Issues of identity transcend national boundaries. Susan Carter (2011), for example, makes reference to identity work, likening Learning Advisors in Aotearoa/New Zealand to 'borderland dwellers'. So, while the national context for this paper is Australian, I suspect that the content of this paper will, in some ways at least, resonate with many Learning Advisors in Aotearoa/New Zealand as much as it does for myself and my work as an Australian ALL educator.

I want to carry across Lee and McWilliam's framing of the ways in which language works into this paper. I would ask you, also, to keep in mind Rorty's words as I outline a strategy that The Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) began in 2010 to gain a place at the table or, more neatly, employing the 'Navigating the River' theme of the conference, 'to gain a seat on the boat' in our institutions' responses to national agendas that currently shape the higher education landscape in Australia.

This paper begins with a description of the AALL strategy and the national higher education landscape or context within which this strategy is positioned. I then take a look back at one of the events and its outcomes that was part of this strategy over the last 18 months and reflect on what sort of place we were able to gain at the table in the constantly moving feast of higher education.

The AALL event strategy

In 2010, the executive members of AALL agreed to fund a competitive targeted 'event' grant program in addition to the existing competitive project and research grants that AALL has made available to its members for some years. Competitive grants are funded through membership fees. This targeted event grant scheme has resulted in a number of AALL funded national events since 2010 that have involved collaborations among higher education institutions in regional groupings. The five events identified in Table 1 were funded under this strategy and were held in 2011.

Table 1. *Targeted ALL national events 2011*

Event	Venue	Event date, links for audio files, PPTS, further information
Good Practice Principles: How do we know what they know?	Edith Cowan University, WA	31 January 2011 http://aall.org.au/forum/good-practice-principles-how-do-we-know-what-they-know-wa-aall-symposium-31-january-2011
Widening Participation in AALL: Developing Interactions Between Universities and the VET Sector	University of South Australia	18 April 2011 One PowerPoint from the day published on the AALL Forum: http://aall.org.au/forum/universityafevet-collaborations-forum-adelaide-18th-april-2011
Introducing the British Written Academic English Corpus: Enhancing our practice in improving student writing in the disciplines	University of Sydney	20 May 2011 http://aall.org.au/forum/dr-sheena-gardeners%E2%80%99-presentation-%E2%80%98introducing-british-written-academic-english-corpus-parts-1
English language entry pathways: Innovations, outcomes and future directions	University of Sydney	9 June 2011 http://aall.org.au/forum/english-language-entry-pathways-innovations-outcomes-and-future-directions-report-symposium
Critical discussions about Social Inclusion Forum	University of Wollongong	10 June 2011 http://aall.org.au/forum/critical-discussions-about-social-inclusion-forum-ppts-and-files-0

Targeted event grant proposals need to meet particular criteria designed to position ALL work in relation to national agendas. These criteria are identified in an excerpt from the application form in Figure 1.

Eligible uses for this round of AALL grants

AALL grants are available to support projects or activities which further the mission and goals of the Association (see Attachment 1 below). In this current round of funding, we are calling for applications for *State/Territory based events* that:

- *focus on a theme that is linked to one of the current national Higher Education agendas* (for example, access, retention, transition, English language development, standards);
- *relate explicitly to Government policies and initiatives and the role that ALL professionals do and can play in relation to these* (for example, ALL professionals' responses to the Government's *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* document; the Bradley review recommendations that have been adopted by the government: 40% of 25-34 year olds with a Bachelor's degree (minimum) by 2020, 20% of HE enrolments at U/G level from low SES backgrounds; The Good Practice Principles; Quality assurance; AUQA-TEQSA; Standards);
- *bring together interested and key players - both ALL professionals and others in the institution as well as an invited high profile speaker on the identified theme - to showcase/workshop/discuss/plan what is going on in the institutions in that state/territory and the ways in which ALL professionals are involved; and*
- *are ideally cross institutional* (for example, involve collaboration across a number of ALL units in the state/territory).

Figure 1. Excerpt from AALL targeted grant application form

Table 1 is interesting in terms of what it reveals about the focus of the events that were both proposed and successful in attracting funding. These events could broadly be grouped into two categories – those events that relate to broadening participation and social inclusion in higher education, and others that relate to English language proficiency. The first group – social inclusion – is elaborated further in later sections of this paper where one of the events in this category becomes illustrative of the reflexive and reflective purposes of this paper. The latter group – English language – included the Western Australian based event that focused in part on the impact of a report by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) commissioned by The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations – *The Good Practice Principles for English Language Development for International Students* (the GPP) (AUQA, 2008). This report outlines institutional and student responsibilities in relation to entry requirements and access to programs that will enhance English language. The GPP also contains examples of best practice offered by a number of institutions around Australia. Two NSW based events also focused on English language proficiency. One of these, based at the University of Sydney, included speakers from the private language provider sector and addressed English language pathways. The one based at the University of NSW centred on the British Academic Written English corpus – perhaps somewhat more of an outlier in relation to an obvious connection to key policy drivers in higher education.

The Australian higher education context

Each of the events that were funded under the new grant scheme nevertheless remains firmly connected to the broader higher education context. They sit within quite visible policy and media discussions about social inclusion and English language development as these relate to ensuring the not always easily reconcilable focus on both standards in higher education and a fair go for all (see for example, the website for The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Policy/teqsa/Pages/default.aspx>) and, the 2011 report from the Victorian Ombudsman, John Taylor).

In this section, I detail some of what is influencing the current context. My intention is not to attempt to be exhaustive since the question of what to include is a political one – there is no single or coherent element influencing the higher education sector and shaping the work that we do and the ways in which we do it. Looking beyond national boundaries, for example, ‘the university’ has been described using multiple, overlapping, and at times contradictory terms: ‘the university of reason’, ‘the university of culture’, ‘the university of excellence’, the university as ‘corporate enterprise’, the university of ‘accountability’. For an extended discussion about the modern university Readings (1996) work is invaluable. Other critically motivated theorists of the contemporary university have added to this bank of terms. There are references, for example, to ‘new managerialism’ and ‘neoliberalism’ (Davies, 2003), ‘audit culture’ (Summers-Bremner, 2006), and ‘risk society’ (Bullen, Fahey, & Kenway, 2006). The competing and overlapping political, economic, and intellectual agendas that are indexed by these terms reflect and shape much of the local and international higher education context.

The context that I describe in this paper, however, is local, situated as it is within national boundaries. It is nevertheless just as non-unitary, non-finite, in process, and influenced and reflective of the competing and overlapping agendas I have sketched above. This context and these agendas are always discursively implicated; ‘discursively’ used here to signal my intention to take up Michel Foucault’s (1982) understanding of discourse as always associated with relations of power. To describe one context or one element or agenda and ignore another is precisely an example of Foucault’s understanding of the power of language to ‘discipline’, make visible or invisible. Some contexts and their agendas are more ‘visible’ than others.

In the following section, and with this realisation in mind, I do privilege one key policy driver – social inclusion. The ‘social inclusion agenda’ occupies a highly visible place in the context of Australian higher education and it has particular relevancy for the work of ALL educators. In the context of this paper, where my purpose is to reflect on the effect of the AALL strategy of targeted events, I could equally have focused on English

language proficiency, or some other driver. My own involvement with one of the social inclusion events, however, has influenced my choice in this regard.

Social inclusion

The 'social inclusion agenda' has become increasingly visible via Australian government commissioned reports, directives, policy documents, and various policy and practical responses from universities in Australia. The Australian government initiated *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) put forward a number of recommendations that have been largely taken up, most demonstrably through the Government's commitment to providing an additional \$5.4 billion over a four-year timeframe in order to resource reform in the higher education sector. Specifically, as this excerpt from the website of Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) indicates, the aim of this funding is to:

... support high quality teaching and learning, improve access and outcomes for students from low socio economic backgrounds, build new links between universities and disadvantaged schools, reward institutions for meeting agreed quality and equity outcomes, improve resourcing for research and invest in world class tertiary education infrastructure.

The reform targets that have been identified on the DEEWR website which relate to the Higher Education report include the following:

... 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds will have attained at least a bachelor-level qualification by 2020. This will be quite testing for Australia, as current attainment is 29 per cent.

By 2020, 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments in higher education should be students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

In order to achieve these and other identified reform targets, the Australian Government began negotiations with individual universities to develop *Mission-Based Compacts* in 2011. The Government web page: *The Mission-Based Compacts for Universities* contains the following information:

The Commonwealth will monitor the University's equity performance through the existing reporting requirements attached to individual programs. The University's performance in meeting equity objectives will also be linked with teaching and learning Performance Funding targets, as specified in the table under paragraph 4.14 of this Compact.

The linking of those targets that relate to previously under represented groups in higher education to institutional funding makes social inclusion a high stakes contour in the Australian higher education landscape. Importantly, as Trevor Gale (2009, p. 10) pointed out in his keynote address to the Student Equity Forum, a strong theme that comes across in the Bradley Review is that social equity and inclusion is everyone's business. This leads me to questions that I want to raise about the new social inclusion agenda and the work of ALL educators: *How are we positioned and positioning ourselves in relation to this agenda – do we have a seat on the boat?* My reflections on these questions provide an entry point from which to reflect on the broader AALL strategy that I described earlier.

Most if not all of us within the ALL field would find it heartening that social inclusion is being taken seriously and positioned with such mainstream prominence. After all, the ALL field, if I can call it that, either expanded in focus or, as it was the case for the majority of universities, came into being in the 1990's largely in response to an earlier wave of social inclusion as part of the Dawkins reforms of higher education. The prominence given to this current agenda is indexed by the creation of professorial positions dedicated to social inclusion in a number of universities. The same prominence, I would suggest, has not flowed over to institutional recognition of the contributions made to social inclusion by many ALL educators. As a field, ALL has since the early 1990s enabled and supported success in university education for students who have been previously underrepresented in higher education. For many of us in that field now, the social inclusion agenda remains business as usual, while around us, and at times without us, policy and program decisions are made by the new social inclusion governance bodies and executives.

Shaping a place at the table – the Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion Forum

The Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion (CDSI) Forum, listed on the calendar of events for AALL (Figure 1), was held at the University of Wollongong in 2011. We conceptualised the event as a way of showcasing ALL work as it relates to social inclusion to the broader university community, and as an opportunity for academic and professional staff to critically reflect on the debates, stories, practices and policy surround the 'new' social inclusion agenda in higher education. We actively opened up the event to those outside of ALL. This was done by advertising within our own universities (the organising committee included ALL educators from the University of Wollongong, The University of New England, The University of Sydney, The University of Technology, Sydney and the Australian National University). We also advertised nationally through the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia (HERDSA), the Unilearn discussion list, the AALL membership list, the AALL website (<http://aall.org.au>), the Australian Learning and Teaching Council site (now The Office of Learning and Teaching), and the Equity 101 website

(<http://www.equity101.info/content/welcome-equity101>). Equity 101 was set up by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education to support collegial networks and locate information and scholarship related to social inclusion, widening participation and student equity issues. Figure 2 shows the CDSI Forum listed on the Equity 101 webpage.

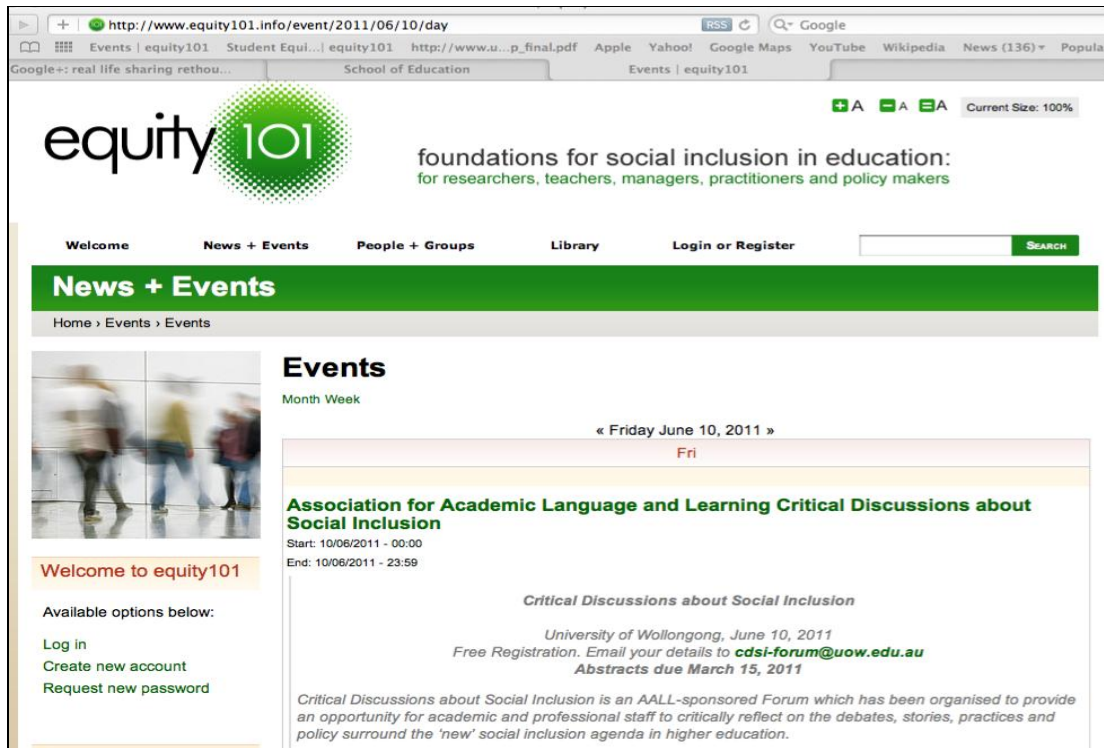


Figure 2. CDSI listed on Equity 101 website

The CDSI Forum was initially funded by a \$4000 targeted event grant from AALL but as the program for the Forum took shape, the University of Wollongong decided to promote the Forum as a strategic priority and offered additional funding. Information about the Forum, speakers and program, and subsequent audio-recordings of the sessions are housed on the University of Wollongong's Focus on Teaching website (<http://focusonteaching.uow.edu.au/events/cdsi/index.html>).

The CDSI was a success in many ways. It attracted over 100 participants; the majority of whom came from NSW city and regional areas but also quite a number of participants and presenters came from interstate and one participant from New Zealand. Two high profile speakers took up our invitation to speak at the CDSI Forum. Professor Alison Lee, Director, *Centre for Research in Learning and Change* (CRLC), University of Technology, Sydney developed an argument for a critical scholarship of curriculum in higher education to consider the relationship between student equity and conceptions of the future of the university; and Professor Martin Nakata, Director of *Nura Gili*, University of New South Wales, examined the complexities of the cultural interface for

indigenous students in higher education. The other sessions involved speakers from the ALL field and beyond. Figure 3 contains the program and, as a consequence of the program design and the aims of the CDSI Forum, a number of future research connections were forged during the day. The feedback that we had during the day and afterwards via an on-line evaluation survey was overwhelming positive. Currently, we are working on a special edition of the Journal for Academic Language and Learning based on the CDSI Forum.

8.30 Registration in Foyer, Building 20			
9.00	Welcome 20.4	Welcome to Country, Aunty Barbara Nicholson DVC (Academic) Professor Rob Castle	
9.10	Critical perspectives: Invited speakers 20.4	<i>The cultural interface</i> Professor Martin Nakata, University of New South Wales <i>Developing a critical scholarship of curriculum in higher education</i> Professor Allison Lee, University of Technology, Sydney	
10.40 Morning tea			
11.00	Critical perspectives: Framing inclusion 20.4	<i>Giving voice to valuing difference</i> Fran Gaynor, Macquarie University <i>Effective university teaching and student success: Views of Australian university students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds</i> Marcia Devlin, Deakin University <i>'Doing' social inclusion: measuring what matters?</i> Lynne Keevers, University of Wollongong	
12.30 Lunch			
	20.2	20.3	20.4
1.20 – 2.50 Parallel sessions	<i>"I can do it!": Access and Equity Programs Can Increase Academic Self-Efficacy</i> Chad Habel University of Adelaide	<i>Students Supporting Student Learning (SSSL) and Social Inclusion at VU – a perfect match</i> Gill Best & Briony Supple Victoria University, Melbourne	<i>Joining the sectors: Pathways for success</i> Fiona Henderson & Corinna Ridley Victoria University, Melbourne
	<i>Researching outcomes of the oldest and largest enabling program in Australia</i> James Albright, et al. University of Newcastle	<i>Walking the Talk: From Policy to Practice</i> Jeannette Stirling & Celeste Rossetto, University of Wollongong	<i>Addressing issues of social inequity arising from the 'digital divide'</i> Martin Collins, et al. University of New England
	<i>First-generation student engagement in the Faculty of Engineering</i> Brad Stappenbelt, et al. University of Wollongong	<i>Planning for social inclusion and student success: a case study of a Foundation Studies program on a regional University Campus</i> Susan R. Robinson & Sandra Walsh University of South Australia	<i>Social inclusion, graduate attributes and curriculum: what's the link?</i> Agnes Bosanquet, et al. Macquarie University
2.50 Afternoon tea			
3.10	Roundtable 20.4	Imagining research collaborations This space has been provided for individuals and groups to propose and explore possible research collaborations.	
	<i>Developing a social justice framework to ensure good practice in higher education</i> Karen Nelson & Tracy Creagh Queensland University of Technology	20.5 Professor Martin Nakata <i>The Cultural Interface as the educational space for investigating learning issues</i>	20.3 Professor Allison Lee <i>Developing a critical scholarship of curriculum in higher education</i>
			20.2 Professor Marcia Devlin <i>Conceptualising the success of university students from low socioeconomic backgrounds</i>
4.10	Where to from here? 20.4	(re)considering practice, productive sites of research and research directions	
4.30 Close			

Figure 3. Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion Forum

Reflective and reflexive moments

My description of the CDSI Forum and its outcomes sounds like a tale of redemption. We were able to create a place at the table for ALL educators that was acknowledged both within and beyond our individual institutions, by senior management and ‘those that matter’. We had, at that moment, been able to seize an opportunity to position ALL work somewhere closer to the centre. We had shifted a perception that our work sits on the periphery of the real work of universities.

We had, to return to Alison Lee and Erica McWilliam’s work, employed language to reposition our work as critical to the social inclusion agenda. But to do this once is not enough. Things go back to normal and the normal for ALL educators and our work is usually not positioned at the centre. The positions available to us in our individual institutions constrain what it is possible to do and to say in the sense that this doing and saying might be deemed recognisable. The ongoing language that we employ to describe ourselves and our work becomes, to use Lee and McWilliam’s words “scripts for self-fashioning ... and hence a strategy of disciplinary power, producing what can be and become thinkable” (p.74).

Rorty’s description of ironists as those who understand that the terms in which “they describe themselves are subject to change, [and as] always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves” (pp 73-74) leads me to the final point that I would like to make in this paper. This is that we, as ALL educators need to seize those provisional but ongoing and inevitable moments when the higher education landscape undergoes some shift or realignment and employ the language of the moment to move our work from the periphery and closer to the centre. The language that we use to describe our work and our students has real effects on who we are seen to be and what will be recognisable in what we say. Most importantly, it has real effects on the ways in which the students that we work with are understood within our institutions.

A provisional conclusion

Language plays an important role in identity work in making visible or invisible what it is that we do and who we are seen to be. Language also offers us, however provisionally and tentatively, a tool through which to create a stance from which we might position ourselves and be positioned differently. As ALL educators in Australia and as Learning Advisors in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the national contexts within which we work provide different possibilities and different constraints. And while what we can do, what we can say and what might be heard is constrained by our institutional positioning, we nevertheless have some options to speak and do differently at precisely those times when the national contexts in which we work shift and through this shift become momentarily less stable.

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