Academic literacies and (inter)disciplinary assemblages:

Thinking through languaging in higher education

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The social role of higher education

We are "facing challenges of interconnectedness and a drift towards the privatisation, the internationalisation and the consequent Englishisation of HE – all of which may have a backsliding effect on democracy …"

(ECSPM Introductory Note)

Introduction

I am a practicing language educator, specialising in general and academic language. I have also worked as a translator.

This presentation draws on my research, but it is also responsive to questions I ask myself as an academic language teacher.

I am very interested in what language *is* and *does*, how we use it, what we accomplish by doing so, and what underpins our use of language.

Background

- Internationally, there is a pressing need for students to become literate across academic disciplines, particularly to address challenges such as environmental sustainability and health crises.

- Language education is always embedded in layered contexts, shaped by material and ideological forces.
    - Education policy
    - Language policy and planning
    - Market forces
    - Nation-building

- Academic language education is no exception to this.

- Effective communication is critical in democratic societies, and across countries and regions.

Core questions

- **Multidisciplinary communication is a form of academic *multilingualism***

  - How can we prepare students to become active negotiators of information in all its forms and shapes?

  - How might the *assemblage* assist us to think through this question, to understand how language and information manifest at the interface of many factors?

  - Are we always able to communicate across disciplines? Or are we speaking different languages?

Higher education: Internationalised, Englishised and massified

- Globally, higher education has undergone significant changes.

- Efforts to internationalise and attract a larger number of students have seen changes to the student body. Student-teacher ratios have shifted.

- Languages of instruction have changed, including increased EMI. CLIL at the secondary level mirrors this.

- The need to prepare work-ready graduates has shaped teaching.

- The teaching of communication skills – which benefits *all* students – has become a need and a standard practice (Baik & Greig, 2009; Larcombe & Malkin, 2008; Thies, 2012).

- This is the responsibility of various professionals: academic language and learning advisors, as well as academic staff. I'll refer to them as *academic language educators*.

Developing academic literacies

- The 'bolt on' approach to academic language development has long been considered problematic (Wingate, 2006), although it is still quite common.

- The **embedded approach** enjoys support:
  - This involves students learning to communicate *about* disciplinary matters of concern while immersed in the study of these, shaped by the **epistemic and ontological parameters** which are particular to **disciplines**.
  - It can be practiced in various ways, but the core characteristic is that communication is always **embedded in context**.

- Academic litera*cies* in the plural

The pluralisation of 'literacies' signals an interest in academic reading and writing not only as **diverse and situated** in specific disciplinary contexts, but also as ideologically shaped, reflecting institutional structures and relations of power.

This ideological concern gives rise to a transformative agenda encompassing individual writers, the conventions and practices of the academy, and the wider social relations in which all are embedded.

(Lillis & Tuck, 2016, p. 30)

Learning *across* disciplines

- Learning across disciplines is becoming increasingly common, even at undergraduate level.
- There is recognition that many **complex problems need multiple perspectives** to understand and address them, and that learners will likely face the need to negotiate information from a range of sources and fields once they graduate.
  - *Multidisciplinarity* refers to the placing side by side of insights from more than one discipline
  - *Transdisciplinarity* involves the integration of insights from beyond the academy
  - *Interdisciplinarity* studies complex problems through drawing on and integrating multiple disciplinary insights (Repko & Szostak, 2017, pp. 23-27)

"Of course, you can argue that the theoretical and methodological limits of a particular discipline are too restrictively drawn, too remote to provide insights of any significance. But limitation there must be. No limitation, no insights." (Widdowson, 2018, p. 137)

From an academic language education standpoint, how can we theorise communication across and between disciplines?

Academic literacies across and between disciplines

How might we cultivate literacies ranging across **multiple disciplines** of study?

What does the discipline understand about the **world**? What are its ontological parameters?

What does the discipline accept about **knowledge/s**? What are its epistemological parameters?

What does the discipline accept about **evidence**?

What does the discipline accept about **ethics** and **responsibility**?

What does the discipline accept about **language** and **communication**?

What are disciplinary attitudes to **deviations** from these positions?

Who are key **actors** within the discipline?

Are there **movements, turns or schools** *within* the discipline that learners need to be aware of?

An assemblage lens

- The assemblage "consists of multiple, heterogeneous parts linked together to form a whole" (Müller, 2015, p. 28). Assemblages are neither organic unities nor combinations of their components; they produce and delimit possibilities for "becoming", and they channel *affect* in particular ways (Fox & Alldred, 2013; Gurney & Demuro, 2022).

- "*Agencement* designates the priority of neither the state of affairs nor the statement but of their connection, which implies the production of a sense that exceeds them and of which, transformed, they now form parts" (Phillips, 2006, p. 108)

- The emphasis here is not so much on what things *are*, but on the **relations** that produce capacities (Fox & Alldred, 2013).

An assemblage lens

- The focus is on the capacity of the assemblage to channel affect and on the *relations* between its components. These are dynamic.
- The assemblage as analytical lens been taken up in critical posthumanist and new materialist research, including in education and applied linguistics.
  - As a relevant example of disciplinary differences in the lives of terms, 'assemblage' is *not* used in this way in other fields, such as geology.
- Deleuze and Guattari's work is strongly grounded in Spinozist philosophy and ethics.

Discipline and language as assemblage

Assemblage thinking gives a particular ontological frame to disciplines *and* language, as:

- Relational, including the *learner*

- In states of becoming

- Material and immaterial, *mattered* and *practiced*

- Diverging from, and revisiting, what has been done before: non-linearity

- Problematising the separation of *what* is said and *how* it is said
    - "the abstract machine of language is not universal, or even general, but singular; it is not actual, but virtual-real; it has, not invariable or obligatory rules, but optional rules that ceaselessly vary with the variation itself, *as in a game in which each move changes the rules*." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 100, emphasis added)

Disciplinary assemblages

- Students
- Academics
- Institutions
- Journals
- Publishers
- Laboratories
- Classrooms
- Conferences
- Libraries
- Articles
- Books
- Internet
- Social media
- News media
- Geopolitics
- Sociocultural practices
- Languages and languaging
- Practices of translation
- Ideologies
- Histories
- Methodologies
- Paradigms
- Turns
- Schools
- Technologies (computers, phones)
- Artificial intelligence
- *and more*

Mobilising the assemblage analytically

(a) ***How it came to be****:* to take a situation or something (e.g., an academic article, an institutional system) and ask about the mix of relations and affects that *produced* it.

(b) ***How it might affect****:* to examine an assemblage (such as a classroom) and ask what capacities and desires it may *produce*.

(Fox & Alldred, 2013, p. 778, drawing on Deleuze & Guattari, 1984)

How do we prepare learners to encounter and respond to knowledge across disciplines?

How do we encourage learners' awareness of the complexities inherent in how claims are made – claims of knowing, being, doing, and communicating – across language/s and discipline/s?

Thinking through challenges for academic language educators

- Navigating disciplines
- Epistemic trespassing
- Bridging disciplinary disjunctures

Can we employ the assemblage to think through these?

- An attempt to capture complexity

I'm going to provide examples and pose questions.

Navigating disciplines

- Navigating disciplines as an educator can be challenging, let alone for learners.

- When we read the work of Karen Barad, for instance, to what extent are we expected to bring knowledge of quantum physics *or* the humanities?

- Much work in education is premised on diverse foundations in psychology, social sciences and philosophy. How should we understand these foundations in order to take a position – for instance, on behaviourism or social constructivism?

  - Without understanding the foundations, how do we negotiate this work?

- The issue of *access:* how do we find, read, uncover this work in the first place? What is the trajectory of our reading and knowledge (our map)?

  - How did the assemblage come to be – and how might it shape interactions with future assemblages?

  - The disciplinary 'map' that students bring to learning is different for each

Epistemic trespassing? Experts acting ethically

- We're often confronted with seemingly authoritative statements issued by experts and non-experts. Recognising expertise is critically important, but it can also be very difficult, particularly for those new to a field (i.e., students).

- Epistemic trespassing may (not) be benevolent.

- "Epistemic trespassing worries me primarily because it can affect others. Casting doubt on the link between cancer and tobacco or on global warming when you're not an expert on these issues [...] strikes me as deeply wrong and worrisome precisely because it impacts others" (DiPaolo, 2022, p. 230)

- *What assemblages give rise to this?*

Expert assemblage

An expert with a network of thousands of followers publishes a message online during the lead-up to an election. The message is about a party's policy.

- The expert is not an authority on the policy. They do, however, have a prestigious title and position. They are well known by the public. Their reach – thousands of followers – is premised on their actual expertise.

- They use language that is confident and convincing (prestigious, standardised). They know how to *make claims.* They know how to use online platforms, which incentivise the making of such claims.

- Their published message, emerging from a particular assemblage, enters multitudinous others, producing *affect* that may shape or change others' practices. Will the audience now vote for this party? Will they continue to trust the expert? Will their views change?

- *What if the expert is not human? How does AI software enter and change the assemblage? There is no 'intention', but there is affect.*

Disciplinary disjunctures – working with (in)compatibilities

- Mol (2013, p. 381) asks how we might negotiate different versions of reality: "Which version might be better to live with? Which worse? How, and for whom?"
  - Disciplines may understand the world very differently. This not just a question of 'measuring' or analysing, but what we think we are talking about.
  - **Are we actually talking about the same things?**
  - Which version may be more apt to meet goals?
- For academic language educators, this is the iceberg underneath the water: that language cannot be separated from disciplinary uses and manifestations, and these are grounded in disparate foundations and characterised by divergent goals.
  - It's not simply about moving across disciplines but appreciating where there is (in)compatibility. *How did the assemblages come to be, and how might they channel affect?*

This all involves epistemic and ontological considerations, as well as axiology (ethics and values).

The professional context: Neoliberal pressures

- Academic language educators face pressures to "fix" students' language problems

- Marketing of degrees that are multidisciplinary

- This work is often done under time pressure and with little understanding of what their work or role entails. These challenges are widely established in the literature, and in my own work in Australia and New Zealand (see Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2022; Gurney & Grossi, 2019, 2021; Grossi & Gurney, 2020).

- Often there is a lack of understanding of what academic language educators *do*, what they *can do* with the opportunities provided, and *how* they do it.

Conclusion: Thinking through languaging in higher education?

- While problematising the separation of language and content is critical and comprehensive, educators are confronted with complex questions.
  - How do we attend to the complexities presented by overlapping disciplinary assemblages?
- There is a place for explicit discussion of these matters in teaching and curriculum design.
- Multidisciplinarity is growing in research *and* teaching (see Carruthers & Fisher, 2020). Academic multilingualism must accompany this.
- Can we navigate commonalities and disjunctures to think towards common goals? Or are we all speaking different languages?

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