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A bluffer's guide to academic literacies: can we communicate a complex set of ideas in simpler terms?

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Abstract

I have often felt sceptical about the idea of academic literacies (AL), which presents a highly influential account of 'how students learn to write at university' (Lea and Street, 1998). AL theory has had a significant impact on the field, but some things about it bother me. Key ideas are frequently expressed in very abstract terms (it is hard to justify this comment in an academic context, but bear with me). Research has recognised difficulties in outlining AL's core principles to students (Lea, 2016, p.91), and 'the exact nature of the relationship between [its component] approaches' (Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019). It can be hard to convert the lofty AL aims of emancipation or transformation into practice. As theories go, it clearly thinks of itself as on 'the right side of history', and perhaps it is. However, having recently spent time wrangling with AL literature, I have developed more of a (grudging) respect for its insights and possible uses in practice. Drawing on theoretical writing and case studies of AL in use, this session aimed to identify the AL insights which are most relevant for the day-to-day practice of Learning Developers and present them in more concrete terms. In doing so, I hope to make this theory 'meaningful, relevant and accessible to all' (for Hockings' definition of 'inclusive', see Hockings, 2010, p.1). After brief comments on its context and aims, I presented a short series of my 'translations' from AL into everyday English for use in everyday Learning Development practice.

Keywords: academic literacies; inclusivity and accessibility; theory-practice gap; concrete application.

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Community response

White's presentation delved into both the complexities and practical applications of academic literacies (AL), highlighting how this concept attempts to reshape students' approaches to academic writing. By translating abstract concepts into concrete strategies, the discussion illuminated the potential of AL to enhance Learning Development, though it also underscored the ongoing challenge of bridging the gap between theory and practice. The lively exchange of comments and questions from participants demonstrated that while AL's ideals of emancipation and transformation may seem lofty, they inspire critical thinking and dialogue about inclusivity and accessibility in educational practices.

Figure 1: The picture illustrates how 'texts' can be inaccessible or seem 'alien' to students new to universities and research. 'Rudolf von Laban (1879−1958) and his Labanotation signs', source: Wikipedia, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Labanotation (Accessed: 7 July 2024).
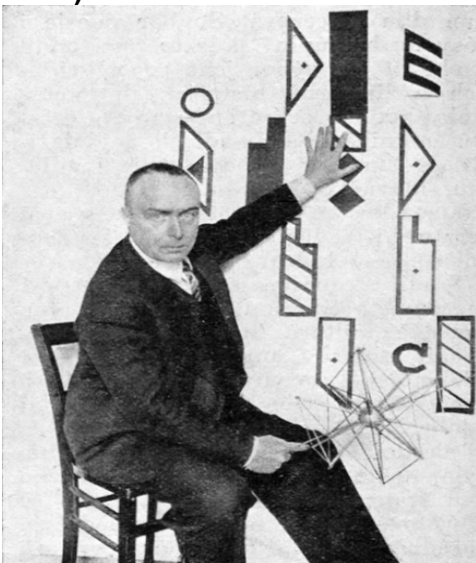
White highlighted AL's contribution to LD as resisting a deficit approach and demystifying the nature of the tools, using Figure 1 to provoke thinking and to help practitioners see the complexity of what may be tacit knowledge to them. He then suggested exploring new readings and questioning current practices, particularly regarding the balance between meeting assessment criteria and fostering transformative learning. The attendees of the session noted the value of continuous learning, even for experienced professionals. One Learning Developer observed:

> While I may, on paper, be 'experienced', I found there was plenty within this talk to take away. I have new readings to explore plus questions to ponder with my team: 'Do we get the students to do the "right thing", as in to answer in terms of the learning outcomes and marking criteria, or should we be more transformative and not push for adaptive [sic] when working with students?' I also have a stick figure representing Judge Judy in my notebook and realise I have given her a mini skirt! I also have a note to myself to ask Gen AI how to complete the marshmallow tower — I am going to do that right now! Thank you for pushing me out of my comfort zone with this theoretical take.

The second reflection focused on the limitations and applications of academic literacies in Learning Development work. Acknowledging the appeal of AL, the participant recognised its origins as a critique rather than a pedagogical tool. The reflection emphasises the challenges in translating AL principles to LD practice, given the varied contexts and agency levels of LD professionals:

> I really enjoyed this session; it was thought-provoking and got us all thinking and challenging what has come to be considered one of the key theoretical perspectives of LD work. While AL really appeals to me due to my disciplinary background, I understand that it has potential limitations, especially when it comes to its application to practice. Academic literacies was intended as a critique to a generalist, study-skills understanding of writing education in HE (with its remedial and deficit implications), not a pedagogical tool, hence the issues we have when it comes to applying this theoretical lens to practice. Also, AL was written by academic colleagues for academic colleagues (in a traditional sense) or what Lillis (2019) calls 'teacher-researcher', not Learning Developers. What this means is that LD is still trying to figure out how to translate the principles of academic literacies to what we do, which as we know, may vary significantly depending on where we are located and the degrees of agency this affords us. I therefore suggest that despite our commitment to critical approaches, as per the ALDinHE values, there is still scope to incorporate other value-based ways to practise LD beyond this theoretical approach. I am a firm believer that this field's theoretical underpinnings can be inclusive of academic literacies and of course other approaches which can help us work alongside students to help them navigate the nebulous world of HE conventions.

Both reflections suggest an openness to exploring diverse approaches and theoretical perspectives in LD work, beyond just academic literacies.

Next steps and additional questions

While many questions have already been asked in the scholarship about academic literacies, it seems that quite a few still remain:

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- Given the origins of academic literacies as a critique rather than a pedagogical tool, what steps can be taken to develop more practice-oriented theoretical frameworks specifically for LD work?
- What other theoretical approaches or frameworks could effectively complement academic literacies in informing LD practice, and how might these be integrated?
- How might the field of Learning Development evolve its own theoretical underpinnings that are more directly applicable to its unique position and practices within higher education?

Author's reflection

The first comment above gets to a difficult issue in using AL in LD. How far should an LD 'push' a transformative agenda which encourages students to challenge conventions and communication practices when working with students? Inevitably, the literature suggests there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and instead that we should balance needs of students, context et cetera. I am glad they found inspiration from the Judge Judy picture but am genuinely baffled by the marshmallow tower thing!

Responding to the second set of comments, I am glad that the session was thought-provoking and certainly agree that AL contributes valuable ideas to the domain of Learning Development. I hope that the session contributes something to the work of LDs in helping students navigate higher education as they mention. Like the commenter, I have also read that AL was never intended as a pedagogy — a claim complicated by Lea's (2004) paper on 'Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design'. I find the defence of AL's complexity as written by and for academics difficult to fully accept, given that AL criticises academic communication more broadly for being inaccessible (see further comment below), yet AL itself seems inaccessible to many.

As a 'bluffer's guide', my presentation aimed to explore simpler ways of understanding or communicating AL theory, so I was surprised and quite wrong-footed to see many very experienced LD practitioners joining the session. As my abstract indicates, I find AL quite difficult to grasp at times, so this was an exercise in grappling with what I find to be a slippery concept. Discussions in my session and in similar sessions (e.g. Paul Chin's

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session on research into AL as a theoretical underpinning for LD) indicate that there is definitely a gap for a clear articulation of AL in relation to LD, though some good work on this already exists (e.g. Wrigglesworth, 2019). This need for more clarity and debate is also supported by a recent Call for Papers in the influential journal *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives,* which recognises that key terms and ideas in such critical perspectives can at times 'remain vague and implicit and often decontextualized' (Luckett and Bhatt, 2024, n.p.). This seems ironic, as it is exactly the vague or implicit nature of disciplinary academic practices in higher education that AL theory highlights and criticises. Hopefully further discussion and the ongoing research into AL in the community will strengthen our understanding and practices in this area.

Acknowledgments

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