

How do we communicate?

John Grierson keynote transcript

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How do we communicate? is the theme of this year's Academic Language and Learning (ALL) conference. I could not think of a more pertinent question for our profession to ask. I want to explore this question a little further. What is it that we communicate? Whom do we communicate with? And how successful are we at communicating? To answer these questions, I considered four key groups of people we communicate with: students, academics, senior management, and ALL colleagues. I was particularly interested to find out how effective our communication with these groups of people is, and how we could possibly improve what and how we communicate.

HOW DO WE “ALL” COMMUNICATE – THE SURVEY

In order to address these questions, I surveyed managers, directors or coordinators of ALL units at the 38 Australian universities, in September this year. I also surveyed the members of the current Executive Committee of the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL). The survey participation rate was extraordinary: 63% of people from universities and 90% of the Executive Committee replied. The replies were extensive, thoughtful and gave a clear indication that many ALL professional believe that talking about communication is an important phase in the development of the ALL profession. I would like to share with you what they said.

I have organised the survey responses as follows. The four main sections are: communicating 1) with students; 2) with academics; 3) with senior management and 4) within the ALL profession. Within each section I asked the same 3 questions: what do we communicate, how do we do this and how successful are we? I selected among all the responses to the survey those that were most frequent and/or those which raised or addressed particular issues. They are reported below either verbatim or in summarised/paraphrased form.

1. Communicating with students.

Our most important message to students is that “we exist”, that “we are not remedial, that we do make a difference” and that “it is important to develop good literacy skills which go beyond university”. We need to keep telling students that improving their academic writing skills is “not going to happen in five minutes”, that they “must give themselves time, persist, commit and be proactive”. We keep reminding them to “use us, and that we are here to help them”. Ultimately, students need to know that “mastering many different discourses is extremely empowering”.

We mainly communicate with students through: orientations, lectures, websites, posters, podcasts, emails, and learning guides. Many of us also communicate with students “via academics”. We tell “people in faculties to promote us among the students, and encourage them to use us”. We also communicate through student associations and other student services. Some of us do it “through feedback on assignments”, and by including information about ALL services in course outlines. We communicate “repeatedly, because students go through their degree, then we have to do it over and

over again". Some of us think that "we're not doing it all that well"; some even believe that "we're doing it quite poorly".

How effective is our communication with students? "It works, but, there are so many of them, so few of us". Considering there are an estimated 400 ALL professionals servicing over one million students of which over one quarter are international students, I believe we are doing a pretty hefty job. On average, this is a ratio of 2,500 university students to one ALL professional. The job is not easy as "there are too many campuses for one person ... I'm across six campuses. There are only five days in a week". Another is saying "Yes, it works but only when it is integrated into disciplines", or, "it works, because the stats on the computer say yes". "Our message is always positive, therefore it works". Others are less positive: "No, it is not working at all", or "I don't know: by the time I get to the sixth campus I don't know what has happened at the first campus." "For me it's all hit and miss: I rarely see a final result". This is a recurring theme, and one of the features of the ALL profession: we help students, and, unlike people in faculties, we do not get students returning to tell us whether they have passed or failed. "At my university", says one, "it's working too well. I can't cope with demand. I've introduced ALL triage strategies ..."

2. Communicating with academics.

Our most important message to academics is that ALL is "central to tertiary learning, and that it is our joint responsibility", and also that "ALL is integral to disciplinary content, and cannot be taught in isolation". This last comment came through very strongly and it reminds me of the theme of the very first ALL here at La Trobe in 1994: 'Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines'. We have come a long way and have made considerable achievements. We also tell academics that "we are ALL experts, not proof-reading, remedial, fix-it, grammar teachers" and remind them that "genres are specialised: writing a report in science is quite different from writing a critical analytical review in social science courses. These genres can be learnt, but not in a two week workshop".

How do we communicate with academics? The most common strategy seems to be "infiltration of formal committees, and simultaneously acting through informal networks". Many of us also communicate with academics "through staff inductions, newsletters, emails, reports to faculties and departments". Communication networks are developed "through collaborative curriculum development and/or research projects as well as through publications. Increasingly we are infiltrating, or working in, faculties, to the point where many of us now publish with people in faculties, and in their journals". "We encourage them to talk about ALL". At a recent Teaching & Learning forum at UTS, we suggested that faculty rather than ALL staff talk about collaborative ALL projects.

Communicating with academics is largely effective, but "there's a constant need to reaffirm, and an ongoing battle to remind people what we do". At some universities "there are pockets of resistance, as well as pockets of success, depending on who you work with". One person says "I'm a lone voice on the 'x' campus." "Increasing casualisation of academic jobs is a problem, not only in the ALL profession, but also in faculties". "As our workloads increase, people tend to disengage, because it's too time-consuming". "ALL is still seen as marginal in many cases", and "it seems as if we are preaching to the converted". "We are exploited by academics: they think that we will rewrite their courses, look after their students and help with their marking". "The success of working with academics depends on the microclimate at a faculty or departmental level, and how teaching and learning is viewed". "There are too many staff changes: you start working with somebody, and the

following semester they are on study leave ...". Many of us agree that "working collaboratively is the key".

3. Communicating with senior university management.

The strongest message we try to convey to senior university managers is that "ALL is integral to transition, early intervention, retention, and the whole student learning experience ... and the integral nature of our work at an institutional level needs to be recognised". We tell managers to "listen to us, and to heed our advice" and that ALL is a discipline: we're not just grammar teachers. In fact, we're not grammar teachers". We also tell them about "the increasing nexus between teaching and learning and research" and that ALL is "developmental, complex, multi-faceted and requires appropriate resources: every student needs ALL development, not just international students". "It is the moral and ethical duty of care of an institution to look after its students" and "good ALL practices add value to the university and increase its reputation".

How do we communicate with senior management? We do it mainly through "evidence of achievements, reports with stats and lots of dot points". We also do it through "meetings with Pro Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, and Deans". "We get onto senior committees and strategic planning maps". "We participate increasingly in teaching and learning forums, and in collaborative policy development projects". "Sometimes, we use help lines and phone Alex or other ALL colleagues, for advice." "We get other senior staff to champion our role". "If you manage to work your way up through a faculty, talking to staff in the faculty can be very productive. They then talk to their Dean, and the Dean encourages the Vice Chancellor to put more funding into ALL to help international students". In some cases, "we haven't been able to communicate with senior management". "We do it with difficulty; it's hard to keep a foot in the door". "Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors play musical chairs".

How effective is our communication with senior managers?

In some cases our message is being heard: In opening this conference, Professor Paul Johnson, Vice Chancellor of La Trobe University referred to ALL professionals as the "experts", a clear acknowledgement of our role. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and many feel that attempting to communicate with senior managers is like "bashing one's head against a brick wall". Others reply that "our agenda contradicts the bean counters' agenda". "I can't say it's been effective at my institution, as ALL staff have just been demoted from HEW 8 to HEW 7", or "we have been reclassified from academic to general staff and we have been offered a position in the library." At another university, "my communication worked brilliantly until we got a new Pro Vice Chancellor, who has other priorities, and hasn't had time to look up and see that we exist." Some say that managers "pay lip service to what we do". "There are no guarantees: they hear us, but they ignore what we say".

4. Communicating with ALL colleagues

The most important message we communicate to each other is that, if we do not want to be seen as the 'grammar teachers', we "need to redefine our boundaries and evaluate our practices". How do we really know that what we are doing is positive, constructive, and works well? "It is vital that we make research much more visible". Almost everybody who replied to the survey mentioned research and how we must make it a priority to inform our practice. We also "must focus on communicating and sharing in order to reduce isolation". "We must agree on common terminology". "Benchmarking is important"; seeing what other institutions are doing and how our institutional practices "compare with what is happening across Australia and overseas". "We need to collaborate, share and communicate nationally and internationally". "We must work on raising the profile and career opportunities of our

field” and, “one of the most important messages we have to communicate is to keep a focus on students amid political turmoil. We must keep our heads above water”.

We communicate with ALL colleagues, “primarily through campus, university and state-wide ALL meetings, team planning meetings, working parties with specific foci, as well as through the *AALL forum* and *Unilearn*”. The range of papers, forums and workshops at this conference is a prime example of how we communicate. “We communicate it through the AALL conference and, most importantly, other disciplines’ conferences and publications”.

Does communicating with ALL colleagues work? “To a certain extent, it does, because it’s easier to focus on a small, local picture, whether it is at an institutional or at a state level”. Some think that “we need to question ingrained assumptions about ourselves and about how we work a little more” and that “some resistance within our ranks needs to be challenged”. Others believe “it works, but requires a lot of schmoozing” and that “changes are gradual and slow”. “It is working, but it takes a lot of energy, and we have the students to look after as well”. “Yes, in my case it’s working: I haven’t said the word *‘marginalised’* for quite a while”. It works if “we are motivated, excited and committed”. We see the evidence in this lecture theatre today: 220 conference participants, the largest ALL conference to date. “It’s working well, we’ve got a growing number of AALL members”. The association now has over 170 members and 110 of them are attending this conference. That’s fabulous? “We’re getting to be very powerful”.

So what, then, are the challenges the ALL profession faces: the **messages** we communicate; the communication **strategies** we use or **other challenges**?

Our **message** is stronger and clearer than ever. We excel at what we do. We know this because that is what students and academics tell us: ALL is everyone’s responsibility: students, academics and institutions. We agree that ALL works best when it is developed and integrated within discipline content, through the curriculum, professional development and research. But we do need to agree on what this means. And this is what we are discussing at this conference over the next two days.

We also need to look more closely at our communication **strategies**. We need to confirm our identity as a professional group and discipline. We have come a long way since the 2001 ALL conference at Wollongong University, with the theme ‘Changing identities’. Let us agree to call ourselves **Academic Language and Learning** professionals, advisors, lecturers, staff ... Universal branding and naming are important. Recently marketers surveyed children in the US and asked them to taste fruit and vegetables presented in plain paper bags and in bags with the MacDonald label. The vast majority of kids preferred the apples and carrots in the MacDonald bag, even though all fruit and vegetables came from the same source. This rationale can be applied to the ALL profession, nationally and, possibly, internationally. At my institution, I always refer to the colleagues at our centre as ALL lecturers.

As a profession, we are represented by the **Association for Academic Language and Learning**. Let’s use the association as a hub to communicate with each other, and with others, nationally and internationally.

We also need to continue communicating with students by focusing on process and outcomes; with academics by focusing on collaboration and the ‘colonisation’ of disciplines through curriculum changes, research and publications.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

In order to address some of the challenges we face at the institutional level, I would like to present a model of systemic **institutional survival strategy**, consisting of intervention strategies at several levels: policy development, curriculum development, professional development, faculty level provision, individual assistance and diagnostic assessment.

At the **policy development** level, we need to make ourselves known as our institutions' experts on every ALL matter. To achieve this we need to be represented on as many senior committees, at an institutional and faculty level, as we can afford. By afford I mean selecting as many committees that are relevant to teaching and learning matters as our timetables allow us to attend.

Secondly, at the **curriculum development** level, we can make an impact by looking out for major course reviews and offering to collaborate on subject reviews, with an aim to integrate ALL in disciplines.

Thirdly, we can offer our assistance at the **professional development** level. This is best done, at least initially, informally, through staff meetings where we can offer advice on matters such as the relationship between curriculum, assessment and language competence.

Fourthly, **ALL provision in faculties** needs to be provided at the same time as we address policy, curriculum and professional development issues: we gradually need to encourage faculties to move from 'discipline flavoured' supplementary workshops to fully integrating ALL across the curriculum. Some generic workshops also have their place, particularly in developing students' oral competence or teaching them the mechanics of referencing and quoting. Working in faculties is increasingly challenging, as tough choices need to be made frequently. For example, we may have to choose between continuing to offer workshops attended by small numbers of students and collaborating in major course curriculum reviews, at the expense of the former. I suggest we choose the latter as it is more sustainable in the long term.

Individual assistance in faculties, the fifth level of institutional intervention, is very important. By definition, individual student consultations are contextualised and integrated, as student assignments are always discipline specific. There is, however, enormous pressure from bean counters to reduce individual assistance, as this is seen to be (and is) the most expensive part of what we do. However, we need to resist this pressure at all costs. Individual assistance is the ALL thermometer, giving us insight into the writing practices and standards of disciplines.

Finally, institutions are pressured by quality agencies like AUQA as well as by employers to demonstrate levels of university graduates' language competence. ALL professionals have experience in conducting **diagnostic language assessments**, which can be completed post enrolment. Students can then be referred to discipline integrated workshops to address their remedial or developmental ALL needs.

The above six levels of institutional intervention need to be supported by thorough systems of reporting, and underpinned by research practices and publications.

SECTOR WIDE CHALLENGES

In addition to the challenges we face at the institutional level, we also need to keep track of sector wide challenges, such as the widely differing working conditions and status of ALL professionals. For

example, yesterday's *Higher Education* supplement of *The Australian* newspaper advertised two ALL positions, one at Charles Sturt University and the other at the Australian National University. While both position descriptions were similar, the salary of the former was in the \$44,000 to \$59,000 p.a. range and the latter was in the \$69,000 to \$76,000 range. Both positions had general staff status. At over 60% of Australian universities, staff are employed as academics, mainly at lecturer B level, earning approximately \$70,000 to \$83,000 p.a., with Senior Lecturers and Associate Professors earning considerably more.

Through increased networking and communicating, continual evaluating and benchmarking of our practices, and the support of AALL, we plan to lobby senior university managers to recognise the value of our work more equitably.

On the political scene it is too early to predict what effect the recently elected Labor government will have on the university sector: let's remain alert, but not alarmed.

And finally, one of the main challenges we continually face is balancing the resource limitations imposed on us by our respective universities against the ever growing ALL needs of local and international students.

... but together we can AALL do it!

Thank you.

(keynote transcribed by Poppy Burnett)