

Chapter 9

Talk it up? Do language and learning advisors have a role in the development of spoken ‘literacy’?

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To judge from recent collections of conference proceedings, language and learning advisors focus primarily on development of student writing and study skills. This paper considers the need for a greater emphasis on spoken language, in particular interactive speaking, within the scope of learning development work. Reflecting on a teaching experience in which communication challenges for students were exposed, I argue that there are sound reasons for seeking opportunities to work in collaboration with faculty colleagues to develop spoken forms of academic literacies.

Introduction

For vocationally-focused disciplines, as Clark (2008) points out in relation to nurse educators, there is a balancing act for both lecturers and for students in terms of the tension between

E. Manalo, J. Bartlett-Trafford, & S. Crozier (Eds.): *Walking a tightrope – the balancing act of learning advising: Refereed proceedings of the 2007 Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ) Conference*, pp. 140-153, 2008.
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attending to the development of academic skills and developing as professionals in the discipline. Attention to academic and workplace needs also presents a tension for language and learning – one which I suggest we currently, and understandably, resolve in favour of generic and discipline-embedded academic literacy skills.

To date most of my centre's work with students on spoken language has involved preparation for oral presentations. Exposure to undergraduate course outlines and prescriptions at my institution suggests that oral presentations, whether individual or group projects, are currently the most common form of spoken assessment. Such presentations are undoubtedly stressful and, regardless of their course weighting, a high stakes task for students, because of the public context in which they usually occur. At the same time, however, because they are 'monologic communication' (Haley & Austin, 2004), they are a more controllable and predictable form of spoken activity than many, in the sense that presenters can prepare content and rehearse delivery. Interactive speaking, as demanded by the less formal crit sessions described below, and by group and team work, involves a degree of unpredictability and makes more demands on sociolinguistic and cultural knowledge (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Haley & Austin, 2004). Interactive communication is also much more commonly used in both academic and working life than oral presentation.

Therefore it may be worthwhile to broaden our focus to include work on discipline specific forms of spoken communication, particularly those involving interactive speaking skills. In this paper I describe a teaching experience and reflect on it to make explicit some issues in the development of spoken language skills as a component of the work of language and learning advisors. This reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) mirrors the actual course of events in which I needed to promptly respond to a lecturer request, and only later had time to consider the wider issues which were involved.

Background

Students on the Bachelor of Architecture at my institution are required to present their practical studio-based work at regular assessed 'crit sessions'. A crit session is a discussion of each student's work, usually in response to a given brief, as it has evolved over a number of weeks, and as presented in the form of models and drawings. The work of all class members is displayed in a classroom and then viewed and critiqued by lecturers, other students and invited guests, usually practising architects or designers. Each student is expected to speak briefly about his/her work, and then engage in discussion in response to comments and questions. As the designated language and learning advisor for the School of Architecture, I was contacted by the course coordinator of Year 1 and asked to run some workshop sessions for students who were having difficulties with the spoken aspects of crit sessions. The coordinator explained that the problems mainly occurred for English as an additional language (EAL) students.

I had the chance to discuss the format of crit sessions with the coordinator and then to attend two similar sessions at which second year students were presenting work. This was invaluable for observing the process, taking notes on language used, and witnessing the discussion between lecturers and students. I noticed that even in second year, students were reluctant to critique each other's work and most interaction occurred between the assessors and each presenting student in turn. It was clear from this observation that many students were having difficulty engaging in discussion of the practical and conceptual aspects of their work. As I saw it, students had understandably been focussed on the realisation of their design work rather than on the need to explicate it to others. Lecturers had perhaps assumed that talking about architecture would be more straightforward for most students than the practice of architecture itself. Unsurprisingly these problems were not confined to EAL students in the second year group.

Process

Following this observation I set up a series of 4 voluntary interactive workshop sessions which the coordinator advertised, on my recommendation, to all students in Year 1. The workshops are briefly outlined below:

Workshop 1: We discussed the students' first critique experience. What had gone well? What challenges had they experienced? What did they think the lecturers and external guests were expecting to hear from them? How could they prepare for the second critique? While emphasising there was no 'one-size-fits-all' pattern for the critiques, we jointly made a list of likely topics and key words which students could refer to in preparing for crit sessions.

Workshop 2: In response to concerns expressed at session 1, I facilitated a more detailed discussion on the purpose of crit sessions. Assuming that they are designed as a learning experience, as well as an assessment, how might students make this work for them? They began preparation for the second critique by discussing concept drawings with another student. We used these to predict questions that might be asked, and look at ways of either pre-empting or fielding potentially difficult questions.

Workshop 3: I took along an architectural model borrowed from the course coordinator. I asked students to study the model and prepare questions they could ask the architect. They then changed roles and as the architect, prepared possible responses to these questions. We discussed learning from the activity and ways they could apply this to their own crit preparation.

Workshop 4: This was set up as a rehearsal opportunity for the second assessed critique. Students brought work that was close to completion, displayed it and prepared to talk about it. They questioned each other on aspects of the work, as they thought lecturers might. They reflected on each other's responses to critique.

A follow up step was an email to staff and Architecture students from Years 4 and 5, asking for their experiences in coping with crit sessions and advice they could give to current and future first years. The responses to these questions were circulated to both lecturers and students.

Observations

Clearly there are benefits to crit sessions as a learning activity, whether assessed or not. In involving students in crit sessions, lecturers are providing opportunities for students to achieve graduate capabilities or attributes. Barnett (1994) critically discusses the change in agenda of providers and consumers of higher education from a focus on disciplinary knowledge to the provision of transferable skills and preparation for employment. While a strong disciplinary focus is still the priority, my institution like many others has graduate capability statements which include the ability to communicate orally as well as in writing. The crit session helps to develop the generic skill of speaking in a contextually embedded way. The Studio course coordinator pointed out to me as well as the students that practising architects are more likely to be orally discussing their work with colleagues and clients, and potential clients, than writing reports or essays about it. This type of critique and discussion will eventually become part of their professional repertoire.

Nineteen students attended the first workshop, 5 of whom were EAL students. In response to the questionnaire I had prepared, most students felt that they were not daunted by the presentation aspect of the crit session but rather by the unpredictable (and some claimed 'unfair') nature of the critique, and that they were expected to respond to comments and questions on the spot. Obviously crit sessions are high stakes events and only in part because they are assessed. The crit session is a public performance in front of an audience with diverse sets of prior knowledge and expectations: peers, lecturers and external guests. Unlike the time and space-

removed communication of a written assignment, for some students the affective component of a critique appeared to be much higher because of the public performance required, and the power relationships implicit in assessment undoubtedly heightened their anxiety. At the same time, precisely because it was a spoken event taking place in front of people they mostly knew, some students seemed to underrate the need to prepare and felt that they simply had to converse with lecturers and peers – and that, since it was represented in front of them in visual form, the thinking behind their work would be readily apparent to others.

In the process of eliciting topics and issues that lecturers were likely to raise in crit sessions (Session 1), I noticed that there was a general reluctance or inability to use some of the vocabulary of the discipline. Students were often comfortable discussing practical details of sites, shapes, buildings and materials but, to judge from reactions in the workshop, embarrassed about using overly technical, but also metaphorical and abstract language to link their design choices to the wider social-historical-cultural context. The fact that this apparently informal discussion required the application of analytic, cognitive and metacognitive skills to design practice had not been recognised by those students who signed up for the workshops. Also, as Chanock (2003a) reminds us, lecturers may not always acknowledge the need to scaffold all newcomers into the language and learning practices of the new discipline.

In a research study based around a group of undergraduate students of Social Practice, Nicholson (2002) discusses student discomfort in using new sociological vocabulary – the ‘fancy words’ which have only just been learned, which do not readily come to mind or roll off the tongue. Nicholson reports that a student in her group referred to this as ‘sociology as a second language’. The jargon of the discipline may sound acceptable in the mouths of experts but, picked up by self-conscious novices, it can feel pretentious and dishonest. Focusing attention on jargon can be a useful strategy both to acknowledge the power of these words to exclude and to confuse, but also to more

specifically describe key concepts. It is often not until use of such words is legitimised that students become comfortable with putting on the fancy clothes.

A key function of the workshops seemed to be that they provided a rehearsal space and normalised talk about the communication of architectural ideas. The work of Bourdieu on 'cultural capital' and 'legitimate language' (as cited in Starfield, 2001) as well as that of Lave and Wenger (1991) remind us of the importance of learners being engaged in interaction within a new discipline in order to learn about the new aspects of culture and the 'situated social practices' which occur within this field. The uncertainties and discomfort that students voiced seemed to demonstrate that "to become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old timers, and other members of the community and to information, resources and opportunities for participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.100). Over the five years of the degree students will of course have multiple opportunities to earn their membership, but for first year students some unpacking of social practices may provide a short cut. A third party, such as a learning developer, may be well placed to provide this, as those who are part of the community are often less aware of the needs of newcomers, or lack the time to attend to multiple needs. This is not to suggest that we learn these practices ourselves overnight, but rather that we can mediate between lecturers and students on the sharing of disciplinary practices, and encourage students to both notice and, as confidence and a sense of belonging develop, to question.

A further benefit of workshops which emphasised interaction is that spoken language may well function as the 'glue' binding 'discourse communities', the term used by Swales (1990) in his work on analysis of written academic genres. The crit session workshops provided opportunities to engage in embodied experience – actually having the physical experience of communicating with others, in a lower-stakes environment, and then being encouraged to reflect on the effectiveness of the interaction (Gee, n.d.). This provides chances to try on multiple

identities and may help students to move from the perspective of outsiders in the discipline to insiders. Interactive speaking provides opportunities for students to let themselves be known to others, and to learn about the perspectives of others. Over the course of the workshops it appeared that Year 1 architecture students came to see the crit sessions as less adversarial and more exploratory. They also acknowledged the benefits of joint preparation to help resolve performance anxiety.

Opportunities for language and learning advisors

Language and learning advisors could encourage lecturers to pay more attention to spoken language because of its importance to students for success on academic programmes and later in career development, particularly in some disciplines such as Nursing, Architecture, Design, Landscape Architecture, Social Practice, Business and Communication. In such programmes work placements or other forms of industry-based learning are often used as a way of socialising and/or acculturating students to the complexities of the field. A successful work placement experience may well be defined by the ability to 'read' the pragmatic information underlying spoken and unspoken messages in order to relate well to co-workers and supervisors.

Table 9.1 sets out some opportunities recently presented at my institution to provide learning development for interactive spoken language assessments.

Table 9.1. Opportunities to provide learning development for interactive spoken language assessment

<i>Interactive spoken assessment task</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Examples of key components</i>
Crit sessions	Architecture Landscape Architecture Design Construction	Presenting projects; response to briefs. Justifying decisions, referring to conceptual and theoretical concerns, responding to critique
Industry-based learning	Business	Range of workplace interactions. Negotiating, 'fitting in', managing workload
Poster presentation	Social Practice	Personal life stories Narrating, identifying patterns, drawing analogies, linking to social practice theories
Communication for clinical practice	Nursing Osteopathy	Interaction with clients and staff Assessing client needs; reassuring; confirming understandings; advocating for clients
Discussions with supervisors for postgraduate students	All Postgraduate disciplines	Exploratory talk, clarifying, negotiating, linking theory, research and practice

Particular forms of interactive spoken language which have emerged in the course of this work are:

- Exploratory talk – such as that involved in joint planning. Cazden (2001) describes this as the equivalent of first drafts in writing;

- Discussion – from informal spontaneous discussion to organised debates;
- Negotiation – resolution of problem situations at different levels of complexity;
- Instructional talk – students teaching other students or informing clients;
- Giving and responding to feedback;
- Social talk – the chat which is incidental to all of the above.

Since a number of these forms involve collaborative talk with critical thinking and problem-solving as a focus, it is easy to see how coaching and practice of speaking can be formative of skills which students may transfer to written language contexts. However while these listings draw attention to common ground, it is their realisation within the disciplinary context which is likely to be most meaningful to students.

Articulation of the nature that these forms of talk take within disciplines could be helpful to both lecturers and students. Learning advisors could assist with developing awareness of the nature of spoken genres, ways in which they can be realised and the possible concerns of the participants. As Johnson Gerson (2006) points out “to acquire the target language is to acquire discursive practices (speech genres) characteristic of a given sociocultural and institutional setting” (p.278). This is as true for students developing professional repertoires as it is for EAL students. From a practical point of view, Koester (2004) provides examples of activities, mostly based around study of transcripts, which can be used to stimulate discussion of socio-cultural features such as underlying speaker goal orientations, the use or non-use of politeness and face-saving strategies, along with the specifics of language choices and vocabulary. In a further practical text which takes an intercultural perspective, Lo Bianco (2004) presents suggestions for materials to develop awareness of language in context. His introduction emphasises the amount that language analysis can tell us about the

underlying values and attitudes of members of a professional discourse community within its cultural context.

Explicit attention to the features of interactive spoken language can occur either prior to an interactive task or as a post-task debriefing activity. The debrief has the advantage of using students' experiences and observations as a learning resource. It is important that language and learning advisors proceed from an augmentation approach (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama & Barker, 1999), rather than emphasising deficits and suggesting the need for individuals to completely overhaul their approaches to spoken interaction. As Yates (2004) points out we may be expecting too much if we hope to evaluate this work on the basis of student's use of features in spoken output. The more important concern is whether students have developed awareness of underlying as well more overt features of spoken interaction within the discipline, and are more conscious of language as a resource for choice.

While the work on crit sessions was initially prompted by concern about EAL students in the Architecture cohort, it was clear that the resulting sessions were of some benefit to all attendees. As noted above, they seemed to provide a safe rehearsal space in which students could try out their explanations of work and articulate justifications their design choices. Within the sessions at least there was effective and encouraging interaction between EAL students and English first language speakers, and it was helpful from a teaching perspective to have more confident speakers modelling some responses to tricky questions. It was also supportive for the EAL students in the group to be aware of the nervousness and vulnerability that first language speakers were experiencing, and to hear suggestions of coping strategies from peers.

In order to further this work we clearly need to consider how to work with our faculty colleagues. Chanock (2003b) outlines ways of communicating concerns to discipline lecturers and learning from their perceptions of student need. At my institution opportunities to work on interactive spoken language have

arisen in a range of ways – from approaches from individual anxious students to requests for input from lecturers, as occurred in the case outlined. It is noticeable though that requests for spoken language work often manifest, as in the example above, through concern about the perceived pronunciation and grammar deficiencies of EAL students, and requesters overlook the need for more consciously drawing attention to the contextual features and purposes of the spoken language activity to all students. Language and learning advisers may therefore need to ‘interrogate’ approaches made by lecturers, and doing so may more successfully cross the social distance between themselves and discipline lecturers which, as Chanock (2003b) points out, can make our own academic and workplace interaction less effective.

Further, it may well be the case that lecturers, having developed expertise in their field, have forgotten the experience of being a novice. Lundeberg (1987) refers to this as “the paradox of expertise” in which the skills needed by beginners in a field become less apparent to more qualified experts in the same field. Discipline experts, often employed for their professional standing, are not always best placed to articulate the micro-skills which collectively make up the high level competence they have achieved (Schön, 1983). We can see how this paradox might also apply to the skills involved in speaking and responding to an audience, as well as to disciplinary knowledge and skills. Useful advice even if given, may not be heard by anxious learners, or if heard and understood, might still not be realised in actual behaviour. In the intervention described above, it was helpful to be a novice myself in relation to crit sessions, and to tease out the skills involved through a combination of observations, quizzing lecturers and using the students themselves as informants.

An emphasis on written forms of assessment by Learning Centre staff is clearly helpful to students while they are attending the institution but may mean that academic literacy comes to be narrowly interpreted as consisting of the development of reading, research skills and writing. Enhancement of ability to

speak and listen becomes an incidental and often undervalued outcome, as for many students spoken communication can not usually be developed in a distanced, abstract, 'read all about it' way. As they develop confidence through learning activities focused around speaking, students may be more likely to take up opportunities to speak as participants in the learning community. The experience of helping students survive and thrive in crit sessions suggested to me that it should become more routine for language and learning advisers to investigate the need and opportunities for development of spoken language within our own institutions, and to engage in work both with students and colleagues in the disciplines.

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