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Association for academic language and learning

Sally Ashton-Hay
Southern Cross University

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Association for Academic Language and Learning

The Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) provides an organisational body for the community of professionals Australia-wide who work with university students to enhance their learning and academic English. Academic Language and Learning staff work with students, both local and international, at every level from first year through postgraduate.



Association for Academic Language and Learning

Report by Dr Sally Ashton-Hay

The 11th biennial conference of the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) was held at RMIT University in Melbourne from November 13-15, 2013. The conference theme was *New students, new learning: new challenges?* The sub themes covered presentations on: 1) The literacies nexus: English, Maths, Academic skills; 2) Demonstrating success; 3) Learners in Technoworld; 4) Pathways and Intersections; and 5) Peer learning. The new award-winning RMIT building (shown below) was a superb venue for the largest gathering of academic language and learning (ALL) practitioners yet. Delegates represented all states and territories in Australia as well as New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada, China, Macau, Germany, and Sri Lanka.

The AALL Conference hosted a series of pre-conference workshops, concurrent sessions, Talk Tanks, poster presentations, a Melbourne laneways walking tour, a cocktail party with live jazz and student art installations in addition to the AALL executive meeting with nomination of new officers and the AALL annual general meeting. Two keynote presentations and many conference papers demonstrated the thought-provoking, engaging and robust nature of English language and learning initiatives in Australia today. This conference report will highlight some of the themes related to English language teaching which may be of interest to QATESOL Newsletter readers.

Associate Professor Sophie Arkoudis' keynote presentation *ALL at the Crossroads* discussed the shifting landscape of higher education particularly in relation to the Australian government call for wider participation as well as the rising number of students with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Arkoudis emphasised the importance of English language at the core of teaching and suggested that institutions should focus more on English language development rather than simply as a support or remedial model of learning. She claimed that the character of teaching and learning and assessment is changing as



RMIT lecture theatre

the focus is no longer about only teaching disciplinary knowledge. With the current shift to standards, Arkoudis believes the missing element is a developmental model of English language as a foundational skill that needs to be developed alongside disciplinary knowledge. Although the nomenclature of English language proficiency, academic literacy/ies and communication skills gets in the way, she thinks universities still need an indicator for English language learning outcomes. Arkoudis would like to see a greater focus on defining the English language skills institutions want students to demonstrate in their learning and then making these skills explicit in the curriculum. She is convinced that the role of academic language and learning specialists has become increasingly important than in this current climate.

Professor James Arvanitakis provided an entertaining keynote as he suggested that universities today are where record labels and newspapers were about ten years ago. Arvanitakis claims that students do not see teachers as 'holders' of knowledge and that the key to engaging diverse students is more along the lines of 'cultural exchange' instead of 'content exchange'. He believes that students often think of academia as a foreign world and lecturers often mistakenly assume that students walk in the university door, know what to do and how to do it. In a new country, or foreign world, Arvanitakis advises teaching concepts and not just theories so that students can participate and engage. His teaching style makes lectures a dynamic and interactive event that students choose not to miss (even though the lectures are recorded and uploaded online). With minimal persuasion, Arvanitakis had 378 conference delegates on their feet dancing, clapping in time and enjoying every second. For an encore, he demonstrated how he teaches the concept of globalisation in an energetic, interactive way that seemed as engaging to group participants as it was to the audience watching. Arvanitakis asks his students for advice about what's working or not and values student voice as essential feedback to improve learning. He also likes student mentors as allies, storytelling, innovations and inspirations, learning new skills like vid-casting and having fun. As the winner of the 2012 Office of Learning and Teaching Prime Minister's University Teacher of the Year Award, his advice resonated.

There were many other highlights which included the focus on peer learning with some variants derived from Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) principles. There were a number of presentations about embedding English language skills in the curriculum, using technology and a Talk Tank on English language proficiency. Besides the academic focus, AALL conferences are known as informal and friendly gatherings. Many conversations around morning tea and lunch seemed to dwell on the current use of 'Re' words at universities, such as *restructuring, reframing, renaming, reforming, redefining, re-viewing, revising, redeploing, refocusing, refreshing, renewing, revitalising, reintegrating, reinventing* and so on. Delegates clearly wanted strong leadership in the midst of instability and constant change. Universities are evolving through the effects of internationalisation, changing demographics, multiple commitments, a wider participation agenda from the government and limited funding. Current demographics include students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, school leavers, internationals, mature age, indigenous and/or almost any combination of those. Technology adds another layer of complexity to learning environments as universities deliver courses to external students and offshore locations as well as to internal students on campus. Student retention becomes a challenge for universities, as lecturers and academic language and learning specialists explore ways to improve learning outcomes and successfully bridge the gaps.

The good news is that a conference enables professionals to network, share and collaborate amongst other like-minded colleagues in a community of practice. It provides opportunities for discussion, debate and affirmation of new initiatives, key themes and important challenges in academic language and learning practice. By attending a conference, professionals gain a sense of solidarity as well as a vision for the future of the field. One of the take-home messages from this conference was that English language specialists are increasingly important due to the growing diversity of students in higher education. Perhaps a less explicit message is that English language specialists have a tool kit of relevant skills and expertise, and are ready to move above and beyond current deficit models of support to take a broader, more prominent role in meeting the challenges in education. English language specialists can identify grammar, sentence and paragraphing difficulties. English language specialists are able to analyse and unpack complex assignment tasks. English language specialists have genre expertise to demonstrate appropriate structure and meet the marking criteria. English language specialists can teach discipline-specific writing skills and language via targeted workshops for specific groups of learners or team teach such skills alongside content lecturers. English language specialists can facilitate links between graduate attributes and developmental programs of oral and written communication skills that would be useful to any employer in a globalised professional world. English language specialists are able to provide staff development for teaching to diversity and differentiating the curriculum. English language specialists design curriculum with embedded language skills. English language specialists have the expertise to identify and meet the needs of diverse English language learners throughout their education. English language specialists build bridges to connect cultural competence and improve learning outcomes. These are valuable skills indeed when student retention, graduate attributes and successful learning outcomes are at stake.

Flinders Station and Swanston Street in Melbourne



Dr Sally Ashton-Hay is a Lecturer in Academic Skills Development, Division of Teaching and Learning at Southern Cross University on the Gold Coast. She is a Queensland state representative for AALL and can be contacted: sally.ashton-hay@scu.edu.au