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It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it: an analysis of the language of educational development

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Biographical note
Shân Wareing's first degree was in English Language and Literature (Oxford), followed by an MLitt in Linguistics for Teaching English Language and Literature (Strathclyde) and a PhD in sociolinguistics (Gender, Speech Styles and the Assessment of Discussion).  After 5 years teaching English Language and Linguistics at what is now Roehampton University, her interest in teaching methods and student learning took her into educational development.  She has led Educational Development Units at Roehampton University, at University of Wales, Newport, and most recently at Royal Holloway, where she has been Director of the Educational Development Centre for four years.

Most of the time, the fact that the discourse academics use with their professional peers is opaque or unpalatable to colleagues from different disciplines is a matter of little consequence.  Indeed, it may bring pleasure, reinforcing the sense of a community which recognises and values the speaker and distinguishing them from other groups in the staff canteen and at committee meetings.  This is however not the case for the discourse of the academic community of educational developers.  Educational development has a distinct role and set of responsibilities in higher education, which include the requirement to communicate across disciplines and to (the verb you select here will depend on your perspective) inform/support/convince/persuade/lead/cajole/manipulate colleagues and influence their behaviour.

It is clear from the most casual analysis of the sector that there is a mismatch between the evident goals of educational development (to switch people on to learning and teaching) and the effect of its discourse (to switch them off).  This article is a brief account of my investigations into this phenomenon to date.  The paper was first presented as a workshop at the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) conference (Cardiff March 2004) and later published in Educational Developments, SEDA's magazine.  I include this information to indicate that the first anticipated audience was the educational development community, and the function of the paper was therefore to start a debate within the community about the way this group, of which I am a member, uses language.  As an English Subject Centre publication the function is slightly different.  Perhaps it will provide an insight into an alien but neighbouring tribe, with some of the schadenfreude of reality TV; perhaps it

will bring the satisfaction of recognition, clarifying and reinforcing existing responses.

Anyway, on with the paper. Tired of my well-meant attempts to engage colleagues in scholarly and reflective discussion on the topic of student learning being rebuffed with comments about the jargon in educational development, I realised that a habit of knee-jerk defensiveness and entrenchment was not the most constructive response. I decided to investigate a little further the style of language associated with educational development. To do so, I presented a small group of Royal Holloway volunteers with two texts, one text an extract from a university learning and teaching strategy, the other an extract from an article published in the ILTHE's journal *Active Learning in Higher Education*. I asked the readers to mark words and phrases which they didn't understand, found confusing, or didn't like. I also asked them whether they considered the texts typical of an educational development text.

I used texts rather than spoken language for practicality, with the usual caveats about differences between written and spoken language (as discussed by Biber 1988 and Hughes 1996, amongst others). The eleven readers came from science, arts and humanities departments, and included a postgraduate student, newly appointed and more established lecturing staff, a professor, and two members of support staff. I choose the texts whose anticipated audience could be assumed to include those in an academic community with an interest in learning and teaching, a description that covered my readers. (I'll consider later whether institutional learning and teaching strategies are supposed to be read by the academic community).

Their responses suggested what many of us must know from experience, that language which is widely used in the texts associated with educational development does not communicate well with the academic community. The texts used expressions that were not understood, and a discourse that was disliked. I was surprised at the number of phrases identified as incomprehensible. If expressions which are commonplace in the discourse of educational development are not consistently understood in the academic community, then there can be no exchange of information, or at least, no exchange of the information which it was the writer's intention to communicate. I had anticipated that the discourse would be disliked but I was still surprised at how many linguistic elements were triggers for an adverse reaction, and at the strength of the reaction. The discourse being disliked may be a more serious matter than that not being understood. Readers respond to a discourse they dislike by ceasing to read, or by projecting their animosity to the discourse onto the concepts and intention of the writing. Educational development texts may be actively building barriers between their authors and the community that it is their job to influence.

From the readers' comments, the aspects of the texts that they identified as difficult to understand, or as features they disliked, were:
1) The use of specialist terms without appropriate explanation; e.g. experiential learning; reflective activities, learning strategies; reusable learning resources.

2)      Abstraction; in this case this refers to descriptions of learning and teaching as processes and products in which teachers and students aren't mentioned.  For example, "checklists and questioning approaches […] can foster mere compliance with externally set demands [rather] than genuine self-questioning and appraisal"; "new developments and staff training will be introduced to support the adoption of new web tools to support e-Learning and the creation and capture of content to allow re-use within a virtual learning environment".  Arguably, abstraction is a requirement for the discussion of complex phenomena, and is a characteristic of academic language.  However, this doesn't mean people who teach like to read about teaching and learning as abstract processes from which their existence has been obliterated.

3)      The discourse of marketing and managerialism; for example, terms such as new knowledge economy, stakeholders, monitoring learning, and descriptions of learning and teaching as processes and products.  The discourse associated with educational development is partly disliked because it locates higher education in an environment driven by the concerns of management and marketing (i.e. an emphasis on profit, on efficiency, on results identified because they can be measured rather than because they are valued).  Even if there are no explicit indicators of this discourse in a text, there may be what are interpreted as indirect markers, such as a focus on processes and results, abstracted from the direct experiences of teachers and students; see abstraction above.

4)      Implicit assumptions not shared by the readers.  Texts depend on shared implicit assumptions for coherence.  Where these are not shared, the text seems illogical or incoherent to the reader, as explored by Christie (2000) in terms of cross-gender misunderstandings.

5)      Habitual collocations, referred to by one of my respondents as 'formulae' and by another as 'mantras'; that is, words that are often used together, so that a writer will use one automatically if they have already used the other.  Examples include checks and balances, robust mechanisms, skills framework, knowledge economy, content capture and maintaining excellence.

6)      Low editorial standards; these included long sentences, poor grammar and punctuation, lack of coherence between subheadings, lack of relationship between sub-headings and the main text, ambiguity, and what might be termed 'poor rhetoric', where the features of language which can be used for emphasis (such as repetition) are used randomly, with no care given to the aesthetic dimension of the writing.

The readers made some general notes on the texts, and wrote responses to specific questions.  A sample is reproduced below.

**'How well did the texts communicate?'**
**Comments**
The journal article does not make me want to read other articles… The [Learning and Teaching Strategy] was very difficult to follow - uses all the usual jargon often not defined.

They need to be read carefully in order for their message to come across. The style is quite dense with long sentences and paragraphs. The language and business and management is used - this depersonalises the experience… The over-mystification of the language might stem from the need to valorise the discipline.

Neither of these texts communicates particularly well; although I suspect the business-driven vocabulary is designed to foster clarity, it would not win any awards from the 'Plain English' campaign. The [Learning and Teaching Strategy] document reads as though it was composed by Microsoft Auto-summarise, and the article hits an uneasy balance between pseudo-scientific and pseudo-social-scientific formulae.

Texts that address the issues of communication and skills transfer may need to introduce new concepts to academic professionals but in order to do so such research articles must adhere to the highest standard of written English. If research articles in Educational Development are published which fall so significantly below our editorial standards this only serves to confirm the existing prejudice among many academics that such work is necessarily second rate. This is clearly not the case.

The [Learning & Teaching Strategy] is full of mantras and management speak. The use of market language (human resources, delivery, resources etc) is especially flagrant here.

**'Did the texts conform to your expectations of educational development texts?'**
**Comments**

Yes it conforms with my expectations. It tries to complicate where simplification is possible and cloak in 'professional jargon' where not essential. It confirms my prejudices about an unnecessarily 'academic' approach to a practical issue.

[The Teaching and Learning Strategy was] …pure corporate university speak which we all do in our College documentation - a shared (if stylistically and ideologically repellent) discourse.


**'Are there terms you don't understand?'**

**Examples**

collaborative learning

C&IT

transformative learning

metalearning

metacognition

4

metacognitive knowledge

accredited skills and enterprise modules

continuation Audit

TQEF

skills activities

**Are there terms you understand but don't like?
Examples**

low staff-student ratios

a brief evaluative personal statement

develop evaluation practice

support the development of the Skills framework

extend our repertoire of teaching approaches and the effectiveness and *efficiency with which we interact with… our student*s

Students find some types of reflection more difficult than others

articulates

must be driven by pedagogical considerations

intensify students' preparation

a tightening of focus

capture of content

skills framework

presentational skills

our skills provision

e-strategy

single generic course

robust mechanisms

evaluation tools

utilised

skills activity

skills agenda

web tool

**'Are there sentences or phrases which are confusing?'
Example**

> It can be retrieved consciously by the learner during efforts to apply an appropriate strategy, or it can be activated unintentionally and automatically by retrieval cues in the task situation [Comment: "UGH!"]
>
> **'Are there sentences or phrases which make you feel irritated or angry?'**
>
> **Examples**
>
> curricula enrichment
>
> contemporary approaches to assessment and accreditation
>
> reflection is highlighted as one of four key learning processes
>
> They warn against the ritualistic use of checklists and questioning approaches that can foster mere compliance with externally set demands rather than genuine self-questioning and appraisal.
>
> Such concerns take on a particular force where it is the professional context and educational programme for professionals, within which reflection is being promoted.
>
> By adulthood, people typically are able reliably to predict whether they know something
>
> Providing our undergraduate and postgraduate students with the opportunity to follow accredited skills and enterprise modules which enable them to develop their academic and career potential, to enhance their skills across a range of disciplines and to ensure that the University continues to provide sought after and well qualified graduates who become leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs required to drive the new knowledge economy.
> the University's mission [Comment: "anything which describes itself as or associates itself with a mission statement would encourage me to disengage, as I would expect it to be largely empty rhetoric and platitudes - perhaps unfair, but I think a typical academic response"]

My colleagues viewed these texts as having been written without the intention to communicate with them as readers; they did not consider themselves to be the intended audience. My interpretation of their reactions is that the texts represented an attempt to diminish their experience, their contribution to the sector and their worldview (some of these sorts of reactions are discussed in general terms in Wareing 2004).

The experience of asking colleagues to consider these texts was salutary. If this is the way the wider academic community feels about educational development texts, then the texts are failing to communicate, and in fact, are driving a wedge between educational developers and the academic community. Instead of progressively informing colleagues of the values and evidence of educational development, and encouraging engagement with its principles, I and my colleagues may be having the opposite effect each time we speak, or press 'print'.

A defence might be built on a claim that these texts were not typical educational development texts, clearing the community of educational development of the worst of these charges. The learning and teaching strategy may have been the output of some corporate committee with its focus on the requirements of the funding council, which no educational developer ever went near. The journal article was from the first issue of Active Learning, and perhaps as such not representative of later papers. However, even making this allowance, educational development is not absolved. My readers were almost entirely in consensus that the texts were representative of educational development texts. No one said, 'Wait a moment, educational development texts are much more accessible and 'simpatico' than this'. Thus even if the argument that these texts were in some respects a-typical were upheld, my respondents nevertheless associated these texts with educational development, and thus their critiques of the discourse stands.

One reader did not think the learning and teaching strategy was a typical educational development text, but a 'management-strategy-jargon thing', and educational developers may agree. But I don't think this clears us of blame either. Shouldn't learning and teaching strategies be perceived as educational development texts and reflect those values? Shouldn't they be documents which include the academic community as a significant intended readership? After all, who does the teaching in our universities? Shouldn't learning and teaching strategies be documents that academic staff want to read? Shouldn't departments want to discuss them? What's gone wrong if this isn't the case? Even if the funding council requires documents written in the discourse of corporate management, the learning and teaching strategy should be important enough to be circulated in a revised version for internal communication and discussion.

It is my view that communication is a core element of educational development. The evidence of this small study has reinforced my intuition that our communication practices are problematic. Indeed, texts of which I was previously tolerant (because I understood them and because the ideology was acceptable or invisible to me) I now find troubling. Are there different ways of writing, and indeed talking, about educational development which we should cultivate and promote? Certainly since beginning this exploratory process, I am more critical of texts that I encounter in the course of my work, and more aware of the need to examine my own language as I prepare materials and papers for circulation amongst colleagues.

Communication is not a transparent process; there is not a one-to-one relationship between words and concepts as there would be if each time you used a word it directed the listener or reader unambiguously to the concept you had in mind. No one in literary studies or linguistics doubts this. Language is inherently ambiguous and, once written or uttered, communicates information other than that intended. It is far from easy to discover from readers and listeners what has been understood from our attempts at communication. Furthermore, words and phrases cannot escape the connotations of their previous use and previous users. Their effect on the reader relates to the identity and politics of the speakers and writers who have used them in the past (as discussed in Birch 1996).

Academic disciplines have their own codes as we well know, codes designed to enable communication concerned with abstract concepts, allowing a level of precision in the discussion of shared concepts, and permitting the indication of fine grades of attitude towards the relative strength of a claim. Academic codes also ID speakers and writers, allowing insiders to detect the exact branch of a discipline or school of thought within which the speaker locates themselves. Finally, codes have a gatekeeper function, intentionally or unintentionally keeping the uninitiated out (discussed in Becher and Trowler 2001 pp104-130).

The educational development community is currently engaged in a debate about whether educational development is a discipline in its own right (Macdonald 2002, 2003, Stefani 2003, Rowland 2004). The arguments for a discipline of educational development include the existence of an extensive and growing literature, of peer-reviewed journals, of networks of people engaged in conferences and seminars, and of the learning and teaching programmes throughout the UK, validated within academic frameworks and developed and delivered by educational developers. The arguments against include that educational developers come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and do not necessarily share methodological approaches, or refer to the same texts as intrinsic to their practice. This debate still has its course to run. However, the argument 'for' might unfortunately include the perception by those in the wider academic community that our use of language is both distinctive (i.e. allowing readers to say 'that looks like an educational development text') and opaque. This surely is a feature of an academic discipline which educational developers do not wish to share (at least not in texts such as the ones discussed here, which are apparently aimed at the community of academic staff, rather than at the specialist community of educational developers). Our role is arguably different from that of staff in other academic disciplines; it is not just to talk to one another, but to talk across disciplines to all staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning. As members of a discipline in the process of defining itself, perhaps we educational developers need particularly to consider our own communication practices.

What is the significance of this moment of angst in one member of the educational development community for readers of this article, people with an interest in teaching English in Higher Education? Perhaps this discussion of the discourse of educational development underlines the difficulties all individuals inevitably and regularly experience, in relation to defining and locating themselves, expressing affiliations and differences of opinion, and talking about things which interest them and matter to them without invoking alien values. For staff whose primary affiliation is to their academic discipline, but who wish to discuss student learning and curriculum design, there may be particular difficulties in finding a discourse which is not contaminated, or which communicates pedagogical ideas and research effectively. I hope this paper can contribute to such a debate.

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