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The Work is the Talk: Collaboration and Power in Tertiary Language Advisory Practice

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Abstract

The field of workplace communication has grown in the past 20 years to encompass the negotiation of identities and the role of power in collaboration. Nonetheless, identity struggles at work remain an underexplored phenomenon, particularly for emerging or marginalised professional groups such as tertiary language and learning advisors (TLAs) in higher education. In this article, we explore how challenges encountered in collaboration between TLAs and content specialist academics (CSs) in an Australian tertiary setting can impact the negotiation of professional identities as well as the success of the work. We draw on transcripts of meeting talk from two novice TLAs as they negotiate collaborative work with one CS in a postgraduate subject, and we use critical discourse analysis to demonstrate how power discursively manifests in the meetings. The study sheds new light on the complexities of collaborative work, manifested through interactions, in hierarchical professional environments.

Key words: workplace communication, language and power, professional identities, language advisory work, academic literacies, meeting talk, critical discourse analysis

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Background

Significant developments in recent decades have prompted Australian universities to review teaching, learning and assessment models, including the provision of language and learning support (Brucken & Delly, 2009). Student and staff mobility, in connection with institutional and government-led internationalisation efforts, and aggressive domestic and international student recruitment agendas, have contributed to increasing diversification of student cohorts within universities (Baik & Greig, 2009; Murray, 2010; Percy, 2011). In consideration of the diversity of the student body—who come to university with a range of cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, professional, and educational practices—there is a greater focus on providing support to attract and retain students, address perceived inequalities, and promote successful completion of academic programmes. Further, the push to prepare work-ready graduates has necessitated the development of employability skills in response to industry. Notwithstanding the heterogenous needs and experiences of students, research confirms the benefits of appropriate language and academic skills support for all (Larcombe & Malkin, 2008; Scouller et al., 2008). Subsequently, the teaching of communication skills has become a pronounced need (Johnson et al., 2015).

Tertiary teaching is more than ever a shared space, where a greater number of *knowledge workers*, including tertiary language and learning advisors (TLAs), are involved in student support (Macdonald et al., 2013). TLAs work alongside academics and other staff, including librarians and online learning specialists, to support undergraduate and postgraduate students throughout their studies. TLA work was historically delineated as a separate remedial service where academic staff could refer students in need of support, or students could self-refer to individual assistance or generic workshops (Chanock, 2011a, 2011b). However, this 'bolt-on' or one-size-fits-all model of general academic skills development has been problematised (Wingate, 2006), such that the *embedding* of academic literacies within the teaching of disciplinary content is now the preferred approach (see Percy, 2011; Stratilas, 2011; Wingate, 2006, 2015, amongst others). Consistent with the conceptualisation of literacy as grounded social practice which extends beyond context-free mechanics of language, academic literacy skills are now taught alongside discipline-specific content with the aim to increase students' awareness of communicative and epistemological norms that

preside in their disciplines (see Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Young & Muller, 2010). Numerous studies confirm the success of embedded and collaborative teaching, recognising the opportunities it presents to teach academic literacy skills and reach greater numbers of students (Evans et al., 2019; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Maldoni, 2018; Stratilas, 2011; Veitch & Johnson, 2016; Wingate, 2018; Wingate et al., 2011). However, distribution of expertise is paramount in determining the effectiveness of this approach to teaching (Arkoudis, 2018). The absence of unified practices and viable models for collaboration can be a serious impediment. As explored in this paper, an added barrier is the hierarchical nature of the contemporary university, where stratification within the academy is well recognised (see also White, 2012).

In working with academic teaching staff, to whom we refer in this paper as content specialists (CSs), under the embedding approach TLAs join an increasingly shared *third space* in tertiary teaching practice. The concept of the third space, proposed by Bhabha (1990, 1994) as a metaphor to denote interculturality, and later by Kramsch (1993) to frame 'third culture' for language learners within intercultural communication contexts, is now widely used across the social sciences (Zhou & Pilcher, 2019). In the academy, the third space has aptly described the newly created work spaces in which academic, professional and administrative staff work collaboratively, blurring traditional boundaries and complicating the demarcation of identities (Whitchurch, 2008). In the context of TLA practice, the notion of the third space is explored by Briguglio (2014), who discusses staff involved in embedding projects as "operating in a cross-disciplinary space that combine[s] the expertise of both parties to come up with more creative solutions" (p. 27). Briguglio's (2014) model underscores the success of embedding as strongly reliant on collaboration between TLAs and CSs.

The contemporary workplace is typified by movement and boundary-crossing, where interdisciplinary teams have become more common (Angouri et al., 2018). Working in interdisciplinary teams in the third space is seen as desirable for many reasons. Given the complex nature of modern work (Frost & Jean, 2003), the third space brings professionals with diverse skills together. Current management approaches view teamwork as consistent with the new work order of fast capitalism (Gee & Lankshear, 1995). In the tertiary sector, it has been argued that such business models can usefully contribute to the success of embedding work (Brucken & Delly, 2009). While we would

proceed cautiously in appropriating management discourses into pedagogical practice, based to no small extent on our misgivings concerning the 'common sense' rationality of neoliberalised governance approaches in higher education and the simplistic answers they pose to complex problems (Gurney & Grossi, 2019; Torres, 2011), it is valid to acknowledge these as salient discourses shaping the professional contexts in which TLAs operate.

Nonetheless, there are inherent challenges to working collaboratively, which manifest due to structural and epistemic factors; in other words, collaboration can be undermined (or facilitated) by both *how* professionals are positioned within institutional hierarchies, as well as *what* their professional expertise is seen to encompass (see Choi & Richards, 2017). Collaborative practices have implications for individual and team identity negotiation, as professionals produce new discourse practices which reshape knowledge and professional identities (Iedema & Scheeres, 2003; Whitchurch, 2008). Furthermore, research suggests that tensions are likely arise in interactions (see Angouri, 2018), which generate significant potential for conflict in response to institutional and discipline hierarchies. Schnurr and Van De Mieroop (2017) indicate that identity struggles may be particularly pronounced in emerging or marginalised professional groups, such as TLAs (see also Gurney & Grossi, 2019), where group members find themselves in the difficult position of "constructing and enacting a professional identity while at the same time creating and negotiating the very boundaries of the profession which functions as the backdrop against which this identity construction is taking place" (p. 7). These authors also note that struggles in identity negotiation remain relatively under-researched, despite growing discourse analysis on workplace identity construction (Schnurr & Van De Mieroop, 2017). An adjacent arena in which identity struggles may occur is professional knowledge. The discipline specificity of academic literacy practices (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) necessitates shared understandings between TLAs and CSs concerning what constitutes 'effective' communication in situ (Thies, 2012). While multidisciplinary teams whose members recognise each other's expertise have greater capacity to work together effectively, the expertise of TLAs is not necessarily understood or valued (Evans et al., 2019; Stevenson & Kokkien, 2007; Strauss, 2013).

TLAs are a highly skilled and qualified professional group (Cameron, 2018), but they inhabit a marginalised position within institutions, and are often required to juggle professional and academic identities (Hildson, 2018). Furthermore, being tasked with the scoping and implementation of embedding, while mostly located outside schools and faculties, means that TLAs operate in a challenging position. Given these factors, their work needs to be negotiated, with networks established to improve negotiation and build on preliminary support through continuity. This negotiation appears to be one of the most challenging aspects of the work.

To illustrate the precarious nature of negotiation in TLA practice, Harris and Ashton (2011) underscore the importance of relationship building in a collaborative project between a TLA and CSs to facilitate support at the postgraduate level. The authors attributed the success of the project to the TLA's flexibility and adaptability; these are characteristics that belong to the realm of soft skills and imply a high degree of accommodation, but very little acknowledgement, of the TLA's professional expertise. These emphases are sharply illustrated in the discussion of their findings:

> Part of the success is due to the TLA's *personal characteristics*; her focus, her commitment, her flexibility, and part of it is her capacity to meld with the lecturer, one colleague stressed. Another lecturer, who has been involved throughout the three semesters, stressed the importance of the TLA's adaptability and her preparedness to come to grips [with new material] and *do whatever fits the group*. (Harris & Ashton, 2011, p. A-79, our italics)

Similarly, Strauss (2013) attributes advisory success in her study to the tentative manner TLAs adopt in the quest to collaborate:

> On the whole, advisors appear to have adopted *a softly, softly approach* trying to get a foot in the door by accommodating academic staff needs, *adopting to a certain extent the servant mantel*. Advisors are trapped in a vicious circle. (p. 11, our italics)

As these studies illustrate, establishing the actual work is often reliant on TLAs' negotiation skills, such that teaching and resource development become secondary in the process. Building on this platform, in this paper we demonstrate ways in which, for practising TLAs, ***the work is the talk***, a situation which can lead to significant identity

struggles and diminished outcomes of collaboration. TLAs' work not only involves teaching and developing resources for students; additionally, TLAs build networks, establish and manage relationships, and navigate the uncertainties of contemporary higher education workplaces. In other words, their deployment of relationship management skills becomes central to their role. Drawing on a case study, we examine a small set of interactions between two TLAs and one CS via critical discourse analysis (CDA). We employ a highly qualitative approach, and our aim is to explore particular, grounded manifestations of pervasive discourses in the shared third space of tertiary teaching. The participants, context, data, and analysis are outlined in subsequent sections.

Participants and Context

The three participants in this study—Lisa, Georgia, and Elisabeth (pseudonyms)—were, at the time of data collection, employed in a metropolitan university in Australia. Lisa and Georgia were novice TLAs with experience in the areas of teaching English in adult education, pre-service teacher education, and pre-sessional English language development for international students. In addition to teaching, Georgia had worked on several cross-institutional projects incorporating new technologies into academic teaching and teacher training roles. Both TLAs held postgraduate qualifications relevant to their work. However, as newcomers to the TLA role, they were still negotiating their responsibilities and transitioning into ways of *being* a TLA, with a view to establishing careers in the field. At the time of data collection, they were acting on the advice of senior colleagues that, in order to work effectively with CSs, they needed to build, develop, and maintain relationships.

Elisabeth, the CS, lectured in an area of commerce and published widely in her field. She proactively contacted the TLAs to arrange embedded academic report writing and referencing support within a postgraduate subject which she convened. This subject was delivered wholly online via recorded lectures and live seminars. Students also had the use of discussion forums, online readings and other audio-visual resources. The students, most of whom were working professionals and studied part-time, were at different stages of degree completion and had varying levels of familiarity with the academic literacy practices endemic to their discipline.

Data and Analysis

The data consist of transcripts of a series of audio-recorded meetings between the TLAs and CS. In total, three meetings were held between the TLAs and the CS. During these meetings, the two TLAs met separately with the CS to establish the support, gain feedback, and discuss further steps and evaluation. The meetings were recorded to explore how relationships were established in these interactions, for both research and professional development purposes. Data were gathered and stored in accordance with ethical guidelines (approval number HAE13098 Deakin ARTSED Ethics). In keeping with the aims of our analysis, concerning the processes of collaboration between TLAs and CS, the data were transcribed using a broad transcription style, which focused on the identification of themes rather than micro aspects of transcribing speech (Gee, 2014).

Methodologically, TLA work has been scrutinised using diverse lenses. Researchers have employed Foucault's governmentality, genealogical design and archaeological method (Percy, 2014); Derrida's notion of hospitality (Chahal et al., 2019); Bacchi's problematising approach (Hildson, 2018); and performativity within neoliberal institutional governance (Gurney & Grossi, 2019). As flagged earlier, issues observed within the collaborations are explained within a 'third space' framework (Briguglio, 2014; Fraser, 2019), and tensions have been drawn out vis-à-vis Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome (Benzie et al., 2016). Finally, Arkoudis (2018) has described collaboration through distributed knowledge. However, experiences of embedding work have predominantly been reported based on observations and reflections (Grossi & Gurney, 2020).

In this article, we make an important contribution to this growing literature by drawing on interactional meeting data. A rich body of research has highlighted meetings as interactions where power hierarchies become evident as participants jointly construct roles and responsibilities (Angouri, 2018). In meetings, participants "claim and project their roles and identities to self and others and project status and expertise" (Angouri & Mondada, 2018, p. 473). In addition, meetings are sites of negotiation, where "participants constitute themselves as formal and informal leaders, as experts, as employees, and so on" (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009, p. 16).

Discourses are standardised ways of using language to construe the world, "which can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors" (Fairclough, 2013, pp. 179-180). According to CDA theorists, language has a reflexive relationship with the ways in which "social and psychological realities" are (re)produced (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 45). Discourses are operationalised into action and identities (see Fairclough, 2010).

To analyse the interactional data, we employed CDA to explore the ways in which power manifested discursively during the meetings. The critical mapping of discourse allowed us to engage with the constitutive potential of language practice to validate realities and social arrangements, and to influence behaviours and priorities within these, across a range of domains. In adopting this stance, we foreground not only the power of established discourse to shape social, psychological and physical realities, but the reflexive power of language *users* to agentively (re)construct, (re)negotiate and (re)produce these through their ongoing enactment and interpretation of discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990). As such, a small case study makes an appropriate contribution to the literature.

In presenting the results of the analysis, we aim to unpack the negotiation of the TLA role in collaborative work. As well as analysing the meeting interactions, we consider the wider social context within which these interactions occurred: that is, a neoliberalised tertiary environment where teaching is, increasingly, expected to be a shared space (Macdonald et al., 2013). In addition, we draw on aspects of politeness theory (stemming from Brown & Levinson, 1987) to describe our texts at a discourse level. No utterance is inherently (im)polite; rather, discursive struggles for politeness occur within the expectations established within particular interactions (Locher & Watts, 2005). We use this lens in tandem with CDA to better perceive the ways in which power was negotiated in the meetings, and the respective positioning of the TLAs and CS via their relational work to develop the collaboration. Here, relational work "refers to the 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others … encompassing both appropriate and inappropriate forms of social behavior" (Locher & Watts, 2005, pp. 10-11). In other words, we contend, relational work *defines relationships*.

Findings

The two TLAs and the CS had different understandings of their relationship and of the nature of collaborative support, particularly with regards to managing their collaboration in an online environment. For the TLAs, teaching online entailed 'embedding' an TLA into a subject through a series of seminars, during which they could learn about students' needs, establish relationships with the students and teaching staff, and subsequently scaffold support. Although Elisabeth, the CS, supported this approach in principle, she expressed concern about the timeframe and favoured a comprehensive set of ready-made online resources to address student needs. The short period of time allocated for tertiary teaching is a widely-recognised concern, which may be further compounded by the increasing casualisation of the workforce, insofar as teachers may only be employed for teaching weeks (and not, for instance, for materials or subject development and evaluation).

In context, these factors contribute to the deferral (or avoidance) of meaningful collaboration with TLAs. In the case of Elisabeth's teaching, the deferral of more extensive collaboration positioned the TLAs as technical experts responsible for constructing sets of generic resources, and the CS as an intermediary between the TLAs and students. Additionally, the interactions appeared to be characterised by competing interests; for the TLAs, their visibility in the institution and the success of their work were key motivations. Elisabeth, on the other hand, seemed motivated to help her students without compromising class time and while minimising interruptions.

The differences between the TLAs' and CS's approaches to support emerged early in the negotiation process, as illustrated by the following transcripts. Throughout the meetings, the TLAs attempted to do relational work in order to pursue their goals—that is, gain familiarity with the context and establish support beyond the teaching period in question. However, due to their positioning, they were compelled to avoid face-threatening acts as they negotiated this support (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Differences were managed in such a way as to reinforce the TLAs' subordinate position, in turn cementing the CS's authority to determine the level and type of support to be provided. This is evidenced at multiple points in the interactions where Elisabeth controls topic, floor and turn-taking, and generally sets the tone of the meetings. Her assertion of authority was not challenged by the TLAs, even when their attempts to

introduce or shift topics were curtailed. The two excerpts presented below are chosen to highlight the complexities of this negotiation.

Negotiating the Work: Managing Criticism and Avoiding Disagreements

The first excerpt below is taken from an initial meeting between one of the TLAs, Lisa, and Elisabeth, the CS. Lisa initiated the meeting to discuss provision of online resources within Elisabeth's subject, as she perceived gaps in the current materials. Prior to the meeting, Elisabeth had directed Lisa to look at the online resources provided by a different institution that Elisabeth considered to be exemplary.

In this excerpt, Elisabeth criticises the existing online resources available at their university. This criticism is directed at Lisa and her TLA colleagues, who are assumed to have responsibility for these resources. Lisa attempts to explain that the online resources were under development; however, her comment appears to be overlooked by Elisabeth, who reminds Lisa of the university's push for a greater digital presence. The excerpt highlights Elisabeth's assertion of authority in the interaction, where Lisa is positioned as working *for*, rather than *with*, her.

Elisabeth: *You know, they've got the [name of the resource from another university], that's been in place for many, many years. It's now online, and it actually makes a distinction between a business report and a research report. But I'd already provided that information before I came to you guys and said, "Is there anything additional you might be able to add?" Because there's not, your webpage in this area is very limited.*

Lisa: *It's under development.*

Elisabeth: *I think there needs to be - - -*

Lisa: *M'hmm.*

Elisabeth: *I think your report writing support materials need to be worked on - -*

Lisa: *Yep—yeah.*

Elisabeth: *- - - just in general - - -*

Lisa: ***Yeah, that's good to hear.***

Elisabeth: *- - - based on what's online.*

Lisa: *Yeah. Yep.*

Elisabeth: *And I think, you know, some of it needs to be done in an online way - - -*

Lisa: *Yep.*

Elisabeth: *- - - given the direction of the university. That's just - - -*

Lisa: *Yep, yeah.*

Elisabeth: *- - - just in general - - -*

Lisa: ***Yeah, that's good to hear.***

In response to Elisabeth's criticism, and as shown in the bolded text, Lisa chooses to avoid the face-threatening act of outrightly disagreeing with Elisabeth. Disagreements, which are speech acts associated with conflict talk, are broadly understood to be a negative aspect of communication (Angouri, 2012). The disagreements in this excerpt are consistent with *weak disagreements* (Pomerantz, 1984), characterised by hedges, silence, and repair initiation (Choi & Schnurr, 2014). At first, Lisa deals with the disagreement by beginning to provide a justification for the possible lack of resources available online ('they are under development'). When this is unsuccessful, she employs agreement markers (yep/M'hmm/yeah/that's right) rather than claiming a longer turn in the conversation to reinforce her point of view. Lisa's responses exemplify that both *what* can be said and *when* interlocutors can speak are subject to power relations (Fairclough, 2010), even in ostensibly collaborative interactions.

At the end of the excerpt, Lisa turns Elisabeth's criticism into a positive statement. By doing this, she downplays the criticism, treating it as welcome feedback to inform the development of the online resources. Given that reshaping public-facing online resources to suit lecturer requests would be unrealistic and unsustainable for the TLAs, there is an assumed element of exaggeration when Lisa states that the feedback is welcome; this is likely a way to manage face. According to the seminal study by Brown and Levinson (1978), in every interaction, speakers choose how to attend to face concerns—that is, the self-image a speaker wishes to maintain. Face can be positive (a speaker's need to be accepted) or negative (a speaker's need to be autonomous) (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Here, as the multiple factors mitigating online resource design are beyond the scope of her conversation with Elisabeth, they are avoided by Lisa, who chooses to attend to face management.

Further to the management of disagreement, this excerpt highlights fundamental misunderstandings between Elisabeth and Lisa with respect to the nature of their collaboration. Elisabeth's foregrounding of her insight and expertise is juxtaposed against her positioning of Lisa as a subordinate who must be directed to work in particular ways rather than a colleague with whom joint decisions are made. Although Elisabeth appears to have misinterpreted Lisa's expertise, Lisa is the one compelled to manage Elisabeth's expectations within the implied hierarchy between TLA and CS.

The second excerpt is taken from a meeting between Georgia, the other TLA, and Elisabeth, the CS. Here, Georgia describes her plans for a forthcoming workshop, which was to be her second session with Elisabeth's class. The workshop was designed to address an assessment piece involving the preparation of a report. A potential disagreement arises during their discussion, concerning the sources of students' confusion about this assessment piece. As shown below, Georgia alludes to a lack of clarity in task design, but does not state this explicitly:

Georgia:	*So this is how we're presenting [the workshop]. This is kind of based on what we do with the other kind of sessions, just an overview of breaking down the task, looking at what you have to do. This theoretical underpinning is based on the task sheet that you gave us, just to get them thinking about - - -*
Elisabeth:	*What it is they're having to do.*
Georgia:	*- - - as they're researching, this is what they're looking for.* ***Because the students see, I think, will often come to us, and they haven't quite worked out what it is they're supposed to be researching****.*
Elisabeth:	*Worked it out, supposed to do.*
Georgia:	*Not from your, but - - -*

In this extract, Georgia establishes her expertise by signalling, albeit tentatively, her experience in facilitating similar workshops. She makes use of hedges such as 'this is kind of based', 'just an overview', and 'just to get them thinking'. Furthermore, by presenting challenges in understanding assessment as a typical learner problem, Georgia avoids referring to the task itself.

Later in the meeting, Elisabeth reinforces that is it the students' responsibility to work out task requirements. She refutes the suggestion that the wording of the task needs to be revised by saying it is typical for the postgraduate level. This comment closes further discussion on the point:

Elisabeth: *Yes. No, no. Yes. The biggest thing I've found when I've required students to do workplace reports in the past, because* ***this is a fairly standard assessment at the postgrad level****, but there's no, so [subject number] is one of four subjects.*

Georgia: *Okay.*

Following Elisabeth's interjection ('Yes, yes, no'), which we interpreted as an agreement marker, Georgia downplays the task as the source of confusion. Elisabeth outlines reasons why the students may find the task difficult, ranging from personal to professional. One reason is that the cohort, who have competing work-study-family demands, complete their programme in different sequences, leading to varying levels of preparation for study:

Georgia: *Okay. And they're working in the field or - - -*

Elisabeth: *Most of them are working.*

Georgia: *Yes.*

Elisabeth: *Most of them are female and have children.*

Georgia: *Okay.*

Elisabeth: *And so they're juggling lots. Some of them are working in the field, some of them aren't. And so there's* ***this huge mix of different skill levels.***

Georgia: *Okay.*

Following this excerpt, Elisabeth continues to discuss why the students found the task difficult, citing the pressures of postgraduate study, misinterpretations of text structure, and the differences between professional and academic reports. While valid observations, these nonetheless close the opportunity to Georgia to provide feedback on task design or to share information from her interactions with students, which may have been of benefit to Elisabeth. In stating her analysis, Elisabeth legitimates her

understanding of the students' experience and diminishes Georgia's potential contribution.

Discussion

In line with previous research, Lisa and Georgia, the two TLAs, experienced challenges in negotiating their work, owing mainly to the CS's misinterpretation of their expertise together with the perception that CSs are responsible for the design and facilitation of tertiary teaching. The interactional data we have presented shed light on the discursive struggles that can take place when these groups of professionals work together in contexts where existing hierarchies influence who is dominant in decision-making. Without a shared understanding of the TLAs' expertise, Elisabeth assumed the position of being in charge.

The presented excerpts reinforce the strong negotiation skills needed when TLAs are presumed to be subordinates in such interactions. In other words, to enact their role successfully, TLAs need to match appropriate professional knowledge with discursive skills in order to make the work happen and to smooth collaborations. For Lisa and Georgia, these discursive skills entailed deflecting conflict talk, avoiding face-threatening acts, negotiating responsibility for teaching and assessment, and attempting to persuade the CS that their contributions were worthwhile.

Ostensibly, trying to be collaborative by working in this manner is consistent with the new organisational order (Gee, et al., 1996; Gee & Lankshear, 1995), which favours flatter hierarchies and team-led work, and where highly-motivated workers are encouraged to take greater charge. This approach is essentially a distillation of neoliberal capitalism and the concomitant hyper-responsibilisation of the individual-as-entrepreneur (Gurney & Grossi, 2021; Lemke, 2001). Professionals are responsible for their own successes and failures even when working within institutional contexts with significant constraints. In such situations, "workers increasingly assume managerial roles within settings where work centres around collaborative teams (team-based projects)" (Gee & Lankshear, 1995, p. 7).

However, this superficially inclusive approach, where everyone is required to contribute to shared work projects, overlooks the organisational hierarchies and power dynamics which are far beyond the reach of individuals. As a useful parallel, Choi and

Richards (2017) discuss interdisciplinary meetings between researchers and the outcomes of asymmetrical relationships in collaboration. In their study, speakers who were considered to possess more highly valued knowledge were accorded more authority in interactions. Choi and Richards' findings somewhat echo our own, insofar as the CS was positioned as arbiter of pedagogical practice and the TLAs as support staff. For Lisa and Georgia, their relatively recent entry into the TLA role may have further compounded the power imbalance. The extent to which their novice status played a role in the interactions would be a useful focus for a further study.

Research suggests that, in some contexts, teams may be able to negotiate collaborative work in flatter hierarchies and without clear leaders, and still reach shared goals (Choi & Schnurr, 2014). However, in the TLA field, in spite of empirical evidence to support the pedagogical benefits of embedded learning advice, the landscape seems little changed after two decades of work (Wingate, 2018). Based on our findings, we argue that a more structured approach is needed to bring TLAs and CSs into more productive collaboration (Brucken & Delly, 2009), which could involve casting a critical eye upon surveilled and performative tertiary teaching contexts (Gurney & Grossi, 2019) and reappraising the goals of shared work. Such an approach would ideally shift the focus from the 'talk' to the actual work—that is, teaching and resource development—which would benefit all parties involved, including, most importantly, the students. Nonetheless, for such an approach to be effective, teaching academics should also accept collaboration as part of their roles.

Moving towards an embedded model of support can be done with careful negotiation and ongoing collaboration between TLAs and CSs, using student-led questions to inform the work. In order to develop tailored support, it is important to know the students and to understand their varying needs. In our experiences as tertiary educators, despite orientation opportunities and well-heeded study advice, we observe that, at times, students are not able to articulate their needs; in other words, they don't know what they don't know. Where TLAs are disconnected from students, their learning resources may be too broad or generalised and therefore not applicable to students' contexts. This can have ramifications for both the effectiveness of support and the perception of TLAs as experts. Likewise, it can be difficult to gain insight when

attendance at adjunct workshops is low, or, as is often the case, those who need support do not attend.

To establish a more detailed picture of what students need and how they interact with learning and assessment, skills teaching opportunities need to be in tandem with the teaching of disciplinary content. For instance, there are opportunities for CSs and TLAs to collaborate with respect to assessment, including sharing markers' comments with TLAs to help them to understand specific requirements and scaffold assistance accordingly, or using early assessment items as diagnoses for targeted interventions conducted by TLAs. Suggestions such as these require close collaboration from the planning stages onwards, where discussions should concern appropriate distribution of expertise between academic literacies and disciplinary content. Nonetheless, as our data here illustrate, such efforts can be thwarted when practitioners problematise collaboration from an early stage.

Finally, in keeping with the CDA approach and the wider social context, we wish to highlight that the challenges experienced by the TLAs are not unique in the tertiary sector. As stated, the university is changing in response to neoliberal agendas (Gurney & Grossi, 2019). Academics face the challenge of maintaining a strong publishing presence to establish their positions in the field, and often manage large teaching loads from semester to semester. For example, in a moment of 'off topic' talk, Elisabeth reveals more about her own context. Her concerns about her changing workplace are insightful. She discusses the pressures of increasingly short semesters on academic teaching, additional work demands resulting from university-wide curriculum reviews, and marking load, particularly for sessional staff. She reflects that the student experience had changed greatly since her own undergraduate days, which she referred to with some nostalgia, and that the recent changes in tertiary education have negatively impacted students to the extent that their learning is severely compromised:

Elisabeth: *I think the system doesn't work; they're not learning anything.*

Lisa: *I think it's really hard from their point of view though …*

Elisabeth: *Yes, it is, I feel sorry for them.*

These remarks are powerful reminders of the competing demands faced by higher education practitioners. These demands manifest in the negotiation of student

support, which is directly impacted by the challenges that academic staff face in meeting their own timelines. Despite good intentions, they often find it logistically difficult to create space to provide meaningful support for students.

As a result, the nature of student support is often ad hoc (see Gurney & Grossi, 2019), and exchanges between TLAs and CSs become fleeting, last minute, or one-off encounters. In such an atmosphere, establishing partnerships which entail true collaboration and recognition of the TLAs' depth of expertise is very difficult. As indicated by the 'off topic' talk above, challenges to embedding require a strategic approach to build effective and sustainable partnerships.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on interactional data to illuminate salient challenges inherent to negotiating student support in the contemporary university. The third space in the tertiary sector is shared and, at times, can seem crowded. Different professionals seek to work with CSs to support diverse student populations. TLAs are tasked with networking and enacting embedding work, which is challenging when operating from a marginalised position. Challenges can result from misunderstandings when professionals are required to collaborate in cross-disciplinary partnerships but do not necessarily have shared knowledge of each other's expertise.

Hierarchies and power imbalances between professional groups have the potential to impact quality and negotiation of support. TLAs are often compelled to smooth interactions in order to manage collaborations and prove their value to the institution, while attempting to establish themselves in the third space, which itself relies on shared understandings. In this sense, the TLA discourse of support does not match the institutional discourse on how and when support is to be provided.

We understand that power structures are not static, and that the difficulties we have described in these TLAs' attempts to establish collaborative working relationships, which they perceived in this case to be their responsibility and not that of the CS, may diminish over time. The ability to establish and maintain such networks is regarded as a hallmark of success in the field, and 'building relationships' is often quoted as the way to ensure it. Over time, team dynamics may change, as members of the teams get to know each other and build on their knowledge of academic support models, their

expertise and their own interactional norms. While much of the success of this way of working currently lies in the negotiation and rapport-building skills of the TLAs, we maintain that it is also the responsibility of the institution—using a more strategic approach—to better position TLAs and other professionals within teaching teams where their work can be better understood and articulated.

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