

Newsletter June 2008

In this issue

Editor's note	1
State activities & initiatives	2
New learning materials	5
Conferences & meetings	5
Member interview	6



Editor's note

Dear AALL members

At the AALL executive meeting held in Melbourne in November 2007, executive members endorsed the regular production of an e-newsletter. The idea was that a newsletter could help to foster the feeling of being a member of the Association, and to share knowledge within the community. We thought at the exec meeting that we could include items such as:

- State activities and initiatives
- New initiatives, including the development of new student material (a brief blurb and a web link?)
- Grants obtained or grants available (it may give others ideas or inspiration!)
- Recent relevant publications (both written by members as well as by others which might be of wide interest - who's got time to keep up with all the journals?)
- Promotions and awards to staff in the field (it helps morale to think that someone's work somewhere is being acknowledged and appreciated, and it might provide inspiration to others about what might be possible)
- E-tips (e.g. brief tips on e-learning software, how it can be used, and a good place to get started if you're a beginner, could be useful to those just starting out with what the web can offer)
- Notices of conferences and meetings, etc.
- Anything that will interest our AALL community.

In the news about state activities, it is interesting to note increasing engagement with peer mentoring and training with a view to peer assisted programs in the disciplines.

As you might notice from the table of contents, many areas such as news of grants, promotions, publications, etc have not been serviced: perhaps (I am guessing here) AALLians have been too busy to get away from their daily tasks and report on such matters.

One of things I've really enjoyed while putting together material towards this newsletter is the chance to interview a fellow member of AALL. Linda Li from the University of Canberra kindly agreed to give her time, and it was a total pleasure talking to her - read the interview to get a glimpse of her positive and charming outlook on life!

After you've read this inaugural issue of the newsletter, please give us feedback on what you think is the value (or otherwise) of having an AALL e-newsletter. Did you enjoy this issue, and if so why? Or do you think such an initiative is redundant, given that we already have an active website where people can display their information, see what others have to say, and participate in a discussion forum too? Email me at Valli.Rao@anu.edu.au. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,
Valli

State activities & initiatives

Academic Skills & Learning Centre, ANU, Canberra

The Academic Skills and Learning Centre has been involved in a number of AALL activities in the early part of 2008, including hosting monthly Academic Language and Learning meetings which bring together ALL professionals from the ACT/regional NSW; producing the AALL Newsletter (Valli Rao); being a member of the AALL Grants Review Committee (Annie Bartlett); and hosting the AALL website.

New in Semester 1, the ASLC published a Research Essay Writing Guide for Masters coursework students, based on Gail Craswell and Stephen Milnes' materials development and teaching. Megan Poore has taken leave to work

An argument - almost ?



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The argument of the club.

for the Australian Catholic University in online education, and SkillSoup has been nominated by the ANU for a Carrick Award for programs that enhance Student Learning.

Academic Skills Program, University of Canberra

With the dramatic increase in the intake of students with lower UAI scores – now down to a minimum UAI score of 60 (from 75 in 2004) – the University is recognising the need for increased student support, and extra funding is flowing into learning development. We are building up a hub-and-spokes model of learning support: the hub is the professional learning development expertise of the Academic Skills Program and UC Library, while the spokes are the Faculty-based learning resource centres where peer-support is available on a discipline-specific basis. This will provide a strong network of learning support across the University – a kind of 'distributed' learning commons.

In addition, we have been funded for a 'Retention Project', which aims at following up with students who are on probation, having failed 50% or more of their subjects in the previous semester. We sent a letter to these students (380 in all) and about one third of them made appointments to talk to us. The project has been rewarding, as it has identified a number of students who really benefit from such support. We are looking forward to the results of a thorough evaluation of this project at the end of semester when students' results come out.

It may be of interest to AALLians that we won this funding partly because of report from the Planning and Statistics Unit of the University showing that, on average over a three-year period, students' GPA improved markedly after accessing individual consultations with the ASP (an increase of 0.256, on a scale where 4 is Pass and 5 is Credit). With 799 students accessing consultations, that's quite a significant contribution to student learning!

Victoria University, Melbourne

As of 2007, Language and Learning support at Victoria University is provided from the VU College, a newly created sixth Faculty of this dual sector University. The VU College was created to bring together the ALL, English language and literacy, preparatory and student career development activities and expertise of the University, and is innovative in that it is a dual sector Faculty - which is causing some teething troubles but promises interesting collaborations.

An example of the cross-sectoral collaborations is a project in the Law area. This project pilots a whole-pathway approach to linking subject content with English language for international students. The approach comprises the inclusion of materials with a Law focus in VU's preparatory English language course, along with the embedding of English language into internationalised curriculum in Business Law in the VU TAFE International Diploma of Business and in Corporate Law in HE degree programs.



A major activity at VU is our collaboration with the Library and IT in the VU Learning Commons. Individual support sessions are now provided from specific sites in the Learning Commons at several campuses. Student Rovers have been introduced in the Commons. These are successful later year students selected, trained and supported largely by ALL and Library staff, who provide assistance to other students on Library, IT and learning issues. This program was successfully piloted in 2007 and has now been extended to a total of three campuses. This project builds on the experience of helping students to support other students that we have gained from our expanding Academic Peer Mentor program, which is now both cross-sectoral and international, with the introduction of an Australia-China student peer mentoring activity.

Since 2006, ALL staff at VU have run an annual Teaching and Learning conference for Chinese staff teaching VU offshore (both English language and mainstream Diploma and Degree) programs in China. In 2008 this conference will focus on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, with an emphasis on generating collaborative research activities between VU and Offshore Partner university staff.

The above represents a few highlights of our current work. Of course, we are still continuing with traditional support (1:1 and workshops) and are looking at some new approaches including using TAFE Concurrent Study hours to add to students' class contact time for the purpose of discipline specific writing support in a Diploma subject; and online initiatives such as email

study tips and a software package on drug calculations for nurses. We also continue to work with staff.

RMIT, Melbourne

Staff at the Study and Learning Centre have become heavily involved in mentor training as part of the 'Learn, Engage, Aspire, Develop' (LEAD) Peer Mentoring/Peer Assisted Learning program. This program has four main areas: Academic, Community, Representation and Activities, and we're involved mainly with peer assisted programs in the academic area. These programs are mostly discipline-specific, where lecturers (called 'champions') contact the LEAD office to organise a peer mentoring program; senior students (the mentors) then volunteer to work with first year students assisting them with their course content and learning. Our job is to provide appropriate training to the mentors through workshops of around 5 hours duration for each program. Since early March we've trained mentors for fifteen programs.

Hopefully the SLC will soon be advertising for a Service Coordinator. This has still to be ratified and signed off, but we're cautiously confident. We've also been able to consolidate some sessional budget into fixed term contracts, which will enable us to maintain continuity.

The SLC has new offices in the Business Portfolio building (several blocks from the main city campus) and at our Brunswick Campus which is now staffed 5 days a week.



La Trobe University Academic Language and Learning, Melbourne

La Trobe is currently engaged in a process of promoting and enhancing Teaching and Learning, with the help of curriculum reform, more emphasis on teaching in career pathways, increased attention to the use of technologies in learning, more sharing of good practice, and more coherent planning for development of skills. New appointments will support these moves: our new PVC Teaching and Learning, Belinda Probert, commenced in January 2008, and Tom Angelo will take up the position of Executive Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning in July. The Faculty of Law and Management has appointed Dr David Spencer as Associate Dean, Academic.

New learning materials

QUT International College

The Cultural Bridge to Classroom Videos (discussed at the AALL Conference in November) are finished and now accessible on the QUT International College website. Please follow the link under About QUT International College and Projects: <http://www.qutic.qut.edu.au/about/projects.jsp>.

This website is open access and QUT are happy for other university advisers to use the video materials.

There are 8 five-minute videos with transcripts. This suite of trigger videos aims to create conversations about learning issues between students and educators. In each video there are points of tension that could act as an opening for discussion. These videos could trigger a re-think in the learner's/educator's approach to the way learning is perceived in university contexts.

Conferences & meetings

The *ACT/NSW ALL Forum for 2008* will be held at the University of Canberra on Friday 13 June, between 9.30 am and 4 pm. The theme is 'Reflective Practice in ALL'. For more details, please contact judy.couchman@canberra.edu.au

Teaching with Technology (TwT) was the theme of the *Learning Support Network (LSN) meeting* held at the Tweed Campus of Southern Cross University on 30 April. Representatives from ACU, GU, QIBT, QUT, SCU, UQ, USQ and USC networked and shared ideas about how they use technology in their teaching.

Attendees at the meeting participated in presentations on wikis, videos, virtual learning centres, Elluminate, streaming of lectures, and podcasting. These presentations highlighted the effectiveness of these tools in teaching but also pointed out some of the problems associated with them. The problems included the cost of the software, the cost of the production of the resources, the initial time commitment associated with setting up the technology and the perceived personal barriers to using it. However the advantages of using the technology outweigh these problems. Using technology in our teaching is effective because of the benefits it affords students. Resources and support are more readily available to them and they have more flexibility in accessing the resources and the support. The overall benefit is that there can be an equivalence of experience for all students whether they are on campus or studying at a distance. Attendees came away with new ideas for using technology in their teaching and they were able to network with those people who were already using the technology.

The next LSN meeting will be held in late November at UQ. If you would like any more information please contact Lindy Kimmins at kimminsl@usq.edu.au

Member interview: Linda Li, University of Canberra



Linda Li (third from left) with her colleagues Garry Collins, Judy Couchman and Kate Wilson from the University of Canberra

Linda Li is an academic skills adviser at the University of Canberra. She was born in China, and educated there and in the US and, more recently, in Australia. English language and literature was her focus for her BA from Beijing University and her MA from Zhongshan University. Her PhD, in second language acquisition and teaching, is from the University of Arizona. In addition to these degrees, in 2006 she also completed a Master of Social Science in Counselling from the University of South Australia.

Linda is happily married, with an 18 year old son. She and her husband were called the "campus couple" when they worked together at three different universities, albeit in different departments. Their son started uni in Sydney this year, and is doing a combined degree in commerce and science.

What languages, apart from English, do you speak?

Cantonese is my first language. I also speak Mandarin and a southern Chinese dialect.

Before you joined UC, what was your experience in the study skills area?

I joined UC as an academic skills advisor in 2005. What I'm doing at the moment is actually built upon my previous teaching experiences. I've taught writing and EAP courses at several universities before, first in China, then the US and Hong Kong. Each position has been a challenging and valuable experience for me. One of the most challenging yet valuable experiences was the four years I spent in the US being a full-time doctoral student and a half-time writing instructor with the university's composition program. It was the first time I taught native speakers of English as a non-native speaker myself, and the first time I practised holding one-to-one writing conferences with students. When I look back at it now, it's very much like the one-to-one consultation in academic advising. From that program I got useful training in teaching writing courses and I did my PhD thesis on academic writing in English as a second language. My thesis won the 1999 outstanding dissertation award in second language research from the American Educational Research Association.

Why do you think 'Academic skills advising' is an important area to work in?

It's because of the increasing number of students who can benefit so much from the kind of work we do for them in terms of academic skills advising. At the tertiary level, we expect our students to be independent learners and develop autonomy in their studies. Yet not all students are well prepared and there are diverse levels of readiness among the students. The kind of work we do actually gives the needed support to students to help them develop into capable and independent learners. We help them in achieving academic success. I believe we are doing very important jobs at the university and our work has great impact on student learning.

What did you want to be when you were young, and what is it about your current life that reflects this initial desire?

I was what's called a "bookworm" when I was a teenager. My ambition at that time was to go across the river to the other side of town where the university was located. I wanted to get into university and stay there. I wanted to become

a teacher at the university. In the Chinese educational system at that time, and probably still true today, the only way to achieve this was to get high grades. I was an extremely hard working student throughout high school, and I got a top mark to get into the top university in China, Beijing University.

I continued to study very hard at uni, reading widely and sometimes blindly, doing a lot of extra homework on my own. But I did work on finding the best ways to study and research on how to learn effectively and efficiently. I remember my first research project was a survey of second language learning strategies.

I quite enjoy studying and the learning process. It gives me a lot of intellectual stimulus and helps my brain stay 'young' and active. Perhaps it's the joy of studying and gaining new knowledge, and the belief in life-long learning that connects my past experience to my current life. I find myself learning a lot from my current work as an academic skills advisor, from students, staff and colleagues. I enjoy sharing

What's Grampa's crime? (answer on last page)



learning tips with students, and I like to see that my teaching makes a difference in the way students learn.

What things keep you motivated?

I always have the desire to do a good job, whatever I do, and the sense of being fulfilled and self-honouring that this brings. I also like the sense of achievement when I accomplish something, big or small, and of course the rewards and recognition gained from good, hard work. My love of life-long learning keeps me happily interested in everything I do.

What are some memorable life experiences?

I have lived in different countries and worked at different universities. My initial stay in each new place, and my start with each new job, is always a memorable experience. It's always a mixture of excitement and enthusiasm, curiosity and adventure, as well as anxiety and stress, joys and sorrows, always a lot of new things to learn, and a lot of challenges to tackle. In each place, I got to meet some memorable people, and they remain friends of mine around the world.

My memorable first impression of Canberra was the piece of blue sky with floating white clouds above the airport. It was my first look at this city, looking up instead of looking around. It was so clear, so serene and so beautiful, a picture that has imprinted itself in my memory, a lasting image.

Other experiences include the many interesting places I've visited in different parts of the world, for example, the breathtaking helicopter ride over the glaciers in New Zealand, the cycling tour in the pictorial lakes and mountain areas of Interlaken in Switzerland, my first farm stay weekend in Kangaroo Valley NSW and making friends with the farm owner from Switzerland who found Kangaroo Valley a mirror of his Swiss farmland... I'm looking forward to my next trip to the spectacular Iguazu Falls in Latin America!



What's your favourite book?

Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus by John Gray. It says things so true about men and women, and actually more than just men and women. Communication and relationships are all about genuine understanding — not only understanding between the sexes, but also between generations, races, cultures, communities, and individuals whether men or women. And it's all there in this book.

Anything else you wish to share?

I recently published an article exploring the use of focused freewriting in developing academic writing. The inspiration came from an intensive writing course I taught as part of my work in the UC academic skills program. The article appears in the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 2007, Volume 4, Issue 1, pp. 40-53. If people are interested, here is the link to the journal: <http://jutlp.uow.edu.au>.

Teach students (and ourselves) not to indulge in nosism



Do you indulge in nosism (also known as the 'editorial/royal we')?

Tell your students what Mark Twain said: "Only kings, presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial 'we'."

Did you know that the term 'nosism' comes from the Latin *nos* (we)?

Weird world of exams

Failure to groom

A 73-year-old Indian farmer who vowed not to marry before passing his high school exams has failed to get through for the 38th time. Shiv Charan Yadav has been taking the exams — normally given to school children aged 15 — every year since 1969, without success. This year, he failed everything except Sanskrit. Mr Yadav, who lives on his own in a small village, was in his 30s when he decided to better himself through education. "Once I pass, I want to get married to a girl under 30", said the ever-optimistic permanent student.

Walkie-talkie terror

A student sparked a terror alert in Sophia, Bulgaria, after he borrowed a walkie-talkie from his secret agent father to cheat in exams. He made the mistake of using the device in the middle of a security alert during US President George Bush's recent visit. Security agents working undercover with similar devices suddenly found their lines blocked. They traced the calls to Sofia's Medical University, and a squad of security agents searched the rooms until they found the cheating student, who was copying down data sent by a friend in the campus toilets.

What was Grampa's crime?

So, Grampa should've said, "The *fewer* jelly beans in the jar, the less time I have left." The rule (of course with all the exceptions that the English language always has!) is to use 'fewer' with objects that can be counted one-by-one and 'less' with qualities or quantities that cannot be individually counted.