

Breaking Down Academic Borders

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The workshop on Transmission of Academic Values in Asian Studies provided a opportunity unique in Australia for scholars from a variety of institutions and career stages to come together and discuss the state of the field. ¹ As a PhD student in history, I am primarily concerned with producing an examinable thesis, a focus that has led to an interest in styles of academic writing and the need for broader engagement beyond the tertiary sector. This paper will touch on the role of academic English in Asian Studies, the use and overuse of technical language and jargon, the role of the academic in a world of new information and technologies, and the need for the academy to reach out beyond our own self imposed borders. ² I cannot provide answers to the questions such discussions raise, but hope that the dialogue thus created will prove fruitful for the discipline of Asian Studies. ³

I've always been interested in inclusiveness between different groups of scholars and other people, whether from different areas,

¹ This paper was presented to the Transmission of Academic Values in Asian Studies Workshop at the Australian National University, Canberra, on the 26th of June 2009. It appears on the Conference Proceedings Website by permission of the author who retains copyright. This paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

² This paper is based on a deliberately colloquial presentation. As these papers will form a record of the proceedings of the Transmission of Academic Values in Asian Studies Workshop, I am reluctant to change the style and tone of the paper.

³ I would like to acknowledge the help I have received from Dominick Fitzsimmons and the Peer Writing Assistants of the Learning Centre at the University of New South Wales, with whom I have had many discussions on these topics.

BREAKING DOWN ACADEMIC BORDERS

generations, regions, countries, ideological standpoints or institutions. For me, a full and active research life is linked to experiencing as many different ideas, communications, areas and information as possible, and sharing as much as I can. This view may be hopelessly idealistic, but it is something that I strive for nonetheless. Thus the way that academics write up their work, and the reasoning behind such decisions, has long interested me. Some write so beautifully that they are a joy to read, and time passes without me noticing. Others are such a hard slog to read and understand that I can't read more than a paragraph or two at a time without needing a break and a lot of coffee. This paper will focus on the nature of academic writing within Asian studies and related disciplines, and on the need to make academic research and writing accessible to a wider audience than just tertiary-trained subject specialists. In particular, I will focus on the role of academic English in universities, as it is the language in which most Asian Studies scholars in Australia teach and publish.

There is a whole field of literature on the importance of academic English in the University environment. The teaching, role and uses of the language have all been researched and presented. However, I have read only lightly in the field, and generally in areas which align with my own interests and experiences. The purpose of this paper is not a literature review of the studies of others, but is based on and expresses personal postgraduate experience. Of course, I will generalise about the nature of the academic community as a whole, but when it comes to attitudes towards academic writing, perceptions are arguably as important as realities.

As postgraduates, the idea of the "thesis" looms over us as we work. We will have to conform to a particular set of standards, in order to pass and get our floppy hat. At the time where perhaps we should be at our most fearless and creative, are some of these academic strictures like wearing a straitjacket? If one more person asks me if I am using a post-colonial/post-modernist/modernist/etc conceptual framework, I may scream. There is pressure from academics and students to follow a certain way of framing research, or whatever trend is then popular (just because I am studying more than one country does not make my research truly "transnational"!). Generally,

BREAKING DOWN ACADEMIC BORDERS

I resent being pigeonholed according to what theories I may or may not follow. I still struggle to understand why any of us should be asked to write in a manner unintelligible to many of our students, let alone the interested layperson, though at the same time I understand the need for subject specific language. One response I encounter to this sort of academic writing is the perception that we in academia are using jargon to police our borders, even against each other.

I have had some wonderful arguments with other postgraduate students about these issues. Some say that all fields have jargon, and it is a necessary part of academic research. I should note that I have no objection to technical terms used for technical means. There are times where only a specific word used in a specific context will do. It is when an author seems to be writing in jargon or extreme theoretical waffling just to show off their own supposed knowledge that I get edgy. If other fields are useful, I want to use them. Preferably without needing a translator. I also wonder how often obscurity in language hides theoretical pretension, or a lack of understanding of the subject matter.

Other students ask whether it is possible to write well to academic standards in addition to making work intelligible to a general audience: academic writing that is fun to do and to read. Yes, it is possible! The best writers do it so very well. We may not be one of them, but it is a process and an achievement towards which we should aspire.

Yet so often, when writing in a formal academic style, something seems to happen to many authors. The words go dead on the page, and nothing seems to be able to breathe life back into them. The most fascinating subjects can become deadly dull. Words which can give such force and impetus and fascination, and wake the historical imagination, turn against the author and reader alike. George Orwell provides a well-known example of deadening jargon at work. The original text is from the Bible:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the

BREAKING DOWN ACADEMIC BORDERS

wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. ⁴

It becomes:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. ⁵

I know which I would prefer to read. Similar examples of deadening jargon can be found throughout history and Asian Studies, but as a postgraduate, I don't wish to offend or antagonize any researcher or writer by picking out their work in particular.

I am interested in the whole way that we write. Why is it academic writing can be so dead? No matter how much you poke or prod or massage it, it just lies there. I wonder whether at times we play up to the idea that for our work to be deemed sufficiently important or "academic", it must be complicated? Does the powerful idea of the rarified world, the "ivory tower", that we are somehow supposed to operate above and beyond the world of everyday life still have cultural currency? Being able to talk "high language" was once a mark of status. Does academic English fulfill that position, I wonder?

There is still a role for academic English. Some ideas and theories are so complex that it may be impossible to present them to the wider public, assuming laypeople were interested. Research for the sake of research, not just because a topic is popular or commercially viable, still has a part to play in university life. Perhaps academic English works on the same principle as Esperanto – a bridging language consistent across countries, of which no-one is a native speaker. The architecture of academic English, the register and vocabulary don't

⁴ George Orwell "Politics and the English Language", quoted in William Kelleher Storey, Writing History, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), p97.

⁵ *ibid.*

BREAKING DOWN ACADEMIC BORDERS

belong to any one country or university.⁶ The nature of academic English may be particularly important to many of us in Asian Studies, a discipline with many other languages. At least we have one in common. Nonetheless, if academic English still performs this important function, why do universities have “plain English policies”?⁷ We as academics need to work on striking a balance between the level of technical language required to express complex ideas and events, and still making our findings accessible to students, if not the wider community.

Is continuing academic jargon linked to the impact of new technology, such as the internet, which both reveals and hides such a wide range of information? Suddenly everyone is a “historian” and “commentator”; how do we continue to define and defend our relevance? Perhaps the above practices are linked to a perceived role of academics as gatekeepers. Ease of communication and access to reference materials means that we may be suffering a relevance crisis. If anyone can search Google Books, or JSTOR, or online newspapers from around the world, government documents or archived footage, and come to their own conclusion, what is the role of the academic? Surely there has to be a way that we can illustrate the importance of our training, the years spent learning to analyse and connect information, the fact that in an age of instant information gratification, it is still essential to THINK?

Information is still power, and academics are trained to spot what is hidden or missing, or simply not studied. We exhibit a high level of analysis, seeing the links that no-one else spots, exposing new debates and extending new ideas, investigating and interrogating theories, as well as continually renegotiating the old ways of doing things. But if we keep our findings in the academic community, are we doing everyone a disservice? Yes, a certain amount of training is required to function at our level, and there will always be a place for so-called “pure” research. Even in academia, however, a substantial

⁶ Thanks to Dominick Fitzsimmons for discussions on this topic, and the Esperanto analogy.

⁷ University of Technology Sydney Publications and Governance Unit, Plain English Policy, <http://www.gsu.uts.edu.au/policies/plainenglish.html> (last accessed 20/9/2009).

BREAKING DOWN ACADEMIC BORDERS

proportion of students come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.⁸ To drop them into the middle of academic jargon must be a huge culture shock, on top of the differences in educational systems that many are already struggling to overcome.

I believe we should reach out further than our students. Books and articles in non-specialised publications, as well as comment in the media, are all possible options. I know that resources are scarce, and people and governments often don't care. In addition, the current model of university funding does not often recognize broader engagement, despite the usefulness of blogs and other technology to the academic and wider communities.⁹ But if we turn our backs on the greater public because they are not interested, we are sentencing ourselves to even further irrelevance.

So where do we compromise? I don't have a solution. As a postgraduate, I have more or less accepted that a fair chunk of my thesis will not be publishable, let alone understandable to a non-specialist. I don't mean poorly written – there is no way my Supervisors would allow it, let alone my own feelings on the subject. But it is likely to be too specialized, in language and subject alike. I know that there is a reason to write the way that we do for a thesis. We have to demonstrate a very specific set of skills in order to obtain a degree, and we carry out a level of analysis that may well be difficult if not unintelligible for those outside the field to understand. But to some degree this is only the case because we make it so. In defining our relevance by policing our borders, have we shot ourselves in the foot? Are we as a community of scholars getting smaller and smaller and more out of touch, at the very time where we need to be making

⁸ In 2007, 169 378 international students were enrolled in higher education in Australia. This represented 18.8% of the student population. Australian Education International, Canberra: Australian Government, http://aei.gov.au/AEI/Media/MediaFAQ_HE#How many international students are enrolled at Australian higher education institutions? (viewed 20/9/09).

⁹ For example, Andrew Walker and Nicholas Farrelly, New Mandala, Canberra, Australian National University, <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/> (viewed 01/10/2009) is an extremely useful resource.

BREAKING DOWN ACADEMIC BORDERS

ourselves more and more public? I seem to have been hopelessly optimistic in hoping that our change of government might mean more focus on Asian studies, but if we don't keep ourselves in the public eye, and trying to build bridges, what chance do we have? We need to overcome the artificial divide that we ourselves have created.