Is learning and teaching terminology a barrier to engagement?

Catriona Bell, Michaela Hubmann, Lindsay Knox, Jill Northcott & Jessie Paterson

Outline

- Starting point

- Defining our terms

- Methods & process
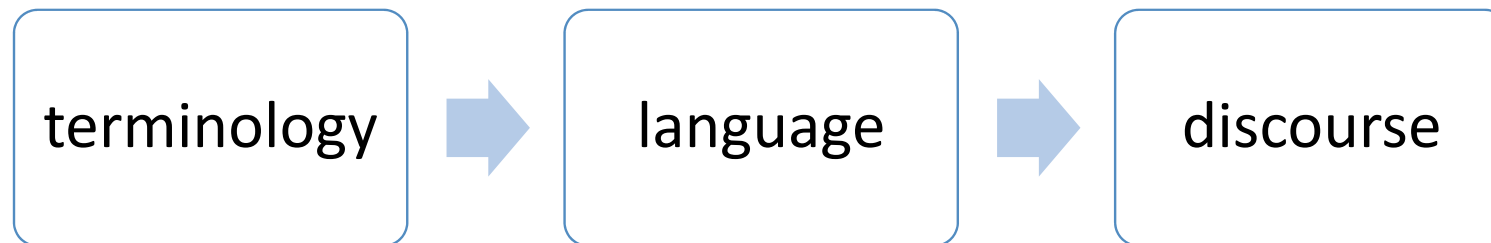
- What was the answer?

- Outcomes & implications

Starting point

- Conversations

- Previous research projects

- Professional roles and interests

Defining our terms

terminology → language → discourse

Methods & Processes

- Original aims

- Exploration

- Process

Language is a barrier to engagement

'However, I think there were times when language might be a little bit of a barrier in some ways. That if you didn't speak the language you maybe, couldn't contribute.'

'I think language is a barrier to any learning […] So, if you want to learn about what I'm trying to teach you about, I'm going to use all these big fancy words and you're going to have to know them because they mean certain things. I want to be able to say them rather than having to use the two-line explanation each time.'

Language is a barrier to engagement

'I think some terms are very vague and a bit of a catch-all.'

'There are words around teaching and learning that are alien.'

'There are a couple of new terms and terminologies that have been circulated recently in the field, but I needed to do that personal effort to get to know them themselves. If I detach myself from the research aspect of the teaching, when I come back, I would find out that I missed quite a lot because I am no longer aware of particular terms that came to the discipline when I was not following up on that.'

Language is a barrier to engagement but barriers can be overcome

'You go through the pain of dealing with the terminology, and as a result of that, you have gained.'

'But some people found it a lot easier than others and mainly because they were from **an arts background** so they were used to this kind of reflective style of writing. This kind of a little bit less black and white type of language.'

'I think from **a scientific perspective** we're very used to writing and explaining things clear cut. There's no descriptive, there's no discourse, it is literally how it is and you know you can't get used to that. Whereas when you try and read an article like that it's sometimes difficult to interpret if you're not that way inclined which can put barriers up and make it a challenge. At the same time, it's like learning a new skill, and if you have the support, I think particularly through like the certificate that I've been talking about, that does help you approach it and forces you to read articles and engage with it.'

Language is not a barrier

'[…]it helps people to engage because it makes it clear.'

'I always thought it was quite clear and straightforward. Because I see the materials that you engage with and teach are separate from your experience of being taught or learning about teaching and learning. It is a specific vocabulary to that and I have personally just never encountered any difficulty with that.'

Language as a proxy for non-engagement

- **Hostility:** ('arms folded' 'encroaching my space').

- **Badge of honour:** 'I don't understand half of the words of what you just said.' 'They are almost proud of it.'

Hidden discourses

'[...]a sort of corporate aspect to the language that gets used around teaching and learning.'

'People rebel against, that they don't like because it doesn't sit well with how a lot of people picture what academia is supposed to be about.'

'Words like **policy** and **consistency** and **framework.**'

Implications for Learning & Teaching

- Needs to be discipline embedded (this is increasingly the case)
- Where centrally provided it should engage discipline specific expertise
- Need for those leading development activity to be aware of their own use of L&T terminology in order not to create unnecessary barriers to engagement

Implications for our own professional learning

- Confirmation of what we already thought i.e. language is not the only barrier

- Important for those working in academic development to acknowledge these barriers explicitly

- People in different disciplines think very differently about the same materials i.e. thinking like a vet/ a scientist/a lawyer/ an English literature scholar…

Any questions?