How Relevant is Relevance?: Weighing the Relative Value of Relevance and Situatedness against Disciplinary Integrity in the Teaching of French in Australian Universities

Alistair Rolls and Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan
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Alistair Rolls, The University of Newcastle, New South Wales, AUSTRALIA
Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan, The University of Newcastle, New South Wales, AUSTRALIA

Abstract: It is our aim in this paper to address the needs of French disciplines in the Australian Higher Education sector in the light of the ‘languages in crisis’ phenomenon and the demands being made on departments to establish the ‘real world’ relevance of their disciplines in a vocationally focused teaching environment. French departments have two fundamental options open to them: they can emphasise their communicative function by specialising in français de spécialité, types of French adapted to professional fields, and hence their potential value-added input into the programs of all university students; alternatively, they can seek to locate themselves as a broad-based academic discipline within Arts-based programs, in which, arguably, irrelevance lies at the very core of their importance. The negative aspects of these two scenarios are, respectively, the reduction of the discipline to the status of service provider and its disappearance due to dwindling numbers. It is with the aim of negotiating the binary terms of this conundrum, and of locating the specific needs of the academic French department within those of the local Anglo-saxon community, that we propose to investigate the use of a specifically French approach to French language teaching (la didactique du Français Langue Étrangère) as an efficient and effective means of teaching French in Australia. In addition to using a methodology initiated in France, we shall consider the ramifications of extending the university context beyond its current parameters by going into local primary schools (taking the inside out) and using on-line student exchanges with French counterparts as well as on-line materials designed in France (bringing the outside in). We shall thus consider whether the solution to situation-specific exigencies is actively to decontextualise the teaching and disciplinary context.

Keywords: Disciplinary Integrity, Vocational Focus, Relevance, Situatedness / Situation, French Language, Didactics

In recent years the Australian education system has vociferously turned its back on what the media has dubbed ‘critical literacy’. In 2005 Irina Dunn, executive director of the New South Wales Writers Centre, decried “the pestilence of postmodern theory” whilst Rod Welford, Queensland’s Education Minister, waged war against postmodernist “mumbo jumbo”. Their concern was to rid the classroom of new-fangled ideas and to get back to basics; they were deliberately casting themselves as educational traditionalists, defenders of the essential values of reading stories. Whilst these comments are understandable insofar as they pertain to the primary and secondary sectors, what is of greater concern is the way in which postmodernism has been tainted across the board, its name becoming an object of ridicule even in the echelons of higher education. A move back to ‘traditional teaching values’ has taken us away from what have become the fundamentals, and indeed the traditional values, of literary research (at least since the early 1970s). This disconnection—between teaching and research—has also been accompanied by a reversal of another traditional dichotomy. Where universities once celebrated their own irrelevance, offering the humanities (that which makes us human, we might recall) to an educated elite (where education still meant ‘leading away’ from the baseness of existence), they are now rushing to prove their relevance, i.e. to show how their concerns can be mapped directly onto society, leading not away but towards the mundanity of human existence. “How can you make your discipline more relevant?” we were recently asked at a university retreat. “But surely we are irrelevant, and if we only reflect society, why not just have society?” was our reply.

In this paper we shall take a cursory look at the question of relevance. And our starting point will be postmodern in nature. Rather than perpetuating this Manichean opposition of the irrelevant and the relevant, or simply reversing its polarity and seeking a return to pure irrelevance, we shall question whether higher education should not be considered an act of deconstruction, a critical engagement with the irre-
evant. In this way, to study, or ‘to read’ a discipline (as we used to say) is a way of activating that discipline, to actualise what is in a virtual state. Relevance, then, not as the opposite of irrelevance but as a process, a ‘making relevant’. And in order to allow this, the discipline, the virtual entity to be read, must have borders; it must present itself as different, as removed and as something to be moved towards. In this scenario, the learner does not passively digest the irrelevant, or ask that knowledge be uploaded directly into her; instead, like the reader of a self-referential text, who is challenged and has to engage with the text and ‘make it mean something’, the learner changes the material and is changed by it. If the barrier is solid, nothing enters or exits; and if there is no barrier, no change is possible; if on the other hand the barrier is permeable, then exchange occurs and both sides are activated and changed. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remind us, in their famous description of the rhizome, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (as between a wasp and an orchid) can only occur at the junction of two heterogeneous entities. For learners, too, their encounter with a discipline can only lead to change when what they learn is different from what they encounter in the real world outside their studies.2

And so to our specific frame of reference. In order to frame a discussion of the state of French Studies in the contemporary Australian university, it is important to speculate as to when the words I am a French lecturer stopped making sense; or rather, when the gap appeared between the job of a lecturer in Modern Languages as understood inside the discipline and outside the discipline. For if we wish here to interrogate what it means to be a French lecturer, it is because this disconnection in the perceived role of the discipline has ramifications at more than one interface: first, there is the disconnection between the discipline and other colleagues in higher education (that is to say that one’s colleagues in the same faculty do not understand how the French discipline works, and also that this ultimately permeates the sector as a whole, with potentially highly damaging consequences); second, there is a serious misapprehension on the part of undergraduate students as they enrol in their major sequences at the university (romantic ideas of wine and cheese quickly cede to patterns of verb conjugation, of course, but crucially, the idea that learning a language is somehow a ‘soft option’ or ‘a nice little extra’ results in often disastrous initial test results and thence to reduced enrolments, and so it goes on).

But surely, what we have just outlined is symptomatic of our contemporary society, in which, across the world, books are constantly being written about the role of the arts,3 about postmodernism, and in which the role of higher education differs in at least two major ways from the ivory-tower ideal that still exists and, indeed, only exists in the minds of many of those academics who are drawn into it: universities function now, it would appear, to palliate falling standards in the secondary sector and to furnish employers with batches of readymade employees. So, we arrive at a series of questions: What does it mean to be an Arts lecturer today? How is the French discipline’s status more problematic than, say, that of English? And what are the specifics of the Australian situation?

The plight of the university sector in the United States is summed up well by Nannerl O. Keohane, for whom the tendency for a blurring of the boundaries between “those [institutions] for specialized research and those for technical training” has led to

[m]ore and more institutions becoming full-service organizations, so that many American universities today provide education across a very broad range, from remedial education for admitted baccalaureate students whose standards for preparation have not been high, through a full rage of graduate and professional training, to extension programs for senior citizens and executive education programs for corporations and newly chosen government officials.4

This has necessarily led to universities becoming in Keohane’s opinion “less clear in their sense of mission, less differentiated from one another and from the community colleges and technical institutes” (130). In this light, a diminishing sense of disciplinary identity is merely a mixe en abyme of a sector-wide breakdown. The question here is whether the best way for the university to serve the communities amongst which it exists is for barriers to be brought down. Rather, do we not need clear demarcations in order to function?

At the level of federal governance, the Australian sector has acted in two ways in response to this situation. It has sought to demarcate institutions one from another in terms of disciplinary specialisation and to force universities to pursue external funding however they can (which has meant, across the

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3 A good recent example is John Carey’s discussion of the role of art, which despite concentrating on the Fine Arts poses some broader questions with clarity: What Good are the Arts? (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

board, the tireless pursuit of the full-fee-paying overseas student and, in particular, the Asian market), with the result that everybody has chosen the ‘best’ and thus the same specialisations to mark their difference. As a result, the relationship between university and community has become vexed and paradoxical. The opinion of Julie Bishop, the Federal Minister for Education in the final terms of the Howard government, according to which Australian universities could not successfully pursue excellence (or perceived excellence) internationally whilst trying to cater to all students’ needs in terms of the disciplines that they offered, appeared to contradict the current service-industry zeitgeist (i.e. how can one act as a service provider to a community when one does not offer a full range of the products required, or desired, by that community?). Furthermore, the idea that certain disciplines should only be offered in certain cities also presupposes a high level of student mobility, which, whilst traditionally accepted in the UK, for example, does not take into account the sheer distance between major cities in Australia. How can excellence be achieved in this way, then, without negative effects on communities of students, especially in regional areas where issues of mobility are the most marked?

To promote institutional differentiation along discipline lines whilst at the same time pushing a vocational-education agenda also presupposes, or at least generates, a further disconnection, this time between teaching and research. It is logical to assume that university excellence would be research driven, especially if most students across the country were unable to attend the university campus, and that the local communities would be catered to, in terms of their employment needs, by a raft of service-teaching courses. Academic staff would thus become either teachers or researchers. Of course, this has already been problematized; indeed, the ramifications of the teacher/researcher divide in terms of disciplinarity were clearly evinced by American sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander in 1993. Alexander’s response to the falling standards of teaching amongst prominent academics (trained, encouraged, funded and, ultimately, employed to do research but contracted and paid to teach undergraduates) was to create undergraduate courses completely contextualised in terms of specific communities external to the university and removed from the specifically academic context of the discipline:

Why must undergraduate knowledge be packaged so artificially? Why ‘sociology’ instead of ‘society’? Why ‘political science,’ ‘history,’ ‘geography,’ and ‘economics’ instead of the study of a specific government within its particular historical and territorial context, with full consideration given to its current economic circumstances?

The (perhaps obvious) answer is that education must necessarily be abstract in order that learners may then go on to apply it in whichever context they find themselves. To contextualize education, to seek to make it relevant, is (again perhaps) ultimately to make it irrelevant (a kind of pre-life series of real-life scenarios). But this is to misconstrue Alexander’s point; the principal barrier that he wished to lift was not that between the discipline and socially contextualised knowledge but that between the academics, “[for many of whom] it is very difficult […] to think beyond their disciplinary constraints” and who are “fundamentally uninterested in teaching” (Alexander 1993), and their undergraduate students. And Alexander’s “real world” and “real needs and desires” are also those of the university itself and the undergraduate student, respectively.

Some fifteen years on and French lecturers in Australia are still experiencing the same tension. Indeed, the situation of languages has deteriorated to such an extent in Australia that in June 2007 Australia’s leading universities (the Group of Eight) called a summit entitled Languages in Crisis. According to their discussion paper, “the language crisis Australia is experiencing cannot be solved by one sector of the education system alone. A co-ordinated national approach involving schools, community groups, universities and state and territory governments is required.” This document drew on the sentiments of the then Minister for Education so as to expose the disconnection between the (official national) desire for Australians to become more competent in languages and the direction of higher education, which continues to see languages sidelined along with other Arts-based disciplines. The Group of Eight’s response was to seek to embed university languages departments within the (national and local) needs of communities.

Anne Freadman, A. R. Chisholm Professor of French at the University of Melbourne, has suggested a system for Australia that involves a network of cooperation between the Group of Eight, such that diminishing quantities and variety of languages expertise can be shared between institutions. In this way, the major metropolitan universities would form their own community:

The Go8 might like to consider creating specialist centres, say one in each of the universities, their specialties being complementary and not overlapping. [...] Students could be funded to attend intensive courses in, say, ‘languages for economics and business’, ‘languages for architecture and engineering’, ‘languages for health and social services’.8

Clearly, the awarding of grants could be used to overcome obvious problems of student mobility, and this idea would appear to represent a positive step towards the desired model of alignment of academia and professional requirements. The movement, however, is still across a binary opposition: from the discipline to the professional community. It should be made clear that Anne Freadman is obviously not suggesting a generalised or systematic replacement of generic language classes with language classes tailored to specific purposes, but her comments are indicative of this tendency to move towards a vocational education system in universities.

So, the need to cooperate with the move towards this professionalisation of higher education, or at least the desire to palliate its effects, is arguably having the opposite effect to that hoped for by academics like Alexander. The deconstruction of abstract academic disciplines and the movement towards relevance is in fact increasing the divide between teaching and research. In Australia, which has for some time been feeling the disconnection between research-led academic work (often in the Sciences) and teaching-heavy discipline areas (with Arts increasingly contributing to—or servicing—more vocationally oriented programmes), the leading research universities have begun (increasingly since 2007) to offer teaching-intensive positions.8 Perversely or perhaps logically and deliberately, dominant discourse within universities seemingly belies this situation. There has, for example, been a parallel move nationally to promote the ‘nexus’ between teaching and learning.9 It is to be hoped that this nexus will develop into a genuine negotiation of the research/teaching dichotomy (and not simply a cynical push to encourage academics to produce research based on their teaching over and above or entirely separate from their ‘own research’).

Keohane offers one of the most nuanced negotiations of this conundrum as she carves a path between a defence of new directions in higher education and a traditional view of the importance of campus-based education (134-35), according to which the conceptual spaces of ‘teaching’ and ‘research’ are mapped onto the physical and virtual spaces of the university environment. Her prediction that the traditional campus will survive into the twenty-first century, even as teaching methods become increasingly indebted to digital technologies, might seem a bold one, but it seems likely that a new space, be it in the form of a physical campus or a virtual arena, digital or conceptual, will need to be negotiated. And negotiation, in a poststructuralist and postmodernist sense, must lie at the heart of new configurations of learning in higher education.

The vital negotiation that is continuing to happen between research and teaching brings into question both the concepts of disciplinarity and learning itself. Traditionally, Arts-based disciplines have defined themselves according to their research. As such, their identity is clearly legible in much the same way as the meaning of a literary work is clear, pure and uncontaminated by the ‘real world’. This clarity of meaning has been considered by (post-)structuralist critic Roland Barthes as the very definition of the literary work, and as such classic literature is readerly.10 In this way, a reader can lose herself in a good book and be carried away by the story precisely because its meaning demands no active speculation on her part; to read, in the sense of imbibing the readerly text, is momentarily to suspend one’s identity and to remove oneself from existence. Literature of this kind, by its abstraction, has posed as salvation from the nausea of existence, and by extension, literary (and other Arts) faculties have owed their existence to a belief in their essential value. They are then, traditionally and fundamentally, irrelevant. Or rather, they are relevant in the sense of being “connected with, pertinent to, the matter in hand”; when that matter is immaterial or abstracted from the existential realm; that is to say, that they are “correspondent or proportional to something” only insofar as that something is not there.11 And the undergraduate experience can be likened to that of the reader who loses herself for the period of her studies, ingesting the knowledge of her readerly canon.

And yet, the irony is that Barthes’s theorisation of the readerly is based on a belief that all text is in fact writerly. In other words, the meaning of any text, classically literary or otherwise, is a process of negotiation. In the light of Barthes’s essay on the death

7 “Languages in Crisis National Languages Summit”, National Press Club, Canberra 7 June 2007, 10am-1pm, p. 7 (accessed 27 May 2008).
8 The University of Queensland is one such institution, although it and others have steered clear of ‘teaching-only positions’.
9 The University of Newcastle is one such example: Professor Pat Michie, Pro Vice-Chancellor Research at Newcastle is an advocate of this nexus.
of the author, text is always already born again in
the ‘meaninglessness’ of the work. Deconstruction-
ist readings of text are predicated on a necessary
abandonment of clear identity on the part of the
author and work; and the reader, too, must not content
herself with a momentary, superficial suspension of
her own identity: in order to negotiate ‘meaning’,
she must embrace the abandonment of her own
identity to join with and in the production of text.
By writing the text, or producing the writerly, the
reader constructs a new identity at her interface with
the literary work. In other words, the virtualisation
of the written work (its dissolution into an infinite
number of potential ‘meanings’) goes hand in hand
with an active engagement in the world of the reader,
who actualises (one instance of) her potential for
meaning, grounding it in the textual meaning pro-
duced. The writerly text lies then not only at the in-
terface of the reader and the work but, arguably, at
that of the virtual and the actual, the abstract and the
real. The virtualisation of the postmodern identity is
accompanied by an actualisation of reading, and the
Arts disciplines are suddenly made relevant (even
in spite of themselves).

If we apply this model of writerly engagement to
the undergraduate experience, the discipline aban-
dons the unity of its identity, offering itself to the
active interpretation of its students; in turn, the stu-
ets tend towards their corpus of study, actively
participating in the meaning-making process and,
at the same time, virtualising any pre-conceived notions
of their own identity. The interface at which this
happens is a state of flux, a process that we can label,
for the sake of argument, ‘learning’.

The problem with arguing for the inherent rele-
ance of the irrelevant lies in the increasing demands
made on students by the workplace. In this scenario,
relevance is opposed to irrelevance in a dichotomy
that admits no negotiation. The identity of the student
intention on occupation-based outcomes is under social
pressures that often preclude time spent challenging
meaning. Vocational education becomes at best, an
exercise in digestion and, at worst, an oxymoron. The
disciplines become entrenched and the students
intransigent, and movements between the two take
the form of ‘dumbing down’ and ‘giving the people
what they want’.

The question we should like to raise here is
whether there are practical ways that an Arts-based
discipline, such as French, can evolve in such a way
as to enhance the learning process by moving to-
wards the students at the same time as maintaining
disciplinarity.

According to Sidney I. Dobrin’s review of three
books covering the teaching of English departments,
"[i]n many ways, it seems that the quest for identity
has become the central mission of contemporary
English departments. As we move into the twenty-
first century, the role of English departments within
universities and within larger world communities
has been called into question both within the disci-
plines under the broad umbrella of English studies
and by critics outside the academy," Dobrin’s US-
context is reflected in Australia in a wave of recent
calls for a return to traditional teaching (particularly
of English and History). What is of most interest
to us here is that disciplinarity, in terms of English,
is understood first and foremost through the concept
of teaching. This clearly presupposes a significant
alignment between the courses taught within an
English discipline and the research produced by its
staff. The demands of economic rationalism in the
context of (regional) Australia, are such that this
alignment is much less common within the discipline
of Modern Languages; indeed, there is a clear discon-
nection between programmes made up almost exclu-
sively of language teaching and individual lecturers’
research, which falls increasingly into one of the area
studies not represented for undergraduate consump-
tion. In Australia, this has led to a doubly difficult
situation for Modern Languages disciplines: first,
within Languages departments themselves, teaching
and research, as opposed to feeding into each other
in a nexus, ultimately co-exist in a non-productive,
oppositional way. Academics are forced to increase
their student numbers in order to justify their exist-
ence and to group these students, wherever possible,
to large groups (which often runs against recog-
nised best practice in terms of effective language
teaching), and second, other disciplines, especially
in situations where institutional memories are
shortest, fail to recognise that Modern Languages
disciplines extend beyond their language-teaching
function (an assumption that is increasingly borne
out by the reality of increasing teaching workloads).
Ultimately, understandings of disciplinarity, as
applied to Modern Languages, vary both across institu-
tions and within institutions. If Dobrin’s disciplinary
“quest for identity” has failed to shape the discourse
of Australian French departments, it is because of
the disconnection of external and internal understand-
ings of the French discipline (academics in French

14 We should argue that this appeal towards the traditional implies a return to the digestive, spoon-feeding model outlined above. It is, as
such, a short-sided and delimiting approach.
15 These two tendencies are known in Australia as “bums on seats” and “efficiency”.
16 For example, outside the older Australian universities (the Sandstones).
Studies find solace in one another’s work at conferences, where discipline coincides with area studies, typically literary analysis in Australia, and articulate the needs and desires of their discipline in their own institutions in terms of the language-teaching role that is their lot.

These differences between Modern Languages and English notwithstanding, there are resonances between their respective situations in terms of the tension between the pull towards the outside world and introspective disciplinary reflection. As Dobrin notes, both inside and outside the academy “vocal critique articulates a need for English departments to ‘return to their roots’ and concentrate primarily on teaching ‘the basics’ in order to become better places for students to learn,” whilst “[still other, such as] bell hooks and Michael Eric Dyson, have insisted that as teachers and scholars we must move beyond the confines of the campus to create a public intellectualism that shares in knowledge-making with the world beyond the institution of the university” (Dobrin, 693). In other words, the modern discipline must maintain the abstraction on which it is founded and take its wares beyond its own parameters, engaging in this process of relevance. For, as we have tried to show with our deconstructive model based on the written text, relevance can work in a discipline’s favour as long as it is not opposed to irrelevance but, rather, construed as a negotiation of—and a process that remains fully conscious of the tension between—the abstract and the real.

Inevitably, Dobrin’s focus turns to Stanley Fish, who seeks to celebrate the divide between faculty and the world beyond. It is, after all, true that when Arts departments claim to broaden the mind and enable students to negotiate the problems of the world, we do this primarily in an abstract way, via the study of literature (in the case of English). As has been stated, this is the rub: in order to be relevant the Arts must necessarily continue to concentrate on their irrelevance. To seek to enhance relevance by a (research and teaching) focus on application of abstract knowledge to the world (as promoted by Alexander) might ultimately lead to further and eventually complete erosion of the (need for) the Arts. The problem for Modern Languages is arguably comparable, identical or markedly different: an emphasis on French literary studies might certainly appear to Dobrin’s “vocal critique” to be more clearly irrelevant than the study of language, which is to do with communication (between people in a setting that, if not real-world, is immediately exportable into the real world). And yet, those who protest a love of languages do not see this link to the ‘real world’ of the marketplace so clearly; for them, Languages are as beautifully irrelevant as ‘English’, which is, after all, happily understood as being a language and a discipline.

Disciplinarity is vital insofar as it embodies a mass of knowledge and the potential of that knowledge to be mobilized by students and academics. We should agree with Arabella Lyon that disciplinary units and unity, when transformed into political entities (again, often by economic factors, even threats of redundancies, which often discriminate at disciplinary level), are cumbersome and potentially counter-productive. Notably, they tend to preclude exchange: “Like so many discussions of disciplinarity, territorial ones argue for a static structure and fail to allow adequately for either changing aims and actions within a discipline or overlapping aims and actions among disciplines.” For there to be such a thing as interdisciplinarity these borders must act permeably. Indeed, for disciplinarity to become productive of multiple layers of discourse, the idea of the barrier needs to be embraced in all its potential ambivalence; instead of simply acting to exclude, the barrier needs to be a membrane across which outside influences can flow, and which acts to promote exchange.

In this light, the emancipation of disciplinarity, via a deconstructive process called ‘learning’, enables individual disciplines to maintain both (apparently mutually exclusive) sides of the relevance/irrelevance dichotomy: the disciplinary body can remain within borders, abstracted from the real world and pristinely irrelevant, whilst simultaneously tending towards the world, always already being mobilized by groups of learners and made relevant. This certainly ties in with the fluid model of disciplinarity put forward by Lyon:

But whatever the varying factors in any single case of interdisciplinarity, disciplines are not nation-states with inviolate borders. The border conceit which we have too long respected has limited explanatory value. Certainly, it is not helping us to understand the complex nature of interdisciplinarity. Our perceptions of interdisciplinarity are better served by metaphors of ‘river,’ ‘flow,’ and ‘confluence,’ metaphors that emphasize the process of coming to knowledge and the distant outflows of a discipline’s decisions and agendas. While the territorial metaphor emphasizes our standing position, our standpoint, it diminishes the social consequences of our disciplined actions by circumscripting our ‘field’ of action. (Lyon, 692)

Indeed, Lyon’s call for a “giving up [of] territory” is the model that we have attempted to apply in our development of the French discipline at the University of Newcastle.

In the wake of an economic restructure that saw a rise in professional programmes and the fragmentation of the Department of Modern Languages into a number of disciplines (including French) of a larger school, it became clear that it was no longer viable for specialist courses, such as French literature or culture, to continue to be offered to the diminishing numbers of students enrolled in generalist programs, such as the Bachelor of Arts. It also became increasingly clear that the attitude whereby French disciplinarity should be maintained through the retention of a full range of language and literature courses under the tricolore of the ‘French discipline’ was a reactionary stance. Furthermore, such a defence of the ‘discipline’ could only lead to redundancy; in other words, the discipline had to embrace efficiency or lose its staff, which forced serious reflection as to what a discipline could be without its practitioners.

The initial impetus behind our reconfiguration and reconceptualisation of disciplinarity was, therefore, born of the same pragmatism that has been taking French Studies sector-wide towards service teaching.

Our first step, then, was what Barthes might consider a ‘wilfully blissful’ abandonment of our own ‘identity’. We decided, against the weight of a longstanding Australian tradition of French Studies, that we could teach French literature in English. And not only in English, but under the banner of the English discipline, as comparative literature, or ‘English’, courses. This decision was efficient (numbers of students enrolling on a course of French literature instantly increased by around 2,000%); but it was also a movement back towards disciplinarity. By removing literature from a small-sized French program that had already become synonymous with the French language, it could finally be taught for its own sake, as literature, and not as a vehicle for complementary language acquisition. In other words, this move, ostensibly away from the national tradition of French disciplinary teaching, was in fact fully aligned with the nexus of teaching and research. For whilst the Australian sandstone universities have always supported the use of the French language as a teaching tool, the Australian Society for French Studies has for just as long embraced research into area studies, and especially literature. The result was that the teaching of French at the University of Newcastle, even as it was servicing the offering of the English discipline, was gaining a fuller range of disciplinarity and aligning the teaching and research of its academic staff. What appeared as a deteritorialisation of disciplinarity at the local level (the French Discipline) was equally a mapping onto a literary program, and thus a reterritorialisation of Disciplinarity at the national level (French Studies in Australia).

Parallel to this devolution of the French literature offering was our reconceptualisation of the teaching of language, which was now the full focus of our French-prefixed courses, or our core program. And our belief was that, here too, the desired level of disciplinary abstraction, or irrelevance, could be maintained in a generic language course, even if trends in contemporary language teaching are towards highly contextualized methodologies. Therefore, it is with one eye still very firmly on the traditional skills of parsing, grammatical analysis and syntactical considerations of register that we are increasingly applying the specific communication situations (and situatedness of communication) of contemporary didactics. Again, a permeable approach to teaching space, such as that adumbrated by Keohane, has allowed us to maintain a simultaneously double motion, inwards (of students into the discipline) and outwards (of the discipline towards the community).

In spatial terms, our understanding of permeable disciplinary boundaries as membranes promoting exchange, shares an ethos with work such as that done on university art galleries by Carol S. Jeffers, who argues for a reconfiguration of the gallery, a space that “can find itself isolated at the edge of campus, located in a metaphorical space known as a ‘borderland’ that lies somewhere between school and community.” For Jeffers too, an understanding of otherness requires a simultaneous maintenance and crossing of boundaries: “To enter this borderland is to cross arbitrary, even ‘unnatural’ boundaries, to understand ‘otherness,’ and to begin experiencing the university art gallery as a nexus of meaning, culture, and context.”

In terms of the teaching of French language at the University of Newcastle, the outward movement has included the forging of strong links with regional schools, community groups like the Alliance Française, Australian metropolitan universities and other universities abroad. In this way our students can interface with French beyond the classroom: the Alliance Française’s activities, for example, provide multiple and invaluable opportunities for our students to communicate with native speakers of French whom they would not otherwise meet. We have also initiated a number of French classes in primary schools and we shall soon take our French teaching into the local high-school community. And whilst we, as Keohane, continue to base our teaching around contact with a real teacher in a real classroom, we also make intensive use of Internet to connect our

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19 From 2009 French will be involved in the University of Newcastle’s Gifted and Talented Program. www.newcastle.edu.au/giftedandtalented and www.merewether-h.schools.det.nsw.edu.au]
students to both the real and virtual worlds through on-line materials designed in France. Our advanced students now have the possibility of exchanging emails with French students learning English in a French tertiary institution.

This de-/re-territorialisation of disciplinarity is even more important for a ‘regional’ university like Newcastle. Even though the University is the main employer in the region, this position is to some degree the result of a fluctuating industrial environment, so it is difficult to say whether Newcastle can in fact define itself as a university city. There is no doubt that the dynamic that exists between the institution and the surrounding population in established university towns does not as yet exist in our specific, and predominantly working-class, situation. To add to the problem, to quote Alex Millmow, “the regionals also have to contend with students of a less scholastic background than city students.”

Despite these handicaps and constant internal pressures to keep our discipline economically viable, we consider it crucial that a culture of high achievement be maintained among our students, to which end it is critical that a culture of high achievement be maintained among our students, to which end it is critical we remain resolved not to become a ‘language school’ (with all that inverted commas can and invariably do entail) providing ‘service language courses’. Indeed, the path towards service teaching would not only have an adverse effect on the levels of competence reached by our students in French but also on their academic abilities more generally.

In conclusion, it is our opinion that a response to the languages crisis that is predicated on a unilateral response to student demand (i.e. the discipline moving towards the community and not vice versa), which is largely constructed by national media, be it in conjunction with or in opposition to the federal government, and the demands of university administration, and which envisages language courses as vehicles for professional and vocational purposes, is a short-sighted and counter-productive one, which can only lead to an impoverished outcome for students, disciplines and the community alike. As educators, we want not only to equip our students with a profound, academic understanding of language, but also to increase their awareness of other cultures and their ability to access documents not written in English or not yet translated. As such, languages are Arts courses; they aim to promote in students the ability to negotiate cultural difference, not to find task-focused responses that effectively iron out and deny such difference. Perversely then, we believe that only generic and abstract Arts-based courses, with universal applicability, can equip students to perceive, negotiate and, ultimately, foster genuine difference inside and between communities; vocational education on the other hand, designed as it is to fill a community’s skills shortages, will lead, at best, to homogenisation and break-down in critical awareness and, at worst, to community-wide ignorance and intolerance.

In the words of Joe Lo Bianco, Professor of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Melbourne, “[l]anguages should be taught for all the traditional reasons: intellectual development, curiosity, cultural insight, literature, all of which are as valid today as ever, as well as for pragmatic reasons of trade, security and travel” (“Languages in Crisis National Languages Summit”, 12-13). It is our opinion that this validity lies in the interpenetration of pragmatism and disciplinary integrity, of teaching and research, abstract concepts and situated learners. And it is our hope that by operating from within permeable boundaries we shall be able to offer our discipline at the international, national and local levels without compromising the intellectual rigour of French Studies, without which we should, after all, become truly irrelevant.

About the Authors

Dr. Alistair Rolls
Dr. Alistair Rolls lectures in French literature and language at the University of Newcastle (Australia). He has published widely in the area of twentieth-century French literature and is recognised internationally for his work on Boris Vian. In 2007 Drs Rolls and Vuaille-Barcan received national recognition for their teaching when they were awarded a Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning.

Dr. Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan
Dr. Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan (co-author of proposed paper) also lectures in French at Newcastle. Her areas of specialism are didactology and translation studies. In 2007 Drs Rolls and Vuaille-Barcan received national recognition for their teaching when they were awarded a Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning.