– EAP KNOWLEDGE –

hosted and reviewed by Emma Lay, EAP Lecturer at Arts University Bournemouth


There are varying views within the EAP community about what knowledge we as EAP practitioners need and why. Are we linguists? Are we academic skills teachers? Are we both? Are we conduits, facilitators, or change agents? (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Are we service providers, academics, 3rd space professionals? Along with these issues of identity come questions about what we need to know to be who we want to be.

As the above extract shows the intention for my BALEAP PIM #knowledgeEAP session was to promote discussion about *what* knowledge we need to be successful EAP practitioners, *how* we acquire our knowledge, and *what other knowledge* we may need in the future as we continue to forge our identity as a discipline. As in many CPD events, the opening plenary framed the day and it struck me immediately that maybe I'd got the wrong end of the stick. Steve Kirk's plenary talked about knowledge as a *construct* and how knowledge is built. He immediately reminded us that '*knowledge* is different from *knowing*'. I realised that I too had confused *knowledge* with *knowing*. I started to think how I could reframe my session a little to ensure practitioners could discuss this thing called 'EAP knowledge'. Would they see it as integrated and whole, or a series of context-specific, individual fields without a unifying core? Would it be matrix like, in which the different parts make up the sum that is EAP or as Steve had suggested, would it be more like a Bernsteinian *region* (different disciplines in a larger unit) rather than a *singular* (an academic discipline)? According to Morton (2003, p.2), an

epistemic ideal is *coherence*, to have 'beliefs that not only make sense individually but which hang together in a coherent pattern'. What is the pattern of EAP knowledge? Had we ever thought about the *structure* of our EAP knowledge? As an advocate of DogmeELT which advocates preparedness over planning, I went out on a limb and asked participants to…

Draw the structure/shape of EAP knowledge

Some drew LCT waves with theory and practice labels accompanied by a question mark as to which one was 'above' the other; some drew 'warring triangles'; some Russian dolls. There was also an interesting Venn diagram with the multiple intersections of: basic ELT methodology (CELTA/DELTA), knowledge of the context of HE, knowledge of disciplinary (interdisciplinary) discourse/practices, (declarative) knowledge about the language, experiential knowledge (purpose and contexts). Some called EAP a meta-discipline. One commonality amongst the responses was *interconnectedness*. We saw EAP as *interdisciplinary* in that there are different but sometimes related disciplines that come together and interact in order to form EAP.

© Russian doll of pedagogy
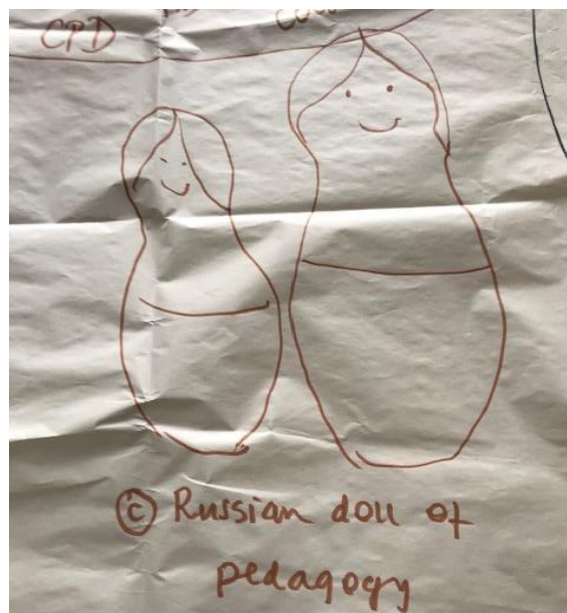
What EAP knowledge do you think we need to have to be successful EAP practitioners nowadays?

My second question provoked many more questions including:

- Do we all need to be experts in corpus linguistics?
- Do we need PhDs?
- Do we need specific EAP qualifications?
- Is there a different knowledge base for an EAP practitioner than an EAP academic?

There was also much heated debate about the actual intersections or fields of EAP knowledge. Possible intersections occurred between: teaching (pedagogy), corpus linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, legitimation code theory, psycholinguistics, second language acquisition, genre theory, the stuff in the TEAP competencies.

Some proclaimed the importance of systemic functional linguistics, for example, and others were less convinced. Some said such terminology may be difficult. One group asked a very important question:

Who is this diagram for? Is it for our benefit? For academics? For people new to EAP? And rightly so. An awareness of audience/intended user is, after all, a familiar question in EAP classes. With much concern and discussion about EAP identity and visibility within our institutions and the academy as a whole, this is a pertinent question. Can we be different things to different people? Do we *need* to agree? Haven't the BALEAP TEAP competencies done this already? "They could be for *any* discipline", one person exclaimed.

As Walková (2019) exclaimed at this year's BALEAP conference, 'other disciplines don't ask who they are'. The origins of EAP can be traced to the late 90s (Ding and Bruce, 2017, p.57). The BALEAP TEAP competencies appeared nearly twenty years later, in 2008. Why do we still seem like we are in an early stage of our development? Are we disciplinary 'teenagers' vacillating between hope and ideals, and self-doubt and angst? Where is this angst coming from?

One thing was evident. We all had quite different ideas about what EAP knowledge comprised and how to represent it diagrammatically. As Steve Kirk later tweeted, this session 'raised the temperature a bit, in productive ways, but also in ways that highlight the lack of consensus around 'knowledge' (Kirk, 2019). A natural reaction to this uncertainty may well be frustration but this is also a starting point in and of itself. It reveals that we are not in agreement. There is ambiguity. There is some sense of chaos. So where do we go from here? Perhaps we do what our beloved EAP does so well, we go interdisciplinary. We draw from other fields. Could chaos theory and the notion of fractals help us identify patterns? What about management's systems thinking, sociology's social network analysis, anthropology's structural functionalism? Food for epistemological thought. It might take a while for us to come to an agreement on what structure our EAP knowledge takes. As one participant wrote, 'What is it that distinguishes our knowledge base from other disciplines? I'll retire when I have worked this out'. But at least we have a starting point.

How have you acquired (or intend to acquire) your EAP-related knowledge?

The next question moved to the more personal and empirical, and answers revealed the impressive range of activities we involve ourselves in. Most scribbled answers were 'talking to colleagues', 'peer observations' and 'formal qualifications' followed by 'reading (circles/groups)' and 'CPD events'. Many learn from those who are writing about their research or practice. These and other answers highlighted two key themes: **knowledge building through interaction** and **knowledge building through self-reflection.**
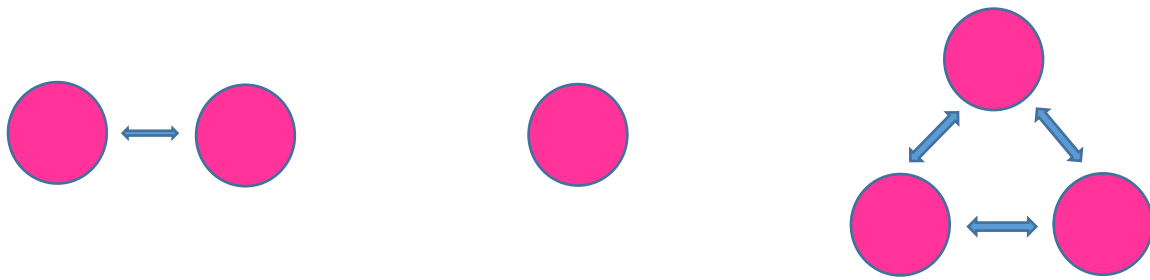
Figure 1: EAP knowledge acquisition

What actions will you now take?

Moving to a focus on the future, the café concluded with participants pledging to do one thing to proactively advance our discipline. Answers included:

- Shut up and write or continue to engage in 'theoretical promiscuity'?
- Present
- Mapping the genres in SODesign – share with other practitioners – moving away from 'the essay'
- Research what the literature suggests EAP knowledge is – engage with literature generally.
- Continue to focus on EAP development with home students on a foundation year.
- Research a priori academic knowledge of our students
- Explore co-delivery
- Collaborate with Emma on 'fuzzy genres'
- Renegotiating names – our position – our centre
- Promote the department across the institution
- Decide on a working definition of what we do (that I'm not awkward saying/feel is inadequate).
- Tracking students' performance post EAP courses - do we have a sense of how well what we doing is?
- Strategies to support/provide pathways for EAP practitioners to access/develop this knowledge.

The actions, as one participant highlighted, evidenced both acquisition vs dissemination of knowledge. There is the self-construction of knowledge but also co-construction through collaboration in one form or another.

Conclusion

These are complex times and there is no doubt that this complexity was evident also in the discussion I hosted at the PIM. Barnett's statement about the university just recently cited on the SEDA website could just as easily apply to EAP: 'in an age of supercomplexity, a new epistemology … awaits, one that is open, bold, engaging, accessible, and conscious of its own insecurity. It is an epistemology for living amid uncertainty' (Barnett, 2000, p.420). I think the way we, the participants, responded in this session

was as EAP is: uncertain, messy, at times clear, at times conflicting. But we were all in the same room. We were, just like EAP, interconnected. And through the continued self-reflection, interaction and collaboration that we so highly prize, I trust that we can, and we will, navigate our way.

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