

Interview with Louise Ravelli

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Louise Ravelli was interviewed by Judie Cross. March 19th, 2015

Louise Ravelli is Associate Professor in the School of the Arts and Media at UNSW Australia where she has been Convenor of the Media Program, and where she continues to teach in communication and journalism, while acting as a reviewer for a variety of academic journals such as *Visual Communication*, *Visitor Studies* and *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*.

You are a highly respected academic and scholar. Did you consciously decide to become a university professor?

Of course not! [Laughs]. I was the first person in my family to finish high school, let alone being the first person in my family to go to university. I went to school in the country (Parkes). My father was Dutch and migrated to Australia after military service in Indonesia, just after the war. He had a poultry farm, and my mother was born in Australia and worked at home, as well as having a small business. I have two older sisters, but they chose not to complete their final matriculation studies, and went straight into the workforce. So, coming from this background, I had no idea why people went to university, but I knew I wanted to go because I loved school, education and learning. Also, as much as I enjoyed growing up in my country town, I knew it was too small for me.

Anyway, when I started uni, I chose French, because I loved it at school, and German beginners, to have another language, as well as Linguistics even though I did not know what Linguistics even meant – something to do with language I thought. Fortunately, my studies occurred when Michael Halliday was Professor of Linguistics at Sydney University and, as the years progressed, I became more and more

interested in Linguistics. I then completed my honours in this field as well as postgraduate studies. I undertook my MPhil and PhD in Birmingham, where Michael Hoey was my supervisor, with Professor John Sinclair in charge. Sinclair had an unprecedented amount of money for this time for his work that was associated with the CoBuild dictionary, a text based on a million-word database (massive for its time!) and stored in a phone-booth size computer in the corner of the CoBuild building. I then received an Australian Commonwealth Scholarship to finish my PhD and was subsequently lucky enough to be offered a one-year contract at the University of Wollongong (UOW) where I was able to bring language studies into their English program. I was at UOW for six years before coming to UNSW to teach in the Linguistics department. It was only in 2007 that I transferred sideways into Media (where I became Associate Professor) because, by this time, I wanted to develop something bigger around Communication. The Media Program was being reviewed and my proposal to the Faculty for Communication was accepted and extended to include Journalism, resulting in a Bachelor of Media in Communication and Journalism (one of several degrees that we teach). I think it has worked out very well for everyone.

Who have been some of your mentors, or the people who have influenced you, in your work and career?

Initially I thought of this from the perspective of academia, but then I thought: "Hang on! First of all, there's my mum!" My mother supported my education and my going to university at a time that was very difficult for my family, but my mum insisted that I go and she worked to make it happen. Also, when I was in high school, I had the most amazing teachers: really amazing! They couldn't do enough for me and so I did extremely well at high school and in the final examination, the Higher School Certificate (HSC). I received unbelievable input from my teachers and for this I am extremely grateful. I am still in touch with quite a few of them.

However, in those days in academia there really was no such explicit thing as mentoring, at least no one used the word and it was not like today where there are many mentoring programs and so on. I think my teachers at university and supervisors mentored by example by being very generous with their time, their positive reception to my probably very inane ideas and by their positive encouragement, even enthusiasm, as in the case of Michael Hoey. Those are the little things that push you along in your career although it wasn't done as obviously as it is today. Claire Painter, for example, was a very generous and quite inspirational former colleague of mine.

People whose work has influenced me are very evident in my writing (e.g. Hasan, Halliday, Martin, Paltridge, Starfield, van Leeuwen). Still, one whose name might not appear in this bibliography would be Frances Christie. It was Frances who made the first suggestion to me, after a conference, that it might be a good idea to publish a paper. And then Geoff Williams and Len Unsworth were others who were very helpful to me in the early stages of my SFL career – they offered me strategic advice and helped me as a young academic. Anne Cranny-Francis has also been someone always generous with her time and advice.

Yet it seems to me that you have been a great mentor to others and regularly nurtured the academic careers of your postgraduate students (such as Emilia Djonov and Robert McMurtrie) by supporting them and/or even by collaborating with them in the tradition of John Swales.

Yes, I really like doing this and actually try to do this quite explicitly. I think it is essential for young scholars today: they have to be mentored because they have to finish their PhD with a raft of publications and yet it's then still unlikely they'll get a "proper" (i.e. full-time) job. Hence, it's essential for someone with more experience to guide young academics. Plus I really like doing this; it's highly energizing and a way to create a stronger research community.

How do you see and manage your multiple roles: as a mentor and also as an active and practising academic teacher, writer and reviewer?

The biggest juggle is to make time for research: ordinary admin, as well as executive admin, can easily be totally consuming – let alone a full teaching load! And these days we teach many, many more hours face-to-face than we did in the past – in fact I teach more now than I did in my first year as an untenured lecturer! And we are all expected to produce much, much more. This is so different from the academic environment of last century: I'd already been working for a couple of years at university before anyone even suggested I write a paper. I thought: "Oh, that's a good idea!" Now it's a different ballgame, and all you can do is try to be efficient and work consistently.

I think the biggest support for my several roles comes from the effort I have put into building up a research community – around our program in the school and also our disciplinary base; i.e. Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), Social Semiotics, and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). This is both local and international, forming and maintaining connections across campuses and countries. I believe that if you can do this, (create and be part of an active research community), then you can keep each other going. It's a corny word, but you do get synergies. And this is important because the university system itself does not give you any positive feedback whatsoever, but you get reinforcement and a sense of community from the people around you and from across the globe.

To what extent do you think the role of an academic has changed in this digital age and with the current cohorts?

Interestingly, one of the positive aspects of this digital age is that you can develop and maintain research community connections as well as mentor and/or teach by going online. I

am in touch with a couple of people in developing countries, for example, who don't have the access to resources that we have here, but through the internet we can connect and share ideas and resources. And of course, so many resources are available online.

Regarding teaching and learning in general, in this digital age, I don't like to assess this from a deficit perspective or lament what is not present. Many bemoan current standards of communication, but I try to assess students according to where they're at and scaffold them towards what they need to achieve, making use of the tools and learning styles they prefer. My students at UNSW are extremely capable as regards finding information (online) and relevant examples, especially in Visual Communication, and more often than not, they are teaching things to me. In short, I really enjoy my teaching with the undergraduates – I can have fun with them – and digital communication enhances that.

What do you see as the common thread running through your work?

I think this is an interesting question, because most academics specialize, whereas I have ranged across several very different areas. Nevertheless, I see these areas as being very much linked, and in two main ways. The first way is the framework and the approach: SFL, Social Semiotics and MDA. These three lenses overlap and I have developed my particular approach, which I just take with me. So, whatever communication area I am working in, I have my eclectic framework through which I view it. Originally it might have been language for academic communication that I was looking at, now it might be a building. In some respects, I'm using different tools to analyze a building rather than language, but to me they are both, more or less, the same problem, and that's the second thread, the issue of communication. That is, how can an understanding of communication be applied to a specific area to enhance communication outcomes? Hence, the

framework and the problem of communication are what connect all these different areas. What I'm interested in is communication as it applies within a particular context, such as academic writing, communicating to visitors in a museum, organizing the layout of a building so you can walk through it efficiently. Whatever the context, these are all issues of communication to me. I see my role as articulating what works in that context and enhancing the roles of those working within that context as either creators or users.

A few years ago you published the landmark publication, *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks*. Can you talk a bit about this book and also others, which you have contributed to and edited?

Yes, this text was a very special one as it came out of work I did with the Australian Museum who approached me to help them with their communication problems with visitors. I worked with two people from the museum, Carolyn MacLulich and Linda Ferguson, to identify language problems and develop training guidelines. We then published a small language guidelines book for the museum, which contained these materials, and I delivered training about this to staff in the museum. This is how my interest in communication broadened, as it relates to museums and exhibitions. *Museum Texts* came out of that collaboration which, in turn, led to my interest in Multimodality because a museum exhibition is, of course, much more than the little texts that are written for visitors. Maree Stenglin and I have both worked with the Australian Museum. She focused on the interpersonal side of museum communication, specifically binding and bonding, and we later wrote a chapter together, 'Feeling Space: Interpersonal Communication and Spatial Semiotics', for Antos' and Ventola's edited volume, *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*.

I have published a few edited volumes, which have been very important in my career even though they may not be so highly regarded by the academy – in some disciplines, such as

Science, an edited volume may simply involve a pasting together of previously published papers. However, the volumes I've edited contain chapters of original scholarship. Further, edited volumes have also meant community for me: an area where there is a whole body of work that has yet to be published. Drawing on this, I enjoy collating and thereby creating a new text. I have, in fact, a new one that came out last year, *Doctoral Writing in the Creative and Performing Arts*, which emerged out of an Australian Research Council (ARC) project that I worked on with Brian Paltridge from Sydney University and also Sue Starfield from my university, UNSW. This was the most marvellous project because it was about PhD theses in the performing arts – quite mind-blowing to see what students have produced or performed as a creative work and then accompanied it with a written text that is not adequately typified by the term 'exegesis'. The three of us tried to map the diversity of these theses as well as explain them since scholarship is an issue for these disciplines: how the creative and performing arts get themselves heard in the academy. That was a really fabulous project, the volume itself emerging from a symposium which brought together academics and students from a wide range of disciplinary areas across the creative and performing arts.

What are you currently working on?

I've just finished writing another book, a monograph, with Robert McMurtrie: *Multimodality in the Built Environment: Spatial Discourse Analysis*. In this book, which is now in press with Routledge, we've considered about half a dozen particular texts, such as the White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney, the Queen Victoria Building (QVB) and the recently renovated library at UNSW. Following on from this for me is a deeper interest in spatial discourse analysis, in particular as it applies to learning environments such as universities, which contain various sorts of spaces. I know that the renovated library space at UNSW, for example, has been very successful –

it really seems to work for our students. However, there has not yet been a lot of semiotic analysis of the current push to address students' learning needs by redesigning their learning spaces (although there is data relating to costs and numbers and so on). I think this avenue of research will be quite fascinating to explore over the next couple of years: formal and informal spaces ranging from lecture halls to a bench in the garden. Design changes communication potential, both amongst students, when they are working on their own or in groups, as well as amongst academics, not to mention lecturers and their students. So this is where I am heading now, again using the same frameworks to understand how these spaces work in communicative terms.

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