

Secret passwords at the gate of knowledge

Language may be a key communication tool but, argues BRIAN MARTIN, it's also about power and exclusivity

TO understand why jargon is so entrenched in academia, it is necessary to examine how academics maintain their power and status. Academic disciplines are central in this process.

There is no inherent reason why knowledge should be divided up into disciplines such as physics and philosophy. These divisions are made and enforced by practitioners. Most of today's disciplines did not exist one or two centuries ago.

An academic discipline can be considered to be a strategy by a group of practitioners to claim control over resources and decision-making. The practitioners assert that they alone are capable of judging competence in their area of study.

Credentials are central to disciplinary control. A tight, effective discipline will demand that all who enter the field must have degrees in the discipline itself. No outsiders are allowed. Someone with lots of experience in practical psychology or engineering but without appropriate credentials is unlikely to obtain a university post.

To maintain a discipline, it is essential to control appointments. Disciplinary guardians insist that they, and they alone, are qualified to judge who should be appointed to positions in the discipline. A biology department, for example, is likely to bitterly oppose appointment of a physicist, especially to a top position.

Conceiving of disciplines as ongoing products of power struggles helps explain the bitter battles that are waged between and within departments. I've witnessed experimental physicists assert their primacy over theoreticians, saying that "physics is an experimental science". I've observed pure mathematicians dismiss parts of applied mathematics as not being part of the discipline of mathematics. In debates over environmental science, I've heard natural scientists reject social science contributions because "an environmental scientist is not a scientist". In each case these claims are aimed at putting a particular group at the centre of the discipline.

If a discipline is to control its intellectual turf effectively, it cannot afford to be too easy to understand by outsiders. Jargon may serve as a convenient medium for practitioners, but it also serves as a way of excluding interlopers, those who have not served their time in study and research.

Suppose you have a bright idea about a subject that is not your speciality. The idea is the easy part. Getting it taken seriously in a different field is difficult.

To get published in an academic journal, it is necessary to know the literature in the field. You've got a lot of study ahead to get on top of it. You must cite appropriate references and be familiar enough with the jargon to write comfortably in it. Referees can pick up an outsider readily enough, and a few false steps are enough for a rejection.

Although your idea might be a good one, that's not enough. After all, if every outsider with a bright idea were allowed to be published, what would be the point of all that long training?

Jargon serves to police the boundaries of disciplines and specialities. It's like a toll collected from those who attempt to cross an intellectual border, a toll collected in the currency of intellectual labour. Jargon, on top of credentials, ensures that migration between disciplines is kept low.

Jargon also serves another purpose. It separates academic work from the so-called "general public". Academics may battle among themselves over knowledge but they have a common interest in maintaining the status of academic knowledge in the eyes of outsiders. If what academics do is too easy to understand, it becomes harder to justify comfortable salaries and conditions.

This helps explain why most academics consider research to be more prestigious than teaching. Research is the creation of new knowledge, which adds to the lustre of the discipline. Most research helps maintain and raise the barriers against understanding by outsiders.

Teaching, by contrast, is about communicating insights to outsiders. It means explaining the very insights that are used to claim exclusive control over the discipline.

Communicating to popular audiences is like good teaching. It explains what is going on inside the discipline and the acad-

Separates experts from interlopers

emy in a way that newcomers and outsiders can understand and use. Popularisers can encounter considerable hostility from protectors of the discipline. There are economists who look down on John Kenneth Galbraith and composers who hold Andrew Lloyd Webber in contempt.

To be fair, academics are not alone in raising barriers to outsiders. Many other occupations do the same. For example, the medical and legal professions seek to outlaw unlicensed competitors. Nor is the use of jargon unique to academia. Even journalists have their own special style, which is said to be required of all who communicate with "the public".

The idea that jargon exists just because specialists need to communicate with each other helps to hide other reasons for jargon. It hides the key role of jargon in struggles by specialists to gain power and status. It hides the way jargon is built into the structure of disciplines, systems of publication and the whole apparatus of credentials.

If jargon is central to disciplines then, by the same token, writing clearly to a wide audience is a challenge to disciplinary power and privilege. (There's even a bit of jargon for this: "demystification".) It sounds easy to do, but for many academics it is the greatest challenge of all.

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