

*Sources of Confusion*

# ***SOURCES OF CONFUSION***

***REFEREED PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE AND  
ACADEMIC SKILLS CONFERENCE  
HELD AT LA TROBE UNIVERSITY***

***NOVEMBER 27-28, 2000***

***Edited by Kate Chanock***

***Published in 2001 and distributed by the Language and  
Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University***

***ISBN: 1-86446-572-7***

***Correspondence to Kate Chanock, HASU, Faculty of  
Humanities, La Trobe University, Bundoora 3086, Australia***

## *Sources of Confusion*

## CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b>	7
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	9
<b>Conference Papers:</b>	
1. Learning centers – from calling the fixer to building a better product: a case study of needs based subject development <i>Claire Aitchison, University of Western Sydney</i>	10
2. Teacher v student: the role of fundamental “conceptions of reality” in the preparation of a legal opinion <i>Jeffrey Barnes, La Trobe University</i>	19
3. Confusing the NESB student: when academic feedback unwittingly contributes to masking the linguistic and academic issues <i>Annie Bartlett, Austrlian National University</i>	37
4. ‘Is this what we’re supposed to be learning in this unit?’ Insights from TULIP (Tertiary Undergraduate Literacy Integration Program) <i>Patricia Cartwright, Australian Catholic University (Aquinas Campus) and Lynne Noone, University of Ballarat</i>	45
5. Collaboration and interaction: modeling explored <i>Patricia Cartwright, Australian Catholic University (Aquinas Campus) and Josephine Ryan, Australian Catholic University (St. Patrick’s Campus), with Patricia Hacker, Australian Catholic University (Aquinas Campus), Elizabeth Powell, and Jo Reidy, Australian Catholic University (St. Patrick’s Campus)</i>	61
6. The ghost in the machine: computers as a source of confusion <i>Kate Chanock, La Trobe University</i>	70
7. Contextualising citation behaviour: Chinese graduate student’ thesis writing <i>Honglin Chen, La Trobe University</i>	80
8. Developing web-based tools and instruction to improve the academic writing and use of referencing conventions of information technology students <i>Rosemary Clerehan, Giselle Kett and Jill Turnbull, Monash University</i>	93
9. Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project: part one <i>Rosemary Clerehan, Tim Moore, and Sheila Vance, Monash University</i>	106
10. Bringing distance students into the university culture: strategies to Support students studying at a distance <i>Jessamyn Clarke, University of Southern Queensland</i>	120
11. Skills and content: locating the boundary <i>Tanya Clarke, University of Melbourne</i>	135

## Sources of Confusion

12. Access to academia: an accredited course for mature age students 144  
*Tanya Clarke, University of Melbourne*
13. Smoother pathways from TAFE to Higher Education 152  
*Paul Conroy, Victoria University of Technology (TAFE Division) and  
Amanda Pearce and Helen Murphy, Victoria University of Technology*
14. Where to begin? Problems in teaching critical reasoning to NESB students 167  
*Martin Davies, Monash University English Language Centre*
15. Dissolving and resolving cultural expectations: socio-cultural approaches to program development for international students 180  
*Constance Ellwood, University of Technology, Sydney*
16. Assessment using multiple choice: implications for testing international students in an undergraduate commerce subject 187  
*Marie Gaspar, Deakin University*
17. How do you know? Who says so? The chant of the university lecturer 199  
*Christine Jessup, University of Tasmania*
18. Premises, principles, procedures, prudence: a useful taxonomy of learning objectives 206  
*Peter Kipka, La Trobe University*
19. Lifebuoys in a sea of confusion: an integrated learning support program for first year Nursing students 215  
*Beverly Kokkin, University of South Australia*
20. Making expectations explicit 224  
*Elizabeth Levin, Swinburne University of Technology*
21. We all know what an article review is...or do we? 233  
*Kerry O'Regan and Helen Johnston, University of South Australia*
22. A systemic approach to working with academic staff: addressing the confusion at the source 244  
*Alisa Percy and Jan Skillen, University of Wollongong*
23. Teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: are students ready? 257  
*Aveline Perez, Reem Al-Mahmood, and Jon Pearce, University of Melbourne*
24. 'I've read his comments but I don't know how to do': international postgraduate student perceptions of written supervisor feedback 272  
*Mary Lou Ridsdale, Swinburne University of Technology*
25. Computer-based spelling and grammar checkers, thesauruses and student confusion 283  
*Jan Robbins, Australian National University*
26. Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project: part two 292  
*Harriet Searcy and Steve Price, Monash University*
27. When I say 'describe' I don't mean that you should just describe... 304  
*Alice Sinclair, Monash University English Language Centre*

## *Sources of Confusion*

28. The root of the confusion: identity <i>Serena Lay Tin Tan Yew and Lesley Farrell, Monash University</i>	315
29. Poor expression or poor comprehension? <i>Robyn Thomas, La Trobe University</i>	324
30. Meeting our students' needs: an innovative English curriculum <i>Vivien Wake, Wanganui Polytechnic, New Zealand</i>	335
31. Application of schema theory to academic discourse: the summary writing process <i>Heather Winskel, University of Western Sydney</i>	341
32. In their own words: what migrants say about succeeding in TAFE <i>Marie Zuvich, Canberra Institute of Technology</i>	353
<b>Participants' contact details</b>	<b>359</b>

## PREFACE

On November 27-28, 2000, a National Language and Academic Skills Conference was held for the third time at La Trobe University, Bundoora. The conference theme was "Sources of Confusion". Our intention was to explore the many aspects of tertiary study which, in our experience, can be bewildering to students with whom we work. While students' difficulties are often understood in terms of some deficiency on their part (a lack of language, skills, or personal organisation needed for their studies), we believed that many sources of confusion are located in the institution and the course of study, rather than in the students. The "call for papers" put the problem like this:

*"Students are referred to LAS advisers for help with developing their skills in expression, essay structure, referencing, etc. Much of our time, however, is occupied with helping students to interpret the assignments and marking comments they receive, and advising them how to seek clarification from their tutors.*

*What is confusing about university study? Is the confusion random, or can we identify patterns? When we do, how can we help to clear up the confusion? Do we work with tutors, students, or both?*

*Talking Points: Some of the sources of confusion that LAS advisers talk about are:*

*Differences between school and university  
The nature of academic discourse  
Differences between disciplines  
Framing and language of assignments  
Tutors' feedback on students' work  
Different cultural expectations  
Students' preconceptions  
Interpretations of tasks*

*Positioned between tutors and students, we are well placed to discover why so much that passes between them is misunderstood. Let's pool our experience over two days in November."*

In the event, 144 people attended, and 53 papers were presented, encompassing all these topics and more. Participants not only identified and illustrated a wide variety of sources of confusion, but shared the practical ways they have developed to address these problems. Some reflected upon sources of confusion in their own practice as LAS advisers. Presenters were invited to submit their full papers, if they wished, for the process of double peer review through which papers were selected for these Proceedings.

The experience of editing these Proceedings raised some issues for me that I think we would do well to consider as a field, so I would like to say a little about them here. They arose this time, rather than in the course of editing Proceedings of earlier conferences, because this was the first La Trobe LAS conference for which the papers underwent a process of peer review. It was necessary, for this purpose, to provide criteria for assessing the papers, and in order to ensure that the standard would be comparable with those of other publications in the field, I adapted criteria used by other editors of conference Proceedings in the last three years. Specifically, I asked reviewers to comment upon "relevance to conference theme"; "relevance and interest to audience"; "grounding in theory/scholarship"; "substance"; and "quality of the writing". On the whole, these criteria proved satisfactory, but their application raised some points that future editors and presenters may like to ponder.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Out of the more than thirty papers submitted for review, only two were accepted outright by both readers. Whether this reflects the practice of peer review generally, or a compulsion on the part of LAS advisers to demand a further draft, I am not sure. In fact, nearly all of the further drafts were better, so the process was certainly worthwhile; but I mention the figure here so that each of the authors who were asked to reapply their noses to the grindstone will know that s/he was not singled out in this respect! For their part, prospective editors should note that the process is much extended by the need to read everything an extra time, and to check the revised versions against the readers' comments in the light of which the authors had been asked to revise their work.

All of the reviewers engaged constructively with the papers, conscientiously addressing the set criteria. As the process went on, however, I began to have some doubts about the suitability of the criteria in every case. Most of the papers situated themselves in a scholarly context, but there were some that reported on work, and offered reflections, which were not grounded in theory, but were valuable in themselves. Should they be rejected because they did not meet all of our criteria? Then, there were papers that made readers uneasy – especially readers from scientific environments – because they did not meet the usual standards for reporting on research: either in terms of the numbers of people studied; or in terms of the methods used; or in terms of the reporting genre of 'problem – method – results – discussion – conclusion'. There was a good reason for this: these papers were not in fact reporting research, but reflecting on practice. As this is a central activity of our profession, it seemed a valuable contribution in itself, and again the question arose, should we honour what is distinctive about our work, or conform to expectations established in other and, in some ways different, contexts?

If we need to seek justification for publishing work in a variety of modes, we can find it in *Under construction : Working at the intersections of composition theory, research, and practice* edited by Christine Farris and Chris M. Anson (Logan : Utah State University Press, 1998). Deborah Mutnick, in this volume, gives us the very useful phrase, "critically inflected narratives" ( 84), which I think describes much of our more thoughtful work. Moreover, in *Negotiating academic literacies : Teaching and learning across languages and cultures*, edited by Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack (Mahwah, N.J. : Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998), Zamel tells us that "The February 1992 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, one of the preeminent academic journals in composition, .... convincingly illustrates that the personal voice, the well-crafted story, exploratory and introspective pieces, not only can but do play a critical role in how knowledge is made in a discipline" (191). Some of us will need to draw on these ideas, and these authorities, to put our work forward in various fora, and we can be glad that they are there to be drawn on. In our own forum, however, perhaps we could lead rather than follow; and this is something we may want to discuss in the context of future conferences.

Thanks are due to Diana Hiller for editing well beyond the call of duty. While responsibility for the editing must rest with me, a disclaimer of sorts is in order: an editor must rely upon the information supplied by contributors, and any omissions or inaccuracies in text or bibliographical details result from this limitation.

We thank all the participants for their contribution to discussions over the two days; and we wish to acknowledge the help of particular people, as follows.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of the organizing committee, the members of the Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University: Jennie Lynch, Julianne East, Shem MacDonald, Diana Hiller, Meg Rosse, Elizabeth O'Connor, Julianne Lynch, Robyn Thomas, Jane McCooey, Sue Harvey, and Kate Chanock:-

We would like to thank Prof. Roger Wales, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, for opening the Conference, and the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Prof. Michael Osborne, for helping us to launch the first such conference in 1994. We are enormously grateful to Estelle Purchas of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences for help through the financial labyrinth. Thanks, too, to the organisers of other conferences for responding to our requests for advice and addresses. Finally, we thank the many colleagues around Australia who generously gave their time to the process of peer review:

### Peer Reviewers for these Proceedings:

Reem Al-Mahmood  
Talia Barrett  
Alex Barthel  
Annie Bartlett  
Colin Beasley  
Bernadette Bennett  
Carmela Briguglio  
Alison Brown  
Anna Brunken  
Margaret Cargill  
Patricia Cartwright  
Kate Chanock  
Jessamyn Clarke  
Fiona Cotton  
Julianne East  
Constance Ellwood  
Jan Fermelis  
John Grierson  
Peter Hanley  
Sue Harvey  
Margaret Hicks  
Diana Hiller  
Barbara Hilliard  
Bronwyn James  
Gwynneth Jansen  
Christine Jessup  
Beverly Kokkinn  
Elizabeth Levin  
Jennie Lynch  
Julianne Lynch

Jane McCooey  
Shem Macdonald  
Ursula McGowan  
Caroline Malthus  
Anne Matthews  
Nancy Moncrieff  
Jane Moodie  
Tim Moore  
Pam Mort  
Karin Moses  
Diana Nicholson  
Elizabeth O'Connor  
Pamela Parsley  
Alisa Percy  
Steve Price  
Francis Quinn  
Mary Lou Ridsdale  
Meg Rosse  
Katherine Samuelowicz  
Sue Shaw  
Sue Starfield  
Serena Tan Yew  
Robyn Thomas  
Sheila Vance  
Rosemary Viete  
David Waters  
Michaela Wilkes  
Heather Winskell  
Peter Zeegers  
Marie Zuvich

**LEARNING CENTRES – FROM CALLING THE FIXER TO  
BUILDING A BETTER PRODUCT: A CASE STUDY OF NEEDS  
BASED SUBJECT DEVELOPMENT**

Claire Aitchison  
University of Western Sydney

*In 1995, the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, inherited a cohort of trainee pilots along with the establishment of a Diploma of Aviation Studies in a deal with an existing pilot training school at Bankstown Airport. In September the Learning Centre and the International Student Services were approached to assist with the “acculturation” of these students into the Australian university system and associated academic expectations, as the award developed into a Bachelor’s degree. An overwhelming proportion of these students were international students who were ill-prepared culturally and linguistically for such a shift in learning contexts. Similarly there was initially a lack of university experience amongst the teaching staff. The transition from training to university learning began with a recognition of the differing cultural expectations of industry and academia.*

*This paper follows the process of change and how the response to a call for help moved from guest teaching sessions to the development of first, a semester, then a year long core subject in aviation related communication and academic literacy. The purpose of this case study is to draw out lessons for Learning Centres about the way we work in a rapidly changing university context where curriculum and course design aim to address multiple needs and confusions.*

**Introduction**

As the size and nature of the student population changes in Australian universities, there has been a greater reflection and critical appraisal of the role and work of learning advisors (Ballard, 1994; Hawthorne, 2000; Rosen, 1999; Webb & Bonanno, 1994). I see this self-reflection in part being driven by a desire to clarify our own and others’ understandings of our work as much as by the desire to evaluate and improve the work done by Learning Centres more broadly. Even a cursory browse through the literature of higher education learning reveals that one aspect of this process is the sharing of information about our practices and environments.

From the literature of how to best facilitate student learning in university I wish to focus on two recurring aspects: the acculturation of the student into the norms and practices of academia and student acquisition of academic skills. Both of these themes can be seen as attempts to interpret the territory of university learning and thereby reduce the confusion surrounding our task as learning advisors. A considerable number of writers, especially those working with international students, have pointed to the centrality of cultural aspects of learning (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988, 1991; Biggs, 1999; Rosen, 1999; Volet & Renshaw, 1996). A common perception has been that international students lack a familiarity with and knowledge of key aspects of Western academic culture and that this deficit has resulted in less than optimum performance at least until the students have become acclimatized to their new environment (Beasley & Pearson, 1999). Hawthorne (2000) claims that most of the funding, policy making and ‘bridging’ programs for international students are based on this assumption. Typically, Learning Centres have aimed to inform and skill students in the

## *Sources of Confusion*

cultural practices associated with the student's discipline. Workshops, individual consultations, bridging programs and courses focus on key aspects of academic culture such as acceptable academic writing and referencing practices, critical thinking skills, skills in interactive group discussion and deep learning approaches. The accepted aim of such endeavours is to demystify the academic culture and to assist students to develop skills for success in their academic environment.

The development of academic skills has been central to the practice of learning advisors in Australia and was originally manifest either through individual assistance or by offering generic workshops in such skills as essay writing, report writing, critical thinking, referencing and so on. Increasingly, however, Learning Centres are favouring an integrative and collaborative approach to the teaching of academic skills that site knowledge specifically in the subject or discipline. The multiplicity of approaches to skills development by Learning Centres includes cooperative course and curriculum development, the development of industry specific Communications subjects, and industry partnerships to name a few (Hicks, Irons & Zeegers, 1994; Hicks & George, 1998; Tapper, 1999).

This paper adds to the weight of documentation of learning support practices from which trends and evaluations about our practice can be made. It traces the original responses of the Learning Centre of the University of Western Sydney to requests for help and the subsequent development of a core first year subject offered on campus and by distance mode. It highlights curriculum changes aimed at balancing the needs of students for academic skills, the concerns of a new discipline for academic rigor and the needs of industry for relevance and flexibility. The challenge for the Learning Centre was to untangle the confusion of competing needs and to devise a means to ensure that students acquired relevant, contextualised academic skills. The two themes of skills acquisition and the role of culture guided this shift from generic to subject and industry specific academic skills development.

The initial impetus for the collaboration between the new Department of Aviation at the University of Western Sydney and the Learning Centre was the perception by academics that students in the Bachelor of Aviation Studies lacked academic skills. The response by faculty was to approach the Learning Centre with a request for language, literacy and study skills assistance, that is for "fix-it remediation" (Tapper, 1999). This paper outlines how this initial and somewhat confused view of the Learning Centre triggered a six year collaboration.

### **Origins of the Collaboration**

The Bankstown campus of the University of Western Sydney is located close to the Bankstown Airport where a number of air pilot training schools reside. In 1995 the University negotiated with one of these to offer a Diploma of Aviation Studies. Students were to take three course strands, one of which was flying training through the pilot school. Over time the course developed further so that students could opt to graduate with a pilot's license or else follow a strand of human factors or aviation management. Over the last five years the course, its subjects and staff have changed considerably. The Department of Aviation has expanded from a small leased building with few teaching staff at the airport, to a small but strong Department on campus offering many aviation-related subjects including postgraduate courses through on-site and distance modes.

However in 1995 when the University began this venture it was moving into largely uncharted waters. In establishing the course, the University inherited an existing cohort of trainee pilots and their teachers into its Diploma program. The aim of the university was to upgrade the Diploma to a Bachelor Degree as soon as possible. As is standard practice, the flying instructors had little or no tertiary education, nor teacher training (Henley, 1995). Their expertise was recognised by the industry and they were well-regarded instructors who unexpectedly found themselves teaching in a university degree course. Most of the trainees were international students who had been recruited from Korea into the flying school with an IELTS of 0.5, a language level that was consistent with industry standards, but unacceptable for university entry.

## *Sources of Confusion*

In the second half of 1995, on the initiative of one dedicated flying instructor, contact was made with the university for assistance with the Korean students whose English level was seen as a barrier to their progress towards the Commercial Pilot's License (CPL). Initially the Learning Centre was asked to conduct one essay writing workshop for all second year students in the core subject *Aviation 2*. While clearly this workshop by itself had no hope of addressing (or even establishing) the students' needs, it was, however, a valuable entree. In particular, the positive student evaluation provided us with the ammunition to bargain for further class time on academic skills development and legitimised the need for Learning Centre expertise.

### **Sources of Confusion – Identifying key stakeholders and their needs**

In the early stages of the collaboration there were four areas of competing needs which created a level of confusion for the students involved, the academics and the staff of the Learning Centre.

#### *Students of the Bachelor of Aviation Studies*

Initially the student body consisted of two strands, the "inherited" students and the new cohort enrolled in the degree course. The establishment of the degree course altered the student demographics and the proportion of international students has gradually diminished from constituting over 50% to now only about 10% of student intake. The numbers of females has fluctuated considerably but never gone beyond 20%. Typically, approximately half the students would be mature aged, coming into the degree as part-timers with industry experience as pilots, flying instructors in aircraft maintenance or as air traffic control personnel. School leavers are mostly aeroplane enthusiasts who already have, or aim to get, their pilot's license. Typically too, almost every student will be working at least part-time while undertaking this Degree.

Of those students inherited from the flying school, all but one were males and more than half were recruited from Korea. These students were soon identified as being at risk of failure within the university environment and contrary to earlier information supplied to them, they were required to improve their English language competency. For many of these students their former educational experiences were in military training and their confusion was heightened by a lack of familiarity with an academic culture.

This cohort of students presented many challenges for the new Department in terms of appropriate and fair language and academic support in the face of funding limitations and competing needs. Ironically, however, it was probably the presence of this group of struggling students that brought about the establishment of an academic skills subject.

#### *The teaching staff of the Bachelor of Aviation Studies*

Like the student body, there have been two waves of teaching staff associated with the Degree, the original inherited staff who were former employees of the flying school and the incoming staff with tertiary qualifications and experience suited to university.

Early contacts with teaching staff from the flying school indicated that many harboured a genuine level of discomfort about their role in a university. Many had no, or very little, former experience of university and were somewhat fearful of the demands that might be made of them. Similarly, few had ever taught non-native English speakers. As flying instructors, their industry and training background was in many ways at odds with the expectations of them within a university. Their experience as teachers had been strictly limited to a "teach and test" approach. They had never set nor marked extended written genre forms such as essays.

As more teaching staff were required to teach a wider range of subjects in the Degree, staff with both industry and academic backgrounds were sought. However, because of the relative newness of aviation as a university discipline in Australia, few applicants could satisfy both

## *Sources of Confusion*

criteria; thus there remained some division within the staff between the industry and academic teaching staff.

### *The Department of Aviation and the Bachelor of Aviation Studies*

Aviation studies has been a university concern in the United States since the 1920s but only came to higher education in Australia in 1988. Unlike most other aviation-related degrees, the Bachelor of Aviation Studies at UWS is a humanities-based, rather than a mechanical or engineering Degree. For this emerging discipline the need to be seen as viable, credible and academically rigorous has been a defining characteristic.

This was evident early on in the dedication of the staff and their concern to maintain 'academic standards'. Consequently the Head of Department and most of the academics supported academic skills development. A staff meeting in 1997 constructed a 'wish list' of academic skills that staff wanted taught by the Learning Centre to first year students in the *Communication for Aviation* subject. The concern for standards was also evident in the Department's approach to referencing and plagiarism, so much so that in 1998 students in *Communication for Aviation 2* were asked to buy the APA Publication Manual and its accompanying student exercise book. Although the exercise books were later dropped, the APA Publication Manual remains a subject text.

### *The aviation industry and the Bachelor of Aviation Studies*

The aviation industry is a global, dynamic and technology driven industry with strong growth forecasts. There is great competition for jobs within the sector, especially for flight crew positions, in air traffic control, as flight attendants and in aircraft maintenance. Because of the emphasis on technology and innovation most employees in the industry participate in ongoing training to maintain and upgrade skills and ensure their continued employment. Not surprisingly there is a growing demand for relevant university qualifications. The establishment of the Bachelor of Aviation Studies at UWS has been keenly observed by industry and close links have been maintained.

## **Making sense of the confusion – Addressing the needs of stakeholders**

### *Addressing the needs of students*

Aviation students are typically highly motivated by their love of flying and the industry. The trainee pilots have to invest large amounts of time and money to pursue their careers. In my experience they are unlikely to be motivated by study for its own sake. In order to offer an academic skills course that had the best chance of engaging the students, we aimed to link knowledge and skills to industry. Culture and communication theory became the key theoretical components of the course from which comparisons and applications to aviation and the academic environment were drawn. This theoretical component also served as the rationale for academic (and industry) skills development.

A major challenge for the learning advisors was to help students come to understand the differences between the kind of teaching and learning associated with training and that associated with university learning. Mature aged students, and in particular highly qualified pilots, found university learning confounding. In aviation there is a strong sense of workplace culture and we were able to exploit this awareness very readily by drawing parallels between the cultural norms, practices, beliefs, attitudes and languages associated with their own workplaces and those of the university and especially of university learning. The final versions of both the campus based and distance Communications subjects incorporated explicit units on culture and academic culture in particular. Other second and third year subjects revisit and extend student understandings of organisational and ethnic culture in aviation.

Most students of the Bachelor of Aviation Studies either are planning to or will already have had considerable industry training in flying or aircraft maintenance. Some are themselves

## *Sources of Confusion*

trainers. Students used to industry training often bring an approach to learning that Ballard and Clanchy (1991) have described as “reproductive”. Such a learning approach entails a “conserving” attitude to knowledge with a view to preserving and reproducing existing knowledge. Associated learning strategies are typically identifying, memorising and accurately describing given information. One of the earliest requests of the Learning Centre in 1995 was to help make these students think! The reproductive approach to learning is based on a supposition that there is a “correct” answer and this is a constant in most aviation training which is skills based, fact oriented and exam tested. Certainly, pilots, aircraft maintenance crews and air traffic controllers are trained to follow standard operating procedures with the threat of major accidents for failure to do so.

Early versions of the academic skills subject aimed to encourage analytical thinking through reflective journal writing, group work activities and comparative writing exercises. The *Aviation Communication* subjects encouraged critical thinking through the development of critical and analytical writing and oral presentations. The second semester *Aviation Communication* subject included a critical thinking component and a major group project which required students to analyse the positions of competing lobby groups vis a vis a controversial issue in aviation.

### *Addressing the needs of the Department and its staff*

Although not an explicit intention originally, the Learning Centre has had a significant impact on raising the awareness of Departmental staff about academic skills. This has been achieved by working directly with individual faculty on the development and teaching of the communications subject, by co-marking assessments, by meeting with faculty to determine their needs and to discuss subject content and the integration of communication aspects throughout the Degree.

In the collaboration which brought about this Communications subject, the Learning Centre worked directly with one Departmental academic almost continuously over five years. Two other members of the teaching staff collaborated directly for a year each. Since mid-2000 the Learning Centre has been assisting in the hand-over of the subject to new academic staff replacing two who have left.

In addition, the Learning Centre has been central in the development of students’ academic skills through the institution of the core, first year communications subject for both on-campus and distance students. In this way all aviation students will be able to understand their academic environment and develop key academic literacies from the earliest stages of their Degree – irrespective of staff changes within the Department.

### *Addressing industry needs*

As the Learning Centre teachers became more conversant with the students, we also learned about the industry our students were a part of. The earliest examples of subject development showed a concern to relate academic skills more broadly to industry. In 1997 the *Language of Aviation* was a parallel subject to *Aviation Theory* and its objective was to assist students to gain the academic skills required for success in the parallel subject. Over time the curriculum expanded to address not only the academic needs of students but also those of industry. Reflective journal writing aimed to build a reflective capacity useful for analysing incidents or accidents, and to assist students to relate theory to practice. Text analysis was based on industry journals, report writing was explored using relevant industry reports such as accident reports, and group projects enabled students to test team skills.

As workers in the aviation industry continue to need to improve their credentials, and as recruitment by major airline carriers becomes more competitive, there is likely to be a growing number of part time students. The distance education mode of the Degree is proving to be very popular in Australia and overseas. In 2000, *Aviation Communication: An Introduction* was modified and offered by distance mode. Over the last three years many full

time professionals in aviation similarly showed their support for optional weekend academic skills workshops, indicating the needs of such personnel for flexible modes of delivery.

### **Curriculum development**

#### *From guest lectures to course subject*

For the first two years of our involvement with the Department of Aviation, the Learning Centre responded to requests from individual staff members who were hoping we could fix problems they had identified amongst their students. However, a key staff member and successive classes of students who articulated their views through workshop evaluations recognised that a longer-term systemic approach was required. Importantly, the Head of this newly emerging Department supported that view.

The development of a subject sensitive to all stakeholders was seen to be the best way forward. Students' needs were monitored by end of subject evaluations, co-marking of assignments, co-teaching of sessions and through regular meetings of teaching staff. Departmental staff meetings discussed course subjects and content and provided an ongoing forum for communicating staff concerns.

The evolutionary nature of the Learning Centre assistance to the Department of Aviation and the sensitivity to Departmental needs can be seen in the name changes to the subject we offered: *English for Aviation Purposes*, the *Language of Aviation*, *Communication for Aviation*, *Aviation Communication: An Introduction*, *Advanced Aviation Communication*. There was resistance to identifying the academic skills aspect of the subject. The title *English for Aviation Purposes* was only used once for the inherited students who had proven language difficulties.

In 1997 the first version of our subject was almost purely academic skills and was offered as a credit subject in conjunction with *Aviation Theory*. At its completion about one third of student evaluations recorded a level of dissatisfaction concerning the relevance of the subject. Our intention had been to gain relevance by linking our subject to those academic skills required in the theory subject. From the student point of view this was not convincing.

In 1998 we tried to make this connection more meaningful by increasing the co-teaching and co-marking between the strands. The academic skills component, however, remained the poor cousin of the "industry strand". It was not taken seriously by the students nor by some academics who saw it as essentially remedial. Many capable students also regarded it negatively.

The academic skills the students needed for success varied little; however, as our knowledge of the industry grew, the subject became more industry-specific and therefore more interesting and relevant. A connection between academic culture and workplace and national culture grew from the need to help non-traditional students interpret their new learning environment. In this way too, we hoped to address the needs of the more able students who found the subject lacking. We found that all students benefited as learning was able to build on the interconnectedness of knowledge spanning personal, industry and course experience (Biggs, 1999).

Innovation and progress in aviation has long been reactive to accident causation, and a key aspect of human failure, and therefore accidents, in aviation is communication breakdown. In early 1999 local politics deemed a need for a stronger theoretical basis to the subject which happened to coincide with a shift in subject content towards communication theory and application in aviation. Communication as a crucial aspect of aviation became the cornerstone of the subject. From 1999 onwards *Aviation Communication: An introduction* offered skills development plus a content knowledge that had legitimacy beyond the subject itself.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Also in 1999, the Learning Centre was asked to conduct academic skills workshops for students taking the Bachelor of Aviation Studies by distance education mode. These students were struggling with “academic learning”; however, unlike local students they were isolated (mostly overseas) and had little or no access to Australian style higher education. Our orientation towards academic skills development at these workshops was again from the point of communication appropriate to the cultural contexts of aviation and the academic environment. In 2000, a modified version of *Aviation Communication: An introduction* was offered to distance education students.

### **Assessing the value of the collaboration**

There have been some clear and demonstrable successes for students from this collaboration. All first year students of the Bachelor of Aviation now take a subject that prepares them for the academic demands of their degree. Successive student evaluations have been positive, especially since the altered curriculum in 1999. The nature of this subject means that students struggling with language are identified early on for extra help from the Learning Centre.

Because more than half the Department’s permanent staff have worked or been involved with the development and delivery of *Aviation Communication*, an awareness of academic literacy has permeated the Department. This collaboration has also benefited the Learning Centre in terms of staff development and positive profile.

This collaboration has had many positive outcomes, but perhaps the most tangible is the development of the subject and its positioning as a compulsory component of a first year introduction to aviation. This, and the production of a distance education mode have truly signified the acceptance and permanency of communication and academic skills in this Degree. When so many academics fear the devolving of their subjects, and the downsizing of their Departments, this can only be a good thing for student learning because it stands independent of other changes.

### **Future Directions**

In this tale the Learning Centre has sustained a commitment to improving student learning within one Department. It has helped develop a core subject in the belief that a systematic introduction to academic skills via an assessable, relevant, skills and knowledge based, first year subject has a lasting, positive impact on student learning. In this way the Learning Centre has worked with over 250 students developing and monitoring their academic skills. It has also reached students by distance mode. Its own staff have developed new skills. It has established itself as a key participant in course design and delivery in a new Department. It has helped academics and students unravel some of the confusions associated with the learning that takes place in universities. Perhaps it has helped clarify further the role of learning advisors.

So has this been a useful model for future collaborations? What are its shortcomings? If it is considered useful then what aspects are able to be reproduced again? Just how much of the history of this collaboration is circumstantial? The politics of a newly developing Department, in this instance, worked to our advantage - it may not always be so. How central are personalities to such an experience? How much time should be spent on curriculum design and on teaching compared to other activities such as research and evaluation? How do we ensure the long-term viability of such courses? How and at what point does the Learning Centre hand over full responsibility? Is subject development without staff development viable?

### *Issues for the Learning Centre*

The history of the collaboration between the Learning Centre and the Department of Aviation has spanned five years and it is now time to evaluate the successes and failures of this experience in order to make future decisions. But we also need to ask questions that go

## *Sources of Confusion*

beyond (or begin before) this one experience. It is important for us to reflect on such experiences in terms of the growing body of writing about the place of Learning Centres and our role in university learning (See Ballard, 1994; Webb and Bonanno, 1994; Chanock, 1996).

Biggs (1999) claims that reflective activity is essential to good teaching practice. For language and learning advisers it must be this and more; reflection allows us to assess the nature and value of our contribution to university learning. Reflecting on individual activities of Learning Centres must occur within a broader context of understanding our role. The current restructuring of the University of Western Sydney has led our Learning Centre to begin asking itself this question.

### **References**

- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Ballard, B. (1994). The integrative role of the study adviser. In K. Chanock, (Ed.) *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines* (pp. 16-25). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Beasley, C. J. & Pearson, C. A. L. (1999). Facilitating the learning of transitional students: strategies for success for all students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 18 (3) 303 - 321.
- Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press.
- Chanock, K. Burley, V. & Davies, S. (Eds.) (1996). *What do we learn from teaching one-to-one that informs our work with larger numbers?* Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Hawthorne, L. (2000). Re-thinking the impact of cultural difference on learning: The evidence for asset versus deficit models. In G. Crosling, T. Moore, & S. Vance (Eds.), *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimensions of our work*. (pp.55 - 58). Melbourne: CeLTS, Monash University.
- Henley, I. (1995). The quality of the development and evaluation of flight instructors in Canada and Australia. (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of Newcastle, 1995).
- Hicks, M., Irons, E. & Zeegers, P. (1994). Academic and Communication skills taught in science and engineering courses. In K. Chanock (Ed.) with V. Burley, *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines* (pp.178 - 183). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Hicks, M. & George, R. (1998). A strategic perspective on approaches to student learning support at the University of South Australia. Retrieved Nov. 1, 1999 on the World Wide Web:  
<http://www.cce.auckland.ac.nz/herdsa98/HTML/LearnSup/HIKSM.HTML>
- Rosen, R. R. (1999). Academic transition into university culture or what are we teaching our students? *Aries Journal of Australian Research on International Education Services* 1 (1) 7 - 22.
- Tapper, J. (1999). Partnerships in the development of students' communication skills. Paper presented at HERDSA Annual International Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Volet, S. & Renshaw, P. (1996). Chinese students at an Australian university: Continuity and adaptability. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*. Hong Kong Centre for Comparative Research in Education. Camberwell, Vic: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Webb, C. & Bonanno, H. (1994). The roles of language and learning staff: Insights from collaborations with the subject discourse. In K. Chanock (Ed.) with V. Burley, *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines* (pp. 126-132). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.

**TEACHER v STUDENT:  
THE ROLE OF FUNDAMENTAL "CONCEPTIONS OF REALITY"  
IN THE PREPARATION OF A LEGAL OPINION**

"[T]hey will be on a razor's edge." (Gaskell, 1995, p. 90)

"Everyone feels 'not smart enough' in law school." (Gabel, 1989, p. 94)

Jeffrey Barnes

School of Law and Legal Studies, La Trobe University\*

*This paper explores the sources of confusion in relation to the preparation of a legal advice or opinion, commonly referred to as "legal problem solving". This task, which is different in crucial respects from the preparation of an academic essay, involves the most basic of all legal skills, yet it commonly confounds many students. The paper initially describes symptoms of a flawed approach widely taken by novice students called the "telephone book" approach, but, applying Laurillard's distinction between "faulty procedures" and "conceptual apparatus", the paper suggests that, fundamentally, the source of confusion in legal problem solving lies in student misconceptions of law, rather than simply in a lack of knowledge of the proper steps or procedures. The paper also challenges the notion that the students' misunderstandings simply flow from novice rather than "correct", expert thinking, because it argues that the academic legal problem is an artificial construct which differs from commonsense and the reality of everyday legal activity. Like the student, the academic brings a conception of law to problem solving, only it is a generally opposing one. The paper explores other sources of confusion: the courts (the ultimate teachers); the casebook tradition by which legal thinking is commonly presented for students; and the literature on problem solving. The strengths and limitations of generalist academic skills advisers in this area are also analysed.*

**Introduction**

Law, exclaims the blurb of a first year text, is a bewildering discipline to enter (Enright, 1995). The task of academic skills advisers, whether generalists or law teachers, is therefore a challenging one. A particular challenge in law is the distinctive task which students must learn to accomplish: the preparation of a legal opinion or legal advice, commonly, though somewhat misleadingly, called in the literature "problem solving".

Legal problem solving is a task which, to a degree, simulates an advice given by a professional lawyer (Clarke, 1995, p. 71), classic examples being an office (in-house) memorandum (Dworsky, 1990, p. 77) and a barrister's opinion (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997). In practice it is a kind of interim judgement on a client's present position (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, p. 52). The relevant law has recently been an issue. It has been traditionally thought that the "prophecies of what the courts are likely to do in fact and nothing more pretentious are what I mean by the law" (Holmes J, cited in Bennion, 1997, p. 24). However, an appeal court has recently ruled that, though an advice often entails an element of

---

\* The author thanks Nicholas Horn of the Parliamentary Counsel's Office of the ACT for comments on an earlier draft.

## *Sources of Confusion*

prediction, the judgement of the adviser is to be based on the law as it is, rather than what it might possibly become (*Heydon v NRMA Ltd*, 2000, paras 402 per McPherson AJA, 652-654 per Ormiston AJA). Specifically, the lawyer will frequently be called upon to advise a client of his or her legal rights and liabilities and their options (both legal and non legal); and to assist the client choosing his or her preferred course of action (Handley & Considine, 1996, p. 202).

An opinion is not an essay (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, p. 53), but as a piece of prose a legal opinion shares, at a fundamental level, some features common to that classic of the humanities — or other good writing for that matter (see, for example, Garner, 1991; Dworsky, 1990; Gaskell, 1995, pp. 94-95). As the essay is far more familiar to a university-wide audience it may be helpful to compare briefly the two in terms of their basic features.

- *Purpose.* Unlike an essay, an opinion is not discursive in the sense of setting out to discuss, explore or consider (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, p. 53; Krever, 1998, p. 58). This is because it is essentially an application of the law to the facts of a problem (Clarke, 1995, p. 74). To the extent to which the law is discussed, it may well be an oblique discussion (Krever, 1998, p. 58) rather than a general canvassing of an area of law (Krever, 1998, pp. 58-59). Nor is it an opportunity to raise wider issues of social or economic concern (Gaskell, 1995, p. 96).
- *Sources.* Unlike an essay an opinion must rely wherever possible on primary sources of law; secondary sources, including the critical literature, with few exceptions, are of no assistance (Krever, 1998, p. 60).
- *Audience.* An opinion is not written to enter a wider debate as an essay is supposed to do (Taylor, 1989, p. 3), and hence the audience or notional audience is markedly different. An opinion writer writes for the benefit of a client, though the immediate audience in practice may be a partner or an instructing solicitor. However, it is true that an opinion writer ought to have one wider audience in mind — the courts — for the lawyer should always have "his eye cocked over his shoulder, so to speak, to see how the Court would respond to what he is doing" (Brennan, 1981).
- *Perspective.* An opinion is "not primarily a vehicle for creative self-expression" (Dworsky, 1990, p. 110), nor an opportunity for the writer's *personal* point of view to emerge (Taylor, 1989, p. 2). Although it *is* the opinion of the writer as distinct from an instruction (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, p. 53), it is nevertheless an opinion of what *a court* would most likely decide if the point came before it (Bennion, 1997, p. 24).
- *Theme.* An essay should contain a main point (Samuelson, 1984, pp. 151-152) or make out a case (Taylor, 1989, p. 89). A legal opinion will be guided by the request for advice (Clarke, 1995, p. 73; Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, p. 52), but does not otherwise need a substantive theme.
- *Structure.* Although arguments and counter-arguments must be canvassed in an opinion wherever possible (Krever, 1998, p. 59) the structure of an opinion is different. It is not an argument in toto in that it is not a work which seeks to persuade the client (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, p. 53). It is syllogistic in form, even if it is much more than an exercise in logic (Waller, 1995, pp. 170-171), and is expressed in a propositional style (Clarke, 1995, p. 74; Gaskell 1995, pp. 89, 90).
- *Scope for criticism.* Unlike the typical essay, a legal opinion is not an opportunity to criticise the law unless the opportunity calls for it (Gaskell, 1995, pp. 92, 95). Thus, an authority which the author disagrees with must nevertheless be applied (Clarke, 1995, p. 75).

What then, in brief, must an opinion contain? In law school, an opinion must contain the matters which are asked for — usually legal matters. Krever tells students it must show "how to make decisions and suggest resolutions of a dispute through a reasoned evaluation of the merits of the arguments you discuss" (1998, pp. 59-60). Even though an opinion writer judges the case put by one side only (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, pp. 52-53) it is "objective" as a judge would be (Inns of Court School of Law, 1997, p. 52; Dworsky, 1990, pp. 77-79). This means that it is not partisan like the argument of a barrister in court can be within certain

limits (Clarke, 1995, p. 77; Dworsky, 1990, p. 78). An opinion must give the clients "a balanced and detached conclusion about their position so that they can make an informed decision concerning whether to invest more of their resources into the legal system" (Clarke, 1995, p. 76). While traditionally an opinion is restricted to the legal position and options as described, there is a view that lawyers ought to consider non legal avenues (Handley & Considine, 1996), and some law teachers include non legal options in their teaching materials for this purpose (see, for example, Douglas, Jones & Cossins, 1999, pp. 23-26, 44-45; 211-214).

Now rule following is something we learn from the time we first acquire language: "Go and pick up your toys Jeffrey!" "Wash your hands Jeffrey!". Nevertheless, rule following in law school confounds many students, at least initially. Acute, emotional trauma can even be experienced (Mitchell, 1989, p. 289). One explanation for the "culture shock" experienced by novice law students is that, unlike the case with disciplines such as English or Physics, most students enter law school without previous or adequate exposure to the vast underlying knowledge base of the legal community (Mitchell, 1989, p. 289).

My paper explores further reasons for student difficulties in the context of learning problem solving. My argument in brief is as follows. Confusion over the learning of this most basic of legal skills does stem from a gap between novice thinking and academic expectations. But confusion over learning this skill is not a simple case of differences between novice performance and expert standards. Fundamentally this gap may be traced to students and academics bringing to bear different conceptions of their discipline to the task of legal advising. Furthermore, in law, the academic, like the student, brings a constructed view of the discipline. The academic's view of law is not "correct" in the scientific sense and may differ from commonsense and the reality of the practice of law. Additionally, there are wider sources of confusion. The courts (the ultimate teachers) and the casebooks prepared by academics are sources of confusion. Academic skills advisers, who may have no more than a lay knowledge of law, may unwittingly reinforce student's misconceptions. Finally, I turn my attention to law teachers, for an additional source of confusion arises in the *instruction* of problem solving. The models of problem solving which are commonly put forward in texts on problem solving on the whole pay insufficient attention to the causes of student confusion.

While much of this paper is devoted to explaining the various sources of confusion, I do wish to consider evidence of progress that is being made in the teaching of problem solving.

### **Building blocks: my assumptions**

In this paper I make certain assumptions about student learning and constraints on student thinking. What follows is a brief outline.

An outdated, if somewhat caricatured (Twining, 1996, pp. 299-300) "teacher-centred" view of learning sees students as "empty vessels". Students are assumed to be passive learners and all that is required is "the transmission of large amounts of information from the fount-of-wisdom teacher ... based on, and organised around subject-matter" (Nathanson, 1996, p. 145).

"Student-centred" methods are now much in vogue (Handley & Considine, 1996, p. 216; Nathanson, 1996, p. 146). One school of thought propounds that, since learning involves a process of "construction", teaching must be an "an act of intervention in the students' construction of knowledge" (Le Brun & Johnstone, 1994, p. 71). In this vein, commonsense would support an approach to teaching which recognises that "[t]he knowledge that students bring to a course will necessarily affect how they deal with the new knowledge being taught" (Laurillard, 1993, p. 30; Oppenheim, 1999). Hence, academics need "to understand not only where students should get to, but also where they are as they begin a course" (Laurillard, 1993, p. 31). What teachers need to know is the "conceptions of reality" which students have already acquired (Laurillard, 1993, p. 36). These conceptions are defined as "an aspect of their behaviour in the world and their experience of it". They of course can be misconceptions. Laurillard makes a very pertinent observation regarding the difference

## *Sources of Confusion*

between a student's faulty *procedures* in performing some task, and the *conceptual apparatus* that support it. As she says it makes no sense to remediate a faulty procedural skill with reference to the procedure alone; we have to appeal to the fundamental conceptions as well (1993, p. 37). The point of this is clear: if we do not address and challenge relevant fundamental misconceptions "we build on sand" (Laurillard, 1993, p. 43).

There is a striking similarity between the "conceptions of reality" in the literature of educational theorists such as Laurillard and the notions of "schemas" and "myths" about which psychologists and cultural theorists speak respectively. It is helpful to draw the connections. Schemas, in the words of Mandler (1997, pp. 44-45) are —

the basic building blocks of everyday thought; they are the major representations (and abstractions) of both our cultural and our individual experiences. ... Schemas are not carbon copies of experience, but abstract representations of experiential regularities. Schemas organize and interpret our world, and they organize experience in that current encounters are defined and interpreted in terms of the schemas laid down by past similar and cognate experiences. ... Schemas are not rigidly bounded representations but are best seen as dispositional. ... [T]he main stock of our schemas that interpret the world around us are created, directed, and colored by society, by the culture in which we live and have grown up.

Mandler, drawing on Piaget, notes that schemas may develop ("assimilation") or, where new information cannot be assimilated, may change ("accommodation"). However, until such time as schemas change, they "define what we are likely to see, hear, and remember and also determine what we are unlikely to hear or see" (1993, p. 44). Moreover, schemas are resilient; a person can stubbornly cling to erroneous and unfounded assumptions, even after lengthy explanation by an expert (Tannen & Wallat, 1986, p. 309).

The significance of schemas for present purposes is that researchers see frames and schemas as operating in similar ways in at least all face-to-face interactions (Tannen & Wallat, 1987, p. 215).

Schemas themselves have political cousins — dubbed by Donald Horne as "myths of modern enchantment" (1986). A myth is "a belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning" (1986, p. 57). The author writes of how, in most modern industrial liberal-democratic societies, a public culture takes hold of individuals; the dominant myths constitute the "language" of that culture. Myths are not necessarily altogether false — they may be partly true (1986, p. 58). Nevertheless, they work "magically" by "transforming complex affairs into simple but crystal-clear 'realities' that explain and justify how things are now, or how we would like them to be ... [They] simplify or deny the great contradictions of society" (1986, pp. 57, 58). One myth is the rule of law (1986, p. 58) which conceals inequalities of access and the inequalities of the law itself (1986, p. 129).

In various fields and from different perspectives, then, writers have theorised about different forms of "reality making". In education, the student's learning will be affected by a conceptual apparatus, which at a fundamental level are "conceptions of reality". From psychology, the relevance of schemas is in explaining, from an individual's point of view, how dispositions take hold, and how they both change and resist change. From sociology, the relevance of myths lies in pointing to how individuals function as members of a public culture and share similar large scale conceptions about law and politics.

I now turn to classroom interaction to identify relevant conceptions of reality which affect the way in which students learn basic legal skills.

### **Student (mis)conceptions as a source of confusion**

On the face of it, student confusion with the preparation of a legal opinion is manifested by the adoption of faulty "procedures", to use Laurillard's terminology. A common misguided

## Sources of Confusion

approach is a "telephone book" approach to studying law, so named for the assumption that all one has to know is "where to find the so called right answer as one would look up someone's telephone number" (Kobetsky, 1998, p. 94). Common broad symptoms are:

- failure to analyse *closely* legal material (both information and rules);
- stating the general principles only;
- failure to analyse the constituent elements of a rule;
- the absence of analysis, or a lack of reasoning and argumentation (Bentley, 1994, p. 142; Gabel, 1989, p. 93; Wade, 1990-91, p. 288) as students leap from the rule or issue to the conclusion;
- a failure to see the issue in a properly balanced way, as when arguments for only one side are considered (Enright, 1995, p. 476);
- reading rules literally rather than interpreting them contextually, even after prior studies in interpretation;
- frequent requests for the "right" answer (Kobetsky, 1998, p. 92); and
- the use of potted, streamlined statements of the law set out in secondary sources (textbooks and articles), instead of reliance being placed on primary sources of law (legislation and cases) as legal authority.

A study of first year Contract students (Kamler & Maclean, 1997) from the perspective of "language as social practice" (1997, p. 207) made findings consistent with the telephone book approach. Among other things, the study compared a student letter of advice to a fictional client with a model letter of advice prepared by the teaching staff of the law school. The authors noted how the students were far more concerned with the written law and the contract (the "textually mediated world of the law") than they were with the everyday world of the client and the client's concerns. The authors observed: "[p]erhaps we could argue ... that the students still see the law as being more about words rather than real events" (1997, p. 203).

Another example of the telephone book approach is drawn from personal experience. In an introductory lecture on how to read the Commonwealth Constitution taken by a colleague, students are asked to read section 68 of the Constitution, which is as follows: "The command in chief of the naval and military forces of the Commonwealth is vested in the Governor-General as the Queen's representative." The lecture is performed in the Socratic style in which the lecturer probes students with questions. Students are asked for their view on whether the Governor-General could have sent Australian troops to the Gulf War or to East Timor. Typically, if not invariably, they respond with "yes, theoretically, but not practically". This view, in so far as it suggests any real power is possessed by the Queen's representative, is misconceived because the power is purely titular (Republic Advisory Committee, 1993, pp. 86-87; Stephen, 1984). The literal view is wrong because it fails to have regard to powerful contextual considerations or, in Boyd White's memorable phrase, "the invisible discourse of the law" (1985, p. 63). In this instance the Constitution is regarded as permeated with the "spirit" of the institution of responsible government (*Amalgamated Society of Engineers v Adelaide Steamship Co Ltd (Engineers Case)*, pp. 146-148 per Knox CJ, Isaacs, Rich & Starke JJ), pursuant to which (with the exception of the "reserve powers") the Governor General is constrained to act under the advice of the responsible minister. Secondly, historical and technical factors explain why, in the drafting of the Constitution, the reference to the Governor-General was not written as "the Governor-General in Council" (that is, the Governor-General acting at the request of the Federal Executive Council) (Stephen, 1984, pp. 570-571).

There is a dearth of hard evidence on *why* students take inappropriate approaches. Clearly, phenomenological research of students' conceptual apparatus of the kind advocated by Laurillard (1993, p. 36) needs to be done. (This must include, she says, "probing interviews with students about their experience of carrying out those tasks".) However, some preliminary thinking logically can start with *lay* knowledge and views of the law for the obvious reason that law students, at the point of entry, can be expected to exhibit the knowledge and behaviours of the lay person. Empirical studies make clear that Australians, like Canadians (Bowal, 1998), do not know much about government or the law. The 1994 report of the

## *Sources of Confusion*

Civics Expert Group found widespread lack of knowledge of government including key aspects of the legal system and, generally, citizen's rights and responsibilities. Its main finding was:

While there are pockets of reasonably informed people, knowledge about governmental, constitutional, citizenship and civics issues is generally very low. The community admits scant knowledge about these issues, and actual understanding is often considerably lower than claimed knowledge. In some cases, there are significant misconceptions. (Civics Expert Group, 1994, p. 132)

Specifically, only 33% of the community feel reasonably informed about the rights and responsibilities of Australian citizens (1994, pp. 133, 155). Furthermore, although some law students take legal studies at school or at university before commencing a law degree, younger people (particularly those aged 15-19 years) were the least knowledgeable group (1994, p. 134). The low awareness was attributed to a lack of formal education on citizenship matters and a heavy reliance on the media (1994, p. 134).

But as this survey found, public attitudes to the law (as in other areas of public life: Horne, 1986) are informed not just by ignorance, but by misconceptions. Professor Weeramantry has written that —

The citizen tends inevitably to look upon legal problems as analogous to the problems of mathematics. Each problem has its correct solution, irrespective of the element of chance and irrespective of the personality of the solver. To his mind therefore there is a perfectly just and definite solution to every legal problem, and a court duly furnished with the relevant facts should inevitably reach that solution. Likewise the lawyer, considering the case ahead of the court, must also inevitably reach the same result. Certainty and predictability are thus looked upon not merely as desirable, but also as easily attainable attributes of the law. (1975, p. 78)

But *why* does the citizen and hence the law student conceive of law in these terms? For what I believe to be a persuasive answer we should pay special regard to the work of the noted law and literature scholar, James Boyd White. Professor White has analysed how the lay person is mystified and confused by law. The sources of confusion for the lay person lie in the *apparent* similarity between law and ordinary speech. First, much of what lawyers say and write is intelligible to the non lawyer, he says, because much of the language is familiar (1985, p. 62). Others have made similar observations. Learning the law is not like learning a foreign language, says Dworsky (1990, p. 2), although there are hundreds of legal terms (Garner, 1991, p. 184; Dworsky, 1990, p. 2.). Second, legal rules, says White, commonly have a "plain and authoritative air and seem to contemplate no difficulty whatever in their application" (1985, p. 64). Third, similar to Weeramantry, White says that to a lay person a legal rule looks like a rule of geometry, and therefore is expected to work like one, that is, deductively (1985, p. 65). Fourth, a lay person will find difficulty in the systematic character of legal rules (the generality of legal language), because in ordinary conversation what matters is the particular conversation, not some larger, categorical system (1985, pp. 68-69). Fifth, and most importantly, says White, the lay person will simply *not see* the "cultural context" (1985, p. 35) or the "cultural syntax" of the law (1985, p. 63), which lies not in ordinary commonsense assumptions (though this is part of the law — see White, 1985, p. 66), but in the "invisible discourse of the law" — the unstated conventions by which the language operates (1985, p. 63). They comprise expectations such as how words are to be interpreted in a statute, and how the general rule or ratio of a case is formulated and in what circumstances, for the law resolves interpretative questions in procedural forums which are rarely to be found in the rule itself (1985, pp. 70-71). Thus, for White, knowledge of the law lies not in knowing the rules, but in understanding what it means to read and write a discourse based on rules (1985, p. 73).

In short, flowing from Boyd White's analysis of lay difficulties with the law, it may be argued that the non lawyer conceives of law as ordinary language. While there is superficial similarity, law is vastly more complex and sharply different both in form and in operation from ordinary speech.

To sum up, faulty student problem solving in law does not proceed simply from the adoption of wrong procedures, though this is the most obvious source of error, but from certain schemas or conceptions of reality about law. A strong case can be made that the conceptual apparatus driving student attempts is a lay conception of law, one which equates law with ordinary language.

### **Academic conceptions underlying the drawing up of a legal problem**

#### *The conception of "the uncertainty of law"*

The law teacher is both expert and academic and it ought not be surprising, on reflection, that there is a serious disjuncture between the student conception of law described above and that of the legal academic who sets problems for students. In saying this it is not pretended that all legal academics share similar philosophies which influence their lecturing and assessment programs. There is a continuum in the teaching of law, the exact dimensions of which are a matter of contention. At one end there is the expository tradition (Cranston, 1978, pp. 54-56) or "black-letterism", defined as a taxonomic stock-taking of legal rules (Hutchinson, 1999, p. 302). At the other extreme are courses which allegedly lack solid legal substance (Pearce, Campbell & Harding, 1987 Vol 3, pp. 944-945). "Law in context" or "law and society" (Cranston, 1978) lies somewhere in the middle (Mason CJ in Bottomley & Parker, 1997, p. 2; McInnis & Marginson, 1994, p. 157). However, even a black-letter exponent will highlight formal inconsistencies and logical error (Hutchinson, 1999, p. 302).

Not all law subjects have examinations and not all examinations have legal problems. But most do. In my experience of teaching at three universities there is a remarkable coincidence of views when setting a legal problem in an examination or an assignment. (For further support, see the discussion below of the literature on problem solving.) The examiner sets two somewhat conflicting tasks for the student, both of which must be attempted satisfactorily for the student to obtain a pass result. First, the examiner creates facts which may raise legal issues to set the student the task of *identifying* possibly relevant law. Second, the examiner attempts to create uncertainty — as much uncertainty as the area of law can bear given the time constraints — to see how the student *manages* uncertainty. Put simply, the uncertainty may be the material facts; it may be the applicable law; or it may lie in the application of the law to the facts. The uncertainty is magnified for the law student by the fact, that unlike an essay question, a legal problem does not normally come signposted with the relevant topic, let alone issue (Fox, 1995, p. 80). Furthermore, the examiner may place red herrings in the problem — facts which are not relevant or which do not give rise to legal remedies. The examiner may also deliberately leave out crucial facts. The open book nature of most law examinations is also a driving factor in the examiner focussing on uncertainty rather than on knowledge.

Of course, for practical reasons, the uncertainty in a law problem is very much controlled, particularly in the way the facts are often a packaged and sterilised version (Wade, 1990-91, p. 285). This consequence flows from the facts being given rather than being something sought out, by being reduced to a convenient bundle instead of being extremely bulky and voluminous, and by being mostly relevant instead of the undifferentiated mass which a practitioner is required mentally to sort.

Boyd White crystallises the "law as uncertainty" model when he writes, of himself and his colleagues, "Our primary field of concern is the problematic and complex in the law, not the simple and orderly" (1985, p. 52). The task of the law student is thus far from the reproductive nature of the "telephone book" approach since under the academic "uncertainty"

## *Sources of Confusion*

model, "The task of the law student is not simply to understand and describe the law, but to *make* it and *remake* it in practice" (1985, pp. 113-14; emphasis added).

A word about the meaning of uncertainty in the context of a legal advice. Some academics take the unorthodox and greatly exaggerated view that legal doctrine is always "qualitatively indeterminate" (Hutchinson, 1985, p. 293) and what rules mean and what it means to follow them are never beyond dispute (Hutchinson, 1999, p. 304). A better view is that the plasticity and multiplicity of legal rules, principles and ideals does not mean that the law is a sham (Aronson & Franklin, 1987, p. 10). The orthodox view of "uncertainty" in the law is that, even in a law examination, some issues are too plain for argument (White, 1985, p. 66; Fish, 1989, ch 21; Twining & Miers, 1999, p. 377); solid judgements can be made in some cases (White, 1985, p. 97); and, where there is uncertainty, it is constituted by "a range of possible meanings" (White, 1985, p. 78).

The uncertainty in the examination will be only the final act in a subject in which uncertainty is stressed, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the teacher's philosophies, resources and time available. Where secondary sources are provided as background they often highlight contradictory materials of the subject, such as the contradictory purposes of the law, the ways in which the law's impact does not measure up to its noble purposes; or the fluidity of the law and the lack of agreement about its desirable content. Furthermore, the standard material in law subjects, the judicial opinion or judgment in a case (White, 1985, p. 49) plays a crucial role in emphasising uncertainty in legal advising. A case is pre-eminently concerned with a dispute. Obviously, the law teacher offers cases as a source of law which may be cited where relevant, but they are also, in the eloquent words of White, "offered to you as the occasion for individual and collective thought, as genuine problems for the mind and heart" (1985, p. 54). White does point out, though, that the worthiness of a judgment in this regard depends on "how far it recognizes what is valid or valuable in each side and includes that within itself" (1985, p. 116).

The academic model can be justified from a training perspective. Uncertainty in the law is a fact of life and the causes of uncertainty are legion (Weeramantry, 1975, ch. 3) and too numerous to mention. Some general explanations are: that law "should not be regarded as an overlay placed upon society by external authority, divine or human" (Weeramantry, 1975, p. 4), rather it "exists at the vortex of the social melee" (Sampford, 1989, p. 263); that rules are prone to "conditions of doubt" (Twining & Miers, 1999, pp. 208-220); and that the very generality of law — a natural cause of variation in application — is a product of the need to be rational and fair (White, 1985, p. 70). In addressing the traditional legal hypothetical, the student is active and obtains valuable practice in difficult interpretative problems (Enright, 1995, pp. 463-64). The problem tests, and hence promotes, the development of skills such as statutory interpretation, factual analysis, case distinguishing and case synthesis, skills which will outlive particular rules (Krever, 1998, p. 5). It may enable the law graduate to practice on either side or at least to understand the counter arguments of the other side (Krever, 1998, p. 7). It assists students to cope with legal change.

There is now wide support for the view that the teaching of skills such as problem solving can be justified on intellectual, as well as professional, grounds (Handley & Considine, 1996, pp. 214, 218). Generic skills fostered by problem solving include: identification and diagnosis of a problem, the use of precedents and analogies, lateral thinking, principled decision making, reasoned evaluation, making judgements and choices, and written communication skills (Handley & Considine, 1995, p. 211; White, 1985, p. 59). Problem solving thus assists the development of the individual mind and in that sense makes a contribution to a liberal education (White, 1985, p. 59).

### *The conception of the uncertainty of law as a source of student confusion*

In science and mathematics, the confusion of the novice thinker arises from a misunderstanding on the part of the student of the "correct" scientific framework — something which the academic in those disciplines is rightly assumed to possess (Laurillard, 1993, pp.

38, 42). But the same assumption cannot be made for law. In law, it is not a simple matter of moving the student from the position of a "novice" to something approaching an "expert" position since the expert conception of law in legal practice is not in all respects equivalent to the academic conception of law. The academic model is, thus, itself a valid source of confusion from the students' viewpoint.

Primarily this is the case because the academic model *exaggerates* uncertainty of law. To state some obvious facts, law is not to be equated with a contested hearing since, to take civil law, most civil disputes do not end up in court (Bottomley & Parker, 1997, pp. 6-7). Furthermore, law is not to be equated even with disputes. Focusing on disputes ignores "non-contentious" (Bottomley & Parker, 1997, p. 6) and "unproblematic" (Twining & Miers, 1999, p. 207) matters — "everyday legal activity" (Sachs, cited in Cranston, 1978, p. 58) such as drafting deeds and wills (Bottomley & Parker, 1997, p. 6). This constitutes much of the work of lawyers (Bottomley & Parker, 1997, p. 6) and is possibly the way "most rules work", which is to say, in a "fairly simple and direct fashion" (White, 1985, p. 65). Admittedly the extent of certainty in the law is impossible to measure. It is relevant to note some facts however. In the criminal law area, the overwhelming majority of matters in the Magistrates' Court involves guilty pleas (Council of Magistrates, 1999, p. 21; Douglas, 1986, p. 181; Douglas, 1982, p. 200). While a considerable number of these may, for various reasons, involve uncontested issues (Bottomley & Parker, 1997, pp. 111-115), it is reasonable to assume a significant proportion involve no problematic legal or factual issue (cf Bottomley & Parker, 1997, p. 112). In the civil law area, it is worth noting that most unfavourable social security decisions are not contested. This is said to be because the decisions are "right" (Volker, 1989, p. 112), which is probably true for a large proportion even if the claim is self serving. Another staple of the law which is worth noting because it rarely causes disputes is the practice of conveyancing.

There are at least two explanations for why rules work unproblematically. One is that "these are occasions of rules-obedience for which no special social or intellectual competence is required" (White, 1985, p. 65). The other is that rules are often a matter of routine (Twining & Miers, 1999, p. 207).

What follows from the above discussion is that the student conception of law — of law as ordinary language — is not wholly wrong. And nor is the academic conception of law — of law as uncertainty — wholly right either. Both are constructions. The academic model is thus a source of confusion itself because it distorts "reality" — if reality is measured (as it should be) by the operation of law generally rather than by legal disputes attended by lawyers.

As to why law schools do not seek to present the reality of legal practice — if they ever could — this is a complex question. At bottom is the realisation that most law teachers these days are not practitioners — they are scholars (White, 1985, p. 55). Put simply, it suits the liberal goals and the research culture of the university for the scholar to stand back from the world of practice and engage, critically and creatively, with the subject (White, 1985, p. 55).

#### *The paradoxical nature of the academic legal problem*

There is an apparent paradox in the academic conception of law which underlies the legal hypothetical. For, even though the dominant idea is, as I have argued, one of uncertainty, legal problems also operate, to a degree, to *reduce* uncertainty when compared with the practice of law. However, the artificiality of the problem in these respects may reinforce student misconceptions of law.

In the academic problem legal principle rather than the facts is magnified. Factual issues are downplayed in comparison with their prominence in legal practice (Megarry, 1967, pp. 176-178) in three ways. First, the problem is commonly more concerned with issues of law than with issues of fact (Handley & Considine, 1996, pp. 198, 215-216). Second, questions of proof and evidential weight tend to be glossed, especially in problems which purport to contain facts "from God", that is, facts whose source is unknown and which must be assumed

to be true and proved (for example in Enright, 1995, p. 464). (These problems are particularly artificial.) Third, although the insertion of red herrings and the deliberate omission of facts are now quite common, the facts which are given are still mostly relevant to the underlying legal issues posed by the problem.

Law school problems also tend to focus exclusively on the question of legal rights and obligations at the expense of non legal options. Hence, litigation and legal avenues of redress are the focus. Since non legal options and remedies are not often canvassed, the range of options under consideration is thereby unrealistically reduced (Handley & Considine, 1996, pp. 214, 217).

The teaching of problem solving is not the sole preserve of the law teacher. It involves others: the courts, casebook authors; authors of texts on problem solving; and generalist skills advisers. I now consider the extent to which each is implicated in student confusion.

### **The courts (the ultimate teachers) and the casebook tradition**

The courts figure in the teaching of problem solving because the judicial opinion is considered to be a model of legal thinking (Cook, Creyke, Geddes & Holloway, 1996, p. 47; Fox, 1995, p. 81) and the "paradigmatic form of legal expression" (White, 1985, p. 41). As mentioned above, cases are the standard (and sometimes the only) materials of the law student. But reported cases under-represent uncertainty because judges sometimes only give the reasons which directly support their conclusion rather than additionally comprehensively explaining why the opposing arguments should not be accepted. Furthermore, as selected in casebooks by academics for teaching purposes, the judgments both over-represent and under-represent uncertainty. They over-represent uncertainty because they are usually reports of high level disputes. They do not therefore represent the ordinary operation of the law in courts or outside courts. And, by not including the results of cases, they leave the student wondering about the eventual operation of the law set out in the judgment (Handley & Considine, 1996, p. 199). The casebooks under-represent uncertainty in the law because, being mostly appellate cases (Cranston, 1978, p. 56), the facts are usually not in dispute, having been settled at the trial level. They also reduce uncertainty, not infrequently, by not publishing significant dissenting views.

### **Textbook models of problem solving**

#### *Approach of student manuals*

There are several works dealing with problem solving in a step-by-step way. There is not a lot of variation between the works. Wade's (1989) method is typical. His model is MIRAT: **M**aterial facts—**I**ssues of law and "policy"—**R**ules and resources—**A**rguments (or **A**pplication) —**T**entative conclusion. Each of the works makes a valuable contribution to demystifying the process of legal decision making. But how far do they go in addressing the issues on learning problem solving raised by this paper? In other words, do they:

- address fundamental misconceptions of law held by law students as distinct from merely giving advice about right or wrong procedures?
- highlight the way in which problems are written: to present, in a controlled way, uncertainties for the student to resolve as best they can?
- give advice on how to handle uncertainties in the law?

Keyzer (1994) is an entire work devoted to problem solving. It readily admits the way in which problems accentuate uncertainty:

Often it is difficult to reach a firm conclusion in an exam question. Problems are often designed to place students in a position where they have to make a *choice* — perhaps between competing interpretations of the law; between a result which is good policy but not yet recognised in the law;

between a result which is good in law but produces an unjust result, etc.  
(1994, p. 53)

Valuable pointers to uncertainty include the non linear fashion of problem solving (1994, p. 8n) and the looseness of the instructions (1994, p. 9). The work is informative on wrong procedures by the highlighting of "begging the question" (1994, p. 50) and examples of flawed opinions (1994, chaps 7-17).

Cook et al (1996) is the standard Australian first year text on legal method. It begins by alluding to the student misconception in an oblique way: "Glib talk of legal systems and rules might suggest that all the laws in force in Australia today could be listed and that all the lawyer need do is go through the list until the rule applying to the client's case is found." (1996, p. 3). The authors discuss the causes of "uncertainties and imperfections of law" at the outset of the work but only very briefly (1994, pp. 3-4). In the chapter devoted to problem solving it recognises that simple, undisputed cases do occur (1996, p. 43), and various causes of uncertainty are pointed out. But it underplays factual uncertainty in failing to refer to the need for factual inquiry by law students (1996, pp. 44-45).

Enright (1995) goes into considerable depth in his chapter on problem solving contained in his work on studying law. The author makes clear reference to the uncertainty model underlying the setting of a legal problem when he writes: "it is a common practice to construct a problem so that the legal consequences of the facts are not immediately clear" (1995, p. 463). Furthermore he emphasises that uncertainty is the gist of the answer: "Not only is ambiguity a problem giving rise to the need for interpretation, it is also the answer or the source of the answer" (1995, p. 467). Enright points out that relevant facts may have been omitted accidentally or deliberately (1995, p. 465). But a limitation of Enright's work is the old-fashioned view that the student must take the facts as true and proved (1995, p. 464). This is not an assumption expressly made by other authors. Enright's work usefully emphasises that an answer could be "maybe" (1995, p. 469) and it stresses how arguments for and against each possible meaning must be given (1995, p. 469). This is because "the facts are normally deliberately chosen to highlight ... ambiguity" (1995, p. 477). Enright highlights common mistakes such as failing to consider whether there might be an issue (1995, p. 476). He demonstrates simple aspects of problem solving which do not give rise to dispute (1995, p. 478). The author also gives general advice about how to approach uncertainty: "working out every possible meaning, or the range of possible meanings, of the ambiguous provision" (1995, p. 479). However he overstates the amount of uncertainty in discussing the prediction of judicial choice (1995, p. 483). He there states it is "largely a matter of guesswork". This ignores the fact that the calculation of what the law is is inherently a prediction.

Krever's work (1998) is devoted entirely to studying law, but with an emphasis, as the title indicates, on mastering examinations. The work highlights uncertainty through the concept of the dialectic of law, which is explained early in the work (1998, chap. 2) and repeated throughout the basic rules for emphasis. Krever offers the sound advice that "[p]reparation for a law exam requires learning the dynamics of the law, not simply its rules" (1998, p. 5). The author explains how uncertainty is contrived with the observation that "virtually never" does an examination duplicate the facts of a previous binding judgment (1998, p. 11). A good example of an advice is given when the situation "remains unclear" and of the argument and counter-argument which sustains that conclusion (1998, p. 57). Krever warns the student that marks are not awarded for a "right" answer, but for showing how to make decisions through a reasoned evaluation of the arguments (1998, pp. 59-60). A particular strength of the work is the long list of warnings of wrong procedures ("Do not ..."). Krever is inclined, though, to overstate the dialectic aspect when he states that "The lawyer is an advocate. She is paid to represent or advise a party" (1998, p. 7). As explained above, to advise is not the same as to represent in court. Later instruction is more accurate: "'Advise Sally' ... means advise her on all the legal issues she will be able to raise in her favour and all those to which she will have to respond" (1998, p. 59). A more serious overstatement occurs with the equation of law with law examinations in the statement "there are no definitive answers in law or in law examinations" (1998, p. 61).

## *Sources of Confusion*

The previous edition of Krever (1995, chap. 6) contains some valuable “alternative guidelines” on problem solving written by three experienced teachers: Philip Clarke, Richard Fox and Nicholas Gaskell. Several points in the guidelines are worth noting. Clarke’s advice is notable for clarifying the form in which issues arise — he distinguishes between “ultimate issues” (“that which determines a party’s right to a remedy, or liability to someone else”) and “subsidiary issues” (those which determine the outcome of the ultimate issue”) (1995, p. 72). Fox articulates well the uncertainty model of law which underlies the legal problem when he says: “[p]roblem questions are deliberately designed by examiners to raise multiple issues and ones for which the law does not currently provide a clear answer” (1995, p. 80). Gaskell similarly is upfront: “The problem will have been designed so that most of the issues could be decided either way: they will be on a razor’s edge” (1995, p. 90). He also usefully collects together reasons why a point in law may be open (1995, p. 92).

Wade’s article (1990-91) emphasises the need to move “to and fro” amongst the problem solving steps and how issues emerge gradually (1990-91, pp. 286, 287). He relates how disputes may occur over material facts (1990-91, p. 286) and over alternative versions of the rule (1990-91, p. 287). The author claims the model has been useful for many students.

Gabel’s article (1989) (extracted in Laster et al., 1997, pp. 170-71) claims success for a problem solving model which the author admits may not be the most sophisticated. His model is based on the IRAC method which is very common in the United States of America. IRAC stands for Issue, Rule, Application (or Analysis) and Conclusion. Instead of explaining, as the others tend to do, lists of things to do or not to do, he concentrates on relating how he developed a programmatic approach to teaching problem solving. The distinctive part of his approach is that he insists on exactly the same introductory words at each stage. They are “[Heading]”, “The issue here is ...”, “The rule is ...”, “Here ...”, and finally “On balance I would conclude”. The author, who works with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, states that a very regimented approach helps students build self confidence and gives them a concrete strategy for building bridges between common sense and the form of a law exam answer, or between ordinary language and legal language.

Dworsky’s (1990) book on legal writing includes a chapter on legal analysis. The author is both a teacher and a practitioner. He also describes the IRAC model. Dworsky’s work does not purport to teach legal analysis (1990, p. 77). He is concerned to teach the proper form of legal writing (1990, p. 77). It is an explicitly plain English perspective summed up by the principle that “[y]our discussion will be easier to follow if your reader can accompany you every step of the way” (1990, p. 84). He makes reassuring noises on the difficulties of locating authorities given the exponential growth of law (1990, p. 64). The work contains useful tips for managing uncertainty such as “save your conclusion on an issue you’re discussing until after you’ve given both sides’ arguments” (1990, p. 86). He adds, “That conclusion doesn’t have to be a yes or no answer — it can include a ‘probably’ or a ‘may’” (1990, p. 87). Hedging is therefore allowed (provided it is done efficiently) as in “Sobel has a good chance of winning in a suit against IBM”, not “It *appears* Sobel *may* have a good *chance* of winning in a suit against IBM” (1990, p. 87; emphasis in original).

The authors of two volumes for legal studies and commerce students appear to share the academic conceptions of their LLB-teaching colleagues even though they are not attempting to create lawyers (Crosling & Murphy 2000, p. 178). Crosling and Murphy go so far as to say:

Law operates differently from *accounting*: there is no correct answer. Both sides are not expected to balance; they are in opposition. The only requirement in law is that the arguments for the opposing parties be considered by the student. (2000, p. 178; emphasis in original.)

When it comes to the design of the legal problem, Frazer (1993), on the other hand, implies that a legal problem will have some certain aspects. She writes: “it is essential that the most

## *Sources of Confusion*

appropriate conclusion be drawn. When this causes a dilemma, the student must be reassured by the fact that problem questions are usually written with a view to causing a little difficulty" (1993, p. 59).

Overall, how successful are the models in addressing issues of uncertainty and fundamental misconceptions?

The models are generally effective in alluding to the *existence* of uncertainty underlying the legal problem, the uncertainty stemming from the fact that, on many issues, there is no single right answer. Most of the works on problem solving, however, could be more emphatic about the key strategy behind it — the uncertainty model of law. Only Krever (1998) gives it the emphasis it deserves with a chapter on the dialectic of law.

The advice the works give on *dealing* with uncertainty is disappointingly slim, extending little beyond "argue both sides of the issue". Admittedly, each substantive area of law is likely to give further clues to resolving uncertainty.

In two respects however the works *overstate*, or tend to overstate, the level of uncertainty. Some texts, such as Krever's, go too far in equating the uncertainty of "law examinations" with that pertaining to the practice or operation of "law". Secondly, the frequent claim that there is no "correct" or "definitive" answer may mislead students into thinking that *every* aspect of the law raised by a problem involves uncertainty. As Frazer hinted, problems are designed so that *some* aspect of a question involves uncertainty, but not necessarily (and usually not) every aspect. To the extent to which the law is *certain*, then there is a correct or definitive answer. Examiners, incidentally, refrain from attempting to make every legal requirement uncertain for various reasons: it may be unrealistic; it may impose too great a burden on the student in the time available; or the examiner may wish only to test a *particular* aspect of the law. So a problem may clearly involve a particular legal category such as negligence (and no other), and some aspects of that law may be unproblematic, such as the requirement that the alleged wrongdoer (D) owed the injured party (P) a duty of care. What may be in issue is the conduct of D: whether D had taken reasonable precautions to prevent foreseeable injury to P or a foreseeable class of persons, of which P was a member. Enright is one writer on problem solving who, fortunately, does give us an example of a "non issue" (1995, p. 478). A further reason why invocations that "there is no right answer" have a tendency to mislead is that it is always possible to point to a *wrong* answer even if there is no single right answer. As Bertrand Russell (1980, p. 70) implied, if we deny altogether the concept of truth we must do the same for falsehood. Errors or answers which lack substance on particular points are in fact extremely common in all but the best answers. The answer may be factually incorrect, at odds with uncontentious law, or clearly be beyond the bounds of acceptable opinion.

Finally, on the crucial issue of addressing fundamental student misconceptions, the models fail to deliver. They are preoccupied with listing dos and don'ts — specific right and wrong procedures. Unless the models make students aware of their fundamental misconceptions, educational theory and experience would suggest that the utility of the models is greatly limited.

### *Empirical studies of the effectiveness of problem solving models*

Some of the authors claimed success for their models, without providing hard evidence. The present writer authorised an independently administered survey of his Administrative Law tutorial students in 1997 on the effectiveness of a problem solving model similar to those discussed above. The sample was rather small: 27. The statement to which students were asked to respond to was: "The problem solving approach modelled in the seminars assisted my learning." The mean response of 4.1 out of a maximum of 5 indicated the model was felt to be useful to very useful by that student body.

## *Sources of Confusion*

A much more detailed study was conducted by a member of the staff at Bond University (Bentley, 1994). The author tested the benefits of a model called IRAFT (restate the Issues—define the Rules—Apply the rules—to the Facts—reach a Tentative conclusion). For present purposes the study is inconclusive because the study does not mention whether the experiment addressed fundamental misconceptions in a direct way. However, it would appear that the study did not do so, for the author notes "It is not the purpose of this article to move to the next step and try and explain *why* students have difficulties with rule identification and application" (1994, p. 142; emphasis added). The author admitted that the structure does not assist with the tasks of rule identification and applying the rule to the material facts, other than to identify them as steps in the process (1994, p. 142). We are only told that the model was demonstrated before the experiment and that "[g]uidance was provided by tutors in ensuring an understanding of the legal reasoning process used in answering the tutorial problems" (Bentley, 1994, p. 137).

Nevertheless, the study produced the intriguing result that the use of the "structure" did "assist students in their analysis of basic fact patterns" (1994, p. 149) and ("subjectively") that their marks were better because they used the legal reasoning process which was taught (1994, p. 147). Specifically, there was an extremely strong correlation between achieving good marks and papers which showed a "good" use of the model, and the number of failures decreased from 22% in the first question to 6% in the third question (the examination). However, even though the students were not pure novices (the sample group included students from the second to the eighth (final) semester) "only the best students showed evidence of having acquired something of an expert interpretive framework" (1994, p. 147). Of the 150 answers, in 78 of the answers students had difficulty in identifying the appropriate rules, and in 77 answers students had difficulty in applying the appropriate rules to the material facts (Bentley, 1994, p. 142).

On the whole, the survey gives some encouragement to those wishing to teach legal reasoning in a programmatic way even though it demonstrates that simply giving students an expert model will not solve the difficulties.

### **Generalist academic skills advisers — can they be a source of confusion?**

Generalist academic skills advisers (advisers who lack a legal qualification) have a challenging task in advising about legal opinions. On the one hand, because an opinion should conform to the principles of good writing (Garner, 1991; Dworsky, 1990), they are well fitted to assist. To quote Dworsky, who has written a little gem of a book on legal writing, "unless you've got that rare case that could be won by a dog with a note in its mouth, good writing makes a difference" (1990, p. 1). General writing matters which should feature in a legal opinion include a narrative form (see Garner, 1991, pp. 67-71) framed by a useful introduction (Clarke, 1995, p. 73) and an appropriate conclusion (Krever 1998, pp. 59-60; Clarke, 1995, p. 78); plain English principles (Dworsky, 1990, ch. 2); formal English style; proper English grammar, syntax, usage, spelling and punctuation; appropriate word choice (see Garner, 1991, pp. 31-41); and what Garner calls "expressive tactics" (1991, p. 190).

On the other hand, academic skills advisers need to tread warily because, in crucial respects, an opinion is a distinctive task. Though it shares the general writing matters referred to above with the essay, it also differs markedly from it (see Introduction, above).

Further, there is at least a theoretical possibility that generalist academic skills advisers may be a source of confusion if their advice depends on lay knowledge of and attitudes towards the law. Even if informed about what are wrong "procedures" in answering a legal advice, they may not be addressing the fundamental problem of misconceptions about law. However, I would emphasise that I have no evidence that this problem is occurring.

### **Conclusion**

In learning a discipline there is a triadic relationship between the teacher, the students and the subject (White, 1985, p. 43). In other words, understanding the subject's idiosyncrasies is crucial to the teaching of academic skills. In the case of law, my general thesis is that learning the art of problem solving is more difficult than is commonly acknowledged or perceived — by students and law teachers. Students underrate the exercise because they underrate and are unprepared for law. Law teachers who are oblivious to their academic assumptions can also fail to see crucial difficulties. And generalist advisers need to tread carefully, should they assume a simplistic lay conception of law. Law is a bewildering discipline (it makes even experts feel inadequate or insecure: White, 1985, p. 58; Dworsky, 1990, p. 64), but we can make it less so if we understand common fallacies underlying the approaches of the novice student. These problems do not lie simply in wrong "procedures", but in fundamental misconceptions of law.

### **References**

- Aronson, M. & Franklin N. (1987). *Review of administrative action*. Sydney: Law Book Co Ltd.
- Bennion, F. A. R. (1997). *Statutory interpretation: A code* (3rd ed.). London: Butterworths.
- Bentley, D. (1994). Using structures to teach legal reasoning. *Legal Education Review*, 5, 2, 129-152.
- Bottomley, S. & Parker, S. (1997). *Law in context* (2nd ed.). Sydney: The Federation Press.
- Bowal, P. (1998). A study of lay knowledge of law in Canada. *Indiana International and Comparative Law Review*, 9, 121-141.
- Brennan, the Hon. Mr Justice (1981). Ministers of the third branch of government. An address delivered to the Young Lawyers' Section of the Law Society of New South Wales, Sydney, 29 May 1981.
- Civics Expert Group, (1994). *Whereas the people: Civics and citizenship education*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Clarke, P. (1995). A guide to answering legal problems, in R. Krever, *Mastering law studies and law exam techniques* (3rd ed.) (pp. 70-78). Sydney: Butterworths.
- Cook, C., Creyke R., Geddes, R. & Holloway, I. (1996). *Laying down the law: The foundations of legal reasoning, research and writing in Australia* (4th ed.). Sydney: Butterworths.
- Council of Magistrates (1999). *Magistrates' Court of Victoria annual report*. Melbourne.
- Cranston, R. (1978). Law and society: A different approach to legal education. *Monash University Law Review*, 5, 54-69.
- Crosling, G. M. & Murphy, H. M. (2000). *How to study business law: Reading, writing and exams* (3rd ed.). Sydney: Butterworths.
- Douglas, R. (1982). Case structure, participation and verdict in the Melbourne Magistrates' Courts. *Aust and NZ Journal of Criminology*, 15, 195-206.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Douglas, R. N. (1986). Social position and magistrates' court outcomes. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, La Trobe University, 1986).
- Douglas, R., Jones, M. & Cossins, A. (1999). *Administrative law: Commentary and materials* (3rd ed.). Sydney: Federation Press.
- Dworsky, A. L. (1990). *The little book on legal writing*. Littleton, CO: Fred B. Rothman & Co.
- Enright, C. (1995). *Studying law* (5th ed.) Sydney: The Federation Press.
- Fish, S. (1989). *Doing what comes naturally: Change, rhetoric, and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fox, R. G. (1995). Approaching law exams in R. Krever, *Mastering law studies and law exam techniques* (3rd ed.) (pp. 78-87). Sydney: Butterworths.
- Frazer, S. A. (1993). *How to study law*. Sydney: Law Book Co Ltd.
- Gabel, P. (1989). How to teach students how to take exams. *Critical Legal Studies Newsletter*, 90-95.
- Garner, B. A. (1991). *The elements of legal style*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gaskell, N. J. J. (1995). Legal writing for law students: answering law exam problems and essays in R. Krever, *Mastering law studies and law exam techniques* (3rd ed.) (pp. 87-100). Sydney: Butterworths.
- Handley, R. & Considine, D. (1994). Introducing a client-centred focus into the law school curriculum. *Legal Education Review*, 7, 2, 193-224.
- Horne, D. (1986). *The public culture: The triumph of industrialism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Hutchinson, A. C. (1985). The rise and ruse of administrative law and scholarship *Modern Law Review*, 48, 293- 324.
- Hutchinson, A. C. (1999). Beyond black-letterism: Ethics in law and legal education *The Law Teacher*, 33, 3, 301-309.
- Inns of Court School of Law (1997). *Opinion writing*. (2nd ed.) London: Blackstone Press Ltd.
- Kamler, B. & Maclean, R. (1997). 'You can't just go to court and move your body': First year students learn to write and speak the law. *Law/Text/Culture*, 3, 176-209.
- Keyzer, P. (1994). *Legal problem solving: A guide for law students*. Sydney: Butterworths.
- Kobetsky, M. (1998). Study strategies and suggestions for commerce students in R. Krever, *Mastering law studies and law exam techniques* (4th ed.) (pp. 91-94). Sydney: Butterworths.
- Krever, R. (1995). *Mastering law studies and law exam techniques* (3rd ed.) Sydney: Butterworths.
- Krever, R. (1998). *Mastering law studies and law exam techniques* (4th ed.) Sydney: Butterworths.
- Laster, K et al (1997). *Law as culture*. Sydney: The Federation Press.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Laurillard, D. (1993). *Rethinking university teaching: A framework for the effective use of educational technology*. London: Routledge.
- Le Brun, M., & Johnstone, R. (1994). *The quiet (r)evolution: improving student learning in law*. Sydney: Law Book Co Ltd.
- Mandler, G. (1997). *Human Nature Explored*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McInnis, C. & Marginson S. (1994). *Australian law schools after the 1987 Pearce report*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Megarry, R. E. (1967). Law as taught and law as practised. *Society of Public Teachers of Law Journal*, 9, 176-189.
- Mitchell, J. B. (1989). Current theories on expert and novice thinking: A full faculty considers the implications for legal education. *Journal of Legal Education*, 39, 275-297.
- Nathanson, S. (1996). Changing culture to teach problem-solving skills. *Journal of Professional Legal Education*, 14, 2, 143-158.
- Oppenheim, N. (1999). Cognitive bridges: Law courses structured for application and knowledge transfer. *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, 17, 17-51.
- Pearce, D., Campbell, E., & Harding, D. (1987). *Australian law schools: A discipline assessment for the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Russell, B. (1980). *The problems of philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sampford, C. (1989). *The disorder of law: A critique of legal theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell,
- Samuelson, P. (1984). Good legal writing: Of Orwell and window panes. *University of Pittsburgh Law Review*, 46, 149-169.
- Stephen, N. (1984). The Governor-General as Commander-in-Chief. *Melbourne University Law Review*, 14, 563-571.
- Tannen, D. & Wallat, C. (1986). Medical professionals and parents: A linguistic analysis of communication across contexts. *Language in Society*, 15, 295-311.
- Tannen, D. & Wallat, C. (1987). Interactive frames and knowledge schemas in interaction: Examples from a medical examination interview. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 50, 2, 205-216.
- Taylor, G. (1989). *The students' writing guide for the arts and social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Twining, W. (1996). Bureaucratic rationalism and the quiet (r)evolution. *Legal Education Review*, 7, 2, 291-308.
- Twining, W. & Miers D. (1999). *How to do things with rules: A primer of interpretation* (4th ed.). London: Butterworths.
- Volker, D. (1989). The effect of administrative law reforms: Primary level decision-making. *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, 58, 112-115.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Wade, J. (1990-91). Meet MIRAT: Legal reasoning fragmented into learnable chunks. *Legal Education Review*, 2, 2, 283-297.

Waller, L. (1995). *An Introduction to Law* (7th ed.) Sydney: LBC Information Services.

Weeramantry, C. G. (1975). *The law in crisis: Bridges of understanding*. London: Capemoss.

White, J. B. (1985). *Heracles' bow: Essays on the rhetoric and poetics of the law*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

### **Cases**

*Amalgamated Society of Engineers v Adelaide Steamship Co Ltd (Engineers Case)* (1920) 28 Commonwealth Law Reports 129.

*Heydon v NRMA Ltd* [2000] NSWCA 374, New South Wales Court of Appeal, 21 December 2000, unreported decision, <<http://www.austlii.edu.au>>

**CONFUSING THE NESB STUDENT: WHEN ACADEMIC FEEDBACK  
UNWITTINGLY CONTRIBUTES TO MASKING THE LINGUISTIC  
AND ACADEMIC ISSUES**

Annie Bartlett  
The Australian National University

*Australian universities are being pressured to go as low as they can ethically go in terms of language proficiency requirements in order to attract more students, both international and local. This means that NESB students can be admitted to universities with, in practice, a modest proficiency in English. The manifestation of 'modest' linguistic proficiency in academic writing has contributed to suggestions that academic standards at universities are being 'lowered'. Arguably this claim emanates from university staff who are minimally aware of what to expect in terms of linguistic proficiency from NESB students, and who are taken aback by the disjunction between what they expect to receive from the student in terms of written work and what the student can actually produce. Because few academics are informed or trained to deal with the disjunction, this creates confusion for the student, the academic and the academic skills adviser. But whatever confusion exists, it is compounded when the student learns to successfully mask his/her actual linguistic proficiency with covering/coping strategies, and the academic marker and the academic skills adviser unwittingly contribute to and become complicit in that masking. This paper traces the sources of confusion for an NESB undergraduate, the marker, the academic skills adviser and ultimately, the institution. It is argued that unless there are significant changes in expectations, institutional support mechanisms and resourcing for all those involved in the confusions, the institution itself is complicit.*

**Introduction**

Australian universities are being pressured to go as low as they can ethically go in terms of language proficiency requirements in order to attract more students, both international and local, many of whom come from non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB). Whilst this augurs well for the diversity of the campus community, the richness of the academic debate and the University's income, it can often augur less well for those at the coalface of academia: the NESB students, academics and academic skills advisers. Were it simply a case of assuming that linguistic proficiency determined academic success, then the obvious strategy – more English – would 'fix it'. But NESB students also bring to the interface the dimensions of age, academic readiness, preparedness and background, and educational experience – a potent source of confusion. And nothing is more confusing than when the confusions are actively masked by the student so that both the academic and the academic skills adviser are themselves caught in a state of unreadiness and resourcelessness. It is not that we – academic skills advisers – are inexperienced in dealing with complex student academic skills and learning needs, or that the academic is wittingly extending the masking, but that both are simply not well enough resourced to deal with the situation. I would argue that this is an institutional problem.

### Diverse pathways

Academic skills and learning advising has come a long way in the last 15 years, but not far enough for some students. There are still cases where students are exhorted by publications in universities to *raise* their intellectual thinking, *strive* for purpose and *be involved* in their writing (Thackray & Thackray 1989) in order to overcome their difficulties in writing. Such advice is, however, useful to academic advisers in so far as it highlights the enormous gulf between what is assumed about students' academic performance and what is actually the case, and the conception of students' needs. It is one of a series of academic skills texts and pieces of advice that assumes the 'problem' lies with the student and the students can overcome 'the problem' by themselves.

Coley's 1999 survey of the English language entry requirements of Australian universities for non-native speakers confirms what is often all too evident to academic skills and learning advisers: that there is such a

variety of English language proficiency...accepted by universities for NESB applicants on entry to university that it is indeed possible for NESB students to be at an Australian university without being able to speak, write, read or understand English at the required level.... (Coley 1999 p.15).

Few advisers would disagree. Coley (1999 p.15) identifies one of the key solutions to the problem as being 'post-admissions language support'; however, this reinforces that linguistic proficiency is 'the problem' and that the student has a responsibility for 'fixing it'. Identifying language proficiency assumes that it is the sole determinant of academic success, and overlooks the specific academic and research skills students need as well – including the ability to critically analyse, awareness of the features of academic genres (spoken and written), logic and argument, research and documentation. Quite clearly language support is needed for many NESB students, but arguably it is only one aspect of what is a very complex, multi-dimensional need, a need complicated by such factors as educational and cultural background, age, readiness for tertiary study, background knowledge and expectations, and institutional responses to the need.

Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) have recently supported the view that what is needed is 'more than just language', and implied that institutions have a key role to play in addressing the issue. I see their comments as a small sign that university leaders/managers are beginning to take notice, despite the fact that the authors use the past tense, implying that the problem has been overcome. They note that "[a]s student numbers increased, institutions were faced with an increasing diversity in student population, both in academic preparation and in terms of language, socioeconomic background and other factors" (Coaldrake & Stedman 1999 p.3). At the very least Coaldrake and Stedman have not singled out the student or language proficiency: they have hinted at the 'other factors' that may be involved. More importantly, they have situated the students' need at an institutional level: academic preparation is an institutional responsibility. Arguably, addressing the complexity requires institutional support in the form of sustained academic – and preferably discipline-specific – inductions into the academic culture/s and expectations of the university. However, this is at odds with the casualisation, marginalisation and inadequate numbers of academic skills advisers, and the cutbacks in resources for academic teaching staff such that class sizes are well beyond those which allow a knowledge of individual students.

The confusion that emerges from such student need and diversity and resource scarcity lends itself to the view, echoed by Coley, that unless something is done about language proficiency, levels of education will be compromised. However, as is illustrated below, at stake are much more complex academic needs, and my question is, just who and what is being compromised?

**The context and the case**

A key aspect of the work done in the Academic Skills and Learning Centre at the Australian National University is via individual consultations wherein we work with students on particular aspects of their study. When a consultation focuses on written work, the student submits the work in advance so that we can prepare for the consultation, and typically my analysis would consider such issues as disciplinary context, focus, the degree of wide and critical reading, whether there is a reasoned argument, and whether the work is stylistically and presentationally appropriate. In the majority of cases English language proficiency issues are very much a latter consideration – the policy of the Centre is neither to edit nor to rewrite written work. Further, to draw attention to language ‘problems’ would undermine the students’ confidence. They have, after all, satisfied the language proficiency requirements of the university, and it is our experience that often other issues are very much more problematic. Arguably, if the work is not focused, researched, reasoned and stylistically appropriate, these considerations outweigh language proficiency issues. This is not to say that language issues are not addressed, but the focus is on what is manageable and appropriate over time: languages are not learnt overnight and must be addressed in the context of other urgent considerations.

It is within this context that I received an essay from a first year student. I knew nothing about her, other than that, from her name, she might present as an NESB student. A note attached to the 2,000-word essay asked that I ‘check the English’. Metaphorical groan. No matter how hard we promote the Centre’s policies with respect to not editing – not ‘fixing’ the English – there is a prevailing view amongst students, academics and the institution that we exist primarily for this purpose.

The essay was good. The student had passed and been well encouraged by the marker’s comments. The essay was focussed, dealt with the central concerns of the question, demonstrated research – albeit scanty – had an underlying coherence and argument, was linguistically and stylistically competent and well presented. At the sentence level, this student had mastered some very complex grammar and vocabulary:

The Cubists has evolved a method of work by which they built up towards a presentational subject through the manipulation of abstract pictorial elements rather than the previous work, beginning with a clearly legible subject which was subsequently fragmented and abstracted in the light of new Cubist concepts of form and space.

I breathed a sigh of relief. The consultation was not going to present many difficulties. Imagine my surprise, however, when she arrived for the consultation and I began exploring her background. I learnt that this student is very young, and she had achieved a Band 5 in writing on the International English Language Test (IELTS). Mentally I processed the fact that IELTS writing 5 is that of a ‘modest user’:

Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field (UCLES 2000).

What is key here is that a decision has been made at an institutional level to admit the student, and the decision implies that the student is able to cope with academic expectations when her IELTS score suggests she is not. The student is not at fault: she is the victim.

During the consultation I became aware that in terms of speaking and listening, the student was an extremely ‘modest’ user. Alarm bells. What was deeply troubling was that she has been enrolled with a 5.0 in IELTS writing: my question is how can she possibly benefit academically when she has only sufficient English to ‘cope’. Individual consultations such as those provided by the Academic Skills and Learning Centre do not provide a ‘top up’ English language service, let alone a structured English as second language (ESL) program, and there

are no structured academic skills and learning programs in place to support her through her study. Without such programs she is unlikely to achieve the linguistic and academic mastery she needs in order to succeed academically.

Yet, despite her 'modest' linguistic proficiency, the essay before me suggested that she had gained a relatively high degree of linguistic and academic mastery. Or should that be 'linguistic and academic *maskery*'? The work she presented was not that of a student with a 'partial command of the language'. The only explanation was that she had plagiarised. But then, how to proceed? At the very least, the fact that the student is a 'modest' user implies that she does not have the metalanguage with which to address issues in academic writing and research, and her youth suggests that she has an incomplete understanding of academic expectations. I would go so far as to suggest that the student would be unable to conduct the required reading and writing independently. That the essay she has produced was focussed is more because plagiarised, cobbled essays often 'happen' more successfully than those essays which students such as her struggle to produce independently. This student needs 'more than just language'; she needs structured academic skills and learning programs to support her through her study. Providing such programs is an institutional responsibility. Having made a decision to admit the student to the university, the institution should take responsibility for putting in place those structures that the student needs in order to achieve academic success.

I asked how she had conducted the research for the essay and without hesitation the student explained that she had translated from Chinese texts, and got a friend to correct the grammar. She was well aware that she had not given formal acknowledgment and full references to her sources of knowledge, and indeed, she had copied in large part what had been written in the sources. She spoke assuredly, entertaining no question as to the (in)appropriateness of the process. She saw no problem with what she had done because it was obviously what the marker wanted: the essay had a 'Pass' grade.

Clearly this was not going to be an easy session because of my confusion. I was very uneasy because my initial analysis was so wrong, because the student was confident and because the student's practice had not been picked up by the marker. Further, I was uneasy because, judging by her needs both in terms of linguistic and academic proficiency, the decision to admit her to the university was unethical. This unease was compounded by the unmanageability of the situation; the sustained, discipline-specific programs this student needs are not available. I was also conscious that what I did or said, and how successful I was at both, would determine whether she would return to the Centre or 'disappear'.

### **The student's view**

The student clearly perceived that she had a 'problem with English' and that it needed 'fixing' – her note, her discussions and her strategy confirmed this: knowing that she would not possibly write fluently, the student used the strategy of translation to mask the problem. The masking was rewarded – in the student's mind – by the fact that the effort, and by implication the process, of writing had been praised by the marker and graded as a pass. And funny enough I could see the point in the strategy. It is significantly easier, and much more successful for this student to write academic essays in this way than writing in 'broken English'. This, however, creates a serious confusion. The masking of the lack of linguistic proficiency – based on the assumption that it is 'the problem' – masks more complex and deep-seated issues. Unmasking the student's practice does not simply involve 'fixing the English', nor simply 'educating the student about plagiarism'. Neither of these strategies will work because they assume a student deficit view; 'fixing' does not imply learning; greater language proficiency is not going to solve the academic proficiency issues; and the student cannot be educated about plagiarism unless the student is educated about and inducted into the process of research and writing at the tertiary level. Finally, what the student needs is not necessarily what she wants or believes she needs.

### **The marker's view**

The marker's view – evidenced by the comments made – parallels that of the student: that the student is academically capable, but there is a 'problem with English'. In the marker's view, the problem is not major – the student's English is sufficient to cope with the demands of academic writing at university level. While in places the student's English has 'gone awry', is 'awkward' and 'sometimes unclear', the implication is that the student's language proficiency is, in the main, acceptable. The corrections and amendments to language in the text are at times intrusive but the outlook is optimistic: the marker is conveying to the student implicitly and explicitly that some more work needs to be done on language proficiency, but that is all. In effect, however, the message conveyed compounds the masking of the real issue and creates serious confusions.

The marker is clearly unaware of the student's actual language proficiency or what English language proficiency guidelines actually mean and how they might be interpreted. Despite institutions setting proficiency levels, some of which have attached descriptors, few academics would be aware of what can be expected of their students linguistically. The tendency is to assume that if students have satisfied university requirements, then the student should be fluent and able to cope, and if not, then it is the student's fault. This marker has made such an assumption, as is illustrated by the following:

#### **Student's sentence**

*However the Cubists attempted to obtain spirit form flanks which eyes cannot see from paintings of traditional methods.*

#### **Marker's comment:**

*What does this mean? It doesn't make sense. Is there a spelling mistake or have you left words out?*

There is an underlying sense of alarm here on the part of the marker, as if the marker has been shaken out of her marking comfort zone. Clearly, in the marker's view, the 'standard' of linguistic proficiency is at odds with what she was expecting, or assuming. Further, the marker attributes the problem with English to the student; it is the student's fault. But my question is to what degree is this manifestation of 'modest' English proficiency a result of institutional decision making gone awry? Who has been involved in the admissions procedure and decision making? Who set the 'standard'?

Compounding this view of the student is the fact that the marker has not in any sense addressed comments to focus, logic, research, reasoning and style. This is where the real issues lie for there is no evidence that the focus and reasoning that exists has happened other than by chance. Only once in the text has the marker drawn attention to the need to source a particular idea. The fact that the essay has no references list attached is not commented on, reinforcing the student's belief that translation from Chinese texts is appropriate. My suggestion to the student that she needs to include a references list was treated with some disdain: the marker clearly did not want one. The student is effectively being marked on linguistic proficiency, not academic performance as is evidenced by the following comment:

#### **Marker's comment:**

*You've made a good effort at producing this essay. Unfortunately your English is still not developed well enough to prevent some awkward and sometimes very unclear meanings.*

Thus, the marker appears convinced that the student has the ability to be focussed, to research, to reason, to produce paragraphs and present an underlying, if not explicit, coherence. The marker is marking what appears to be the basis of a good undergraduate essay. Herein lies the

## *Sources of Confusion*

source of a serious confusion. The marker is unwittingly compromising the 'standards' of academic research and writing.

Finally, the marker believes that it is within her power and professional expertise to solve the problem. After all, as noted, this is considered to be a 'problem with English'. At the end of the paper the marker writes:

*Come and see me and I'll do my best to assist you to sort out these difficulties.*

The academic's view that she can assist the student is a misapprehension because her work – in isolation, carrying the assumptions she has about what is needed and in an area which is not her professional brief – will have little, if any impact. This is not the academic's fault. In fact it is a credit to the marker to find one so prepared to give what little time they have to the academic welfare of a student. In areas of the university where there are concentrations of students with such complex needs, with more than one layer of masking, and with cutbacks in resourcing and staffing, few academic could find the time – had they the necessary skills – to effectively assist one student such as this, let alone more. This is an institutional problem.

### **Academic Skills Adviser's view**

Solutions are hard to come by at an individual student level. At the stage when the student arrives in my office, the amount of unmasking that needs to be done is beyond my professional skills in the short term. In addition, the question of resistance looms large. At the very least, if institutions accept students with 'competent' – dare I include 'modest' – linguistic proficiency, such students cannot be held responsible for not being fluent. To focus on the student, and in this case her linguistic proficiency assuming that it is 'the problem', would draw attention to the fact that even though she has been accepted into university, her English is inadequate to the task. In the student's view, this is clearly not the case. She has passed.

Further, because in her view, a view reinforced by the marker, language is 'the problem', and translations are clearly acceptable, the student is unlikely to accept the academic skills adviser's view that she needs other than language assistance. Although the need for post-admission language support is evident in the literature and in practice, as this case illustrates, it is not simply language assistance that is required. Academic preparation programs such as those tried and tested by Bartlett, May and Holzkecht (1994) and McGowan and Cargill (1996) would go part way to addressing the student's needs, but preparatory programs need to be augmented by accessible, structured and sustained academic skills and learning programs. The provision of such programs is an institutional responsibility.

It is quite clear that the student is out of her linguistic and academic depth – no amount of work on the part of the student, academic, or academic adviser is going to make a difference in the short term. Thus, referring her to academic skills and learning texts or advice is also problematic: at best she 'should be able to handle basic communication in own field' (UCLES 2000), so it is highly unlikely that she will understand the principles of essay writing and research as written. In terms of plagiarism, Prosser (1994) suggests the first and most obvious strategy is to educate students about plagiarism. Such a strategy, however, as alluded to earlier, is often premised on telling students what it means and what is unacceptable, but not how to avoid it.

The marker's comments and the suggestion that the student come and see her reflect the assumptions of Thackray and Thackray's advice. There is no recognition of the difficulties inherent in an NESB student's academic experience. As Killen (1994 p.202) suggests, student success at university is attributed to factors "within the control of the student". Thus, the student is responsible for producing a 'sub-standard' piece of work, or developing English fluency, and should go away and 'fix' it. This leads, amongst academics, to the logical conclusion that academic standards are being lowered: that students are less literate and less

capable of achieving high academic standards. But as is illustrated by this case study, the student is not lowering the standards. The marker, and more importantly, the institution are complicit in the perceived lowering.

Implied by the case study is a need for academics to give much greater consideration to the 'demographics' of their classes, rethinking who is in their classes, where they are from, the kinds of educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds they have. There is a considerable lack of 'client awareness' one might say. But in this the marker needs institutional support. With increasing student numbers, less oversight, less marking, and less opportunity to know students and their work, there is little chance that academics can make the connection between the student's oral proficiency, indeed non-English speaking background and his/her academic writing. Part-time tutors – legitimately cutting their consultation cloth to fit their financial frameworks – have, in common with academics, an overwhelming sense of pressure and little time. It is possible that a student resorting to the academic writing approach outlined will not be identified as having a problem until second or even third year when class sizes tend to be smaller. This increases the pressure to accept the approach – the student is often by then only a semester away from completing the degree. This is an institutional problem. One step towards improving awareness would be to ensure, as Coley (1999) points out, that university administrations produce clear, correct and unambiguous documentation on English language proficiency requirements and communicate these to academic staff. But the second step is to ensure that academics are fully informed and cognisant of where students are from, and the kind of mastery they have.

Also implied by the case is the need for changes in assessment procedure. If it is possible for a student to submit plagiarised work and receive a pass, then rethinking the curriculum and assignment expectations (Prosser 1994) would go some way to preventing a student masking. What is needed is a sustained and powerful signal that the improvement of language proficiency is important, but not to the exclusion of the process of research and writing – how to communicate in the discipline. This is one approach being trialled in the ANU. It aims to induct students into research and referencing, academic writing expectations and, by being promoted and taught by both academic lecturers and academic skills and learning advisers, there is a greater chance that students will come to believe that the practices have a real, lasting value for themselves. However, the trial approach does not signal institution-wide acceptance of the need for such programs – it is a Band-Aid application.

### **Conclusion**

From the above, I would suggest that neither the student nor the marker are at fault: indeed, they are the victims of institutional practice. So too is the academic skills adviser. No amount of 'fixing' will address the complex needs this student has, and importantly, the fixing will itself mask the degree of 'maskery' that has occurred. Thus, in agreeing to 'fix', academic skills advisers can become complicit – are complicit – in masking. 'The fixers' are the assumed providers of solutions which are beyond their professional capacities. Fully unmasking a student's 'problem' – in other words, fully identifying a student's academic needs – effectively involves unmasking our own capacities and capabilities. There are limits to what we can do most effectively in the interests of the institution – assuming universities exist primarily for students – without the necessary resources. But herein lies a deep seated confusion for us professionally: given demand, given the limits to resources, it is not often easy to find the time to address students' needs at an institutional level. It is, as this student found, easier to fix the English and ignore the bigger picture. That must change if our work is going to be sustained and professionally driven. The one key issue here is that we are not alone in wanting to change the bigger picture – I have no doubt that the student and the marker would want the same. We have a responsibility to the student – yes – but that should not mask the institutional dimension of that responsibility.

**References**

- Bartlett, A, May, M, & Holzknecht, S. (1994). Discipline-specific academic skills at postgraduate level: a model. In K. Chanock (Ed.) with V. Burley, *Integrating the Teaching of Academic Discourse into Courses in the Disciplines* (pp.284-287). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Cargill, M. (1996). An integrated bridging program for international students. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 15 (2) 177-188.
- Coaldrake, P., & Stedman L. (1999). Academic work in the twenty-first century: changing roles and policies. *Occasional Paper Series*, Higher Education Division, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, September.
- Coley, M. (1999). The English language entry requirements of Australian universities for students of non-English speaking background, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18(1) April, 7-18.
- Killen, R. (1994). Differences between students' and lecturers' perceptions of factors influencing students' academic success at university. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 13 (2), 119-211.
- Prosser, A., (1994). Plagiarism and cheating: not entirely the student's fault. In M. Pettigrove and M. Pearson (Eds), *HERDSA Research and Development in Higher Education* (pp.776-783). Vol 17, The Australian National University: Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods.
- Thackray, M., & C. Thackray, (1989). *How to Succeed at College or University*, 3rd rev edition, Springwood NSW: Butterfly Books.
- Warner, R. (1998). Plagiarism: an intercultural communication gap in academic writing. In *Re/Searching Writing Horizons*, New Zealand Tertiary Writing Network Colloquium Proceedings, 30 November-1 December, 2, 195-208.
- UCLES - University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, (2000). Interpretation of results. Retrieved on July 7, 2000 on the World Wide Web:  
<http://www.ielts.org/facts.html>

**'IS THIS WHAT WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE LEARNING  
IN THIS UNIT?'  
INSIGHTS FROM TULIP (TERTIARY UNDERGRADUATE  
LITERACY INTEGRATION PROGRAM)**

Patricia Cartwright  
Australian Catholic University, Aquinas Campus

Lynne Noone  
University of Ballarat, Mt Helen Campus

*This paper explores lecturers' and students' experiences of TULIP (Tertiary Undergraduate Literacy Integration Program), a CUTSD funded project that focuses on the integration or embeddedness of tertiary literacy within content teaching. A particular feature of the Project involved us in working collaboratively with lecturers from different disciplines and different tertiary institutions around the issue of first year student literacy. These lecturers, in turn, engaged in an action learning process with their particular groups of students, centred on using literacy teaching strategies. One of the insights from the Project is that students' preconception of learning in a discipline can impact on the teaching/learning situation. We found that, while the literacy teaching strategies ultimately assisted students in learning their discipline knowledge, their initial confusion at the inclusion of unfamiliar and unexpected pedagogical practices disrupted and challenged the presentation of material in tutorials and lectures. This led us to consider that issues in student literacy are as much to do with issues of epistemology, subjectivities, discourses and institutional power relations as they are to do with students becoming familiar with disciplinary genres. A further insight from the Project, and one closely aligned to the above, is that the notion and practice of collaboration is problematic. In engaging with our colleagues in devising ways of countering the occasional student hostility, we were called on to be responsive in our collaboration to the changing and challenging learning/teaching situations. In this paper, we highlight some of the interactions, activities, outcomes and benefits that emerged as we worked with lecturers and students from a range of disciplines in two tertiary institutions.*

**TULIP Project Activities**

The aim of the TULIP Project was to enhance students' tertiary literacy simultaneously with their learning of the content of their discipline areas. Rather than adding generic literacy skills onto study programs, the Project began from the proposition that discipline content is itself composed of language that has been constructed by each discipline community. Introducing neophytes into that discipline community is therefore like undergoing an apprenticeship in the ways with words of that community (Bartholomae, 1985). To understand the discipline is to be able to engage in the discourse of that discipline.

Through action research, five lecturers and approximately two hundred students from the disciplines of Education, Social Science, Environmental Science and Nursing at the University of Ballarat, and Australian Catholic University, Aquinas Campus, were involved in developing, trialing and implementing a series of literacy learning and teaching strategies to be used within the usual tutorial sessions as the content of each subject was taught. There were

two phases to the Project: Phase One involved Education lecturers and students from both institutions; Phase Two involved lecturers and students from the other discipline areas from both institutions. Each lecturer engaged in an action learning process with his/her particular group of students, centred on using literacy teaching strategies.

The literacy teaching strategies cover aspects such as vocabularies of discipline areas, approaches to organising arguments, achieving authority in texts, forms of reflective writing, and understanding features of the genres of academic texts. The documentation of these strategies will result in a Tertiary Undergraduate Literacy Integration Program (TULIP) Resource Kit. It is envisaged that the final version of the TULIP Resource Kit (due for publication early in 2001) will contain a number of learner-centred literacy teaching strategies adaptable to any tertiary classroom, a brief theoretical justification for each strategy, narratives from teachers of different disciplines about the teaching context and use made of each strategy, appropriate evaluation approaches, student workshop materials and teachers' notes.

### **Integrating literacy learning with discipline knowledge**

Learning to be literate in higher education is a challenging task for many students. According to Flower (1994), such 'literate acts' are 'sites of construction, tension, divergence and conflict. They happen at the intersection of diverse goals, values and assumptions, where social roles interact with personal images of one's self and one's situation.' Flower suggests that learning in higher education is a 'site of negotiation', which is a useful way of exploring literacy learning in higher education, and one that seems especially relevant in regard to many students in their first year of tertiary learning.

Recent literature has highlighted the initial experience of learning for first year students (Cartwright & Noone, 1998; Dearn, 1995; McInnis & James, 1995; Tinto, 1993). Frequently, this learning is viewed in deficit terms, where the literacy difficulties exhibited by students are seen to reside in the students themselves, rather than in the structures and processes of curriculum and pedagogy. These academic structures and processes often result in students experiencing learning as a site of conflict and confusion between their understandings of literacy and learning and the demands and expectations of the academy. A further challenge to students by those who hold a deficit view is that, in the academy, student writing has tended to be regarded as both homogenous and transferable from context to context both from outside and within the university (Lea & Stierer, 2000). Thus students are seen to 'lack' so-called 'basic' literacy, as well as having only limited understanding of the demands of 'academic' literacy. However, recent research has challenged the deficit, and 'common sense' view of literacy as a basic, generalisable, transferable skill, and proposed one that focuses on an integrated approach where literacy learning in the academy is most effectively learned in conjunction with discipline content (Cartwright & Noone, 1999; Chanock, 1995; Gordon, 1998; Hinkle, 1997; McMillan, 2000; Vardi, 2000).

While the TULIP Project focuses on the integration of literacy learning with discipline content, we would argue that what also needs to be understood is that there are multiple and often contradictory patterns that emerge in each student's experiences of learning. It is important to bear in mind, we believe, the relationship between learning in the academy, and the context of 'culture(s)' which provide a range of possibilities that compete for dominance. For instance, student learning in the academy often involves challenge and contestation as students interweave (Lea, 1998) prior knowledge and ways of writing and reading texts with course requirements. When the course requirements, and pedagogical practices conflict with student understandings (or quite frequently misconceptions) of what learning in the discipline might entail, students can experience tension, conflict, and confusion as they attempt to negotiate and shape meaning. Not infrequently, as we discovered during Phase Two of the TULIP project, this tension and conflict were played out in tutorial sessions, with students confronting their lecturers (ie, our collaborating lecturers) with their concerns and confusions.

### **Collaboration in Professional Development – challenges and possibilities**

In our Project, the aim of collaboration was brought about by teaching the teachers involved about literacy and literacy teaching in a way that supported their classroom activity with first year students. We envisaged a collaborative culture that would achieve the following: it would acknowledge the teacher's voice through teacher narrative; provide a context of trust in which teachers could share success, uncertainty, and failure with a view to gaining assistance and support from the Project members; enable the sharing and questioning of beliefs and values; and celebrate the art of teaching.

In recent years, notions of collegiality and collaboration have been frequently articulated in the literature as a range of initiatives has endeavoured to promote more collaborative forms of professional development in the academic community. In relation to these initiatives, Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) note that 'Attractive concepts like collegiality and collaboration are often imbued with a global sense of virtue' (p.63). Hargreaves and Daw (1990), however, challenge this 'sense of virtue', commenting on the paradox of teachers being urged to collaborate more when there is less for them to collaborate about, particularly when the collaboration is incorporated within processes and structures 'bureaucratically determined elsewhere' (p. 228). They also draw attention to the contrasting notions of collaborative cultures and 'contrived collegiality', the latter being characterized by Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) as a 'set of formal, specific, bureaucratic procedures to increase the attention being given to joint teacher planning, consultation and other forms of working together' (p. 78). In contrast, Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) offer the term 'collaborative cultures', which are not seen to be established for specific projects; rather, they 'consist of pervasive qualities, attitudes and behaviours...[with] a commitment to valuing people as individuals and valuing the group to which people belong' (p. 66).

It is our belief that a collaborative culture, as distinct from Fullan and Hargreaves' contrived collegiality, is one that begins from the recognition that the language and ideologies of collegiality and collaboration are often used to sell to teachers the contradictory notion of increasingly centralised authority alongside a divesting of central responsibility to schools (Smyth, 1995). While Smyth is talking about schools, we would make the same argument for tertiary teachers and tertiary management.

The TULIP project was not part of a management strategy, and therefore had a degree of autonomy from managerialist imperatives; but, we were aware that versions of 'contrived collegiality' are commonly associated with external funding of any project, implying a top-down model of change (Johnston & Proudford, 1994). We were mindful, too, of the comment by Blackmore (1999) that 'action research and teacher/academic partnerships have now been adopted as management strategies to implement government policy, often neutralising their political, critical and democratic intent' (p. ii). From the outset of the Project, therefore, we were anxious to promote collaboration that would be inclusive and empowering, and that would not be viewed by the participants of the Project as merely co-opting their participation in order for us to fulfill the requirements of a tight time-line, accountability, and pre-specified outcomes. The key structural feature that seemed to us to allow some empowerment was that we ourselves were in the same structural position as the people we were inviting to be participants. Therefore, the participants' calculus of the 'cost benefits of collaboration' (Smyth et al. 2000, p. 91) did not have to include a suspicion that this was management trying to sell them something, or putting them under scrutiny.

In our work, teacher narrative (Jalongo et al., 1995); Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, 1990; Elbaz, 1991) is an important part of the collaborative process. These researchers acknowledge teaching as an uncertain business, one whose character results from the sense which teachers make of the immediate and broader contexts in which they act. The teachers' stories about what happened in the classroom when using the literacy teaching strategies constitute both data for the project and the means by which practitioners give meaning to their activities. The

stories are constructed from the teachers' judgements about their own practices, their perceptions of the literacy outcomes in students' discipline work, and of the students' experiences of focusing more directly on literacy learning. We see teacher narrative as a powerful means of enhancing professional development

### **Process of collaborating with lecturers to enhance student learning**

For the purposes of this paper, we can outline only some of the material that was generated as we collaborated with our colleagues on the project. We saw collaboration as a process that evolved during the time we worked together, hence our seeing it as 'flexible collaboration'. This notion of collaboration enabled us to acknowledge different kinds of work practices and knowledge-practices, but it also enabled us to work collectively to reshape and rethink our pedagogical practices.

Our meetings with the participating lecturers took place on a weekly basis, and initially, we directed and shaped our colleagues' ideas regarding what constitutes literacy in a tertiary classroom. We acknowledge the unequal power relations suggested at this early stage of the project, with the control of the power lying with us, as the 'initiators' of the project (Gore, 1991). However, we felt comparatively comfortable with this initial direction, as lecturers had chosen to participate in the project because of their concerns regarding student literacy, and their desire to be part of a research project that was designed to address this concern. Then, as the project progressed, we engaged with our colleagues in devising ways of countering the occasional student confusion and hostility that sometimes resulted from ways of teaching and learning that were unexpected in their particular disciplines. This disruption to their teaching called on us to be flexible in our approach to collaboration. Sometimes, we would be supportive, providing a sympathetic ear to stories from the classroom. At other times, we would be somewhat confrontational, as we asked them to articulate their understandings clearly to the group, who would also question their pedagogical approaches. Ultimately, we found that our flexible collaboration was very much a reciprocal process, as we learned from each other's experiences, shared beliefs and values, and felt collectively empowered in our teaching.

In the paper, we focus on three particular areas that seemed significant in the shaping and direction of Phase Two the project. These areas are (1) Lecturers' and students' understanding of literacy learning, or 'I'm looking forward to receiving (sic) help with my spelling and grammar skills' (sic); (2) Strategies for literacy learning, or 'Just tell me the recipe'; (3) The construction of a tutorial or a lecture, or 'Is this what we're supposed to be learning in this unit?'. These areas made clear, for us, the processes of collaboration, the response by students to 'different' ways of learning their discipline, and the issues that emerge when attempting to embed tertiary literacy within content teaching.

#### **1. Lecturer and student understanding of literacy learning, or 'I'm looking forward to receiving (sic) help with my spelling and grammar skills (sic)'.**

It is our belief that to understand the discipline is to be able to engage in the discourse of that discipline. Hence, 'literacy' is not something that can be remedied in isolated tool sessions, but is integral to the teaching and learning of the discipline material. It follows from this view of literacy as a social construct that the language conventions (or 'literacy') which need to be fostered will be in many ways specific to each discourse community (Baynham et al., 1994). But insights from the field of literacy theory and pedagogy suggest that there may be generic teaching strategies which can be used to foster the learning of different discipline languages. TULIP explored that possibility.

The literacy strategies that our participating lecturers trialled emerged from our version of what counts as literacy teaching. So, one of our major priorities was the need to create a shared language in order to be able to talk across disciplines. We found, however, that we first had to work out a common understanding of certain terms. For example, while we saw literacy as a 'dynamic, evolving social and historical construction...constructed by individuals

## Sources of Confusion

and groups as part of everyday life' (Luke, 1993, p. 4), the lecturers generally had a deficit view of literacy, seeing it as being able to read and write, which they decided most students couldn't do to a standard required for tertiary learning.

At one of our first meetings, the following comments were made:

**Social Science Lecturer:** They can't read or write. They can't pronounce the words in the readings, much less work out what they might mean from the context.

**Nursing Lecturer:** I'm really looking forward to getting started on some of your strategies, but I can't see, at this stage, quite how it's going to work, because the students' own reading and writing is so bad, usually.

If we look back at the heading of this section, it is not difficult to see why some lecturers have this view of student learning. The comment by that student occurred when students were asked in their first tutorial session to respond to the 'invitation' to be part of the TULIP research. At the end of the semester, students were also asked to comment on their literacy learning activities.

### Social Science

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
j. I have learnt techniques for approaching academic writing.	0	0	14	63	8	36	22	100
k. I have learnt techniques for approaching academic reading.	0	0	16	72	6	27	22	100
l. I have learnt techniques for dealing with difficult vocabulary.	0	0	7	31	15	68	22	100

### Environmental Science

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
j. I have learnt techniques for approaching academic writing.	0	0	7	54	6	46	13	100
k. I have learnt techniques for approaching academic reading.	0	0	3	23	10	77	13	100
l. I have learnt techniques for dealing with difficult vocabulary.	0	0	8	62	5	38	13	100

### Nursing

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
j. I have learnt techniques for approaching academic writing.	0	0	27	52	24	47	51	100
k. I have learnt techniques to approaching academic reading.	0	0	22	43	29	56	51	100
l. I have learnt techniques for dealing with difficult vocabulary.	0	0	14	27	37	72	51	100

## *Sources of Confusion*

As can be seen, by the end of each of the units, students felt positive about their literacy learning, and were able to respond favourably to each of the statements. Some of their comments that accompanied this section of the evaluation provided further perspectives on their understanding of literacy. Brief mention, however, could be made regarding the percentages for different skills in the different disciplines. The Social Science Lecturer spent a certain amount of time in each tutorial discussing and working through the required readings. The Environmental Science Lecturer tended to focus more on the techniques for dealing with the difficult vocabulary that was occurring in the students' reading. This was also the case with the Nursing Lecturer who used both lecture and tutorial time to explore the construction of vocabulary used in that discipline.

### ***Social Science Students:***

- I now use more words and can understand things more.
- Doing the exercises each week have helped my literacy skills, but I'm not sure it's obvious at this time.

### ***Environmental Science Students:***

- I have learnt more about writing full sentences. Mainly in engineering we are taught to write in point form.
- This unit has made me understand the value of writing in full sentences. As an engineer, I become very used to writing in point form.

One of the early difficulties we noted in our collaboration with the lecturers was that we have particular ways of looking at and approaching literacy learning that were generated through our own understandings, experiences, and reading of the literature. We were also aware that our understandings shaped the particular literacy learning strategies that lecturers were to use in their tutorials or lectures, and that these strategies may conflict with students' perception of literacy learning, or their approach to their learning experiences. We were mindful of Grundy's (1982) comment which saw one aspect of action research as one in which the project 'would be instigated by a particular person or group of persons, who, by reason of their greater experience or qualifications, would be regarded as 'experts' or 'authority figures' (Grundy, 1982, p. 24). We acknowledge this perspective and tried to find ways of being both 'experts', and 'co-learners' when collaborating with the participating lecturers, and suggesting ways of implementing the literacy learning strategies in their classrooms.

## ***2. Strategies for Literacy Learning; or 'Just tell me the recipe'***

A particular dilemma we had was in presenting the strategies to the lecturers in ways that would be coherent, but that would not just mean they followed the steps in the strategy, without adapting them to the particular needs of the students or to the particular content of the session. At the same time we were aware that each of us in the project had our own 'different ways of knowing, acting and subjectivity, which are constructed differently by different knowledge communities' (Giroux, 1992, p. 43). We believed it was important that the particular context of their own classrooms was taken into consideration, with concomitant adjustments made in the way they implemented the strategies. At each of our sessions, we presented the lecturers with a new literacy strategy, together with suggested steps for implementation. This would be followed by a discussion regarding the ways the two Education lecturers had used the strategy in our classrooms, the modifications we might have made according to the particular dynamic of the classroom at the time, and how we incorporated particular content areas into the strategy. Lecturers would then apply the literacy strategy in their own classrooms in the following week.

It may be useful at this point to include an example of one of the literacy strategies as a means of contextualizing the comments made by the lecturers. There was a number of reading strategies that were presented to the lecturers for use in their tutorials, and the following is one example of these:

## Sources of Confusion

### Interpretive Reading

Instead of memorisation of each detail of the text, this approach requires students to react to the text. It recognises that students will 'read' the text differently, depending on their background knowledge. It can be in writing, and then answers compared in small group discussion in tutorials.

- ◆ *What was one idea from the text that you were familiar with? Why was it familiar to you?*

(This requires students to link knowledge/information sources)

- ◆ *For you, what were the two most important points in the text?*

(This is not the same as asking students to identify the author's main point)

- ◆ *Why are they important to you?*

(This requires the student to articulate a justification for their choice, a task that will require them to place their new knowledge within the context of their existing knowledge, and to be explicit about their values)

- ◆ *What was one idea that you disagreed with? Why?*

(This requires students to compare new knowledge with either their own tacit knowledge – which can then be explored – , or with the views of another author that they can recall)

- ◆ *Did any of the points in the text remind you of something that you have experienced?*

(This requires the student to link academic knowledge with personal knowledge so that meaningfulness is encouraged)

The following comments indicate how the challenge of developing a shared language was realised during the course of the project.

**Environmental Science Lecturer:** *Early on I was struck by coming from a different discipline. And that was why I was fascinated by the role play that you were talking about, and how could I change it to fit into a science context. It was fascinating to me, and I didn't really necessarily understand what was going on. I knew you were talking a different language, but I didn't necessarily understand the language all the time. It was intriguing. And you were also talking about different philosophies, various people, political stuff, people that I'd never heard of.*

**Nursing:** *I felt a bit isolated by it, but that was no problem. I tried to get as much out of it as I could, but I just accepted that it was a different discipline, different language, and I obviously had large gaps in my knowledge.*

**Social Science:** *I think it's because it's within your language that the recipes have been developed. It's not natural for us, or expected that we do these things as part of our discipline, and therefore you need a starting point because it is just not natural to do that in that discipline.*

One of the early aspects of this process was that the lecturers generally followed each of the steps provided for implementation of the strategy, even though, both during the tutorial/lecture itself and on later reflection, they could see it would have been more effective to have modified the steps to suit their particular classroom situation. As the above responses make clear, we were at pains to suggest that they did not have to follow the steps as written, and the following conversation demonstrates how we continued to address their concerns:

**Social Science Lecturer:** *It's like following a recipe that is new to you. At first, you follow each of the steps, then as you get more confident you make adjustments until the recipe is really your own. So, it's similar with your strategies. I don't have the confidence yet to*

## Sources of Confusion

*deviate in any way. It's providing me with a sense of security to know that I have the steps that I can follow.*

**Environmental Science Lecturer:** *I get worried if I don't do quite what you say, because I feel I'm not doing it right. Generally, I feel I'm groping my way with the strategies, and so I have a tendency to stick to the steps formulated, no matter what. Though, I do imagine that as I get more familiar with the structures, and with incorporating them into my tutorials, I'll learn to move away from the steps a bit.*

**Nursing Lecturer:** *When they got to talking about the literacy stuff it came back to common threads, and that's probably why I was quizzing Janice about what she was doing, because I wanted to find out what the common threads were, that were applicable to what I was doing. It was useful to get the recipes, which I could then add on to.*

How did students respond to the strategies? The following extracts from the final evaluation provide some information regarding students' response to particular strategies that had been implemented in their tutorial sessions, or in lectures. Each lecturer chose strategies that they thought would be appropriate to their group of students and to the content being presented. The extracts below provide a brief sample of the strategies used in the different disciplines. A full overview of the strategies used in each discipline area, and the responses by students and lecturers will appear in the final TULIP document.

### Environmental Science

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No	%	No.	%	No.	%	No	%
f. Writing or talking from a particular role forced me to understand the role better.	0	0	7	54	6	46	13	100
g. Writing or talking from a particular role helped me to realise that there are other ways of thinking about an issue.	0	0	9	69	3	23	13	100

### Social Science

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No.	%
f. Writing or talking from a particular role forced me to understand the role better.	0	0	12	54	10	45	22	100
g. Writing or talking from a particular role helped me to realise that there are other ways of thinking about an issue.	0	0	12	54	10	45	22	100
h. Making concept maps helped me to recall ideas.	2	9	16	72	4	18	22	100
i. Making concept maps helped me to connect ideas.	0	0	16	72	6	27	22	100
j. Writing a play made different gender approaches more understandable.	2	9	7	31	13	59	22	100

## Sources of Confusion

### Nursing

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
h. Making concept maps helped me to recall ideas.	7	13	28	54	16	31	51	100
i. Making concept maps helped me to connect ideas.	0	0	26	50	25	50	51	100

Further comments from the students demonstrate their reaction to some of the strategies.

<p><b>Social Science Students:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I believe concept maps are excellent ways to connect and revise material.</li> <li>• Concept maps helped my memory skills and made me realise how important lectures are. It also helped me to take better lecture notes.</li> <li>• It was good writing from a concept map because you wrote about each idea and how they linked together. It helped me to understand the connection of ideas and helped my literacy skills too.</li> <li>• Writing from a concept map helped me remember what it is we actually did in the lectures because I'm re-writing it.</li> </ul> <p><b>Environmental Science Students:</b> Thinking through a 'role play' (Jabiluka scenario)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This was valuable in learning the many different views on this issue. I did like this activity.</li> <li>• It was ok. It made it easier to understand what it was about</li> <li>• Good – putting yourself in another person's shoes really makes you understand where they are coming from</li> </ul> <p><b>Nursing Students:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Made me think more about the lecture and refreshed my memory.</li> <li>• I was never a fan of concept maps, they don't work for me</li> </ul>
---

We fully expected that students would react to the strategies in a variety of ways, due to their previous experiences of learning, their individual learning styles, and their expectations of what they thought a lecture or a tutorial session might consist of. In general, lectures are situations in which students are relatively passive. They are not situations in which students expect, or are expected, to interact with their peers. Similarly with tutorials when first year students can be reluctant to discuss issues with their peers, often because the group is smaller than a large lecture group and they can feel that their 'errors' or 'mistakes' will be instantly obvious. Thus, while the above comments show some expected reactions to the strategies, in the section that follows other more confrontational responses are reported on by the lecturers.

### 3. The construction of a tutorial or a lecture, or 'Is this what we're supposed to be learning in this unit?'

Theoretically, we hold to the view that in teaching one must transgress (hooks, 1994) the boundaries, which will 'take them [students] beyond their current horizons to consider perspectives and issues that they would not normally entertain' (Zeichner & Liston, 1991, p. 193). We see ourselves engaging in a pedagogy that is both within and against the academy, and that encourages students to become deep learners (Gibbs, 1994). For many students, however, thinking through writing is not part of their understanding of how tertiary learning should occur. Indeed, many students experienced a sense of cognitive dissonance when they were confronted with our literacy strategies that were different from what they expected tertiary learning to be – that is, finding the 'right answer' from a text book.

We were, in a sense, directing the lecturers to teach in ways they had not considered before.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The following is a discussion that focuses on this issue:

**Environmental Science Lecturer:** I think TULIP activities exposed some things the students were not good at – ie writing, analysing written material, sharing opinions, sharing their writing skills – and they therefore came to resent the fact that their frailties were visible to everyone else in the class. I suspect that focusing on communication skills in science is almost unheard of – at least in these students’ minds. I suspect that if communication and literacy issues were pushed in other science units, those units might get a reputation for being difficult and students might avoid enrolling in them.

**Our Response:** So, is your concern more to do with the student hostility, or with the possible threat to your teaching load if this particular unit got a ‘bad’ reputation for being difficult?

**Social Science Lecturer:** I don’t think it’s an either/or situation. One of my students said she thought she was back in primary school.

**Nursing Lecturer:** In the last two or three weeks I’ve found it hard going, and I think I’ve had some of the same reactions that Janice has had. You feel sort of embarrassed that you’re doing it, and you really have to push yourself to get involved because it’s just easier not to because of their reaction to you.

**Environmental Science Lecturer:** I think they’re reacting to being pushed. I’ve been leaning on them pretty hard to try and encourage them to be involved in discussing the issues, but also to be involved in TULIP activities and thinking about issues. Thinking about sources of information, thinking about their exams, thinking about their assignments, thinking critically about anything. And they just don’t want to. On Monday, one of the two women who refused to be involved directed some quite serious hostility towards me when I asked her a direct question about information. She was very sullen, and that was directed at me personally.

During the part of the project when this hostility began to emerge, we were reminded of Ellsworth’s (1989) writing on the problems of ‘empowerment’ and her criticisms of critical pedagogy. We noted Ellsworth’s charge that critical pedagogy can become positivist itself, stressing who we ‘should be’ and what ‘should be’ happening in our classrooms (p. 299). Furthermore, the concepts of ‘empowerment’ and ‘voice’ can be fraught with difficulty once they are extended beyond the level of rhetoric. Nevertheless, what struck us in particular was the way that lecturers spoke so freely of their classroom dilemmas, denoting a sense of trust in the collaborative process and the support of their peers.

The following are extracts from the final evaluation provided by the students in each of the discipline areas. As can be seen, they provide a mixture of responses, and are, in general, very positive.

### *Environmental Science*

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Individual writing in class helped me to think.	0	0	6	46	7	54	13	100
b. Individual writing in class forced me to put my ideas into words.	0	0	3	23	10	77	13	100
c. Discussing my ideas in small groups helped me to get more ideas.	0	0	4	31	9	69	13	100
d. Discussing my ideas in small groups helped me to clarify my own ideas.	0	0	4	31	9	69	13	100

## Sources of Confusion

e. Discussing my ideas in small groups forced me to put my ideas into words so that others could understand them.	0	0	2	16	11	84	13	100
---	---	---	---	----	----	----	----	-----

### Social Science

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Individual writing in class helped me to think.	0	0	10	46	12	54	22	100
b. Individual writing in class forced me to put my ideas into words.	0	0	5	23	17	77	22	100
c. Discussing my ideas in small groups helped me to get more ideas.	0	0	4	19	18	81	22	100
d. Discussing my ideas in small groups helped me to clarify my own ideas.	0	0	4	19	18	81	22	100
e. Discussing my ideas in small groups forced me to put my ideas into words so that others could understand them.	0	0	2	9	20	91	22	100

### Nursing

	Not at all		A bit		A lot		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Individual writing in class helped me to think.	0	0	24	47	27	53	51	100
b. Individual writing in class forced me to put my ideas into words.	0	0	14	27	37	73	51	100
c. Discussing my ideas in small groups helped me to get more ideas.	0	0	11	21	40	79	51	100
d. Discussing my ideas in small groups helped me to clarify my own ideas.	0	0	11	21	40	79	51	100
e. Discussing my ideas in small groups forced me to put my ideas into words so that others could understand them.	0	0	9	17	42	83	51	100

Their comments expand on the above, indicating both the positive responses to the strategies, as well as the conflict and confusion expressed by some students, chiefly towards their lecturers.

#### Social Science Students:

- Very good to hear a range of opinions and approaches to the topic.
- It is a bit intimidating at first, but it is interesting and useful to share opinions and thoughts
- Originally, I thought I was back in primary school, and I became quite confused as it was not what I expected learning in a university to be. But it turned out to be quite an effective way of remembering and understanding.
- Some of my readings were hard to understand, and I was helped to change my reading habits, and learn how to do it.
- I was annoyed at first, but then I could see how they were assisting to develop ideas and I didn't mind doing them.
- Anything's better than an exam.
- Well, they had to be done so I did them!

#### Environmental Science Students:

The writing tasks that we undertook did help me to understand the content of the unit. It

## *Sources of Confusion*

makes you focus more on your ideas and to express them clearly and back them up with information, rather than thinking about it and leaving it.

- After sharing with others I got more ideas, therefore was able to add to my own writing.
- Writing in class helped me think about the information and issues and get it on paper. I feel this did improve my literacy skills
- I became confused at some of the things I was asked to write, especially when I knew I was to share it with someone else. I didn't know if I should write what I really believe, or try to guess what the person I was sharing with might want to hear.
- I don't like to read my writing in class. I don't feel it helped. But I like hearing what others have written.
- Like I was in high school again. Couldn't see the relevance. Therefore I didn't take the tasks as seriously.

### *Nursing Students:*

- My reaction to writing to someone in a lecture was quite positive. I enjoyed it, and found it useful to understand issues that were being presented in the lecture.
- I didn't bother much, because the lecture class was so big you could get away with not doing much.
- Having to stop listening to the lecture, and write something, helped me gain more ideas.
- Having to write about the topics makes you actually think about the topic, rather than just taking notes. I think you put a bit more effort if you know someone is going to be looking or hearing your words.
- When I was looking back over my lecture notes, I would sometimes get confused over what was actually notes from the lecture, and what was part of the writing I'd done.
- It helped plant it in my memory.

### **Collaboration resulting in divergent practices**

In one of our final sessions, we asked the lecturers to share what had been successful, or otherwise, in their involvement in TULIP and in implementing the literacy strategies with the students. The reciprocity in collaboration came about, we believe, because we had included lecturers from a range of disciplines, which opened up to all of us other ways of working in our classrooms. The following are a few of their responses:

***Environmental Science Lecturer:*** I think that's something I've picked up, that what works for one person may not be the best means, so diversity is a good thing

***Nursing Lecturer:*** What I found successful was situating the lecture within the realm of their experience, or within the realm of their imagination, like the time I got them, when I was lecturing on infection control, to imagine a world without antibiotics. I think that's good to bring it in to a realm that they can understand, because you are starting at a point from their reference, rather than yours, and I like that idea very much.

***Environmental Science Lecturer:*** I got the feeling that Janice was able to be a lot more creative than I was, had more scope. And I think the social sciences have that freedom because you are not dealing so much with definitive answers. Science, I know there's controversy within science, but basically it tends to be pretty 'factual', and that dictates how you approach the subject. But, at the same time, it stimulated me to say, well, does my subject area have to be so didactic, so black and white.

***Social Science Lecturer:*** The TULIP activities assisted greatly in showing students the processes of reflection and consolidation of lecture material and in some deep reading of certain chapter segments or articles. My teaching had to change in that I had to be organised before a tutorial, something I did not always do before. I also changed my teaching of some lectures by trying to integrate breaks to write and think about things in the lectures.

**Nursing Lecturer:** I believe my involvement with TULIP has enhanced students' understanding of the unit content. I believe this occurred because TULIP encouraged me to explore and use a range of teaching styles I might not have otherwise used. TULIP has given me the freedom, or perhaps the permission, to experiment with my teaching. As a consequence of TULIP, teaching has once again become exciting for me as I now find myself once again searching for new ways of approaching topics with which I had grown all too familiar. TULIP has aroused within me a passion for my teaching.

### **Discussion**

Overall, the Project found that tertiary teachers involved in this project welcomed the opportunity to talk about their teaching with others who similarly valued the reality of classroom life. They found it useful to have teaching strategies about literacy explained to them, both as an expansion of ideas of how teaching might occur, and also as a way of exploring the notion of literacy. They found the group based action learning approach to making changes in their teaching to be powerful and challenging. They found the challenges of talking about student literacy and their classroom teaching to colleagues of different discipline backgrounds confronting, and conducive to critical interrogation of existing understandings. However, the challenge of talking across disciplines was to seek a language that was 'common enough' to enable all participants to talk to each other. Not only was this more difficult than we envisaged, but we also found that we did not always share similar beliefs and values regarding teaching and learning. Further, the nature of collaboration in the Project was somewhat uneven in power relations, in that the teachers were required to follow our agenda of incorporating certain literacy strategies into their usual teaching practices. At the same time, we shared our own successes and failures in our teaching with the group, and through our teacher narrative, placed under scrutiny our own dilemmas in implementing the literacy strategies in our own classrooms.

Despite some of the difficulties briefly mentioned above, we would like to add some final comments that indicate how much the lecturers appreciated being given the opportunity to talk to others, share their concerns about teaching, and discover more effective ways of shaping the teaching/learning context. As can be seen from the comments, lecturers engaged in reflective practice, a 'dialogue of thinking and going' (Schon, 1987, p. 31) that became a powerful form of ongoing professional development.

**Social Science Lecturer:** I've had lots of ideas to get energised by others, and I've heard basically the problems I experienced were the same. They are universal, it doesn't matter the discipline you're with. You realise you're not a failure, or you're part of a collective failure! That was the great thing I enjoyed.

**Environmental Science Lecturer:** It made me get back and experiment a bit. I'd fallen into a rut. I had the formula there and it worked, and I didn't move out of the formula. And all of a sudden I had to and that was great. I discovered I could do things quite differently.

**Nursing Lecturer:** One of the great strengths for me was talking to others about my teaching. And it's suddenly made teaching more exciting. No-one wanted to know about my teaching knowledge. That's the thing about tertiary teaching – no-one is interested in it. They're interested in all sorts of other aspects – like, what's your research. Nobody says, 'how's your teaching?' They couldn't give a damn. All of a sudden I was with a group that gave a damn.

### **Conclusion**

One of the insights from the Project is that the notion and practice of collaboration is problematic. Indeed, McTaggart (1992) has argued that a 'deliberate mix of people from different work contexts' forming a participatory, democratic group is 'one way of problematising the work of all parties and of diversifying the value commitments people must

## *Sources of Confusion*

attend to, justify, implement and problematise' (p. 8). It is our belief that when collaboration is undertaken by colleagues who experience similar constraints and possibilities within a power structure, the result can be educative, empowering, energising, critical, affirming, and flexible in a way that no managerialist contrived collegiality can be. Further, we believe that collaboration and collegiality can be re-appropriated from the managerialist discourse in a way that renews their links with the emancipatory discourse from which they came.

A further insight concerns the recognition of the often multiple and even contradictory patterns which emerge in each student's experiences of learning. Meaning-making and negotiation of learning often involve the construction of multiple student subjectivities, and these become visible through the teaching/learning practices that occur in the tertiary classroom. We need, we believe, to be mindful of the signs of conflict and confusion that are given out through curriculum and pedagogical practices. We need to acknowledge that learning contexts involve specific discourse communities, and that both learning experiences and lived experiences impact on opportunities for success. What seems clear is that, while there are powerful possibilities for learning in the integration of literacy practices into the content of the discipline, the living out of these initiatives is neither seamless nor unproblematic. It is our belief that the ways in which learner subjectivities are negotiated and constructed, and the contexts within which learning takes place are crucial to successful learning in the academy. Success in turn needs to be understood as a process of working one's way through the contradictions, conflicts, and confusions of learning in a multi-layered, complex context.

### **References**

- Bartholomae, D. (1985). *Inventing the University*. In M. Rose (Ed.). *When a writer can't write: Studies in writer's block and other composing process problems*. New York: Guilford.
- Baynham, M., Beck, D., Gordon, K., Lee, A., & San Miguel, C. (1994). *Constructing a discourse position: quoting, referring and attribution in academic writing*. In K. Chanock (Ed.) with V. Burléy, *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines* (pp. 163-168). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Blackmore, J. (1999). *Teacher practitioner research: Academics and teachers as knowledge producers and partners in learning communities*. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 26(3): i-viii.
- Cartwright, P. & Noone, L. (1999). *TULIP (Tertiary Undergraduate Literacy Integration Program): A project that focuses on the literacy development of tertiary students*. Paper presented at the National Language and Academic Skills Conference, Monash University, Melbourne, November.
- Cartwright, P., & Noone, L. (1998). *Surviving the first year: Exploring students' experiences of beginning tertiary learning in an Education course*. In R. Stokell (Compiler). *Proceedings of the Third Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education (Vol. I & Vol. II)*. Auckland: Auckland Institute of Technology.
- Chanock, K. (Ed.) (1995). *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines*. Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Connelly, F. & Clandinin, J. (1992). *Teacher as curriculum maker*. In P. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum*. New York: Macmillan.

## Sources of Confusion

- Dearn, J. (1996). Enhancing the first year experience: Creating a climate for active learning. In R. James & C. McInnis (Eds). *Transition to Active Learning* (pp. 31- 55). Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher education: University of Melbourne.
- Elbaz, F. (1991). Research on teachers' knowledge. The evolution of a discourse. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 23(1): 1-19.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(3): 297-324.
- Flower, L. (1994). *The construction of negotiated meaning: A social cognitive theory of writing* Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Fullan, J. & Hargreaves, A. (1992). *What is worth fighting for in your school?* Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gibbs, J. (Ed.) (1994). *Improving student learning: Through assessment and evaluation*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
- Giroux, H. (1992). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. New York: Routledge.
- Gordon, K. (1998). Contemporary nursing: An integrated approach to academic literacy. In R. Stokell (Compiler). *Proceedings of the Third Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education (Vol. I & Vol. II)* (pp. 132-145). Auckland: Auckland Institute of Technology.
- Gore, J. (1991). On silent regulation: Emancipatory action research in preservice teacher education. *Curriculum Perspectives*. 11(4): 47-51.
- Grundy, S. (1982). Three modes of action research. *Curriculum Perspectives*. 2(3): 23-34.
- Grundy, S. & Hatton, E. (1995). Teacher educators' ideological discourses. *Journal of Education for Teaching*. 21(1): 7-24.
- Hargreaves, A. & Dawe, R. (1990). Paths of professional development: Contrived collegiality, collaborative culture and the case of peer coaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 6(3): 227-241.
- Hinkle, A. (1997). Transcriptional and compositional responses to student writing: Designing courses with social climates supportive of written expression. In C. Rust & G. Gibbs (Eds). *Improving student learning: Improving student learning through course design* (pp. 164-171). Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development..
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- Jalongo, J., Isenberg, J. with Gerbracht, G. (1995). *Teachers' stories: From personal narrative to professional insight*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Johnston, S. & Proudford, C. (1994). Action research: Who owns the process? *Educational Review*. 46(1): 3-13.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart*. London: Routledge.
- Lea, M. (1998). Academic literacies and learning in higher education: Constructing knowledge through texts and experience. *Studies in the Education of Adults*. 302, 156-171.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Lea, M. & Stierer, B. (Eds.) (2000). *Student writing in higher education: New contexts*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- McInnis, C. (1996). Reinventing the first year experience: Making it work. In R. James & C. McInnis (Eds.) *Transition to active learning*. (pp. 549-554) Centre for the Study of Higher Education: University of Melbourne.
- McMillan, J. (2000). Writing for success in higher education. In M. Lea & Stierer (Eds.) *Student writing in higher education: New contexts* (pp. 149-163). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- McTaggart, R. (1992). Reductionism and action research: Technology versus convivial forms of life. Keynote address presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress on Action Learning. Brisbane: University of Queensland.
- Richardson, L. (1994). Writing as a method of inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516-529). London: Sage Publications.
- Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Smyth, J. (1995). Teachers' work and the labour process of teaching: Central problematics in professional development. In T. Guskey, A. Hargreaves. *Professional development in education: New paradigms and practices* (pp. 69-91). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smyth, J., Dow, A., Hattam, E., Reid, A. & Shacklock, G. (2000). *Teachers' work in a globalising economy*. London: Falmer Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Vardi, I. (2000). Developing critical writers at the undergraduate level: Some insights from critical thinking pedagogy and linguistics. In R. Jamesk. J. Milton, R. Gabb (Eds.), *Cornerstones of higher education*. Melbourne: Research and Development in Higher Education. Vol 22, 100-110.
- Zeichner, K. & Liston, D. (1991). *Teacher education: The social conditions of schooling*. New York: Routledge.

**COLLABORATION AND INTERACTION: MODELLING EXPLORED**

Patricia Cartwright

Australian Catholic University, Aquinas Campus

Josephine Ryan

Australian Catholic University, St Patrick's Campus

With

Patricia Hacker

Australian Catholic University, Aquinas Campus

Elizabeth Powell, and Jo Reidy

Australian Catholic University, St Patrick's Campus

*The paper will explore the implications of a two stage program designed to give students a more explicit understanding of academic discourse. In Stage one, Supporting Academic Writing Explicitly (SAWE), which took place in 1999, lecturers and academic skills advisers worked together to demonstrate to second year Education Students the actual steps they, as experienced writers, took to complete the set assignment for the unit. The project experimented with ways of using the traditional context of the lecture to teach writing. The project culminated with students discussing the final drafts of essays written by their lecturers and advisers (after students' essays were submitted). Student evaluations showed that modelling was valuable for inducting students into the discourse of an academic community. However, it also demonstrated that, for modelling to be most successful, students need to be active participants in the process. The collaboration between the advisers and lecturers proved very successful, giving team members a forum for an on-going conversation about literacy related issues. Stage two, Case Study: Supporting Academic Writing Explicitly (C:SAWE), which took place in Semester One 2000, attempted to make modelling a more participatory process, and to more closely integrate theory with practice. The paper will report on both stages of the project and explore implications for the teaching and learning of academic writing.*

**Introduction**

For the past two years collaborative teaching has been a feature of the work of English Education lecturers and Academic Skills Advisers from Australian Catholic University, Aquinas and St Patrick's Campuses in Victoria. This collaboration was assisted by small Australian Catholic University teaching development grants, and resulted in the completion of two projects, SAWE (Supporting Academic Writing Explicitly) in 1999, and C:SAWE (Case Study: Supporting Academic Writing Explicitly) which was undertaken in Semester 1, 2000. In both instances, the projects aimed to provide students with a more explicit understanding of academic discourse by having English Education lecturers and Academic Skills staff work together during lectures to demonstrate and discuss the requirements and conventions of particular aspects of academic writing. This paper will focus on the C:SAWE Project, but a brief overview will be provided of the SAWE Project, as the results and recommendations

from this project provided insights for the C:SAWE Project. Considered together, the projects reveal much about the teaching of academic writing to tertiary students.

### **Background to the Project(s)**

The first project, SAWE (Supporting Academic Writing Explicitly), was a collaboration between academic skills advisers and lecturers from the School of Education, working independently on writing an essay. In class, over a number of weeks, we modelled the processes of essay writing for the students, discussing with them the readings we had done to inform our writing, and presenting the drafts we were working on at the time. The second project, C:SAWE, again involved a collaboration between academic skills advisers and lecturers from the School of Education. This time, however, we chose to work on the writing of a Case Study, a task that involved the students integrating their understandings of classroom practices in the primary school with the theories of literacy learning and teaching presented in lectures. We planned four sessions, using the second hour of a lecture period.

Our conception for the first project was a result of often repeated conversations about students' academic writing in meetings and staff rooms at the university. Among lecturing and academic skills staff there was anxiety about students' academic writing, that it often seemed to be based on too little reading, was not clearly argued and was poorly documented. Moreover, lecturers doubted whether students really understood what was wanted. The academic skills advisers confirmed that students whom they saw often seemed not to know, for example, what reading might be expected for an essay or research topic, or what kind of writing might be required. For the project team the need to respond constructively to the situation seemed a crucial consideration since the Education students would become teachers, soon to be responsible for teaching writing in primary and secondary classrooms.

Our perception of students as having difficulty with their writing tasks is one which has received considerable scholarly and practical attention both internationally (Gibbs, 1994; Swales, 1990) and in Australian universities (Chanock, 1994, Golebiowski, 1997; Golebiowski & Borland, 1997) during the last decade or so. Researchers have argued that many students are unclear about academic writing requirements. For example, students are unsure about what is expected when they are asked to 'analyse' (Caterall & Martins, 1997, p. 129), or they do not have a deep understanding of the purposes and practices of citation (Buckingham & Nevile, 1997). Significant in the thinking about tertiary writing, and important in our projects, is the idea that students need to understand the nature of the discourse community or communities of which they will become a part, and learn to use the patterns of language allowable in that context (Bartholomae, 1985).

Students are often puzzled and discomforted by the talk they hear in the classroom or lecture theatre. But, their puzzlement cannot be solved by simply teaching them a set of new vocabulary, with accompanying definitions, as this overlooks the contextual and discipline basis of the words and terms. Frequently, what emerges is a tense relationship between students' own attempts to use a language that they are familiar and comfortable with, and the pressures to conform to the language and writing conventions of academic disciplines. The result of this tension, in the initial stages of learning to write for the academy, is that students feel overwhelmed by the demands on their language and literacy capacities, and seriously doubt their abilities in this regard. In addition, their initial problems with academic writing can be interpreted as a 'lack' of skills in writing for the academy, with students being seen as under-prepared and under-skilled in terms of requisite communication and literacy skills (Higher Education Council, 1992, p.45).

For the designers of the projects, an important position within the debate about academic literacy is to reject the deficit theory that tends to reduce writing to a set of discrete skills to be learned. Rather, we believe that generic reading and writing skills should be integrated with discipline-specific knowledge. International writers like Delpit (1992), Gee (1996) and

Swales (1990), and Cartwright and Noone (1999) in the Australian context, argue that students need to have the skills and knowledge to operate successfully in various academic contexts. Our projects were based upon this view: students will be assisted in their learning when we make explicit to them the skills, conventions and expectations of academic reading and writing in the particular discipline in which they are operating.

Cope and Kalantzis (1993) argue that explicit modelling of the target genre is essential for apprentice writers: "For those outside the discourses of power and access, acquiring these discourses requires explicit explanation; the ways in which the 'hows' of text structure produce the 'whys' of social effect" (p. 8). We wanted all of our students, not simply those who were struggling with their academic writing and reading, to have further explicit knowledge about the rather demanding forms of academic discourse. Although our target group was composed of mainly second year students, many appeared to be apprentice writers in relation to the kind of paper we wanted them to write: in the case of SAWE an academic essay which involved discussion of an educational issue; and in the case of C:SAWE a case study on literacy learning. In both instances we saw the students as being inexperienced in locating themselves in the field of educational discourse. We aimed to make the demands of the discourses explicit.

The second common element to the projects was collaboration between lecturers and academic skills advisers. Similar to previous collaboration at RMIT (Elliot, 1997), which had been a stimulus for our initial project, both of our projects were based on collaboration between lecturing and academic skills staff within and across campuses, with a particular focus on academic reading and writing. Indeed, the planning of the C:SAWE sessions meant the team was much engaged in discussing various perspectives on the case study. The collaboration enabled us to acknowledge and give voice to our teaching purposes, explore our theories on teaching and learning, share and discuss our successes and our uncertainties, and continue to work on "the creation and maintenance of satisfying and productive work environments" (Smyth, 1995, p. 96). This collaboration of lecturers and advisers during lecture time meant that the project brought the academic support staff into the centre of the formal lecture program.

### **The SAWE Project**

In the SAWE project, we demonstrated the actual steps experienced writers take to complete a significant example of academic writing, in this case the major essay for the English education unit that students were undertaking. Swales (1990) argues that students need knowledge of the discourse community within which specific academic genres are situated. We, therefore, wrote the essay *with*, or more precisely, *just ahead* of the students. We did crucial aspects of the process in front of them. On each campus, students saw a lecturer and an academic skills adviser working on the essay independently of each other. We saw our process as providing students with an insight into the ways in which writers in the field debate issues of significance. While we did not plan that the lecturer and adviser would necessarily provide different points of view, we did expect that the students would see the ways in which the disciplines, including education, depend on the canvassing of opposing viewpoints as ways of coming to 'final' positions. We hoped that the SAWE process would be an effective way of inducting students into the discourse community of which we were 'full members' (Swales, 1990, p. 220), and the students relative apprentices. Further details of this project can be read elsewhere (Ryan et al., 1999, in press).

### **Outcomes of the SAWE Project**

We found that the complex nature of academic writing was not easy to model in brief presentations, especially where students were not on an equal footing with us in terms of reading and understanding. Indeed, many students did not begin reading until a week before the essay was due. In addition, attempting to model a genre within a lecture format works against the interaction that is a significant part of a writing pedagogy. Findings from SAWE suggest that the institutional pattern of limiting tutorials has potentially negative consequences

for student learning (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992). We certainly felt that having students and lecturers and advisers composing together would have been a task better suited to tutorials where interaction is much easier to encourage. In terms of Australian Catholic University's Strategic Plan, which has as one of its goals a focus on learning and teaching, we were *teaching* but the students were not sufficiently *learning*. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the project can be said to have enhanced the sophistication of discourse discussions between students and teaching staff and among students. A very successful aspect of SAWE was the collaboration between English Education lecturers and academic skills advisers to model ways of approaching academic writing.

### **The C:SAWE Project**

The C:SAWE project aimed to build on the insights of the SAWE project, and continue to work in improving students' academic reading and writing. For the C:SAWE project, the lecturers and advisers worked in pairs on each campus and conducted a series of four voluntary sessions held during the second hour of a two hour lecture block. Our aim was to involve students in discussing, with experienced writers, the complexities of preparing and composing a major assessment task of the unit, a Case Study. As with SAWE, we saw this approach providing a flexible mode of delivery in that students had the freedom to choose independent learning or to be involved in the group sessions. We also saw the project as a more effective way of improving student writing than the brief, ad hoc, one-to-one interactions lecturers typically have with students when discussing aspects of their academic writing. Further, by integrating academic skills advisers into the teaching program, their time and expertise were shared with a greater number of students. The University's Strategic Plan (1999) encourages creating "environments...that bring students to construct knowledge for themselves" (p. 8), and we considered that the focused, purposeful sessions achieved this aim.

Lecture time was considered to be the most practical time to work with the students, as there we had access to all of the students at once, and this made it possible to have the academic skills advisers and lecturers working together. The lecture time was also chosen for the program because recent cost cutting had meant that the tutorial time had been decreased from two hours to one hour per week and the students given a second lecture hour instead. We hoped that a program, which was so directly connected with students' assessment requirements, would be a way of making the potentially distancing lecture context engaging (Biggs, 1999). As will be seen, this structure was modified somewhat in regard to the possibilities and constraints of each of the campuses, and the numbers of students involved in the project.

A significant result from the SAWE project was the recognition that, for some of our prospective teaching students, some academic tasks are seen as having little relevance in regard to the practicalities of the primary or secondary classroom. While we would reject the 'technocratic rationality' view of teacher education that foregrounds the competencies required for classroom teaching (Beyer & Zeichner, 1987), we do nevertheless recognise that we need to find ways of engaging students in their learning, so that they can clearly see the integration of theory and practice. A Case Study appeared to offer that opportunity.

The task of the Case Study was deliberately chosen to involve undergraduate Education students in looking at educational practices in light of the theory that was being presented in lectures and tutorials. The SAWE essay task also asked students to consider the integration of theory and practice, but, to the students, this essay task seemed removed from what they perceive actually happens in the primary classroom. The Case Study, however, specifically directed students to observe, experience and reflect on a child's literacy learning in the context of the school and program in which the child is learning. We asked students to visit primary schools to collect and analyse data relating to the child's reading and writing abilities; to relate this analysis to the theory and practices of literacy learning discussed and read about during

the unit; and to write a critical reflection about what they had learned about literacy teaching and learning from the case study.

### **The Program as it happened**

The C:SAWE program consisted of a series of four sessions which focussed on particular aspects of the Case Study. While the particular sessions were different on each campus, broadly we selected aspects of case study discourse to discuss with students. Because results varied according to the campus where the research took place, the following will look at each campus separately.

#### *Aquinas Campus*

Sixty students took part in the project at Aquinas campus. Three of the four sessions took place in the second hour of a lecture session, with the lecturer and academic skills adviser taking half of the group each for discussion focusing on the structure of a case study. Students were given published case studies on related areas of literacy learning in order to provide them with models of different ways of writing up the 'results' of case study research. These provided a focus as they called on students to make connections between their data collection in primary schools and the ways in which the research was presented in the published case studies. The fourth session took place in tutorial times, with approximately 20 students in each group. The lecturer and academic skills adviser attended each of the three tutorial sessions. These sessions focused on particular concerns the students may have had synthesising their data with the literature in the field. Small discussion groups were formed, with the lecturer and academic skills adviser, separately, providing support and advice to small groups or to individuals.

#### *St Patrick's Campus*

The greater student numbers at St Patrick's Campus meant that even when there was a lecturer and two academic skills advisers available they were working with at least sixty students at a time. In addition, unforeseen circumstances meant that on two occasions the groups were much larger than sixty students. The sessions consisted of the lecturers and advisers discussing, lecture-style with visual support, elements of published case studies, highlighting the ways in which experienced researchers managed to look at an individual case in the light of the literature in the field. Students asked questions and completed various activities designed to give them practice in the discourse. Tutorials were not used to discuss the case study because the limited tutorial time was needed to deal with the rest of the unit content. The large numbers involved on the city campus seemed to make the flexible program of Aquinas difficult to achieve. Students did not in general decide to do independent research, opting to rely chiefly on the lecture sessions for input and information.

### **Program Evaluation**

It was apparent that the smaller class sizes at Aquinas enabled the interaction that was such an integral part of the project. When the large lecture group divided into two smaller groups, there were only 30 students in each, a number that allowed for discussion, questions, and the interaction that can be constrained in a larger group. The smaller class sizes meant that students were not inhibited when asking questions, and querying aspects of their particular school, or child. The smaller class sizes also enabled students to improve their writing, and it was much easier to work one-to-one, with small groups, or even with the large group in modelling how the case study should be written. For the fourth session, when the academic skills adviser attended each of the three tutorial sessions, it became even more apparent how the smaller class sizes facilitated discussion and exploration, as students readily articulated particular aspects of their case study and explored areas of concern. They were thus engaged in dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999) that enabled the students to construct their understanding of the art of teaching through reflective practice, drawing for guidance and assistance upon their

## Sources of Confusion

readings of the literature, their notes from lectures and tutorials, and their practical experiences and observations in the primary school classroom.

A selection of comments from Aquinas students indicates their positive view of the program:

*The classroom observations and group/tutorial discussions have been the most effective. One strength in the unit is having the work from the lectures and tutorials connect to the classroom observations.*

*I found this subject to be extremely worthwhile and enjoyable. The case study was probably the most beneficial, as I felt I could relate to the concepts introduced in lectures because I was able to observe them in the classroom, and then talk about them in tutorials. The aspects that were most effective were the ones that allowed us to be critically involved.*

*Once again, I have enjoyed the challenges of learning within and about literacy learning. I have really enjoyed completing the case study, and found the structure provided in lectures and tutorials most beneficial. The chance to get into the classroom and to commence to build a professional language and attitude was one that I believe will be a great building block for the future.*

*I particularly liked the idea of the case study and found that the lectures and tutorials provided insights into how to present a case study, as well as to how literacy is taught and learned in schools, which could then be placed against what I saw in the classroom.*

The following comment specifically on the collaboration between the lecturer and academic skills adviser:

*Incorporating the academic skills adviser allowed for the whole lecture group to be divided into smaller groups, allowing for more discussion.*

*Good idea, as we learnt different ways of presenting. She assisted us and gave us plenty of opportunities for questions.*

*Very helpful. Breaking down into smaller groups gave more time for questions.*

*Excellent, especially when we were talking about writing up the Case Study. It helped because it meant that you, in a sense, got to know her, which means that you might not be as reluctant to see her at other times.*

*She was extremely helpful with the structuring of our case study, and letting us explain where we were at so as to gain more idea of how to go about it.*

*Very good idea. This way you not only have the advice/point of view from the lecturer, but the adviser. More ideas can be gained.*

*I found it to be quite helpful, particularly as there are over 50 students in the class and Pat can't be expected to see all students in one lesson.*

At St Patrick's, students were somewhat less than satisfied. They had listened to their lecturers and advisers discuss case study models but there had been less interaction in the sessions than at Aquinas. While they felt that it was valuable to have suggestions as to where to go with their papers, especially in terms of what to read, they were not engaged in the sessions in creating the new discourse. The majority of them saw the program as "quite helpful" (rather than *very helpful* as at Aquinas). They expressed frustration that the Case Study requirements were not as clear as they would have liked despite the presentations by lecturers and advisers. They were glad of the experience in schools but found the writing of the paper stressful.

## *Sources of Confusion*

*Not enough detail on how to write a "case study." I have never written one and was confused.*

Some things were helpful, but I found some of the information actually confused the issue. And we were not given clear enough instructions of exactly what you wanted

It seemed that the lecture format of the presentations meant that students were waiting for the input to be given to them rather than engaging in discussion of the task. They described themselves as waiting for more direction.

The sessions were helpful but more sessions were needed in order to gain a better understanding.

They expressed frustration because, as they saw it, the input came "too late." They had to make their observations in schools before they knew what to look for.

*I felt I was on the back foot the whole time having done the observations without adequate background knowledge.*

This was an interesting comment because on the other campus the students did not seem to feel so uncertain. It seems likely that a major reason for the students on the smaller campus feeling differently was that the lecturer with fewer students was able to provide early feedback on the students' writing. She looked at a draft of the first section, commenting on particular areas that needed strengthening. Also it seemed the large groups in which the case study was discussed, were less engaging for students. Some of the students at St Patrick's noticed that the input was more helpful on the occasions when the group was broken down from two hundred to sixty or so:

*The days when the group was separated so we could look at the elements of the case study was [sic] excellent. It made it 'less daunting'.*

*Having the small groups discussing each segment of the case study during lecture time was excellent*

### **Conclusion**

To note the criticisms of the program is to undervalue the achievements. The students were almost universally positive about the value of the project, even if the St Patrick's students expressed more limited satisfaction. Our job next year is to find our way to provide explicit knowledge of academic discourse within the context of large classes and limited time.

One of our goals for the Case Study was to achieve a meaningful way of engaging students in the discourse of education. We considered we were very successful in achieving that goal. All parties found the Case Study to be a very valuable means of integrating classroom practice with the literature on literacy learning and teaching. It enabled students to concentrate on the literacy learning of an individual child, to collect reading and writing data for analysis, to place this analysis within the research on literacy learning and teaching, and to reflect critically on their own learning as a result of their involvement in case study research. Through the use of case study, we felt we had demonstrated to students the link between gathering data, reading texts, being reflective, and becoming reflexive (Denzin, 1994).

### **References**

Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the university. In M. Rose (Ed). *When a writer*

## *Sources of Confusion*

- can't Write. Studies in writer's block and other composing process problems* (pp.125-161). New York: Guilford.
- Beyer, L. & Zeichner, K. (1987). Teacher education in cultural context: beyond reproduction. In T. Popkewitz (Ed.) *Critical studies in teacher education: its folklore, theory and practice* (pp. 298-334). London: Falmer Press.
- Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Buckingham, J. & Nevile, M. (1997). Comparing the citation choices of experienced Academic writers and first year students. In Z. Golebiowski (Ed.) *Policy and Practice of tertiary literacy: Selected proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy Research and Practice*. Vol. 1 (pp. 96-107). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Cartwright, P. & Noone, L. (1999). TULIP (Tertiary Undergraduate Literacy Program): A project that focuses on the literacy development of tertiary students. Paper presented at the Language and Academic Skills Conference, Monash University, Melbourne.
- Catterall, J. & Martins, R. (1997). Peaks and pitfalls of a tertiary communication policy. In Z. Golebiowski (Ed.) *Policy and practice of tertiary literacy: Selected proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy Research and Practice*. Vol. 1 (pp. 126-134). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Chanock, K., with assistance from Burley, V. (Ed.) (1995). *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines*. Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (1993). Introduction: How a genre approach to literacy can transform the way writing is taught. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *The powers of literacy* (pp. 1-21). London: Falmer Press.
- Delpit, L. (1992). Acquisition of literate discourses: Bowing before the master? *Theory and Practice*, 3(14), 296-302.
- Denzin, N. (1994). The art and politics of interpretation. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 500-515). London: Sage Publications.
- Elliot, M. (1997). The teaching of academic discourse: A collaboration between discipline lecturers and academic support staff at RMIT. In Z. Golebiowski & H. Borland (Eds.), *Academic communication across disciplines and cultures: Selected proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy*. Vol 2, 78-87. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Taylor and Francis.
- Gibbs, G. (Ed). (1994). *Improving student learning: through assessment and valuation*. Oxford: Centre for Staff Development.
- Gibbs, G., & Jenkins, J. (Eds). (1992). *Teaching large classes in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Golebiowski, Z. (Ed). (1997). *Policy and practices of tertiary literacy. Selected proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy Research and Practice*. Vol. 1. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Golebiowski, Z. & Borland, H. (Eds). (1997). *Academic communication across disciplines and cultures: Selected proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy Research and Practice*. Vol. 2. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Higher Education Council (1992). *Seeking quality*. Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service.
- Ryan, J. Powell, E., Cartwright, P., Hacker, P., McArdle, F., Reidy, J. (2000). Supporting academic writing explicitly (SAWE) project: Modelling explored. . In G. Crosling, T. Moore, & S. Vance (Eds.), *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimensions of our work*. (pp.20-26). Melbourne: CeLTS, Monash University.
- Smyth, J. (1995). Teachers' work and the labour process of teaching: Central problematics in professional development. In T. Guskey & A. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Professional development in education: New paradigms and practices* (pp. 69-91). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE: COMPUTERS AS A  
SOURCE OF CONFUSION**

Kate Chanock  
La Trobe University

*While computers have transformed the writing process, making drafting easy, revision fast, and correction simple with spelling and grammar checkers, these amenities have spawned new errors in our students' work. By relying on the spell-check, they miss errors and exchange misspelled words for other words entirely, resulting in bizarre wording they would not have generated on their own. By deferring to the grammar check, they develop uneasiness about, rather than control of, structural options. By narrowing their vision to a single screen, they lose sight of the organisation of their text. And by narrowing their literature search to what key words will net for them, they may never be aware of the discourse community in which their topic moves from mouth to mouth. This paper looks at the confusion that arises when students think that their computers think, that they know what the student means to say and know better than s/he does how to say it; and when they become accustomed to the spaces and the paths that suit the technology, but not, perhaps, the purposes it exists to serve.*

**Introduction**

For many of us here, the advent of word processing has been wonderfully enabling. Along with giving us the freedom to tinker with a single draft, each year this benign technology has brought us further tools with which to do it. The spell-check identifies combinations of letters that have not been programmed into its vocabulary, and gives us the chance to consider whether that was really what we meant to type. The grammar check does the same for combinations of symbols it has been alerted to identify as suspect. It underlines long sentences in green (for over-luxuriant growth?). It pulls up at a passive verb, and we can either acquiesce in the North American tradition of belles lettres, from which this odd little bit of programming has sprung, or we can tell it brusquely to "ignore", or even, "ignore all". If we are dissatisfied with a particular word, we can ask the thesaurus to produce another for our consideration. When we are ready to review the structure of our text, we can print a copy to spread out around the floor, with scissors and sticky tape at the ready. And if we decide we need to know some more, we can bring up the library catalogue and see which of the things our sources read are readily accessible for us to go into more deeply. Few of us, I am sure, would wish to go back to the bad old days; some of us, in fact, can barely remember them. Neither can our students.

And this is the problem I want to visit in this paper, for the technology itself can be a source of confusion when users do not have the means effectively to make the choices that it puts before them, or the cast of mind to regard the computer as a machine – a processor of words – rather than an authority on language. It is not so much that individuals have lost the skills of composing that they used to have, but that the culture has not seen a need to reproduce these skills. I would like to note some of the effects these tools are having, and their implications for our teaching.

### **The authority of the machine**

I do not want to oversimplify this, for people's relationships to their machines are quite complex. The same person will be overcredulous towards her spellcheck at one moment and oversuspicious at the next, just as a person who seeks a medical diagnosis comes home and throws the pills away, muttering "Doctors! What do they know!" It is noticeable, however, that particular kinds of errors are increasing with dependence on the technology of word processing, and that this dependence is not only a matter of convenience but of trust. We see this in the language people use to talk about what their computers do, a language of personification in which we all are enmeshed. It was only by a conscious substitution of mechanical terms that I managed a first paragraph to this paper that did not attribute a ghost to the machine (a phrase first used by Ryle to describe the dualist picture of the mind within the body; 1949, p. 15). My instinct, like everyone else's, is to say that my computer "wouldn't let me" write something, or "didn't like" my sentence length, or "balked" at passive verbs, or "caught" my typing errors, or "suggested" a synonym. This is the language that my students use, and when I suggest a correction they will often tell me that the wording I have suggested is what they had at first, but their computer "didn't like it", and "wouldn't let them do it". When they do not know *why* they thought their wording was correct, they have no grounds for deciding whether it is or not, and much of the time they assume that the computer "knows better" than they do.

The problem with this is the idea that the computer knows anything at all. Rather than understanding the input or the output passing through it, a computer operates a formal system, "involving the automated manipulation of digital tokens according to rules" (Moody, 1993, p. 129). The acts of matching input to arrangements of tokens already held in memory, which produce the results we see in the spelling and grammar checkers, the thesaurus, and the various searches the computer enables us to do, are performed without reference to meaning. "One of the key features of a formal system," as Moody reminds us, "is just that *the rules for identifying, combining and manipulating tokens do not have to make any reference to any meanings assigned to them.*" (p. 49; his emphasis). Once you impute understanding to the computer, rather than thinking it is acting on reflexes it was programmed to have, it is a short step to thinking that it knows what you meant, or what you were trying to say. You do not ask yourself, then, what the programmer was trying to prevent or bring about, and why; you simply click on "change". For many of our students, as apparently for many publishing writers and their editors, the computer has acquired this kind of authority. It is tempting to speculate that it may even go beyond the kind of cultural authority held by a dictionary, to the natural authority our culture customarily imputes to science.

### **Spelling**

*Scared sites differed in their spiritual importance.*

*After frightening off the sheep shears the men returned to the dairy.*

*This is not the goal of individuation begin reached*

It is in this light, I think, that we should see the spelling errors which, rather than being kept in check by drafting on computers, actually proliferate in these conditions. There are all the homonyms that just "slip through": *there* for *their*, and *to* for *too*, *except* for *accept*, *know* for *no*. There are the words that look sufficiently alike, particularly to people who learned to read by the "look and say" technique, to be mistaken for each other: *were* for *where*, and *of* for *off*, *decent groups* for *descent groups*, *scared sites* for *sacred sites*, *begin* for *being*, and words from which endings have been omitted, often plural or possessive "s", verb inflections, or "er" as in *shearers*. There are the words that have the right root but the wrong form, as in the *dominate* male; and words with the right root but the wrong prefix, like *proscribe* for *prescribe*. (Bates, Bobrow and Weischedel (1993) identify these as belonging to a category of "ill-formedness that seem[s] particularly intractable [to successful programming] without a

strong model of pragmatic knowledge for proper understanding” (p. 29).) The student who expects that his spell-check will “catch” anything amiss excuses himself from proofreading by eye, and all of these go through to the keeper.

It is more difficult to know what was meant, however, when the misspelled word is not related to the target word but is actually supplied by the computer, precisely because it cannot know what the writer meant. The other day I typed “demotic” and the computer underlined it in red and suggested I substitute “demonic”; this is entertaining, but potentially harmful. Indeed, when I typed in “shearers”, above, it came up underlined in red, and the computer recommended “sharers”, “shirrs”, or “shiraz”. Opportunities for this sort of thing are multiplied, moreover, if the writer is not a good speller. If, for example, I type in “pertend”, when I meant “portend”, the spell-check offers me “pretend”, “pertained”, and “pertness” in that order. I am able to reject all of these, because I know what they mean; but students to whom some of the alternatives are unfamiliar will often accept that the computer probably knows best – either that it knows what they meant or that the word they typed in actually is spelled the way the computer seems to be telling them it is. Thus, one student began a sentence with “The decreased illegibility of Philipina women above the age of 25...” and another wrote that “Individual conciseness and adherence to the commandments of ‘the petty bourgeois morality’ were considered to render one unfit for a revolution.” This led their tutors to suggest that they were probably dyslexic.

Of course, the spell checker can be particularly unhelpful to the group of people who have most reason to rely on it, students who really are dyslexic; one of these wrote “Other facets of computer based technology are open to new and poetically disastrous problems”, the error occurring when he typed in “poetially” for “potentially”. Another wrote, “Through understanding, individuals free themselves from the domination of the unconscious, and consciousness and innocuousness merge.”

The marking comment on these is usually “word choice” rather than spelling, and they are regarded as more serious than spelling errors would be, for they put the students’ comprehension in doubt in a way that spelling errors do not. As Mina Shaughnessy says, “errors carry messages that students can’t afford to send” (1977, p. 85), and they can afford this message less than they could afford to reveal themselves simply as poor spellers. Of course, these errors could be avoided by using the dictionary, but if you think the spell-check knew what word you had in mind, there is no reason to go behind its back.

### **Word choice**

*One of the most notorious stories relating to David was the conflict he fought with the giant Goliath.*

*We would comply that the many different roles of a contemporary woman would need more than one person to accomplish.*

*Jane Austen is sarcastic on the subject of marriage.*

In the examples in the previous section, the students had not gone searching for a word but had just accepted a spelling. Often, though, they do want to see a choice of words, and go to the thesaurus. This is, perhaps, where the tools on the computer have seemed to offer the most amenity, and where the offer has proved most risky to our students. Students are drawn to the thesaurus both because they want to sound more sophisticated or more academic, and because they know they must not “quote too much”, and must find other words for the ideas they want to import from their reading. We require that they put things in “their own words”, but often they do not own the words they need. You have to understand something quite well before you have much choice about how to express it. It is natural to go to a thesaurus for a “synonym”, and because they believe that synonyms are interchangeable, they often look no further. This is unfortunate, because a commendable impulse to extend one’s vocabulary can result in a marker deciding the writer is illiterate (or irrecoverably addled). My favourite

example, from last year, was a sentence that began "We can diocese the meaning..." My first guess was that the writer had mistyped "discern", and the spell-check had changed it to "diocese"; but I was wrong. When I asked her where she had got this word, she could remember: she had wanted a better word than "see", monosyllabic and common as it was, and had looked it up in a thesaurus. "Diocese" (a Bishop's "See") was among the synonyms – why not?-- and struck her as the most high-sounding one.

I have seen considerable damage done by word substitution when the marker has thought the student knew what "her" or "his" word meant, because if that was the case, then the only conclusion possible was that s/he had not understood the reading or discussion in the subject. When a student takes out "famous" and puts in "notorious"; takes out "suggests" and puts in "recommends"; takes out "agrees" and puts in "complies"; takes out "humorous" and puts in "sarcastic"; as far as he is concerned, he has not changed the meaning, for these words are listed as synonyms in the thesaurus. Sometimes, indeed, the "synonyms" *are* interchangeable. My thesaurus, supplied by Word, offers as synonyms for "flowering", "peak, high point, acme, blossoming, pinnacle, zenith". If you replaced "zenith" with "flowering", in a sentence about cultural achievement, you would be all right; but if you replaced "flowering" with "zenith", in a sentence about a shrub, it would be odd.

The problem is not the fault of the thesaurus, of course, but of the students' understanding of what a thesaurus is; and the problem is not generated by computer thesauri (indeed, some of the synonyms quoted were found in books), but it is exacerbated by them. The proliferation of very weird vocabulary should alert us that we need to teach students about this, and also to let tutors know that the error here is not "word choice", if that implies a choice of meanings, for none has taken place. The student was hoping to achieve a change of register without a change of meaning, and has achieved neither the desired meaning nor the desired register, for a "wrong word" – even, or perhaps especially, an elegant one -- is not going to add elegance to a sentence.

### Grammar

One of the things that alerted me to this source of confusion, beginning about three years ago, was the arrival at my door of students wanting to know "What is the passive, and why is it an error?" Of course it is not an error, but an option, useful when one wants to focus attention on the recipient of an action or on the action itself, rather than the agent; useful, too, when one does not know the agent and wishes to disguise this fact. There is a cultural, or rather sub-cultural, preference for the active voice in the Humanities, as being stronger, more direct, and, even, more responsible (see, e.g., Strunk & White, 1979, pp. 18-19; Hay, Bochner, & Dungey, 1997, pp. 121- 122; Bate & Sharpe, 1990, p. 106). Particularly among North Americans, the active voice is thought indispensable to vigorous writing, the natural choice of a natural writer and a sort of verbal viagra for the rest of us. Presumably this was the cultural value behind the programming of grammar checking tools, but it puts science and social science students in an uncomfortable position, and Archaeology students have reasonably pointed out that they do not know who flaked the core or sucked the marrow they are writing about, and, as one said, it feels rather repetitive to begin each sentence with "A hominid"!

The grammar checker is, in fact, quite often not policing grammar at all, but rather recklessness – as when it objects to long sentences because they are long, not because they are wrong – or something the programmer regarded as infelicitous. The problem for students is that, if they have not had enough training in grammar to tell whether grammar is the reason for a wavy green line appearing under their words, they have no grounds for deciding whether there really is a problem, and if so, what kind of problem. At the same time, the tool's programming does not allow it to be consistent in recognising the grammar errors that students are most likely to make. In my experience, the five most common errors at university level are incomplete sentences (or "fragments"), run-on sentences (including "comma splices"), comma errors, subject-verb agreement errors, and apostrophe errors. Having noticed that my grammar checker, which came with Microsoft Word, was objecting to these only some of the time, I tried it out on sentences taken from my students' essays, and on variations of these that I

generated in the hope of working out how the machinery recognised or failed to recognise an error.

### **Incomplete Sentences ("fragments")**

The grammar checker identified the following sentences as fragments:

- If you don't go.
- Because he did not know how.
- Due to the fact that he did not know how.
- Although he did not know how.

This suggested that it had been programmed to identify subordinating conjunctions (but not coordinating ones, for when I started the last utterance with "and", "but", or "so", there was no reaction). On the other hand, it made no objection to

- Though he did not know how.

-- so my guess cannot have been quite right.

Other fragments to which the grammar checker made no objection included:

- That he did not know how.
- Despite he did not know how.

However, when I rephrased this as

- Despite his lack of knowledge.

-- the grammar checker identified it as a fragment. This made me wonder whether it was unable to recognise fragments if they had verbs in them (apart from those that started with the flagged conjunctions). This seemed like a promising theory when I tried the following fragments, which the grammar checker did not identify as fragments:

- Whether you want to or not.
- Which leads us to ask about the date.
- The type of remains being examined.
- The type of remains being animal in origin.
- Having given up in despair.
- Realizing that her dream was never going to come to fruition.
- The question to be asked.

Active verbs, passives, participles, and infinitives all got through, which suggested that anything verby, whether a full verb or not, would qualify the utterance as a sentence. However, the next example was identified as a fragment, although it did have a verb:

- The type of remains, the type of site, and the date at which the remains were deposited.

Moreover, the next one, which lacked anything remotely verby, got past the grammar checker:

- The towns and villages around.

Finally, I tried one which was not identified as a fragment, but the spell-check helpfully suggested that I ought to have written "knew" where I had "new"! –

- The prince being new to his role.

As it pointed out, "knew" and "new" are "commonly confused words."

### **Run-on Sentences (Including "Comma Splices")**

Having failed to find the key to the grammar checker's reaction to incomplete sentences, I moved on to run-ons, and here its performance was, at first, encouraging. It identified the following examples as having something wrong with their "comma use":

- He married for love, she married for money.
- The kingdom was well governed, its officers were not corrupt.

However, when I inserted a word that should not have solved the problem, the grammar checker was satisfied:

- The kingdom was well governed, then its officers were not corrupt.

Moreover, when I removed the comma, the grammar checker stopped complaining:

- He married for love she married for money.
- The kingdom was well governed its officers were not corrupt.

I concluded that it had not been programmed to recognise run-on sentences.

### **Comma Errors**

Evidently, the grammar checker did "know" something about commas, but here again, the results were not going to help our students with many of their most common comma errors, for all of the following passed without comment:

- They used tools of bone stone and wood.
- Living in caves and rock shelters overlooking the lake they got protection and safety.
- The author a former soldier makes some acute observations.
- The author, a former soldier makes some acute observations.

Only this example earned the wavy green line and the comment "comma use":

- The author a former soldier, makes some acute observations.

### **Subject-verb Agreement**

Here, too, some errors are identified, such as:

- Results suggests widespread confusion.
- He focus on development.
- Research have focussed on development.
- The research and the support has focussed on development.
- Development earn funds.

However, the following were not identified as errors:

- Research focus on development.
- Research and support has focussed on development.
- Research and development earns funds.

Moreover, the checker identified as a subject-verb agreement error something that was not:

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Rules which experience tells us that students often find confusing...

Here, the checker suggested "those students" or "that student".

Again, it is difficult to guess how the grammar checker had been programmed with respect to this area; but, as with fragments and commas, it would give students the impression that it did know about this type of error, and might therefore be expected to monitor its appearance in their work. The same is true of the last error on my list, and here, too, the offer is misleading:

### **Apostrophes**

The grammar checker correctly found fault with the following:

- The government tried to hide it's corruption. (This was flagged as "commonly confused words" and the suggested correction was "its".)
- The authors arguments are not convincing. (This was flagged as "possessive use" and the suggested correction was "author's" or "authors' ".)

However, the checker had no complaint about these:

- The authors' did not agree.
- The author's did not agree.

### **Other Errors**

Apart from the big five, there are other types of errors that we often see in our students' work, and the grammar checker did not identify as errors the following constructions commonly written by NESB students:

- He was prevented to be king.
- He asked what is the time.
- I do not know why must I go.

### **Creating Errors**

Finally, as with spelling and word choice, the computer may object to a correct construction and offer something incorrect instead, as in this bizarre offering contributed by a colleague, who had typed:

- I have also been approached by Graduate School of Education staff to supervise and support research of visiting scholars.

Her grammar checker preferred this:

- Graduate School of Education staff to supervise and support research of visiting scholars has also approached me.

Presumably, it was trying to help her avoid a passive construction, at any cost!

### **Drafting**

In other ways, too, the reliance on computers has resulted in a loss of skills that are important to the writing process. The ease of drafting and revising on the computer means that many students put their essays together without ever looking at more than one page at a time, as that is all the screen can show them. When they get complaints about the structure of their argument, they are surprised at my suggestion that they print off a draft so they can see its structure, and then, if necessary, cut it up and reassemble it by hand before going back to the

computer to rearrange the text. The best technique I know for dealing with problems of text structure is Clanchy and Ballard's suggestion that the writer summarise each paragraph in a sentence to produce an outline of the argument, and then consider whether it needs weeding, reordering, and/or more explicit signposting (1991, p. 61). This is much easier to do with paper, in the margins of the draft. Students can easily print out their work; but often it has not occurred to them to do so, and they are surprised to hear that I use something as low-tech as sticky tape.

### **Finding Reading**

The final area in which I see a loss of skills resulting from reliance on computers is the activity of looking for reading on an essay topic. When students tell me that they cannot find more than a few things to read, I ask them how they have gone about looking, and in every case they have typed key words or subject headings into the library catalogue and assumed that the references it produced were all it had on the topic. None of them has thought of following up the references in the core reading they began with, then following the references in those works, and so on through the literature. To find out more about this, I arranged to take tutorials with a first-year Linguistics class last year, at the point when they were about to undertake a literature search for a research essay. I chose one of their topics, went to the library, and tried the key words method, which produced a few references, only three of which turned out to be of use. Then I tried the method of following up the references in the textbook chapter the students would have read, and my search produced over a hundred readings. Not only were they relevant, but they referred to one another; this method allows us to see readings as discussion in a discipline, rather than as isolated articles. When I took the tutorials, however, and asked the students which method they would have tried, only four out of the twenty-eight students would have followed the trail of references. I think this skill is being lost because tutors and perhaps librarians assume that students have it when they come from school, so the research skills they will need are the skills of handling the electronic searching tools available in the university library; these then become the ways of finding reading that the students know about, and they are unaware that there are other ways to do it.

### **Implications For Our Teaching**

Each of these problems, by itself, is merely irritating, but as a cluster they suggest that we would do well to consider what students need to know about how computers work and what effects their computer use may be having on their work. There is a sense, perhaps, in which a computer can be said to "know" something -- it has ways of drawing upon the information in its memory to produce utterances -- and it can even "learn" in the sense of comparing new instances of data with ones it has been given previously, and suggesting solutions to problems on the basis of such comparisons. It is not, however, equipped to do more than its programmers have foreseen and included in its instructions. It can do more than a person, in the sense that it can do it faster; but it can do less, in the sense that it cannot call upon an understanding of context to eliminate ambiguity and recognise all variations on a pattern. As Gerstl puts it (1996, p. 185), "...the interface between discourse semantics and world knowledge needs to be explicitly stated. Despite a lot of activity in this area there is still no systematic way of coordinating these two knowledge sources". One of his examples is the sentence "Mary turned right and John left", in which there is no way of knowing, short of context, whether "left" is a verb or an adverb.

Not only is it limited in these ways, but it is also limited by the assumptions and even the tastes of the people who have programmed it, as we see with the way in which the grammar checker flags the passive. It seems that users are not always aware of this, perhaps because they do not associate authorship with machinery. Pepi and Sheurman observed this when they asked a student about the source of some of her information: who said it and where did that person come from? "I got it off the Internet" was all the answer they could get; "To this student, the source of information was the Internet itself, not a human being with a particular perspective on a specific issue" (1996, p. 233). This is a familiar problem to teachers, and there are now many materials designed to help students evaluate the sources they find in

cyberspace. But if students do not ask themselves who put a piece of information on the Net, how much less likely are they to ask who wrote their grammar checker?

We can, at least, remind them that somebody wrote it, and that what it can do depends entirely on what it was told. We can point out that behind the language that personalises the operations of the machine is simply that, a machine, whose operations can more accurately if less interestingly be described in mechanical terms alone:

A dictionary is supplied with the word processor package and an option in the program allows the words in the whole document or a section of the document to be compared with the words in the dictionary. Any words which do not occur in the dictionary are highlighted as possible errors in order that the user can retype if necessary (Ford, Ford, Holman, & Woodroffe, 1991, p. 107).

It is matching that occurs in the spell-check, in the grammar checker, and in the literature search mechanism -- not thinking, let alone understanding what we meant. The problem with relying on the "ghost in the machine" is that it is indeed a ghost, not in the German sense of *geist* (i.e., spirit), which informs the phrase from philosophy, but in the sense that it is dead. The programmer cannot follow the program into the machine and pop up when needed to sort out the user's problems. Thus, Raj Reddy is, I think, quite wrong when he enthuses (1996, p. 97): "The great Chinese philosopher Kuan-Tzu once said: 'If you give a fish to a man, you will feed him for a day. If you give him a fishing rod, you will feed him for life.'" The version I am aware of, and which I think we must insist upon, is "If you *teach* him to fish, he will eat for a lifetime."

### **How?**

When we teach in the one-to-one mode, we can take a piecemeal approach, dealing with each kind of problem as it arises with particular students, e.g.:

- We can highlight spelling mistakes for students who do not proofread because they think their spell-check has done it for them: this sometimes has a galvanising effect on writers who cannot see why they are losing marks for "expression".
- We can talk to them about the differences between errors that violate rules and expressions that violate subcultural expectations -- and the grey areas where there are options, rather than rule-based decisions to be made.
- We can sit down with students, asking them what their sources' wording means until they find that they do have words of their own, or more of their own than they believed they had.
- We can cut up their drafts, spread them on the floor, and stand by with sticky tape.
- We can go through their readings together and show them how to follow a trail of references.

If we are teaching courses in academic writing, on the other hand, perhaps we should raise these matters together, and talk about them as a package of potential hazards of misunderstanding the workings and the capabilities of the technology. Similarly, if we put up websites offering advice on academic writing, as many of us now do, the topic of hazards might be discussed and linked with examples of each of the things I have discussed. It may, indeed, be advisable to try to raise awareness of this package of hazards among teaching staff in the disciplines, as subjects are increasingly being offered online. We can only spot this sort of problem if the students show their work to us; but students who do not come into the university may be less likely to consult us (about two-thirds of my students each year come without referral, because they have heard on the grapevine that it is likely to be beneficial;

when students do not meet, the grapevine may wither away). In these circumstances it is more important that tutors and students be alerted to the types of errors that may be tolerated, or even generated, by the technology they are inclined to rely upon.

### References

- Bate, D. & Sharpe, P. (1996). *Writer's handbook for university students* (Second Edition). Sydney: Harcourt Brace.
- Bates, M., Bobrow, R. & Weishedel, R. (1993). Critical challenges for natural language processing. In M. Bates & R. Weishedel (Eds.), *Challenges in natural language processing* (pp. 3-36). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clanchy, J. & Ballard, B. (1991). *Essay writing for students: A practical guide*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Ford, N., Ford, J., Holman, D., & Woodroffe, M. (1991). *Computers and computer applications: An introduction for the 1990s*. London: Ellis Horwood.
- Gerstl, P. (1995). Word meaning between lexical and conceptual structure. In P. Saint-Dizier & E. Viegas (Eds.), *Computational lexical semantics* (pp. 185-206). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hay, I., Bochner, D., & Dungey, C. (1997). *Making the grade*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Moody, T. (1993). *Philosophy and artificial intelligence*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Pepi, C. & Scheurman, G. (1996). The emperor's new computer: A critical look at our appetite for computer technology. *Journal of Teacher Education* 47 (3), 229-236.
- Reddy, R. (1996). The challenge of artificial intelligence. *Computer*, 29 (10), 86-98.
- Ryle, G. (1949). *The concept of mind*. London: Hutchinson.
- Shaughnessy, M. (1977). *Errors and expectations --a guide for the teacher of basic writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strunk, W., Jr. & White, E. (1979). *The elements of style*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. New York: Macmillan.

## CONTEXTUALISING CITATION BEHAVIOUR: CHINESE GRADUATE STUDENTS' THESIS WRITING<sup>1</sup>

Honglin Chen  
Institute for Education  
La Trobe University, Bundoora

*Some researchers hold that there exists a Chinese way of academic writing. A common complaint is that Chinese students tend to restrict or confine their ideas to those provided in various sources. As a consequence, their writing appears to be over-reliant on the reference texts and to lack critical analysis and interpretation. The difficulties that Chinese students have in citations have been interpreted as a disposition shaped by cultural ideology and Chinese rhetorical conventions. In this paper I argue that this explanation is simplistic and reductionist. Importantly, it neglects the agency of a writer in the discourse construction. It is proposed that the limitation of this interpretation can be redressed by adopting a social and cognitive view of context and through an examination of students' ways of knowing. One case study is selected to provide an illustration of the method I have devised for examining Chinese students' citation behaviour. The findings suggest this approach enriches our understanding of the meaning making process of the students during the citation process and affords insight into the sources of confusion.*

### **Introduction**

This paper is part of a larger study that is seeking to examine how a group of Chinese postgraduate students in a Chinese university context make meaning of an important academic activity – citations – when they are writing their Masters theses for an Australian degree. The research started with my interest in the claims made about the difficulties that Chinese students have in citing other people's work in academic writing (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Matalene, 1985). A common complaint from these researchers is that Chinese students tend to restrict or confine their ideas to those provided in various sources. As a consequence, their writing appears to over-rely on the reference texts, and to lack critical analysis and interpretation.

The problems have been interpreted as a manifestation of a cultural disposition. Kaplan (1966) and Scollon (1991) claim that the cultural disposition is developed because of students' adherence to Chinese cultural rhetorical conventions. This line of thought underlines the theoretical assumptions of contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996), a field of study that aims to identify the different cultural rhetorical value systems through comparisons and to use the results to account for cross-cultural differences in writing. However, the attempt to establish a link between students' cultural conventions and the effects on their writing has been criticised on two fronts. Zamel (1997) suggests that such an approach tends to lead to a reductionist perspective and deficit orientation as to what students can accomplish in writing. Apart from that, Raimes (1998) asserts that the approach stereotypes students of the same linguistic background regardless of the contexts and prior experiences.

---

<sup>1</sup> This research is funded by the OPRS and LTUPRS scholarships provided by Australian Federal Government and La Trobe University.

Different from the approach taken by contrastive rhetoric, recent studies in sociolinguistics show how social-cultural knowledge, particularly the culturally constructed perception of self (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Scollon, 1994), have an impact on Asian students' interpersonal orientation in a text. These researchers hold that the original, creative, rational and individual authorial self expected in English academic writing is likely to be in conflict with the Oriental perception of self. While these studies represent a significant progress in the research focus from structure to text orientation, the claim about the relationship between text and context is problematic in several ways.

First, there is a mismatch between the two concepts: writer identity and social subject. According to Price (1999), the two are different terms. He refers to the former as "knowing agents that have intentions, pragmatically make meaning" and the latter as the agent characterised by culturally formed positions (p. 590). By equating the culturally constructed self with the intentional agent, the approach overlooks the agency of the knowing subject in the discourse construction. Second, the relationship between text and context described by Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999), Ramanathan & Kaplan, (1996) and Scollon (1994) is narrowly defined as being a fixed one-to-one relationship. This conceptualisation portrays students as autonomous beings who are bound by cultural constraints and will automatically reproduce the social cultural knowledge given by their specific cultural context. Third, this approach ignores the heterogeneity of Chinese cultural context. Bloch and Chi (1995) have shown that critical thinking played a great role as early as the 11th and 12th centuries. In this respect, Chinese rhetoric is not monolithic but is "as complex and ever changing as is Western rhetoric" (Bloch and Chi, 1995, p. 271)

The notion of context is redefined by current scholarship in genre theory (Paltridge, 1997; Swales, 1990). In contrast to sociolinguists who regard macro cultural context as the key factor accounting for the sources of confusion, genre theorists introduce a micro level concept of context – discourse community -- and argue that academic writing is shaped by values and conventions of a discourse community (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Swales, 1990). Based on this theoretical framework, Swales (1990) asserts that the difficulties that international students have can be understood as stemming from the clashes between different genres. Therefore, knowledge of academic genres will enable the students to shape their writing according to discourse conventions and is necessary for success in higher institutions. This is exemplified by Swales' (1990) suggestion of four-move structure in writing an introduction to research articles. While genre theory makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the role of the immediate discourse community in academic discourse, the approach takes discourse conventions as surface features of writing. Academic writing under this conceptualisation would merely be "a matter of pouring one's thoughts into the 'formal shells'" (Bizzell, 1986, p. 295). Therefore, the approach could not provide a satisfactory explanation of the sources of confusion.

The contrastive rhetoric, sociolinguistic and genre approaches reviewed above contribute to our understanding of the cultural contextualisation of language. Each approach gives us a valuable partial picture of the sources of the confusion that Chinese students might have during the citation process. However, these studies take culture as tangible context which physically surrounds the text and hold a deterministic view that cultural ideology is a pre-existing state of the students and that they will act out the rules and conventions automatically. As Street (1993, p. 23) argues that culture is not "a thing" but "a verb", the concept of context should not be regarded as a static and reified entity but a social and cognitive construct which is fluctuating.

On account of the gaps identified above, a more contextualised approach is clearly needed to best account for what it is that leads the students to cite in the way they do. It is hoped that the proposed approach could shed light on the possible sources of confusion that might lead to the citation behaviour of the students in my study. The theoretical background to the study is based on Fairclough's (1989; 1992) framework of discourse production and interpretation, Akman's (2000) concept of intrinsic context and Malrieu's (1999) conceptualisation of human

consciousness as an aspect of context. The following section is a discussion of the theoretical underpinning of my study.

### **Background**

#### *Context as a social and cognitive construct*

The importance of contextual information has been addressed by a number of researchers (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 1996, 1999; Halliday, 1979; 1994). However, it is the work of Fairclough (1989; 1992), Akman (2000) and Malrieu (1999), which have clarified my understanding of the concept of context.

Fairclough (1989; 1992) embeds text in the processes of production and interpretation which create it, and the socio-historical conditions within which the participants are situated. Within this theoretical framework, context is infused with two layers of meaning, social conditions of production and process of production and interpretation. The two aspects of context are parallel to Halliday's (1979; 1994) concepts of 'context of culture' and 'context of situation'. This conceptualisation expands the notion of context to include "members' resources" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 24) as another aspect of context. In recognising "members' resources" as the means to realise the social-cultural context, Fairclough (1989; 1992) shows a combination of socio-cognitive and socio-cultural dimensions of language which views the construction of text as a product of both individual and social processes.

A concentration on members' resources is reflected in Akman's (2000) work in which he introduces the notion of intrinsic context. Considering the intrinsic nature of context is an attempt to capture the information available to a process and stress the "experiential nature" of context (Akman, 2000, p. 748). This is shown by his statement that "experience may be a comprehensive synonym for 'total context'" (Akman, 2000, p. 748). The sentence implies that context is a social and cognitive construct, shaped and obtained by an individual growing up within the confines of a society.

Both Fairclough (1989; 1992) and Akman (2000) emphasise human resources as one aspect of context, but it is Malrieu's (1999) work within cognitive semantics, which specifies how discourse is instantiated through human consciousness. In his book, he elaborated the relationship between subjective experience and cultural knowledge and argues that subjective appropriation (or in other words, interpretation) is the key to the mental ideological representation. The idea of reality being constructed by virtue of its interpretation is inherent in the assumptions of Pierce's social constructive semiotic view of context (Witte, 1992) and a person-based cultural psychology (Lucariello, 1995). By suggesting that context is construed by the individual and that subjectivity is "a filter operating on cultural knowledge" (Malrieu, 1999, p. 6), these studies contribute greatly to the conceptualisation of the relationship between mind, culture and language and provide a theoretical basis for my study.

### **Ways of knowing**

Recognising the subjective and evaluative nature of context is what leads me to concern myself with ways of knowing as a crucial factor in citation behaviour. As interpretation and evaluation are the means by which context is constructed, the study of meaningful frames by which students construe citations and literature reviews will shed insight into the process of interpretation and production of the citation behaviour and will consequently illuminate the issue of the sources of confusion.

Empirical studies of ways of knowing can be seen as part of the study of the students' epistemological beliefs in cognitive psychology, notably by the work of Perry (1970), Belenky et al. (1986) and Magolda (1992). Perry's (1970) pioneering work examined male students' beliefs about knowledge through college years at Harvard University. He noted that most college students entered college with a dualistic view of knowledge as consisting of unchanging and absolute facts, passed down by teachers. When they entered senior years, their

perspective towards knowledge developed as encompassing a more complex conceptual structure, which is relative in nature.

This hierarchical model of intellectual development is re-evaluated by Belenky et al. (1986). Their study analysed women's ways of knowing from diverse backgrounds. The study uncovers five ways of knowing from which women perceive reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge and authority. These five ways of knowing include silence (no voice), received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing and constructed knowing. Although I do not agree with their idea to put learners into a fixed category, the study reveals the obstacles that many women experienced in their intellectual development and their relationship to authority.

Magolda's (1992) study of students' epistemic beliefs is built on the assumption that students' ways of knowing are a socially constructed entity, that is, they make sense of the meaning of their experiences according to frames of references in various contexts. Based on this assumption, she conducted an in-depth investigation of students' beliefs about knowledge through an exploration of students' attitudes towards the role of learner, the role of peers, the role of instructor and the role of evaluation. The study detects a hierarchical reasoning pattern which progresses from a simplistic view of knowledge as being absolute and imparted by authorities, to a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of different knowledge claims, and the need to construct personal interpretations based on evidence and analytic reasoning.

These studies of ways of knowing regard the student as a knower, situate learning within the students' own experience and define learning as constructing meaning through cognitive acts. The theoretical assumptions are in line with the socio-cognitive and socio-cultural aspects of context reviewed earlier, therefore, the studies lend strong support to the proposed approach which aims to contextualise citation behaviour through the lens of ways of knowing.

### **Research methods**

The paper draws on data collected from a group of Chinese postgraduate students who enrolled in an off-shore Master of Arts program in Education of an Australian institution in a university in the south-west of China. The program involved a three-year course component which was designed according to both Chinese and Australian higher education systems. The students were required to spend two years completing all the courses and one year writing minor theses in English which were submitted to the Australian institution. All the courses were taught by four Australian staff, of whom two were retired former lecturers based in China and the other two were current lecturers from the Australian institution who taught three intensive courses.

Two intakes of students have graduated from the program. The course structure of the current intake has changed to a two-year program based on the course requirement of the Australian institution. It is the second intake on which my study was based. Data were collected when the students were writing their research proposals and after they had received some training on the genre of academic writing before the data collection and had experience in essay writing.

The research methods are a hybrid model of questionnaire, in-depth interviews and follow-up email interviews in a three-stage procedure. In the first stage, questionnaires were distributed to all the participants to select key informants for the interviews. In the questionnaire, the students were asked to provide brief answers to the questions concerning their writing experience, their perceptions of the use of citations and the writing of literature reviews.

The second stage involves in-depth interviews with selected participants. The interviews, which were semi-structured, covered issues of their previous writing experience in English, their understanding of the use of citations and the writing of literature reviews, their attitudes towards themselves as writers and towards the role of a supervisor and the approaches they adopted in the citation process. These issues were based on Magolda's (1992) five domains of

learning, but with some items added to meet the context of the study. The interviews were carried out in English given the fact that the content of the interviews concerns academic writing in English. Although the participants are all experienced lecturers in English, as foreign language speakers spoken mistakes were unavoidable. As the purpose of the interviews was not directed towards linguistic analysis, the mistakes they made did not influence the results of the study and were kept in the transcripts.

The final stage involved follow-up email interviews with the aim of examining whether certain attitudes changed as they progressed through thesis writing stages. The following case study of Joy is selected to illustrate how the student approaches knowing during the citation process and how the examination of students' ways of knowing can shed insight into the sources of confusion.

### **Case study**

Joy has been a university lecturer for seven years. Her major responsibility as a lecturer is to teach Intensive Reading to the first and second year English-major students. She did not begin to write in English until she entered the university as an English-major student. In the writing class, she was asked to write argumentative and narrative texts. However, she was often just "given a title and offered little advice from both Chinese and foreign teachers" (Questionnaire, Q 3). The instruction she got from the Chinese teachers was to follow the "Introduction-Body-Conclusion" pattern (Questionnaire, Q 2), a formula stipulated in most of the English writing handbooks in China. She received some training from the foreign teachers who "preferred to let us write narratives and we're much freer in their class" (Questionnaire, Q2). The following sections demonstrate her ways of knowing towards citations.

### **Conception of writing in English**

Joy conceived English writing at university level as an exercise which was meant to pass examinations. This practice denied her the pleasure of writing, an exciting experience that her Chinese writing would promise.

J: I should say that I have very limited writing experience. I mean what I can remember is write for examinations, or I practice writing, the only purpose is to pass the examination, I never enjoy the beauty, or the excited experience, or a kind of deep feeling from writing English. Even though I prefer writing in Chinese, I am good at Chinese writing, and personally, but I never have the same experience in writing English (Interview, Lines 10-14).

When Joy became a fourth-year student, she was asked to write comments on literary works, but again the writing was directed at getting a grade. Apart from the assigned writing, Joy wrote diaries in English, a habit transferred from her Chinese writing practice. The content of the writing was confined to mere descriptions of routine activities. The inherent idea is that writing is a means to practice language, a common conception held by almost all the participants. However, this conception fails to give her a sense of satisfaction that she could get from diary writing in Chinese.

J: ... Another point, another experience, I can remember is that I want to improve my English, so I keep writing English everyday, maybe for one year, but it's very boring, it is a kind of life story, what time I get up, what time I did everyday, that kind of diary for one year. So they are the two kinds of writing I can remember in the university. After we learn literature, we write something about literature, but that's for teachers' grades or comments. I cannot have a real appreciation, the real happiness in writing English (Interview, Lines 15-20).

(...)

J: Writing Chinese I can recreate myself, I can find myself, I can help myself develop or grow up. So I wrote a lot of diaries, and also that's a means of improving my Chinese. But it is a part of my purpose. For English, that's the only purpose, improving English (Interview, Lines 24-27).

The extracts taken reflect both the conception and the curriculum design of English writing in the Chinese EFL classroom. The conception that English writing is a supplementary means of language reinforcement hampers Joy's construction of her identity as a writer. The writing curriculum, which is designed to practice language points and pass examinations rather than to communicate, is another factor contributing to Joy's dilemma in representing herself in writing in English. This conception of writing in English is recurrent in her perception of thesis writing.

J: Thesis writing seems only an exercise for improving our writing skill, because the findings we obtain after doing the research is of no importance, for us, or for others, or for the society. It's not productive (Questionnaire, Q21).

### **Conception of citations**

As has been shown above, the curriculum design in Chinese EFL writing class is both exam- and grammar-oriented. The design offers Joy no instructions on citation practices and allows her little experience in using and practising referencing. Consequently, what Joy had experienced before she was enrolled in the MA program was just quotations of "some famous scholars' words, [and] remarks" (Interview, Line 202). In citing other people's works, she was not asked to list a bibliography for the references that had been used. What she did was 'copying' other's works without acknowledging the sources.

*I: ... do you perceive any differences between Chinese ways of citing other people's work and your way of citing other people's work now?*

J: Quite different. In citing other people's words or points in English, what I am doing is to respect other people's research, to be honest. But when I write in Chinese, nobody minds where this idea comes from, so I copied a lot. I took them for granted, and I used them,

*I: Without acknowledging them?*

J: Yes, and nobody cares, and I don't care either (Interview, Lines 223-231).

Because of her experience of citing in Chinese, Joy later developed the understanding that citations are used to represent the knowledge objectively and that she should be honest during the citation process in order to show a due respect to the cited author.

J: ... As for citations, first, it is important to try to be objective when we cite other people's works. Second, as a Chinese, I found that we are used to citing other's words without acknowledging that. This is also a big difference between Chinese and Western academic culture. Our education seldom focuses on the training on citations. But my American students (of Chinese) told me that they were trained on the issue of citations since their childhood in their primary school (E-mail interview, August 17, 2000, Lines 60-65).

Joy's shift of understanding from 'copying without acknowledgment' to 'objective representation' is a breakthrough for her in acculturating into western academic community. The development illustrates the discourse communities, which nurture her ways of knowing towards citations. This is an illustration of individuals' awareness of culture-embeddedness of ways of knowing and willingness to explore alternative epistemology endorsed by the discourse community (Goldberger, 1996).

However, her conception of citations is narrow to the extent that she could just conceive citations as having perfunctory functions. This is reflected in the following comments on citation practices:

J: ...For using citations, there does exist a “bad cycle”, I mean, everybody cites, some responsible, some not; overstressing citation also arises a dead and stiff model, just like part of “Ba Gu Wen” in Chinese, both advantage and disadvantage exist (Questionnaire, Q21).

J: ... the third purpose is, I don't think it is necessary, but it will make my research more like a research, it is not isolated, but I doubt it is necessary because Michael gave us this model, I just follow it... (Interview, Lines 113-115)

### **Conceptualisation of the literature review**

At the proposal writing stage, Joy conceptualised literature review writing as a knowledge-getting process which will enable her and her reader to understand the topic under study. Noteworthy is that in the interview, she used the metaphor ‘ladder’, which vividly portrays her conception of literature review writing.

J: ... The first purpose is to help my readers, or to help the supervisors or classmates or the person who is going to read my thesis to understand what I am going to write, what big field I am involved in. This is the first purpose. The second purpose is that I think it is a kind of ladder I built it from the broader area to the top. So I make ‘communicative competence’ and ‘pragmatic competence’ as the base, that means I want to help my learners to improve ‘pragmatic competence’. That is also the goal of learning English. I made it as the base and because ‘complaining’ and ‘speech act theory’ and ‘pragmatic’ is a kind of science. So I have to give some related theory in this area. That's the reason why I focus on ‘speech act theory’. After reading this part, I believe my readers will know why I, or what is the meaning of ‘complaining’, it is one speech act. And then I go, I am climbing, I mean, ‘speech act’, that's the characteristics of ‘complaining’, so it's very important in this research. And there are many other characteristics, such as, ‘politeness’, that's also part of speech act theory here. And then general principle of ‘conversation’, that's also the base for my research, that's the pragmatic theory, the theory. And the last part, I think, I came to the point, I came to the top ... (Interview, Lines 93-108)

The underlying meaning of ‘ladder’ is apparent from the above quote. The metaphor symbolises the route to knowledge with each stair leading her to a deeper understanding of the topic.

*I: So the purpose of the literature review is just like, serving, like the basis for your, for your research. Is that right?*

J: Sometimes, I think it's not only base, it is not only a basis, maybe sometimes I think it's a purpose. I mean if you achieve, if you finish literature review, it's almost to the end of your research. You achieved a lot (Interview, Lines 169-173).

However, in the e-mail interview which was carried out after she submitted her thesis, she demonstrated a shift of understanding of the functions of literature reviews.

J: As for literature review, logic and whole are the most important. Each section in the literature review part should not be separated, but be connected by your argument. That is, once the area, topic, or problem of the research has been chosen and defined, the research needs to be placed in a broader context by

reviewing the related literature (E-mail interview, August 17 2000, Lines 61-64).

The shift reflects Joy's interpretations of the task of literature review writing at different stages. The effect of task interpretation on her way of knowing recalls Flower et al.'s (1990) study of reading-to-write, in which they suggest that the definition of a rhetorical situation has a strong effect on citation behaviour. In Joy's case, the literature review helped her to find and refine the topic at the thesis proposal stage when the first interview was carried out. At the final stage of thesis writing, the literature review had a new function which was to embed the research within a broader context. The above quotes show how complex the formation of ways of knowing is and how this is linked to the citation process.

### **The role of a writer**

In a paramount study of writer identity, Ivanic (1998) argues that a writer's identity is composed of four interrelated parts, namely, autobiographical self, discoursal self, authorial self and possibilities for selfhood. The aspects of writer identity throw light on Joy's dilemma in creating her identity in English writing. In Chinese writing, her authorial self emerges easily in writing because she has no difficulty in constructing her discoursal self in Chinese. Nevertheless, in English writing, the difficulty in representing her discoursal self poses a big challenge to the construction of her authorial self. This is corroborated by the following quotes:

*I: When you were writing your proposal, what difficulties have you ever encountered?*

*J: Language problem. I have some excellent points, but I don't think I can use English to express myself. Maybe to certain degree, I can never express fully what I want to express. I am not so competent in using English to express what I really want to express. The English language can express some of my ideas. That's the trouble, that's the difficulty I always face in thesis writing or in paper writing.*

*I: How do you overcome this problem?*

*J: Try my best, and excuse myself when I write in English. I mean if that's the English I can use, that's enough. But I always think that they cannot represent myself, they cannot represent my identity, my character and my feelings (Interview, Lines 68-77).*

The relationship between an EFL writers' discoursal self and authorial self identified here lends strong support to Ivanic's (1995; 1998) study on the writer's identity, which in turn contributes to our understanding of EFL learners' difficulties in constructing their identity as writers in English writing and shed insight into the sources of confusion.

In addition to the language problem, Joy's belief in citations as objective representation of truth impinges on her perception of the role of a writer during the citation process. When attempting to be objective, she tried to suppress the self, "taking as impersonal a stance as possible toward the object" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 109). In the interview, she indicated that "it (literature review) limited my imagination, and I was controlled by the literature review, I don't have too much space to develop it" (Interview, Lines 105-106). The understanding of objective nature of citations is also echoed in her distinction between quotations and paraphrases. She felt that the former "look(s) more real" while the latter tends to be "more subjective" (Interview, Line 191).

Her understanding of objectivity and subjectivity reflects the eighteenth century Enlightenment dichotomy of mind and body. The dichotomy characterises the objectivity as the ability to argue dispassionately, the ability to analyse according to rules and procedures and a separation from feelings and emotions (Goldberger, 1996). This belief might have led to

## *Sources of Confusion*

Joy's misconception that the use of citations precludes the possibility to represent herself in writing.

### *Attitudes towards authority*

In terms of attitudes towards authority, Joy demonstrated a tendency to conform to the authority. Her belief in authority is reflected in her response to Question 11 of the questionnaire.

*I: When citing other people's ideas and theories, what positions, if any, do you usually take towards the cited materials?*

J: I always take what they said for granted; I regard myself inferior to them; I always appreciate what they've done; for those I don't agree with, I still think highly of them; I regard the published paper as a kind of authority (Questionnaire, Q 11)

In the interview, Joy demonstrated a unique perception of the role of a supervisor. She expected that her supervisor would provide reference materials for her while she was writing her thesis. This expectation is, however, conditioned by the material environment, that is, the library resources in her university.

*I: So in writing your thesis, what kind of help would you like to get from your supervisor?*

J: More materials.

*I: Getting from the supervisors?*

J: Yes.... And some good model of how to write this part and analyses why you think it is good, some evaluation of this part. That's enough (Interview, Lines 178-185)

Apart from providing reference materials, she expected that her supervisor could give her some critical comments. However, critical comments, in her sense, mean that supervisors should tell her directly whether she is on the right track. This conception again signals her conformity and dependence on the authority.

*I: Did you expect some critical comments on your thesis?*

J: That's what I expect, even I think it is cruel and embarrassed to hear that. But that's what I expect. But usually my supervisor do not do like that. The foreign supervisor does not prefer to do like that. But I, I just suppose that Chinese teachers,

*I: will do?*

J: will prefer to do this.

*I: will tell you whether you are doing the right thing or not?*

J: I think that Chinese teachers will say that this is not related to your topic, omit this part. But foreign teachers will say "that's OK", do what you want to do, "that's OK". But, to be frank, if you tell me the truth, the good truth, the helpful truth, I prefer to listen to the helpful truth. So they both have advantages and disadvantages (Interview, Lines 186-197).

Expecting the supervisor to tell the truth is reminiscent of absolute knowing identified by Perry (1970; 1988). Inherent in the absolute way of knowing is the expectation of a teacher's duty to "give students the truth, the right answers, in assimilable, graduate doses" (Perry, 1988, p. 152). This perspective reflects the social context in which Joy has grown up and been educated.

In spite of the fact that Joy's attitudes towards authority are more towards conformity, she demonstrates a capacity to think independently in the interview. When trying to be objective in citations, she claimed she was not objective enough due to the inaccessibility to the library resources.

J: I have the negative opinions about the literature review mainly because of our present situation – it is really impossible to obtain all (or most of) the relevant previous research information in the field which we are going to investigate, so the gap which we claim is too subjective. It seems that we claim there is a gap, the gap exists. That is the biggest problem for us to do a research in China. I just think real research does not mean that (E-mail interview, July 28, 2000, Lines 11-16).

The capacity to think critically is also reflected in her attitudes towards citations. This is shown in her critical comment concerning the generic model of thesis writing in the follow-up e-mail interview.

J: ...the fixed research genre (introduction-literature review-methodology-analysis and discussion-conclusion) kills our imagination in some extent and everyone follows the model. Why it is the only model for writing a research paper? These are what I felt about literature review when I was writing my research proposal (E-mail interview, August 17, 2000, Lines 35-38).

### **Citing strategies**

“Gist and list” (Flower et al., 1990, p. 43) can be said to be the strategy that Joy used during the citation process.

J: So first I finish reading all the materials I got. I think that's because, when I, when I went to collect the materials, I narrow it down, I mean, I collected materials about this topic. So after I getting the materials, after I finish reading them, I just listed all the points I think they are related to each other, or they are useful. I, I listed all the points, such as communicative competence, speech act theory, I just listed all the points and then I go back to my materials, and find the most important and the most useful theory or materials I listed, and then I wrote them down (Interview, Lines 143-149).

However, just wanting to get the knowledge, her approach to the literature review is “surface elaborative” (Biggs, 1988, p. 198).

*I: ... what makes you choose particular points in your literature review?*

J: Similar points or quite different points about the topic I am going to write about. If I got twenty, I will make a summary. I will list all the authors, and what they found. And similar ideas, I just conclude one point. If quite different, I will make a summary about the differences. Most, in my literature review, most are from books, from chapters from the books, not from the very refined research papers. So it is not difficult for me to get the point because usually there is a title such as speech act theory. Maybe there is fifty pages about the point, I can quickly get what I want, I do not want to go deeper, just get a common knowledge of this point (Interview, Lines 159-168).

The following extract shows again how the material environment, that is, the library resources have an impact on her approach to citations. In the interview, she told me that at times when she could not get enough references, she would try to make use of all the materials available and arrange them in a compact way in the writing.

J: If I have plenty of references, I will focus on all the points which are connected with my point, such as ‘complaining’. If I don't have many

references, I will put all the references I have in the citation part in my thesis writing. For example, I chose 'dictogloss' as my topic for the first time. Because the material for 'dictogloss' is so limited here, so I put all the information about the 'dictogloss' in my thesis writing, such as steps of the 'dictogloss', and the purposes of 'dictogloss', all the things about 'dictogloss'. I do not throw some away (Interview, Lines 81-87).

Noteworthy here is how an individual's ways of knowing are constrained by the availability of the library resources. The information uncovered here highlights the importance of taking a holistic perspective towards the Chinese students' citation behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

The case study demonstrates that in acculturating into the western academic community, the student becomes adept at some rules of the academic community, such as objectivity and critical thinking. However, her ways of knowing are conditioned by her previous experience in writing and the use of citations, her attitudes towards authority and herself as a writer and the local library resources. The study shows the complex nature of ways of knowing and citation behaviour and provides a rich picture of how the participant makes sense of the meaning of the citations and literature reviews. The ways of knowing uncovered here shed insight into the participant's interests, values, and practices and gives a dynamic view of the sources of confusion. The case study lends strong support to the argument that context is a social and cognitive construct and the findings resonate with Lemke's ecosocial perspective of learning, in which he holds that "our trajectories are unique and individual, but are also moulded by the social systems around us to conform to prevailing social types" (Lemke, 1997, p. 10).

Consideration of ways of knowing presented in this paper could have important pedagogical implications for the development of ESL students' academic literacy. As demonstrated in the case study, the student's approach to knowing reflects her previous writing experience as well as the beliefs and attitudes valued by her immediate community. However, the case study also demonstrates the student is aware that her way of knowing is embedded in a culture and, more importantly, that she is willing to explore an alternative way of knowing espoused by the western academic community. An important issue that emerged from the study is the necessity to hold a flexible, rather than a static, view of cultural ways of knowing. The need to adopt a dynamic perspective is underlined in Ivancic's (1998) study. She suggests that "people change their preferences as life experiences and values change, moving in and out of discourses according to particular demands of particular occasions for writing and particular readers" (p. 52). ESL teachers who appreciate this notion will work to identify the students' ways of knowing and seek to find the catalysts that might shift these. They will see the need to encourage these shifts as part of the language learning experience, rather than expecting the student to remain fixed in a culturally embedded perspective.

### **References**

- Akman, V. (2000). Rethinking context as a social construct. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(6), 743-759.
- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic books.
- Berkenkotter, C., & Huckin, T. N. (1993). Rethinking genre from a sociocognitive perspective. *Written Communication*, 10(4), 475-509.
- Biggs, J. (1988). Approaches to learning and essay writing. In R. R. Schmeck (Ed.), *Learning Strategies and Learning Styles* (pp. 185-228). New York: Plenum.

## Sources of Confusion

- Bizzell, P. (1986). What happens when basic writers come to college? *College Composition and Communication*, 37(3), 294-301.
- Bloch, J., & Chi, L. (1995). A comparison of the use of citations in Chinese and English academic discourse. In D. B. Belcher (Ed.), *Academic writing in a second language: essays on research and pedagogy* (pp. 231-274). Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second language writing*.: Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Flower, L., Stein, V., Ackerman, J., Kantz, M. J., McCormick, K., & Peck, W. C. (Eds.) (1990). *Reading-to-write: Exploring a cognitive and social process*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* ( 2nd ed.). London: Taylor & Francis.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *Discourse analysis: Theory and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Goldberger, N. R. (1996). Cultural imperatives and diversity in ways of knowing. In N. Goldberger, J. Tarule, B. Clinchy & M. Belenky (Eds.), *Knowledge, difference and power: Essays inspired by Womens' Ways of Knowing* (pp. 335-371). New York: Basic Books.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1979). *Language as social semiotic : The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Ivanic, R. (1995). Writer identity. *Prospect*, 10(1), 8-31.
- Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discursive construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.
- Lemke, J. L. (1997). Cognition, context, and learning: A social semiotic perspective. In D. Kirshner & A. Whitson (Eds.), *Situated cognition theory: Social, neurological, and semiotic perspectives* (pp. 37-55). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lucariello, J. (1995). Mind, culture, person: Elements in a cultural psychology. *Human Development*, 38, 2-18.
- Magolda, M. B. B. (1992). *Knowing and reasoning in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Malrieu, J. P. (1999). *Evaluative semantics: Cognition, language, and ideology*. London: Routledge.
- Matalene, C. (1985). Contrastive rhetoric: an American writing teacher in China. *College English*, 47(8), 789-808.
- Paltridge, B. (1997). *Genre, frames and writing in research settings*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Perry, W. (1988). Different worlds in the same classroom. In P. Ramsden (Ed.), *Improving learning: New perspectives* (pp. 145-161). London: Kogan Page.
- Perry, W. G. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Price, S. (1999). Critical discourse analysis: Discourse acquisition and discourse practices. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(3), 581-.
- Raimes, A. (1998). Teaching writing. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 18, 142-167.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Ramanathan, V., & Atkinson, D. (1999). Individualism, academic writing, and ESL writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(1), 45-75.
- Ramanathan, V., & Kaplan, R. (1996). Audience and voice in current L1 composition texts: some implication for ESL student writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 5(1), 21 - 34.
- Scollon, R. (1991). *Eight legs and one elbow: stance and structure in Chinese English compositions*. Paper presented at the Paper presented at the international reading association, North American Conference on Adult and Adolescent Literacy.
- Scollon, R. (1994). As a matter of fact: the changing ideology of authorship and responsibility in discourse. *World Englishes*, 13(1), 33-46.
- Street, B. (1993). Culture as a verb: Anthropological aspects of language and cultural processes. In D. Graddol & L. Thompson & M. Byram (Eds.), *Language and culture* (pp. 23-43). Clevedon: British Association for Applied Linguistics in association with Multilingual Matters.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Witte, S. P. (1992). Context, text, intertext: Towards a constructivist semiotic of writing. *Written Communication*, 9(2), 237-308.
- Zamel, V. (1997). Towards a model of transculturation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 341-352.

**DEVELOPING WEB-BASED TOOLS AND INSTRUCTION TO  
IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC WRITING AND USE OF  
REFERENCING CONVENTIONS OF INFORMATION  
TECHNOLOGY STUDENTS**

Rosemary Clerehan, Giselle Kett and Jill Turnbull  
Language and Learning Services, Monash University

*This paper reports on an analysis of referencing problems identified in a group of first-year Computer Science assignments. The paper highlights the most common sources of uncertainty and confusion in using appropriate referencing conventions for these students, and outlines how these problems have been addressed in the development of a web-based tutorial. The tutorial seeks to provide online learning support for interpreting an IT assignment topic, extracting information from sources, and integrating the material into a report with the support of online lexical tools. The project's origins lie in the evidence from previous years' experience that first-year students find this a particularly challenging task.*

**Introduction**

One of the most compelling explorations into academic literacy has been the research into the practices of academic citation, particularly over the last ten years since John Swales' *Genre Analysis* (1990). As Hyland (1999), one of the key researchers in the area, claims, differences in use of citation practices are integrally related to the particular kinds of knowledge construction academics are engaged in. These practices are embedded in, and representative of, "the epistemological and social conventions of their disciplines" (p. 341). The work of Myers (1990), Tadros (1993), Thomas and Hawes (1991) and Thompson and Ye (1991) has provided illumination about the way expert writers cite in different disciplines, and has drawn attention to the centrality of appropriate citation as a mark of membership of the discourse community. An awareness of citation patterns can help us assist our postgraduate students, for example, to notice how integral or sentence citation can be important in the early sections of a piece of work (such as this paper), but fades as the writer moves into his or her own work.

This is an insight for which the postgraduate will thank you profoundly and from which they will learn. What of the first-year student, fresh from school, and only barely aware - if at all - that there are different sections in research papers; that different citation styles exist; and, more abstractly, that knowledge is constituted differently in different disciplines? Many first-year students will only care about this when they find their approach in their first assignment does not seem to cut the mustard. As Hyland (1999) reports, the "soft" disciplines - such as Sociology and Applied Linguistics - tend to employ more citation and more "Discourse-activity" reporting verbs (eg, *discuss, hypothesise, state*), compared with the "hard" disciplines. Hard disciplines such as Engineering and Physics favour "Research-type" verbs (eg. *observe, show, calculate*), and are less likely to employ evaluation, whether positive or negative.

Relatively new fields such as Computer Science and Software Engineering remain relatively unexplored in this respect, so it is difficult to offer students - who may be confused anyway - clear guidance (Gollin, 1998). Research in the more practical areas of Information Technology too involves consultation of web sources, which may be refereed journal articles, e-zines produced by corporations or simply advertising material. If students learn from models, as we assume they do, then they are exposed to a dizzying array, the questionable

value of which may not be clear to them. Where they are required in their subjects to “evaluate” their sources, they may not be sure how to approach this, and lacking models in the texts themselves, may literally not have any idea how to integrate the sources into their own text.

### **Student Perceptions**

First-year Information Technology students at Monash University undertaking the subject Computer Systems were surveyed early in first semester about their perceptions of their research and writing skills in relation to the assessment tasks of the subject. Interestingly, only 17-18% of students thought that “using quotations in assignments” and “referencing – in assignment and bibliography” was difficult or very difficult. Only one-quarter of the students thought they needed help with these tasks. This flies in the face of the course leader’s experience, which is that every year students demonstrate that they do not understand the conventions or the reasons underlying them. This is a common experience in first year (Clerehan, Moore & Vance, 2000), partly produced by the conditions associated with Year 12 study. It may be hypothesised that, if new students across the spectrum of “essay-writing faculties” are not well-equipped to deal with integrating sources, the first-year computer science and software engineering student is likely to be less so.

Other explanations for this conflict of perception are that students may be less focussed on the assignment (worth 15%) than the exam (worth 70%). A high proportion of the students were international or local non-English speaking background, and, having been asked for their name/ID number, may have not wanted to admit difficulty. One-third, however, were willing to admit difficulty in “answering exam questions”. Perhaps a more plausible explanation is that many, coming in from Year 12, were either not aware of what referencing involves or thought it of little importance, based on past experience. After completing the task and receiving their mark, students are more aware - in a number of cases painfully so - that confusion exists in their minds regarding the precise task requirements.

### **Development of web-based tools**

To assist students to use referencing conventions appropriately, interpret assignment topics and respond to exam questions we are currently developing a web resource (see Figure 1). The resource provides web-based activities which draw attention to the ways ideas are organized and presented in academic texts, with a special emphasis on the discipline of Information Technology. Perhaps the most innovative aspect of these activities is the way in which we have integrated lexical tools – three online dictionaries and a concordancer – with a variety of activities which aim to develop effective academic study skills.

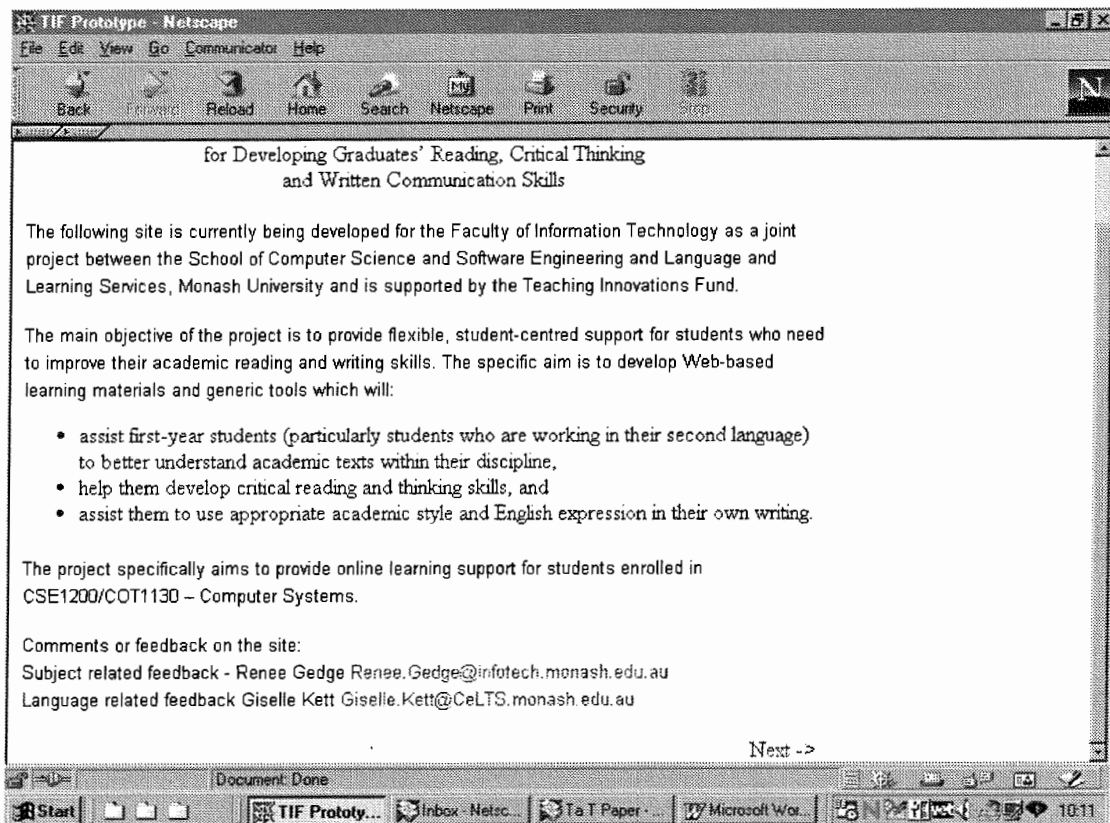


Figure 1. Web-based tools introductory page.

The design of the web resource is centred around three separate academic study skills tutorials (see Figure 2):

1. Interpreting an assignment topic
2. Using sources in assignments
3. Analysing and responding to exam questions

All tutorials are designed specifically to support first-year undergraduates enrolled in the Information Technology subject, Computer Systems. In this subject, students are required to complete a 1500-2000 word report assessing the current state of an area of computer technology, as their first assignment. The assignment requires students to consult recently published information from a range of journals or internet sites and to consider the reliability and relevance of the information used. Students are explicitly instructed to summarise the opinion of experts in the field, acknowledge the sources of these opinions and to avoid plagiarism. As a measure to discourage plagiarism, students are instructed to attach an appendix consisting of photocopies or printouts of three of their most frequently used references.

The activities in tutorials 1 and 2 of the web resource draw on authentic discipline-specific texts related to the assignment topic, relevant readings and student writing. The objective of these learning activities is to equip students with appropriate and “transferable” strategies for analysing an assignment topic, extracting relevant information from sources, and integrating these in summary form into a report, using appropriate academic style and referencing conventions.

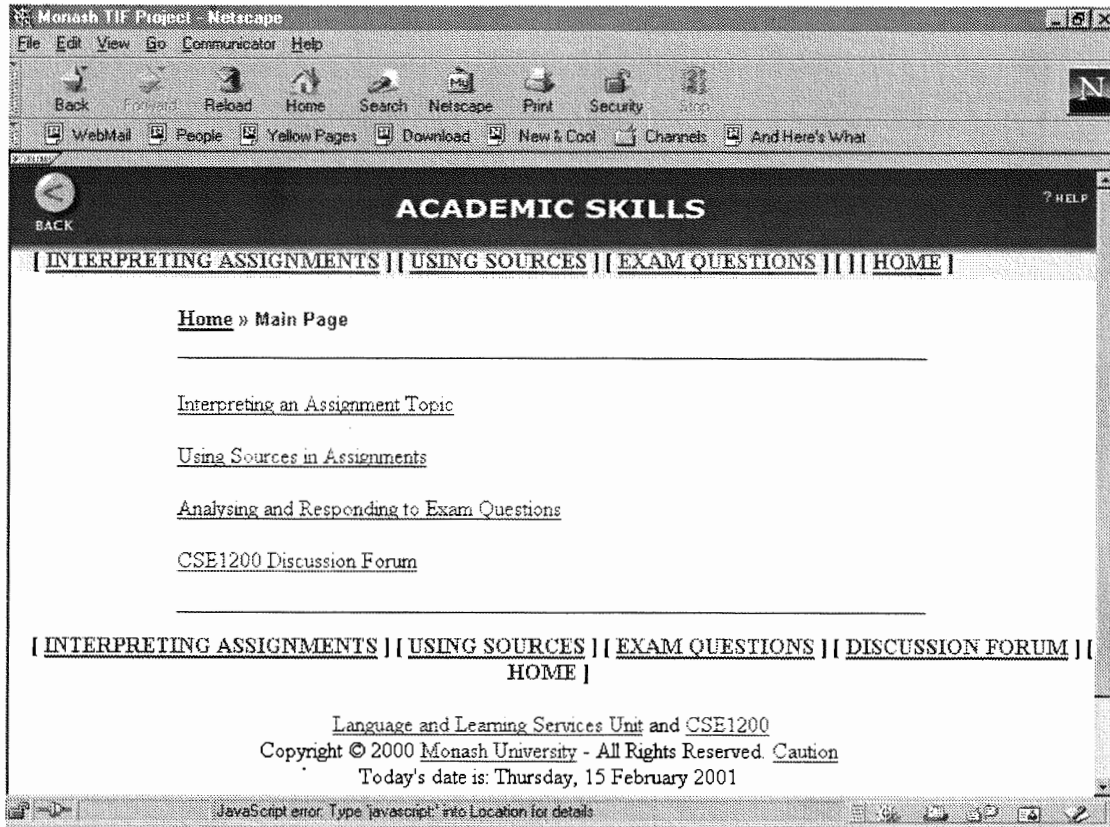


Figure 2. Module Index.

### **Assessment of referencing problems**

The perceptions of the course leader were confirmed in the results of our survey of reference skills demonstrated in a sample of 30 reports drawn from across all grades. An assessment was undertaken for the purpose of writing a needs analysis to assist in the planning and development of the web-based tutorial, and for comparative research in 2001. A modified version of a diagnostic assessment instrument developed at the Learning Assistance Centre, University of Sydney was deployed (Bonanno & Jones, 1997). The instrument was designed to create “a literacy profile” for a cohort of students in relation to a specific set of criteria (Bonanno & Jones, 1997). Our instrument was developed in close collaboration with the course leader to reach a consensus on valued characteristics associated with the assignment topic. The assessment criteria were then categorised into three main areas: selection of source material, integration of facts and ideas from source material, and referencing conventions. Each of these criteria was divided into sub-criteria (see Appendix A). These sub-criteria were rated on a scale of 1–4, where 1-2 indicated serious problems, an inappropriate response, and 3-4 indicated a predominantly accurate response, or in other words an appropriate response.

Overall, the results of the assessment indicated the selection of source material (A) presented fewer difficulties for students than the integration of information from source material (B) and the implementation of referencing conventions (C). The latter two criteria were rated as inadequately met in the majority of reports examined (see Appendix B).

Table 1. Frequency of criteria rated as inappropriately met.

Criteria	Frequency	
	No.	%
C. Presents the Bibliography and/or List of References using an appropriate format	22	73%
C. Presents correct in-text citation format (using Harvard or Footnote style)	18	60%
B. Clearly distinguishes facts and opinions found in the reference material from own views and assumptions	17	57%
B. Supports claims with references	16	53%
B. Presents summarised or paraphrased information appropriately to avoid plagiarism	16	53%
B. Uses appropriate academic language and style to present and discuss reference material	15	50%
C. Presents quotations in the text with quotation marks or indentation as appropriate	13	44%
A. Uses references relevant to the topic	12	40%
A. Uses references from a range of journals/texts	11	37%
A. Uses up-to-date references	10	33%
A. Uses references from a reputable source	9	30%
B. Integrates quotations into the discussion	8	27%
B. Selects appropriate information to quote	5	17%

Table 1 shows the frequency of criteria rated as inappropriately met. The data indicate that the following of referencing conventions in terms of presenting a bibliography and/or a list of references (73%) and in-text citations (60%) were the most challenging aspects of citing for students. This may in part be attributed to confusion between in-text or footnote forms of citing, both options were provided to the students. As previously stated, a lack of familiarity with academic style in combination with the variety of citation models the students were exposed to in web sources may have also contributed to this result. These sources range from refereed journal articles to online magazines and even advertising material. Without explicit guidelines as to which model to follow, students appeared to make inappropriate choices. A number of reports used a journalistic form of citation, for example:

The verticals targeted by touch-screen players include point of sale (POS), retail, health care, hospitality, finance and gaming. "We see a fair amount of growth in the kiosk side," (said Scott Hager Moser, product marketing director at Micro Touch.) (*Student # 17*)

Despite the majority of reports displaying an appropriate selection of references in relation to the criteria of currency, relevance, authority and a range of sources, there was a small percentage of reports with major problems due to either inaccurate citations in the bibliography or the absence of a bibliography entirely. The citation of web sites presented challenges to the students, with many students simply providing the URL for a site referred to.

Characteristics associated with the integration of facts and ideas from source material were identified as the next most frequent area of difficulty. These criteria were inadequately met in approximately half the reports. An inability to distinguish facts and opinions found in source material from the writer's own views occurred in 57% of the reports. This was primarily due to the absence of citations for sources referred to in a report. Related to this was the finding that 20% of the reports examined included no citations at all, although this was an integral part of the assignment. This accounts for the lower frequency of occurrence for the integration of quotations into the discussion (27%) and the selection of appropriate information to quote (17%), and contributed to the occurrence of plagiarism, in one of its many forms, in 50% of

the reports. There was limited evidence in the reports of questioning the knowledge or opinions referred to; instead students presented information from source material as a statement of accepted fact. This may be a reflection of the style of citing which typifies the discipline (Hyland, 1999). However, it also concurs with the findings of Buckingham and Nevile (1997) in a study comparing the use of citation in 20 first year political science essays with that of experienced writers, suggesting that this may also relate to a lack of familiarity and experience with academic style.

This assessment of referencing problems suggests the content of the study skills tutorial on *Using sources in assignments* should specifically focus on the implementation of referencing conventions and the integration of information from source material. Referencing conventions, both in terms of the reference list and intext citations, need to be explicitly modelled for a variety of sources; for example, monographs, periodicals and websites. A clear distinction needs to be made between intext and footnote forms of citing, possibly specifying a preferred style in the assignment description. Focus on the language of reporting and evaluating evidence, and explicitly defining plagiarism is also necessary to address the limited ability of many students to distinguish facts and opinions found in source material from the students' own views. The introduction to *Using sources in assignments* (see Figure 3) attempts to draw the students' attention to the importance of using sources appropriately and directs students to sections within the tutorial which address the referencing problems identified. The activities in these sections are supported by a range of online lexical tools which provide students with further models of referencing practice.

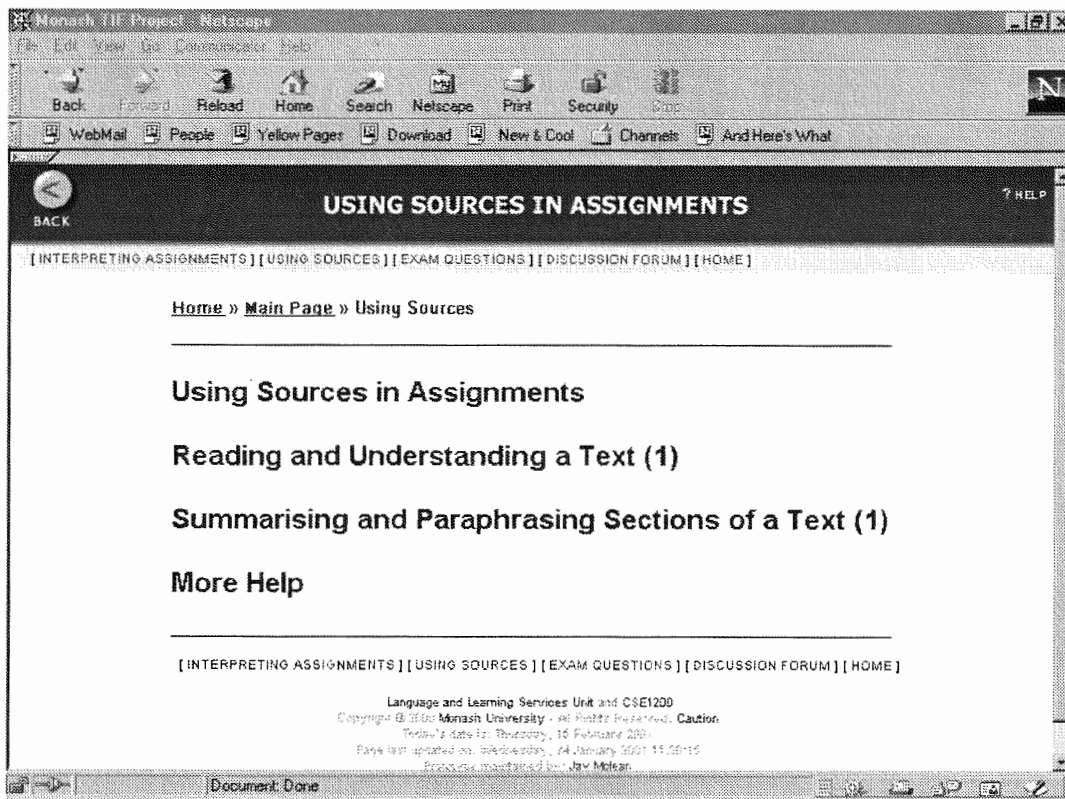


Figure 3. Using Sources.

### The lexical tools

The integration of electronic lexical tools with academic study skills activities has been adopted in the web resource with the aim of facilitating the learner's concurrent development of fluency in reading, comprehension, referencing and writing skills. Within the context of

## Sources of Confusion

the primary focus on study skills development, extended activities are being developed which involve exploring new vocabulary to develop a better understanding of word meaning and use in a variety of different contexts. Figures 4, 5 and 6 below illustrate the interface design for the integration of the lexical tools within the tutorial *Interpreting an assignment topic*. Two online dictionaries were selected, for native and non-native speakers: the Macquarie and the Cambridge International. Access to a subject specific dictionary in the discipline of computing was considered essential for students to examine terminology related to the field. A third online dictionary, Webopedia, was therefore selected for this purpose by Faculty staff. Students are encouraged to read through the assignment topic on the left and explore whether they will get a better result from looking up a word in a general dictionary or a subject-specific dictionary.

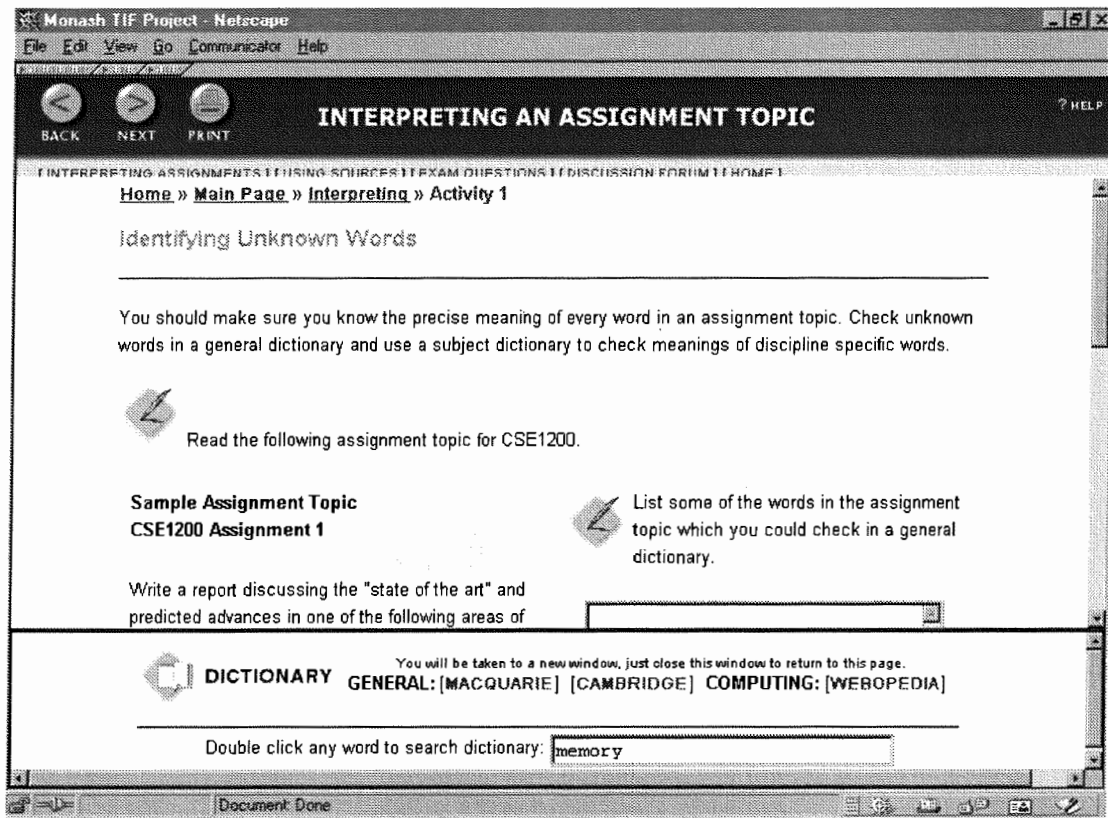


Figure 4. Interface design for the integration of lexical tools within a tutorial.

Figure 5 shows one of the learning activities in the web resource which encourages use of the web dictionaries; a student is able to learn more about meaning – or disambiguate - and also compare discipline-specific meanings with general meanings.

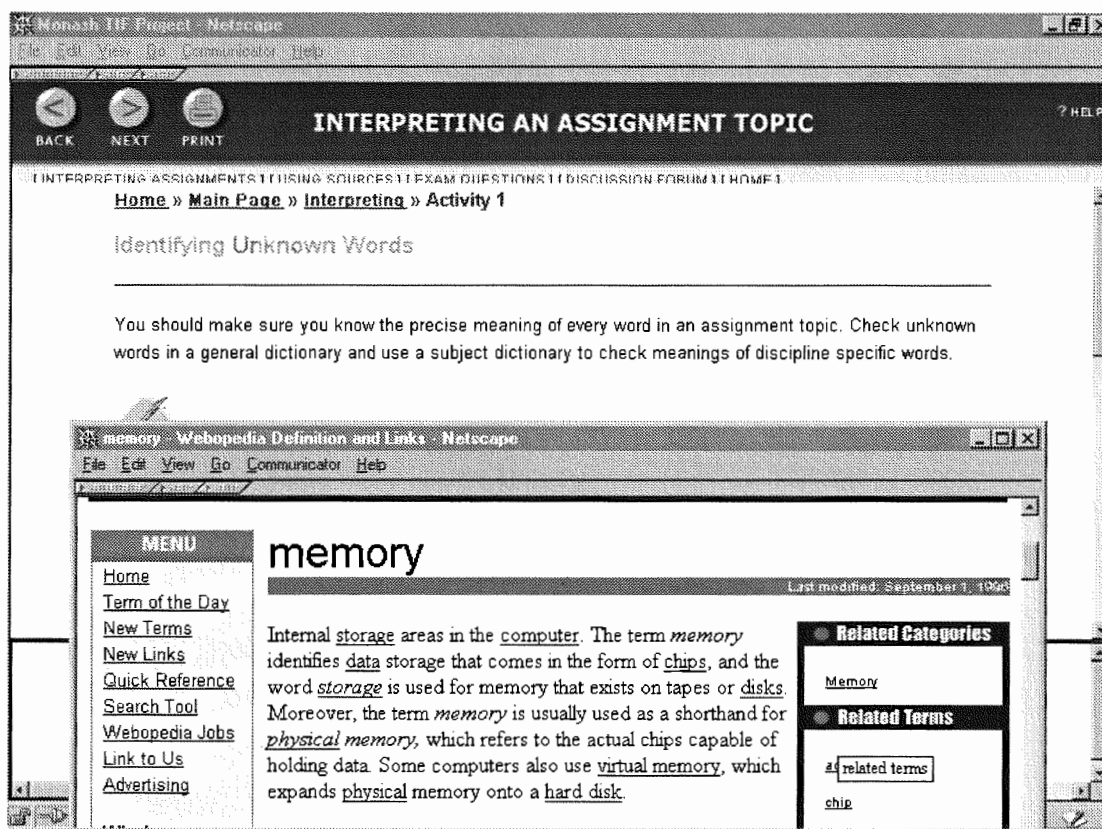


Figure 5. Learning activity integrating use of web dictionary.

### The Concordancer

A web concordancer performs the relatively simple function of searching texts to find all occurrences of a selected keyword or phrase. It can provide multiple examples of the different contexts in which a word is used. It is a very useful tool for language development as it enables systematic study of the meanings and use of words (including discipline-specific terminology) in authentic contexts (Johns 1991; Hadley 1997; Milton 1999). The use of a concordancer in our web-based learning resource follows the lead of Chris Greaves, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, who has developed an integrated platform for language learning in his Virtual Language Centre (VLC).

We have adopted the VLC strategy of linking lexical tools to learning activities to enable students to investigate the meaning and use of language from texts to improve reading comprehension. Our activities differ, however, in that the focus is on discipline-specific academic English and study skills, rather than general English proficiency. For example, the concordancer will be used to generate models of discipline specific citations and reporting language. To suit this application of the concordancer, we are using an adapted version of the VLC concordancer, with the permission of its author, Chris Greaves. We are compiling our own corpus files of discipline-specific academic English and are also using selected academic English corpora from the ICAME corpus collection of American, British and Australian English.

Our approach recognizes that many students will be unfamiliar with concordance investigations, and will need clear guidelines on what to search for and how to analyse the concordance data (Stevens 1991, Turnbull & Burstson 1998). We will therefore include

## Sources of Confusion

learning activities which encourage the appropriate use of a concordancer as well as an online help tutorial to assist students to independently use the concordancer for their individual linguistic investigations.

Figures 6 and 7 demonstrate the concordancer interface and an example search related to in-text citations and reporting verbs. The original source paragraphs for the concordance items identified can also be accessed by students to examine the context of a phrase.

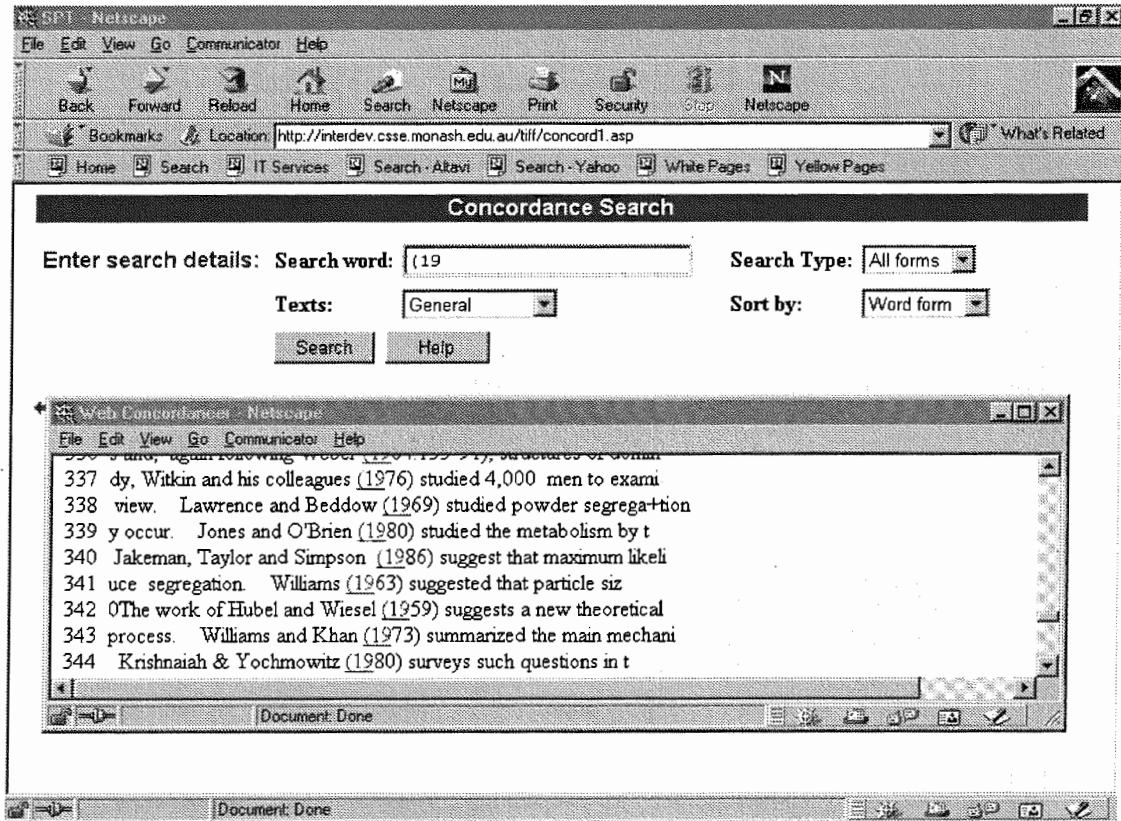


Figure 6. Interface design of web concordancer and overlay of example search.

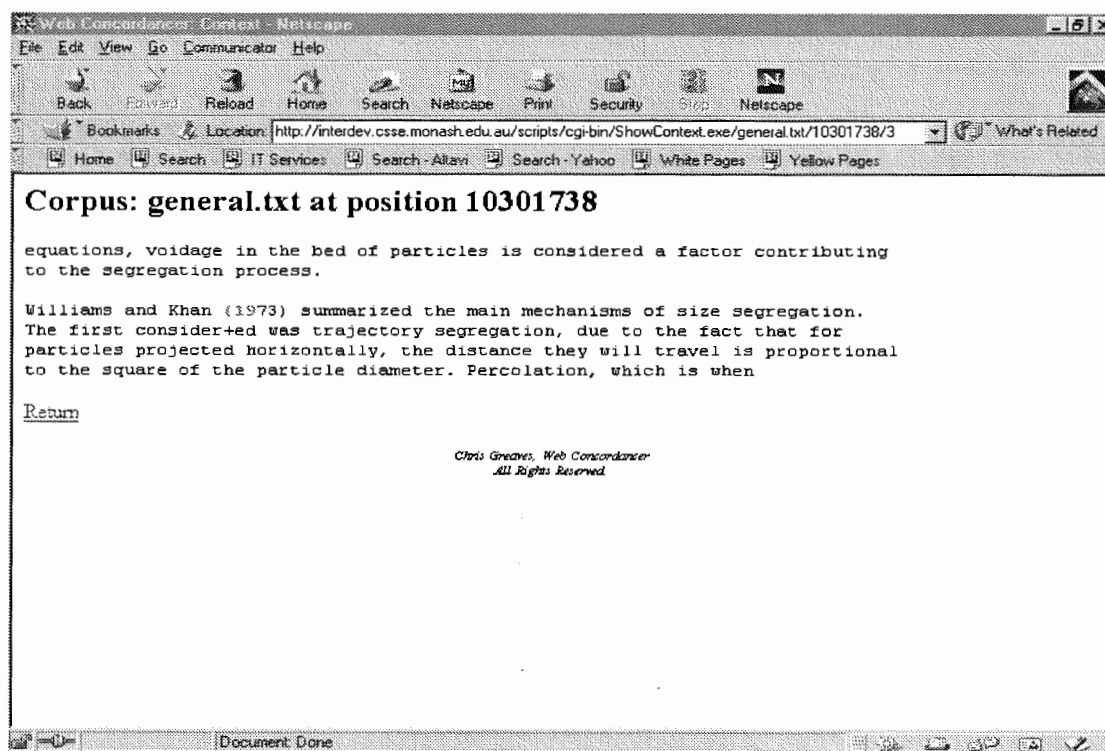


Figure 7. Context for selected concordance token.

## Conclusion

This web tutorial has been developed, among other things, to address student uncertainty about selecting source material, implementing referencing conventions and integrating facts and ideas from source material. It will be integrated into the mainstream tutorials early in the first semester 2001. Although the specific content of the web tutorials targets first-year students enrolled in the subject, Computer Systems, it is expected that many other students will benefit from the learning activities, particularly those which focus on the integration of sources. Furthermore, as the lexical tools will also operate as “stand-alone” tools for self-directed language learning, it is expected that the resource will be of particular benefit to international and NESB students. In order for students to gain maximum value from the resource, it is important that the lexical tools – especially the concordancer - are fully contextualised, and presented to the students in such a way that their curiosity leads them to become, to some extent, “data driven” learners.

## References

- Academic Skills Web Resource. Language and Learning Services Unit & Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University. Retrieved Sept. 28, 2000, on the World Wide Web: <<http://interdev.csse.monash.edu/TIF/index.html>>
- Bonanno, H. & Jones, J. (1997). *Measuring the academic skills of university students: The MASUS procedure*. Sydney: Learning Assistance Centre, University of Sydney.
- Buckingham, J. & Nevile, M. (1997). Comparing the citation choices of experienced academic writers and first year students. In Golebiowski, Z. (Ed.), *Policy and practice of tertiary literacy: selected proceedings of the first national conference on tertiary literacy – research and practice*. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Clerehan, R., Moore, T., & Vance, S. (2000). Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing project: Part one. Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> National Language and Academic Skills Conference, "Sources of Confusion". La Trobe University, Melbourne.
- Gollin, S. (1998) Literacy in a computing department: The invisible in search of the ill-defined. In C. Candlin, S. Gollin, G. Plum, S. Spinks & V. Stuart-Smith (Eds.), *Researching academic literacies*. Sydney, N.S.W.: Macquarie University.
- Greaves, C. (1999). *Virtual Language Centre Study Guide*. Retrieved Sept. 28, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <<http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/StudyGuide/default.htm>>
- Hadley, G. (1997). *Sensing the Winds of Change: An Introduction to Data-Driven Learning*. Retrieved Sept. 28, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <<http://sun1.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/winds.htm>>
- Hyland, K. (1999). Academic attribution: Citation and the construction of disciplinary knowledge. *Applied Linguistics*, 20 (3), 341-367.
- Johns, T. (1991). Should you be persuaded – two samples of data-driven learning materials. *English Language Research Journal*, 4, 1-13.
- Milton, J. (1999). Lexical thickets and electronic gateways. In C. Candlin & K. Hyland (Eds.), *Writing: Texts, processes and practices*. Harlow: Longman.
- Myers, G. (1990). *Writing Biology: Texts in the social construction of scientific knowledge*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Stevens, V. (1991). Classroom concordancing: Vocabulary materials derived from relevant, authentic text. *English for Specific Purposes* 10, 35-46.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tadros, A. (1993). The pragmatics of text averral and attribution in academic texts. In M. Hoey (Ed.), *Data, description, discourse*, London: Harper Collins.
- Thomas, S. & Hawes, T. (1994). Reporting verbs in medical journal articles. *English for Specific Purposes* 13, 129-48.
- Thompson, G. & Y. Ye (1991). Evaluation of the reporting verbs used in academic papers. *Applied Linguistics* 17, 501-30.
- Turnbull, J. & J. Burston (1998). Towards independent concordance work for students: Lessons from a case study. *ON-CALL* 12:2, 10-21.

**Appendix A: Assessment Instrument**

**Assessment criteria for using sources and referencing in assignments**

Key to Rating

**A = appropriate**

**NA = not appropriate**

**4 = Yes / excellent / no problems / accurate / very appropriate**

**3 = Mostly / good / minor problems / mainly accurate / largely appropriate**

**2 = Sometimes / only fair / some problems / often inaccurate / often inappropriate**

**1 = No / poor / major problems / inaccurate / inappropriate**

Criteria	Rating			
<i>A. Selection of Source Material</i>	4	3	2	1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses up-to-date references</li> <li>• Uses references relevant to the topic</li> <li>• Uses references from a range of journals/texts</li> <li>• Uses references from a reputable source</li> </ul>	A		NA	
<i>B. Integration of Facts and Ideas from Reference Material</i>	4	3	2	1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selects appropriate information to quote</li> <li>• Integrates quotations into the discussion</li> <li>• Presents summarised or paraphrased information appropriately to avoid plagiarism</li> <li>• Supports claims with references</li> <li>• Clearly distinguishes facts and opinions found in the reference material from own views and assumptions</li> <li>• Uses appropriate academic language and style to present and discuss reference material</li> </ul>	A		NA	
<i>C. Referencing Conventions</i>	4	3	2	1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents quotations in the text with quotation marks or indentation as appropriate.</li> <li>• Presents correct in-text citation format (using Harvard or Footnote style)</li> <li>• Presents the Bibliography and/or List of References using an appropriate format</li> </ul>	A		NA	

## *Sources of Confusion*

### Appendix B Results of a diagnostic assessment of 30 first year computer science reports.

*Diagnostic assessment of 30 first year computer science reports.*

Criteria	Appropriate % (No.)	Inappropriate % (No.)
<b>A. Selection of Source Material</b>		
• Uses up-to-date references	67% (20)	33% (10)
• Uses references relevant to the topic	60% (18)	40% (12)
• Uses references from a range of journals/texts	63% (19)	37% (11)
• Uses references from a reputable source	70% (21)	30% (9)
<b>B. Integration of Facts and Ideas from Reference Material</b>		
• Selects appropriate information to quote	63% (19)	17% (5)←
• Integrates quotations into the discussion	53% (16)	27% (8)←
• Presents summarised or paraphrased information appropriately to avoid plagiarism	44% (13)	53% (16)↑
• Supports claims with references	47% (14)	53% (16)
• Clearly distinguishes facts and opinions found in the reference material from own views and assumptions	43% (13)	57% (17)
• Uses appropriate academic language and style to present and discuss reference material	50% (15)	50% (15)
<b>C. Referencing Conventions</b>		
• Presents quotations in the text with quotation marks or indentation as appropriate.	33% (10)	44% (13)→
• Presents correct in-text citation format (using Harvard or Footnote style)	40% (12)	60% (18)
• Presents the Bibliography and/or List of References using an appropriate format	27% (8)	73% (22)

← 20% of the reports examined did not include citations and are therefore not included in these figures

↑ 3% of the reports included direct quotes only and are therefore not included in these figures

→ 23% of the reports included indirect quotations only and are therefore not included in these figures

**MONASH TRANSITION TO TERTIARY WRITING PROJECT  
PART ONE**

Rosemary Clerehan, Tim Moore and Sheila Vance  
Language and Learning Services, Monash University

*The Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project seeks to produce a web-based resource for first-year students to facilitate their transition to the kinds of thinking and writing valued at university. The background research on which the project is based centres on three main areas. First is the evidence provided by Year 12 teacher observations about the likely difficulties teachers expect students to experience in making the transition, and also by an analysis of the kinds of texts which are valued at year 12 level. The second area concerns first-year students' comments about writing their first assignment and how well-prepared they felt themselves to be. The third involves lecturers' comments written on student assignments and in interview. These three areas yield a number of insights about sources of confusion for students making this transition, which is both a vertical one (school to university) and a lateral one (moving from one discipline specialism to the next). The remainder of the paper outlines the nature of the resource and how it attempts to address these sources of confusion.*

**Introduction**

Transition research suggests that many students experience a range of academic adjustment difficulties when they commence their university study, many of which relate to the challenges imposed by new types of writing (Candlin, 1998). In undergraduate education, there is a need to find ways - both new ways and ones that are supplemental to any existing *good* practices - that make explicit for students the types of writing and researching that are required of them in their courses. The *Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* aims to develop a web-based writing resource as one way of addressing the uncertainty and confusion born of these difficulties.

In this paper we provide first an outline of the background research into Year 12 practices, first-year students' writing experiences, and institutional response. We then present the resource itself in its current state of development, along with discussion of some of the ideas underpinning its structure. Let us begin, however, with a brief discussion of a conceptual model of university writing that has informed the design of the resource.

**A model of university writing - texts, processes and practices**

Within the language and academic skills field, it has been well-understood that there is a need for literacy pedagogy(ies) to provide for students a fuller contextual account of writing(eg Halliday, 1978; Johns, 1997), including an understanding of the processes by which it is constructed, as well as the social purposes and conditions that shape this construction (Swales, 1990).

Candlin (1998) lays out three "perspectives" that need to be drawn on to understand the nature of writing in the tertiary domain, each suggesting its own research methodology:

## *Sources of Confusion*

- *textual structures* - involving “linguistic descriptions” of the genres of student writing: essays reports etc.
- *discursive processes* - involving students’ understandings of the participant relationships that obtain in the academy between student-writer and tutor-reader, expressed in “ethnomethodological accounts” of the ways that students go about researching and composing their work (generated from student interviews)
- *institutional practices* - involving “ethnographic accounts” of those elements of the process that have become conventionalised and valued in the discipline (generated from a range of sources, including lecturer interviews, feedback on assignments, assignment guidelines, disciplinary style guides).

Although Candlin’s model was developed in the first instance for applied research purposes, it is our view on the *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* that these three perspectives (and their associated methodologies) are relevant to the development of a discipline-based writing pedagogy.

For many students, the university situation represents a marked contrast to their secondary school experiences, where institutional practices and participant roles were clear: expectations were codified comprehensively in the form of quite specific assessment criteria and sub-criteria. At the university however, these practices and roles are not clear: expectations are often expressed as vague exhortations. The key concept of “critical analysis” is a case in point. Students are told frequently that they must adopt a “critical” attitude to their research, yet as Candlin (1998) points out, “disciplines are often unclear and inexplicit about what [this analysis] consists of” (p. 6). This point is taken up by Chanock (2000) who investigated lecturer and student interpretations of the term “analysis” as it is used in assignment feedback to students. Chanock found that there was a significant mismatch in the understandings of the two groups, but also surprisingly that lecturers felt there was little call on them to elaborate on the concept in their teaching.

Related to this lack of understanding about expectations and approaches is a lack of knowledge of the nature of university writing, of the valued textual structures. For students new to the academy, the problem often stems from a lack of access to appropriate generic models. They find themselves having to rely on, on the one hand, the “formative” genres of their secondary education (over which they have gained some mastery) and on the other hand the “expert” genres that make up the reading content of their course (which are clearly beyond their present abilities). Between these two poles, it can be difficult for students to find an appropriate novice discursive voice, one fashioned by an understanding of the textual structures, discursive processes, and institutional practices of their new writing context.

### **Aims of the project**

The project targeted ten first-year subjects: History, Literature, Philosophy, Sociology (Faculty of Arts), Commercial Law, Economics, Management and Marketing (Faculty of Business and Economics), Perspectives on Learning (Education), and Legal Process (Law). The objective was to develop a web-based module for each subject.

The project aimed to facilitate a more critical orientation to tertiary literacy for the students undertaking those subjects, with the following anticipated outcomes:

1. Students should be better positioned to understand what was required of them in their writing at university level, including knowing how to interrogate an essay topic in order to answer it fully.
2. With respect to lecturer expectations, it would be clearer to students how subtle changes in the use of language and structure can affect the success of a piece of writing. The lecturer feedback would be presented so as to provide maximum useable benefit for the student, based on current local research into how students respond to written feedback.

## *Sources of Confusion*

3. A “mentoring” experience would be provided, with the student able to draw on other students’ experience of the personal organisation necessary to the essay-writing process, and thus on alternative approaches to writing tasks.
4. Some of the benefits of a one on one discussion with an academic skills or subject lecturer would be provided in the resource’s focus on task/subject specific issues.
5. Students are often perceived as only “describing” when they should be “analysing”: the resource will give students visible evidence of what terms such as “analysing” in their subject mean.
6. The development of transferable thinking strategies may be encouraged as students are being encouraged to reflect on their learning.

To inform our development of the web modules, we also carried out research into the Year 12 writing experience and the first-year writing experience.

### **The Year 12 writing experience**

In order to elicit a *developmental* perspective on the precise nature of students’ difficulty - and thus, confusion - in these subjects, one of the project’s first tasks was to conduct a series of focus groups with a total of 25 teachers of cognate Year 12 subjects at five schools in Victoria. This was of particular relevance as students undertaking Year 12 in 2000 would be undergoing different writing experiences from those encountered in previous years under the CAT (Common Assessment System) system. Under the CAT system, students were encouraged to research assignments by engaging in additional reading and then to develop the assignment through a series of drafts. Students entering university in 2001 and thereafter will undertake school-assessed coursework (SACS), “designed to reduce workload”, which must be completed mainly in class within a limited timeframe. The implications of this change raises a range of issues for these students, particularly in terms of research and writing experience, but for the present paper, let us turn to the more perennial confusions which teachers anticipate for their students as they move from Year 12 to first-year.

In semi-structured focus groups, teachers were asked a short series of questions about the problems they thought students faced in adapting to university writing requirements. It is noteworthy that, as some first-year lecturers bemoan the lack of preparation of new first-year students, so Year 12 teachers declare themselves not in the business of “preparing kids for uni”. Their responsibility is to ensure their students learn in such a way as to complete the requirements for their subjects and get the best marks possible. Looking ahead - and knowing their students well - they felt that they would have little idea how to use a university library, would be unlikely to know how to select texts, to determine what is most relevant, or how to skim read. Because of the ubiquity of the “set text”, there was naturally a lack of exposure to different examples of disciplinary discourse in Year 12, and teachers believed students would not be aware that there were differences. In Year 12, students were not encouraged to browse the internet, and except for certain subjects, were not given any guidance as to how to evaluate sites. In contrast to previous secondary years, Year 12 students were either told specific sites to consult, or advised that internet research was “optional”. With respect to writing, the teachers identified the following areas as potential problems.

#### *Understanding expectations*

Expectations for Year 12 writing continue to rest upon specific criteria to which marks are attached (eg Criterion 1, 10 marks; Criterion 2, 10 marks; Criterion 3, 4 marks). Teachers assist students to identify where they have not met criteria. The question is treated as a springboard to talk about the topic. Students are often asked for “their opinion”, and acknowledging sources is treated by them in a very “cavalier” fashion. They are taught referencing at every year level, but will tend to “play dumb” whenever they are asked about it: students will plagiarise and believe that it is OK if you can get away with it. For students, it was “sophistry” that they did not have to bother with. With respect to their audience, students are often told “explain as if the reader doesn’t understand”, so they perceive that it is important in writing to show what you know. Other than for the top students, there is a

## Sources of Confusion

tendency to agree with propositions in preference to grappling intellectually with issues raised (“they want to play parrot”).

### *Drafting and editing*

In many subjects in Year 12, there is little experience of expanding, elaborating, feeling one’s way. Word counts are strict; the teacher is there to give instant feedback. Some students are likely to approach university tasks by going to the other extreme and “over-playing” their writing, thinking that verbosity is what is required to be acceptable. Writing, in a number of Year 12 subjects, is treated as a transparency: for subjects such as Economics, teachers are instructed “if students are getting their message across, don’t penalise them”. Working on an assignment often involves getting the content right and not bothering about the form of words.

### *Writing at length*

Under the CAT system, students wrote longer pieces, often up to 2,000 words. Under the SACS system, there is the occasional 1,500 word assignment, but most are 800-1,000 words. In any case, the previous experience of drafting longer pieces was still different in that deadlines were carefully managed and supervised; students were told when to begin, reminded when work was due; they discussed their work and received comment on it in class; and they talked with their peers about it out of class. According to teachers, students fresh from Year 12 would have no idea how to set out the work and how to reference and format an assignment unless they were told. In most Year 12 subjects, students are told what they need to learn, and there is little point in (reward for) “reading around” a topic or taking off on a different tack; Year 12 writing gives exactly what is asked for and no more.

The majority of this strikes us as so much received wisdom, but it is still interesting how uniform the teachers’ views were across schools. Interesting too how teachers’ predictions suggested that a lot of the bother they believed students would find themselves in occurred precisely because libraries, essays, topics, deadlines were going to *look* the same, but they were not the same.

Our understanding is that while some topics in VCE are more directive, sometimes it is the teaching strategies that may make them *appear* directive to students. For example, with DISCUSS questions, students are often encouraged to set up a strong line of argument on one side as a way of dealing with them. As one teacher explained:

Certainly, I taught my students to set up a contention in relation to the topic, and encouraged them to see it as an argument in which they were trying to convince me of their point of view on the text. Without that kind of direction, they tend to just waffle without really saying anything.

In this way, students entering university are likely to have a perception that “there is a specific question requiring a definite and determined stance” from them. As a further example of this potential source of confusion for students, let us consider a set of small extracts (here out of context), which appeared in three acceptable Year 12 Literature essays:

Sample 1: “Shakespeare shows through this play the good and evil, mainly in the characters [good and bad characters and their qualities are then listed]... These qualities are the motivations of the good characters”.

Sample 2 (a): “Language is used to suggest lack of control. The idea of language as power is represented”.

Sample 2 (b): “Lear does many such things in scene 1 that show examples of his folly”

Sample 3 (a): “Shakespeare also uses symbolism to enrich his idealism and in turn the idea of forgiveness”.

Sample 3 (b): “The scene is also put in to show that all characters are not evil and dishonest”.

These statements attracted no comment from the teacher, and would, no doubt, be put down to the unsophisticated pen of the students. Let us review some of these from the point of view of a first-year tutor. The approach of the first-year tutor would probably involve concerns in number one whether qualities, good or bad, can *be* motivation; wondering whether the “*mainly* in the characters” parenthesis was the beginning of a metaphysical observation or lack of thought. In 2a, the question would be whether it is appropriate to think of Shakespeare setting Lear up to demonstrate folly, etc; in 3a, whether it is helpful to think of Shakespeare getting out the bag of symbolist tricks. These would not remain as isolated observations on the part of the tutor, but would seriously undermine their sense that the student had an appropriate grasp of the creative writing process, and of the way poetic drama might work. In this way, what a Year 12 teacher might overlook as merely infelicitous expression can evoke a negative institutional response on the part of the first-year tutor, creating confusion in the student.

### **The first-year writing experience**

The kinds of adjustment problems cited above relate to what might be called the “vertical transition” - that is from school to university. There is, however, also the “lateral” transition that students must negotiate as they move from one discipline specialism to the next, each arguably with its own distinctive discursive mode, “variations in knowledge structures and norms of inquiry, different vocabularies, differing standards of rhetorical intimacy” (Bhatia, Candlin & Hyland, 1997). In the literature on adjustment into academic culture - in both its vertical and lateral dimensions - a common metaphor for pedagogic processes is “the apprenticeship” (see for example “cognitive apprenticeship”, Lave & Wenger, 1991). In such processes, the lecturer (or disciplinary expert) is thought to provide mentoring for the “apprentice” through processes of: i) modelling, to make tacit knowledge explicit; ii) coaching, by supporting students' attempts at performing new tasks and then iii) fading after having empowered the students to work independently (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989).

It is fair to say, however, that within undergraduate education, these types of “apprenticing” activities are often more desired than actual. Candlin (1998) reports, for example, that students do not perceive themselves to be tutored in this way: “there is simply not the close contact with experts on real-world problems that the term apprenticeship conventionally implies” (p. 21). In Peel’s (1998) transition research, his student informants express concern about:

- a lack of provision in courses of “a transition stage” in which the development of the skills of independent inquiry, research, writing and analysis might be addressed;
- a lack of available advice and assistance in assignments and learning difficulties (due mainly to increasing academic workloads, funding cuts etc.);
- too much “unexplained” assessment of written work, where university teachers fail to explain what is required in a particular assignment and also do not indicate to students how their work could have been more successful (Peel, 1998: p. 6).

In our research for the project, we wanted more specific comments from first-year students about writing, and how prepared they felt themselves to be. We collected information from students in two ways: through a written survey conducted during tutorials for nine of the subjects (excluding Sociology due to time pressures); and through audio-taped interviews with individual students. In the survey, students were asked, *inter alia*, to rate how well they felt their year 12 assignment writing had prepared them for writing their current assignments. In order to get an accurate assessment of the students’ *perception* of their preparedness, the survey was given to students prior to marks being released.

The quantitative results of this survey are not overly surprising: on a scale of 5, where 1 is not very well prepared and 5 is very well prepared, the average across the disciplines was 3.2. Averages do tend to sit in the mid-zone; nevertheless, this result should not be taken alone, for when we examine the explanations the students gave for their rating, some interesting points

## Sources of Confusion

are revealed. Those students who felt that year 12 prepared them very well, with a rating of 4 or 5 out of 5, tended to view writing in terms of what they called “the basics”: the mechanics of writing, such as paragraphing, structuring an essay, writing effective introductions and conclusions, being concise, focussing an argument, referencing, and so on. In contrast, those students who felt that year 12 had not prepared them well at all, with a rating of 1 or 2 out of 5, tended to view writing in broader terms that incorporated approach to the task as well as “the basics”. These students commented on the lack of guidance about what content to include; the fact that university essays required independent thinking; and that students had a greater freedom to interpret questions, to provide opinions, to seek out appropriate sources, and to create their own arguments. These students emphasised the formulaic nature of VCE writing, the fact that there were very strict guidelines as to what could be written. One student described writing essays in VCE as “filling out a form”. Another wrote, “you don’t learn how to write, only copy a set of guidelines”.

The individual audio-taped interviews with students emphasised these same distinctions between writing in year 12 and university, and how well-prepared students felt. The students felt that, in addition to having fewer written guidelines and advice about what content to include, the questions themselves were “broad” and “less specific” at university, and that this was a fairly challenging change. To illustrate this point, let us examine a topic from the English subject, Reading Literature, on *Jane Eyre*, a novel that some students had recently studied in the VCE:

Mr. Rochester describes in Vol. 3, chapter 1, the circumstances in which he was married to Bertha Mason, and how he came to incarcerate her in the attic at Thornfield. What do we learn about him from this and how far does the novel endorse his claim that he has acted for the best?

One student indicated that she had great difficulty answering this question, particularly in deciding what to include. She explained that in VCE, she would have been given a passage from a text and asked a set of directed questions:

They expected you to just answer the question that they had put forward and then answer the next question, and you can do this certain amount of detail, but you can never really deviate from the question... Whereas at university ... you have a lot more room to [decide] what you want to include and don’t want to include, and I think in this way it brings out the complexity of the novel more than just being expected to answer a certain question.

Our understanding is that the aim of these focussed questions is to test the students’ ability to read literary texts closely, and that these questions would often be followed by a more open question. It is a staged pedagogical process. However, at university this ability to read closely is often taken for granted, and the expectation is for students to move straight on to a larger argument, and engage with the discourse as presented.

The second difficulty experienced by the Literature student related to the nature of the topic, in that it was asking *how far* the novel endorsed Mr. Rochester’s claim. The student felt her answer to the question suffered because in the past she had been “generally expected to take a view for or against”. The nature of this topic made this difficult to do, and she had trouble incorporating elements that did not fit with her argument. The student knew that she could have a qualified answer, but “didn’t really know how to fit it together to do that” and as a result her conclusion was comprised of a set of contradictory statements about the character. Another student had similar difficulties with this topic and suggested that if the topic were presented in VCE it would read as follows:

Mr. Rochester describes. . . . *Provide evidence from the text to show* that Mr. Rochester acted for the best.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The student's reformulation of the question illustrates well the point made earlier that, through exposure to prescriptive topics and to teaching strategies that assisted them to limit the scope of their answers, students often *perceived* questions to require a definite, unequivocal stance. As a consequence, many students felt unprepared for writing essays at university that required them to determine for themselves what content to include, and to construct a more complex and qualified argument. This finding is, of course, not surprising for those of us who work with students on these very issues. Nevertheless, it is useful for us to understand exactly where the sources of this confusion lie.

### **Researching disciplinary writing practices**

The third area of research for the project was the way in which university disciplines present their literacy practices and conventions to students. This representation occurs across a range of modes – including for example specific instructions from lecturers in class; information in course handbooks, assignment tasks, documented assessment criteria and the like. From discipline to discipline, and from subject to subject, there would appear to be considerable variety in the information provided - both in its comprehensiveness and comprehensibility. In this section, we discuss briefly some of these information sources and the types of messages they might convey to students about disciplinary literacy practices. We draw on examples from two disciplines: History and Philosophy.

The first source of information considered was assessment criteria used to mark the main essays in first year subjects in the two disciplines. On the evidence of students' secondary education experiences, it would appear that assessment criteria have an important influence over the way students conceive of writing practices. What struck us about the criteria from History and Philosophy was that, save for a number of terminological differences, there was overall a surprising degree of correspondence between them (Table 1). From the two lists, a reasonably consistent view of tertiary writing emerges, which we can characterise thus: students need to present neat work (criterion 1), written in grammatical and clear language (criteria 2 & 3), that draws on a range of sources, correctly documented (criteria 4 & 5), that is well structured (criterion 6), that presents an identifiable argument (criterion 7), that is clearly related to the question posed (criterion 8).

*Table 1.* Essay assessment criteria (Philosophy and History).

<b>PHILOSOPHY</b>	<b>HISTORY</b>
1. legibility & layout	presentation
2. spelling, punctuation & grammar	expression - <i>grammar</i>
3. clarity	expression - <i>clear/concise</i>
4. bibliography & citation	format - <i>has bibliography, notes if required</i>
5. comprehension & exposition of sources	depth - <i>has quotations, drawn from appropriate sources</i> accuracy - <i>has correct names, dates etc</i>
6. logical development	structure
7. argument & originality	intellectual engagement - <i>makes an argument</i>
8.	relevance - <i>answers the question</i>

From these two sets of criteria, students could reasonably conclude that there is not much to distinguish an essay in Philosophy from one in History, and that there need not be a

## *Sources of Confusion*

substantial difference in their approach to the two. But, this would appear not to be the case. To borrow from an expression, the discursive “devil” is in the detail.

When we investigated additional sources of information, some crucial differences between the two subjects began to emerge. To take the simple issue of how much reading a student should do for an assignment, the History handbook provides the following unequivocal information:

*The essay should be properly documented and footnoted. ESSAYS BASED ON TWO OR THREE SOURCES ONLY, OR NOT FOOTNOTED WILL BE FAILED (original emphasis).*

But from philosophy comes a very different perspective. The equivalent document in the Philosophy subject provided no specific information about this point. In interview, however, the subject lecturer responded thus:

*Generally for Philosophy essays, it's enough just to look at the course readings and lecture notes. Surprisingly in Philosophy extra reading can make an essay worse. So it is not really a good idea to go to the library and just take a book off the shelves – it may be an inappropriate text – not really a Philosophical one. ... So what's a reasonable number of texts to read for an essay? It will depend on the essay topic, but often it will be just one or two or three.*

Thus, for a student doing first year History and Philosophy subjects, for the former they will do well to spend time in the library; for the latter they may be advantaged by staying away from it. This is an intriguing difference that probably makes sense when one considers the epistemological bases of the two disciplines. It is nevertheless a potential source of confusion for students – especially for those who imagine one of the keys to tertiary study is to read widely for their work.

Further contrasts emerged around our investigations of the notion of argumentation (Criterion 7). The History handbook stipulates the following:

*Broadly an essay is the exposition of your argument, supported by appropriate evidence - with rigorous documentation and footnoting*

In the list of assessment criteria for Philosophy, argumentation was linked to the notion of ‘originality’. In interview, the Philosophy lecturer was quizzed about this point:

“Originality” can come out in just one or two critical comments the student makes about ARGUMENTS THEY’VE READ. Or it might come out in the examples they draw on to demonstrate a point – We are impressed when a student comes up with an example of their own devising - ONE THEY HAVE THOUGHT OF ENTIRELY THEMSELVES (emphasis added).

Again in these statements we have intimations of two quite disparate rhetorical domains. In History, students are expected to construct their own argument; in Philosophy it is principally the arguments of others with which they must engage. With respect to evidence, in History students must rigorously document much of the propositional content they include in their work; in Philosophy which deals often not with actual events, but with hypothetical scenarios, students are invited in effect to ‘invent’ their evidence. These are, if not sources of confusion, certainly sources of significant divergence - ones that suggest a need for disciplinary writing practices to be conveyed to students in a systematic way.

### **The Transition to Tertiary Writing web site**

As a way of addressing some of these issues, the *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* was conceived. The project team was a large one, consisting of the various participants implied in the Candlin methodologies above. These included: language and academic skills staff who worked one-on-one with subject lecturers from the ten disciplines selected. Between one and three first-year student volunteers were selected to participate from each of the discipline areas above. Also involved was the educational developer, who made a major contribution

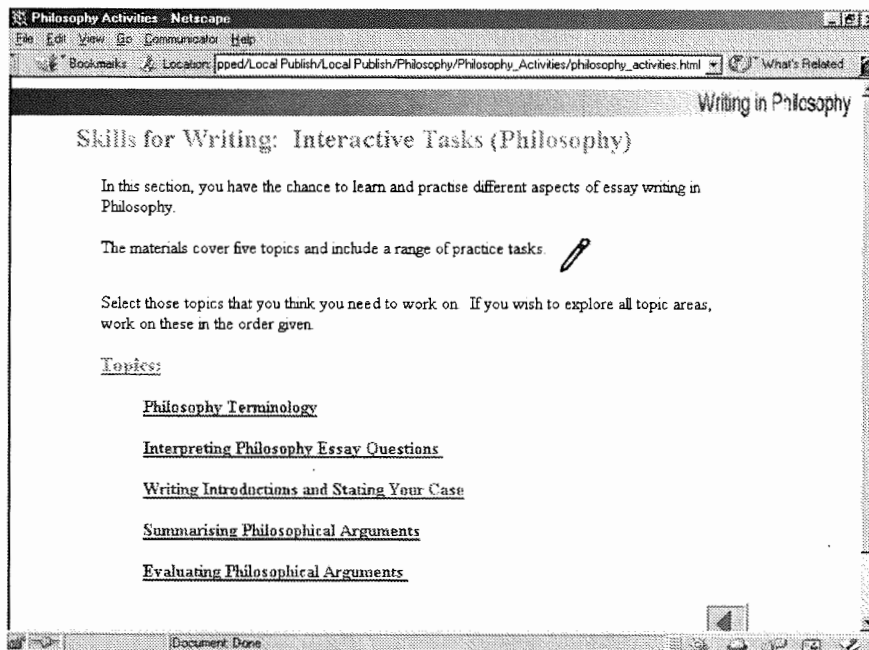
particularly to the functionality of the template, the web designer and the multi-media graphic designer.

The web-based resource is made up of ten modules, one for each of the first year subjects listed. Students access the modules by selecting a subject/discipline from the Index page. The module then divides into three sections: Writing in [Subject Area] FAQs; Skills for Writing; and Sample Assignments. The key component of the module is the sample assignment(s) produced by the student participants.

The first section of each module has as its focus the “institutional practices” of writing in the discipline, using the subject lecturer as informant. The list of Frequently Asked Questions, along with a summary of the main types of writing difficulties experienced by undergraduates, includes elaboration of key concepts such as the meaning of “analysis” in the particular disciplinary context, as defined by the lecturer and refined for web consumption by the LLS lecturer.

The second section is organised around a range of interactive tasks, aimed at facilitating students' understanding of the nature of textual structures in their discipline as in Figure 2 (Moore & Clerehan, 2000). These tasks are different for each subject and the topics are selected in consultation with the lecturer.

**Figure 1 Skills for Writing - Philosophy**



The focus of the third section is on “the student”, the “processes” involved in writing in the discipline; and the institutional expectations and response (see Figure 2 below). For each subject, there is at least one sample assignment (main essay or equivalent in each subject) where both student audio and lecturer commentary are available, in addition to the assignment itself and the lecturer’s annotations. In the case of the other sample assignments, users of the resource will see only the assignment, the lecturer’s annotations and the lecturer commentary which appears in a pop-up box. Students can print out the assignment to read if they wish.

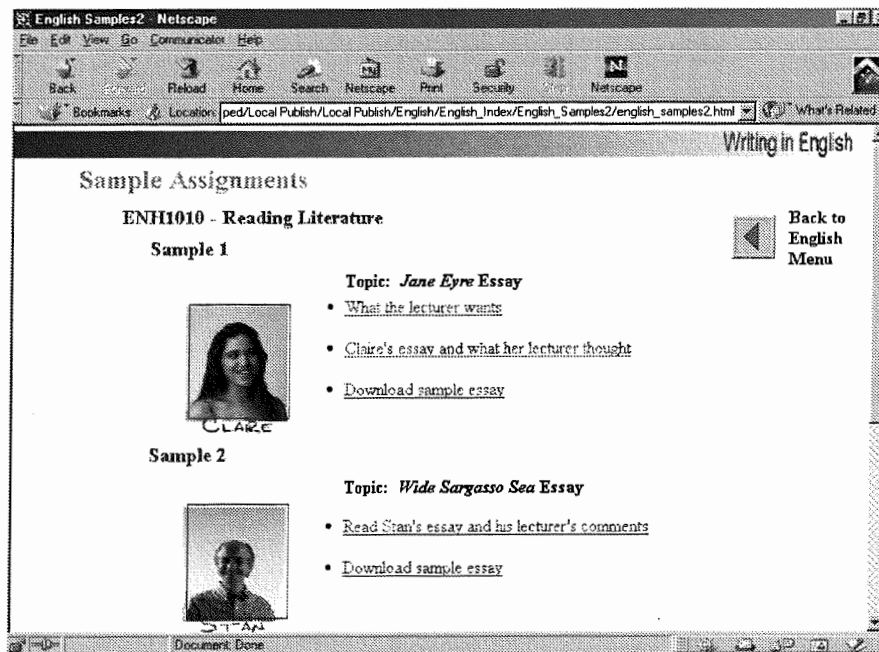


Figure 2 Sample assignment interface

For the featured assignment, it was decided to suggest a sequenced approach (Figure 3 below). The first part, dealing with "What the lecturer wants" invokes both discursive processes and institutional practices as it presents the lecturer's explanation of what the topic requires (and descriptors for different grades), and invites the student to engage with how well the essay in question responds to these expectations. Students are, at this stage, presented with an unmarked essay. They are then invited to take a further step and think how the essay may have been improved. Finally, they are asked to view the annotated essay.

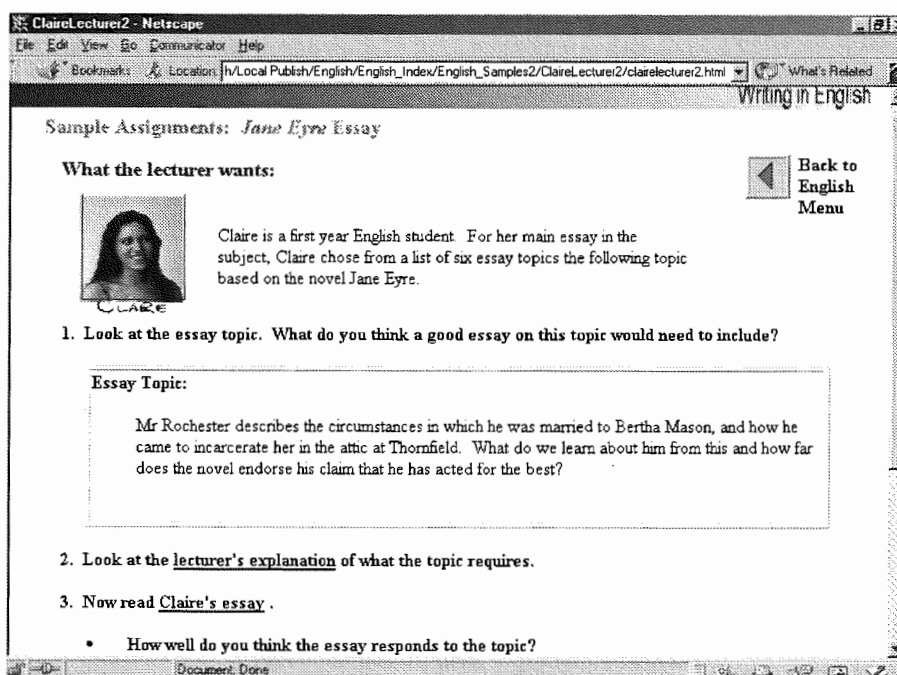
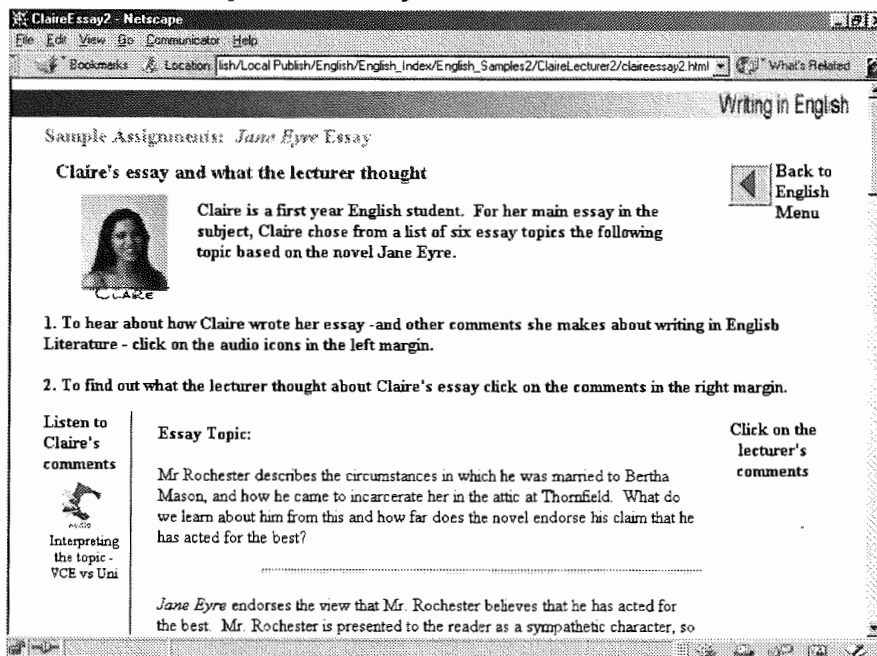


Figure 3 What the lecturer wants

At this point, the student users can click on the audio icons and listen to the essay's author tell how they went about researching and composing the sample assignments, beginning with their first engagement with the essay topic to their submission of the final piece of work (see Figure 4 below). The students also reflect on their broad approach to university writing, and also on what comparisons can be drawn with their experiences of secondary school writing. In accessing this section of the module, other students will have the opportunity to hear the voices of fellow students, in an interaction modelled to some extent on the notion of peer mentoring.

Figure 4 Claire's essay, introductory material



There is a counterpoint to this page, with the students' *understandings* of the task considered in relation to the lecturer's *response* to it (see Figure 5), both in the form of annotation and also elaborated in pop-up boxes. We hope this will lead to a more informed and critical appraisal of what is involved in institutional expectations and what is involved in actually researching and composing an assignment in this discipline. At the end of the paper, the student's impressions of their completed essays will be juxtaposed with the lecturer's own final assessment.

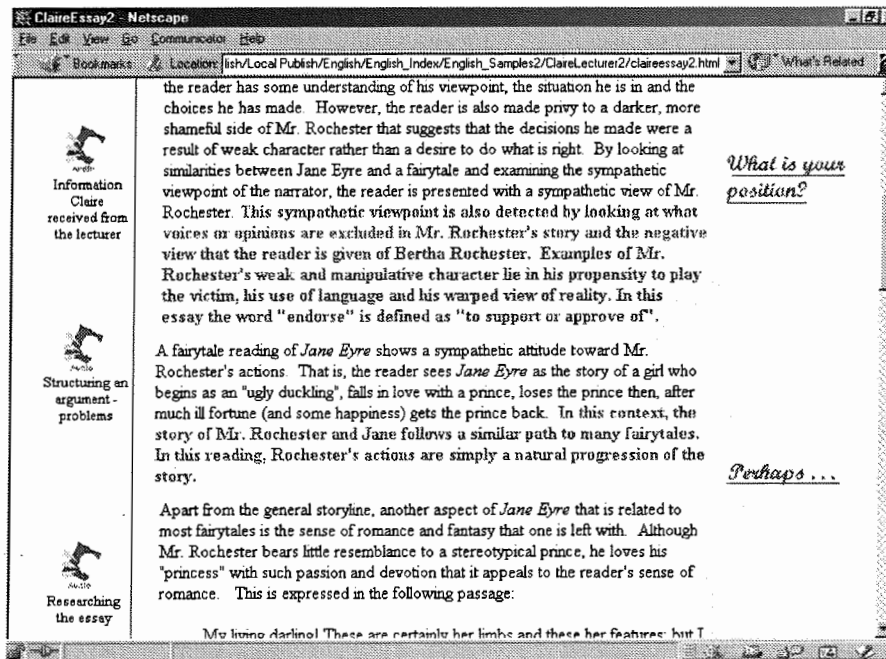


Figure 5 Claire's essay and comments

Even with a resource for which the purposes and use, we hope, are very clear, there are still possibilities of confusion for first-year students. For example, whilst the benefits of emulating a type of peer mentoring relationship are well documented (Peel, 1998), there is the potential, in an on-line setting, for the role of these peers to be misinterpreted. Student users may perceive these students as "exemplary", and think that the approaches to study they use should be copied. Thus, we have endeavoured to cast material in a thoroughly "descriptivist" rhetoric, with the aim of encouraging users to reflect upon their own practices and to draw whatever is useful from those *described* in the resource. A second strategy has been to recruit several student participants for each discipline, so that alternative approaches -- rather than a single "exemplary" one -- can be presented. Finally, we have avoided, as far as possible, selecting any disciplinary "prodigies" i.e. those whose literacy practices might constitute an unattainable (and ultimately demoralising) ideal for others. Overall the project recognises that the student-to-student interaction has considerable instructional potential; but it is also understood that this interaction will need to be handled sensitively in the resource.

A second concern is that for student users of the resource, the texts, processes and practices involved in this task may not seem easily relatable to other writing contexts they must contend with. As Candlin (1998) found, the transfer of genre-specific information can be problematic. At any given point, the student user is enmeshed in their own discursive processes relative to their own quite specific learning situation. It is thus important in the resource to seek to contextualise as much as possible these specific writing tasks within the broad dimensions of disciplinary practice. It is for this reason that both the student and lecturer commentaries will move purposefully from the particular (about *this* essay) to the general (about writing *philosophy* essays). Similarly, there is an attempt to extrapolate from the sample essays those general features that distinguish the discipline as a discourse.

### Conclusion

The *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project*, still under development, attempts to de-fuse a set of confusions about tertiary writing. The research underpinning it in some cases exists as background: in others, it feeds directly into the resource materials. The Year 12 teachers' perspective is a valuable back-drop, highlighting the student confusion which may arise from restricted exposure to selecting and using sources, and from having experienced very different types of writing in Year 12. The baseline survey of first-year students in the targeted disciplines suggests that students who felt themselves to be most prepared conceived of writing in terms of the mechanics. Those who felt least prepared had apprehended that the task was asking them to exercise greater independence and freedom of thought than they had done before. Finally, the institutional expectations tended to be couched in broad terms which may mislead the students into thinking there is little difference between subjects, and thus approaches to them.

In attempting to de-fuse confusion, it is essential that the resource itself is useable, motivating, not overwhelming. The fact that it is founded upon our understandings of texts, processes and practices in the academy will, we hope, render these more transparent to our students.

### References

- Bernhardt, S. (1993). The shape of text to come: The texture of print on screens. *College Composition and Communication*, 44 (2), 151-176.
- Brown, J. S., Collins, A. & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*, 18, 32-42.
- Candlin, C. (1998). Researching writing in the academy. In C. Candlin, S. Gollin, G. Plum, S. Spinks & V. Stuart-Smith (Eds.), *Researching academic literacies*. Sydney, N.S.W.: Macquarie University.
- Bhatia, V., Candlin, C. & Hyland K. (1997). *Academic Communication in Disciplinary Communities*. Hong Kong: Department of English, City University of Hong Kong (mimeo).
- Chanock, K. (2000). Comments on essays: Do students understand what tutors write? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 5 (1), 95-105.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as a social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Johns, A. (1997). *Text, role and context: Developing academic literacies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, T. & Clerehan, R. (2000). Language and learning in "the late age of print": Reflections on a web-based essay writing module. In G. Crosling, T. Moore & S. Vance, *Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Language and Academic Skills Conference* (pp. 121-135). Churchill, Vic.: Monash University.
- Peel, M. (1998). *The transition from year twelve to university*. Monash University.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**BRINGING DISTANCE STUDENTS INTO THE UNIVERSITY  
CULTURE:  
STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS STUDYING AT A  
DISTANCE**

Jessamyn Clarke  
University of Southern Queensland

*Students are readily confused and confronted by the university experience. The potential for students to misinterpret advice and feedback from academic staff is particularly high when staff and students are separated by distance. For universities with high proportions of students studying off-campus, the role of Language and Academic Support (LAS) advisers and services is particularly critical.*

*The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) comprises seventy-five per cent distance students, made up of Australian students studying from diverse locations and over 3,000 international students studying off-shore by distance education. The range of learning support strategies offered by USQ provides an interesting case study of ways in which the challenges of supporting students studying from remote locations can be efficiently and effectively managed.*

*The conference theme of 'Sources of Confusion' will be considered in the context of Language and Academic Skills (LAS) support in a predominantly flexible learning university.*

*Overall, USQ's distance program strives to be the following:*

- *well-planned within a supportive culture;*
- *student-focussed;*
- *flexible - catering to diverse needs and 'individualised' wherever possible;*
- *human-centred - with technology providing a useful medium but never driving the educational process;*
- *educationally-driven - with an emphasis on a distinct flexible delivery pedagogy;*
- *team-driven in materials development;*
- *heavily reliant on providing support for students - being inherently resource intensive;*
- *based on the provision of choice - seeking to extend options available to the student rather than using new strategies simply to replace existing approaches.*

*An important realisation is that distance education is what you make it. It is not inherently of high quality or of low quality; it is not inherently equitable or inequitable, nor can it inherently ensure a good or a bad educational experience for students. Like face-to-face teaching, the detail of the approaches and strategies undertaken to deliver flexible learning will ultimately influence such factors as the quality of the educational environment established, the effectiveness of the process in achieving the intended educational goals, and the equitability of the educational provision so created.*

### **1. Flexible educational delivery at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ)**

Flexible educational delivery refers to educational delivery that is not constrained by geography or time, that is 'open' in the sense of placing the needs of the student first, and catholic in its use of a range of educational approaches (Taylor, Lopez & Quadrelli, 1996). It can be perceived in terms of a focus "upon modes of delivery which are able to transcend the time/place/pace determinism of most educational programs" (Kinnear, 1999, p. 45). The attitude to flexible learning at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is typical of this accepted paradigm: "The University believes that flexible delivery is about giving people WHAT they want, WHERE they want it, WHEN they want it, in THEIR style, in THEIR place, in THEIR time" (University of Southern Queensland, 2000a).

USQ is a medium-sized regional university with its main campus located in Toowoomba, 120km west of Brisbane and with a small branch campus at Hervey Bay on Queensland's central coast. The University is a major player in flexible educational delivery, with some three-quarters of its students studying in the external mode, and has attained the status of a recognised world leader in the flexible delivery of higher education courses. This leadership position was recently highlighted by USQ being awarded (jointly with the University of Wollongong) the *Good Universities' Guide University of the Year Award* as the 'e-university for an e-world'.

USQ's long experience in flexible delivery suggests that effective educational delivery at a distance, particularly for first time learners in undergraduate programs, and the subsequent assurance of a valuable learning experience for the student, is contingent on the quality of the learning environment and the level of support afforded to the student. As such, distance learning is no less reliant on aspects of sound pedagogy and student support than more traditional forms of university teaching. As critical is an appreciation that, although technology features largely in considerations of flexible educational delivery, distance learning at USQ remains fundamentally human-centred – and as the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional approaches to university teaching become blurred, the importance of the human-centred approach in flexible learning will become even clearer.

This paper concerns the nature of pedagogy and support for distance learners in the context of a humanistic model for higher education using the programs and services for distance learners at USQ as a case study.

### **2. Key factors influencing distance learning approaches at USQ**

In the modern educational context, flexible learning is most often associated with the use of increasingly sophisticated information and communications technologies. There is good reason for this association. Traditionally, distance education providers were amongst the first to embrace emerging technologies as strategies for overcoming the tyranny of distance experienced by students studying in remote locations, and distance education providers have

## *Sources of Confusion*

tended to remain leading pacesetters in the use of educational technologies ever since (Taylor 1995).

Technology provides many important tools for the educator. Increasingly there is talk of the 'virtual campus' as a metaphor for the electronic teaching / learning and research environment created by the convergence of powerful new information and instructional technologies (van Dusen, 1997). However, the place of technology in flexible learning is often overstated, or, at least, misunderstood. There is a need for a clear distinction to be made between 'the medium' and 'the message'. The medium of technology can make information available, but this is not sufficient in itself to create an educational experience. To achieve the latter requires pedagogy, which is no less critical in considerations of distance education than it is in more traditional forms of teaching. As Richardson (1995, p. 1) points out: "It is the underlying structure of the subject content, the overall curriculum design and the instructional design of the learning experience that results in effective learning rather than the medium used to deliver the message."

Clark (1983, as cited in Taylor, 1995, p. 5) makes the point that educational technologies are: "mere vehicles that deliver instructions but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition." Technology therefore should never be considered as an end in itself. Postle and Sturman (2000) make the point, for example, that web-based educational delivery provides new avenues for students to access educational opportunities but its emergence has demanded the development of a specific pedagogy that takes into account its unique nature and ensures that an appropriate learning environment is created that maximises the learning experience for the web-based learner. Contrary to common perceptions, the intention of flexible delivery is not simply to approximate face-to-face learning but rather to develop pedagogy that best exploits the opportunities created by the advent of new technologies. For example, it is now often argued that the benefits derived from asynchronous teaching techniques such as electronic discussion groups provide considerable advantages over traditional face-to-face teaching methods. These include:

- the ability for students to gain 24 hour access to academic staff;
- the potential for questions and answers to be framed in a more considered way than can occur in a face-to-face tutorial situation;
- the potential to create a greater structure and deliberation in developing discussion and debate - providing greater opportunity for individual reflection;
- providing for greater involvement by all class members in an environment where individual students do not have to compete for attention by staff; and
- creating permanent records of all the discussions and dialogue undertaken (Peoples 1999; G. Postle, personal communication, November 2, 2000).

Realising these benefits does depend, of course, on a certain minimal level of literacy skills and commitment by the students involved, and their ability to access the full range of hardware and software required to participate – then clearly, on-line learning is not the ideal medium for everyone. Success also requires classes to be limited to a maximum number of students, based on criteria not dissimilar to those considered when setting maximum sizes for traditional classes – the use of technology, at least at present, does not remove the need for the 'personal touch' and the importance of dialogue which have always represented the essence of good teaching. The potential for intelligent automated systems in the future that could enable larger class sizes to be accommodated through enabling some of the more routine student inquiries to be answered without recourse to staff intervention (J. Taylor, personal communication, November 2, 2000) would appear to contradict this view – but at least at present, the potential use of such systems does not challenge the primacy of the human element.

Also, critical to an understanding of the role of flexible learning in modern higher education is an appreciation of how it has developed from traditional distance education, and how it inter-relates with the notion of 'open learning' "that places student learning, needs and choice at the centre of educational decision-making" (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 6). The emphasis on equating flexible educational delivery with technology has tended to mask the fact that flexible learning in its earliest form as distance education was amongst the earliest examples of a student-centred 'open' approach applied to teaching in a higher education context. McKay and Clarke (1998) argue that from the time that the University of Queensland first started offering 'correspondence courses' to students in remote geographical areas in 1911, the operating paradigm was rooted in considerations of what was required to overcome the educational barriers created by distance – that is, what was needed to take education to the remote student. This inherently student-centred approach – seeking to take the education to the student – was in stark contrast to the paradigm under which traditional higher education focussed at the time, which was more related to setting up courses in a way that was most convenient for the teaching staff concerned – that is, based on an expectation that the student would come to the education. From this basis, a culture of student-focussed learning has arisen in association with those educational institutions that have embraced distance education as a major area of activity and this has positioned them naturally to extend these strategies and approaches into flexible learning. These developments have tended to occur in many of the newer universities which have typically provided the leadership in both distance education and inclusiveness in university teaching and learning over the past few decades (Hall, 1996).

Approaching educational delivery from a student-centred perspective leads naturally to the adoption of flexible approaches to learning, particularly in circumstances where the student body is diverse and has diverse needs which require to be met. As Taylor (1995, p. 4) points out:

Because the clientele for distance education consists largely of part-time students in full-time employment, distance educators have had to provide resources (printed study guides, audiotapes, videotapes, computer-based courseware, etc) of high quality that could be used at a time and in a place convenient to each student. In effect, these 'flexible access' technologies allow the student to turn the teacher on, or off, at will, as lifestyle permits. ... Such flexibility has a major pedagogical benefit - it allows students to progress at their own pace. Thus varying rates of individual progression can be accommodated, unlike typical conventional educational practices where the whole class tends to progress at the same pace in synchronisation with the delivery of information through mass lectures and tutorials.

Flexibility in educational provision therefore provides the basis for making allowance for individual needs – education unbound by constraints of time or location, and providing the potential for self-paced programs. Such approaches are, incidentally, essential to accommodate the needs which have arisen as a result of the emergence of mass higher education and lifelong learning (Slattery, 1989).

### **3. Sources of confusion: The distance student experiences**

In considering the central theme of this conference, it is clear that students are readily confused and confronted by the university experience. The potential for students to misinterpret advice and feedback from academic staff is particularly pronounced when staff and students are separated by distance. This situation is enhanced in situations where students come from disadvantaged (including educationally disadvantaged) backgrounds, where difficulties exist in gaining access to resources, where students may be experiencing time constraints resulting from difficulties in balancing study, work and family responsibilities, and where the opportunities for interactions may be limited – all of which can be significant features of the distance student's experience. Perhaps ironically, the situation can also be exacerbated by the close association between open and distance learning as the strain on academic staff of attempting to individualise each student's educational experience can result

## *Sources of Confusion*

in feedback to individual students that may lack the depth possible when dealing with a more homogeneous student body in a face-to-face teaching situation.

One key to addressing this situation is to appreciate the positive influences that typically feature in the distance learning situation. Adults studying part-time by distance education while employed, who represent a high proportion of distance students at USQ, typically come with a wealth of life experience, and often have access to unique resources generated by their work, family and community environments – which can be exploited in the educational context. Program pedagogy needs to embed within it strategies that address the needs of students coming from diverse backgrounds and experiences, as well as taking advantage of their wealth of life experience and knowledge, and the extent to which they have access to their own workplace, communities and local resources. Distance learners need to be encouraged to: “create local dialogues that aren’t necessarily orchestrated by the institution, and to access and harness available resources in creative ways” (Morgan & O’Reilly, 1999, p. 23).

Technology has provided a basis for many problems of distance, student motivation and opportunity to be overcome – albeit creating new considerations for concern over equity and access. It is critical that technology is viewed in the correct perspective – as a medium or tool facilitating opportunities for learning rather than as a driver of the educational process itself; that issues of pedagogy and appropriate student support be held paramount, and that technology be managed in a way that maximises the student’s learning experience while minimising the risk of creating social inequities through factors such as unequal access or ability to utilise technologies.

Peoples (1999) suggested seven “best-practice principles” for on-line learning that provide an exemplar of the sorts of considerations required in order to make programs and services provided to students studying at a distance effective in achieving their educational goals. Peoples’ seven principles are as follows:

1. Develop a network of support – involving each of peer support, teacher support and administrative support.
2. Ensure a variety of learning styles and preferences – to take account of a diverse student body.
3. Design interactive learning materials – to enable students to increasingly direct their own learning.
4. Ensure educationally-driven learning – as opposed to approaches dictated by the technology experts.
5. Provide financial and organisational support – and don’t assume that distance learning is in any way an ‘inexpensive’ or ‘non-resource-intensive’ educational option if an equivalent quality of educational experience to on-campus learning is to be achieved.
6. Ensure adequate security – controlling access to materials and considering copyright issues. (This is the one principle listed here that is less pertinent to a consideration of distance learning overall than it is specifically to online learning.)
7. Use a planning model – to ensure that developments are properly managed and evaluated; appreciating that good teaching never occurs by accident.

Peoples’ placement of the need to provide support networks at the top of the list reinforces the critical importance of this consideration to on-line (and more generally all distance) learners. Peoples emphasises the need for learners “to be given the opportunity to learn in company with their peers”, whether they choose to take advantage of these opportunities or not, the need for “ready access to [the] teacher or supervisor ... [in a] relationship between teacher and learner that requires commitment by both parties”.and the need for “administrative questions [to]... be directed to specialist staff” (Peoples, 1999, p. 11). This author places a particular emphasis on the need for a rapid turnaround time for queries with the need for “guarantees [to be]... given and met” (Peoples, 1999, p. 11).

Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) point to the importance of distance educators understanding the ways in which distance learners approach their learning tasks in the development of teaching, support and assessment strategies. Not unexpectedly, the diversity of the student body undertaking distance study is also reflected in a diversity of learning styles and approaches. Commonly, approaches are based on 'pragmatic' or 'strategic' approaches which seek to tackle the study materials in a way that leads to the assignment items being completed as efficiently and effectively as possible, rather than students working systematically through the coursework as the course designers have intended. The tendency to adopt such approaches is particularly strong for adult learners who may have limitations imposed on their available study time through work and family commitments, and who may be considered as being quite discerning in terms of what material they see as personally interesting or relevant (Goodsir, 1978). LAS advisers must therefore be prepared to deal with student inquiries in ways that are relevant to the individual student concerned – rote or standardised approaches to *ad hoc* student queries have particular dangers in the context of distance learning.

Clearly, for universities with high proportions of students studying off-campus, the role of LAS advisers and services is particularly critical. The following section will use the programs and services provided for distance students at USQ as a case study in strategies which attempt to overcome the risk of 'student confusion' and maximise the chance of students achieving their own educational goals.

#### 4. Learning Support Services for distance students at USQ: A case study

##### 4.1 General considerations

It is important to consider just how critical the nature and level of student support provided to students as part of their flexible learning experience is to the quality of their educational experience and to enhancing their chances for maximising their academic performance.

One school of thought in Australia – as epitomised by the operations of Open Learning Australia (OLA)-- interprets 'flexible learning' and 'open learning' in the context of educational approaches that emphasise independent learning and low levels of academic learning support. Such an approach has been found to be appropriate for students with highly developed learning skills and high levels of individual motivation, as may occur with students who have had previous experience in higher education or considerable life skills (Senate Committee, 1994), but appears totally inappropriate for students entering higher education for the first time.

By way of contrast, USQ's approach is based on its strict adherence to two key principles:

- 1 The need for distance education to be based on specialised distance pedagogy – which has been the key to the relatively recent emergence of USQ as a leader in web-based course delivery.
- 2 The need for distance education pedagogy to be enhanced by high quality, intensive student support.

Critical to USQ's model of flexible delivery is the inclusion of academic learning support commensurate with student needs as a central and critical feature to ensuring learning experiences on par, in quality and outcomes terms, with more traditional on-campus learning experiences.

##### 4.2 Support services for distance students at USQ

USQ maintains a number of specialist student support units.

- a) Outreach Services within the Distance Education Centre (which now reports to the new position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Global Learning Services)) provides a range of academic learning support services specifically to external students.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- b) The Office of Preparatory and ACademic Support (OPACS) which reports to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) is a dedicated academic unit that offers a range of academic learning support programs to internal and external students.
- c) Student Services located within the Registrar's Division provides an integrated group of professional student support services, with all services being offered to both internal and external students.

Each of these operational units provides services which enhance the learning environment of the student studying at a distance; as do other units including the Library, Information Technology Services and the International Office. Contact with these offices and their services is available by phone, fax, e-mail and on-line – with information on the services available and contact procedures included as part of the Introductory Booklet for all units, as well as through the *Distance Education Student Guide* which is provided to all external students in book form and available on-line ([www.usq.edu.au/dec/studguid](http://www.usq.edu.au/dec/studguid)).

Following a consideration of the nature of student support provided by academic staff to distance students, the services provided by each specialist support unit will be discussed in turn.

### *4.2.1 Support provided by academic staff*

Academic staff coming across distance education / flexible learning for the first time are frequently surprised by just how labour intensive a discipline it represents. Materials development requires many person-hours of work and draws on considerable experience and expertise. Materials updates are frequent and need to occur to a strict and often demanding timetable to allow for production and delivery times to students. Teaching commitments during semester include a considerable time requirement for student support – including answering student queries obtained through either direct contact through a range of media or as referrals from Outreach Services (see section 4.2.2.2 below), the conduct of tele- and/or audiographic tutorials, the management of electronic discussion groups, attendance at residential schools and assessment/feedback responsibilities.

The preparation of study materials represents the first, most obvious and most fundamental way in which support can be offered. At USQ a team approach is used in the production of study materials, involving academic staff and specialist instructional designers. Instructional design is a critical feature of the success of external study materials – the literature in this area is large and a review of this area is beyond the scope of this paper; interested readers are referred to University of Colorado (2000). However, staff development materials at USQ encourage academic staff to make particular efforts in this area, pointing out to them that:

Your total command of and interest in your unit and your concern to share its excitement with your students should be obvious from the opening sentences of Introductory Booklets and the study materials. The use of support techniques, such as clear logical presentation, summaries, overviews, self-assessment questions, relevant illustrations, experiential anecdotes, etc., brings materials to life for students (Mitchell & Timmins, 1993, p. 2)

All external units include an Introductory Booklet which contains core information on the range of services available, contact procedures, and university standard evaluation. In addition, the Introductory Booklet includes the Unit Specification (which is required to be developed for all units and made available to students prior to their study in the unit), an introduction to staff, an introduction to the unit (and sometimes to the course of study), teaching/learning resources, recommended study schedule, and an overview of assessment with marking criteria clearly indicated.

Mitchell (1993) points to the importance of academic staff providing good feedback to distance students. He listed the major criteria for this feedback as being direct, specific, prompt, positive, extensive, student-centred, and part of a continued dialogue between the

student and the academic staff member involved. Morgan and O'Neill (1999) point to the pressures placed on academic staff through the need for effective early communication with students in order to pick up problems early, the need to take full advantage of what windows of opportunity for contact with students arise in situations where opportunities for teacher-student contact may be otherwise limited, and the need for rapid turnaround time for all student inquiries. The experience of academic staff at USQ involved heavily in distance education / flexible delivery is that contact with students represents a significant (dare I say heavy) and continuously pressing responsibility, particularly as University policy strives for inquiry turnaround times to be kept to a minimum – with 48 hours as the current standard.

Open and distance education also puts particular pressure on academic staff through issues created by striving for individualising the student experience. The need to negotiate and assess individualised learning activities, the related concerns about consistency and reliability of marking where individualised items may be difficult to compare and the associated higher risk of dispute, concerns over the risk of plagiarism and proof of authorship, and the need to balance open approaches with academic standards and the requirements of professional bodies (Gibbs, 1995, as cited in Morgan & O'Neill, 1999, p. 24) all put continual demands on time and effort in order to be resolved.

At USQ, the contact between teacher and student can occur directly or be 'managed' by the specialist distance student support unit Outreach Services.

### *4.2.2 Outreach Services*

Outreach Services is the student support section of the Distance Education Centre (DEC) dedicated to supporting distance students. It manages the Regional Liaison Officer (RLO) Network as well as managing telephone and audiographic tutorials, the Synchronous Teaching Studio, residential schools, the *USQOnline* Support Centre, and student support systems linking students to academic support within the faculties and other University services.

External students include a high proportion of non-traditional students, adult learners, rural and isolated students and students with disabilities. Students can make contact with Outreach Services (located on the main campus at Toowoomba), their local Regional Liaison Officer or the Regional Centres located in Brisbane and Ipswich by telephone or e-mail 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The purpose of the regional support network is to assure students that assistance is at hand locally and that they are not isolated in their endeavours. A total of 86,725 student inquiries were dealt with in Outreach Services in 1998, with 47,909 of these queries processed by the RLO Network. The strong emphasis provided by Outreach Services on people-people interaction as the basis for all of its activities reflects the importance afforded by the University to such interactions in supporting a successful educational experience for distance students.

The following provides an outline of the services provided by Outreach Services.

#### *4.2.2.1 Regional Liaison Officer (RLO) Network*

**The RLO Network** was established in 1978 and has developed to become an integral part of the University's commitment to supporting distance education students. RLOs are now located in twenty-one centres throughout Eastern Australia, including two USQ regional Centres at Brisbane and Ipswich. The Network provides a service to over 10,000 students studying off campus.

RLOs are the regional USQ representatives who provide an easily accessible and local point of contact for distance education students. The network includes 17 'home-based' RLOs working as individuals out of their own homes. Each home-based RLO is provided with a computer, fax/photocopier machine, answering machine and Internet access, and is available to take inquiries from students 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The Regional Centres located in Brisbane and Ipswich in themselves provide support to over 3,500 students. Each employs a number of staff and provides a focal point for the faculties and other departments to channel their information, to coordinate special activities and to provide services to USQ students. The Regional Centres are equipped with audiographic, teleconferencing and videoconferencing equipment, as well as audiotape recording facilities.

RLOs provide assistance on request for students throughout their period of study, as well as a point of contact for referral to specialist academic learning support and student counselling services. Other regular services provided by the RLO Network include individual contact with each distance student early in semester through a 'ringaround', the conduct of regional orientation meetings, assisting students' participation in telephone and audiographic tutorials and discussion groups, and regular reporting. The latter ensures close two-way communication between RLOs and the University campus and takes the form of 'semester reports' where each RLO submits a report twice per semester to the Distance Education Centre (DEC) to provide feedback on issues relative to their region; and weekly reports from the Head, Outreach Services to the RLOs to keep them informed of events on campus.

Additional services provided by the USQ Regional Centres include routine administration (from changes of enrolment to organising off-campus Library loans), computer laboratory facilities, the conduct of telephone/audiographic tutorials, the Unit Mentoring Program, Tutor Service, Careers reference library and employer visits information, and exam supervision. During the year, workshops are conducted regularly in the Regional Centres on a range of subjects. For example, the following sessions were held during the first half of 1999:

Workshop	Sessions	Workshop	Sessions
Library Skills Workshops	4	Study Skills Workshops	2
Peer-Assisted Learning Support (PALS) sessions	28	Lectures/workshops	3
Project Management Workshops	2		

The following table shows usage of the USQ Regional Centres during 1998:

<i>Statistical Item</i>	<i>Regional Total</i>
Telephone calls	21,095
Visitors	2,480
Computer usage	7,524 hours
Private study	7,860 hours
Room bookings	372 students
Counselling appointments	157

**The RLO Seminar.** RLOs undertake regular development exercises, including a requirement to attend campus for one week each year for what is termed 'the RLO Seminar'. This provides the opportunity for RLOs to update skills, knowledge and awareness and to ensure that a continuing high level of service is provided to regional students. The RLO Seminar also provides an additional link between the main campus and the student. The following comments are provided by the RLO for the Sunshine Coast region, Janet Shaw:

Some students really rely on the fact that I go to the seminar every year. They know that I speak to the people who can implement change and respond to student needs. This is very reassuring to a student who has a problem and it is just another part of what an RLO does. It is all support for the student and a purposeful effort to make a difference for them so that they finish their study successfully at USQ with fond memories. For students who study externally and do not have ready access to their lecturers or perhaps do not feel confident in approaching lecturers, the RLO is the ideal 'go between'. We offer advocacy for the student, we provide support for them by listening to them and taking

## Sources of Confusion

their concerns seriously and we provide follow up, to ensure that they are happy with the outcome.

In addition to USQ's own RLO Network, USQ is a member of the Queensland Open Learning Network (QOLN) which provides its students access to the over 40 QOLN Centres located across Queensland – from Thursday Island to Coolangatta. Each Centre is managed by a Coordinator and has teleconference and audiographic equipment, 24 hour computer access, internet access, quiet study areas, course and career information, and provides a meeting place for students and study groups.

### 4.2.2.2 Outreach Services, Toowoomba Campus

**Student Support Systems.** The Outreach Services unit situated on the main campus at Toowoomba received and processed a total of 50,896 student inquiries in 1999, representing an average of 979 student inquiries per week. Inquiries peak and trough somewhat during the year. However, with a three-semester academic calendar there is no truly 'slow' period – the smallest number of inquiries per week in 1999 was 243 during the Christmas-New Year period, with weekly inquiry numbers otherwise ranging from 527 to 1,541 throughout the year.

A little over half (54 per cent) of inquiries are answered by Outreach Services itself while the remainder are referred on to the relevant academic staff. Outreach Services thus provides an efficient conduit between distance students and academic staff but also minimises the burden on the faculties by addressing a significant proportion of the more routine student inquiries itself. Inquiries for 1999 can be broken down as follows:

<b>Outreach Services inquiries, 1999 – excluding inquiries to RLOs and Centres</b>							
<b>Total Inquiries = 50,896</b>							
Answering Machine	Problem assignments	Problem CML tests	E-mail Inquiries	Faxed Inquiries	Letters / Forms	Phone Inquiry	Inquiry Answered form
261	463	210	16,717	1,474	2,104	6,051	23,616

Considerable effort is expended to ensure that turnaround times are kept to a minimum. Approximately 79 per cent of telephone inquiries and 23 per cent of e-mail inquiries are answered immediately and the mean turnaround time on student inquiries is consistently under 48 hours.

<b>Turnaround times for student inquiries that cannot be answered immediately for 1998</b>			
<i>Semester</i>	<i>Number of Queries</i>	<i>Duration of Semester*</i>	<i>Average Turnaround Time</i>
Semester 1	6,416	20 weeks	1.45 days
Semester 2	6,548	20 weeks	1.45 days
Semester 3	2,176	12 weeks	1.38 days
Annual total	15,140	52	1.43 days (average)

\*USQ's academic year has since been regularised to involve three semesters of roughly equal duration.

Outreach Services facilitates the development of 'Learning Circles' (ie local student study and support networks) and maintains an electronic noticeboard for distance education students to access a range of information such as unit troubleshooters, telephone and audiographic tutorial schedules, learning circles, residential schools and general information.

**Telephone and audiographic tutorials** are held as evening classes – the times most convenient for students studying part-time while employed, who make up a high proportion of USQ's distance students. Permanent records are kept of all sessions in the form of video- or audiotapes which are available to students through various channels. Students with

## Sources of Confusion

disabilities are provided with home connections if they wish, and students located outside an RLO Region or from Correctional Centres are automatically sent copies of the telephone tutorial tapes. All costs are met by DEC. The table below shows the usage of these services:

<b>Telephone Tutorial</b>			
<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Tutorials</i>	<i>Number of students who participated</i>	<i>Number of tapes sent to students</i>
1997	600	7,277	29,856
1998	505	6,201	27,580
1999 (semester 1)	275	2,844	11,808

<b>Audiographic Tutorials</b>		
1997	22	573
1998	21	487
1999 (semester 1)	30	538

The Synchronous Teaching Studio provides teaching linkages between the University's Toowoomba and Wide Bay Campuses.

Residential schools are conducted for many units (some requiring compulsory attendance) which provide face-to-face teaching blocks for distance students as well as the opportunity to attend a number of specialised workshops, on a range of topics including Study Skills, Careers, Maths, Library, and use of the Internet.

**Support for on-line students.** USQ has experienced a considerable growth since 1997 in students studying via the world wide web. In 2000 some 1,500 student were enrolled in on-line units and a further 3,000 students were enrolled in units which had an on-line option in addition to print-based delivery. An emphasis has been given at USQ to promoting on-line delivery in postgraduate areas, partly in the belief that graduates are more likely to possess the independent learning skills and level of self-motivation which make them suitable candidates for successful on-line study. This has had some influence on the extent and type of support required by on-line students at USQ; however, on-line study is becoming increasingly utilised in undergraduate study and will likely play a role in preparatory study in the future.

The USQ*Online* Support Centre is administered by Outreach Services to ensure that prospective and enrolled on-line students are provided with a high level of service and support. The USQ*Online* Website at [www.usqonline.com.au](http://www.usqonline.com.au) provides a communication facility for students via the 'Contact Us' option on the Web site. USQ has also established a new network of USQ*Online* Liaison Officers (ULO) worldwide called USQ*Net*. Mimicking the well-established RLO concept, the ULOs provide assistance and support to online students.

**Evaluation and review.** The Distance Education Centre (DEC) in which Outreach Services is located at USQ is accredited to the ISO9001 International Quality Standard. This requires meticulous quality management standards to be maintained, including the documentation of procedures, extensive record keeping and regular review. As part of routine program review, distance students are encouraged to complete an in-house evaluation form after each telephone/audiographic tutorial and at the end of the residential school period. These forms are processed by Outreach Services and assessed for continuous improvement. Formal evaluations of these services, as well as external unit evaluations, are conducted every few years to survey students' opinions and gain feedback. The following is an extract from the formal evaluation of telephone tutorials processed from first semester 1997:

- 4,134 external students participated;
- 96.3 per cent intend to participate in future telephone tutorials;
- 92.6 per cent agreed that the telephone connection at their location was satisfactory;

- 91.1 per cent felt their lecturers were well prepared;
- 85.2 per cent gained new knowledge;
- 76.9 per cent found the shared learning activity at the telephone tutorial beneficial.

### 4.2.3 Office of Preparatory and Academic Support (OPACS)

OPACS is an academic unit with close links to the Faculty of Education but with a distinct reporting line to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). The unit has 11 academic staff with full administrative support and is responsible for the delivery of the University's preparatory / bridging course and a range of academic learning support programs and services.

**Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP).** Offered by OPACS, TPP is an enabling program accredited with the USQ Academic Board, that provides an access pathway to tertiary study for 'later-chance learners'. The program is conducted entirely through distance education, representing the largest preparatory program to be conducted in this mode by an Australian university. As such it provides an entry pathway that is accessible to many groups that could not otherwise access such a program, including many adults in full-time employment, many people in rural and isolated areas, and prisoners in custody. The TPP program guarantees an undergraduate place at USQ for all students who successfully complete the course and is recognised as a basis for entry by most tertiary education institutions in Queensland. Annual enrolments approach 1,000 students. Around three-quarters of the students study TPP free of charge on the basis of recognised disadvantage through the Commonwealth's enabling provision; the remainder of the students are fee-paying. Around 80 students per semester are inmates of correctional centers, studying while confined – representing USQ's **Correctional Services Program**. The support services provided to TPP students directly by OPACS include student orientation, a free-call telephone number for student inquiries and assistance, two full-time student support officers, and regular tele- and audiographic tutorials.

**Mathematics Support Program.** Various programs are offered by OPACS in conjunction with the Faculties to meet the needs of specific groups of students, particularly the educationally disadvantaged and female students:

- The Foundation Maths Program which offers an alternative first year math unit in many undergraduate courses. In 1998, 397 students enrolled in this unit and 260 were selected for preparatory maths support.
- The 'Engineering in Practice' unit which incorporates math and communications support within a more mainstreamed context.
- The Engineering Support Program which was implemented in 1998 for 306 students enrolled in 64612 Algebra and Calculus I.

Maths support programs are available in print, CD-ROM and web-based self-paced formats, and include self-testing.

**Learning Centre.** The OPACS Learning Centre provides drop-in support, diagnostic testing and workshops. Some 3,000 students have contact with the Centre per annum for mathematics and communications support, diagnostic testing and special workshops. A Learning Centre also operates on USQ's small branch campus located at Hervey Bay. Although primarily servicing the on-campus student population, the Centres are being increasingly utilised by distance students, primarily through telephone contact.

**Distance Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS).** USQ maintains several successful peer-assisted learning programs, including the 'Proctor Programs' offered by the Faculty of Business and the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS) offered by OPACS which employ learning assistance by trained peer tutors as a basis for academic learning support. These programs typically target challenging first year units in Business, Accounting, Economics and Law. Distance PALS is an adaptation of PALS for challenging distance units, including

## *Sources of Confusion*

51008 Economics and 64001 Data Analysis, conducted in selected geographical areas. Its characteristics are that it:

- inducts students into the expectations and requirements of distance education university studies in the context of a specific content area;
- is only implemented in units which distance education students have historically found challenging, most typically first-year core units;
- is implemented at the express invitation and in cooperation with faculty academic and administrative staff;
- is implemented and monitored by academic staff with an education background;
- is available to all enrolled students irrespective of their prior academic performance;
- is conducted from early in the semester before students encounter academic difficulties;
- provides training for the student leaders in appropriate group facilitation and distance education learning methods; and
- provides a structure in which distance education students can meet together, with guidance, to work through unit content collaboratively.

The programs have been particularly successful among students with low entry scores, with students who attended Distance PALS performing substantially better than those who chose not to or were unable to attend (Couchman, 1999).

### *4.2.4 Student Services*

Student Services at USQ provides a range of developmental and support services to external students. These include career and employment services, counselling, disability support, learning enhancement programs, financial advisory services, and health and chaplaincy services. Extensive use is made of telephone and e-mail contact, the posting of services and information on the web, and personal contact (including such services as learning enhancement workshops), particularly during events such as residential schools and orientation programs. In all cases students are also able to arrange out-of-hours consultations via telephone or e-mail, which include contact with professional counsellors or, if seen as more appropriate, peer counsellors. (The Peer Counselling Service involves fourth year Psychology students who receive credit for their experience.) Careers and Employment Services also utilise a web-based discussion newsgroup and make available a specially designed careers counselling program via Continuing Education for external students. The section works closely with Outreach Services and the RLO Network, particularly in such areas as disability support, welfare support and health.

### *4.2.5 Other Services Supporting Distance Students*

Although outside the scope of this paper, USQ organises special support for distance students through other key operational sections including the Library, Information Technology Services and the International Office. Particularly important for keeping students informed and involved is **USQconnect**, the USQ student intranet on the world wide web. It is accessible to currently enrolled students via a user name and password and provides students with the following range of information and services: electronic course materials for an increasing number of units; access to the Library catalogues, electronic journals, articles and text databases; secure access to enrolment details, unit assignment and end of semester results; faculty information on departments, courses, policies, and staff details; e-mail; conferencing and group communication; internet access; Outreach Electronic Noticeboard (refer above); and 'frequently asked questions' (FAQ) at [www.usq.edu.au/usqconnect](http://www.usq.edu.au/usqconnect).

## 5. Conclusion

Open and distance learning / flexible delivery provides new means to address old problems but it does not fall outside the sorts of considerations that have always influenced good teaching. A concern for appropriate pedagogy, strategies to ensure appropriate contact and dialogue between stakeholders in the learning process and suitable strategies to ensure that appropriate levels of support are provided which meet the specific needs of individual students are as much features of distance learning as they are of more traditional face-to-face learning approaches.

Like face-to-face teaching, the detail of the approaches and strategies undertaken to deliver flexible learning will ultimately influence such factors as the quality of the educational environment established, the effectiveness of the process in achieving the intended educational goals, and the equitability of the educational provision so created.

At USQ the aim is to provide for distance students a learning environment that:

- is student-centred;
- caters to a diverse range of needs;
- exploits state-of-the-art flexible delivery pedagogy;
- provides for interaction with staff and peers;
- places an emphasis on the need for student support, particularly for first-time university learners; and
- provides students with choice.

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks are extended to Suzanne King, Taisoo Kim Watson, George Petroff, Linda Galligan and Robyn Pigozzo for providing information on USQ services. Thanks also to John Clarke for serving as a sounding board for the arguments developed in this paper. Some of the material on USQ programs and services described in this paper has been taken from the University's promotional and student information literature.

## References

- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas: A brief guide for lecturers and supervisors*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Couchman, J. (1999). *Report on Distance PALS (Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy for Distance Education Students): 51008 Economics, Semester 2 1998*. Toowoomba: Office of Preparatory and ACademic Support (OPACS), University of Southern Queensland.
- Goodsir, W.W. (1978). Knowles' term 'andragogy' and its implications for adult education. *Australian Journal of Adult Education*, 18, 10-18.
- Hall, J. (1996). The educational paradigm shift: Implications for ICDE and the distance learning community. *Open Praxis*, 2, 27-36.
- Laurillard, D. (1993). *Rethinking university teaching: A framework for the effective use of educational technology*. London: Routledge.
- McKay, M., & Clarke, J. (1998, 4 May). Resource issues in flexible delivery - the way forward. Paper presented at the National Scholarly Communications Forum Round Table No. 8, Hyatt Hotel, Canberra.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Mitchell, I. (1993). *Providing feedback to students on their academic work*. Staff Development Papers, Number 3. Toowoomba: Distance Education Centre, USQ.
- Mitchell, I., & Timmins, J. (1993). *Student support*. Staff Development Papers, Number 2. Toowoomba: Distance Education Centre, USQ.
- Morgan, C., & O'Reilly, M. (1999). *Assessing open and distance learners*. London: Kogan Page.
- Peoples, K. (1999, August). On-line learning: Seven best-practice principles. *The Australian TAFE Teacher*, 11-13.
- Postle, G.D., & Sturman A. (2000, 12-13 June). Models of learning as a factor in online education: An Australian case study. Paper delivered at the Society for Research in Higher Education Conference, Stirling, UK.
- Richardson, J.T.E. (1994). Mature students in higher education: A literature survey on approaches to studying. *Studies in Higher Education*, 19(3), 309-324.
- Richardson, L. (1995). The medium and the message. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 11(1), 1-11.
- Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee (1994). *Inquiry into the development of open learning in Australia, part 1*. Canberra: Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee.
- Slattery, B. (1989, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter). Lifelong education revisited. *The Australian TAFE Teacher*, 39, 41, 43, 45, 47-8.
- Taylor, J.C. (1995). Distance education technologies: The fourth generation. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 11(2), 1-7.
- Taylor, P.G., Lopez, L., & Quadrelli, C. (1996). *Flexibility, technology and academics' practices: Tantalising tales and muddy maps*. Canberra: AGPS.
- University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (2000a). Vice-Chancellor's Home Page. Retrieved 29 January 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.usq.edu.au/>.
- University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (2000b). How USQ Library clients rank their Library service. *Library Lines*, 36, 1. Retrieved 30 June 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.usq.edu.au/library/about/LibraryLines/Liblin36.htm>.
- University of Colorado (2000). Instructional design models. Retrieved 21 November 2000 from the World Wide Web: [http://www.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc\\_data/idmodels.html](http://www.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/idmodels.html)
- van Dusen, G.C. (1997). *The virtual campus: Technology and reform in higher education*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, The George Washington University.

## SKILLS AND CONTENT: LOCATING THE BOUNDARY

Tanya Clarke

The University of Melbourne

*In clarifying the role of a learning skills adviser in a tertiary institution a distinction is always made between teaching academic skills and addressing content. The latter is seen as outside the boundaries of the role, and yet experience working with some individual students makes it clear that in order to develop students' intellectual skills and further their intellectual development, maintaining this distinction can be problematic. This is particularly true when an adviser has a grounding in particular fields of knowledge relevant to the subjects the student is undertaking. What, then, constitutes skills teaching and what constitutes content knowledge? Are we addressing skills or content when we help students clarify a particular methodological approach? Similarly, are we teaching skills or content when we identify or clarify the dominant conceptual frameworks in a discipline and explain how they might be used to make sense of experience, observation or evidence? Does crossing over into what might be considered content compromise our relationship with faculties? Furthermore, are we reducing the complexity of our role as learning skills advisers when we address the confusion about our role by asserting the difference between skills and content teaching? This paper addresses these issues through examining case studies of two mature age students. What I hope will emerge is an appreciation of the need for learning skills advisers to be flexible in responding to the complex learning needs of those who present for learning support, while being mindful of the need for clear boundaries in relation to our role.*

In our role as learning skills advisers a distinction is always made between teaching academic skills and addressing content. It would appear this distinction is made for two main reasons. Firstly, we see students from a range of disciplines and it is impossible for us to be cognisant with content knowledge in all those fields. If students are having difficulties with understanding content it would be unprofessional of us to attempt to address these with students even if we had some knowledge in a discipline, given the rapid development of thinking in most fields of knowledge. We would be treading on dangerous ground to enter into this arena and would rightly refer them back to their tutors or lecturers. This leads to the other main reason for maintaining the boundary between skills and content. To maintain some credibility for what we do in our institutional settings it is imperative that we maintain good relations with academic staff and faculties. This may be compromised if we were viewed as encroaching on their territory.

However, helping students with specific content knowledge is one end of the spectrum of addressing content, at the other end is engaging in a dialogue with students about a topic for an essay, for example, in order to help them clarify their argument or explore the dimensions of the topic. And as human beings who have studied, who read and who have had a range of experiences, we in our role as learning skills advisers have much to bring to this dialogue. It would be a denial of the knowledge we do have, and also diminish the potential richness of the intellectual exchange, if we did not draw upon our knowledge and understanding to foster a student's intellectual development. I know that in my own case, just as it would be for all learning skills advisers, my academic background and interests enable me to have an informed dialogue or intellectual conversation with many students for whom this provides a means to deepen their thinking and understanding of a topic, or even to understand a way of thinking in a particular discipline.

To say something about my own academic background and interests: I have actually completed two undergraduate arts degrees, majoring in history, history and philosophy of science, social theory and psychology. I also have postgraduate qualifications in education, women's studies and counselling. In the past I have taught year 12 Australian history for many years to mature age students, and developed a year 12 women's history course and a year 12 women's studies course. In addition to my work as a learning skills adviser I also work as a psychologist. My therapeutic orientation in this work is a psychoanalytic one and I continue my professional development in this field by attending a regular clinical learning group which involves the reading of psychoanalytic texts. Psychoanalytic thinking has had an impact in the fields of literary, social and cultural theory, film theory, philosophy and politics, among others. I have also had an ongoing interest in politics, issues of social justice and development, literature and film. This background and my interests mean that I am familiar with both the general debates and broad knowledge areas, and methodologies, in a range of arts and social science subjects. At the learning skills unit where I work there is some recognition of the fact that experience in certain subject areas is an advantage when working with students studying in those areas; if possible an attempt is made to match the adviser with the student in this respect.

Of course advisers also see students from areas they have no background in and can still provide a valuable service to those students because there is a strong base of generic skills in the work we do. In addition, working as learning skills advisors with a range of students from different disciplines gives experience in the ways of thinking in those disciplines. While it may be true that learning skills advisors can offer more to some students than to others, not just on the basis of their greater knowledge base in some subject areas but also because there can be a greater rapport with some students than with others, all students are able to benefit from seeing an advisor because of the advisor's experience and expertise in academic discourse and culture. The challenge for tertiary institutions is to provide the resources that would enable any student who wishes to see an advisor the possibility of doing so.

This notwithstanding, I think it important to acknowledge the intellectual understandings that we learning skills advisers do bring to our work with students as we attempt to foster learning. The other half of the equation is of course the students who, as Crebbin (2000, p. 13) notes, bring their own, "expectations, emotional propensity, and self-understandings, in all the processes of meaning-making." Our field has begun to grapple with ways to theorise learning (Webb, 2000) and to understand 'how learning happens' (Crebbin, 2000) for students. Crebbin (2000) believes that learning is complex, personal and emotionally laden, and Webb (2000, p. 11) calls for "Reflective practice [that] starts with authentic listening to the needs and requirements of the particular people involved [in the learning process] and taking account of their own understandings and appreciation." I support these views but also want to assert what I believe is a critical aspect of learning: it occurs best in the context of a relationship. The psychoanalyst Bion comments that in learning, emotion and cognition are brought together and that this occurs always in the context of a meaningful relationship between people. He also distinguishes what he calls 'coming to know' from the acquisition of pieces of knowledge (Riesenberg Malcolm, 1990). The 'coming to know' what something really means, to be interested in fostering 'real' learning, is at the forefront of my work with students and where we are engaged in a meaningful relationship.

Before discussing my work with two students (which both explores the process of their individual learning and highlights the issue of the boundary between skills and content) I wish to draw attention to the critical factor of the context in which we do our work, and which impinges on this work. Taylor (2000) argues that people in our field should 'do everything in our power' to maintain our individual work with students, which he views as the ideal. Of course this work is under threat from government and higher education authorities (Taylor, 2000). These bodies, concerned with monetary restraint, have also made decisions which have impacted on students' educational experiences in their academic courses. McCalman (2000) comments on three recent reports which she says reveal how effectively "accountability", "down-sizing" and "user pays" have crippled teaching and research in universities. A report

by the National Tertiary Employees Union (NTEU) details staff exhaustion and burn-out as academics' weekly hours of work extend beyond 60 hours. This of course has implications for how available academic staff may be for individual students. Tertiary institutions have also responded to these developments. Tutorial sizes have been increasing, for example, with some tutorials containing up to 25 students, making it less likely for individual students to contribute to discussion. In some universities there has been talk of reducing the number of tutorials or cutting them out altogether. Tutorials may be the only opportunity for a student to engage in a conversation about their academic work or where they may be known more fully as an individual by academics. And of course the model of individual tutorials that existed at Cambridge and Oxford seems now like a utopian dream. These developments have implications if one accepts that learning occurs in the context of a meaningful relationship, something recognised in the Cambridge/Oxford model. It also has implications for our work as learning skills advisers. For some students, their contact with us may be their only experience of a one on one relationship with a professional connected to academia.

McCalman (2000) comments on another report that indicates undergraduate students are disengaging from the world of tertiary learning. It appears that nearly all students engage in paid work to pay university and living costs and are so stressed they rarely attend lectures and would be happy to take them off the Web, and do the minimum of reading. She concludes that students' "time at university is no longer a transformative experience." For the two mature age students I now want to focus on, university has in fact been a transformative experience. It appears that the quality of this experience has been greatly enhanced by the opportunity they have had to engage in a meaningful intellectual (and human) relationship.

### **Therese**

Therese is a woman in her early fifties whom I first met in 1997. She had the chance to enter university through the mature age entry bridging scheme (MAEBS). This scheme was initiated by the Arts Faculty in 1996. It provided mature age students without year 12 who fitted the DEETYA categories of disadvantage with an alternate entry to the University of Melbourne. Therese was enrolled in the academic skills subject I taught that was a compulsory subject for MAEBS students.

Therese's background is an extraordinary one. She was brought up in institutions (Catholic orphanages) from birth and was actually born with a vision impairment that nobody picked up. In an intelligence test she took when she was seven years old, she was classified as intellectually impaired when she could not in fact read the test. She was sent to an institution for the intellectually disabled where she spent her time looking after the other children and where she received no formal education. She ran away from this institution at fourteen and was sent to a Catholic home for wayward girls in the country. Here the girls had to work hard, in the laundry for example, and if they were disobedient could be kept in isolation. Therese always had a strong sense of social justice and her own rights but, given her precarious situation in these institutions, also felt intimidated to some extent by those in authority and had no faith that she would be listened to or that anyone could be there for her. She left the institution at 18 and went to work in a household where she looked after the house and children. She married and had two children of her own who are now grown up and independent. She lives with her husband in a suburb in the outer east of Melbourne.

Contrary to her childhood assessment Therese is in fact highly intelligent, and she has always had a passion for learning. Without any formal teaching she educated herself by listening to the radio, taking a passionate interest in politics and issues of social justice. She developed an extraordinary aural memory and an intense desire to gain the education that was denied her. I think she also wanted to expunge the label that had been applied to her as a child, where she had been classified as uneducable. She found her way to a neighbourhood learning centre and was fortunate to find a person who had some capacity to understand her and could recognise her intellectual strengths. She was helped to develop literacy skills and went on to complete some year 12 subjects in small classes where the teachers were very supportive of students and engaged with them in an ongoing and sustained way. She was encouraged to attempt to

## *Sources of Confusion*

gain a tertiary education and the MAEBS scheme instituted at Melbourne the year before (and discontinued at the end of 1999) offered her the possibility to do this. She also approached the Learning Skills Unit (LSU) for regular additional help, given her vision impairment and the lack of formal education that had left her with ongoing difficulties with spelling and grammar. Her spelling of words was largely phonetic based on what she heard. Given most people's poor diction and the vagaries of English spelling, this was an area of difficulty for her.

In addition to being her teacher in the academic skills subject she undertook in her first semester at Melbourne, I also began to work with her on a weekly basis (towards the end of that semester). She had felt overwhelmed by attempting two subjects. As a minimum, the MAEBS scheme required students to undertake a compulsory skills subject alongside another arts subject each semester for two semesters, and if they passed all four subjects they were offered a place in the Bachelor of Arts degree course (BA). Because of her vision impairment, Therese was allowed to take three semesters to complete MAEBS, and she was offered a place in the BA in second semester of 1998. Since then she has undertaken one subject a semester and I have continued to work with her on a weekly basis.

How do we work together? Because of her vision impairment Therese has developed a learning style that relies heavily on verbal exchange. It is in talking out ideas that she clarifies her thinking and grapples with the new ideas she is being presented with. As she has a passionate interest in politics and social issues, she has chosen subjects in sociology, history and politics. The specific subjects she has undertaken have related to inequality, contemporary social issues, third world development and feminism. In all these areas I have some background knowledge and I share with Therese a strong left leaning. There is, therefore, much common ground we share and she does feel that I have some understanding of both the way she works and the particular difficulties she struggles with.

When she comes in with an essay question, initially we talk about it. She attends all lectures and can retain a lot of the material presented in them, because of her exceptionally developed aural memory. She, therefore, has a basic orientation to the subject and can bring this to bear to the discussion of the specific essay question. She usually chooses an essay topic she is passionately interested in and she always has very strong views on the topic, informed by her own general knowledge, the lectures and the tutorial reading. Practical difficulties, both in being able to get the reading material put on tape ahead of time and the time consuming nature of trying to absorb, and take note of, material heard on tape, have meant that accessing the reading material is often very difficult for her and takes much longer than for other students. It is still important for her, after the initial brainstorming stage and development of a plan for her approach to the question, to continue to talk about the ideas she is developing. This is an intellectual exchange in which we are both active participants. I respond to what she is saying and highlight those things she may have overlooked. Because she has very strong views sometimes what I also do is show her how they might need to be modified to take into account the more tentative, and 'objective', stance taken in academic discourse. We are both irreverent so this is done in an atmosphere of good humour and my own frequent critical stance towards academic discourse means that I always affirm her own knowledge and point of view. She is in fact committed to 'learning the rules of the game' both because there is validity in that approach and because she recognises that mastering these rules gives what she says more power.

However, what I want to emphasise here is how important it is for Therese's intellectual development and growth that she be able to engage in an intellectual dialogue about her work with someone who does understand her more deeply and also validates her. This is also vital for her because she is in an environment at home where this dialogue does not take place and where there is little understanding and support for her intellectual endeavours. Tutorials can also provide the space for dialogue but can be a bit hit and miss in terms of a student being in a group where the majority of students feel free, or are stimulated, to talk. Sometimes tutorials are a valuable avenue for the discussion Therese needs and sometimes not. While she is usually fairly vocal in tutorials, in some of the feminist theory subjects she has taken there were some very articulate students with a background in the subject matter under discussion

## *Sources of Confusion*

that she found intimidating. She, therefore, said little. But she also needs more in the way of an intellectual exchange of ideas than is possible in the most stimulating of tutorials.

Being a mature age student, and living quite a distance from the university, has also meant it has been hard for her to make friends with the younger students or engage in conversations with them outside of class. She often finds other mature age students have a very different perspective from hers and are more conservative in their views and, therefore, it is difficult to have an enriching intellectual conversation with them as they are not on the same wavelength. While most of the academics who take her courses have been supportive, they have little time available for extended conversations with students, for the reasons outlined above. Given Therese's institutional experiences she also finds it difficult to ask for something in the first place, or if she comes up against unwillingness or indifference she does not pursue the issue, believing that you really cannot expect anything from anyone. Approaching busy or indifferent academics to discuss her work has been a difficulty for her. Therefore, it has been nearly impossible for her to find a place at university or at home where she could develop her thinking through dialogue.

Academics have also been reluctant to provide alternative forms of assessment if, as in some subjects, she has had to complete two research essays. This is a daunting task for her, whereas completing one research essay and one reflective essay or a critical review of a stipulated number of texts is much more manageable. She puts an enormous amount of time into her academic work and few academics would understand the time it requires for her to write a research essay. Getting hold of research material is a problem, even with research support from the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU), as research assistants need to have some capacity to know where to look for material and how to search and not just to look up catalogue numbers of given texts. This material needs to be put on tape as this is the easiest way for Therese to access information, although she can read print that is magnified to a font size of 24. There are always delays in getting this done. She will often ask friends to read material onto tape, as this is quicker than getting it done through official channels. Once she has the material she has to listen to it, and rewinding and going back over something on tape is enormously time consuming. She writes onto computer because she has software installed that makes this possible. Because of her difficulties with spelling she may take hours to check the spelling of a word that she only knows phonetically, and which may be too far away from the original spelling for a spell check to be much use.

Unlike most first year students we see at the LSU who have problems developing an argument or their own point of view and rely too much on secondary sources, Therese has the opposite problem. She always has a well developed point of view and a strong argument but, because of the difficulties in research and reading, often has problems in locating the appropriate evidence to support her points, another important aspect of academic discourse. And this is another area in which it may be considered I cross the boundary from skills teaching to dealing with content in my work with Therese because I frequently am aware of sources that might be useful for providing evidence and which I can locate for her. Given the difficulties she has, this seems a reasonable thing to do in her case.

When she has completed a draft of her essay I then work on this with her on the computer. Hand written corrections on a hard copy are very difficult for her to read and it is time consuming for her to then make the corrections if she can read them. As I work with her on her draft I read aloud the text of her essay and she can 'hear' problems I identify. We then work on how it could be worded differently. She is actually passionate about words — learning new words and being clear on what they mean and learning to use them appropriately in her own essays — and she has developed a sophisticated vocabulary. She has a very strong sense of the ownership of her work and if I suggest a word or way of expressing something that may be more accurate or clarifies her meaning, she will consider this or maybe suggest another appropriate word. There is no sense of me doing the work for her or of unduly influencing what she is saying because she has a very good mind and knows what she wants to say. Sometimes we work on links between ideas or the structure of her piece of writing because this is difficult to do when you cannot visually organise material in a plan. Mostly she

## *Sources of Confusion*

has to hold the details of a plan in her head, something most of us would find extremely difficult to do. In the three years I have been working with her, her skills have developed enormously, and she usually receives grades above 75% on her essays. It is easier for her in subjects that are less evidenced based, which unfortunately history is not, or where there is less complex theory to grasp. Getting a handle on complex ideas in texts without being able to go back easily over the reading material is very difficult.

Therese's previous educational disadvantage as well as the nature of her disability, have meant that it is necessary for her to continue to receive ongoing learning support. This is not a question of dependency but recognition of the reality of her individual needs. What has also been critical, I believe, in her intellectual growth and development has been the nature of the relationship I have with her. This relationship is a meaningful one and one of mutual respect where I recognise her capacity and we both enjoy the intellectual conversations about the work. I think that working with a student such as Therese highlights the complexity of our individual work with students and the fact that it can be inappropriate to assert a rigid boundary between skills and content. Clearly, I could not help Therese get the university education she so clearly deserves and which, I believe, is her right (when our society has failed to provide an education for her in the past) without crossing that boundary. I feel perfectly comfortable in doing so because of the uniqueness of her learning needs.

### **Georgie**

Georgie is a woman in her early thirties of Greek parentage and for family reasons, that intersect with class and gender issues, did not get the chance to continue her education beyond high school. She married young, to a man she had been going out with since adolescence, and has a daughter who has just turned four. Georgie also gained entry to a BA at the University of Melbourne via MAEBS, in its last year, and undertook philosophy subjects in her first year, along with the two compulsory academic skills subjects. She has always had an interest in philosophical issues and ideas and was passionate about having the chance to receive a tertiary education. She was a conscientious student in my skills class, asking a lot of questions and needing to understand fully everything she was doing. She was somewhat anxious and needed to be reassured that she was on the right track. I used to spend time during the break in the class or afterwards clarifying things for her, sometimes in relation to her philosophy subject. I saw her infrequently in individual sessions at the Learning Skills Unit in the first year, and when I did see her it was mainly in relation to particular assignments for her philosophy subjects and for exam preparation. The Philosophy Department is a smaller department than many and academic staff often do make themselves available to students. Georgie did have access to her tutor in second semester, whom she went to for clarification of particular philosophical concepts that she was having difficulty with. She ended up getting good grades in her subjects taken as part of MAEBS.

In first semester this year she decided to take an Australian history subject because she felt she knew little about the history of this country. I started to see her more regularly in individual sessions in this semester as the change of discipline proved a somewhat difficult one for her in that the methodology in this area is very different from that employed in philosophy. Australian history was also something I had a good grounding in, having taught in this area for a number of years, and I was very aware of the ways of thinking and constructing knowledge in this discipline. After the abstract reasoning in philosophy, Georgie was very moved by the subject matter of the history course, particularly the history of the treatment of Aborigines in this country. She also found the treatment of female convicts by the penal administrators hard to comprehend on rational grounds. When she had to choose her own topic for her research essay, she decided to explore why convict women were described in particular terms by penal administrators and wealthy free settlers and why they underwent particular forms of punishment. These questions also touched deeply her own feelings about being a woman and judgements made of women. Initially she had a hypothesis regarding this, based on a fairly simplistic feminist view. She started to examine the primary documents and realised an explanation for the behaviour she was trying to understand required a more sophisticated conceptualisation.

In this process I was engaged in an intellectual dialogue with her about methodological issues, the use of evidence for example, as this was completely different from the methodology in philosophy. In addition, because in philosophy ideas and concepts are the objects of study, she had little understanding of how, in a subject like history, the use of different conceptual frameworks could be used to make sense of the evidence. In other words in a subject like history the ideas are generally not the object of study in themselves but are used to make sense of something else. Lectures and tutorials in her course did not address directly how theory is used in this discipline, although the first year history course handbook does outline a number of the dominant theoretical frameworks. I tried to explain this to her as she was involved in the process of researching her essay and formulating her ideas. I remember I made the analogy that theories were like different windows through which one can look at the world, and gave examples of how in very general terms a Marxist, say, or a feminist might look at the world and explain a particular behaviour. She came back the next week in great excitement because she had actually had an intellectual breakthrough. She was sitting on the toilet picturing theories as windows onto the world and something 'clicked'. She came to really 'know how' intellectual frameworks are used to make sense of reality, and that there are different ways one can look at something.

This breakthrough saw her take a giant intellectual leap and the quality of her work and her thinking increased dramatically. It also meant that I could talk to her about ideas from other disciplines, too, that might help her answer the question she began with in her research essay. Mary Douglas (1966), an anthropologist, has written on taboos in particular cultures and the need for societies to maintain boundaries in order to maintain the social order. Foucault (c.1977), in *Discipline and Punish*, theorises about the meaning of particular punishments and how these reflect the preoccupations of a society. These ideas and others from sociology, coupled with an historical understanding of the cultural period in which convict women were viewed in particular ways and meted out particular punishments (gained through a close reading of primary documents and through the use of relevant secondary texts) enabled Georgie to write a sophisticated academic essay. In doing so, she demonstrated a growth in her intellectual skills that might not have occurred so quickly, if at all, if she had not had the benefit of a meaningful relationship in which she could engage in conversations that addressed her intellectual preoccupations and their emotional resonances.

Georgie, like Therese, also lives in a world where her intellectual interests are not understood or supported. With her friends and family, and her husband, it was not possible for her to have conversations about what she was studying or what she was grappling with intellectually. In fact she often experiences hostility from those around her because she is interested in things they do not understand or value, and the path she is on takes her further away from them. This has been a very painful experience for her but she is committed to this path because it gives meaning to her life and she could not now live without intellectual sustenance. As for most of us, I suspect, I did in fact have the experience of growing up in a relatively intellectually enriched environment. I was never studying in an intellectual vacuum or in a situation where I could not have conversations about the ideas that mattered to me. My daughter, who has now completed an honours Arts degree at Melbourne University, has also been brought up in an environment where ideas are discussed and where she has the benefit of two university educated parents. Deficiencies in the university system, or the schooling system for that matter, do not have such a profound effect on students who have the means to get their intellectual needs met in other ways. It did not seem possible for Georgie to have the conversations she had with me about methodology and theoretical frameworks, and to be given ideas for relevant reading outside her discipline, from elsewhere in the University or in the world she lived in. Was I crossing the boundary between skills and content? I was doing no more than I would have done for my daughter in discussing her academic work with her.

To my mind it is as Bion (cited in Riesenberg Malcolm, 1990) says: learning is a cognitive and emotional experience that does occur in the context of a meaningful relationship. For Therese and Georgie learning is a powerful experience; ideas have the power both to move one emotionally and to impact upon the course of one's life. Georgie, in studying existential

philosophy in second semester this year, was grappling with what Sartre had to say about good and bad faith and about freedom and the choices we have in our lives. It was these ideas, expressed by people attempting to make sense of human existence (and not writing so university students can study their ideas in first year philosophy) that profoundly affected Georgie and gave her the courage to leave a marriage that had not been functioning for a long time. She felt she had to live and act in good faith. For Therese, too, the ideas she was exposed to in the course of her university study also led her to make changes in her life. This is a far cry from the young university students Janet McCalman (2000, p. 15) writes of in her article, for whom she says, "A degree is just a meal ticket; an arts degree a boutique experience that confers a certain cultural gloss."

To engage in the kind of relationship I have described with these two students, where meaningful conversation is possible and where the uniqueness of a person and their learning needs is acknowledged, is in fact what makes my work as a learning skills adviser so rewarding. It is not that I develop this kind of relationship with every student that I work with, or that every student needs this kind of relationship. However, it has been the work with the few students I see regularly, with whom I can engage in a meaningful way about their academic work, that has kept me in the job; it has prevented the kind of disillusionment with the work it is possible to encounter in our field. It is just as important to me, as to the student, that there is room in our work for an acknowledgement of the complexity of individuals and their learning needs, and a recognition that at times the boundary between skills and content cannot be so rigidly maintained.

While my primary concern as a learning skills advisor is to respond to the individual learning needs of the students I work with, I have indicated that the changed university environment has impacted on the capacity for particular students to have their needs met. It could be argued that this puts greater pressure on us and perhaps masks deficiencies in the institutions that need to be addressed. I think it is important that both learning skills advisors and academics recognise their common interests in this regard, and that united action in highlighting the problems and lobbying for change at the institutional level could also help bridge the traditional divide between our two areas of work. In the post-modern world boundaries of all kinds are being challenged and students' learning can be more fruitfully fostered, to my mind, if the boundary both between skills and content, and between the work of academics and learning skills advisors, is not so rigidly asserted.

### References

- Crebbin, W. (2000). How does learning happen? In Crosling, G., Moore, T., Vance, S.(Ed.). *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimensions of our work* (pp. 13-19). Monash, Vic.: Monash University.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of pollution and taboo*. London: Ark Paperbacks.
- Foucault, M. (c.1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Sheridan, A. (Trans). New York: Pantheon Books.
- McCalman, J. (2000). Settling for second-class. *The Age*. July 27, p 15.
- Riesenberg Malcolm, R. (1990). As if: the phenomenon of not learning. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 71, 385-92.
- Taylor, G. (2000). The 'generic' and the disciplined: Can universal and particular be reconciled? In Crosling, G., Moore, T., Vance, S.(Ed.). *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimensions of our work* (pp. 157-163). Monash, Vic.: Monash University.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Webb, G. (2000). Learning theory. In Crosling, G., Moore, T., Vance, S.(Ed.). *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimensions of our work* (pp. 7-12). Monash, Vic.: Monash University.

**ACCESS TO ACADEMIA: AN ACCREDITED COURSE  
FOR MATURE AGE STUDENTS**

Tanya Clarke  
The University of Melbourne

*Entering a tertiary institution involves entry into a completely new culture, with few signposts and little guidance for students. This can be a profoundly disorientating experience for mature age students who may not have been studying for many years and who may also have been educated in a system that had very different rules, expectations and understandings about what constitutes knowledge. As a teacher/lecturer of a semester-length academic skills subject offered to students enrolled in the Arts Faculty as part of its Community Access Program, I see myself as an interpreter of this new academic culture, reducing confusion about the nature of academic discourse. However, I am also constrained by the rules of that culture. As the subject is assessed students must conform to assessment requirements set by the Faculty of Arts. The high grades students need (to gain a HECS based place in the BA through this program) require a rapid process of acculturation and rapid development of academic skills, particularly critical thinking skills. This paper describes the strategies employed in this subject to both reduce confusion about the nature of academic discourse and to develop students' academic skills. While addressing the students' confusion and anxiety, I may also help them struggle with the realities of academic study and their own intellectual capacity to undertake this study.*

I would like to begin with a quote by Thomas Ogden, a psychoanalytic theoretician and clinician, who addresses the issue of how difficult it is to learn, something I think many of us tend to forget unless we regularly expose ourselves to the hazards of learning:

A reader dares to experience the disturbing feeling of not knowing each time he begins reading a new piece of writing. We regularly create the soothing illusion for ourselves that we have nothing to lose from the experience of reading, and that we can only gain from it...In attempting to learn, we subject ourselves to the tension of dissolving the connection between ideas that we have thus far relied upon in a particular way: what we think we know helps us to identify who we are (or think we are). (Ogden, 1989, p. 2)

Learning can, therefore, be a profoundly challenging experience. This is never more so than for students entering a tertiary institution, where they are in fact entering a completely new culture - both different from the culture of a secondary school and different from that which operates in the everyday world. It can be a particularly disorienting experience for mature age students, who may not have been studying for many years and who may also have been educated in a system that had very different rules, expectations and understandings about what constitutes knowledge. Those of you over forty, as I am, may be able to remember back to High school history, say, where the issue of history as a site of contestation was never raised. The study of history largely consisted of the memorisation or synthesising of 'facts' about our past. How different, then, to be confronted with a range of theoretical frameworks that can be employed to interpret events in the past and with the notion that there is no one historical truth or reality. I can remember clearly coming back as a mature age student myself in 1987 to complete a second Arts degree at Melbourne University, majoring in social theory and psychology. Studying social theory was extremely challenging and even distressing for me as I was forced to question the humanist assumptions that underpinned my world-view. I

suffered in many ways through that first year when what I believed, and thought I knew, was negated by structuralist and post-structuralist theory. It felt like the rug was being pulled from underneath my feet. At least I could bring this experience to bear in teaching an academic skills subject for mature age students attempting to enter a Bachelor of Arts degree (BA) at Melbourne University without the normal entry requirements. I think I did have some understanding of what it was to be confronted with new ways of thinking, and of struggling with the difficulties of learning, as these students do in entering a tertiary institution for the first time.

In this paper I will focus on my role as interpreter of this new culture in the teaching of the subject Academic Skills 100-001, emphasising the critical role the tasks for assessment played in developing in students the necessary academic skills they required for entry into the BA. This may prove useful for other teachers of tertiary academic skills courses.

I had taught this academic skills subject prior to the year 2000 for four years as part of a mature age entry bridging scheme (MAEBS). This scheme was discontinued at the end of 1999 for funding reasons. However, the Arts Faculty wanted to retain the subject due to positive student evaluations and it was offered as a subject to Community Access Program (CAP) students undertaking courses in the Faculty of Arts. CAP is designed to enable members of the public to undertake academic subjects outside a normal degree structure and in doing so offers a diverse cross-section of the community access to tertiary study at the University of Melbourne. This opportunity, however, comes at a price. Students pay approximately \$2,200 for four semester-length subjects, the minimum number of subjects taken over a year for which students have to achieve an academic average of approximately 70-75% if they wish to gain entry to a BA. This is actually a tall order for students who may not have completed secondary school and/or may not have undertaken any form of academic study for many years. Many CAP students pay their fees, undertake the requisite number of subjects and are completely unaware of how difficult it is to attain the grades that are required to gain entry into a degree course.

While gaining the grades necessary for entry to the BA places a burden on students, it also places a burden on me as a teacher. Many students are highly anxious and focussed on getting the grades, rather than on learning. As a teacher concerned with their intellectual development, I must try to keep the focus on learning, while being mindful of the reality they are facing. It also means that these students have to undergo a rapid process of acculturation, developing their academic skills quickly, if they hope to gain entry into the BA without too great a financial outlay. The development of critical thinking skills is particularly important, as these need to be demonstrated to some degree by students if they wish to gain these higher grades.

In the rest of this paper I will focus on what was taught in the course and the role of formal assessment as a teaching tool. I will not be engaging in the debate about the value of teaching what looks ostensibly like a generic study skills course, which has been addressed by Quinn (2000) in her paper. She outlines some advantages of teaching generic programs, primarily that they are being relatively easy to implement as they require few resources, and do not require sometimes sensitive collaboration with academics or reduction in course content. However, she views credit-bearing study skills units as a form of integrated skills support (Quinn, 2000). Chanock (2000) argues cogently for the teaching of academic skills in the context of subjects in the disciplines because these skills are both generic and discipline-specific. However, for CAP students at Melbourne University, being able to take a subject designed to make more explicit the nature of academic discourse in its more generic aspects was the best that could be offered them. In fact it would appear that most CAP students choose a relatively narrow range of first year subjects, largely from the disciplines of history, art history, classics, anthropology, politics and English, and, therefore, in teaching the course, examples of 'how knowledge is made' (Chanock, 2000) in these disciplines were frequently given. Buckland (2000) also supports the use of generic attributes as a framework for tertiary literacy teaching.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The Academic Skills course, which has been developed over five years, was designed to both aid in the acculturation process and to systematically teach the academic skills that would hopefully enable students to write a competent and critical academic essay, the main form of assessment in Arts subjects. The acculturation process is initially addressed through a two-day intensive course before the semester starts. This is not compulsory, and technically not part of the semester subject, but students enrolled in Academic Skills 100-001 are urged to take it. (This was part of the subject when it was offered as part of the MAEBS scheme.) The first unit offered in this intensive course familiarises students with the organisational structures of the university, the layout of the university and location of departmental offices, the processes necessary if students require extensions on work or need to apply for special consideration, the student services available on campus, and also addresses generally the expectations of university study and the role of various academics they will encounter and the different methods of instruction they will be exposed to. They are also given a tour of the library and shown how to use both the computer catalogue system and the computer system that enables them to search the web. Anxiety is somewhat alleviated by knowing these things ahead of time rather than having to discover them for themselves, as most new students are forced to do. Having a prolonged experience of not knowing where things are or how the system works can contribute to the feelings of being lost and alienated that many first year students initially experience.

Their needs as mature age students are also addressed, particularly in a unit on time management which acknowledges that as mature age students they are often juggling a number of competing demands on their time. A unit on note-taking from lectures is also part of the intensive program, as well as a unit on understanding course structure, which both explains the importance of course outlines in orienting a student in a particular subject and explores the issue of differences in academic discourse. This latter issue warrants ongoing attention, as part of the task of being a tertiary student is to come to grips with different discipline specific discourses. This is addressed throughout the semester length academic skills subject and is an essential aspect of the acculturation process as it relates to helping students find their way in this new academic world. Chanock (2000, p. 69) has addressed the problem of explicating academic discourse raised in the literature and highlights the dilemma of helping our students succeed by mastering academic discourse at the cost of them discarding "their own ways of thinking and writing in favour of the ways of the dominant class". However, she decides that one element in academic discourse is 'writing and reading against the grain' and that a university education is designed to get students to think critically and construct arguments. This is the stance I have taken towards academic discourse in my teaching of Academic Skills 100-001.

Along with explicating academic discourse, a strong focus in Academic Skills 100-001 is also the teaching of specific academic skills. These are taught in a weekly three hour class and involve the presentation of lecture material, activities that often occur in small groups and which are designed to reinforce the skills taught, and also whole class discussion. The subject begins with a class on how to approach reading in the tertiary context, with a focus on pre-reading skills to aid comprehension of complex texts. This is followed by a class on summarising arguments in texts and a class on reading texts critically. It is assumed that the skills of being able to comprehend a text and being able to identify the central argument in a text and the supporting points, distinguishing between these and supporting evidence, and to critically engage with what an author is saying, are skills vital to the task of producing a good tertiary essay. Four or five classes are then devoted to the specific task of essay writing: analysing essay questions and developing thinking in relation to an essay question; understanding the importance of structure in an essay and the role of paragraphs and how to link them; understanding the nature of academic evidence and how to incorporate the ideas of others into a constructed argument, using appropriate referencing; and understanding the requirements of academic writing style. Some classes are also devoted to understanding the way memory works to maximise retention of material, and also to presenting students with a range of study techniques that prepares them for different kinds of exams and enhances their ability to work under exam conditions. The course has a strong focus on the development of academic skills, and in a student evaluation questionnaire administered at the end of semester

## *Sources of Confusion*

two by a unit that functions as part of the central administration of the university, all students in the academic skills class strongly agreed that the subject met their intellectual needs.

Students also receive two resource books for the subject. The first contains the course outline, detailing the objectives for the course, the content of each class, the assessment requirements and assessment tasks, with criteria for each task, and the articles needed for the assessment tasks. The second book contains a copy of the overheads for each class, activities and exercises, and relevant handouts. Students are also given booklets and flyers produced by the LSU as they relate to the topics under discussion. The material in these books and the resource material handed out can be referred to by students at other times, and past students say they have often gone back and reread information that they may have forgotten or to refresh their memories.

Although the classes are taught sequentially, things already covered will be gone over again when the issues come up later or in the course of discussing the assessment tasks. A dominant element in the classes is an ongoing conversation that the students and I have about the nature of academic work, with me drawing upon my own subject knowledge in particular disciplines or experiences working with tertiary students, to give examples and explain the subject matter under discussion. This may be answering the question, 'What are conceptual frameworks?', and how can they be used to interpret evidence or to make sense of aspects of the social world, discussing the nature of evidence and how this may vary in different disciplines, or giving an example of an academic argument. Students are encouraged to see that information or arguments in academic texts are to be engaged with, and that they are expected to question what they are reading and to have thoughts about it. It is important that they recognise that academics, in academic texts, are frequently carrying on an ongoing debate or conversation with each other. The questions to be applied to a text when reading critically, articulated by Marshall and Rowland (1998), have been found to be a useful starting point for students in this process of beginning to think critically.

The nature of having an ongoing class with space for discussion and response to individual concerns and questions, has meant that I usually get to know students well. Many may also make individual appointments with me at the Learning Skills Unit (LSU) for help with work in their other Arts subjects. I am often aware, therefore, of their individual learning needs, the things they struggle with, and in some cases their educational and learning history. They perceive me as being somewhat separate from the academics who teach them in their other subjects, which relates to both my position as a learning skills advisor and not an academic, and the fact that my task in teaching them is to act as an interpreter of the academic world that they are attempting to come to grips with. I am also not strongly identified with this world and can be critical of aspects of academic discourse, recognising its limitations, but I also see it as my job to help students understand why academics do things the way they do. Being amongst fellow students who are also struggling with similar issues, adds to the freedom they feel in being able to ask the questions they may feel too intimidated to ask of academics or other younger students.

However, while I may be perceived as holding a different position to their other lecturers, and while I may know them in deeper ways than their other lecturers could possibly know them, I am still constrained by the rules of the culture I am interpreting to my students; the subject I teach must conform to assessment requirements set down by the Faculty of Arts. These requirements stipulate that students must complete written work equivalent to 4000 words, and I must assign marks that reflect an appropriate standard of academic work at the required grade level. Of course I do have autonomy in this marking but there may be questions asked if I assigned grades above 75%, say, for the majority of students, as Academic Skills 100-001 is recognised by the Faculty of Arts as equivalent to 12.5 credit points for selection purposes into the BA for CAP students. Initially, having to assign a grade to a piece of work felt difficult, as I was aware of the impact a particular grade may have on a student or the way it might contribute to them not realising their dreams. However, my work as a psychologist and therapist has made me realise the importance of human beings facing reality, no matter how painful that might be. Having a dream and then facing the reality of that experience, or your

## *Sources of Confusion*

own capacity to realise the dream, can be useful in clarifying what you do want or what you can achieve. For some students I have taught, attempting to gain a tertiary education has made them realise that this is not for them or they have not got the capacity to succeed, and, therefore, they can let go the dream or the fantasy of what has been denied them and get on with working out what else they can do. This can be liberating. A student from my class this semester wrote me a letter which accompanied his final essay and where he expressed his difficulty in being able to organise and develop his ideas. He identified this as a problem he has had since high school and which the study skills classes have highlighted. It was painful for him to acknowledge this but he concluded his letter by saying, "being aware of our limitations is as empowering as being aware of our strengths".

I have come to see that the formal assessment that is a necessary part of teaching a course for credit, and that could appear as compromising student learning in some respects, in fact plays a critical role in teaching and learning. From reading students' work I can get a clear idea of whether the students have learnt the skills I have been attempting to teach. It also provides me with a valuable teaching tool. In most of our work as academic skills advisors we see students one on one with work that has been assigned by the lecturer in the subject. We often focus on identifying the problems evident in the piece of work but may not have the time to actually teach them the academic skills they haven't been able to demonstrate or to provide a model of how it could be done. In relation to the latter we are usually helping students with work that has yet to be handed in, which could also raise ethical issues about what is the student's work and what ours, if we attempt to 'show them how'. In one off classes that of course have no assessment attached, we have no sense of whether the students have actually learnt what we have been attempting to teach. It is very different with a subject that has a component of formal assessment. In the rest of this paper I want to discuss the role of the assessment requirements in Academic Skills 100-001 in the teaching of academic skills and its role in student learning.

The academic skills focussed on at the beginning of the course were reading for comprehension and being able to summarise a text. The first assessment task, then, was a summary of a relatively short and straightforward academic article. The article chosen was from a reader for a first year geography class and was on the topic of the green revolution (GR). It was chosen because the article was clearly structured, the subject matter comprehensible, and because in my experience very few mature age students choose to do a geography subject when they return to study and so no particular student would have an advantage in studying a subject in this discipline. In addition, the author had taken a clearly articulated, strongly expressed point of view. This article had also been used for the class on critical reading. In completing a summary of the article in 500 words the students were working, then, with an article that had been discussed fully in class and, therefore, one with which they should have had few comprehension problems. They could focus on identifying the main contention and organising the structure of the author's argument, which involved them categorising the information in the article so that they could identify the supporting points and the evidence used to support these points.

It was only when they attempted this task that I could see what it was they were still having trouble with, regarding the skill of summarising. I provided detailed feedback on individual work, identifying what they did well and also what they were unable to do in order to produce a good summary. I would give back all assessment work very quickly, usually within a week or at the outside two weeks, so that in the next class we could discuss the assignment and my responses to their work. I also provided them with a summary of the article that I had done, and this was discussed and deconstructed in terms of identifying the attributes of a good summary. I think providing a model of 'good practice', which can also be the work of a student, is an invaluable teaching tool, as students rarely get to see a good example of the tasks they are required to undertake for assessment in a subject. This enables them to see how it is done and be clearer about the possible problems with their own work. It frequently makes clear to the student why they got the mark that they did. Of course utilising models of good practice can also elicit feelings of inadequacy in the student or envy of the person who can produce the good piece of work. However, these feelings can be dealt with in a sensitive way

## *Sources of Confusion*

in class or individually with students if required. I often acknowledge and normalise these feelings by saying from the outset that it can be difficult to compare our work with others, especially someone who has done a good job, although most students have said this has been a valuable exercise despite the difficult feelings it might evoke. I also discuss students' work in the context of affirming them as learners on a journey where it takes time to master the difficult skills they are attempting to learn. Learning is, I believe, a developmental process.

This method of giving detailed individual feedback quickly, and also providing a model of the assessment task and discussing this in detail in class, was followed with the other two assessment tasks: a 1500 word summary and critique of a complex research article in criminology, and a 2000 word essay on the green revolution, using five articles in addition to the one used in the first assignment. I think it was important to choose a different kind of academic article for the second assignment and from a different discipline. This article focussed on differences in violent behaviour manifested by male and female inmates in juvenile detention centres and an explanation of these differences. The content of the article was quite confronting and the author's thesis complex, in that he employed complex concepts to explain the behaviour observed in the course of the research. Therefore, quite a bit of class time was devoted to discussing this article before students had to complete the assessment task. Given that this was a research article, students needed to understand the structure of such an article and where they might locate the author's thesis. Issues of methodology were also explored, along with a discussion of the theoretical framework used by the author to interpret the data which led to his thesis. The task of summarising such an article was more difficult than in the first assignment but the first article could be referred back to in terms of highlighting the principles involved in summarising learnt through undertaking that assignment.

In addressing the task of critiquing the article, it was explained that there are different aspects of the article that could be the focus of their critique - the author's thesis, the theoretical framework used to interpret the data and used by the author to arrive at the thesis, the methodology used in the research, the evidence itself, his solution to the problems identified, and lastly the clarity of expression and organisation of ideas. While discussion was focussed on clarifying those things necessary for them to tackle the assignment, in doing this much else was learnt about research methods in the social sciences and the theoretical frameworks often used in those disciplines, but also about how theory is used in academic discourse to make sense of experience. This is much easier to discuss through the ideas expressed by a specific author. Again detailed feedback was provided to students on their work, and a model summary that I had done and also one by a past student were also provided and discussed. The latter exercise was very useful in demonstrating to students that there is no one way to produce a summary; they can in fact look very different.

However, while focussing here on the development of intellectual skills in deconstructing a text it needs to be said that reading an academic text can also have a powerful emotional impact. The content of this particular article moved a student in my class this semester very profoundly. She actually had an interview to gain mature age entry into a law degree at Monash University and when asked about the study skills subject spoke about this article and how it influenced her wish to study law and to work in the field of juvenile justice. She had one of the interviewers moved to tears. (She was in fact offered a place, one of only six places offered to 157 applicants.)

Having been exposed to one author's thoughts on the green revolution in the article for the first assignment, students were also asked in the last assignment, a 2000 word essay, to focus on the green revolution. Students were provided with five further articles that presented a range of views on this development, from authors with very different perspectives and writing in different times. The articles were given to students because the focus of the assignment was both the critical and written skills necessary in the task of writing an essay, rather than the research skills. In order to produce a good academic essay students did not just have to demonstrate good written and organisational skills but to demonstrate a capacity to critically engage with the ideas and points of view expressed in the articles. This of course is a very

## *Sources of Confusion*

difficult task for first year students and most students struggled with it. In the essay I provided after they had completed theirs, I attempted to demonstrate this skill in particular, drawing their attention to how this was done through annotations written on the essay itself. These annotations also identified topic sentences, where a point was drawn out, links between paragraphs, and how the order of ideas presented in the introduction was followed through in the body of the essay.

As this was a final assignment handed in after the end of the semester, I had to post their essays with detailed comments back to them, in addition to the annotated model of the essay and also a covering letter where I discussed both what they had done well and the general problems I identified in their work. It seemed important to clearly articulate to them the difference between using the information or ideas presented in the articles purely as evidence to support their argument, and engaging critically with these ideas and the evidence provided. This is of course the most difficult of academic skills to master but I think it was in students undertaking formal assessment where this skill needed to be demonstrated, that provided a very useful teaching tool for me in my efforts to foster student learning.

And did students learn? This raises the issue of evaluation of the effectiveness of such a course. As this is the first year it has been run as part of CAP, and as there are no matched controls, it would be extremely difficult to ascertain whether taking this course has improved the students' grades in their other Arts subjects. Buckland (2000) comments on the need to determine what it is we are actually evaluating and whether success is a matter of improved grades. Comments written by students anonymously as part of central administration's evaluation of courses and course teaching indicated that students felt that the subject had helped them with their other Arts subjects and had given them confidence. As one student said, "This subject enabled me to successfully complete my other subject and to confidently re-enrol for another semester. I now have a good understanding of what is expected at this level of academia. Subject should be compulsory for every first year student in every course." Many other students echoed these sentiments, indicating both the self-confidence and skills they had gained through undertaking the course.

My sense is that it takes time for students to move from being clearer about the skills they need to demonstrate in a piece of academic writing to actually being able to demonstrate them. Working with past students I have subsequently seen individually it is evident that as much as a full year might pass after the academic skills course when they will say, "Now I understand what you meant by..." Immersion in the culture, practice in producing academic writing, reinforcement with individual work may all be necessary to enable a student to move from knowing what they should be doing to being able to do it. It seems clear from student responses on the evaluation forms, and their verbal comments, that it has been immensely relieving and valuable to have the general 'rules' of academic discourse made transparent, whether or not they can yet demonstrate a fluency in this discourse. Trying to find your way without a guide makes the task of learning --that most difficult and perilous undertaking -- so much more difficult.

It would seem that learning skills advisers in different tertiary settings have developed a range of academic skills courses designed for the particular needs of their students. I think it is always useful, however, to gain some insight into what others are doing. The detailed discussion of this particular academic skills course may prove useful to other teachers of similar courses or those contemplating developing such a course. What has become evident to me as a teacher is the importance of affirming what students do know and working hard to avoid their demoralisation as they confront the rigors and demands of writing a good tertiary essay. It has been important in this process not to soften or sidestep what they are up against and what it is they are aiming for, and yet their struggle needs to be acknowledged. The skills they need to learn are difficult to master and need continual reinforcement. I have found that using the assessment tasks as learning tools has been a particularly valuable way both to assess students' mastery of the skills taught and to reinforce the learning of those skills.

**References**

- Buckland, C. (2000). Assisting the transition to tertiary study: An academic literacy project in the first year of the Bachelor of Education. In Crosling, G., Moore, T., Vance, S (Ed.). *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimensions of our work* (pp. 189-195). Monash, Vic.: Monash University.
- Chanock, K. (2000). Discussions of discourse: LAS and the disciplines looking at language together. In Crosling, G., Moore, T., Vance, S.(Ed.). *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimesions of our work* (pp. 67-76). Monash, Vic.: Monash University.
- Marshall, L. and Rowland, F. (1998). *A Guide to Independent Learning*. 3rd edition. Melbourne: Longman.
- Ogden, T.H. (1989). *The Primitive Edge of Experience*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc.
- Quinn, F. (2000). Generic vs context in embedded study skills support: A tale of two essays. In Crosling, G., Moore, T., Vance, S.(Ed.). *Language and LEARNING: The learning dimensions of our work* (pp. 232-241). Monash, Vic.: Monash University.

## **SMOOTHER PATHWAYS FROM TAFE TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

Paul Conroy

Language Studies Dept./ Program of communication Skills & Concurrent Assistance, Victoria University of Technology (TAFE Division)

Amanda Pearce and Helen Murphy, Centre for Educational Development & Support, Student Learning Unit, Victoria University of Technology

*Beginning study at a large university can be confusing for anyone in terms of adjusting to a new "culture" with the expectations and practices which that entails. This is particularly true for students articulating from TAFE to Higher Education (HE). For years, anecdotal evidence from these students, their tutors, and Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers has indicated, particularly in the first year of HE, that articulating students experience confusion in many aspects of university study which can adversely affect their academic success. This confusion can be exacerbated when TAFE students receive exemptions from core HE subjects.*

*The Smoother Pathways Project looked at the experiences of a diverse group of TAFE students who articulated from TAFE business courses into the Bachelor of Business and Law degree at Victoria University (VU). These students receive an exemption from Business Law, a core first year, first semester subject in the degree, and articulate directly into Corporate Law, a second semester subject. Their experiences were compared with those students who did not receive the exemption. Drawing on literature about transition to HE and data from questionnaires and interviews with students and both TAFE and HE staff, a raft of issues emerged for articulating students that emanated from the differences between TAFE and HE cultures and norms. The more obvious "shock" of larger class sizes, imposing physical environment, and the administrative labyrinth figured in the confusion. Confusion also arose from the apparent gap between TAFE preparation for HE and tutors' expectations of students in HE. Whereas TAFE students are accustomed to guidance from teachers, in HE students are expected to possess independent study skills and to carry out research. This issue was evident in assessment tasks, teaching styles, and even the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum and pedagogy where TAFE generally focuses on vocationally demonstrable competence, while HE values more theoretical perspectives on subject content which require a more analytical approach to learning. These differences between the two sectors appear to cause significant confusion, particularly where the initiation and acculturation of first year core subjects are omitted.*

### **Introduction**

Since July 1997, when Victoria University (VU) merged with Western Melbourne Institute of TAFE, lines of communication between sectors have opened. Staff now teach in both sectors, sit on committees, and work in research teams with representatives from both sectors. Thus, it is not just Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers in Higher Education (HE) who encounter confusion among students but also subject teachers and managers from both sectors. Consequently, anecdotal evidence arises of sometimes poor academic progress of former

TAFE students studying in HE. Such evidence includes the progress of TAFE students who receive exemptions from first semester subjects under credit transfer arrangements. This evidence, primarily about students from particular equity groups, suggests that despite benefiting in some ways from exemptions, some articulators are experiencing confusion manifested in problems in coping with the demands of Higher Education.

The credit transfer system recognises that students who have successfully completed prior relevant study receive exemptions from Higher Education courses. Thus, credit transfer assumes that prior learning prepares students for higher education in that learning the content of a subject in a TAFE setting is sufficient to ensure students are able to cope with more advanced learning at HE. In many cases this is true; however, the findings of the research outlined below question the notion that mastery of content in previous learning is enough in itself to ensure success among students from specific equity groups. This is particularly the case if measures are not taken to address sources of confusion among these students. In fact, for these students, moving directly into second semester subjects, it may be, as mentioned above, that exemptions from core subjects actually exacerbate the already considerable obstacles that they have to negotiate in order to attain academic success. As such, this paper will focus on the experiences of TAFE students who successfully completed business/commercial law modules in TAFE at Associate Diploma level and then enrolled in the Bachelor of Business and Law at VU. They were granted exemptions from the core first semester subject of Business Law (BL) and articulated directly into the second semester subject of Corporate Law (CL) in 1998 at the VU Footscray Park campus.

The transition experiences of eight students who articulated into CL have been gathered through semi-structured interviews. In order to gain an insight into a range of student experiences, the interviewees were selected on the basis of different backgrounds, for example, language background and different age groups, that is, mature age or younger. Data will be compared with the perceptions of five TAFE personnel – two teachers and two managers - and HE personnel – three teachers and three managers from the relevant departments regarding sources of confusion for articulating students. These data from staff were collected through interviews and a questionnaire (See Appendixes A, B, and C).

Thus, data from interviews will be examined in the light of sources of confusion for articulators, and strategies to ensure a smoother transition from TAFE to HE will be recommended.

### **Major issues in the literature**

A recurring issue in literature dealing with transition from school to university is how students organise their own learning. Research by McInnis, James, and McNaught (1995) in the Australian context would seem to support the concerns of students in the current research about managing numerous assessment deadlines, lack of explicit instructions, and the lack of ongoing assessment. Students in the McInnis et al. study also cite the length of essays and the difficulty of subjects as among students' concerns about the move to HE.

The literature on tertiary literacy describes the many genres and text types that students encounter at university: essays (argumentative, expository etc.), summaries, research reports, case studies, exercises and so on (Moore & Morton, 1998). This array is clearly suggestive of potential confusion for new students in HE. The work of Swales with his definition of genre as a "recognised communicative event...with aims mutually understood by the participants within that event" supports the notion of generic conventions that 'uninitiated' students must grapple with if they are to master the tasks set (Swales, 1986). This is compounded by cross-cultural factors at work in the discourse patterns of students from different language backgrounds who may organise and develop their ideas differently within a genre (Bhatia, 1993). Further to this, within each genre and text type there are features which are particular to disciplines and other features which are shared by disciplines (Golebiowski & Borland, 1997). Thus, students need to master not only new discourse but also discourse that is markedly different from other academic discourses (Baldauf, 1997). This is borne out by law

subjects at VU where students must come to understand the conventions of argumentation, epistemological issues and citation rules (Crosling & Murphy, 2000). In addition, students are required to be “multiply positioned as advocates (before a judge or magistrate), advisers (to a client), [and] as analysts of the 'correct' parts of the law to apply to the ‘facts’ of the case” (Maclean, 1997); Murphy, Crosling and Webb (1995) argue that this positioning is “contradictory and conflicting” (p. 109). When this is compared to writing requirements at TAFE, where short answer questions are the most common type of writing and the student is usually positioned as himself or herself when learning basic concepts and facts about commercial and contract law, it is easy to see academic discourse as a source of confusion.

For articulators from non-English speaking backgrounds, the problem is exacerbated by culturally determined generic conventions which are not only a problem of linguistic proficiency but also involve cultural expectations of learning (Kirkpatrick, 1994). Learning discourse is not usually supported by explicit instruction (Bauldauf, 1997), which would make transition to HE even more difficult for students in various equity groups (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Clearly, academic and discipline-specific-discourse must be learned, ideally in a meta-cognitive sense whereby writing workshops provide opportunities for practice.

At VU, students in the first semester BL subject are exposed to discipline-specific academic discourse. There are also academic writing skills workshops run concurrently by the Student Learning Unit as well as a summer school immediately before the start of the first semester. While there are periodic workshops run in the second semester and second year, in this regard articulators would seem to be less prepared for discourse demands of the law subjects than their classmates who did not receive exemptions from the core subject in the first semester.

Discourse demands at TAFE have received little attention from researchers and these demands greatly differ between courses depending on whether they are trade or further education courses. In general, “...(while) higher education courses are grounded in the disciplines which underpin them,... VET courses are grounded in the industries they serve” (Doughney, 2000). This practical nature of demonstrable competency in work related tasks in TAFE study implies less demanding discourse requirements in an academic sense.

Thus, it would seem likely that students articulating into HE without being required to engage with legal discourse in a HE first year core subject will encounter problems in mastering this discourse quickly enough to be able to manage the assessment requirements of CL. In a study of the ways students can best be assisted to learn better in HE, Devlin (1995) discusses the Cognitive Apprenticeship model in relation to improving academic reading and writing skills. As Berryman points out, (the objective is to) “initiate the novice into a community of expert practice” (as cited in Devlin 1995) by “modelling”, “coaching”, “scaffolding”, and “fading” (Devlin, 1995, p.11). In other words, students need to be shown examples of reports and essays that are acceptable to HE lecturers in terms of generic conventions, then students can be taught/coached to use the conventions in their own work by incorporating their own ideas and presenting these ideas on the framework or scaffold of, for example, an academic essay. Then, over time, the academic skills adviser’s intervention can be gradually withdrawn or faded as students show understanding of the academic discourse expected of them. The “community of expert practice” into which TAFE students are to be initiated is by no means identical to that conceptualised by HE staff, which may in itself explain some difficulties of articulators. Berryman’s concepts of “scaffolding” and “fading” suggest the disruption of a gradual progression from “other-regulation to self-regulation” on articulation.

A major disjunction between TAFE and HE is between the practical and theoretical underpinnings of curriculum. TAFE curriculum at all levels is founded on competency based training, even though it is often modified to local situations and particular student needs (Foster, 1998). The emphasis of competency based training on demonstrable competent performance of a list of competencies specific to a task and setting has raised concerns. In Foster’s study there are concerns regarding consistency, the place of knowledge and skill, the perceived minimal nature of competency standards, and the downvaluing of generic skills in competency based training. Another concern is the appropriacy of non-graded assessment in

## *Sources of Confusion*

the sense that students are judged either competent or not. That is, there is no grading system to distinguish, for example, between a student who performs well and a student who performs a given assessment task at a barely satisfactory level. Both students will have on their academic records that they are competent as they both passed. If both students apply for the same degree course their records show they are both able to cope with the academic demands of the degree.

This pass/fail/competent/not competent assessment is a fundamental of competency based training, and can be inadequate in particular where students articulate to HE. In response, an ANTA-funded project has suggested a number of strategies as follows. Optional supplementary assessment regarding theoretical knowledge relevant to HE study could be incorporated into relevant TAFE courses. Optional additional competency units relevant to progress to HE could be provided in order to provide extra lessons and practice in areas students will need in HE study. Summer schools need to be jointly conducted by VET and HE whereby teachers and lecturers from both sectors can develop a curriculum that provides practice in language and academic skills that articulating students will need at HE: for example, research skills, academic reading and writing skills and strategies (Rumsey, 1997, cited in Foster, 1998).

Some TAFE documents appear to sanction graded assessment to augment ungraded assessment (see for example ACTRAC, 1994).

### **Curriculum issues**

Modules of TAFE National Curriculum (TNC) are written within a competency based training framework. The module authors comprise a committee formed at the TAFE institute designated for that function. The law modules of the Associate Diploma are written by a committee which has no HE representatives. TAFE staff saw TNC as hindering the development of structural methods of aligning TAFE and HE curriculum.

Graded assessment is administered in law modules taught at VU HE. However, competency based training, as mentioned above, awards “A students” and “C students” the same passing grades if a task is completed satisfactorily. Furthermore, CBT permits students to repeat assessment tasks until they are successful; at VU HE this occurs only once or twice in most cases. There was significant disagreement among TAFE staff interviewed as to whether a student who gains a graded assessment of close to 50% in a law module can be said to have a sufficient grasp of the content or other aspects of the module to gain credit for HE Business Law. One staff member suggested that because in accordance with competency based training the student must pass all sections of the curriculum, a TAFE student who barely passed may outclass a HE student who had gained an overall 52% in Business Law but may have virtually no knowledge in some areas. Clearly, there is another perspective on this issue. This emerged when it was suggested that “competency” as currently defined and measured by ungraded assessment at TAFE, may not indicate “enough” competency to proceed to the difficult subject of CL, which is estimated to have a 40% failure rate at VU.

### **Staff and students’ interviews – experiences and perceptions**

To ensure reliability of data, a set of questions was asked (See Appendixes A, B, and C). Data from staff and student interviews produced a number of issues that pointed to the confusion that students experience when they study at university level. Some issues were anticipated, like the initial “culture shock” of HE. Other issues arose which were more systemic in nature.

Some HE staff thought that over the last five years articulators’ performances in HE may have improved judging by examination results and fewer requests for assistance. However, as one HE teacher commented, the reason for fewer requests for assistance could be that TAFE articulators are not being forthright about their needs or concerns. Another reason for the perceived improvement among articulators is, in the perception of HE interviewees, because TAFE is preparing students better for HE study or because the problems of TAFE students in

## *Sources of Confusion*

general may not appear so great because the perceived quality of school leavers enrolling has declined. However, at present there is no system in place whereby HE teachers know who are TAFE articulators, unless these students identify themselves as such. Regarding teaching practices in TAFE, staff confirmed suggestions in the literature regarding variability of practice between staff in all TAFE institutions. This led to some difficulty in making generalisations regarding TAFE practices.

### **Variables**

A number of factors were mentioned by TAFE and HE staff that may affect students' academic progress regardless of their educational pathway. Such factors included mature age and workforce experience, both of which were deemed to be advantageous. Socio-economic status (SES) was also suggested to be of significance, with some of the stronger students in CL having articulated from eastern suburbs TAFE institutes. Even within the range of students interviewed, it was clear from interview data volunteered by student and staff interviewees that younger students, NESB students and those without tertiary educated parents or workforce experience were experiencing far greater difficulties than other students.

### *Purposes of the TAFE and HE sectors*

TAFE and HE staff were very aware that the major purposes of the two sectors are generally very different. The vocational education and training (VET) role of TAFE is to prepare students to enter, or to gain promotion within, the workforce. This is reflected in curriculum modules, assessment, and trades facilities and equipment. TAFE staff were committed to this approach for students in need of vocational skills, although it was seen that part of TAFE's role is to prepare students for HE. In fact, some TAFE staff saw that it is in the interests of both TAFE students and the TAFE sector itself to have a pathway to HE.

Some TAFE staff appeared to see HE as a badly taught, too abstract alternative to TAFE. One TAFE manager suggested that HE was "out-of-date", because industry wanted people trained in the "hands-on stuff". However, insofar as HE also prepares students for the workforce, it may be more useful to see the differences between the sectors as linked to the differences between administrative and professional/para-professional levels of employment.

### *Initial impressions of university life*

As expected, the physical differences in campus and class sizes between TAFE and university were mentioned. One student commented that the HE timetabling system was so confusing that she failed to attend her first lecture which was an introduction to the subject. The faster pace of HE subjects was also commented upon as a source of confusion, as was "juggling" simultaneous deadlines in several subjects. Interestingly, two TAFE staff thought the issue of actually meeting deadlines in order to do well was more important at TAFE than HE. In general, the HE staff thought the opposite.

### *Subject content – depth and complexity*

The issue of pedagogical differences readily elicited student and staff responses comparing both sectors. In keeping with TAFE's vocational brief, students saw TAFE law modules as "hands-on", "practical", and "common sense". CL and HE subjects in general, on the other hand, were thought of as theoretical and requiring more analytical thinking. One student commented that to succeed in CL it was necessary to have a global knowledge of the law rather than simply remembering small sections, as in TAFE. This difference in pedagogical depth and complexity is supported by examination of TAFE curricula which makes it apparent that students' tasks are created with demonstrable work-based skills in mind (ACTRAC, 1994).

Perceptions differed among staff as to the real equivalence between the TAFE modules and Business Law. One TAFE staff member declared that they were identical because law

## *Sources of Confusion*

modules at some TAFE institutions involved the same topics, textbook/s and sessional teaching staff. This staff member saw the differences between the two as “only [differences of] approach”. However a TAFE Law teacher indicated that there were far too many topics in the TAFE modules to cover “properly”, and the TAFE teacher would “pick and choose” among them, with the result that students gaining credit may have “skimmed” contract law covering only the main concepts and terms. Regarding HE law, one CL lecturer saw CL curriculum as simply too massive for all students.

### *General skills required in HE*

Staff from both sectors concurred that students needed to be able to write extended analytical prose for success at HE, which was not as important in TAFE law modules. Critical thinking was seen as more important in HE by HE staff but of equal importance in both sectors by some TAFE staff. Clearly, a definition of critical thinking is subjective; however, it could be said that the nature of HE subject content and assessment tasks, ranging from identifying one clear reason why a contract is not valid to refuting an imagined opponent’s case in detail over several pages, may require a higher degree of critical thinking.

A majority of staff including some from both sectors agreed that the ability to research legal assignments independently, to summarise and synthesise information and to read and understand judges’ and barristers’ reports were more important in HE than in TAFE. The comments of some staff also suggest that while broadly described generic skills may be considered equally important in both sectors, different degrees of development are required in the two sectors. CL lecturers commonly assumed students to have a number of high-level academic and generic skills like critical thinking, problem solving, and research skills which were clearly not developed in TAFE programs as evidenced by TAFE staff responses to the questionnaire and examination of TAFE curricula.

### *TAFE and HE teaching styles*

In terms of teaching style, students and staff nominated differences between the two sectors that firmly identify HE teaching as a source of confusion. Both TAFE and HE staff saw TAFE classes as being more supportive of students’ learning in that small class sizes accommodate different learning styles. One TAFE staff member said TAFE students are “nurtured along” which helps them gain organisational skills and become disciplined and consistent. From a HE perspective, one HE law lecturer viewed TAFE institutions as being in the practice of “handholding” their students, which compounded the problem of adjusting to transition, especially in social terms. A HE teacher commented that TAFE students are intimidated when they enter HE. Further to this, TAFE students expect teachers to “be a friend” when “it’s my obligation to students to be one step removed”. Cognisant of the impression that students are “spoon-fed” at TAFE, TAFE staff admitted this happens early in a course. As a course progresses students are expected to become more independent. This is in contrast to HE, where staff said they expected students to arrive in a subject equipped with skills to carry out independent research and be able to analyse topics without asking the teacher to guide them.

### *Level of HE law staff support*

From the students’ perspective, there were varying levels of assistance provided by HE teachers in regards to carrying out research and using the research to write lengthy essays. A NESB student from Hong Kong said she received help only from her friends and the HE Student Learning Unit (SLU) while a mature age student said TAFE law modules prepared her for skills needed to work independently. Other mature age students disagreed. In the case of the NESB student, it could be speculated that NESB students do not often directly ask the teacher for help. Asian students in particular may first turn to other international students in regular study groups as well as go to ESL trained teachers in the SLU. In general, of course, students must choose to seek support as it is not overtly included in class work.

## *Sources of Confusion*

As mentioned above, academic writing skills workshops run concurrently by the SLU as well as a summer school immediately before the start of the first semester are provided for first semester students. Workshops are run in the second semester, although articulators would seem to be less prepared for the demands of CL than their classmates who did not receive exemptions as the latter would have received more support and exposure to course demands in core subjects.

### *HE teachers' instructions*

Again, the McInnis et al. research (1995) identified lack of structure in classes and unclear teachers' instructions as sources of confusion. This is supported by students who said HE teachers used the whiteboard infrequently, tending to give instructions verbally so students must rely on notetaking skills which largely had not been practised at TAFE.

### *Teaching materials*

Teaching materials, or lack of them, were seen as problematic. Articulators were satisfied with textbooks used in TAFE classes as the books were clear with exercises and short answer quizzes included in each chapter. Class handouts further amplified and clarified class content to the extent that there was little need for classroom notetaking and/or independent research. Conversely, at HE the lecture/tutorial system demands high level notetaking skills. This is a high order skill for all students, particularly NESB students (Borland & Pearce, 1999). Two students spoke of having trouble taking notes in lectures and were critical of handouts as being inadequate. The confusion continued in large tutorials where there was little chance for discussion of lecture content. Further to this, students said they were not sure how to complete assignments because no models or previous examples of answers to assignments were provided.

HE staff interviewed were aware of the problem. A lecture may contain over one hundred students and a one hour tutorial was more like a mini lecture which staff said did not allow for student discussion or questions. As for seeing teachers outside class or lecture times, HE staff said the opportunity for such access was not possible. The sheer number of students, lack of time, and the growing number of sessionally employed staff meant articulators had few possibilities to alleviate their confusion. HE staff also acknowledged that articulators were probably too intimidated to ask for help. This is especially the case in a very large faculty like Business and Law at VU. What emerged from the student interviews was that lack of personal communication with teachers at HE was not only a cause of potentially poor academic progress but also quite distressing after the relatively personal environment at TAFE. That is, TAFE students are accustomed to greater access and personal support from teachers whereas HE teachers and lectures, besides being less available, expect students to be independent and resourceful learners.

### **Assessment**

The stark differences in assessment between TAFE and HE clearly caused confusion. Compared to TAFE, assessment tasks in HE were seen as complex and technical. Also, the independent research required to complete tasks was reported to be onerous. That is not to say that non-articulators who study BL are totally prepared for CL assessment; however, TAFE assessment does not require the same "higher order" academic and generic skills that non-articulators practise in BL.

TAFE assessment practices based on competency based training and ongoing assessment were seen by several TAFE teachers as appropriate given the role of TAFE and the needs of the students. Several HE staff confirmed that some students found it difficult to cope with the lack of ongoing assessment in HE in that they felt unable to gauge their progress until the examination when it was too late to improve their performance. There was also evidence that levels of achievement fell soon after articulation, at least for some students; students in HE had commented to lecturers that they "used to do well in TAFE".

## Sources of Confusion

A comparison between TAFE and HE assessment, drawn from the research data, is summarised below:

Table 1

<i>TAFE assessment</i>	<b>HE assessment</b>
-ongoing and regular, often completed in class  -short written answers and multiple choice questions	- “do or die” assessment (HE Lecturer) - one research essay for submission late in the semester (2-3000 words, 30%) and one examination consisting largely of legal problem questions (up to 1200 words per question, 70%) (Corp Law Tutorial & Lecture Guide, 1999b)
- assistance provided, especially with research, for longer assignments	- students expected to research and write essays independently
- academic essay genre not required	- academic essay genre, requiring students to sustain an argument in a legal context
- <i>questions to which there is a correct answer; instructions typified by “define”, “describe”, “list” &amp; “recognise” with few asking students to “discuss” &amp; “apply” (ACTRAC, 1994)</i>	- problem questions based on sophisticated legal reasoning and synthesising of information
- few primary sources; detailed knowledge & citation of cases and statutes not required (ACTRAC, 1994)	- use of range of books, journals and internet sites; use of statutes (Corp Law Tutorial & Lecture Guide, 1999b)
- simple problem questions involving limited legal reasoning	- detailed knowledge and citation of cases and statutes
- memorisation of material not required due to ongoing assessment	- memorisation of material required even though examination is “open book”
- students positioned as themselves, i.e. a student	- student positioned as quasi-legal adviser to a number of clients in problem questions'

### Strategies

A number of valuable suggestions for tackling the difficulties of articulating students were made by staff interviewed for this project. These included:

1. inclusion of HE representatives on committees responsible for writing TAFE modules;
2. closer monitoring of VU statistical data on performance and retention rates of articulating students;
3. more careful attention to graded assessments during the selection process;
4. an elective system within the second year of the Associate Diploma for those students who plan to articulate;
5. a bridging program run by HE and TAFE Law staff and HE language and learning staff;
6. staff mentoring during the semester in which articulators study CL;
7. extension and embedding of explicit supplementary teaching of the generic and academic skills requirements of CL by language and learning staff;
8. review of the CL subject to benefit all students.

A combination of these initiatives would be the most desirable.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, all students agreed that CL was one of the subjects for which they were least prepared. Although they felt that their TAFE study had helped prepare them for transition to HE, it was agreed this preparation was partial. The research found that articulating students might experience a number of difficulties, some of which are similar to those of school-leavers. It is acknowledged that TAFE operates on a vocational rationale with a largely different client group from that in HE. In fact, areas of difficulty for articulators from TAFE to HE may arise from this very difference. That is, the acquisition of academic, independent learning, and legal and discourse skills appropriate to HE are at times not considered when pathways are being planned. At the same time, assumptions made by HE staff about TAFE articulators in terms of readiness for HE study are not grounded in fact, and formal communication between staff in both sectors regarding curriculum content and study of academic discourse conventions may assist articulators to better prepare for HE study.

One reason why articulators experience difficulties is a type of break in the cognitive apprenticeship (Devlin, 1995). While students with strong personal resources may adjust to this break, weaker students may not succeed in these circumstances. While a similar break may occur for non-articulators on transition from school to university, first year subjects provide a degree of support in initiation to the new culture which articulating students do not have. The experiences and needs of TAFE articulators must be given careful consideration if the chances of success and retention of all students are to be maximised.

### **References**

- ACTRAC National Accounting Modules: Contract Law*. (1994). ACTRAC Products Ltd (now Australian Training Products), Australian National Training Authority (ANTA).
- Baldauf, R. Jr. (1997) Tertiary Language, Literacy and Communication Policies: needs and practice. In Z. Golebiowski (Ed.) *Policy and Practice of Tertiary Literacy: Selected Proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy: Research and Practice. Vol. 1*. (pp. 1-19). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Bhatia, V. K. (1993). *Analysing genre: language use in professional settings*. London: Longman.
- Borland, H. & Pearce, A. (1999). *Valuing Diversity: experiences and achievements of NESB students at Victoria University*. Melbourne: Centre for Educational Development and Support, Victoria University of Technology.
- Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.) (1993). *The Powers of Literacy: A genre approach to teaching writing*. London: Falmer Press.
- Crosling, G. & Murphy, H. (2000). *How to Study Business Law*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Sydney: Butterworths.
- Devlin, M. (1995) Metacognition and the Cognitive Apprenticeship Model in Tertiary Learning Support. In M. Garner, K. Chanock and R. Clerehan (Eds.) *Academic Skills Advising: Towards a Discipline*. Melbourne: Victorian Language and Learning Network.
- Doughney, L. (2000) National Training Packages. *Campus Review*: April 6, 2000.
- Foster, S., (1998) Competency based training in Victoria, Office of Training and Further Education. Available at [http://www.otfe.vic.gov.au/planning/Competency\\_based\\_training](http://www.otfe.vic.gov.au/planning/Competency_based_training).

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Golebiowski, Z. & Borland, H. (Eds.) (1997). *Academic Communication across Disciplines and Cultures: Selected Proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy: Research and Practice*.(Vol.2). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (1994). *Contrastive rhetorics and the teaching of academic discourse*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Maclean, R. (1997). 'You only have to humiliate yourself': Discursive Practices in a First-Year 'Practical Legal Skills' Course. In Z. Golebiowski and H. Borland, (Eds.), *Academic Communication across Disciplines and Cultures: Selected Proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy: Research and Practice*. (Vol 2). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- McInnis, C., James, R. & McNaught, C. (1995). *First year on campus: D diversity in the initial experiences of Australian undergraduates*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Moore, T. & Morton, J. (1998). *Contrasting Rhetorics: Academic writing and the IELTS test*. Paper presented at the Australian Council of TESOL Associations – Melbourne: Victorian Association for TESOL and Multicultural Education National Conference, January 1998.
- Murphy, H., Crosling, G. & Webb, J. (1995). *Evaluation of Language and Learning Programs: promoting academic credibility*. In M. Garner, K. Chanock and R. Clerehan (Eds.) *Academic Skills Advising: Towards a Discipline*. Melbourne: Victorian Language and Learning Network.
- Rumsey, D. (1997). *Reporting of assessment outcomes within competency-based training and assessment programs under New Apprenticeships*. Brisbane: ANTA in Foster, S., (1998) *Competency based training in Victoria*, Office of Training and Further Education. Available at [http://www.otfe.vic.gov.au/planning/Competency\\_based\\_training](http://www.otfe.vic.gov.au/planning/Competency_based_training)
- Swales, J. (1986). *A genre-based approach to language across the curriculum*. In M. L. Tickoo (Ed.), *Language across the curriculum*. Singapore: SEAMO.
- Victoria University of Technology (1999a). *Corporate Law Examination Paper BLO2205* School of Law Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Victoria University of Technology (1999b). *Corporate Law: Tutorial and Lecture Guides BLO2205*. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.

**APPENDIX A**

**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
Student Learning Unit & Language Studies Department  
SMOOTHER PATHWAYS PROJECT**

**Outline of questions to be asked of students**

[Prior to interview, check that they are actually doing Corporate Law and were exempted from Business Law on the basis of their TAFE study. Find out also how long had elapsed between their finishing their TAFE course/TAFE Law module and beginning the HE subject Corporate Law. Also find out which TAFE they attended.]

1. Did you find Corporate Law different from the Law modules in TAFE? If so, what were the main differences?
2. Did you find Corporate Law difficult?
  - If so, what did you find difficult about it? Why were these things difficult?
  - If not, what do you think made you successful in this subject? (Prompts – TAFE study, familiarity with legal concepts in work or family or other personal experience of law; very good study skills, literacy skills; good relationship with teacher; extra assistance; being older/more confident, etc)
3. Do you feel that your TAFE course prepared you to study Corporate Law? In what ways?
4. When you started Corporate Law, had you ever
  - completed a piece of writing of similar length?
  - researched independently in the way demanded by this subject?
  - written an essay which required you to argue a case from your own research?
  - written an answer to a legal problem question?If so, in what context?
5. Did you receive any assistance with these skills? If so, from whom? What kind of assistance? Was it effective?
6. Did you receive exemption from any other first year degree subjects on the basis of your TAFE studies? If so, what subjects? Did you feel that these TAFE subjects prepared you adequately for the following degree subject?
7. Do you have any suggestions as to how the transition from TAFE to university could be made easier for students?

## APPENDIX B

**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY**  
**STUDENT LEARNING UNIT & LANGUAGE STUDIES DEPARTMENT**  
**SMOOTHER PATHWAYS PROJECT**

**TAFE TEACHERS AND MANAGERS**

1. Do you know from which HE subjects articulating students receive exemptions in their first year of HE study? If yes, what are they?
2. Do you support students being exempted from some HE subjects? If yes, why?
3. Are you aware of assessment requirements at Higher Education (HE) level in Business Law subjects? If yes, how did you find out?
4. Do you see part of your role as preparing your students for HE?
5. From the list below, what skills are essential for academic success in **TAFE law modules and HE law subjects**? Also, how important are these skills? Are there other skills not mentioned below?

	Not Important	Important	Very Impr't nt	Not Appli-cable
<b>1 critical thinking – in TAFE module</b>				
<b>1a critical thinking – in HE</b>				
<b>2 ability to write extended analytical prose– in TAFE module</b>				
<b>2a ability to write extended analytical prose– in HE</b>				
<b>3 ability to research legal assignments independently– in TAFE module</b>				
<b>3a ability to research legal assignments independently - in HE</b>				
<b>4 ability to locate, read &amp; u/stand judges' and barristers' reports – in TAFE module</b>				
<b>4a ability to locate, read &amp; u/stand judges' and barristers' reports - in HE</b>				
<b>5 answer multiple choice questions – in TAFE module</b>				
<b>5a answer multiple choice questions – in HE</b>				
<b>6 write short answers to factual questions – in TAFE module</b>				
<b>6a write short answers to factual questions – in HE</b>				
<b>7 memorise factual information – in TAFE module</b>				
<b>7a memorise factual information-in HE</b>				
<b>8 meet deadlines – in TAFE modules</b>				
<b>8a meet deadlines – in HE</b>				
<b>9 draft and redraft written work – in TAFE</b>				

*Sources of Confusion*

<b>modules</b>				
<b>9a</b> draft and redraft written work – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>10</b> read a textbook – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>10a</b> read a textbook – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>11</b> select key information from a textbook – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>11a</b> select key information from a textbook – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>12</b> summarise and synthesise factual information – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>12a</b> summarise and synthesise factual information – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>13</b>				
<b>13a</b>				
<b>14</b>				
<b>14a</b>				

6. How do you develop those academic skills which you have indicated as important?
7. Do you think that **ALL** of your students who pass the law modules are equipped to tackle HE law subjects?
8. Do you think that the teaching methods you use in accordance with the curriculum you use to deliver your law module/s prepare students to go on to HE?
9. Do you think that:
  - a) a student who barely passes
  - b) a student who passes well
 in your law module/s would have a deep understanding of all the content areas specified in the module/s outline? Please elaborate.
10. Do you have any plans to change the way you deal with the law module/s which would be relevant to what we have discussed today? If yes, what are your plans?
11. Do you have any other comments?
12. Are there others, eg colleagues, past or existing students, you think we should interview for this project?

**APPENDIX C**

**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
STUDENT LEARNING UNIT & LANGUAGE STUDIES DEPARTMENT  
SMOOTHER PATHWAYS PROJECT**

**HIGHER ED TEACHERS AND MANAGERS**

1. Are you aware that students can articulate from TAFE to HE? If so, how do you know?
2. Are you aware of assessment requirements at Higher Education (HE) level in Business Law subjects? If yes, how did you find out?
3. Do you think TAFE courses should prepare their students for HE?
4. Are you aware of any concerns and/or experiences of articulating students? If so, what is your perception of the issues for articulating students in your subject?
5. What content do you assume students know when they enrol to study your subject (Corporate Law)?
6. What skills do you assume students already have when they enrol to study your subject?
7. From the list below, what skills are essential for academic success in **TAFE law modules and HE law subjects**? Also, how important are these skills? Are there other skills not mentioned below?

	Not Important	Important	Very Important	na
<b>1</b> critical thinking – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>1a</b> critical thinking – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>2</b> ability to write extended analytical prose– <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>2a</b> ability to write extended analytical prose– <b>in HE</b>				
<b>3</b> ability to research legal assignments independently– <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>3a</b> ability to research legal assignments independently - <b>in HE</b>				
<b>4</b> ability to locate, read & w/stand judges' and barristers' reports – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>4a</b> ability to locate, read & w/stand judges' and barristers' reports - <b>in HE</b>				
<b>5</b> answer multiple choice questions – <b>in TAFE module</b>				

*Sources of Confusion*

<b>5a</b> answer multiple choice questions – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>6</b> write short answers to factual questions – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>6a</b> write short answers to factual questions – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>7</b> memorise factual information – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>7a</b> memorise factual information- <b>in HE</b>				
<b>8</b> meet deadlines – <b>in TAFE modules</b>				
<b>8a</b> meet deadlines – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>9</b> draft and redraft written work – <b>in TAFE modules</b>				
<b>9a</b> draft and redraft written work – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>10</b> read a textbook – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>10a</b> read a textbook – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>11</b> select key information from a textbook – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>11a</b> select key information from a textbook – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>12</b> summarise and synthesise factual information – <b>in TAFE module</b>				
<b>12a</b> summarise and synthesise factual information – <b>in HE</b>				
<b>13</b>				
<b>13a</b>				
<b>14</b>				
<b>14a</b>				

8. Do you have any other comments?

9. Are there others, eg colleagues, past or existing students, you think we should interview for this project?

## WHERE TO BEGIN? PROBLEMS IN TEACHING CRITICAL REASONING TO NESB STUDENTS

W. Martin Davies

Monash University English Language Centre

*Following Kaplan (1966) and Scollon (1997) this paper makes a distinction between contrastive rhetoric, contrastive poetics and contrastive inferencing. From this, it is argued that there are a number of confusions in the teaching of critical reasoning. The paper looks at the construction of inferences in the form of syllogistic reasoning as one form of "critical reasoning". A number of problems are outlined: 1. the conflation of poetic form and inferential form; 2. The 'exposition' problem; 3. The problem of the shifting conclusion; 4. The implied argument problem; and 5. Critical thinking and disciplinary bias.*

"The fact that rationality is extolled in universities means that irrationality is sometimes practised in universities. I am not saying that all academics are irrational. You will probably find more reasonableness in universities than in most places. But you will certainly find some unreasonableness. Another interesting thing is that where you find standards extolled, inevitably you find hypocrisy.... The particular kind of hypocrisy that is typical of universities is unreason masquerading as reason; irrationality disguised as rationality. I ... urg[e] you to operate always... with principles of rationality...Rationality is worth a fight. Keep the faith and fight."

B. H. Medlin, 'Rationality, Reasoning and Ratiocination' in Beasley (Ed.), 1985, pp. 172-173.

### 1. Introduction

A key requirement for success in university study is to be skilled in the promotion of *reasonableness*. Particularly, this means to be *critical* and *analytical* in one's approach to texts and/or experimental data. It's not much good being merely familiar with the *language* of the academic discourse if one cannot critically evaluate the material in question. Critical thinking is central to academic success in English-speaking countries. Exactly what 'critically evaluate' and 'analytical' mean, however, is a matter of some debate, even if their desirability within the university context is not. What is 'critical thinking'? How should we teach it to students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (hereafter, NESB)? The claim in this paper will be that there are problems and confusions associated with the teaching of critical reasoning which we have not yet begun to understand or remedy.

### 2. Critical thinking in the academic context

Critical thinking is the essence of scholarly debating within all faculties of the university. This is something common to both the "hard" and "soft" sciences and the humanities alike. All disciplines require an ability to argue critically in essays, term papers or dissertations. The rules for using logical arguments in English are tacitly understood and applied by educators and academics when grading student work, and mastery of acceptable critical reasoning is considered to be essential for academic success and failure. Critical thinking, though hard to define, is vital for success at tertiary level (Atkinson, 1997; Benesch, 1999). Skills in critical reasoning are as important for educational success as is mastering linguistic genres associated with particular fields of study and vice-versa—both skills are equally necessary for good

academic performance: “Poor English and poor argument or analysis [are] inextricably linked” (Felix and Lawson, 1994, p. 67).

While there is an important link between writing and arguing, the skills required to master both are different. Well-written work can often be poorly argued. And, for students from NESB the “spectre” of critical thinking, not writing, is usually their single greatest fear (Felix and Lawson, 1994, p 67). There is some justification for this fear. All too often lecturers and supervisors of NESB students will complain that students’ work is “all there, but lacking in argument” or that the work “seems to lack a clear critical focus” or, worse still, “is merely descriptive—contains no arguments at all”. This is so even for students who have otherwise exceptionally good English expression. Skills in argument and critical thinking are difficult to acquire (Felix and Martin, 1991). (See also Biggs and Watkins, 1996.)

The perceived likelihood that NESB students have special difficulties in this area was brought to public attention in 1995 by a number of television documentaries on the poor academic standards of some overseas students studying in Australian Universities (“The Future of our Universities”) and regularly revisited in newspapers and periodicals. Some have argued that there is a general decline in academic standards that continues to compromise Australian higher education (Noonan and Contractor, 2001). There has been no shortage of “letters to the editor” from academics and educators which endorse this general view, and the flood has recently become a torrent (for the latest instalment, see Puleston, 2001). This problem has also been noted in relation to education “Quality” debates (Nowack, 1992). Critical thinking and analytical skill development for NESB students—and the level of competence in English required to function in these areas—are emerging as top priority concerns.

### **3. What is critical thinking?**

It is not obvious what everyone means by any of these terms, however. ‘Critical’ does not mean attacking one’s opponent; ‘thinking’ does not exactly amount to a synonym for being receptive to new ideas. Often some of the best critical thinking goes on when new ideas are rejected out of hand—for good reasons, of course. Critical thinking can be explained in terms of being *reasonable* or *rational* as I have suggested, but these concepts, in turn, require further explanation. As Brian Medlin points out, while being reasonable is an overriding aim of universities, this is not to say that everyone in universities always has rational arguments (some academics openly proclaim themselves to be “irrationalists”). However, generally speaking, academics cry out for—and sometimes bemoan the loss of—rationality in our higher educational institutions.

Despite vagueness about what constitutes the enterprise of ‘critical thinking’, there are some general points which can be made about it.

#### *3.1 Critical thinking and logic*

The first point is that ‘being critical’ *at least in part* is less a facility with language than a facility with *logic*. Language is, in some interesting sense, the *bearer* of logic—one cannot make logical moves without using a linguistic medium of some sort, though not necessarily a *natural* language. Language and logic are not equivalent notions though they are closely connected. The linguistic medium is, however, secondary to the content of the logical structure being expressed, and one can devise any number of ways of linguistically expressing such a structure without losing the main logical point. Just as the content of the statement “it is raining” can be expressed as “Il pleut”, “Es regent” etc., so a valid logical argument can be expressed with different languages, grammars and even (as is usually the case) with mathematical symbols.

The point here is: when dealing with the logic of thought, the medium is not as important as the *structure* of the thought being expressed and the *inferences* that are being made. Inferences are certainly not reducible in any explanatory sense to language.

It should be noted here that some linguists—for example, Halliday—have argued for an alternative account in which language is considered a “resource for reasoning” rather than a system of inferential rules. However, I certainly do not wish to argue for the latter position, or for that matter, the former. It seems to me that it is to commit the fallacy of the false alternative to view language as *either* a resource *or* a system of rules when it is clearly both, and I want to stress the second (often neglected) function of language here.

### 3.2 Independence of meaning

A second related point to note is that critical thinking is as much independent of meaning as it is independent of language. The following logical move:

All Masdocks are Primpletons  
This X is a Masdock  
Therefore, this X is a Primpleton

uses nouns that are utterly meaningless though it expresses a perfectly valid argument. Critical patterns of thought are, to some degree, independent of *meaning*, even if they may not be independent of the traditional ‘parts of speech’: nouns, verbs and so on. But, likewise, the ‘parts of speech’ in a natural language like English are not essential for critical patterns of thought either. We can remove the language operators here (the verb “to be”, the articles, the quantifier—“all”—and the demonstrative pronouns) replace the nouns with symbols, join the symbols by mathematical connectors (‘Boolean operators’) and the validity of the ‘argument’ remains unchanged. Strangely, though the premises of this argument are unsound because they are nonsensical, this fact does *not* affect the logical validity of the argument overall. That this ‘X’ is a Primpleton *follows* from the premises despite the premises being nonsense. And the ‘conclusion’ would continue to follow from the premises whether there were any Masdocks or Primpletons or not. The logic of the argument is undeniable, it seems, *regardless* of what you think about the premises. In an important sense, such argument structures and inferences are—at least partly—what it means to *do* “critical thinking”. This seems to be so regardless of the content of what it is being expressed or its grammatical structure (more on this below).

Such matters should be clear enough to the native speaker of English—they are certainly familiar to logicians and mathematicians. Most logic courses in Philosophy or Mathematics departments can, in principle at least, be conducted without reference to *English* at all. So it is clear that any approach to understanding critical thinking will have to largely exclude reference to the meaning of the words and phrases being used (though perhaps not the emotional context; see, for example, Brookfield, 1987).

This has importance for ESL methodologies in the context of assisting NESB students in academic study. The chief difficulty here for the non-native speaker is the largely *irrelevant* nature of language to logical patterns of inference. Put plainly: getting the language right doesn’t mean getting the logic right. There is demonstrably more to the process of being a good critical thinker (and hence: being academically successful) than language learning. (I am *not* saying here that language learning is not important; it obviously is. I am just claiming that it is not the *only* thing that is important.)

### 3.3 Having an argument and making inferences

Another important point is that being critical/logical/analytical (or any of the other pertinent synonyms) often means more in the university context than the same expressions in ordinary discourse. This is yet another reason to eschew emphasis on the *language* of critical thinking. Clearly, being ‘critical’ in an academic context is not simply to cavil at one’s opponent’s position as we take ‘critical’ to mean in ordinary language (“Cut it out! You’re just being critical!”).

To be 'critical' certainly involves being argumentative, but not argumentative in the sense of being successful in starting or finishing a fight. What is meant by 'critical' in an academic context is to have supporting reasons for a position which *logically demonstrate* the point being made. And this does not necessarily amount to being rhetorically convincing either (though a logically valid inference may *also* be rhetorically convincing). Rather, being able to logically demonstrate some point or other is to be able to devise workable *inferences* from plausible premises to plausible conclusions. And it is this process of making plausible argumentative inferences—or, alternatively, being able to spot and criticise bad inferences—that distinguishes the good student from the average or poor student. Students who can demonstrate the ability of doing this largely succeed in academic study; students who cannot demonstrate this ability do not.

Ron Scollon has recently made a distinction between contrastive *rhetoric* and contrastive *poetics*: the former is concerned with differences in *persuasive language use* and its influence on audiences; the latter is concerned with differences in *the structure of poetic form*, or what is sometimes known as Kaplan's "squiggles" (see Scollon, 1997). In his famous paper, Kaplan argued for 5 distinct rhetorical "profiles"—English, Semitic, Oriental, Russian and Romance—which represented the variety of structural patterns often found in student writing. These profiles were claimed by Kaplan to be marked by linear, coordinate, spiraling, digressive and branching poetic forms (see Kaplan, 1966).

A further distinction could be made between contrastive rhetoric and poetics, and what might be called *contrastive inferencing* (i.e., differences in the kinds of logical inferences made). As far as I know, this influence on language learning is not dealt with as closely as it should be. One interesting question is that, given that there seem to be differences in poetic form, and rhetorical language use among different cultures, perhaps there might be also differences in the structure of inferential form. However, interesting though it is, I won't explore this suggestion here (see Davies, 2001 for further discussion on this issue).

#### 4. Problems in teaching critical thinking

One problem in teaching "critical thinking" is that there are few available materials for NESB students which help in understanding precisely what arguments are, how to construct them and—especially importantly for postgraduate students—how to effectively criticise them. There is an urgent need for student support in exactly *how* to argue and be critical in a manner acceptable in tertiary study. However, current ESL support programs only assist NESB students with their critical English *expression* (*contrastive poetics* in Scollon's sense); few attempts are made to demonstrate the principles of argument used in the critical university culture (*contrastive inferencing* in my sense). Why is this?

The reason for this is that there is a confusion among educators about what critical thinking is supposed to be (see Atkinson, 1999). On the one hand, critical thinking is supposed to be a function of academically acceptable linguistic genre patterns or writing conventions—contrastive rhetoric—and, to some extent, it is. On the other hand, among philosophers and mathematicians at least, critical thinking is a function of underlying sub-linguistic inference patterns, patterns which are largely a product of cognitive processing, and have very little to do with rhetorical language styles. In one view, inferences are a function of language use as an adjunct to linguistic operations; in another view, one cannot express inferences except *through* or by means of language. This confusion leads to two prevailing attitudes, which prevent discussion in this area.

One attitude is that improving skills in one area is tantamount to improving skills in the other. (Call this attitude "Assumption 1"). It is assumed by some language teachers, linguists and academics that critical language development in English (i.e., being able to use language such as: "in conclusion", "therefore", "it follows" etc) and being able to engage in critical argumentation are the same things. They are not. One can use critical language without being able to construct logically valid inferences. It can be shown, for example, that many uses of "therefore" (and other "conclusion indicator" words) in the hands of NESB students who are

well-familiar with the use of such words, are little more than *non sequiturs*.<sup>2</sup> Clearly Assumption 1 is false.

The second prevailing attitude among many language educators is that NESB students will, in assimilating critical genre via the process of studying, overcome the first language (L1) influences which cause difficulties and learn how to argue. (Call this attitude “Assumption 2”). However, quite often this does not happen. Specifically, argument and reasoning skills are not necessarily greatly improved by attention simply to the appropriate language.

Felix and Lawson’s (1994) study, for example, showed that integrated bridging programs only show a marginal improvement in the area of students’ critical argumentation (compared to other areas of need) despite extensive tutoring in the appropriate linguistic genre. Were academic support programs doing their job in this area—that is, were Assumption 2 true—one would expect there to be fewer and fewer comments on student graduate work. However, if anything, complaints by lecturers, supervisors and examiners on the poor quality of student argumentation seem to be on the increase. In a recent article on the parlous state of Australian universities in *Business Review Weekly*, (entitled: “Degrees for Sale: why universities are behaving like used car salesmen”) one academic is quoted as saying: “In my opinion, many overseas students ... simply aren't up to it. They're not capable of writing a thesis, or structuring arguments, of writing in an academically acceptable way. In many cases, supervisors end up acting as an interpreter” (Way, 2000, p. 75). This is not an isolated view.

The point I am making here argues against the current contrastive rhetoric orthodoxy, which views critical thinking as simply linguistic genre patterns. At tertiary level, we are not improving the ability of NESB students to argue by either focussing on critical language connector words, or by emphasising the assimilation of that genre. Neither leads to good reasoning for NESB students despite a lot of effort on the part of language educators to achieve precisely this. Critical arguments aren't just a function of language, they're also inferences. And, identifying the difference between acceptable and unacceptable inferences is not being taught as often as it should be. (Perhaps this is a *little* unfair, but it certainly seems to be so from where some of us are standing.)

### 5. Further problems teaching critical thinking

There are, I believe, four additional problems for the non-native speaker of English in terms of understanding what I have called contrastive inferencing—patterns of critical thought in English. I'll look at each in turn.

---

<sup>2</sup> Examples of this are not hard to find even in graduate work. One Ph.D student in soil science, for example, argued as follows:

“The major forms of land degradation are ‘soil erosion by wind and water, salinity of land and streams, soil acidification, soil structural decline, soil nutrient depletion, rural tree decline, damage to land through recreational use, invasion of semi-arid area.’ *Therefore* as can be seen there are a lot of problems which reduce the productivity of land. [sic.]

This argument can be represented schematically in the following manner:

Premise 1. The main forms of land degradation are soil erosion by wind....

Conclusion. Therefore, there are a lot of problems which reduce the productivity of land

Which is clearly a *non sequitur*: no legitimate logical inference can be made to the conclusion on the basis of the available premises. For comparison, a sensitive re-write of the inference attempted in the argument is as follows:

Premise 1. Land degradation reduces the productivity of land

Premise 2. Soil erosion by wind.....etc., are forms of land degradation

Conclusion. Soil erosion by wind....etc., reduces the productivity of land

## Sources of Confusion

### 5.1 The Problem of the Misleading Connector Word

How do we understand the patterns of inference-making in arguments? One way we understand them is by looking at the clues: connector words like ‘therefore’, ‘because’ ‘so’ are good indicators that there is a conclusion on the way. Find the conclusion and work back to find the premises and you have an argument. Words like ‘since’ and ‘assuming that’ are good indicators that there is a premise on the way. Find the premise or premises and work forward and you have your conclusion. Connector words can be taught by giving students lists such as the following:

#### Conclusion Indicator Words

let us conclude that...; we conclude that...; we can conclude that...; concluding...; thus...; therefore...; so...; consequently...; hence...

#### Premise Indicator Words

since...; as...; for...; because...; assuming that...; supposing that...; given that...; for the reason that...

They can then learn to use them in context noting that there are indicator phrases which signal that what goes before is a premise, and that what comes after is a conclusion:

(premise)	...shows that...	(conclusion)
(premise)	...indicates that...	(conclusion)
(premise)	...proves that...	(conclusion)
(premise)	...entails that...	(conclusion)
(premise)	...implies that...	(conclusion)
(premise)	...establishes that	(conclusion)
(premise)	...allows us to infer that...	(conclusion)
(premise)	...gives us reasons for believing that	(conclusion)

and indicators which signal that a conclusion which comes before has as its premises some statements which come after:

(conclusion)	...is shown by...	(premise)
(conclusion)	...is indicated by...	(premise)
(conclusion)	...is proven by...	(premise)
(conclusion)	...is entailed by...	(premise)
(conclusion)	...is implied by...	(premise)
(conclusion)	...is established by.	(premise)

But one has to be careful here. The implied ‘premise’ here—that all arguments use connector words (and, by parity, non-arguments do not use connector words)—is unsound. There is an ambiguity in how we use connector words and phrases. Sometimes writers use such words with a strictly *grammatical*—not logical—function (however, statements often have *more* than a grammatical function). Not all collections of statements are arguments because they use connector words. There has to be an inferential *connection* between the premises (an inference) for there to be an argument, and quite often, there is no such connection. Consider the two expressions below:

1. I am a student; *therefore* time is precious
2. All men are mortal and Socrates is a man; *therefore* Socrates is mortal.

Since both the expressions use the logical connector word “therefore”, it could be said that they both attempt to argue something. But it is fairly clear that there is an inference to a conclusion in expression (2) but there is no conclusion being drawn or inferred in expression (1). In example (1) isn’t being *concluded* that “time is precious” from the fact that “I am a student”. The connector word has the force of an *explanation*, not an inference. But in

## Sources of Confusion

example (2) it is being concluded that “Socrates is mortal” from the fact that “All men are mortal and Socrates is a man”. The first example uses “therefore” as a grammatical device, the second example uses “therefore” as a logical device (*more* than a grammatical device); and in so doing, draws an inference from premises to a given conclusion.

I am concerned here with the second usage of such connector words and not the first usage. There are plenty of other examples of non-inferential uses of logical connector words, but these are not under consideration here. In the examples there's no difference in the structure of either rhetorical or poetic form, in Scollon's sense; however, there is a difference in the structure of *inferential* form. One expression is making a logical inference from premises to a desired conclusion; the other clearly isn't. Language connectors clearly encode *both* grammatical, inferential and lexical meanings and students need to carefully distinguish them (see Jordan, 1986, for further elaboration on this point).

This seems to me to be an important area of language education that is seldom discussed: namely, how do we teach students the difference in connector word usage in cases where we make inferences and cases where we don't? How do we know when it is being taught successfully? The pedagogical question is: how does one practically teach such a difficult and complex skill to students from language backgrounds other than English? How can we teach when a connector word is playing an inferential role and when it is playing some other role?

Consider another passage that looks like an argument. In the preface to my copy of *Roget's Thesaurus* we find the remark:

*Synonyms are good servants but bad masters; therefore select them with care.*

In spite of the presence of the conclusion-indicator “therefore” in the above passage, we do not regard such an utterance as expressing an argument (at least, not without extensive and unnecessary reconstruction). What follows the “therefore” is a *command* rather than an argument. It is informing us to be careful about using synonyms. To borrow an old term, the command is the *illocutionary force* of the statement.

Interpreted slightly differently, the “because” functions as an *explanatory* indicator. Paraphrased, it might read: “The reason why you should select synonyms with care is *because* ...”. What follows the “therefore” might be considered to be an *explanation*. Either way, we don't regard the statement as a series of premises leading logically to a conclusion (an argument).

*Compare again:*

*All men are mortal and Socrates is a man therefore Socrates is mortal.*

In this case, we *are* expressing an argument. There is a clear inference being made from the premises to the conclusion. Indeed, unlike the earlier examples, we can express it easily as a syllogism to *show* the inference being made:

P1: All men are mortal

P2: Socrates is a man

Therefore: Socrates is mortal.

The point is this: whenever a connector word has a *grammatical*, not logical, use, we do not necessarily have an argument. In an argument—as opposed to a statement—the inference is supposed to establish a *logical connection* (not just any old connection) between the premise(s) and the conclusion. Let's call this *the problem of the misleading connector word*.

The first problem then, is how to distinguish arguments from non-arguments. This is an important step: in order for NESB students to even begin to understand and criticise arguments they must first learn to recognise them—and this requires being able to distinguish logical

## Sources of Confusion

from non-logical uses of connector words. However, distinguishing arguments from non-arguments is sometimes not an easy step even for the native speaker as the following examples show:

Do these examples establish a logical connection or another kind of connection? (I have given my answers in brackets following the examples):

*Study English because it's the world language. (command)*

*If you can speak English then you will get a job—so study English (logical)*

*The Jones family must be wealthy because they have a BMW. (logical)*

*I hate cats, so keep that animal away! (warning or explanation)*

*The moon is full. Therefore the hour is nigh. (explanation)*

*Synonyms are good servants but bad masters; therefore select them with care. (command)*

*Stillwell Ford sells more cars than the rest—so we must be the best! (explanation)*

*If you want to buy a new house, then take note: Mortgage rates are low, inflation is down, prices are cheap. The conclusion has to be that now is the best time to speculate. (suggestion/persuasion)*

*The suicide note was a forgery—forged by the man who stood to inherit Charles' estate and who had a quantity of the fatal poison in his possession. Charles died because he was murdered (logical)*

*If you go to west terrace at five p.m., then you will see very congested traffic (prediction)*

*Blessed he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed (logical)*

*Mary attended the opera so her lamb must have attended the opera too. (logical)*

*If objects of art are expressive then they are a language. (assertion)*

*Because objects of art are expressive they are a language (logical)*

*Your body is a complex machine, therefore treat it with care. (command or explanation)*

*Harry can't be coming to the party because his wife can't come. (logical)*

### 5.2 The exposition problem

The second problem is connected to the previous difficulty: the way people present their arguments is not always so helpful or transparent. This is a problem not so much with connector words necessarily, but with the way that arguments in general are presented. Let's call this *the exposition problem*. The difficulty here is that some arguments may be ambiguous or downright vague even leaving aside questions about connector word usage. What looks like a statement may in fact be an argument—interpreted differently it may be seen as a statement. There are many examples of perfectly ordinary 'academic' sentences where you cannot tell whether they express a statement, or present an argument. Take the following:

*In a democracy the poor have more power than the rich, because there are more of them*

It is not clear whether this is a statement, an assertion, which simply states that the power of the poor is produced by their superior numbers, or an argument which claims that the reason for accepting the conclusion that the poor are powerful in a democracy is the fact that the poor are more numerous. One of the most difficult tasks students encounter is deciding whether they are considering a statement or an argument. Some conditional statements are just that, statements, while other sentences which may appear to express statements actually give arguments. Thus, the sentence:

*If he knows about Critical Thinking then I'm an Idiot*

is best understood as an argument, thus:

P1. If he knows about CT then I am an Idiot

P2. He doesn't know about CT

C. I am not an Idiot (assumed)

This is really an argument to the conclusion that he does not know CT since the presumption is

## Sources of Confusion

that the speaker does not think of himself as an idiot. Again, consider the following example:

*If men have obtained advantages through past discrimination in their favor, then we may discount men's advantages when selecting people for jobs.*

Clearly, this statement is intended to give a *reason* for discounting men's advantages in employment, and so should be regarded as presenting an argument in favour of that conclusion, based on the tacitly assumed premise that men have in fact obtained advantages from past discrimination in their favour. It can be rewritten as:

- P1. If men have obtained advantages through past discrimination, then we should discount men's advantages when selecting people for jobs
- P2. Men have obtained advantages in the past from discrimination in their favour (assumed)
- C. We should discount men's advantages when selecting people for jobs

Perhaps the academic context of such examples would make their meaning clear; perhaps it wouldn't. In any case the moral is that students shouldn't be fooled by indicator words when they are looking for arguments and they shouldn't assume that lack of indicators means that there is no argument. Nor should they assume that what looks like a statement is, in fact, one. Platitudes enough: but, again, how does one teach the skills to recognise such things?

### 5.3 The implicit inference problem

The last two examples with assumed premises bring me to a third problem. Premises in arguments are seldom clear-cut. They may not even be in the argument at all, but implied. Consider the following example:

*If you want a new car, now is the time and Hindmarsh is the place.*

#### Analysis:

- P1 If you want a new car, now is the time and Hindmarsh is the place (to borrow)
- P2. You do want a new car
- IC. Now is the time and Hindmarsh is the place (to borrow)
  
- P3. If now is the time to buy a car and Hindmarsh is the place, then you should borrow from Hindmarsh
- P4. Now is the time to buy and Hindmarsh is the place
- MC. You should borrow from Hindmarsh.

The final conclusion is completely implied as are the second and fourth premises. The intermediate conclusion helps the main conclusion by forming part of the major premise in the second syllogism.

That arguments can have implied premises and conclusions certainly raises difficulties for the non-native speaker in terms of comprehension. Faced with a new 'argument' in the course of one's academic studies, how does one sort out what is tacit and what isn't? What constitutes the missing pieces of the critical jigsaw? To be able to work out these patterns of inference from very limited initial information seems to require the learner to possess very sophisticated reasoning skills in addition to the language skills needed. Background knowledge about the culture is, of course, needed to an important degree. One would need to be aware, for instance, that 'Hindmarsh' used to be a place which lent money for such things as purchasing new cars. But there seems to be more to it than that. There is nothing obvious about the initial statement itself that guarantees that the pattern of reasoning will follow the way that it does. How can non-native speakers acquire this information readily? Let's call this the *implicit inference problem*.

### 5.4 The problem of the shifting conclusion

## Sources of Confusion

Moreover, even if the information is spelt out—not implied—it does not mean that the inference being made is easy to find, because the pattern may not be in an expected order. In order to ‘see’ the inference, one needs to locate the conclusion, but sometimes this is not easy. What is the conclusion in the following examples?

*Every flying animal has wings, so it must be that some mammals have wings, for it is certainly true that some mammals fly.*

Analysis:

All flying animals have wings.  
Some mammals are flying animals.  
Some mammals have wings.

*All students are radicals because they are opposed to cuts in education spending*

Analysis:

All radicals are opposed to cuts in education spending.  
All students are opposed to cuts in education spending.  
All students are radicals.

*The woman down the street is a doctor, so she probably drives a Mercedes because 97% of them do.*

Analysis:

97% of doctors drive a Mercedes.  
The woman down the street is a doctor.  
The woman down the street (probably) drives a Mercedes.

*There is trouble ahead. The King is old and has no heir.*

Analysis:

If the King is to die, then he needs an heir.  
The King is old (and soon to die).  
The King needs an heir.

If the King has no heir, then there is trouble ahead.  
The King has no heir.  
There is trouble ahead.

It is possible for the conclusion to occur anywhere in an argument. In the second and the last examples, the conclusion is at the beginning of the argument. In the first and third examples it is in the middle. Often conclusions are to be found at the end. This is yet another difficulty that faces the non-native speaker attempting to deal with logical constructions in English: quite often crucial information is not in the place where one expects to find it *even if* the information is made explicit. Of course, as native speakers thoroughly familiar with the subtleties of the language this is not normally a problem. But for non-native speakers I imagine it is. Let’s call this *the problem of the shifting conclusion*.

### 5.5 Critical thinking and disciplinary bias

A final problem is a more general one which applies to all students, not just those from NESB (in fact, *all* the problems apply to students generally, but particularly so to NESB students). This final problem is the difficulty of seeing the connections between arguments advanced in academic debates and what philosophers call ‘paradigms’ or ‘mental models’—the knowledge/conceptual base which lies behind the particular academic ‘tribe’ for whom that dispute is important.

Questions such as: “What, in general, counts as a logical inference?” “What, in general, counts as a ‘plausible’ premise or conclusion?” are questions which cannot be answered *in abstracto*. They must be answered ‘inside’ the context of a linguistic and, importantly, *logical* community; specifically, the academic culture that regards a given dispute as meaningful. Being able to see this connection is crucial for bridging *any* student into the critical academic culture of learning. For quite often it is an *inability* to see what is logically relevant/plausible that is the reason for academic failure. There are a number of reasons why such questions are difficult to answer.

To take the first question given above: There is often no clear reason why a logical inference can be made in one case and not in another. Often, a logical move is considered ‘reasonable’ only when movements in academic frontiers allow it. So inferences are dependent, in some crucial sense, on changes in knowledge. (Prior to spherical earth astronomical theories, it did not follow at all that if one part of the earth was in darkness the other side was in light—flat earth theorists simply could not have allowed this inference.)

An answer to the second question—what counts as a plausible premise or conclusion?—is also difficult as it largely depends on subject-specific assumptions: what is plausible in Religious Studies (that Jesus is the son of God, for instance) is not at all plausible in a Philosophy Department. What counts as axiomatic in a biology department (that there is a struggle within nature for survival) is hardly likely to be convincing to Marxist sociologists. Given that NESB students need to understand these academic presuppositions before they understand the arguments being raised, it is hardly surprising that they find the whole business of being “critical” and “analytical” very difficult.

It might be tempting to argue that *all* of the problems I have mentioned above are a function of the context of the community in which it is argued. It might be claimed that many of the examples I have chosen have been artificially removed from their context, and therefore look to be problems of reasoning when they are, in fact, problems of contextualisation. For example, the student of soil science might not need to point out the “missing” premise if it is contextually appropriate for him/her to do so. Therefore, the problem identified is not a problem of reasoning but understanding context.

No doubt it is true that logic is as dependent on context as other facets of language (emotional content, grammar, and so on). The connection between the two is complicated and difficult to assess—to understand it we must stand “outside” language, and this we cannot do. Again, I am *not* saying here that the context of language learning is not important; I am just claiming that it is not the *only* thing that is important. The point of this paper is not that “logic is independent of language”. It is that there is sometimes an oversight in our treatment of problems associated with critical reasoning and that we need to even it up.

### 6. Conclusion

This paper has presented grounds for pessimism in the aim of teaching critical thinking to students from non-English speaking backgrounds. While it may not be impossible to teach skills of critical reasoning to NESB students, there are clearly major problems. The examples I have given to demonstrate these problems are contrived and *very simple*. The academic prose students have to deal with at university level magnifies the problems ten-fold or even a hundred-fold. How can teachers overcome these problems? More to the point: given the clear importance of critical thinking to the university context, why aren’t the problems being addressed with more enthusiasm and dedication?

Brian Medlin’s remarks at the beginning of this paper may offer an explanation, though we may not wish to hear it. Academia extols the virtues of rationality and reasonableness. We all take it for granted that our respective disciplines practice and teach “critical thinking” (even if it is not taught explicitly). In language education we like to think we do too. Yet, sometimes the university practises hypocrisy where it claims to have expertise. Perhaps language

educators are participating in this subterfuge.

*W. Martin Davies*

I would like to thank Kate Chanock and two anonymous reviewers for comments on the draft form of this paper. I also acknowledge the use of examples taken from Dr. L. E. Johnson's critical thinking lecture notes (Flinders University).

## References

- Atkinson, D. (1997). A critical approach to teaching critical thinking. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(1), 71-94.
- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1984). *Study Abroad: A Manual for Asian Students*, Kuala Lumpur: Longman.
- Barker, M., Child, C., Gallios, C., Jones, E., & Callen, V. (1991). Difficulties of overseas students in social and academic situations. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 43, 79-84.
- Benesch, S. (1999). Thinking critically, thinking dialogically. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33 (3), 573-580.
- Bradley, D., & Bradley, M. (1984). *Problems of Asian Students in Australia*, AGPS, Canberra.
- Brookfield, S., (1987). *Developing critical thinkers :Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting*. Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press.
- Davies, W. M., (2001). Are we different?: English language and cross-cultural thought patterns', *13<sup>th</sup> International English Australia Conference Proceedings*, October, 2000 (forthcoming).
- Felix, U., & Lawson, M., (1994). Evaluation of an Integrated Bridging Program course on academic writing for overseas postgraduate students. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 13 (1), 59-70.
- Felix, U., & Martin, C., (1991). A report on the program of instruction in essay writing techniques for overseas post-graduate students, School of Education, Flinders University.
- Jordan, R. R. (1986). *Academic Writing Course*. New ed. Harlow: Longman.
- Kaplan, R. B., (1966). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education, *Language Learning*, XVI, 1-20.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (1994). How do you know what I am going to say? The use of advance organisers in Modern Standard Chinese, *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, Series S, 11, 83-96.
- Medlin, B. H., (1985).Rationality, Reasoning and Ratiocination in V. Beasley (ed) *Participation and Equity: The Flinders Experiment*, (pp.172-173) Health and Counselling Service: Flinders University of South Australia.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Noonan, G., and Contractor, A., (2001, January 20). The new import-export trade, *The Age*, News Extra.
- Nowack, R. (1992). A case study on postgraduate students: Are tertiary institutions coping with overseas students? Paper presented at a conference on *Quality in International Education*, University of Southern Queensland, 6-9 February 1992.
- Puleston, M., (2001, February 28). The Truth About Universities, *The Age*. Letters, p. 16.
- Samuelowicz, K., (1987). Learning problems of overseas students: Two sides of a story, *Higher Education Research and Development* 6 (2),121-132.
- Scollon, R (1997). Contrastive rhetoric, contrastive poetics or something else? *TESOL Quarterly*,31 (2), 352-358.
- The Future of our Universities. (Circa August, 1995). *Television documentary* on the 'Sunday' program and 'A Current Affair' Nine Network
- Watkins, D. A. & Biggs, J. B., (Eds.) (1996). *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences*. Hong Kong : CERC ; Camberwell, Melbourne, Vic. : ACER, 1996.
- Way, N. (2000, July 28). Degrees for sale: Why universities are behaving like used car salesmen. *Business Review Weekly*, p.72-78.

**DISSOLVING AND RESOLVING CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS:  
SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACHES TO PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT  
FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

Constance Ellwood  
ELSSA Centre, University of Technology, Sydney

*This paper discusses several issues which arose from a one year course offered by the ELSSA Centre at UTS. While the course, particularly through an ethnographic study carried out by students, aims to promote skills for cultural understanding along with tertiary literacy skills, the responses by students have led to a continual revisioning and rethinking of the programme. To date, most of the students enrolled have been Japanese. Several issues relating to the identities of both lecturers and students are discussed here.*

This paper briefly describes a one-year course for international students which included an ethnographic study to be carried out by students. While a central purpose of the course, and the ethnographic study in particular, was to engage students in exploring and appreciating cultural differences, we did not feel this aim was satisfactorily achieved with many students. The paper questions why this was the case; it discusses a number of issues which arose from the course and proposes these issues as fruitful areas for further research.

**The course**

The course is a two semester Advanced Diploma, offered since 1998, of 20 hours per week, for international exchange students. It aims 1) to develop tertiary literacy skills in the context of Australian society, and 2) to promote skills for cultural understanding. To this end, the course features a selection of interlinked segments. As well as the expected focus on language, and on the skills and knowledge of major tertiary assessment requirements (essay, report, seminar), the course includes an ethnographic study, a peer program called 'Interlinks', interview and questionnaire research, audited classes, cultural excursions and guest speakers.

**Theoretical background to the course**

The ethnographic study crystallises four theoretical underpinnings of the overall course: the language/culture link, the importance of authenticity, and the importance of first culture awareness and of attitude change in intercultural competence.

**The link between language and culture**

The course sees language and culture as inextricably linked and sees language as mediating the social construction of culture.

**The validity of authentic contexts and authentic language**

Unlike an EFL context, we are fortunate in that we have the culture 'on our side' so to speak. We are surrounded by authentic contexts for language use; we do not have to simulate them. The course seeks to take full advantage of this by providing opportunities for students to interact with native speakers in authentic contexts.

### **The need to reflect on one's own culture in order to understand another culture**

The ethnographic study focuses the opportunity for students to confront their taken-for-granted assumptions about their own cultures and to see something of the taken-for-granted in Australian culture. A major part of the study and a number of other tasks in the course require students to compare and contrast with previous experiences in their own cultures.

### **The importance of attitude change in learning**

The ability to communicate across cultural boundaries requires attitude change of some kind since it requires a putting aside of preconceptions. The ethnographic study gives students an opportunity to learn the practices and behaviours of the target culture from the inside and, ideally, provides "a pedagogical tool to promote positive attitudes towards speakers of the language studied" (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon 1996, p. 431).

### **The students**

The course was originally designed for students with scores above IELTS 5/TOEFL 510 to allow them the opportunity to gain the required language level for entry into degree courses in UTS faculties, the assumption being that a year's study would effectively mean their English level had risen to the equivalent of the required UTS entry level language scores. In fact, the actual clientele of the course rarely meet this profile. While we have had students who meet the language requirements, the bulk of students have language scores ranging from as low as IELTS 3/TOEFL 450. In addition, no students have enrolled with the intention of eventually completing a degree at UTS; they have been, for the most part, undergraduates at the tail end of their degrees. Thus, they have tended to view the course as a sojourn during which time they would have preferred to be enrolled in their discipline - engineering, business, design or education. Finally, our classes to date have been made up almost totally of Japanese students.

### **The ethnographic study**

While the peer program and the audited subjects require students to report back explicitly on cultural difference, and cultural differences in academic requirements are highlighted in the teaching of tertiary literacy skills, the ethnographic study is, in a sense, the focus of the attempt to promote intercultural understanding. It is regarded as a key way to develop intercultural competence since it focuses student attention on the culturally constructed nature of beliefs, values and practices while providing a structured context for authentic language use. Intercultural competence implies skills in appropriate language use and behaviour in particular cultural and textual contexts. Examples of specific skills which the course aims to teach include the ability to recognise that our worlds are socially constructed, that language is used quite specifically in specific contexts and reflects values and behaviours which are culturally determined and that we need to be aware that we normally bring our own taken-for-granted cultural assumptions, values and behaviour to any situation.

The ethnographic study is based on that described by a number of writers: Barro et al., 1992; Roberts, 1993; Arries, 1994; Byram, 1994; Byram, 1995; Byram, Duffy and Murphy-Lejeune, 1996; and Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996. These writers all propose the use of ethnography in second language contexts primarily as a means of teaching (small 'c') culture; that is, of developing intercultural competence. Generally speaking, these ethnographic studies involved a number of phases including a *theory* phase which helped students to develop an understanding of ethnography as a research method and to begin to develop the skills to design and carry out their own research, along with a *preparatory* phase before departure where the researchers could experiment with ethnographic methods and do a small research study in their home country. This benefited the student researchers in that they not only had some experience with carrying out an ethnographic study but could then, if desired, continue

## *Sources of Confusion*

researching the same subject in the foreign country. There were also the phases of fieldwork (observation and interview), analysis and presentation of findings.

The model of the ethnographic study used in our course has similar goals and phases. We aim to develop a deeper understanding of Australian culture by highlighting the constructedness of culture and we aim to develop skills rather than knowledge; that is, to equip students with tools to notice, analyse, reflect on and interpret aspects of the target culture. However, we have been obliged to adapt the model in some significant ways.

Firstly, since we do not have prior access to students, we cannot prepare them by giving theoretical input on ethnographic research and its techniques or by setting a preliminary ethnographic study in their home country. Such preparation, in itself, would function as a kind of pre-departure cross-cultural awareness training. We thus do not and cannot expect either that students have been prepared, in any way, for what can be the rather shocking experience of a new culture, or that they are prepared to take an interpretive approach to that culture.

In addition, the fact that our students are obliged to learn about, and to use the metalanguage required for, ethnography in L2 may be significant since they miss the opportunity to clarify ethnographic concepts in their native language. Arries, addressing himself to the EFL curriculum, does propose courses in which beginner level students use L2 alongside anthropological techniques to “test hypotheses about the second culture” (1994, p. 236) and we acknowledge that we are dealing with undergraduates and graduates who do have a significant amount of life experience. Therefore we have had faith in the capacity of our students to come to grips with the concepts even through a second language.

Nevertheless, over the three years since the course began we have found it necessary to continually adapt the ethnographic study, trying to clarify tasks and simplify theory.

### **Issues arising from the course**

To some extent the course has been successful in terms of the development of intercultural competence. In the process of negotiating their paths through the different segments of the course, students have been exposed to a variety of aspects of language, behaviour and belief systems and have ultimately left Australia with greatly enhanced understandings of the nature of both their own and Australian culture. There have also been instances of attitude change as a result of the ethnographic study; for example, one student changed her mind about children of single parents growing up to be drug addicts; another came to understand that the apparent disregard of the latest fashion among university students was not necessarily an indication of ignorance but rather a deliberate resistance to some of the advertising hype; another came to terms with the homosexuality which had been ‘in his face’ when he first arrived at the time of the Mardi Gras – being able to say ‘I now know I’m not gay but I also now know that gay people are just like you and me’. However, although we have seen these kinds of shifts in most students, on the whole, we have been disappointed with the progress in language and intercultural communication skills made by some of our students.

Our belief that we are not succeeding as well as we would like is based on what we see as resistances in some students: those who consistently arrive late, who look sulky, who resent or appear to resent the tasks we set, who think the ethnographic study is silly, who seem to operate at a superficial level when we ask them to notice differences in the two cultures, who do not seem to appreciate what we show and tell them or where we take them, who basically seem incredibly uninterested in our culture. We read this behaviour as a kind of ‘identity distress’ (Crozet, p. 1996). These problems, expectations, disappointments and resistances all lead to the querying of some of our own assumptions about the course and the students. There are four main assumptions or issues which we want to question here: the importance of culture learning, the nature of a supportive learning environment, teachers’ cultural assumptions and the impact of Japanese identity.

**Taking for granted of the importance of culture learning**

Like Cowley and Hanna (1997), we were perhaps so convinced of the interrelatedness of language and culture that we took it too much for granted, failing to make clear to students that all the segments of the course, particularly those which appear 'non-traditional' and including the ethnographic study, were in fact designed, specifically, consciously and knowledgeably, as language and culture learning opportunities. This relates to our, seemingly culturally-based, inability to really grasp the meaning of the evaluation forms which students completed at the end of each semester. These showed that what and how we taught was consistently regarded by students as "not relevant". While it may be true that our students are unable to cope with uncertainty and the unknown, our inability to be more overt about our purposes, to be more conscious, to give more time to debriefing, may be linked to an inability on our part as teachers to be truly intercultural – in the sense of an inability to make our assumptions explicit, in this case the assumptions of ESL discourse (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Related to this is our failure to make explicit to students the difference between EFL and ESL and, what might be called, ETL - English as a temporary language. Sojourner status differs from both immigrant status and foreign language learner status; to what extent is there a lack of interest in second culture values in an ETL situation? And to what extent are intercultural communication skills actually seen as valuable by students?

**Questioning what constitutes a supportive learning environment**

Arries writes of the need for a supportive learning environment and for the identification and evaluation of aspects of self in order to allow the student "control over the ability to talk about experience, to adjust speech patterns according to life situations, to express attitudes, to retrieve information about [him or her]self, to use language for self-awareness"(Titone & Danesi, 1985; cited in Arries 1994, p. 528). However, what counts as supportive, and what counts as self are not always clear.

There have been a number of studies questioning the relevance of certain language teaching methodologies. The validity of communicative methods for all learners is one example. However, there is a shortage of research studies which can be used by language teachers to know what 'supportive' means in intercultural contexts. Pritchard's study (1995) which shows that neither praise nor admonition are commonly used in Japanese culture is a case in point. Studies such as those by Uchida and Duff (1997) and Ryan (1996) support the idea that teachers' understandings of culture need further research in order to support changes in practice.

**Putting into question teacher's cultural assumptions**

As teachers we, overtly, try to teach our culture, and we justify this by saying that we are teaching the skills that students will need to study here successfully -- but in fact, it seems often to be not what they need or want. Is there an inability or at least a reluctance, on our part as teachers, to really see that these are people from another culture? Are our hopes, read 'expectations', no better than the taken-for-granted assumptions that we are trying to get our students to question in themselves? We need to not only confront our students' taken-for-granted assumptions, values and behaviours with our own taken-for-granted schemata but also to allow our own 'ethnocentric delusions' (Murphy, 1988) to be challenged. Increasingly, in our understandings of how this course can be successful, we have realised the major part played by teacher identities.

**Querying the impact of Japanese identity**

A final factor relates to Japanese identity since, in our course, we have, in the main, been dealing with Japanese students. The ways in which Japanese identity plays out in a classroom such as ours are interesting and bear further investigation. A description of the current English language teaching situation in Japan (Honma & Takeshita, 2000) reveals conflicting notions of the benefits and effects of learning English, and of intercultural communication itself, both

## *Sources of Confusion*

within and between government policy and public sentiment. In addition, Hoffer and Honna (1999) discuss the widespread use of English loanwords in Japanese as well as the “impressively inadequate” results of Japan’s English language policy. Could the poor rate of progress in language learning which is made by some of our students perhaps point to an ambivalence towards learning the language and culture of English? Could the “drive for Japanisation” (Hoffer & Honna, 1999, p. 52) of English loanwords in fact be seen to indicate another side of that strong resistance to anything foreign of which previous observers have spoken? It may be that our students’ desire to ‘learn more grammar’ and their resistance to our ‘new-fangled’ ideas allows them, as it does for Canagarajah’s students, to be “detached from cultural alienation” (Canagarajah, 1993, p. 601). Recent studies (Canagarajah, 1993; Pennycook, 1994) are beginning to question a kind of neocolonialism in the teaching of English. This leads us to ask about the power relationship between Australian English and Japanese language, and the effects of this relationship on learner identities. How do students see themselves as being positioned in relation to each culture?

In addition, on the whole, our Japanese students do tend to fit the stereotypes of being passive and non-participatory, with little ability in the type of critical enquiry which is so valued by the western academy and, in addition, with little understanding of ‘learning to learn’ skills. Initially, following studies like that by Chalmers and Volet (1997), we tried to resist this view, accepting it as an imposition of western stereotypes on an Eastern culture. We work, optimistically, to try to get students to see the cultural nature of beliefs and behaviours, and where possible, to try out new behaviours -- to speak up in class, to be critical, to form an opinion, to offer their ideas, to debate, to contradict -- but we feel frustrated by the lack of change. Our lack of success with this, along with the fact that the students themselves identify with the stereotypes, indicates that the issues of stereotyping and behaviour-change remain in question.

These are just some of the issues which would readily bear further investigation. Overall, it seems that it is identity which heads the list as one of the most fruitful and interesting themes. What is the effect of teachers remaining blinkered by their own ethnocentrism? And to what extent are identity changes in students possible, or even desired? All the identities involved are in question, ‘under interrogation’ as the postmodernists might say; identity not as in “‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (Hall & Du Gay, 1996, p. 4).

Acknowledgement: I am indebted to my colleague, Barbara Lasserre, for many interesting discussions prior to our joint presentation at the conference.

### **References**

- Arries, J. (1994). Constructing culture study units: A blueprint and practical tools. *Foreign Language Annals* 27 (4), 236-242.
- Barro, A., Byram, M., Grimm, H., Morgan, C. & Roberts, C. (1992). Cultural studies for advanced language learners. In D. Graddol, L. Thompson & M. Byram (Eds.) *Language and Culture* (pp. 55-70) Clevedon: British Association of Applied Linguistics.
- Brecht, R., Davidson, D. & Ginsberg, R. (1993). Predictors of foreign language gain during study abroad. *NFLC Occasional Papers*. Washington, DC: National Foreign Language Centre.
- Byram, M., Esart-Sarries, V. & Taylor, S. (1990). *Cultural studies and language learning: A research report*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

- Byram, M., Morgan, C. and colleagues (1994). *Teaching-and-Learning-Language-and-Culture*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. (1995). Intercultural competence and mobility in multinational contexts: A European view. In M. Tickoo (Ed.), *Language and Culture in Multilingual Societies: Viewpoints and visions*. Anthology Series 36, Singapore, SEMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Byram, M. & Duffy, S. (1996). The ethnographic interview as a personal journey. *Language Culture and Curriculum* 9 (1), 3-18.
- Canagarajah, A. (1993). Critical ethnography of a Sri Lankan classroom: ambiguities in student opposition to reproduction through ESOL. *TESOL Quarterly* 27 (4), 601-626.
- Chalmers, D. & Volet, S. (1997). Common misconceptions about students from South-East Asia studying in Australia. *HERDSA* 16 (1), 87-98.
- Cowley, P. & Hanna, H. (1997). Is there a class in this room? *ARAL Series S #14 Teaching Language Teaching Culture*, 119-134.
- Crozet, C. (1996.) Teaching verbal interaction and culture in the language classroom. *ARAL* 19 (2), 37-57.
- Duff, P. & Uchida, Y. (1997). The negotiation of teachers' sociocultural identities and practices in postsecondary EFL classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly* 31 (3), 451-486.
- Hall, J.K. & Ramirez, A. (1993). How a group of high school learners of Spanish perceives the cultural identities of Spanish speakers, English speakers and themselves. *Hispania* 76 (3), 613-620.
- Hall, S. (1996). Who needs identity? In S. Hall and P. Du Gay (Eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage.
- Hoffer, B. & Honna, N. (1999). English in Japanese society: reactions and directions. In D. Graddol and U. Meinhof (Eds.), *English in a Changing World*. AILA Review 13.
- Honna, N. & Takeshita, Y. (2000). English language teaching for international understanding in Japan. *EA Journal* 18 (1), 60-78.
- Kline, R. (1992). The social practice of literacy in a program of study abroad. (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University).
- McKay, S. & Wong, S. (1996.) Multiple discourse, multiple identities: Investment and agency in second language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students. *Harvard Educational Review* 3, 577-608.
- Murphy, E. (1988). The cultural dimension in foreign language teaching: Four models. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 1 (2), 147-163.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The Cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.
- Pierce, B. N. (1995). Social identity, investment and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 29 (1), 9-31.
- Pritchard, R. (1995). *Amae* and the Japanese learner of English: An action research study. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 8 (3), 249-264.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Roberts, C. (1993) Cultural studies and student exchange: Living the ethnographic life. *Language Culture and Curriculum* 6 (1), 11-17.
- Robinson-Stuart, G. & Nocon, H. (1996). Second culture acquisition: Ethnography in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal* 80 (iv), 431-449.
- Ryan, P. (1996) Sociolinguistic goals for foreign language teaching and teachers' metaphorical images of culture. *Foreign Language Annals* 29 (4), 571-586.
- Scollon, R. & Scollon, S. W. (1995). *Intercultural Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shanahan, D. (1997). Articulating the relationship between language, literature, and culture: Toward a new agenda for foreign language teaching and research. *Modern Language Journal* 81 (2), 164-174.

**ASSESSMENT USING MULTIPLE CHOICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
TESTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AN  
UNDERGRADUATE COMMERCE SUBJECT**

Marie Gaspar  
Deakin University

*This paper is based on a research project that examined multiple choice testing in an undergraduate commerce subject, Marketing Management, in which I work as a language and learning support tutor.*

*The study was designed to assess the validity of items in the publisher's test bank that accompanies the prescribed text for the course. Testing experts explain that validity is the most important feature a test must possess. One central validity issue is whether a test measures what it intends to measure. Items that are designed to test content knowledge of a subject but that in fact assess linguistic knowledge or cultural understandings or testwiseness (test taking strategies) are of doubtful validity.*

*The research design involved devising a practice multiple choice test using the publisher's test bank, which is used by the subject lecturer to create tests in the subject. In the process of compiling the test, I examined items for linguistic features, cultural assumptions and item writing characteristics that could undermine their validity. The practice 20-item test was administered to three tutorial groups, consisting of forty students, nine of whom were international Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students. International students were interviewed, using a retrospective think aloud protocol, to try to elicit their thought processes as they answered each item.*

*This paper examines the validity of three test items, looking at student answers, their comments about their thought processes in answering these items, and my prior analysis of the items for linguistic, cultural and item-writing characteristics that were thought might impact on their validity.*

*The results show that undue linguistic complexity, implicit cultural assumptions and item writing flaws compromised the validity of items for international NESB students and adversely affected their test scores. The study concludes that it is imperative to scrutinise test items for their validity so that students are given the opportunity to achieve fairer test outcomes. The paper suggests several ways this might be accomplished.*

### **Introduction**

This study looks at the implications of multiple choice testing of Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) international students in an undergraduate commerce subject – *Marketing Management*. It investigates the validity of multiple choice items in the publisher's test bank (Perreault & McCarthy, 1999), which is used by the lecturer in devising tests in this subject.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Testing experts, among them Oosterhof (1994) and Thorndike (1997) explain that validity is the most important feature a test must possess. One central aspect of validity relates to whether a test measures what it is intended to measure.

An important aim in testing is to assess content knowledge. Multiple choice testing is commonly used to meet this aim. This study looks at whether the validity of the *Marketing Management* multiple choice items in the publisher's test bank is compromised, especially for NESB international students. The literature on multiple choice testing (Adkins, 1974; Aiken, 1987; Isaacs, 1994; Oosterhof, 1994; Thorndike, 1997; Osterlind, 1998; Haladyna, 1999) identifies several factors which can adversely affect the validity of test items and which are relevant to this study. They are:

- Linguistic factors – for example, unnecessarily complex language and obscure idiomatic expressions.
- Cultural factors – that is, implicit assumptions about how people think and act, which are culture specific and may not be applicable to all test-takers.
- Item writing factors – flaws in writing test items, which can advantage or disadvantage particular test-takers.

If some or all of the above-mentioned factors are present in items, their validity is doubtful, because they may not test content knowledge. Rather, they may test linguistic knowledge or cultural understandings or testwiseness, that is, knowledge and use of strategies for maximising test scores, as distinct from knowledge of the content being tested.

The scores of all test-takers can be affected by the factors mentioned above, but NESB international students in particular can be disadvantaged by linguistic, cultural and item writing factors impinging on the validity of test items.

### **Background of the study**

My interest in the validity of multiple choice test items grew out of my work as a support tutor in *Marketing Management*, where my role is to help students with language and learning in the subject. In order to familiarise myself with the subject and in an effort to provide effective language and learning support tutorials, I attended lectures in the subject and studied the prescribed course textbook. Exploring how best I could help NESB international students to prepare for the multiple choice test in the subject led me to examine the publisher's test bank of items and consider their validity in regard to linguistic, cultural and item writing factors.

Another reason for my interest in this issue is the increasing numbers of international students on Australian campuses. I was concerned about the related issue of whether assessment is sensitive to the backgrounds, learning styles and past experience of these students, who constitute a significant presence in the Australian tertiary scene. My research, which examines a few chapters in one publisher's test bank, is a small step in addressing the larger issue of appropriate assessment.

My interest in this area was also raised because of the popularity of multiple choice testing at the tertiary level in a number of disciplines, among them psychology, economics, commerce, accounting and medicine; the increasing workloads of lecturers and therefore the attractiveness of published test banks, in terms of convenience and time-saving, for lecturers.

Furthermore, I was led to investigate this topic because of my interest in the area of assessment and my perception that assessment is often not given the attention it deserves at the initial stages of planning and curriculum design.

### **Purposes for the research**

The aim of this study is to assess the validity of items in the publisher's test bank (Perreault & McCarthy, 1999) that accompanies the prescribed text for *Marketing Management*. The study assesses the validity of items by examining linguistic, cultural and item writing factors and considering students' answer choices and comments on test items.

The research project is designed to identify difficulties international students may experience with some items and aims to suggest ways possible difficulties can be minimised so that students are given the opportunity to achieve fairer test outcomes.

The study also aims to raise lecturers' awareness of language, cultural and item writing factors, particularly as they relate to the validity of multiple choice items. I hoped that lecturers might use these insights when selecting multiple choice items from publishers' test banks.

### **Multiple choice assessment and issues of validity**

#### *Multiple choice items*

A multiple choice item traditionally consists of a stem that describes a problem and a series of options or alternatives, each representing possible answers to the stem. One answer is the correct or best answer. It is a common misconception that multiple choice items can test only factual recall (Oosterhof 1994). They can be used to test many types of learning, from simple recall to high-level skills like making inferences, applying knowledge and evaluating (Adkins, 1974; Aiken, 1987; Isaacs, 1994; Oosterhof, 1994; Thorndike, 1997; Osterlind, 1998; Haladyna, 1999). These testing experts point out that while multiple choice tests are quick and easy to score, good multiple choice items are difficult and time-consuming to write. The wording of the stem, the identification of a single correct answer and the writing of several wrong but plausible choices is a challenging task. Because of the ease of scoring, multiple choice items are used extensively in standardised tests. Hoffmann (1962) and Owen (1985) criticised the dominance of large-scale standardised testing using multiple choice, to the exclusion by and large of other methods of evaluating student learning. Aiken (1987) reviewed some of the issues and technical matters associated with multiple choice testing over a twenty-year period (1967-1987). He recommended a critical stance towards multiple choice testing. This involves awareness of its drawbacks and benefits, coupled with knowledge of the techniques of constructing more effective items.

#### *Linguistic factors and validity*

Item writing texts recommend that careful attention be paid to the language of items to ensure that the reading level is appropriate to the test-takers for whom they are designed. Thorndike (1997) explains that certain linguistic constructions like complex sentence structure and the use of negative statements increase the time needed to answer items. Negative statements require an involved, reverse process of reasoning to untangle meaning and are semantically more difficult. In addition, other linguistic factors affecting clarity and comprehensibility are identified and discussed in the literature on multiple choice testing. Rubin (1989), Freedle and Kostin (1991), Scheuneman, Gerritz and Embretson (1991) and Paxton (1998) note that these linguistic factors include relatively obscure idiomatic expressions, problematic comparatives, excessive nominalisation, abstractness, fronted structures, reversal of usual English subject/verb order and complex negation.

### **Socio-cultural factors and validity**

Ballard and Clanchy (1991; 1997) consider multiple choice items to be language-bound and culture-bound. They explain that cultural factors are involved in the requirement to respond quickly and in the willingness to guess.

Other factors too can bias test items and disadvantage groups of students. Osterlind (1998) explains that bias in socio-cultural terms refers to social and cultural assumptions made by test designers in the process of devising tests. Such implicit understandings may be unfamiliar to some test-takers. Test items based on taken-for-granted assumptions can unfairly disadvantage these test-takers, by testing cultural knowledge, not content knowledge. Osterlind notes that statistical approaches to detecting bias may not be able to detect language and socio-cultural factors that may alienate groups of people. Osterlind, as well as Haladyna (1999), call for item writers to gather opinions representative of differing ethnic heritages and of varied groups of people when reviewing test items for possible bias. Haladyna calls this process 'sensitivity review'. It has received little scholarly attention, he points out.

#### *Publishers' test banks of multiple choice items*

Richichi (1996) examined item banks related to two introductory psychology textbooks and analysed 680 student test responses. From the item writing flaws he discovered, he concluded that lecturers should be wary of tests constructed from test banks.

Hampton, Krentler and Martin (1993) reported on a case study of eight textbooks accompanied by test bank questions and classified according to the levels of Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. An earlier US edition of the text that is used in *Marketing Management* was one of the texts studied by Hampton, Krentler and Martin. Their study concluded that the textbook publishers overrated the cognitive level of their questions, and that 65% of marketing questions measure knowledge, the lower level of Bloom's Taxonomy. Hampton et al. suggest that lecturers not rely on publisher's classifications and be vigilant in selecting questions in line with their educational objectives.

### **Research design**

Students in three tutorial groups participated in the study. A total of forty students took part, including local ESB (English Speaking Background), local NESB and international NESB students.

The data collection methods used were:

- Practice pen-and-paper multiple choice testing
- Student interviews

#### *Practice test*

I designed a 20-item practice multiple choice test, taking items from the publisher's test bank (Perreault & McCarthy, 1999). Items for the actual multiple choice tests in the subject are taken from the same test bank. The prescribed course textbook is by McCarthy, Perreault and Quester (1997).

### **Selection of items**

Items for the practice test were examined for linguistic, cultural and item-writing factors that could compromise their validity. Linguistic analysis was based on principles of clear writing, as set out in the AGPS (Australian Government Publishing Service) *Style Manual* (1994); Plain English principles, as explained by Eagleson (1990); guidelines on English usage as detailed by Swan (1995); and on factors identified in the literature reviewed. With regard to cultural factors, it was acknowledged that in a subject like *Marketing Management* a free market economy is a 'given' and hence certain assumptions are made about marketing

## Sources of Confusion

theories and consumer behaviour. The analysis concentrated, rather, on background knowledge that was assumed but which may have been unfamiliar to international students. Criteria for evaluating item writing were based on Haladyna's 30 guidelines (1999), which are synthesised from the recommendations of many test-writing experts.

Some items were found to exhibit more than one potential problem. The breakdown of items according to possible difficulties for students is detailed below:

language aspects - 16 items  
item writing faults - 5 items  
cultural assumptions - 4 items

Items were also selected according to difficulty level, as indicated by the publisher. The proportion of easy/medium/hard items selected for the practice test was similar to the proportion of such items chosen by the lecturer when devising tests. The purpose of using a similar ratio was to give students a practice test similar to the real test they would take in the subject. The difficulty level of items, as gauged by the publisher, was as follows:

easy - 4 items  
medium - 14 items  
hard - 2 items

The practice test was held a few weeks before the actual test, to give students practice, feedback and potential benefit from participating in the research project.

### *Student interviews*

Student interviews were used to shed light on the raw data of test scores. It was realised that students might not be able to recall or report their thought processes, or might be reluctant, or refrain from expressing what they believed to be inappropriate, as cautioned by Merriam (1998). Some attempt was made to overcome some of these possible drawbacks of the interview method. The potential benefits to students of the opportunity to discuss test items on a one-to-one basis were pointed out to them. Furthermore, it was explained to students that the research sought to discover how they reported thinking through items and all student comments were welcome.

Nine international NESB students were interviewed, using a retrospective think aloud protocol, to try to elicit their thinking processes when answering items. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour per student. They were tape recorded in order to capture accurately students' actual words.

### **Findings**

#### *Test scores*

The research is designed to ascertain whether and how potential problems previously identified compromised the validity of items and impacted upon how this group of students handled particular test items. Thus, the figures that are presented in this report are descriptive only, in accord with the research aims and design. Statistical analysis has not been undertaken.

This was a 20-item test, with one mark for each correct item, and with a score of 10 or more classed as a pass. The table below indicates the number and percentage of pass/fail scores.

	PASS		FAIL		TOTAL NUMBER
	Number	%	Number	%	
<b>All students</b>	22	55	18	45	40
<b>Local students</b>	19	61	12	39	31

## Sources of Confusion

<b>International students</b>	3	33.3	6	66.7	9
-------------------------------	---	------	---	------	---

It can be seen that, overall, local students fared better on the test than international students.

Quantitative data were also gathered on the number of correct and incorrect responses to each item and each international student's choice for each item was recorded. For three items of particular interest, local students' choices were also noted.

### Review of items

The validity of each test item was assessed, considering whether the correct answer hinged on language proficiency, cultural knowledge, testwiseness or other factors, rather than content knowledge of marketing. This review was informed by my initial analysis of items, student answers and their comments at interview.

### Sample items

Reproduced and discussed below are three sample items from the practice test. I selected these specific items for discussion in this paper because they clearly illustrate how linguistic, cultural and item writing factors can compromise validity. For each item, the difficulty level and the cognitive process as gauged by the publisher are indicated. The correct option is indicated by an asterisk. International students are identified using codes to discuss their comments at interview.

### Sample item 1

Difficulty Level – **Medium**  
Cognitive Process - **Application**

**Which of the following is LEAST LIKELY to compete in the same generic market with others?**

- A) Long-stem roses
- \* B) Bread
- C) Champagne
- D) A greeting card
- E) A telegram

### Initial analysis

This item is designed to test whether students can apply their knowledge of what a generic market is. However, NESB international students who understand the concept of a generic market may not be able to apply their knowledge because the examples in this item are based on Western culture and ways of celebrating. On the other hand, international students studying *Marketing Management* are usually from affluent backgrounds in their home countries and may be familiar with Westernised ways of celebrating and remembering special occasions. One could also make a case that 'telegram' is the odd one out, because it is virtually anachronistic today, in the West.

### Test data

International Students - 67% incorrectly answered this item (6 out of 9 students)  
Local Students - 32% incorrectly answered this item (10 out of 31 students)

**Student interviews**

Three international students correctly answered this item; two of them chose the correct answer (option B – *bread*) for the ‘wrong’ reason. KM commented that bread is the ‘cheapest’ of all the items listed in the options. VF commented that bread is ‘similar’, explaining that there is not much difference in the taste of different kinds of bread. This is an interesting example of cultural conditioning, determined by VF’s Chinese background. People of European backgrounds might consider that there’s not much difference between different kinds of rice. AF chose the correct option, reasoning that bread is ‘more basic’ while the other items are ‘more special’.

Other students gave various plausible reasons why they selected the (incorrect) options they did. SF viewed a telegram as a service, and all the other items as products. PM also chose *telegram*, considering it as ‘different from the rest’. DF reasoned that it is possible to have different brands of bread, champagne and greeting cards but not of telegrams. She did not know the word *stem* in *long stem roses*, so had no clear idea about what this option means. MM chose *champagne* as he considered it more rare than any of the other options.

Only one student, MF, specifically mentioned ‘parties’ in discussion, correctly identifying this as the generic market (celebrating special occasions). However, she reasoned that bread may also feature at parties. Perhaps unaware that bread is a staple of Western diet and not primarily a party food, she chose telegram, which she was unfamiliar with, as was AF. MF thus got this item wrong, though it appears that her thinking was closest to the reasoning the test designer intended to test.

When students were told at interview that the generic market is (Western) ways of celebrating, they commented that it is different in their cultures. DF further explained that in Hong Kong one sends greeting cards only to people overseas or far away. Querying the correctness of option B (*bread*), SF commented that one could have bread at parties.

Seven of the ten local students who incorrectly answered this item chose option E – *telegram*. It can be surmised that many chose this option because of its unfamiliarity to this group of young students.

**Discussion of sample item 1**

This item demonstrates the cultural bias inherent in it, and also points out how students may select the right answer for the ‘wrong’ reason. It also highlights the fact that test-takers may use different logical processes from those intended by the test designer and be marked wrong, when their reasoning is as complex and sometimes more so, than the reasoning which the item is apparently designed to measure.

Validity of items is not fixed once and for all, and should be established for each test and for each group of test-takers, as Shepard (1993) explains. This item appears dated, with its reference to a telegram. It seemed to adversely affect the responses of young local students, who appeared not to know what a telegram is.

***Sample item 2***

Difficulty Level – **Medium**

Cognitive Process – **Application**

**If a soft-drink company bought out a cranberry juice producer in an attempt to appeal to health conscious consumers who do not drink soft-drinks, it would be pursuing a \_\_\_\_\_ opportunity.**

**A) market development**

- \* B) diversification
- C) market penetration
- D) product development
- E) None of the above.

### Initial analysis

This item could present difficulties because of its complex sentence structure. It uses the conditional – *if...would*, which is generally a difficult pattern for NESB students. Further, the *if* clause is long and complex, containing another clause embedded within it – *who do not drink soft-drinks*. Additionally, the use of nominalisation – *in an attempt to appeal to* – rather than simple verb forms – *trying to attract* – makes the language abstract and hence more difficult. Also the past tense – *bought out* – of the phrasal verb *buy out* is used. This may be problematic on two counts. First, many people, including native English speakers, confuse the past tenses of the verbs ‘buy’ and ‘bring’ (bought and brought). Second, it is doubtful whether international NESB students would know the meaning of the phrasal verb – *buy out*.

The distinction between ‘soft-drink’ and ‘fruit juice’ may not be all that clear to some. Indeed, the Collins Cobuild English Dictionary (1995) lists fruit juice as a type of soft-drink, because it is cold and non-alcoholic. However, the correct answer hinges on conceptualising soft-drink and cranberry juice as two entirely different products.

A comment in regard to item writing for fill-in-the-blank items, like this sample item, is that *none of the above* (E) does not fit into the sentence grammatically.

### Test data

International Students - 44% incorrectly answered this item (4 out of 9 students)  
Local Students - 42% incorrectly answered this item (13 out of 31 students)

### Student interviews

Students did grapple with the complexities identified in the initial analysis. In addition, the options all contain terms that can easily be confused because of word collocation. The words *market*, *product*, *penetration* and *development* are crucial and choosing the correct answer hinges on remembering and distinguishing phrases containing these words in different positions. They are, however, important phrases and concepts that students of marketing should know.

MF knew and could distinguish all the terms in the options. She got this item wrong because she considered cranberry juice to be the same type of product as soft-drink, not because of faulty understanding of the concepts in the options. Similarly, SF also understood and could differentiate all the terms in the options. However, like MF, she too conceptualised soft-drink and cranberry juice as essentially the same product, and so was marked wrong. SF suggested that, in test items such as this one, examples of products should be ‘deeply different’, as in the textbook. One example given in the textbook is of Telstra, a non-financial company, offering a credit card under its own name.

### Discussion of sample item 2

This item exhibits unnecessary linguistic complexity and insensitivity to cultural factors. It is possible to test whether students can apply their understanding of *diversification* – offering a new product to a new market – using examples that are more clearly different. It is also not necessary to use the conditional to convey the facts of the case. The scenario can be described using the present or the past tense.

## Sources of Confusion

The test data show that a similar percentage of local and international students answered this item incorrectly. The limited scope of this study means that it was not possible to ascertain what factors influenced local student responses, though it would be interesting to explore issues such as this in further research.

### Sample item 3

Difficulty Level – Easy

Cognitive Process – **Definitional**

**Underlying any economic environment is technology which affects:**

- A) how quickly technological developments lead to new consumer protection laws
- B) how competitors react to each other
- C) how aggressive competitors are in planning new market strategies
- D) how fast consumer attitudes change
- \* E) how the economy's resources are converted to output

### Initial analysis

Though this stem is not particularly long, it is difficult because of its fronted structure (*underlying any economic environment*) with the subject (*technology*) coming towards the end of the stem. This structure might confuse some students and result in their inability to identify the keyword – *technology*. Further, a comma is missing after the word *technology*. The comma would go some way to making this clumsy sentence a little more intelligible.

In addition, the stem deals with two broad concepts – *technology* and *any economic environment*. However, it is unfocused, too general and does not present a specific problem. Therefore, all the options are plausible and can be supported, or dismissed, for that matter, if one pursues particular lines of thinking. The correct option, E, is worded very vaguely and uses a phrase akin to computer jargon – *converted to output*.

### Test data

International Students - 56% incorrectly answered this item (5 out of 9 students)

Local Students - 55% incorrectly answered this item (17 out of 31 students)

### Student interviews

Four international students did not identify the keyword in the stem, picking *economic environment*. The options of the five students who answered incorrectly were spread among options A, C and D. Because of the very general nature of the stem and the options, no one option appears to have stood out as clearly correct or incorrect.

### Discussion of sample item 3

This item is classified by the publisher as 'easy'. Nevertheless, five international students answered this 'easy' item incorrectly. In addition, the test data also show that more than half the local students answered this item incorrectly.

If the level of difficulty is judged by the proportion of correct/incorrect responses, it appears that the publisher's classification of this item as 'easy' is not accurate for this group of local and international students. This item, intended by the publisher to be 'easy', proved difficult not because of high-level cognitive demands but because of poor item writing and bad wording.

### **Discussion**

The data from the three sample items are indicative of the test as a whole. Poor item writing, unnecessarily complex language and cultural assumptions undermined the validity of items and adversely affected scores of international NESB students. In some instances, it appears that local students, too, were disadvantaged by poorly designed, badly worded and outdated items.

This study attempts to isolate and document some of the factors involved in a particular group of students' responses to test items. It is recognised, though, that it is not possible to isolate some factors from everything else that impacts upon a person's performance. Some of these are motivation, knowledge of the subject matter, amount and type of study undertaken, memory capacity, testwiseness, familiarity with the type of test, luck, willingness to guess and mental/physical/emotional state at the time of the test.

One must be cautious therefore in making categorical cause/effect statements. Nevertheless, patterns of responses can be discerned and should be heeded.

### **Recommendations**

- Test designers and test users should ensure that their items are valid for the students being tested.
- Test designers and test users need to pay particular attention to the language of test items and how it might affect NESB test-takers.
- Test items should be examined by a person or persons with cross-cultural expertise.
- Lecturers should be aware that test bank items might be flawed.
- Lecturers should ensure that they carefully assess the cognitive demands of test items and evaluate how these relate to their own learning objectives for students.
- When evaluating a textbook for a course, particular attention should be paid to the quality of the publisher's test bank, if a lecturer intends to use it for test generation.

### **Conclusion**

The central focus of this study is validity. An essential aspect of validity, in the professional literature, and public perception, is fairness (Willingham, 1999). Validity, and fairness, deal with whether a test is relevant to test-takers, what interpretations about a person's aptitudes and abilities can be inferred from test scores and what consequences follow for test-takers from their performance on tests.

It is imperative that multiple choice items be carefully scrutinised so that they test the content that they are intended to; so that reading comprehension and cultural knowledge are not confounded with content knowledge; and so that items are relevant to those being tested. This process does not guarantee the validity of items, but it goes some way to ensuring that testing is fair for all students.

### **References**

- Adkins, D.C. (1974). *Test construction : Development and interpretation of achievement tests* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Columbus, OH : Charles E. Merrill Publishing.
- Aiken, L.R. (1987). Testing with multiple choice items. *Journal of Research and*

## Sources of Confusion

- Development in Education*, 20, 44-58.
- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1991). Assessment by misconception. In L. Hamp-Lyons (Ed.), *Assessing second language writing in academic contexts*. (pp.19-35). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1997). *Teaching international students: A brief guide for lecturers and supervisors*. Deakin, ACT : IDP Education Australia.
- Bloom, B.S. (Ed.). (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook 1: The cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay.
- Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995). London: Harper Collins.
- Eagleson, R.D. (1990). *Writing in plain English*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Freedle, R. & Kostin, I. (1991). *The prediction of SAT reading comprehension item difficulty for expository prose passages*. (PRPC Final Report P/J 969-60). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 386 477).
- Haladyna, T.M. (1999). *Developing and validating multiple choice test items* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hampton, D.R., Krentler, K.A. & Martin, A.B. (1993). The use of management and marketing textbook multiple-choice questions : A case study. *Journal of Education for Business*, 69, 1, Sept./Oct., 40-43.
- Hoffmann, B. (1962). *Tyranny of testing*. New York: Crowell-Collier.
- Isaacs, G. (1994). *Multiple choice testing : A guide to the writing of multiple choice tests and to their analysis*. Campbelltown, NSW: HERDSA.
- McCarthy, E.J., Perreault, W.D. & Quester, P.G. (1997). *Basic marketing : A managerial approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> Australasian ed.). Sydney: Irwin.
- Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (Rev. and expanded). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Oosterhof, A. (1994). *Classroom applications of educational measurement*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Macmillan.
- Osterlind, S.J. (1998). *Constructing test items : Multiple choice, constructed-response, performance and other formats* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston: Kluwer Academic Publications.
- Owen, D. (1985). *None of the above : Behind the myth of scholastic aptitude*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Paxton, M. (1998). A linguistic perspective on multiple choice questioning. *HERDSA News*, 20, 1, 1, 3-7.
- Perreault, W.D. & McCarthy, E.J. (1999). *Basic marketing: A global-managerial approach* (13<sup>th</sup> ed.). [Test Manual on CD Rom]. Chicago: Irwin.
- Richichi, R.V. (1996). An analysis of test bank items using item response theory. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 405 367).

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Rubin, D.L. (1989). *Sociolinguistic test item review*. Montgomery, AL: Centre for Business and Economic Development, Auburn University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 321 525).
- Scheuneman, J., Gerritz, K. & Embretson, S. (1991). *Effects of prose complexity on achievement test item difficulty* (Report No. ETS-RR-91-43). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 389 717).
- Shepard, L. A. (1993). Evaluating test validity. In L. Darling Hammond (Ed.), *Review of research in education*, (Vol. 19, pp. 405-450). Washington DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). (1994). Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Swan, M. (1995). *Practical English usage* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Thorndike, R.M. (1997). *Measurement and evaluation in psychology and education* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Willingham, W.W. (1999). A systemic view of test fairness. In S.J. Messick (Ed.), *Assessment in higher education : Issues of access, quality, student development, and public policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

**HOW DO YOU KNOW? WHO SAYS SO?  
THE CHANT OF THE UNIVERSITY LECTURER**

Christine Jessup  
Learning Skills Unit, University of Tasmania

*This paper discusses the experience of working with a group of third year students who failed an assignment and were referred to the learning skills unit for assistance. It discusses issues about and students' reaction to feedback and proposes that teaching students to write effectively includes working on identifying the writing role. It is proposed that an awareness of feedback as a discourse should underscore the process of giving and interpreting feedback.*

**Introduction**

The university essay, as a product, contains elements of ritual and discourse conventions, and is the result of reading and interpreting research. It is an appropriate location for the exploration of assumptions made about feedback which is a great source of confusion and uncertainty for undergraduate students. When lecturers mark essays the ideal text is constructed in the comments they make and therefore the ideal student is also constructed. While feedback is supposed to assist students to learn how to write better essays, an identified problem is that general assumptions about language and its meaning can place staff and students at odds if feedback is provided in such a way that it draws a personal response from students. This paper suggests that undergraduates must develop a sense of being a writer and become familiar with the formal uses of language implicitly understood by the academics who mark their work. In this context, lecturers need to produce considered and pedagogically sound feedback to support students in developing appropriate writing processes and written texts.

This paper presents a snapshot of the experience some students had in failing an assignment, my attempts to understand their difficulties and my efforts at assisting them to act on the feedback. It is not a dedicated study as such, but describes typical work for a learning skills lecturer. The most significant issue in my discussion with the students was the reaction to the feedback as negative and personal and the disbelief by students that someone could not understand what they were trying to say. My interpretation of their response was to move away from advice about academic argument, structuring paragraphs or logical sequencing of ideas, as such. I asked students what they knew about the topic, having done the assignment, that they did not know before they started, and I encouraged them to use that knowledge in reconstructing their resubmission. In some cases I did not touch the essays at all. In others I wrote reports to interpret for students what the lecturer was trying to say. Some students benefited from verbally articulating what they understood the feedback to mean. The process of engaging the students in discussing their role as student writers resulted in all students doing very well with their re-submissions and the lecturer being able to give positive criticism about their work.

In deciding how to approach this task I was informed by texts which modeled the use of participants' voices in telling stories about teaching and learning issues within the higher education system (Schwartz & Webb, 1993; Ballantyne, Bain & Packer, 1997). The main virtue of using stories is aptly described by Barrone (1998) who explains that the critical story teller aims to inform readers by presenting stories that "prick the consciences of readers" and in doing so enable a re-visiting of values. While there is some literary distance between

enabling the space for students' voices and the art of critical story telling, as Barrone describes, a starting point must necessarily be a willingness to move over and, instead of speaking on behalf of particular constituents, allow them to speak for themselves.

### **Academic writing and feedback**

To be part of a discourse community one must gain entry. The entry to the academic community does not come with enrolment in an undergraduate course like membership to a club on receipt of fees. The acceptance into the academic community is a gradual one that relies on the development of appropriate ways of knowing and relevant learning strategies. If a lecturer writes on a student's essay: "Let your introduction be two things: a definition of terms; and a blueprint of the discussion to follow, the shape of the argument" (Clanchy & Ballard, 1981, p. 83), then in Halliday and Hasan's setting we need to be certain students understand the specialised meanings of such words as "terms", "discussions" and "argument".

It is not helpful to teach students how to write academic essays by looking at structure without investigating the underlying assumptions that control and predicate language behaviour. If we accept the view of the complex inter-relationship between "texts", "processes of production" and their "social conditions" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 26) then to engage successfully in linguistic and social practices manifests itself in a form of "constraint". An example is the caution surrounding the use of first person singular in much academic writing. In other words what is pre-empted about any use of language from a discourse point of view is some sense of context and therefore a way of knowing how to interact and how to interpret the use of language by others in a particular discourse community. Fairclough points out that without the notion of power and its influence on language we are likely to interpret discourse in terms of fixed and agreed on ways of knowing and interacting. This paper acknowledges the sense of social construction and, therefore, constraint surrounding the discourse of giving and receiving feedback. Feedback is dynamic in that it is not consistent, is sometimes illuminating and other times destructive. Ultimately it defines the nature of the relationship between tertiary teachers and their students. Research into language and discourse shows us that the ways we use language to communicate are related to context of situation (Halliday & Hasan, 1985), the socio-cultural environment (Gee, 1990), and our experience with a variety of discourses (Adamson, 1993).

Candlin (1998, p. 7) indicates that writing itself becomes a "vehicle by which to lead 'apprentices' through a process of continual improvement into membership of the disciplinary academy" while also pointing out that the analogy to an apprenticeship is problematic as the nature of the university apprenticeship is not generally identified. Spinks (1998, p. 199) describes the marker's role as "not merely... grading a student's work but also... inducting the student into the ways of knowing and thus the ways of writing considered appropriate." On both sides therefore, there is a lot going on. On one hand, markers have an idea of what they are looking for, but are not necessarily able to identify it in terms that students can interpret and act upon. Spinks (1998, p. 227) refers to the accepted notion that academics know a good piece of writing when they see it. On the other hand, students are attempting to pick up whatever "signals" they can use in their attempts to engage with otherwise unfamiliar "academic literacy practices" (MacMillan, 1998, p. 161). There is a fundamental difference between novices (students) and experts (lecturers) when it comes to feedback. Beasley and Pearson (1999, p. 304) explain it as a "paradox of expertise". Academics have generally forgotten the journey they have made to their specialised world views. Their expertise frequently does not extend to the ability to pass on to students wisdom about becoming a writer in their discipline that in itself is one in a collection of discourse communities. Swales (1990, p. 29) suggests such communities are likely to include: "common goals, participatory mechanisms, information exchange, community specific genres, a highly specialised terminology, and a high general level of expertise." All of which potentially mitigates against incoming students knowing how to write appropriately for their discipline.

Much of the feedback on students' writing focusses on how students have written their text, for example, "This is too descriptive"; "You need to say why"; "Where is the analysis?" Lea

and Stierer (2000) argue this is because lecturers fall back on the tangible issues of structure in lieu of the ability to engage in discussion about essay writing processes. The task of interpretation is made more difficult for students especially because of the various ways to interpret description or analysis (Chanock, 2000) and determine the extent to which either is valued or considered to be one or the other, in any specific piece of text. Chanock points out that for a learning skills/academic skills lecturer, with a need to offer support across many disciplines, analysis, for example, "looks quite different in different disciplines" (p.97).

Students need to receive considered and explicit comment on their work. They need to be taught to interpret the signals and act on them to develop their academic writing ability. This area of work commonly falls to learning skills lecturers who are likely to be located outside disciplines. It is therefore important that learning skills staff understand not only the nature of academic literacy but also the issues for both markers and students. If interpreting feedback is a tool for students then providing feedback for student writers becomes a tool for staff. Unfortunately, it is one that is not necessarily used particularly well.

Understanding how students interpret feedback is central to developing an informed approach to assist them to make better use of it and further develop as writers. Nightingale (1986) pondered whether or not feedback actually helps students learn to write better. She concluded that while most students probably throw out the marked essays there should be a way for feedback to assist learners and, despite the difficulties, academics should continue to provide feedback. However, giving feedback is problematic. The focus of feedback tends to be directed at fault and error. It does not necessarily show students how to improve (Crooks, 1988). Often students write the next essay before they get the previous one back. In particular, there are negative effects of feedback. It "can provide a weight of destructive comment from which it is difficult for a person to surface: it is dehumanising" (Boud, 1986, p. 32).

### **The failed essay and the interviews with students.**

I worked with a cohort of five paired Arts students who had to write joint essays. This group of third year students had to write a research paper on a particular issue of interest to them. The students, in pairs, had to choose their topic and produce an academic paper for which they shared the grade. These ten students failed the task. The lecturer got in touch with me on receiving the re-submitted essay from one pair who had sought my assistance on their own initiative. Upon reading the re-write the lecturer decided to refer the rest of the students who failed. His comment was, "Why didn't they write like this in the first place?"

I saw the students in their pairs for two sessions. In the first session we talked mostly about the failed assignment and how they were feeling about it. The students led the interview and as they focussed on individual feedback comments I tried to direct their attention towards the writing intention. In the second interview they talked me through how they had attended to the feedback comments.

The students all seemed to share one basic problem. They did not have a story that they wanted to tell in their research papers. They had chosen broadly generic titles for their essays. Initially, some students were very angry and embarrassed at being sent to see me (although at least one pair were pleased that the lecturer had given them another chance and saw this as the lecturer being interested in them). One student out of the ten refused to come to an interview on the grounds that he had a family and had no time to engage in rewriting something that he thought he did well in the first place.

The comments students received on these failed essays made it clear the lecturer was rejecting their writing, in some cases quite strongly (see Table 1). The students were incredulous and made their own comments that matched their contempt for what they perceived was an undeserved failure. These comments suggest certain attitudes to the polarised roles of marker learner.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Table 1 Marker comments on the failed essays

<b>Feedback on essays</b>
That really does render this sentence incomprehensible!
You simply can not make this kind of categorical claim! You must learn to be more tentative.
How do you know this? Ref?
Who says so?
Where is the reference to support this claim?
This is a very strange statement?
This paragraph is typical of those preceding it in that you have assembled a series of points that do have some general association but you have made no effort to develop these points into a coherent argument.

Table 2 The reaction by students to the failure and the comments on their text

<b>Comments by students</b>
If I had the time I could write to the depth that he wants but I've got other things to do.
I have never been picked up for my writing before.
You just have to write what they want.
I don't care really; I just need a pass.
It's all bullshit; I just need the bit of paper.
It's so hard you can't be sure whether you are saying the right thing.
I know we are not supposed to know anything. We are here to soak it up.
We just know it. We've been working for ten years and now they're asking us how we know it. It's common sense.

Table 1 does not include all the comments made by the lecturer. The comments included represent the most common types. This marker's comments mostly share an emotive quality and made students respond negatively. Words like "incomprehensible" and graphic features such as exclamation marks suggested to students that the marker was questioning their knowledge. The implied mistrust in comments like "How do you know?" and "Who says so?" misled students to assume that the lecturer did not believe what they had written whereas, generally, what the lecturer was alerting the students to was the need for citation to support their point. Where students were directly asked about references to support their claims the common response from students was anger at being questioned about what they considered as "their knowledge".

### **Changing mindsets**

The role that I seemed to play in assisting this group of students was interpreter of the comments by the lecturer to students on the work and from students back to the lecturer about the comments and students' understanding of academic writing. Both the lecturer and the students were encouraged at the final outcome which was substantial improvement in the initial piece of work.

I asked one main question of the pairs of students aimed at what they were trying to tell their lecturer about the topic. Initially, there was little or no response, but as I asked them what they knew about this topic that they did not know before doing the assignment I started to get some discussion between the pairs. What I found was that the title of their papers did nothing to help reveal the specific substance of their paper. Once they could identify the main message in their text (the sub-text), the ability to re-write their paper seemed to be improved. Given the time it was unlikely students did much, if any, new research. The students began to articulate what they had discovered in their research and to see the connection between that and the need to decide on what they wanted the marker to know. In short, the main improvement came from students developing a better understanding of their role as writers. In this assignment their role extended to setting their own question.

I became a critical reader. I focussed on the purpose behind the content. The main thing learned by these students was the need to be consistently aware of the marker as external and not sharing an immediate understanding of their text. Once students got a sense of what the marker needed their writing objective became clearer. The changes that students needed to make related to the way they viewed the task not the actual content.

In all the interviews with the separate pairs there was a similarity in comments about their role as students. These comments (Table 2) need to be read in the knowledge that students were angry about having failed their assignment. But it was the very nature of the comments that enabled discussion with students about their role in relation to writing. Initially their responses were content focussed. They did not seem to understand that they had a role in "framing" the content. They considered that this marker was just "having a go" or making a big fuss about nothing. Finally, only one student was reluctant to see the very important role she had to play in determining how the marker interpreted her writing. I attempted to focus them all on re-working their essays according to what they wanted the marker to know. I believe my task would have been more difficult if I had chosen to focus on assisting students to re-structure their texts. I believe that I would have been working at cross purposes with them because initially they did not see why the lecturer could not make sense of their writing.

What was significant to me in reflecting on my actions as a learning skills lecturer was the role I played in encouraging students to develop views of themselves as writers. In general, what these students had done was to pick a descriptive title and then indiscriminately put together a lot of information which broadly covered the topic without actively taking on the role of investigator. The essays shared a lack of intellectual engagement and therefore attracted negative comment from a lecturer who clearly had expectations about the nature of third year writing. Students, in general, did not value the exercise of writing essays and saw it as a distraction from the real business of their studies. Their texts contained many categorical statements which read as platitudes and were grounded in assumptions and home spun philosophy. Initially, students did not see the need to explain why they were taking a certain position. A frequent response was "it's just common sense."

### **Conclusion**

This paper does not report on an experiment but provides an exploration aimed at understanding an experience of learning to write academically. The key proposition is that to write academically means being part of a discourse community which communicates from a position of specialised knowledge and practice. Furthermore, in order to learn how to write academically students need to construct themselves as learners and writers, which they are not necessarily informed about, nor are ready to do, when they begin study. Finally, in re-focussing attention away from the surface and structural features of an essay-as-product and highlighting the role of voice in a constructed text, as opposed to the "truth" and "right answer" concept of writing, students are better able to develop a meta-cognitive approach to what they are doing, the result of which is better writing. There are many questions about why these students were so bereft of any understanding of core writing tasks at third year level and, clearly, more work needs to be done to encourage discipline lecturers to assist students in becoming academic writers.

But, in the meantime the last words should go to one of the students who had this to say, when we discussed how she was feeling about writing, after this process of interviews and discussing her understanding of feedback. "I felt like I had taken another step... I felt... I could see... It was the first time I had taken notice of the feedback." This same student commented to me when she had written the next piece of paired work that "I've got it... I've really got it. I got my part right... I was exceptionally pleased with my bit".

**References**

- Adamson, H. D. (1993). *Academic competence: Theory and classroom practice: Preparing ESL students for content courses*. New York: Longman.
- Ballantyne, R., Bain, J., & Packer, J. (1997). *Reflecting on university teaching: Academics' stories*. Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development, Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA). Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Barrone, T. (1998). Beyond theory and method: A case of critical storytelling. In *Research Methodologies in Education, course reader*. Geelong: Deakin University.
- Beasley, C., & Pearson, A. (1999). Facilitating the learning of transitional students: Strategies for success for all students. *Higher Education Research and Development* 18 (3), 303-321.
- Boud, D. (1986). *Implementing student self assessment*. HERDSA Green Guide no.5. Sydney: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).
- Candlin, C. N. (1998). Researching writing in the academy: Participants, texts, processes and practices. In C. N. Candlin & G. A. Plum (Eds.), *Researching academic literacies*. Sydney: Macquarie University Department of Linguistics / National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) / Centre for Language in Social Life.
- Chanock, K. (2000). Comments on essays: Do students understand what tutors write? *Teaching in Higher Education* 5 (1), 95-105.
- Clanchy, J., & Ballard, B. (1981). *Essay writing for students*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Crooks, T. (1988). *Assessing student performance*. HERDSA Green Guide no. 8. Sydney: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Gee, J. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies*. London: Falmer Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. & Hasan, R. (1985). *Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Lea, M., & Stierer, B. (Eds) (2000). *Student writing in higher education: New contexts*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- MacMillan, J. (1998). Writing for success in higher education. In M. Lea & B. Stierer (Eds) *Student writing in higher education: New contexts*. (pp. 149-164). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Nightingale, P. (1986). *Improving student writing*. HERDSA Green Guide no.4. Sydney: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).
- Schwartz, P., & Webb, G. (1993). *Case studies on teaching in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Spinks, S. (1998). Relating marker feedback to teaching and learning in psychology. In C. N. Candlin & G. A. Plum (Eds) *Researching academic literacies*. Sydney: Macquarie University Department of Linguistics / National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) / Centre for Language in Social Life.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**PREMISES, PRINCIPLES, PROCEDURES, PRUDENCE: A USEFUL  
TAXONOMY OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Peter F. Kipka  
Human Communication Sciences, La Trobe University

*Instead of knowledge, skills and attitudes, this paper proposes that learning objectives can be more fruitfully classified into Premises, Principles, Procedures and Prudence.*

*Premises are the framework or point of view that allows one to ask questions in a (sub)discipline. Acquiring Premises may involve learning certain key concepts or ways of seeing or a sufficiently rich store of facts, terms or experiences. This can be stated explicitly to students. Sometimes the questions the Premises raise can be attacked immediately by applying set Procedures (such as mathematical algorithms, or a set of report writing headings). At other times, it will not be obvious which Procedures to apply, but discipline-specific Principles, which consciously transform one problem space into a related one, may help. In fact either route may be feasible (one student preferring to go directly from Premises to Procedures, while another employs mediating Principles; experts may differ from novices), and then Prudence, which checks and evaluates proposed solutions, will need to be invoked to address any discrepancies. Examples of Principles include conservation laws (physics), distributivity (mathematics), and grammatical agreement (language). Importantly, Prudence enables one to fine tune one's Procedures, Principles or Premises.*

*Different assessment tasks value different combinations of Premises, Procedures, Principles and Prudence. This paper illustrates the situation drawing upon the professional disciplines, the sciences and the humanities. The proposed framework, inspired in part by Polya's four phases of problem solving (See-Plan-Do-Look back), allows expectations to be clearly stated in a way that relates directly to assessment and accommodates cognitive differences, thus alleviating at least some of the confusion on the part of students and other stakeholders.*

**The prevailing model**

Students are on the receiving end of contradictory messages about tertiary education. Having heard careers advisers and the media emphasising the vocational and instrumental benefits of a degree, they are confronted during Orientation Week with the news that they will be taught how to think - a turn of phrase sure to sound "airy-fairy", if not downright patronising. At the level of individual subjects/units/courses, the mixed messages are often multiplied. While lecturers tell students to strive for understanding rather than memorisation, the sheer volume of weekly readings coupled with detailed multiple choice examinations makes rote learning look like the only feasible strategy. In some subjects, comprehensive printed lists of aims and objectives have been reported to have come across as unhelpful if not unfathomable. At times students in course evaluation focus groups have actually wondered whether teaching staff are being deliberately obfuscatory.

One important factor behind this confusion is that students are tempted to conceive of education in terms of an input-output model:

## Sources of Confusion

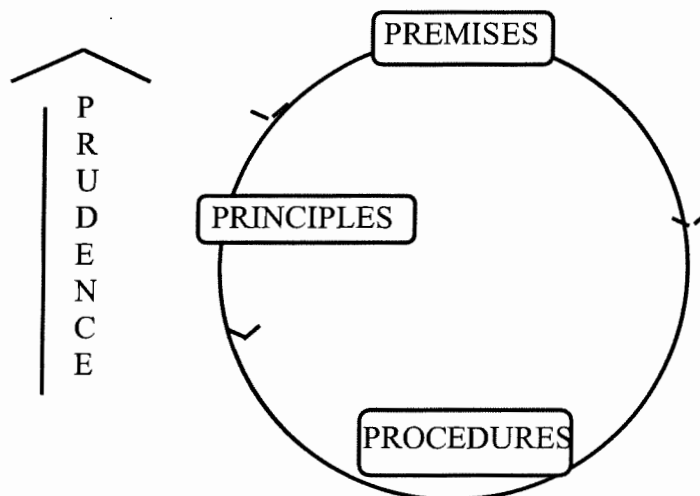


Economically minded cultures such as ours tacitly encourage the adoption of such a model, speaking as they do of rationalising inputs, optimising processes and maximising outcomes. In the quest for adequate resources, university spokespersons describe their products as knowledge and skills. As Kolb (1984, p.162) puts it “Higher education is increasingly called upon to deliver the specialized knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for students to find their niche in society”, and this way of speaking re-inforces the simple input-output framework. Students who think in terms of this model expect their lecturers to present only clear and relevant information [inputs] and to provide ample opportunities for practising skills [processing], preferably with career preparation [outputs] in mind; anything else is likely to be dismissed as a quaint curiosity at best, a waste of time at worst.

Yet despite the pervasive oversimplified rhetoric of knowledge-and-skills, “teachers in higher education expect their students to develop intellectual abilities that go beyond the possession of technical skills and subject knowledge” (Ramsden, 1992, p.38). Goals such as analysing unfamiliar situations, novel applications, critical thinking and self-critical reflection are what teaching staff have in mind. This is not some recent development. At the turn of the century, Dewey (1910, p.101) wrote as follows about schools conducive to imparting good judgment: “they have done more than if they sent out their pupils merely possessed of vast stores of information, or high degrees of skill in specialized branches”. But ninety years later, society at large and students in particular are still not really convinced that it is vital to aim for more than just skills and knowledge. Thus confusions reign.

### A new model

It is my contention that a richer model of the education process is required. The framework illustrated below can be used to present accessibly the learning outcomes of whole degree programmes, or the expectations within single subjects or parts thereof.



While not denying the value of knowledge and skills, the above model serves to highlight what is even more significant - the relationships between them.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The proposed model tries to capture the key phases of the human problem solving process. It arises from the confluence of three tributaries. Three of its four key terms come directly from Grunwell's (1983) conference paper dealing with education within a particular profession (speech pathology). The need for a fourth key term stems from Polya's (1945) seminal treatise on mathematical problem solving, summarisable using four verbs: See-Plan-Do-Look back. Finally, the relations between the terms mirror recently developed views of the human language faculty (e.g. dual route models of the reading process (Morton, 1996), or Pinker's (1999) splitting of morphology into a combinatorial and an associative system, or Wray's (1999) account of holistic versus analytic aspects of language). To my mind, this genealogy helps to give the proposed model cognitive validity and augurs well for cross-disciplinary applicability. In effect, I am suggesting that quite specific models of cognition in specialised domains have enough in common to warrant being generalised to much if not most of tertiary education. In what follows, after a quick overview of the whole model, I elaborate on each of the four key terms, and then I go on to present practical implications for alleviating students' confusion.

As with any cognitive process, the model begins with Premises. These are the starting point, one's initial outlook or framework for perceiving reality (Polya's "See"). The Premises allow one to formulate a question, a problem to be solved. Sometimes one can proceed directly from Premises to Procedures (via the rightmost arrow) - this happens when one intuitively knows right away what is likely to need to be done. Procedures (Polya's "Do"), not unexpectedly, refer to set routines, fluently executed skills. However, sooner or later, a problem will be encountered which is rather more intriguing, and for which one has no good hunch as to how to proceed. In this situation one follows the left hand curved arrows, moving from Premises to Procedures via intermediate Principles. Principles enable one to reconceptualise the problematic data, to consciously transform it into something that one's skill-base can fruitfully attack. Once a potential resolution to the problem has been arrived at by either route, one should not stop there. Reflection (Polya's "Look back") enables us to check whether we really have a genuine resolution, or the best one. It also enables us to use the problem to actually learn, to adjust or fine tune our Premises, Principles and/or Procedures in the process I call Prudence.

Comparable models for tightly circumscribed domains can be found in the literature on problem solving. One rather tidy formulation is Derry and Murphy's (1986) TAPS (Training in Arithmetic Problem-Solving Skills) programme, summarised via Four C's: problem Clarification, Choosing a solution, Carrying out the solution, and finally Checking the results. As stated above, my contention is that this approach can be generalised to much of tertiary education, thus clarifying its often nebulously stated goals.

### *Premises*

If one attends an advanced lecture in an unfamiliar discipline, one is likely to feel lost. What is more disturbing is that students rather too frequently report finding it difficult to understand what their own lecturers are really on about. In both these scenarios we have a mismatch at the level of Premises. Sometimes this can be glaring, but the situation is more ominous when this mismatch is not spotted until it is too late.

A well researched instance of the latter arises in the learning of the branch of physics known as dynamics. All too many students report finding elementary Newtonian physics unfathomable ("out there"). Their tacit assumption (unconscious Premise) is that any motion requires a "force", something explicitly denied in Newton's First Law. Being able to recite this law from memory is typically fairly useless; unless one is able to perceive reality with this law as a key assumption, unless one is comfortable using it as a Premise, one is likely to conclude that "physics is not for me". Consequently, unless a physics course recognises that Newton's Laws are Premises to be acquired, not merely items of propositional knowledge, many students are unlikely to do well and diligent students are likely to remain puzzled as to why.

## *Sources of Confusion*

As the preceding examples show, acquiring Premises is likely to involve the learning of new terminology, but even more importantly, of a new conceptual framework. Such frameworks cannot be conveyed by “telling”. I suspect their successful acquisition usually involves cycling through our proposed model several times, using Prudence to gradually adjust Premises. I suspect further that students can benefit from being told to expect that this is how successful (or “deep”) learning occurs.

Not all disciplines have codified their Premises to the same degree of explicitness - in fact physics is probably an extreme case. In many humanistic and professional disciplines, the appropriate frame of mind for effective problem formulation can only be acquired by personally synthesising an appropriate range of facts and/or experiences. Here too, students are likely to benefit from being informed why they are being exposed to such a range of facts or experiences; otherwise, students will probably infer that memorisation or skill practice is what is primarily expected in such subjects.

### *Procedures*

Fluently executed skills do have their place in tertiary education - our model calls them Procedures, and practice is indispensable for their acquisition. Explicit identification of the important Procedures in a subject can only help - without this, diligent students are tempted to spend time practising everything, while others are likely to be haphazard in what they choose to revisit sufficiently many times to attain mastery.

Educationalists such as Laurillard (1984) have stressed the need to distinguish between Procedures (what she calls “localized manipulative procedures” or “standard procedures”) on the one hand, and the problem solving process on the other. Not only does our model do this without introducing baroque terminology, but it also highlights how Procedures and problem solving are related to each other. Learning objectives conceived of in these terms help to clarify the different learning processes involved. In place of catch-all advice along the lines of “do as many past papers as possible” (and it is worth noting that this advice can actually provoke anxiety among students when, in rapidly changing disciplines, few relevant past papers are available), explicit identification of Procedures worth practising should prove much more student-friendly.

### *Principles*

Dewey (1910) contrasts direct understanding (termed apprehension) with indirect, mediated understanding (which he calls comprehension). In our model, it is Principles which mediate understanding. In some disciplines Principles are explicitly formulated and labelled as principles, generalisations or laws. From these contexts we can see that what is involved are discipline-specific generalisations about reality that allow one to transform the data one sees into a new (and hopefully more amenable) form. Thus conservation laws in physics transform dynamics into algebra. The distributive law [  $a(x + y) = ax + ay$  ] or the commutative law [  $x + y = y + x$  ] can be used to transform ordering and operations in mathematics. However, primary school arithmetic probably furnishes us with examples which are simplest to grasp. Thus there is a Principle for transforming subtraction (  $21 - 9 = ?$  ) into addition (  $9 + ? = 21$  ). Some call this Principle “counting on” (in our example, one counts on from 9 until one reaches 21, and so solves a subtraction problem without actually subtracting). Consequently, those who possess this Principle together with counting abilities can immediately subtract. Strong mathematics students sometimes wonder why textbooks spend so much time on the “obvious”, giving it arcane terminology (like commutativity). It may help them to realise that what is to be learnt here are Principles, not mere labels, facts, or propositions.

As is clear from the Latin origin of the term (*principium* = beginning), a Principle is a means of beginning anew, of consciously starting the problem solving process afresh, from a new perspective. This characterisation is helpful when looking for Principles in disciplines without codified and labelled laws. Such Principles certainly do exist in professionally based

## *Sources of Confusion*

disciplines like medicine and the health sciences, where problem-based curricula and hence conscious use of the problem solving process are currently on the increase.

It is worth reiterating that problem solving can occur via a direct route (based on a *Gestalt* prompted by one's sense of salience) or via the indirect route where Principles are used to overtly transform the problematic data into a form more amenable for handling via previously mastered Procedures. The direct route is characteristic of experts solving fairly routine problems; non-routine problems or questions faced by novices cannot be so handled, thus requiring the indirect path via Principles. Explicit Principles enable one to be systematic and to list all logical possibilities - this is particularly valuable in the non-routine and the novice situations. Occasionally students are disconcerted by the fact that lecturers can see answers to complex questions immediately; awareness of the differences between expert and novice problem solving should help to allay feelings of inadequacy that may arise in these circumstances.

### *Prudence*

Prudence refers here to the process of looking back once one has arrived at a possible resolution to a problem. It is clearly prudent to look back to check if one really has solved all of the initial problem as actually formulated, particularly if different people have used different lines of attack. One might ask - do their proposed resolutions coincide exactly? Reflective Prudence checks whether the results of the direct (*Gestalt*) route can be verified by the more systematic Principle-based indirect route. It also asks whether the results of the indirect path could have been arrived at more quickly and efficiently. This process of looking back reverses the directions of the arrows in our proposed model and thus enables one to adjust one's Procedures, Principles, or even Premises. Here is where deep learning occurs. Being explicit about Prudence is one way to help students value this kind of learning, and to see what lecturers mean by phrases such as "striving for a non-superficial understanding". Prudence (the Latin origins of which are a little intricate, but which suggest "looking in a different direction") is what helps us to integrate different facets of our experience.

The proposed framework allows one to perspicuously classify many students' weaknesses and their consequent learning needs. Students submitting work deficient in Prudence - rushed, unchecked and containing assertions that lack any plausibility - are encountered not only by maths teachers (particularly in the days of electronic calculators) but by teachers in numerous discipline areas. Lack of mastery of Principles is often straightforward to diagnose when a student can solve only standard, routine problems. Butterworth (1999) provides dramatic examples of difficulties solely with Procedures, or only with Premises. When studying the mathematical performance of adults with brain damage (due to strokes, surgery, accidents, or degenerative disease) he encountered some patients whose basic mathematical deficit was a loss of previously routine skills, while a few others had essentially lost the practical concept of number (which he terms numerosity) despite recalling rote learned facts such as multiplication tables. The latter situation - a loss of a fundamental Premise - has far more debilitating consequences than a difficulty with Procedures (e.g. always subtracting the smaller digit from the larger, yielding  $71 - 19 = 68$ ), with Principles (e.g. knowing  $5 \times 7$  but not  $7 \times 5$ ), or with Prudence (e.g. not checking one's answers).

### **Implications for tertiary education**

Having tried to demonstrate the cognitive plausibility of the model proposed, I turn next to some examples of how it helps in clarifying university level learning objectives. It has already been mentioned that students are too often confused about their lecturers' real expectations and possibly unstated agendas. Ramsden (1992, p.6) reminds us that students can devote a lot of their effort to "learning how to please lecturers and gain high marks". Those who do not "learn" this may well simply drop out of a course, or at best remain confused.

For lecturers and course co-ordinators, the key message is to avoid presenting a subject solely or mainly in terms of knowledge and skills. I have proposed a framework for discussing one's deeper aims. It would be nice if learning objectives were organised around explicit Premises. This entails grouping of objectives if a subject has more than one key Premise. It is worth stating openly that Premises enable Principles, Procedures and Prudence to do their work, but that the way to acquire Premises is precisely via coming to grips with related Principles and Procedures in a prudent fashion. There is a kind of mutual dependence relation here that is sometimes conveyed by labelling desired Premises as aims, and the corresponding Principles, Procedures and Prudence as (sub)objectives grouped under the relevant aim. In such cases, both aims and objectives are statements of goals, but at different levels of detail and with different cognitive implications.

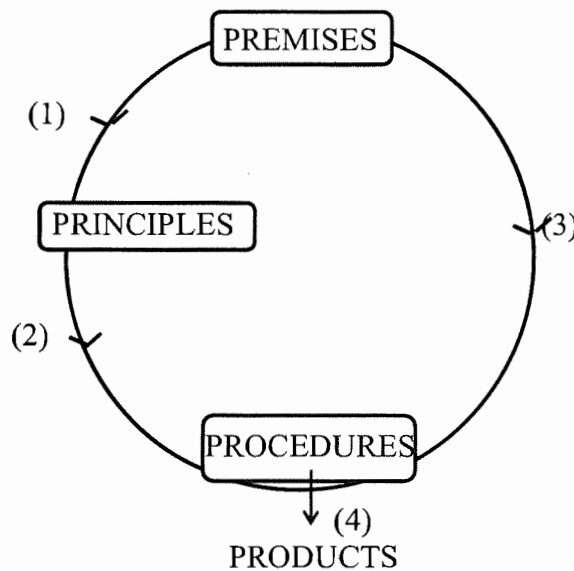
The previous two sentences contain an important message for students and for learning advisers: when goals are listed as aims and objectives, it is possible that the aims may actually be the Premises of the subject in question. Looking for keywords such as "framework", "outlook" or "seeing in a new light" can help to confirm this hypothesis. Decoding of the other kinds of objectives may require close scrutiny of set assessment tasks and is most clearly done on a discipline by discipline basis.

### *Professional disciplines*

Many university degrees prepare students for entry into a designated profession. Typically coursework will include work experience or a supervised clinical component, which students often find eye-opening, valuable but also quite stressful when formally assessed. Assessment-induced anxieties can be alleviated by reference to our proposed learning model. Thus students can be alerted to expected differences between expert and novice clinicians' thinking. The Bachelor of Speech Pathology degree at La Trobe University further uses a clinical feedback form that explicitly evaluates procedural performance and (separately) clinical reasoning skills. Feedback about "self-assessment" behaviour provides a rubric for commenting on Prudence. Thus students can be reassured that they have been exposed to many of the elements of a clinic in all their prior university subjects. Where students have difficulty seeing the links between the non-clinical and the clinical components of their course, a unified model such as the one here proposed can assist with the challenge of integration. This is because a single model is now available for framing the learning objectives of the various subjects in a professional degree or diploma, allowing one to highlight commonalities and links.

It is worth adding that current trends towards Evidence Based Medicine and Health Practice (EBM), defined as the systematic and explicit use in decision-making of *both* individual clinical expertise and the best available external evidence, illustrate beautifully the complementarity of the direct and the indirect routes of problem solving inherent in our model. Individual clinical expertise often takes the form of direct apprehension, whereas external evidence usually requires principled weighing up and evaluating before it is applied.

Some professionally based degree programmes expose students to adult learning theory, for example, Kolb's (1994) four modes of learning: Concrete Experience, Abstract Conceptualisation, Reflective Observation, and Active Experimentation. These theories mesh neatly with our proposed model. Once one adds a fourth downward-pointing arrow (from Procedures to products, for instance), we have four arrows, the direction of which can be reversed by Prudence - these seem to correspond closely to Kolb's four learning modes. The following diagram illustrates the situation.



- Learning involving reversing (4) = Concrete Experience
- Learning involving reversing (3) = Reflective Observation
- Learning involving reversing (2) = Active Experimentation
- Learning involving reversing (1) = Abstract Conceptualisation

*The sciences*

Since problem solving is integral to any science, there should be little difficulty in applying our proposed model in such contexts. Several mathematical examples have already been discussed above. A word of warning may, however, be warranted - it is not necessarily the case that every equation, formula, law or even principle should count as a Principle. The definition of Principles (looking anew, data transformation) needs to be borne in mind, lest the list of Principles to be learnt be extended *ad infinitum*. In fact, an equation or formula may merely be a Procedure at one stage of learning, become a Principle after some prudent reflection, and ultimately end up as a Premise in the expert's view of reality. Awareness of this developmental sequence can help students and teachers gauge progress in the deeper aspects of learning, and so assist with preparing for the different demands of different assessment tasks.

It is worth reiterating that where a lecturer simply assumes Premises which students lack, serious frustration if not antipathy can arise. Again, without awareness of this possible dynamic, it is not likely that any real solutions will be found. Kuhn's (1962) seminal work on paradigms and paradigm shifts highlights how different sets of key Premises (paradigms) can lead to incommensurability and miscommunication. It is reassuring that Kuhn also points out that budding scientists are better able to handle paradigm (Premise) shifts than those who are more set in their ways.

*The humanities*

Some disciplines usually classed under the rubric of humanities fit very neatly into our proposed learning model. Thus language learning involves Procedures (e.g. pronunciation, orthography), Principles (e.g. grammatical agreement), and Premises (e.g. cultural assumptions about discourse), all of which can be gradually mastered via Prudence. One might wonder, however, if the proposed model is of any use in disciplines such as history or literary appreciation. I would like to suggest that any discipline which makes use of the essay as a form of assessment has much to gain from having its expectations analysed according to the framework developed here. This is because the model can be readily used to explicate the experience of writing essays.

Students at university often receive mixed messages about essay writing. They are advised to go through a process of drafting and redrafting, yet (with the notable exception of postgraduates) they typically receive no formal credit or feedback on intermediate drafts, as if only the final product is to be valued. Given commonly experienced pressures and procrastinatory tendencies, it is hardly surprising that all too many university essays are submitted in a rushed, undigested state. Feedback along the lines of “take more time”, “where’s your argument?”, “?”, “so...”, etc. is unlikely to get to the heart of the problem of mismatches between student and staff expectations.

This is where our proposed learning framework can help. A conscientious essay must involve drafting and redrafting because essay writing involves at least three cyclic passes through the model. On the first pass, one’s Premises are trying to make sense of what is already known about a particular question. One’s note-taking Procedures when reading the literature can be guided by an intuitive sense of what is salient (the direct route) or by explicit discipline-specific Principles. One should then reflect on the extent to which the extant literature answers the question at hand, a process that may lead to deep Principle- or Premise-adjusting learning. In some disciplines, further data collection would be expected at this juncture. However, sooner or later, we are ready for the next pass through the model. The question to be addressed now is, given the available data, of what precisely can I convince myself (or a friend), and how? Once again, one has the option of trying to construct intuitive arguments, or one can try to follow a principled, discipline-based model of exposition. Once more, it is prudent to reflect on one’s draft essay at this point, fine tuning as needed, before embarking on the third traversal of the model. This time, the question is: of what can I convince a sceptic, and how? Such critical appraisal can be undertaken intuitively (the direct route) or systematically (via Principles), as can proofreading (cf. “Read each sentence aloud to check if it sounds right” versus “Check spelling, commas, agreement one after the other”).

Essay marking has been criticised as being subjective and time consuming. There is an element of truth to this, but it is the trade-off for using a form of assessment which, at its best, rewards students for engaging in successive cycles of deep learning. Presented in this light, the advice about drafting and redrafting should feel less like an arduous imposition and may even come across as inspiring. A well constructed essay can (perhaps should) be life-changing.

Is this an over-statement? I actually think not, as working through an example will hopefully show. Space limitations prevent me from here analysing an authentic student essay, but the relevant points can readily be made by considering the stages in the construction of this very paper. The first stage was an attempt to come to grips with how to convey the notion of “deep learning” to students. In the process I consulted a reasonably eclectic set of models of what it means to learn to think and process information. Many modern writers have argued for quite neat models for some tightly circumscribed cognitive domain. Reflecting (prudently, I hoped) on the similarities and differences among these, it emerged that all the models examined could be synthesised into one, so that each would highlight the workings of some subpart of the overall picture. Could it be that a powerful generalisation had eluded those researching specific cognitive subdomains? Trying to answer this new question via drafting this paper was the second stage of my thinking, and thus my second pass through the model. This time I adopted a Principle-based tack - if the various specific models in the literature could truly be synthesised, then that synthesis should be applicable to each of the three major types of university faculty - humanities, science, and education for the professions. Writing the first draft confirmed my hunch that such a synthesis is achievable, and on subsequent reflection, it seemed considerably more useful than the prevailing view that the “outputs” of a university education should be knowledge and skills. However, would my argument convince a sceptic? The third pass through the model began with that question, and encompassed not only the usual polishing and proofreading, but also feedback via external review. It emerged that one referee wanted more specifics as well as expressing concerns about the overall purpose of the paper. My response is this very paragraph, the idea for which came to me not via some discipline-specific Principle, but (after considerable mulling over) as an intuitive, direct,

“apprehended” hunch. On subsequent reflection I became aware how my own essay writing closely conforms to the model I have presented, a welcome realisation for me given the very general, cross-disciplinary claims I have made in this paper. Perhaps then my contention that a single model can be used to clearly convey tertiary education expectations is worth considering even by the sceptical... Needless to say, I would welcome any responses to this, which might well trigger yet another pass for me through the learning cycle.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Trying to make sense of university-level expectations without an appropriate framework is a bit like staring at a rainbow that has been photographed in black and white. If our proposed model clarifies the nature of learning objectives for at least some lecturers, students and learning advisers, it will have served its purpose. I personally find that it makes the process of compiling aims and objectives quite rewarding. Because of its cross-disciplinary applicability, the model described here can further serve as a common basis for reflecting upon the university experience in general. If in addition my proposals prompt a rethinking of the prevailing, oversimplified (and I would add dangerous) “knowledge and skills” rhetoric, with its detrimental logical implication of a dichotomy between elite research-intensive universities and vocationally oriented others, society as a whole may even benefit.

### **References**

- Butterworth, B. (1999). *The mathematical brain*. London: Macmillan.
- Derry, S.J., & Murphy, D.A. (1986). Designing systems that train learning ability: From theory to practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 56, 1-39.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. London: D.C.Heath.
- Grunwell, P. (1983). Phonological therapy: premises, principles and procedures. *Proceedings of the XLIX Congress of the International Association of Logopaedics and Phoniatics*. University of Edinburgh.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Laurillard, D. (1984). Learning from problem solving. In F. Marton, D. Hounsell, & N. Entwistle (Eds.), *The experience of learning*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- Morton, J. (1996). How many routes in reading? In D. Green and others. *Cognitive science: An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pinker, S. (1999). *Words and rules: The ingredients of language*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Polya, G. (1945). *How to solve it*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher education*. London: Routledge.
- Wray, A. (1999). Formulaic language in learners and native speakers. *Language Teaching*, 32, 213-231.

**LIFEBUOYS IN A SEA OF CONFUSION: AN INTEGRATED  
LEARNING SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR FIRST YEAR NURSING  
STUDENTS.**

Beverley Kokkinn  
University of South Australia

*Many commencing nursing students struggle to deal with the complexities and resulting confusions associated with university study given the range of their educational experience, ability, learning styles and preparedness. The successful acculturation of nursing students to tertiary expectations is particularly problematic because they are confronted by four different disciplines in the first year, each with its own worldview and academic expectations. Students often look for ways to make sense of their experiences by asking for individual support services. However, given the level of demand, an individual approach is not the most efficient way of providing learning support. Nor is it necessarily the most effective.*

*At the University of South Australia, an integrated approach to providing learning support has led to a range of resources or lifebuoys for students to grasp throughout the first year. They include the usual face-to-face, print based and electronic support all aimed at demystifying the unwritten conventions that students encounter. They also include a curriculum development approach working collaboratively with teaching staff. This paper provides details of the integrated approach to learning support at the University of South Australia and identifies the lifebuoys available to the nursing students in this sea of confusion.*

**Background**

Learning support that is integrated into the student experience of their course is a highly effective way of improving student learning (Feast, Barrett, Kokkinn & Head, 1998). The extent to which the integration of the learning support is possible is largely dependent on the location of learning support advisers in the structure of the various institutions. Their location, either inside or outside the Faculty structure, brings with it opportunities for, and constraints on, the levels of integration of the support interventions. The level of "integration" of learning support can be seen to sit along a continuum. At one end there are generic resources developed by learning advisers but labelled as subject materials and included in a subject outline. At the other end of the continuum there are the learning support interventions developed by learning advisers but which appear "seamless" with other course materials. At the University of South Australia, learning advisers are members of Learning Connection, a service unit of the University of South Australia, consisting of Professional Developers, Counsellors, and Production staff as well as Learning Advisers. They are, as such, located outside the Divisional structure but work directly with Divisional staff in a contractual arrangement aimed at changing the teaching and learning environment. This location allows for a professional development model of student learning support (Hicks & George, 1998) realised through collaborative relationships with Faculty staff which often result not only in changes in the curriculum but also in integrating relevant learning support interventions. Collaboration between staff in the School of Nursing and learning advisers resulted in an integrated support program that was in many ways seamless.

## *Sources of Confusion*

In 2000 there were over 1700 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing degree at the University of South Australia studying at three campuses of the university - City East, Underdale and Whyalla. The number of enrolments at the three campuses is usually highest at City East, being more than half the total number. Of particular interest within the large student group is the wide diversity among the students and how they undertake their study. The students study in different modes and take on different study loads. At the City East campus in 2000, the percentage of full time internal first year students was 42%, part time internal students 23%, and external students 35%. There was also a wide range of ages among the students. Many are mature age students and this year approximately 52% of the enrolments were enrolled nurses, most studying externally. The percentage of males was around 13% and International and students from non-English-speaking backgrounds represented 12% of the total number. The diversity among the students is also visible in the way they gain entry to the course. The more traditional method is by achieving the minimum required school-leaving score in the Tertiary Entrance Ranking - about 61. Another way is through a mature age entry test. Language proficiency levels also vary widely. Although all International students are required to present evidence of English proficiency levels of IELTS 6 and above, non-English-speaking-background (NESB) students who are Australian residents are not required to undertake a language test to gain entry and may commence tertiary study with relatively low English proficiency levels.

Apart from diversity in cultural backgrounds, gender, ways of entry, mode and type of study, the students represent further diversity in ability, experience, background knowledge, socio-economic status, and all the affective issues that impact on student learning and success. In at least one respect the students are homogeneous, that is in the lack of preparedness for university study, particularly in academic writing and mathematical background. To a large extent, their experience of writing has been discursive and they have little understanding of expository writing, academic argument and the conventions of referencing. They often arrive with little understanding of learning science subjects like Human Bioscience or they often lack the mathematical background for performing accurate drug calculations.

Given the diversity among the students it was necessary to provide a range of learning support interventions that could be accessed at a number of different points and in a range of ways. The challenge that this presented was exacerbated by the level of staffing which allowed for limited one-to-one access to individual Learning Advisers. Clearly, there was a need to develop services that were wide ranging and effective and a needs analysis was undertaken to identify the major issues and sources of confusion among nursing students and to use the findings to develop new ways to support student learning.

### **Tracking the sources of confusion**

The needs analysis involved several methods so that a clearer understanding of the range of student needs could be determined (West, 1994). These methods included an analysis of the curriculum and subject materials, the assessments, discussions with teaching staff and with students. Analysis of the first year curriculum revealed that first year subjects came from a number of disciplines. Five subjects introduce the students to fundamental nursing concepts and four others were from different discipline areas, each with their own discourse. These were:

*Human Bioscience 1 and Human Bioscience 2* (taught by lecturers in the School of Pharmacy)

*Society and Culture* (taught by lecturers in the School of Social Work and Social Policy)

*Aboriginal Health and Culture* (taught by lecturers in The Unaipon School [Aboriginal studies]).

In each subject the quantity of content in itself is challenging, but for students to be successful they also need to become familiar with the different worldviews and discourses of nursing, science, sociology and cultural studies. When the extensive range of assessments and

## *Sources of Confusion*

academic genres are linked to the complex list of discourses, some of the reasons for student confusion in their first year become evident. For example, in semester one students were required to write:

- essays in two different discipline areas
- a reflective journal
- an annotated bibliography
- a health contract proposal and report
- a critique of a taped interview
- a summary of a clinical field trip

They were also required to:

- answer multiple choice questions in the examinations for two subjects
- conduct a tutorial presentation and to "write a paper" on the topic
- undertake a practical examination

This wide range of subjects and assessments is common to many first year courses which usually attempt to provide a broad foundation for students. However, many of the diverse group of students in the nursing course find the demands of the first year subjects particularly problematic.

As part of the needs analysis, subject outlines and assessment items in the different subjects were analysed to identify the implicit cues to the valued ways of thinking, reading, speaking and writing that operate within each discourse community (Swales, 1990). Learning Advisers negotiated and collaborated with subject lecturers to gain insights into the discipline specific discourses and the specific institutional expectations (Tickoo, 1994). Other valuable insights into student confusion came from students themselves through many of the questions they asked in face-to-face sessions. Analysis of the developing drafts of student assignments also provided insights into the sources of confusion for them. The analysis of student texts was extremely valuable for understanding the mismatches between student attempts at academic writing and the "valued texts" (Swales, 1990) of the particular discourse communities.

From the findings of the needs analysis it became clear that the combination of diverse student backgrounds, diverse disciplines, and diverse assessment expectations lay at the heart of the confusion that students reported experiencing. They were confused about subject expectations, academic reading and writing, argument, referencing and plagiarism and this was particularly evident in questions like: "What's referencing?" "Can you show me how to write an argument? I don't know enough to argue with the experts who wrote the books! How can I argue with them?" "What amount of detail do I have to know for Bioscience?" "What's the difference between an essay and a report?"

### **Theoretical framework for integrated support programs**

The most effective way to provide learning support for the evident needs of the diverse group of students was to adopt a systemic, systematic and strategic approach. The learning support needed to be systemically integrated and consistent, and it needed to be contextualised in the relevant discourse so that it appeared seamless in the eyes of students. There needed to be a systematic way of presenting the support to enable it to develop students' skills in a logical, consistent way through explicit guidelines for academic writing. The approach needed to be strategic in the type and timing of the interventions. Students also needed to see a range and mode of interventions as integral to their course. To achieve this approach, a number of strategically positioned interventions or lifebuoys were set up so that they were interconnected, consistent and repeated in order to achieve maximum access. They also were set up to operate in multiple modes.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The process of developing the integrated learning support program was framed by three factors: the notion of literacies, the type of approach adopted, and genre theory. In terms of academic literacy, it is clear that when teaching staff assess students' work, they do so as members of their discourse community and play a role in "gatekeeping" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). As well as being experts in their field, staff at the University of South Australia also work within a teaching and learning framework of Graduate Qualities and play a major role in developing the attributes that distinguish students as members of their professional communities. In view of this, staff view student writing and speaking not only in terms of its content, but also according to the way it corresponds to the particular academic discourse. In other words, students are expected to display appropriate levels of 'literacies' (Baynham, 1995) in each discourse. Literacy can be defined as "social practices that are complex, multifaceted and ideologically loaded" (Baynham, 1995, p. 8). It is not neutral in terms of social and cultural structures. Students are expected to be able "to 'read' the culture, ... (and) come to terms with ... (the) distinctive rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour" of each discipline (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988, p. 8). They are required to adopt the academic expectations and conventions of each particular "discourse community" (Swales, 1990). In order to do this, Cope and Kalantzis (1993) suggest that explicit instruction of the academic demands of the discipline is needed so that all students gain "membership" to their discourse community. In view of the range of literacies in each of the disciplines in the first year of the nursing course, it was clear that many students needed these literacies to be made explicit.

The second factor that influenced the process of developing the integrated learning support program was in the approach taken. As discussed, the most effective way to achieve explicit teaching was deemed to be a systemic, systematic and strategic approach for all interventions. The systemic and systematic approach was achieved through close collaboration with nursing staff and in this way, learning support interventions were integrated into the course. This approach is in line with Ballard's (1998) calls for "networking, negotiating and nagging" staff to integrate learning support. Collaboration with nursing staff was essential to determine the appropriate content for the support program. Working closely with staff also resulted in successful marketing of the support programs by removing the perception that students often have of support programs as an "add-on" to their course. In this way it was possible to create the impression in the minds of students that the link between the School of Nursing and the Learning Connection was seamless. The integration of the support has resulted in students having strategically positioned 'lifebuoys' to grasp when they find themselves floating in the "sea of confusion" of their first year at university. The learning support for Nursing students is consistent with the range of resources produced by the student support services in the Learning Connections on all campuses and this further emphasises the systemic and systematic approach.

In relation to the teaching of academic writing, it was important for the explication to be consistent. In order to achieve this consistency, the Learning Advisers drew on genre theory for the development of the resources used in face-to-face workshops, as well as for print and online resources. Genre is "a staged, goal-oriented, social, purposeful activity in which speakers (and writers) engage as members of ... [the] 'culture'" (Martin, 1984, p. 25 cited in Eggins, 1994). Genre analysis of texts was used to form the basis of the resources for academic writing so that the ways of meaning in the discourse areas of their study were made explicit. This approach to teaching academic writing has found wide support (Swales, 1990; Drury & Webb, 1991; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Stevenson, 2000).

### **The integrated learning support program**

The systemic, systematic and strategic approach is realised in two instances: lifebuoys of support during orientation and others spread over both semesters of the first year.

#### *The Orientation lifebuoys*

The orientation program at university is believed to be an important first step for any student. The orientation program at the University of South Australia aims to reduce anxiety and

## *Sources of Confusion*

confusion by making explicit the resources available to students and the workings of the university and university expectations, particularly with regard to workload and managing time. For the diverse group of nursing students, the three modules in their orientation program are the first strategically placed lifebuoys for them to grasp. The systemic, systematic and strategic approach was part of the design, development, implementation of the programs. Noticeably, the marketing of the programs emphasises them as an integral part of the Nursing School's orientation program, although the Learning Advisers are from the Learning Connections on each campus. Several orientation programs are available:

- Mature age nursing students can attend the "Returning to study" program
- All first year nursing students can attend the "Making the Transition to University study" and "Using the University's computer network" programs. This latter program introduces students to the university's computing network so that they can access some of the resources made available to them later.
- External students attend their own one-day program conducted by the School of Nursing and including workshops by learning advisers on making the transition to tertiary study.

Apart from the important function that the orientation program serves for the nursing students, it also provides a valuable opportunity for students to accept Learning Advisers and their work as integral to the first year experience. This perception of a seamless support program involving staff from Nursing and from the Learning Connection is important for the later parallel learning support sessions to function successfully in a systemic way.

### *Semester lifebuoys*

There are four large lifebuoys that support students during the semester. Firstly, there is the semester-long program which includes face to face workshops, online workshops and online downloadable resources. Secondly there is the study skills book for nursing students at the University of South Australia titled *Strategies for Success in Nursing Studies* (Calabretto & Kokkinn, 2000) and thirdly, there is the learning support for academic writing skills embedded in the first year subject, *Concepts of Professional Nursing Inquiry*.

The semester long program of learning support is planned and advertised at the start of each semester - the complete program is available from the start of the academic year and students register to attend. This process involves close collaboration between the Learning Adviser and the Subject Coordinators. Workshops are strategically timed and reminders are provided by nursing staff in classes.

Most of the sessions for nursing students focus on developing academic literacy through assessment items for particular subjects. The development of academic writing skills is genre based. This approach facilitates the development of a meta-awareness of how texts work and change according to their social function. The genre approach is consistently used to support nursing students in developing their writing skills in the face-to-face workshops as well as in all the print and online resources available.

There are also some sessions in the program that aim to develop effective learning strategies for science subjects. These sessions are titled "Talking Bioscience" and operate largely as small group discussions of Bioscience topics to encourage familiarity with the scientific discourse. A useful outcome of these workshops is the number of independent study groups that develop.

### Face to face programs

Three types of workshops are offered to groups of students face to face with Learning Advisers. They include:

- Group workshops focused on assessment tasks in subjects for two semesters
- Group workshops titled "Talking Bioscience"
- Group workshops to prepare NESB students for clinical placement for two semesters

## *Sources of Confusion*

These are conducted during the semester at times specified by the subject coordinators to suit study timetables and student needs.

### Online resources

Online computer resources have only been available since 1999. The range of resources includes online generic and subject specific materials:

- Online generic resources  
- There is a set of print downloadable learning guides on a range of topics

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/learnres/learnng/index.htm>

- There are a number of interactive workshops on a range of study topics  
<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/wkshpol/general.htm>

- Online subject specific interactive workshops  
There are workshops designed for several nursing subjects. Examples for first year nursing subjects include:

Guide to writing the RNP 3 Essay (O'Regan & Kokkinn, 1999a):

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/assignment/>

Guide to writing Assignment 2 for RNP4 (2000) (O'Regan &

Kokkinn, 1999b): <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/07259assn/>

Writing Assignment 3 for Aboriginal Health and Culture (12166) (Stevenson, Kokkinn & Taylor, 2000)

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/12166-AboriginalHealthCulture/>

Preparing for the Human Bioscience 1 exam (O'Regan & Kokkinn, 1999c) <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/12160examprep/>

The range of consistent learning support resources available to nursing students as well as the repetition spread throughout the resources allows for maximum access in a systematic way. Students are able to access support in different modes, at different times and different places and find guides that are consistent throughout. The full range of support materials is consistent with the approach to academic writing in the face-to-face workshops. They are on the web and can be accessed at:

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/learnres/index.htm>

### Study Skills book for Nursing Students at the University of South Australia

Apart from the generic learning guides and workshops available online through on each campus, a study skills book was produced specifically for nursing students at the University of South Australia. The book, *Strategies for Success in Nursing Studies* (Calabretto & Kokkinn, 2000) was written as a collaborative project by staff teaching in the first year of the nursing degree and a Learning Adviser. It is a compilation of many of the learning resources available to students as well as specific applications of the more generic resources to the specific discourse and assessment requirements within Nursing. The collection of annotated examples of student writing represents the genres students use in first year. Again, the resources are consistent with the genre approach used by the learning advisers in support programs and resources on academic writing. Chapters in the book include: *Getting started at university*, *Strategies for finding information*, *Strategies for success in nursing subjects*, (*Chapters for each subject in first year*), *Referencing-the CIBA system*, and *Presentation guidelines*.

Having a study skills book specifically for nursing students at the University of South Australia has several advantages. The book provides guidelines written by the subject coordinator of each subject. Each of the subject chapters, therefore, provides the kind of explicit guidelines that lecturers provide to individual students when they ask about assignments. Each chapter represents the "worldview" of that subject. Some focus on

strategies for learning, others on particular strategies for assessments like expectations and guidelines for successful tutorial presentations. Most importantly in terms of academic writing skills, *Strategies for Success in Nursing Studies* is consistent in its approach to teaching academic writing skills with other Learning Connection resources as well as those specific to nursing students.

### Resources embedded in first semester subject

Of all the learning support lifebuoys provided, the one that has been **seamlessly** integrated into the course is the material developed by learning advisers on academic writing that has been embedded in the compulsory first year subject *Concepts of Professional Nursing Inquiry* (CPNI). This integration took place through close collaboration between Learning Advisers and Nursing staff and led to shared understandings of student needs. Genre based essay writing resources (Hipp, Kokkinn & Stevenson, 1997) were adapted for inclusion in CPNI. These materials are again consistent with others used in the support program for nurses and make explicit how written texts change according to their social purpose and function. Students develop a meta awareness of texts as schematically different and therefore become aware of the related linguistic differences.

### **Evaluation**

Many of the individual 'lifebuoys' of support for nursing students have been evaluated. The results of evaluations of the orientation programs have shown that students set up early study networks, understand the new workload and time management demands and have some understandings of the "systems" that operate in the university. Evaluation of the face-to-face workshops has been limited and is an area which will be more rigorously examined in 2001. Generally speaking, the number of students attending was unpredictable and inconsistent and appears to have been influenced by the time of year, assignment dates and in some cases poor advertising of program details and dates. In terms of the online workshops, the number of "hits" made on the sites indicated that **many** students accessed them. For example, there were 508 students enrolled in Aboriginal Health and Culture in 2000 and there were 704 hits on the site between October and late November. As yet, no evaluation has been set up beyond the hit register. Where feedback was sought the comments were positive.

Thanks for this wonderful program. You saved my life! (Student)

I have just had a look at this assessment guide and think it is fabulous. I will share it with our course coordinator and first year subject coordinators as a good way to assist students to develop some of the writing, noting and critiquing skills that we often assume they have. (Staff member)

The study skills book has been evaluated and the results show that ninety three per cent of the respondents said they would recommend the book to all commencing students. Ninety-one percent also stated that they had used all the subject chapters, the Library chapter and the Referencing chapter. The book has also received positive evaluation from staff and has been added to the list of recommended reading for all first year nursing subjects for 2001.

### **Conclusion**

The extent to which learning support is integrated into courses and subjects can often be determined by the location of learning advisory staff in the structure of a university. It is usual to assume that integration is best achieved from being located within a Faculty structure, but it is also possible for learning advisers to adopt strategies to achieve the integration of learning support equally successfully operating outside the Faculty. At the University of South Australia, the contractual arrangements between Faculty and Learning Connection staff allow for collaborative development of integrated learning support. In the case of the collaboration between learning advisers and faculty staff from the School of Nursing, the support has been integrated into the first year experience of nursing students in a number of ways and extents.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The support is systematic in that there is a clear development of academic skills that starts during the orientation program and continues throughout the first year through a range of interventions. The different programs and resources cater in different ways for the diverse needs of the diverse student group. The mode of delivery includes face-to-face support, online and paper-based support, all designed to meet diverse needs of the students. The learning support is systemic in that it is contextualised in the discourses, is offered at strategic points of the course and appears seamless to students. The academic writing support is consistent in all the modes of delivery and the inclusion of support materials in an important first year subject further adds to the perception of seamlessness.

Further curriculum change, particularly in assessment practices, could allow for more embedding of learning support strategies. However, these changes could be problematic given the number of staff involved in teaching the course. Immediate future plans are to extend the integrated support program through to second year subjects in the course such that the appropriate critical literacies can be made explicit. Integration of explicit guidelines for academic writing and speaking into the second and third year levels of the course would achieve even further "integration" of the learning support that would sit closer to the "seamless" end of the continuum of possible support. This integration could be achieved by adopting the same framework as adopted for integrating learning support into the first year subjects: the notion of literacy, the type of approach and the use of genre theory. For the students enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing degree, the result would be an extended program of learning support that is systemic, systematic and strategically located over the three year course - a complete set of "lifebuoys" in the sea of tertiary confusion.

### **References**

- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1988). Literacy in the University: An anthropological approach. In G. Taylor et al. (Eds.), *Literacy by Degrees* (pp. 7-23). Milton Keynes: Open University Press/Society for Research into Higher Education.
- Ballard, B. (1998). Network, Negotiate and Nag. Proceedings of the ISANA Conference, Canberra.
- Baynham, M. (1995). *Literacy Practices: Investigating literacy in social contexts*. (pp. 1-37). London: Longman.
- Calabretto, H. & Kokkinn, B. (2000). *Strategies for Success in Nursing Studies*. Adelaide: University of South Australia.
- Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.) (1993). *The Powers of Literacy*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Drury, H. & Webb, C. (1991). Literacy at tertiary level: Making explicit the writing requirements of a new culture. In F. Christie (Ed.) *Literacy in Social Processes: Papers from the Inaugural Systemic Linguistics Conference* (pp. 214-223). Darwin: Centre for Studies of Language in Education, Northern Territory University,.
- Eggs, S. (1994). *An introduction to systemic functional linguistics*. London: Pinter
- Feast, V., Barrett, S., Head, M. & Kokkinn, B. (1998). The Janus approach: Gateways, beacons and learning loops. In R. Stokell (Compiler). *Proceedings of the Third Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education (Vol. I & Vol. II)*. Auckland: Auckland Institute of Technology.
- Hicks, M. & George, R. (1998). A strategic perspective on approaches to students' learning support at the University of South Australia. Proceedings of the HERDSA

## Sources of Confusion

Conference: *Transformation in Higher Education*, Auckland, New Zealand, 7 – 10 July.

- Hipp, H., Kokkinn, B. & Stevenson, M. (1997). *Assignment writing at university: The essay*. South Australia: Flexible Learning Centre.
- O'Regan, K. & Kokkinn, B. (1999a). Guide to writing the RNP3 assignment. Retrieved Nov. 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web: URL: <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/assignment/>.
- O'Regan, K. & Kokkinn, B. (1999b). Guide to writing Assignment 2 for RNP4 (2000). Retrieved Nov. 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web: URL: <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/07259assn/>.
- O'Regan, K. & Kokkinn, B. (1999c). Preparing for the Human Bioscience 1 exam. Retrieved Nov. 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web: URL: <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/12160examprep/>.
- Stevenson, M. (2000). The development of genre based essay writing materials that are responsive to student needs and contexts. Paper presented at *Communication Skills in University Education Conference*, Fremantle, W.A.
- Stevenson, M., Kokkinn, B. & Taylor, P. (2000). Writing Assignment 3 for Aboriginal Health and Culture (12166). Retrieved Nov. 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web: URL: <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/12166-AboriginalHealthCulture/>.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tickoo, M. L. (1994). Approaches to LSP: Arguing a paradigm shift. In R. Khoo (Ed.), *LSP: Problems and prospects*. Anthology series 33. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- West, R. (1994). Needs analysis: State of the art. In W. Scott & S. Muhlhaus (Eds.), *Languages for specific purposes* (pp.77-83). Kingston: CILT in Association with Kingston University School of Languages.

## **MAKING EXPECTATIONS EXPLICIT**

Elizabeth Levin

School of Business, Swinburne University of Technology

*Developing written and oral communication skills are an important part of the first year university experience. Subject convenors have clear expectations from their students but do they clearly communicate these requirements? It is important during the first year of a course to set the tone and standards for later studies. Despite the fact that different disciplines may have differing writing and oral presentation requirements, with a little thought and effort students can be given guidelines which will provide them with a blueprint for future success. This can be achieved and reinforced in a variety of ways without overloading the student at any one time. This paper will describe the rationale for providing thorough instructions for assignments and case studies and how these are communicated to first year students enrolled in a core business subject.*

### **Introduction**

Teaching and guiding first year university students can be both exciting and challenging. First year university is usually when a student first encounters the 'academic' approach to learning and begins to establish independent study patterns. In many tertiary institutions much time and energy, and many resources are being spent on efforts to generate more effective student learning, especially during the transitional first year of study; yet, there are still many students who have difficulty interpreting and completing assigned assessment tasks. This paper uses Schramm's model of communication to explore ways of designing assessment tasks, particularly assignments, case studies and business reports that are readily understood by the student cohort.

### **What do communication models tell us about the problem?**

People who play cricket find the rules of the game straightforward, but people who are not familiar with cricket may find a description of the game quite confusing and will interpret the rules in a variety of ways. Veronesi (2000) uses this example when trying to illustrate how people can interpret the same message differently. But why do people interpret the same set of words differently? In order to explain this one can turn to the theory of communication. Although there is no such thing as a best theory, each theory and model has value in a specific setting and it is up to the user to select the best perspective for a particular situation. Models are useful as they offer ways of analysing the communication situation and anticipating problems that may be avoided or mitigated through design strategies.

The basis of many models of communication is the one developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949. It was developed with the technical side of communication in mind and considered the flow of information through an electronic system. This model, however, did not consider the meaning of the message, which is included in Schramm's model (1954 source 'Communication theory and models'). This model (Figure 1) begins with a sender who has a message to transmit. This message is translated or encoded and sent to a receiver who must decode the message, thus developing an interpretation of the message. Interfering with the basic communication model is the element of noise which takes the form of random and competing messages that may interfere with the intended communication. The final element of Schramm's communication loop is that of feedback, which is transmitted by the receiver back to the sender. This complex model shows the various elements that are present when

assessment tasks are being set and communicated. The message that the student (receiver) receives is unlikely to be the same as the message that the sender (lecturer) initiated as there are many elements along the way that can affect the way the message is received and interpreted.

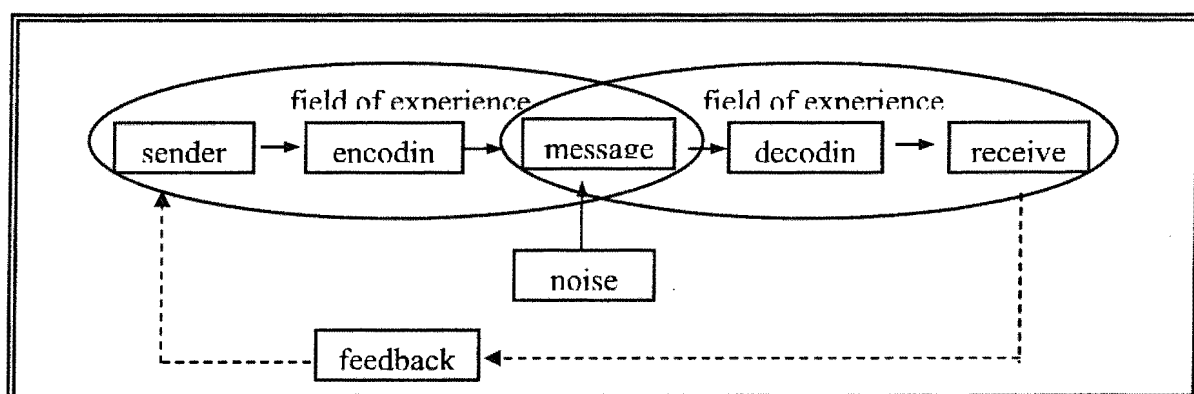


Figure 1: Schramm's model of communication  
Source: 'Communication theory and models'

#### *The Sender and the Message*

The communication process model highlights the key factors in effective communication. Senders must know their audience and what response they want. Thus it is important that the lecturers who set the tasks send clear messages to the students.

#### *Encoding*

In education the message is commonly represented by words, but words have different meanings depending on one's previous knowledge, culture and experiences. Problems occur when a sender transmits a message which is encoded in a way that is unfamiliar to the recipient. It is the task of the designer of the message to ensure that the material that is presented is partially in the field of experience of the learner. The other part may be outside this field, in order to provide a learning experience. Therefore the designer has to know what knowledge and experiences the learners already have so that the new knowledge can add to this ('Communication theory and models').

For a message to be effective, the sender's encoding process must be consistent with the receiver's decoding process. Thus the best messages are essentially encoded in signs that are familiar to the receiver. The more the sender's field of experience overlaps with that of the receiver the more effective the message is likely to be. This requirement puts a burden on communicators from one field of experience who want to communicate effectively with an audience that has a different field of experience. They must encode their messages in a way that takes into account how the audience usually decodes the messages. Given the diversity of cultural, educational backgrounds and experiences of the student body, this is indeed a difficult task.

The sender of the message must also transmit the message through efficient media that reach the audience. Assessment tasks are usually communicated in written and verbal forms. Thus at least two types of media are employed to disseminate the message.

## *Sources of Confusion*

### *Noise*

The sender's task is to get his or her message through to the receiver. The audience may not receive the intended message for several reasons – poorly encoded message, differing fields of experience and noise. The noise factor can take many forms - people might distort the message and hear what they want to hear. Receivers often add things to the message that are not there or do not notice other things that are there. Thus, the communicator's task is to strive for message simplicity, clarity and repetition to get the important points across to the audience.

### *Feedback*

Often in the communication process the sender does not receive feedback from the recipient. But when a lecturer sets an assessment task, the feedback appears in several forms. These include questions asked prior to submission of the assessment, the submitted piece of work and regular subject evaluations. Thus the sender can determine whether the message was received as originally intended.

Unfortunately not all lecturers take the time to consider the valuable feedback provided by their students. Student enquiry can highlight sources of confusion in assessment instructions and also misconceptions. Academics could use this information to clarify criteria by supplementing written instructions with verbal information during classes.

Submitted pieces of work do not always meet the lecturer's required or expected standard. Some students do not spend adequate time on task and thus produce inferior submissions. In the author's opinion there are several other causes for inferior submissions. An assignment that is not plainly documented and explained will mean that students will be unclear of the requirements. Not all academics are approachable so it is possible that misconceptions will not be identified until students have submitted their reports and assignments.

Some academics are prepared to provide students with the opportunity to resubmit assessment tasks, which allows students to correct mistakes, while others are philosophically opposed to the concept of resubmission, saying it is easier to give students a bare pass. However no one learns from either of these processes – neither the instructor nor the student. Misinterpretations can be minimised by providing clear instructions, reinforcing requirements and/or providing model solutions.

Finally the lecturer will often receive feedback on assessment guidelines as part of regular subject evaluations. How many teachers actually take these forms seriously? There are many criticisms of the subject evaluation process from poorly designed questionnaires, to poor response rates and slow processing of questionnaires. Rather than being critical of the forms and the process, one should focus on the information provided by the evaluations. However, in reality most academics appear to file the evaluation summaries without making any adjustment to their teaching and assessment practice.

The originator of the task is not the only one who receives feedback on the assigned task. When students approach LAS advisors then the feedback is not being provided directly to the source of the message. This feedback has the potential to provide the missing link between clear instructions and ambiguous assessment directives.

### **What does the literature tell us about the problem?**

Studies that have examined student writing from subjects representing a range of disciplines have shown that there is a significant difference in the writing requirements between different disciplines including differences in the discourse patterns adopted and the linguistic features used. In addition to this, not all players within a discipline have similar expectations and in

fact many times conflicting instructions are provided to students (Vardi, 2000, Craigie, 1998 and Radloff & de la Harpe, 2000). Through literature reviews Vardi (2000) has found that literary practices at university are not clearly agreed upon or even universal in their nature; rather they are contested, resulting in an unclear and confusing path for many students. Interviews with lecturers have revealed that while they 'know good writing when they see it' they have difficulty in explaining why a piece of writing is poor (Lea & Street, 1998).

The reason expectations for essay writing vary so greatly is due to the interaction of four factors: firstly the reason for setting the task, secondly the thinking of the discipline, third the lecturer's beliefs about good writing in relation to learning objectives and finally the need to assess understanding (Vardi, 2000). As these factors vary so lecturers' expectations can vary. This means that each task can potentially result in a unique set of expectations that makes it extremely difficult for students to clearly determine what is expected of them. This can be challenging for first year students. Thus the students need to be able to predict for each written task what the lecturer wants. Helping students requires an awareness by all players in the teaching and learning process of the various expectations and requirements in the writing tasks of their own particular context. The challenge for all staff then becomes finding ways to make these explicit.

Chanock (1995) looked at the ways academics communicated their expectations to students. She stated that there are three kinds of teachers. First, there are those who take the time to consider "what students need to know about the approach of their discipline and explain these things" openly. Then there are "the teachers who are so immersed in their discipline that its ways are 'transparent' to them, appearing natural or universal" (Russell, 1991) making it difficult for them to explicitly state their expectations. Finally there are those teachers who are aware of the culture and nature of their disciplines "but believe that students can and should learn how to participate in it by 'osmosis'". These teachers feel that if they demonstrate the art of their discipline students copy their style and thus learn by doing.

This is an interesting view and exemplifies the notion of the student as an apprentice which is discussed by Spinks (2000). The use of the metaphor of the undergraduate writer as an apprentice in the craft of mature academic writing implies a two-way responsibility relationship with academic mentors. Subject convenors and class teachers have a responsibility to frame the discourse for their students, through specific instruction and modeling as well as through marker feedback. Students have a responsibility to follow the instruction, to learn from the models and to be prepared to take risks and 'get their feet wet' in the intellectual contexts of the discipline (Spinks, 2000).

Most students are faced with a multi-faceted task: learning new content, learning new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing that new knowledge and learning new ways of writing their knowledge. For many students the last of these new ways poses one of their major problems. They are told that analysis, interpretation and evaluation are important aspects of good academic writing practice, but what academic markers mean by such terms is not always clear, nor is it clear whether the meanings are constant across disciplines (Spinks, 2000; Vardi, 2000). Despite some reservations about the apprenticeship metaphor within academia it remains a useful conceptual framework for discussing best practice in the communicative relationship between teachers and their first year students.

Black and Wiliam (1998) recognise that the essential and necessary role of the teacher is to act as a mediator between a body of knowledge and skills to be learned, and the learner. The knowledge base is inanimate, and in some instances is not rigidly fixed but still malleable. The learner is, however, a cognizant being, situated in a context largely constructed by others. The role of the teacher could broadly be described as working to reduce (but not necessarily eliminate) the rate of error production in trial and error learning, and thereby to make learning more efficient. Teachers can do this effectively only if they know thoroughly both sides of the operation, and how to build bridges between the two. This view of teaching applies when the teacher is both responsible for, and accountable to, the learner, and accepts that responsibility. Black and Wiliam (1998) concur with the findings of Chanock (1995) that, although teachers

bring a deep knowledge of criteria and standards appropriate to the assessment task, these criteria and standards may exist in an unarticulated form (which makes them difficult to share with learners).

Devising assessment tasks represents in many instances creative and integrative activity of a high order (Sadler 1998). Learners often have little on which to base expectations about what should be delivered as they have little access to the performances of others, historic or current. Teachers, on the other hand, can and often do make adjustments to their expectations about how students should perform at a task after students have made their attempts. These adjustments are often made on the run, more or less intuitively, sometimes to correct for deficiencies in assessment task specifications, but mostly for the putative 'benefit' of the learners (Sadler, 1998).

The studies cited above provide an insight into the differing philosophies of academics and the difficulties that some academics have developing clear assessment guidelines that are interpreted consistently by the student cohort.

### **What is being done to make expectations more explicit**

We often hear of learning support staff who spend considerable time assisting students who have difficulties interpreting assignment instructions. Students are unclear as to what is expected of them and how they should approach the assigned task. It is heartening to see several people working on projects to develop the professional and academic skills of students as well as academic staff. Carmichael, Driscoll and Farrell (2000) from the University of Western Sydney have developed a booklet for students containing 'model' assignments, which have been successful in terms of critical analysis or practice with annotations from the students who wrote the assignments and comments from the markers. The project team was a cross faculty group comprising academics and learning advisors. They conclude that sharing ideas regarding critical practice provides opportunity for enhancement of learning and develops a sense of collegiality.

Alex Radloff and Barbara de la Harpe (2000) have used funding provided by CUTSD to develop a book to help lecturers across the disciplines to develop their students' writing skills (Curtin University of Technology). This book recognises the complex nature of writing and includes simple and practical strategies that can be used to help writers manage the writing task. In addition this resource assists lecturers to help their students develop writing skills. In their abstract Radloff and de la Harpe argue that writing is best developed by the discipline lecturer in the context of subject learning. However, many lecturers do not believe that they have the knowledge and skills to do so. In response to this problem, Radloff and de la Harpe (2000) developed a writing resource to assist lecturers to improve their students' writing skills.

Similarly, Cullity (2000) from the Australian Catholic University is developing a teaching resource to assist staff to set appropriate, interesting and unambiguous assessment tasks to support students' learning. Percy (2000) from the University of Wollongong argues that the role of learning advisor is moving from a focus on students to a focus on teaching and learning. This is achieved by integrating literacy skills instruction into subject curricula and training staff in providing explicit feedback to students. Collaboration between learning advisers and academic staff is essential for the success of this shift.

### *Learning skills advisers aiding academics*

Usually language and academic skills advisers endeavor to assist the receiver of the message, the students. However the problem does not always lie at this end of the communication process. Thus it may be prudent to focus on the elements at the beginning of the process, that is the sender of the message, the encoding of the message and the message itself. This requires interdisciplinary collaboration which is evident in several universities around Australia. By working together the LAS advisers and the academics bring together different expertise and may find a solution to the problem of students who have difficulty understanding and

## Sources of Confusion

completing assessment tasks. The LAS advisors will better understand the kinds of thinking and responses expected by the academics and will be able to assist in integration of content and process.

Chanock (1995) says that “three kinds of expertise are needed to help students improve their academic writing: expertise in the discipline, expertise in language and an understanding of how the discipline interacts with language”. The subject teacher is responsible for imparting discipline specific knowledge to the students. Chanock indicates that in addition to the subject teacher it is helpful to have the assistance of someone who is an expert in the use of language and discourse styles.

Learning skills advisers possess the language expertise but often work outside the disciplines and thus some believe that they may mislead students if they try to focus on the content of an essay or report rather than simply on its ‘expression’. It is unlikely to find LAS advisers that have sufficient expertise in all the disciplines to be able to advise students about what is wanted in each. Whilst this may be seen as a weakness it is also strength. I believe that any report or assignment should make sense to any reader despite his area of expertise. If a piece of writing is not clear to the LAS adviser it will not be clear to other readers either. It is imperative and expected that tertiary courses teach students communication skills. In business one must be able to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds; thus anyone who picks up a business report should be able to understand the content despite his/her fields of experience. I concur with Chanock (1995) who believes that a combination of disciplinary and linguistic expertise is desirable.

Many academics require and would welcome literacy support. Academics often seek help of outside experts. For example, librarians are invited to aid in the research process, in finding resources for teaching and in preparing resources for students. The aid of technicians is sought for help with computer usage and design of on-line learning materials. Similarly, there should be interdisciplinary collaboration between academics and language skills advisors since they are the teaching, learning, languages and academic skills experts. Many academics do not have a background in education but are highly educated in their chosen field of expertise, particularly in the schools such as Business, Information Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and the like. Academics should be calling upon the expertise of LAS advisors to assist in the writing and formulation of assessment tasks. However content can be left to the academics. Figure 2 represents the current situation in many universities, whereby the lecturers assign a task to the student, who will occasionally seek assistance from the LAS advisor prior to submitting a piece of assessment. The learning support staff become aware of the sources of confusion and ambiguity faced by the student cohort but do not have an open channel of communication with the academics; thus, the cycle is incomplete, providing little opportunity for future improvements.

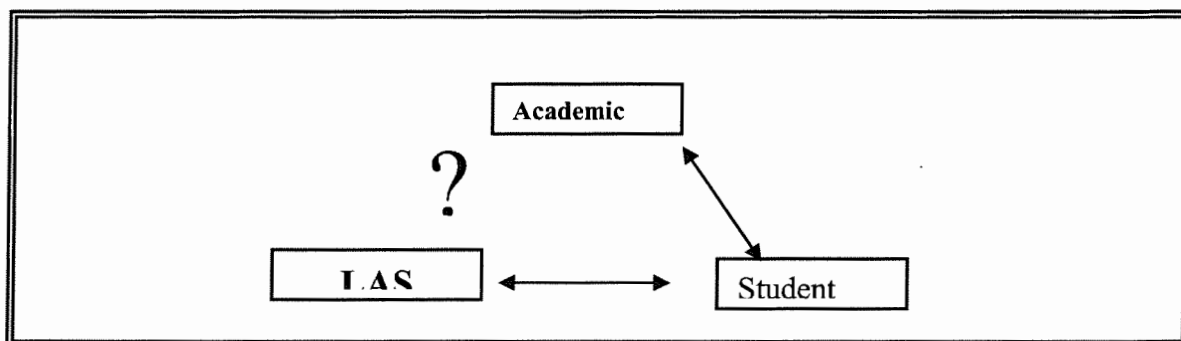


Figure 2. The incomplete cycle.

### What we do at the School of Business, Swinburne University of Technology

A first year Marketing subject at Swinburne University of Technology is studied by students from a variety of courses as diverse as Business, Engineering, Information Systems and

## *Sources of Confusion*

Multimedia. In this subject the convenors and lecturers go to considerable lengths to provide both written and verbal instructions for the various assessment tasks that are set. There are four assessment tasks which include tutorial participation, oral and written presentation of a case study, an industry analysis presented as a business report and an examination. Written information on assessment requirements is contained in the subject workbook and also available via the subject web site. Hints on preparation of case studies, writing business reports and presenting oral presentations are provided in the workbook as well as notes on using the Harvard referencing system. These notes have taken several authors and several years to compile.

Additional activities are also undertaken to provide a blueprint for successful completion of this subject. These include:

- thorough coverage of requirements during the first lecture, and reiteration in tutorials throughout the semester
- links on the subject website that connect assessment tasks to relevant sections of the subject workbook
- assessment forms and marking guides are included in the workbook, so students know what criteria are being assessed (see Appendix)
- a library skills session and library web page developed specifically for the industry overview, providing students with links to relevant web sites
- an industry speaker to reinforce literature searches and answer specific questions
- past assignments circulated during tutorials
- students are directed to learning support staff
- lecture and exam techniques are presented by learning support staff.

Although students are guided and provided with clear instruction, some students still find the assessment tasks challenging.

### **Conclusions**

Why is all this necessary now, when we managed without it in the past? Mass education, the information age, time poor students who receive little financial support from the government, forcing many to work, are just the beginning. At Swinburne University of Technology there has been a push from university management to reduce teaching contact time, so lecturers and tutors tend to focus on content delivery rather than spend precious time on process (Di Virgilio & Evans, unpublished). Due to the increasing pressures on academic staff there has been a gradual reduction in the number of pieces of written work submitted. Tests and exams that provide little opportunity for students to develop the critical communication skills demanded by industry have replaced assignments, reports and essays. Universities are pushing for a research focus. Students are expected to possess research skills which are difficult to develop and consolidate in the current undergraduate environment.

There are three stakeholders involved in the issue of providing clear guidelines - the academics, the students and the LAS advisers. From the perspective of the academics it is critical to be effective yet efficient teachers. More time spent planning up front will make savings in the long term. A little time spent on carefully designing and clearly explaining assessment tasks offers savings on two fronts. Firstly, less time will be spent answering student enquiries. Secondly, due to the clear instruction students will better understand what is expected/required from them, and thus will submit reports and papers of higher quality, which are more stimulating to assess and require less time for writing corrections and more time for writing constructive comments (Sadler, 1998).

From the learning support staff perspective, again time spent up front planning and working with academics to provide unambiguous instructions will result in fewer frustrations and enquiries and allow more time to focus on other activities such as helping students to improve their learning and writing skills. Finally the students benefit as they understand the expectations of the lecturer and know how to approach the assessment task. Hopefully this

will mean that less time is wasted trying to interpret the task and more time researching, analysing, synthesizing and developing communication skills vital for the graduates of the future.

If academics can provide explicit, unambiguous and detailed guidelines during the first year of tertiary studies, discuss requirements prior to submissions and after grading, students will have an opportunity to understand what is expected, what they have done well and what requires attention. This knowledge will serve them well in the future. Fewer instructions will need to be provided in subsequent years, as the students have a model from which to work. However, this requires considerable work on the part of the instructor and potentially the learning support staff. Firstly they have to understand the objectives of the assessment tasks in the first year, as well as the requirements for subjects in later years. This then needs to be translated into clear and detailed instructions which will guide students to submitting reports, assignments and essays in the appropriate form meeting the expected standards.

In order to encourage effective learning we need to place more emphasis on designing assessment tasks that facilitate these outcomes. Different disciplines have significant differences in their report/essay/assignment writing requirements; however the techniques discussed are quite generic and applicable across a variety of discipline areas. The lecturer as message sender must work towards making expectations explicit and should employ the assistance of those who are experts in the fields of language and education, the LAS advisers. The suggestions posed in this paper can not guarantee that all students will be engaged, but those students that choose to listen and follow the explicit guidelines provided for them will produce better submissions and will have acquired some of the generic skills expected of graduates.

'I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow', Woodrow Wilson. US president

### References

- Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: principles, policy & practice*. 5 (1).
- Carmichael, E., Driscoll, K. & Farrell, H. (2000) How to get an A. *Proceedings of First Year in Higher Education Conference Brisbane*.
- Chanock, K. (1995). Disciplinary subcultures and the teaching of academic writing. In Chanock, K. (Ed.) *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines*. Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Communication theory and models (2000). Retrieved from the World Wide Web: <http://www.to.utwente.nl/isml-97/campagne/studyctr/week15/read15.htm>
- Craigie, D. (1998). Hold on now! What are universities about anyway? In R. Stokell (Compiler). *Proceedings of the Third Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education (Vol. I & Vol. II)*. Auckland: Auckland Institute of Technology.
- Cullity, M. (2000). Assignment task booklet: Assisting staff to set assessment tasks. Paper presented at Language and Academic Skills Conference, Latrobe University, Victoria.
- Di Virgilio, P., & Evans, B. (unpublished). Facilitating quality learning outcomes with limited resources by reducing class time from 3 hours to 2 hours per week. Facilitating Quality Outcomes on Limited Resources, Swinburne University of Technology.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Lea, M. & Street, B.V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157-72.
- Percy, A. (2000). A systematic approach to working with staff: Addressing the confusion at the source. Plenary session presented at Language and Academic Skills Conference, Latrobe University, Victoria.
- Radloff, A. & de la Harpe, B. (2000, 2-5 July) Helping students develop their writing skills - a resource for lecturers. *Flexible Learning for a Flexible Society, Proceedings of ASET-HERDSA 2000 Conference*. Toowoomba, Qld., ASET and HERDSA.
- Russell, D. (1991) *Writing in the academic disciplines, 1870-1990: A curricular history*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sadler, D. (1998). Formative assessment: Revisiting the territory. *Assessment in Education: Principles, policy & practice*, 5 (1), 77-85.
- Spinks, S. (2000). The craft of academic writing and the first year experience: The importance of marker to student communication. *Proceedings of First Year in Higher Education Conference*, Brisbane.
- Vardi, I. (2000) What lecturers want: An investigation of lecturers' expectations in first year essay writing tasks. *Proceedings of First Year in Higher Education Conference*, Brisbane
- Veronesi, P. (2000), Testing and assessment in science education: Looking past the scoreboard. *The Clearing House*, 74 (1), 27-30.

## WE ALL KNOW WHAT AN ARTICLE REVIEW IS... OR DO WE?

Kerry O'Regan and Helen Johnston  
University of South Australia

*A major source of confusion for students beginning university is that they enter not one but a multitude of discourse communities. Academia is not a single cultural entity but in fact comprises a whole collection of "academic tribes and territories" each with their own traditions and their own ways of going about things. To a novice they may appear misleadingly similar. However, different disciplines have their own characteristic ways of conceptualising, defining, gathering evidence, interpreting, reporting and theorising. These differences are inherent but are not routinely made explicit to the unsuspecting student. Woven through this macro diversity is variation at a micro level reflecting the vagaries and academic predilections of individual staff members. Tasks which have the same label may in fact represent quite different things in different discipline areas and for different individuals. One example of this is the assessment task called Writing an Article Review. This can have a diversity of meanings and the unwitting student is faced with considerable confusion attempting to negotiate their way through these meanings. They must try to interpret just what is required by this task in any particular subject, which may or may not be the same as what is required in another subject. The complexity of meaning presents challenges for learning support staff as well as they endeavour to interpret the various requirements and expectations. Herein, however, may lie some resolution, as the learning support process makes the variations explicit and can offer some paths forward.*

### **Introduction**

Students entering university are confronted with a multiplicity of possible sources of confusion. They are moving into a distinctive "culture of knowledge" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988), which is in reality not one but many cultures. Becher (1989) describes universities as comprising a collection of academic tribes and territories to which he applies Evelyn Waugh's description of the English aristocracy; "a complex of tribes, each with its chief and elders and witch-doctors and braves, each with its own dialect and deity, each strongly xenophobic" (Becher, 1989, p. 22). Each academic tribe, he claims, has its own idols, artifacts, language, customs and belief systems; each a recognizable identity with its own distinctive cultural attributes.

This diversity of culture is manifested in many ways by the various "discourse communities" making up a university (Swales, 1990). Fish (1980) talks of the different ways these communities "make sense" through various "systems of intelligibility". These systems are reflected in and shaped by particular uses of language; in Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" (Dentith, 1995); in the "dialects" of the discipline areas (Ballard and Clanchy, 1988). Bazerman (1981, p. 378) in analyzing academic texts from different disciplines, concluded that in attempting to mediate the contextual worlds of "reality, mind, tradition and society" each writer produces a text that "seems to be making a different kind of move in a different kind of game". In practical terms, these various "games" are associated with different expectations and judgements in relation to texts written within the different disciplines (Currie, 1994; Chanock, 1997).

## *Sources of Confusion*

In universities, then, communication occurs within a series of more or less closed systems, the meaning made by the individuals functioning within each system being specific to that system (Fish, 1980). Not only does the discourse define the territory; it also defines the boundaries to that territory. Membership of a particular discourse community is consequent on the individual's competence within that discourse (Giltrow & Valiquette, 1997), on their demonstration of an appropriate level of "discoursal expertise" (Swales, 1990). In Becher's terms, the "intellectual ground" is both defined for its inhabitants and defended from invasion by "illegal immigrants" by the construction of these boundaries, by the enforcing of the "deep rules of the culture" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988).

Although this multiplicity of cultures, disciplines and discourses exists within universities, this reality is seldom addressed in any explicit way (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988). There are many possible reasons why this may be so. Perhaps because academics are so deeply enculturated into their own discourse community, because it has, for them, become such a "natural" way of functioning (Fish, 1980), they do not perceive it as an issue. Or it may be because they are primarily "seekers after knowledge rather than...communicators of it" (Becher, 1989, p. 3) that they are, by and large, unaware of their students' limited perspective of their discipline (Ryan, 1997). Whatever the reason, the existence of discipline-specific characteristics typically remains unacknowledged.

A consequence of this lack is that, unless there is a process of inducting initiates into specific academic cultures, students are faced with the task of conducting their own self-initiation as best they can. This process involves what Bartholomae (1985) calls "inventing the university". The student "has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialised discourse... as though he were a member of the academy" to "try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community...by assembling and mimicking its language" (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 135). They have to "read the culture" and learn to "crack the basic code" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1985).

There is considerable recognition that a process of demystifying the culture is appropriate for those from other language backgrounds (Currie, 1994; McLoughlin, 1995) and for those who seem to lack skills in academic literacy (Ryan, 1997). However, there is growing support for the notion that explicit teaching of discipline- and genre-specific processes and text structures will help all students gain membership of academic discourse communities (McLoughlin, 1995; Golebiowski, 1997). It will help them negotiate the "unsteady transition between cultures" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988, p. 8). What makes this transition even more unsteady, however, is the fact that many students enter not just one but several discourse communities simultaneously. So for any one student there is not just one code to crack, one discourse to unravel, but several.

As well as confusion associated with macro level discipline differences, there are sources of confusion that arise within disciplines. Meyer (1988) discusses misunderstandings between staff and students associated with patterns of spoken and written language and with words which have one meaning on campus and another elsewhere: words such as "argument", "critical", "opinion". Silyn-Roberts (1997) reports on genre-confusion among a group of Engineering students. Having previously been required to write academic essays, and having gained some measure of competence in that genre, they proceeded to apply essay-writing principles to a report-writing task, with considerably less success and a considerable degree of confusion.

Then there is the confusion that arises from the idiosyncratic characteristics of the individual academic. Bazerman (1981) identified "the author's own self" as one of the four contexts determining how and what an individual would choose to write. As well as reading the culture, students also need to learn to read each lecturer or tutor, a fact that many of them realise as being an essential requirement for success as a student. The complexities and variations associated with discipline, genre and language traditions and expectations are ultimately subject to the interpretation and mediation of the individual academic, and indeed the individual student.

The issue for us then is to determine our role in the resolution of this confusion. According to Ryan (1997, p. 62), the role of the academic skills instructor is a mediating one which enables students to "understand more about participating in the academic discourse of their field". Given the possible sources of diversity and associated confusion, it is important that our attempts to mediate and elucidate do not themselves generate their own confusions. In providing generic support that tries to accommodate all the levels of variability, there is a danger that we may add to rather than reduce the confusion experienced by students. In their work with postgraduate mathematics and computer science students, Cerone and Caruso (1997) thought it "remarkable" how important contextualisation was within the discipline area. With some tasks, the variability at the individual level may be such that even discipline-specific support is confusingly general. The solution there may be to work with individual academics, to engage in what Golebiowski (1997) calls "dialogic interaction", to negotiate appropriate support for specific, individual tasks; support which truly encompasses all levels of academic diversity.

In Australian universities the function of negotiating the terrain between an implicit academic purpose of a particular writing task set for assessment and the interpretation of that task by students is part of the role of learning support staff. Traditionally this has involved support of students through face-to-face workshops and individual sessions, and through print resources. More recently, and increasingly, support is being provided online through electronic media.

### **Language and learning support in the University of South Australia (UniSA)**

At UniSA the role of Learning Advisers is largely determined by explicitly stated institutional goals. Learning Advisers are located within the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC), part of the service portfolio 'Access and Learning Support'. The service portfolios support the University's four Academic Divisions.

The FLC has primary responsibility for two major university initiatives: Graduate Qualities and UniSAnet. In 1996 the university adopted a Graduate Qualities framework to encourage a shift in program emphasis to learning outcomes (Hicks & Leask, 2000). In relation to the seven generic Graduate qualities, courses and programs are required to provide a Graduate Quality Profile in all formal program documentation to the extent of stating the weighting of each quality within a course. Since then the University has established an online presence in the area of teaching and learning known as UniSAnet. This is the masthead for all online dimensions of the University's teaching and learning program. It provides

- home pages for all academic staff linked to subjects they teach and courses on offer,
- access to course content and related study resources
- teaching and learner support mechanisms including interactive communication capacity between teacher and students and among students, and
- administrative services related to teaching and learning

The FLC's central role in changing the teaching and learning environment of the University has had a major impact on the way its services, including services to students, are provided.

In May 2000 the FLC reformulated and launched Student Support Centres as Learning Connection, a term which describes both place and function. This was a deliberate move to reconstruct staff and student thinking about services such as student support and staff development; to frame support services as developmental not remedial. Each Learning Connection site services academic staff and students. As well as staff traditionally involved in student support, Learning Connection includes lecturers (Professional Development), and staff with design and technical expertise in online development and delivery. The focus is much more clearly on educational support directed at large scale change in the learning environment. Learning Connection's focus on promoting the use of new technologies in teaching, learning and service provision is transparent.

Online delivery is seen to :

offer the promise of providing appropriate and timely services which reach the range of students ( equity groups, continuing education, re-trainees, mature age, school leavers, and international students) studying in significantly different contexts (on-campus, distance, off shore, workplace) in a large number of courses using online technologies (George, Hicks & Reid, 2000, p.1).

This change in approach to the delivery of services has had major impact on the work of Learning Advisers. Their role has broadened from one in which direct and face-to face work with students was central to one in which they also

- work with subject teaching staff developing subject specific online workshops;
- develop generic online workshops;
- develop online, down-loadable Learning Guides; and
- work with other Learning Connection staff in various ways to enhance subject delivery.

The production of online resources in collaborative arrangements with teaching staff, has become core business.

### **Online learning support**

One aim of an effective learning support program is to develop resources that can be embedded in subjects, ie electronically linked to the subject or aspect of the subject to which it relates (George, Hicks & Reid, 1999, p. 3). The premise is that the more embedded the resource, the more ideally it will meet student learning needs.

There are two forms of online resources being developed by Learning Advisers: Learning Guides and interactive online workshops. Each form can be either generic, that is, of general applicability, or subject specific. They can be accessed in various ways:

- on the web through the Learning Connection home page;
- on the web linked to subject home pages;
- in print form in selected subject information booklets; and
- in print form in *Overview*, an Orientation booklet for external students.

The Learning Guides are down-loadable text-based documents which are practical references for students needing advice on specific university level learning tasks. The Learning Guides have immediacy for students as they provide sound general information on a wide variety of topics. Their value is limited by the fact that they are adjunct materials unlikely to address students' questions for a particular subject and assignment task.

The online workshops provide a richer learning experience because they are interactive. They are also multi-layered in that each online workshop can be directly linked to a number of Learning Guides and other support information. They are designed to encourage student engagement and control of their own learning. The generic workshops replicate to a degree the topics covered by the Learning Guides. Those that are subject specific engage very directly with the subject materials, the actual tasks set for assessment, and they promote student/staff discussion of issues.

### **Writing an article review**

One of the functions of this learning support, in its diversity of forms, has been to help students negotiate their way through the myriad of discipline-specific, genre-specific and lecturer-specific assessment tasks that they encounter. The task of writing an 'article review', in its various manifestations, has been particularly problematic.

## Sources of Confusion

Learning Advisers have found that students seek clarification about the genre, the subject requirements, their own purpose and positioning as writers. As they are generally inexperienced with writing reviews many adopt the same approach as for writing an essay, the genre with which they are most familiar. Students who have returned to study after a long break have mixed responses to the task and mixed success: some know they don't know what to do so they actively seek support; others plunge in and write about the article following the subject guidelines as well as they can. Teaching staff are frequently dissatisfied with the variability and quality of student assignments.

We decided to look more closely at the nature of assessment tasks that corresponded more or less with the description 'article review'. Students in all subjects are provided with a subject outline booklet, which details the assessment requirements for that subject. Increasingly these booklets are published online and so information about assessment requirements is in the public domain. We surveyed the assessment tasks in the available online subject outlines and identified 14 such tasks. They were assigned across all years from first year Access courses to postgraduate level, with the main bulk being in undergraduate first years (See Table 1). The tasks were located in a fairly limited range of discipline areas involving courses in the Unaiapon School, the De Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies, the School of Nursing and Midwifery, the School of Medical Radiation and the School of Social Work and Social Policy.

Table 1: Distribution of selected reviewing tasks across Year levels and Schools, UniSA 2000.

Year level	School - Unaiapon	School - Social Work & Social Policy	School - De Lissa: Early Childhood Education & Family Studies	School - Nursing & Midwifery	School - Medical Radiation	Total N=14
1	5	2	2	1	1	11
2		1				1
3	1					1
4			1			1

The assessment items had some few similarities and very many differences. What they had in common was a primary focus of engagement with (in all but one case) the academic literature associated with a particular topic and the requirement to critique that literature. In all other respects they presented considerable diversity, specifically with regard to the following attributes:

- Descriptors

The tasks were not all strictly 'article reviews' *per se* and what they were called reflected this variation. The descriptors used were:

- article review - 2
- review of an article - 1
- reviews -1
- literature review - 3
- curriculum project: literature review - 1
- literature critique - 1
- research critique -1
- annotated bibliography - 4

- Word length

The length required also showed considerable variation - from 250 words to 2250 words, most typically 1000 or 1500 words being specified. One assignment did not specify a word length, requiring a 2-page review of each of 5-8 articles.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Purpose

The purpose of the task was unspecified for eight of the assessment items. Two said that the purpose was to form the basis of the research for an essay task, three aimed to facilitate engagement with particular areas of the literature (“to review an aspect of early childhood of interest to you; to find out what current research has to say about each of these topics; to consolidate your thinking around one chosen significant concept in this topic”). One of the tasks was set with the expressed purpose of “prepar[ing] you for professional practice” while another added a further level of complexity by requiring the students to critique not the article itself but the research study reported in the article.

- General instructions

Mostly, the general requirement was to summarise and critique one or more journal articles or other texts, but this too was subject to many variations. Generally the instructions were of the form:

...review and discuss...Summarise the major points ...then ...comment on the journal article

Write a short summary of the contents of each text followed by a brief critique

Present a summary, then write your own comments

Critically analyse and review the article

though one specifically said “Do not write a summary but extract the key issues evident in it.”

- Additional guidance

Sometimes (though not always) there was more guidance provided. For one first year, first semester subject this included the statement that

The critical comment can focus on such factors as:

the perceived level of coherence of argument

writing style; and

the relevance of the material for human service workers

though one may wonder what sense a beginning student would make of these guidelines.

For one assignment, key words were defined in the guidelines, for example:

Critically analyse: showing the essence of something, by breaking it down into component parts and critically examining each part in detail. Your judgement about the merits of each part is given and supported by a discussion of the evidence.

Similar definitions were given for “Review, Summary and Compare”, although in this case the assignment had not specifically directed the students to summarise the article.

Some guidelines provided support material (for example a resource entitled “What is an annotated bibliography” and an out-of-date leaflet on “Article reviews and annotated bibliographies”); two suggested some aspects or questions that might be considered in the critique (“Is the book/article easy to read? What is the relevance of the author's findings?”); two provided proformas providing annotated headings to help students structure their critique (for example “**Subject matter:** This might include topics addressed and level of detail, including specific page numbers if useful, disciplinary focus etc”).

One assignment provided a page of explanation as to what kind of material was to be reviewed and from what media. These instructions represented an extremely elaborate and complex set of requirements; however, in relation to the review process itself, they merely suggested that the students “do have a look at some book or film reviews in the paper”. The guidelines did reassure the students that they would have “the opportunity to ask questions in teleconferences”, though students not able to participate in these may be somewhat at a loss.

Students were advised in some instances to write a conclusion and/ or an introduction perhaps with a specified content:

Conclude by listing the main points which a Nuclear Medicine Technologist in your opinion should adhere to.

You may want to provide a concluding paragraph that details which texts were particularly useful, and those you wouldn't recommend to someone interested in the subject

- Relevance of other literature

Mostly it seems that the article or articles were to be reviewed in isolation without reference to other literature. In other cases a selection of articles was to be reviewed in relation to each other (“note common and competing ideas; abstract the key issues evident in [the readings]”) or one or more articles were to be considered in the context of other relevant literature (“this should include your own critical judgement, based on your own reading, as to how this particular text contributes to the general field; You should comment on the article by making comparisons with the ideas, research findings and opinions of other authors”).

- Balance of sections

Few guidelines provided any indication of the relative balance expected between the summary and critique sections; however a couple were explicit in regard to this:

In about 1000 words summarise the messages...In about 500 words, discuss the relevance that the messages have...

Write a summary (150-200 words) of the chapter(s) and/or articles...the critique should be brief (50 words).

As the above analysis shows, the assignment tasks were highly individualistic. This in itself may not have resulted in confusion for students undertaking them, as any particular student would most likely be required to complete only one of the 14 tasks. What was problematic was that the guidelines given were, in most cases, quite minimal. This seemed to be based on an assumption that there exists some abstracted and commonly known generic form of 'review' which students have internalised and could readily apply to the particular requirements of the task in hand.

### **Online support for writing an article review**

From experience in working with staff and students with 'article review' assignments, Learning Advisers knew that the 'article review' is regarded by course-based academics as a good vehicle for engaging students with the ideas and the literature of a subject. The review is seen by some as suitably brief to be an easy first assignment for commencing students. In most cases staff require a summary and critique. Beyond that teaching staff vary their requirements markedly. It is almost as if this is a type of writing that you can mould to your own requirements in ways that you cannot with essays and reports. This is demonstrated in the considerable variation in what staff nominate as reviews.

In 1999 Learning Advisers at UniSA decided to develop a generic online workshop on 'Writing an article review'. Their attempts to do this unfolded the complexity of defining this genre and the difficulty of developing clear, useful advice for students

The diversity in the task made it very difficult to write a useful generic student guide. It seemed important initially to acknowledge that diversity in the workshop. Early drafts of the workshop reflected this and when put to the Learning Adviser team for comment provoked vigorous discussion about what to include and exclude in the workshop. It was agreed that acknowledging the diversity in requirements made the task and the workshop seem too complicated. The debate prompted the team to develop a formulaic structure for all workshops that would provide a consistent framework for both the Learning Guides and all

## *Sources of Confusion*

generic online workshops. The draft online workshop on 'Writing an article review' was put on indefinite hold until a Learning Guide was developed on the same topic.

Writing a Learning Guide on 'Writing an article review' meant developing a text document as a precursor to the interactive workshop. For the Learning Advisers it was a shift back into a more familiar medium. Familiarity with the print medium provided team members the space to deal with the complexity of the variables of the topic, an irony not lost on staff dealing with student writing problems. Even so, writing this guide involved the team in vigorous debate, multiple drafts and long review meetings until consensus was reached on the final product. (<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/learnres/learnng/word/!8artrev.doc>)

The Learning Guide facilitated subsequent development of the generic online workshop on the same topic (<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/articlereview/>). The final workshop is quite different to the early versions, largely ignoring the variations inherent in the article review task. In this it resembles other generic online workshops. The simplicity of these workshops is purposeful: they offer practical base level advice to students inexperienced with the genre. They are also used as a starting point to negotiate with teaching staff the development of much more useful subject specific workshops.

In semester two 1999, Learning Advisers at the University of South Australia developed a number of subject specific online workshops with subject co-ordinators. In the main they dealt with essay writing tasks in various subjects. The workshops were known to manage discipline based variations in tasks in a way that satisfied both students and staff. Their success suggested that this type of workshop would work well with other tasks that were known to be difficult for students, such as writing article reviews.

During 2000, Learning Advisers collaborated with the academic teaching staff to develop task-specific workshops for two of the assessment tasks discussed in this paper. One was the 'Curriculum Project: Literature Review' assigned in first semester to first year students in Early Childhood Education. This task had presented considerable difficulty in the past. Students had been unclear about what was required of them in terms of the content, language and form of their response. This resulted in high levels of confusion and anxiety, with large numbers of students seeking clarification and guidance from the subject lecturer and learning support staff. The subject lecturer reported a great deal of variability in the quality of the products submitted by the students, many of them being of an unsatisfactory standard.

The subject lecturer consulted one of the Learning Advisers and discussions between them led to a clarification of the task requirements and expectations and articulation of the concerns expressed by both lecturing staff and students. It was agreed that an online workshop be developed to support students through the task. This is available at <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/09208litrev/>. All students enrolled in the subject were e-mailed and notified of the workshop and it was also recommended to them in lectures.

The workshop unpacks the assessment task in some detail. The purpose of the assignment and expectations are explicitly spelled out; students are given guidance on how to choose an article to review and how to deal with it to produce the various parts of their final product. There is also a checklist which students may use to evaluate their drafts and make appropriate changes. In each section of the workshop students are invited to make comments or ask questions, anonymously if they wish.

Just under 200 students were enrolled in the subject and the workshop has received 430 hits. While there were few contributions to the online discussion, those that contributed did so to make positive comments rather than to ask questions or raise issues:

Thankyou for the fabulous help on this web site. I hope we get this type of help for every assignment as it is a good source of reference.

## *Sources of Confusion*

The help given for the article review is fantastic. There should be more of it in all subjects. Being external and trying to contact lecturer's for help can be hard and take a couple of days. With this sort of info available and on-line discussions it would make assignments a lot easier.

The subject co-ordinator and the learning support staff both reported fewer queries and less obvious anxiety among students. The assignments were also judged to be of a consistently higher standard than had been the case previously. One unexpected spinoff was that the subject co-ordinator, who had previously been very reluctant to have anything at all to do with computers, developed a degree of competence and confidence in the area and entered into ongoing electronic communication with her students.

The other task-specific online workshop was requested by the School of Medical Radiation for the Literature Critique required of first year students in their second semester. This workshop (available at <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/MedRad101JournalLitReview/>) also addresses the specific requirements and expectations associated with this particular task, in this discipline area for this staff member. Around ninety students were enrolled in the subject and the workshop has received 120 hits. Generally the Discussion involved information seeking and sharing and some informal socialisation. As this assignment was part of the work for the current semester, there is so far no feedback available on the performance of students relative to other years.

Generic forms of support make little if any concession to discipline-specific variations to the article review task. However, even with two task-specific workshops, these kinds of differences are beginning to emerge. The Medical Radiation task focuses much more on factual information and very specific aspects of clinical practice. The focus is on knowledge and related clinical experience. Questions asked in the discussion have to do with issues of fact: Is one injecting chemical actually the same as another with a similar name?

The Early Childhood task has an approach that focuses more on broader contextual considerations. It has more to do with issues and ideas related to the development of a whole human person in an educational setting. The focus is different and the way of writing about it is different.

As more and more workshops are developed with different individuals within different areas, these discipline-specific differences will become more obvious and the confusions associated with them will be addressed more explicitly.

There have been a number of significant outcomes associated with working with academic staff to produce task-specific online support workshops. Through the process of developing these resources, the tasks assigned to students change from being relatively private communications between individual lecturers and the students they teach. The language used in presenting these tasks, the guidance provided, the very nature of the tasks themselves all move into the public domain and are subject to a process of benign interrogation of the lecturer by the learning adviser. If these are not already explicit, the purposes, assumptions, requirements, expectations all need to be teased out, so that which was implicit or hidden becomes explicit and visible. The process is collaborative instead of individualistic.

### **Conclusion**

In attempting to clarify what an article review is, we have found that it is quite like Medusa and just as dangerous to students. Not only is the genre loosely defined in academia, it seems to be able to take alternative forms in different disciplines. There is a danger that the variations in the task can become lost in the blandness and generalities of generic support material. Subject specific online workshops mean that the multiplicity of confusions can to some measure be addressed because the workshops are developed collaboratively with staff teaching the subjects. Through interactive materials and the online discussion, students can be encouraged to explore any further confusions of which they are aware. The benefits of this

type of support to teaching staff are also transparent: they contribute to and share ownership of teaching resources; they are able to address student questions in a public medium during the writing process.

This paper considers some of the confusions associated with one assessment task, namely writing an article review, variations of which are assigned across a number of discipline areas. It focuses on the way the task is variously presented to students and looks at some of the difficulties associated with trying to support this task through the use of generic resources. It proposes another model of support, one involving Learning Advisers and subject lecturers in the development of task-specific online workshops. This is seen as a way of addressing some of the macro-and micro-level differences that exist. There is, however, still much to be explored about sources of confusion. Other assessment and learning tasks may be considered; the meanings made in relation to various topics in various disciplines could be investigated; as could the lived experiences of students attempting to negotiate their way through the multiplicity of differences: institutional, discursive, individual and language.

### References

- Ballard, B & Clanchy, J. (1988). Literacy in the university: An anthropological approach. Pre-publication print later published in G. Taylor et al. (Eds.), *Literacy by degrees*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the university. In M. Rose (Ed.), *When a writer can't write* (pp.134-165). New York: The Guildford Press.
- Bazerman, C. (1981). What written knowledge does: Three examples of academic discourse. *Philosophy of the social sciences*, 11, 361-387.
- Becher, T. (1989). *Academic tribes and territories*. Milton Keynes: SRHE & Open University Press.
- Cerone, P. & Caruso, G. (1997). Providing scaffolding for theses preparation in computer and mathematical sciences. In Z. Golebiowski & H. Borland (Eds.), *Academic communication across disciplines and cultures, Selected Proceedings of the First National Conference on tertiary Literacy: Research and Practice, Vol.2* (pp.48-53). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Chanock, K. (1997). Never say "I"? The writer's voice in essays in the humanities'. In Z. Golebiowski & H. Borland (Eds.), *Academic communication across disciplines and cultures, Selected Proceedings of the First National Conference on tertiary Literacy: Research and Practice, Vol.2* (pp.54-63). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Currie, P. (1994). What counts as good writing: Enculturation and writing assessment. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Learning and teaching genre* (pp.63-80) Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook.
- Dentith, S. (1995). *Bakhtinian thought*. London: Routledge.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Giltrow, J. & Valiquette, M. (1994). Genres and knowledge: Students writing in the disciplines'. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Learning and teaching genre* (pp.47-62). Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Hicks, M. & Leask, M. (2000). Online teaching – responding to and supporting change through staff development. Paper presented at HERDSA conference, Toowoomba, July 2000.
- Hicks, M., Reid, I. & George, R. (1999). Enhancing online teaching: Designing responsive learning environments. Paper presented at HERDSA conference, Melbourne, July 1999.
- Hicks, M., Reid, I. & George, R. (2000). Designing student support for flexible Learning environments using online technology. Paper presented at HERDSA conference, Toowoomba, July 2000.
- McLoughlin, C. (1995). Tertiary literacy: A constructivist perspective. *Open letter*, 5 (2), 27-42.
- Meyer, R. (1988). The comprehension gap: Reflections on staff-student misunderstandings in respect of language. *Higher education research and development*, 7 (1), 79- 89.
- Ryan, J. (1997). Struggling with academic language: Tertiary literacy. *Literacy and numeracy studies*, 7 (2), 55-64.
- Silyn-Roberts, H. (1997). The report and the essay: Are we muddling science and engineering undergraduates by asking them to write in two different genres? In Z. Golebiowski & H. Borland (Eds.), *Academic communication across disciplines and cultures, Selected Proceedings of the First National Conference on tertiary Literacy: Research and Practice, Vol.2* (pp. 240-247). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO WORKING WITH ACADEMIC  
STAFF:  
ADDRESSING THE CONFUSION AT THE SOURCE**

Alisa Percy and Jan Skillen  
University of Wollongong

*The role of the learning adviser in the tertiary context could be argued to be in a period of transformation with the changing culture of modern universities. While in many respects we are still attempting to develop an appropriate and comprehensive definition of our role at the national level, the approach we take is often dependent on our university's organisation, philosophy and policy. In response to a number of educational and economic factors, in some universities the role of the learning adviser is moving from one that operates in the remedial mode focusing solely on student skills development, to one that transforms the culture of teaching and learning in the institutional by working with academic staff at the curriculum level. At the University of Wollongong, it is the latter systemic approach that is deemed the highest priority in providing the most equitable and effective learning support for all students. This approach aims to remove the sources of confusion for students by integrating tertiary literacy skills instruction into subject curriculum, training staff in providing explicit feedback on their students' skills and developing teaching and learning materials which further explain and model aspects of the feedback. This paper will present three crucial aspects of the systemic approach: the shift in focus from working outside the curriculum to one that addresses the issues inside the curriculum, or system, by collaborating with discipline staff; the importance of working at the faculty and department level to make these collaborations strategic; and the need to participate in and impact upon policy decisions at a number of levels.*

In the CAUT commissioned report *First Year on Campus*, McInnis, James and McNaught (1995) discuss students' first year transition, as "characterised by...a series of gaps and gulfs, especially between school and university, and between students and academics". These 'gaps and gulfs', in part, represent two sources of confusion: the students' lack of familiarity with the academic learning context (generic skills) and the conventions and discourse of their discipline (discipline-specific skills); and discipline staffs' inability to clearly articulate their tacit knowledge of the discourse and conventions of their discipline and to provide students with developmental and timely feedback. It is these two sources of confusion that Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers deal with on a day-to-day basis. In the current educational climate that has highlighted the importance of quality teaching and learning in higher education, in many cases LAS advisers are moving away from the remedial and generic model of providing learning support, to one that is pro-active, systemic and developmental. This latter approach addresses the students' confusions at the source by working with discipline staff at the curriculum level. The curriculum is the 'bridge' where all groups engage, the students, the staff and LAS advisers: it is where confusions can be addressed in a contextualised, relevant and timely manner. This approach, however, extends the notion of integration by working strategically at the department and faculty level, and by ensuring that discipline staff develop the knowledge, resources and ability to continue with the teaching of the skills and discourse long after the LAS staff member has moved on to other subjects. The systemic approach is a long-term solution which has the capability of effecting real and lasting change in the teaching and learning culture of our institutions. This paper will present three

crucial aspects of the systemic approach: the shift in focus from working outside the curriculum to one that addresses the issues inside the curriculum, or system, by collaborating with discipline staff; the importance of working at the faculty and department level to make these collaborations strategic; and the need to participate in and impact upon policy decisions at a number of levels.

### **Background**

There is no doubt that the modern university is experiencing a cultural transition or paradigm shift in the current economic and educational climate, particularly in relation to internationalisation, increasing student diversity and the subsequent need to ensure quality teaching and learning (eg. Adams et al., 1999; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bryant et al., 1999; Candy et al., 1994; McInnes et al., 1995; Ramsden et al., 1995). This 'shift' is having a profound effect on the role of the Learning and Academic Skills staff in higher education and on the approach taken in surviving and/or facilitating this transition (Candy et al., 1994; Chanock et al., 1996; Hicks & George, 1998; Skillen et al., 1998; Van der Wal et al., 1998). The approach taken by a unit, however, will depend largely on the culture and policy of the institution and the unit's philosophy of practice.

Over the past decade, university policy has been conforming to increasing pressure to meet international and government regulations on quality, transparency and accountability (eg. Dearing, 1997; West, 1998). For many universities, this has placed a sense of urgency on reforming curricula and improving learning outcomes, a process that places extra pressure on discipline staff with regard to their teaching practice, and one which requires sophisticated approaches to supporting their professional development.

Learning advisers are in an ideal position to make a valuable contribution to curriculum reform, and in many universities they have moved beyond the remedial student-focused role to one which assumes a developmental and professional development role by working systemically with discipline staff. A number of Learning and Academic Skills units have developed approaches to learning support that are not only effective and equitable in terms of promoting quality learning outcomes, but are consistent with the values and goals of the university (Hicks & George, 1998), are cost-effective, and are capable of creating deep qualitative change in teaching and learning in the long-term (Angelo, 1999).

Additionally, educational theorists (eg. Baldauf, 1996; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Boyer, 1990; Ramsden et al., 1995) have been arguing for a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning culture of the modern university, a shift in practice from teacher-centred to student and learning-centred, a shift in curriculum from content-based to skills-based, and a shift from the perception that research is separate from teaching to the acknowledgement of teaching as a scholarly activity in itself. Such a shift requires an enormous transition for some discipline staff: in many cases learning and educational developers have been identified as the 'meta-professions' (Candy, 1996) responsible for assisting in the facilitation of such a shift (McInnes et al., 1995). As Candy (1994) claims, "the enhancement and the facilitation of learning should be viewed as the central purpose of the university, and accordingly student support services...should be regarded as full partners in the education process". This concept of partnership is a crucial element in the systemic approach. It represents the shift away from providing a service 'for' students and discipline staff from outside the curriculum, to one that collaborates 'with' discipline staff to enhance students' learning inside the system at the curriculum level.

**The systemic approach: addressing the confusion at the source**

In order to achieve an effective and equitable approach to students' skills development, Learning Development at the University of Wollongong places an emphasis on the systemic approach as illustrated in the left arm in Figure 1 below.

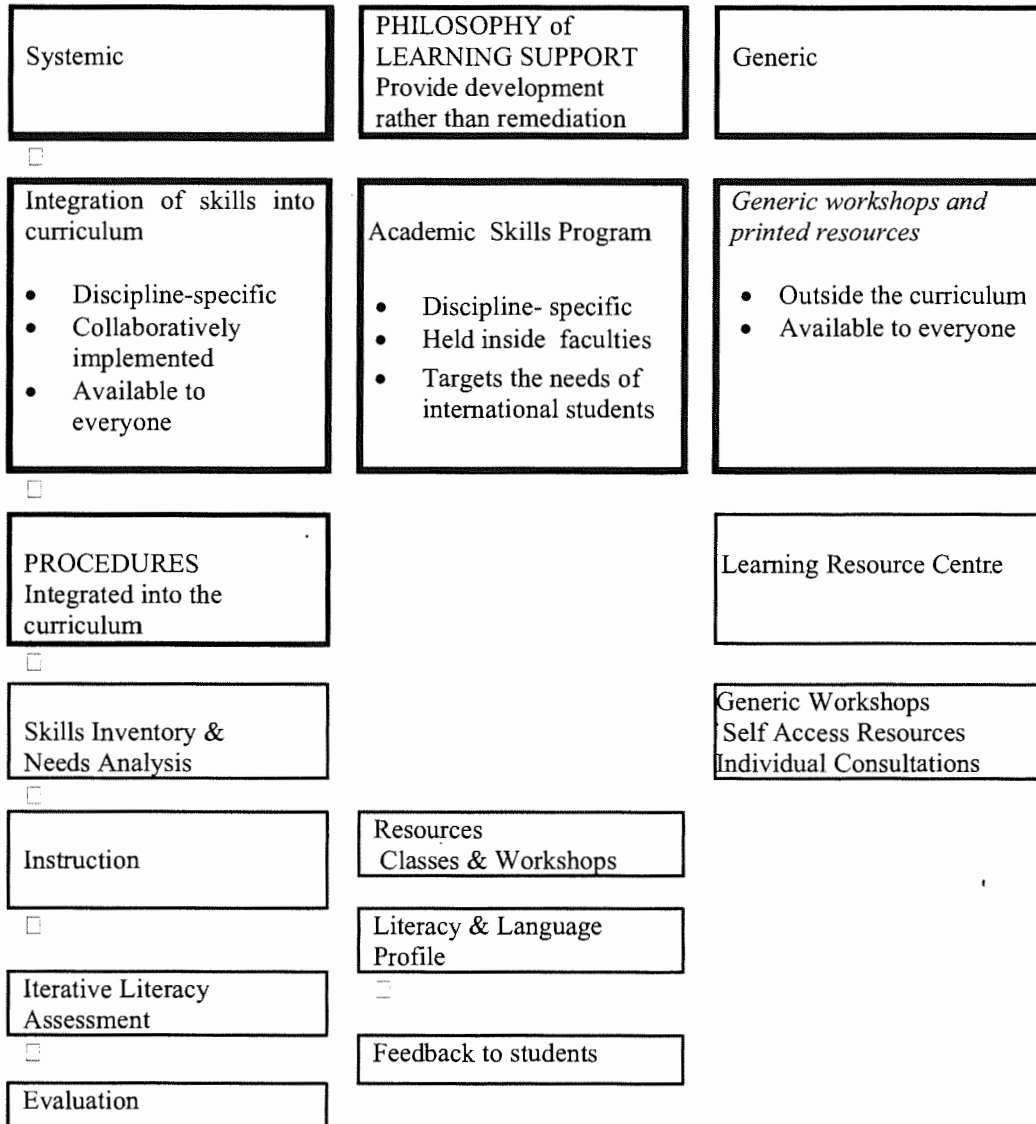


Figure 1. Model of learning support, Learning Development, University of Wollongong.

The emphasis on the systemic approach is based on the recognition that all students making the transition to university require assistance in acculturating not only to the academic context but to the skills and discourse of their discipline, and it is believed that this assistance is most relevant, effective and equitable when offered to students within the curricula. By making explicit the skills and conventions of the discipline and subject, and providing timely and relevant skills instruction and feedback inside the curriculum, the potential for students' confusion is limited and their potential for learning enhanced.

To formalise the systemic approach, Learning Development developed a model called the IDEALL (Integrated Development of English language and Academic Literacy and Learning) approach which has been used extensively in collaborations with academic staff. The model has four basic procedures: collaboratively conducting a skills inventory of the subject, assessing students' literacy and language skills, designing and implementing skills instruction,

## *Sources of Confusion*

and evaluating student learning outcomes (see Skillen et al., 1998 for more detail). This approach goes beyond the old model of integration where learning advisers came into subjects as 'literacy experts', delivered their knowledge to the students and left with that knowledge (Skillen et al, 1998). Systemic collaborations aim to develop the knowledge and skills of discipline staff that will assist them in improving their teaching practice in the long term beyond the single subject.

One example of this type of collaboration has occurred in the core 100 level subject for the Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Business Administration, MGMT110: Introduction to Management. The collaboration has been conducted using an action research framework to document and evaluate the effectiveness of the integration and the collaboration itself. In the most recent phase of collaboration, the planning stage of the cycle involved the following:

- a collaborative curriculum review and skills inventory;
- the strategic placement of assessment tasks to allow for an iterative feedback and development process;
- the development and use of explicit marking criteria to provide the feedback;
- the strategic placement of skills instruction in the curriculum;
- the development of a staff training manual and workshop; and
- the redevelopment of web-based and print-based learning resources to underpin the instruction and assessment.

The development of explicit marking criteria provides staff with the opportunity to articulate the exact skills that students are expected to master within their subject. It also allows for Learning Development staff to impact on their way of thinking about their role as teachers and assists them in clearly articulating the discourse and literacy conventions of their discipline. The use of such criteria to assess students' work means that students are receiving timely feedback that unpacks the requirements of their assessment tasks and makes explicit that which is valued. And it also provides a framework for the development of relevant learning resources.

The implementation stage of the cycle can be summarised as follows:

- essay lecture inside lecture schedule situated before the first essay, team taught by Learning Development and the subject lecturer;
- essay Preparation tutorial run by tutors before the first essay;
- first essay feedback using explicit marking criteria, marked by tutors;
- student essay example (Distinction level) annotated for linguistic and structural features placed on web and handed out to students;
- comprehensive self-access web-based and print-based Study Guide provides explanation and models of the various items in the marking criteria among other things;
- individual consultations for students still having difficulties; and
- essay 2 feedback.

The staff marking workshop and team teaching activities that take place throughout the session are crucial for modelling and providing feedback to staff so they feel comfortable in taking ownership over this process.

In the evaluation stage of the cycle, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the integration. A student survey was used to gauge students' perceptions of the benefits (or otherwise) of the instruction to their learning process, and their essay marks from the first and second essay were statistically analysed according to whether, and to what extent, they had accessed the integrated support.

Of the 273 students enrolled in the subject, 159 (58%) were surveyed to gauge their perceptions of the usefulness of the integrated support. An analysis of the survey results

## Sources of Confusion

indicated a majority of positive responses. With regard to the essay feedback process, 94% of students agreed that the process of getting explicit feedback on their essay and having online support was a useful concept for teaching and learning, 72% felt that the feedback from the first essay was clear and easy to understand, and 71% felt that the feedback motivated them to improve their skills. Thus, the collaboration did have some benefit for a large number of students who may not have received the same instruction otherwise. However, developmental instruction of this sort may not always meet the individual needs of students who have serious deficiencies in their skills, and therefore the provision of individual or group consultation to those students is still necessary.

Additionally, a random sample of 59 students (22%) was used to explore any significant differences between the timing of students' use of the Study Guide and their performance in the essay. This analysis was conducted using a two-tailed t-test. The students were divided into the following groups: those who accessed the Study Guide only before the first essay, those who accessed the Study Guide only after the first essay, those who accessed the Study Guide before and after, and those who didn't access the Study Guide at all. The average of each group's first and second essay mark was also used.

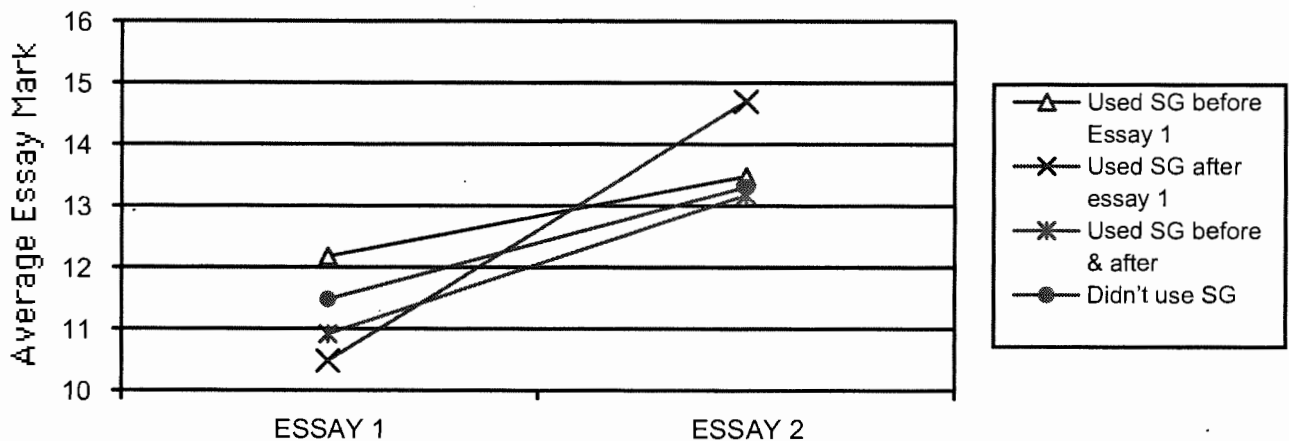


Figure 2. Students' improvement between the first and second essay according to their use of the Study Guide.

As can be seen in the Figure 2, the students who accessed the Study Guide only after receiving the essay feedback improved at a significantly higher rate than any other group ( $df=10$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). This could be explained by the fact that they also rated the poorest in the first essay (10.05) and were strongly motivated to improve their marks. This assumption is supported by their survey comments stating the majority of this group had felt motivated by the feedback. Further, their use of the learning resources at this stage would have been guided by the feedback. Another theory could be that these students were in fact very capable but made little effort in their first essay, which they promptly changed for the second essay when they understood what was being valued in the assessment task. This is in contrast to the students who used the Study Guide only before the first essay. These students failed to make a statistically significant improvement ( $df=23$ ,  $p<.0083$ ), which could be explained by the fact that they did not capitalise on the feedback to develop their weaker areas.

Those students who did not access the Study Guide at all did make a significant improvement ( $df=36$ ,  $p<.0012$ ), yet it is felt that these students could have done better if they had accessed the Study Guide.

A perplexing result was that those students who claimed to have used the Study Guide both before and after did not improve as significantly as the 'only after' group even though they made a significant improvement ( $df=15$ ,  $p>.0019$ ). There could be a number of explanations for this lack of improvement, but further analysis showed that although they may have

## *Sources of Confusion*

referred to the Guide before and after the first essay, they had not made extensive use of all the modules. Analysis indicates that the students who made extensive use of the Study Guide modules showed the most significant improvement. An Analysis of Variance using repeated measures indicated a ( $p < .0001$ ) significant improvement between students' first and second essay mark according to whether they accessed 1 – 25%, 26 – 50%, 50 – 75% or 75 – 100% of the Study Guide.

Despite the promising results and the positive feedback from students, this approach does not come without its limitations: it is a slow process, and without support at the institutional and faculty level initiatives could remain as ad hoc as past approaches to student learning. Successful and lasting collaborations require patience, persistence and often very careful management to keep the process moving and to maintain the participants' morale and interest, including one's own. One reason for this is that most discipline staff are already over-worked and they continually need to be shown how this process benefits them and their students. Also, discipline staff need to come to accept the fact that their students' skills development is their responsibility, so in some cases it takes some time before they are willing to work independently with the materials and modelling provided for them. Many still see the learning adviser's role as providing a service 'for' them rather than being collaborators 'with' them. There is also a need for LAS advisers to work simultaneously with Deans, Heads of Department and the Education Committees to influence their understanding and appreciation of the university's goals and provide them with strategic options for skills integration.

### **Working at the department and faculty level**

Providing consultation to faculties and departments, educating them on the importance of curriculum-integrated skills instruction for a diverse student population, and assisting in the development of strategies for curriculum reform from first to third year is an essential part of the systemic approach. Impact at this level is necessary to ensure whole degree approaches are taken and an emphasis can be placed on students' incremental skills development throughout their degree program. This requires LAS staff's participation in Faculty Education Committees (FECs), Strategic Review Groups and any other faculty level group that deals with teaching and learning issues.

Learning Development at the University of Wollongong has representatives in each of the faculties either working in teams or as individuals. These representatives are responsible for applying the systemic approach in their allocated faculties and have a formal place on each of the Faculty Education Committees. Being situated in such a position allows Learning Developers to provide comment on teaching and learning issues, provide the faculty with strategic options for curriculum review with regard to skills instruction, and makes the approach and achievements visible to the entire faculty.

In the Faculty of Commerce, Learning Development have been involved in the Department of Management's *Strategic Review of the Undergraduate Program*. The final report provides recommendations that the Department implement a team-based approach to strategically plan and implement skills instruction from first to third year (see Appendix A for an excerpt of the recommendations made in the Report). This report was finalised at the end of 1999, but its implementation has been slow. Despite this slow progress, Learning Development's involvement has raised their awareness of the importance of curriculum-integrated skills instruction, and has profiled Learning Development staff as facilitators in this process. Effecting change is not an overnight process. It requires participation at all levels to inform and influence those who have the keys to the curriculum and the power to effect change, and again it requires patience and persistence.

Understanding the limitations of working at the Program and Departmental level only, Learning Development has had extensive dialogue with the Dean and Sub-Dean of the Faculty about the core priorities of the University's *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 – 2005* and the increasing external pressures for quality assurance in relation to teaching and learning, such as the recently introduced Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA). Learning

## *Sources of Confusion*

Development provided consultation to the faculty as it underwent an External Course Appraisal Committee (ECAC) Review of its undergraduate programs, and is currently playing a key role in their subsequent project to 'map' the tertiary literacies in these programs. A year into this project, collaboration with the faculty executive (top-down) and discipline staff (bottom up) has resulted in a new project proposal for the systemic and strategic integration of skills instruction across the 100 level (core) and 200 level (large) subjects trialling innovative methods for professional development, such as action research and action learning. The use of these methods is the result of ongoing research into the most effective ways to promote a culture of inquiry and scholarship in teaching (see for example, MacDonald, 1999; Weeks & Scott, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

Thus, 2001 represents a new phase in the collaborations between Learning Development and the Faculty of Commerce that aims for improved teaching and learning outcomes for all students through the incremental articulation of integrated skills instruction from first to second year across a multi-disciplinary degree program, and through the promotion of professional development activities for staff that promote a culture of inquiry and scholarship in teaching.

### **Impacting on policy at a number of levels**

Another level of action and influence lies in our impact on university policy through participation in University Education Sub-committees, working parties, and any other policy-making groups that deal directly with teaching and learning issues. Learning Development had direct involvement in the development of the University's *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan, 1997 – 2005* which provides strategic goals and guidelines for the enhancement of teaching and learning on campus (see Appendix 2 for a statement of its core priorities and a summary of our role). Learning Development has also made significant contributions to the Generic Skills Working Party, the Internationalisation of the Curriculum Sub-Committee, the Peer Review Working Party and the English Language Entry Standards and Ongoing Support Working Party, to name a few. Contributions at this level are characterised by well-researched reports, including qualitative and quantitative data reflecting the issues and needs of students and staff. Input such as this not only provides guidance and strategies for the university to move towards 'best practice', but in many cases also allows learning developers the opportunity to define their role and involvement in addressing these 'issues' according to our philosophy and practice.

### **Conclusion**

LAS advisers, or learning developers, have the opportunity in the current culture shift of the modern university to have a far-reaching impact on the skills of all students by working within the system, at the curriculum level with academic staff. Working at this level eliminates the confusions that are caused by the students' lack of familiarity with academic and discipline conventions and the inability of the staff to articulate this for them and provide them with developmental feedback. Implementing this systemic approach requires collaborating with academic staff in such a way that they finally take ownership over the skills instruction in their subject(s). Crucial to the effectiveness of the systemic approach is participation by LAS advisers at the department and faculty level to facilitate the strategic nature of the collaborations, and at the institutional level to impact on university policy. For LAS advisers taking a systemic approach, ongoing research into its benefits, pitfalls and long-term effects will provide invaluable data to inform practice at the institutional, national and international level.

### **References**

- Adams, M., Marshall, S. & Cameron, A. (1999). Strategic academic program development: Heads of Schools' perceptions of the role of professional development. *Proceedings*

## Sources of Confusion

- of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference, Melbourne.*  
<http://herdsa.org.au/vic/cornerstones/pdf/Adams.PDF>
- Angelo, T. (1999). Doing academic development as though we valued learning most: Transformative guidelines from research to practice. *Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference, Melbourne.* <http://www.herdsa.org.au/vic/cornerstones/pdf/Angelo.PDF>
- Barr, R.B. & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning – a new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 27 (6), 13 – 24.
- Baldauf, R.B. (1996). Tertiary language and literacy policies: Needs and practice. In Z. Golebiowski. (Ed.), *Selected proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy: Research and Practice: Academic communication across disciplines and cultures.* (Vol.1). Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Boyer, E.L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriat.* Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Bryant, M., Scoufis, M. & Cheers, M. (1999). The transformation of higher education in Australia: University teaching is at a crossroads. *Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), Melbourne.* <http://www.herdsa.org.au/vic/cornerstones/pdf/Bryant.PDF>
- Candy, P.C., Crebert, G. & O’Leary, J. (1994). Developing Lifelong Learners through Undergraduate Education. Commissioned Report No. 28. National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Canberra, AGPS.
- Candy, P.C. (1996). Promoting learning organisations: Academic Developers and the University as a Learning Organisation. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 1 (1), 7-18.
- Chanock, K., Burley, V. & Davies, S. (1996). What do we learn from teaching one-to-one that informs our work with larger numbers. Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Dearing, R. (1997). Higher Education in the learning society – Summary Report. National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, London: HMSO.
- Hicks, M. & George, R. (1998). A strategic perspective on approaches to student learning support at the University of South Australia. *Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference, Auckland.* <http://www.auckland.ac.nz/cpd/HERDSA/HTML/LearnSup/HICKSM.htm>
- George, R. & O’Regan, K. (1998). A Professional Development Model of Student Support. *Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference, Auckland.*
- MacDonald, I. (1999). The teaching community: recreating university teaching. *Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference, Melbourne.* <http://www.herdsa.org.au/vic/cornerstones/pdf/MacDonald.PDF>
- Merten, M., Murray, P. & Quinlan, A. (1995). Facilitating First Year Students’ Transition Into University and Disciplinary Cultures. *Proceedings of the 1995 Biennial Education Conference, UNSW: The Changing University Sydney:* University of New South Wales.

## Sources of Confusion

- McInnis, C., James, R. & McNaught, C. (1995). *First year on campus: Diversity in the initial experiences of Australian undergraduates*. CAUT Commissioned Report, Canberra: AGPS.
- Osborn, M. & Johnson, N. (1999). Helping academics to help themselves: A work embedded approach to professional development. *Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference*, Melbourne.  
<http://www.herdsa.org.au/vic/cornerstones/pdf/Osborn.PDF>
- Quinlan, A. & Merten, M. (1998). Embedding opportunities for student resilience for academic success in professional disciplines. *Proceedings of the International Consortium for Educational Development Conference, Higher Education Conference: Supporting Educational, Faculty and TA Development Within Departments and Disciplines*. Austin, Texas.
- Ramsden, P., Margetson, D., Martin, E. & Clarke, S. (1995). *Recognising and rewarding good teaching in Australian higher education*. CAUT Commissioned Report, Canberra, AGPS.
- Richardson, K. & Sylvester, G. (1998). An integrated model for staff development. *Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference*, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Skillen, J. Merten, M., Trivett, N. & Percy, A. (1998). The IDEALL approach to learning development: A model for fostering improved literacy and learning outcomes for students. *Proceedings of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference; Research in Education Does it Count?* Adelaide.
- Skillen, J. & Mahoney, M.J. (1997). Learning and literacy development in higher education: An issue of institutional change. *Proceedings of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference*, Brisbane.
- University of Wollongong (1997). Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan. Internal policy document. [http://www.uow.edu.au/about/teaching/LTStrategic\\_plan.html](http://www.uow.edu.au/about/teaching/LTStrategic_plan.html)
- Van der Wal, A., Carmichael, E., McGowan, U. & Hicks, M. (Eds.) (1998) The position of academic skills lecturers in Australian universities. Paper prepared by the SIG Teaching and Learning Group for HERDSA.
- Weeks, P. & Scott, D. (1993). *Exploring tertiary teaching: Papers from the TRAC (Teaching, Reflection, and Collaboration) Project*. Queensland University of Technology Publications.
- West, R. (1998). *Learning for life*. Higher Education Review Committee Final Report, Canberra: AGPS.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1992). *Professional Development in Higher Education: A Theoretical Framework for Action Research*. London: Kogan Page.

**Appendix A: Excerpt from *A Strategic Review of Undergraduate Programs*,  
Department of Management, September 1999**

**4.0 Major Recommendations**

Learning and Teaching

- R5** That the Department develop a team-based strategy for integrating Tertiary Literacies across all subjects offered in its undergraduate programs.
- R6** That the Department propose that the Faculty develop a team-based strategy for integrating tertiary literacies across all subjects in the C-1 Schedule.
- R7** That the Department develop a team-based strategy for the progressive development of its capabilities in flexible delivery.
- R8** That the Department integrate the proposed process for quality assurance with the above team-based strategies for improving the integration of tertiary literacies.

**Resources and Capabilities**

- R9** That the Department capitalise on its current specialist expertise in teaching and learning research and development, by encouraging and supporting the development of a team capable of: securing competitive research and development grants; designing and implementing initiatives in teaching and learning; designing evaluations of those initiatives; capable of publishing the findings in relevant journals; and leading skill development for all members of the Department in tertiary literacies and flexible delivery.
- R10** That the Department maintain the excellent relationships it has developed with both Learning Development and CEDIR as strategic alliances on which the enrichment of our teaching and learning capabilities depends.
- R11** That the Department make a major investment in the human and capital resources needed to develop, deploy and maintain leading-edge capabilities in providing computer and intranet based resources in support of its primary on-campus teaching as well as flexible delivery.
- R12** That the Department very carefully consider the opportunity costs of committing to these recommendations particularly in terms of the capacity to pursue individual and collective goals in research and career development.

**Appendix B: Summary of the Learning & Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 - 2005,  
University Of Wollongong**

The University of Wollongong's *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 - 2005* states as its core priorities :

to provide an environment in which:

- a) students become skilled in actively pursuing discipline specific and tertiary literacies knowledge and critical understanding; and
- b) staff find rewarding opportunities for personal and professional development as educators" (p.1).

These priorities are in accordance with the philosophy of Learning Development staff.

The *Plan* identifies nine Attributes of a Wollongong Graduate which provide a framework of competencies for student learning outcomes and curriculum development. The *Plan* also provides a range of guidelines outlining the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved in implementing the *Plan's* objectives; these include education committees, service providers and academic staff. The *Plan* states that Learning and Educational Support services have the following role:

in addition to assistance for individual students and staff with particular needs, support units will assist individuals and faculties to develop sound teaching and learning practices in the context of curriculum development and review (p. 7).

Clearly, it outlines our role as developing programs which:

- Assist students in dealing with the transition to higher education;
- Provide a diagnostic service, in collaboration with faculties, to identify specific learning needs, especially in relation to English language;
- Support students at risk of failure for academic or social/ cultural reasons;
- Provide consultancy service to faculties regarding students' transition to university, student diversity and students at risk;
- Provide consultancy to Faculty Education committees in educational planning and instructional development for students-centred curricula and flexible methods of subject delivery and learning support;
- Design support to assist faculties and FECs in the integration of tertiary literacies into the curricula;
- Provide consultancy to faculties and academic staff in the principles and methods of program evaluation, teaching evaluation and quality assurance;
- Provide support and training for academic staff in the design and development of course materials and resources needed for flexible delivery;
- Provide support for academics in developing their skills in accessing information resources, particularly in electronic format (p.7-8).

As can be seen from the above policy statement, institutional policy places a greater weighting on the systemic approach to our work. It is clear that the roles of both the Learning Development Lecturers and Educational Development Lecturers are blurred, as they both play a key role in the provision of support to faculties, departments and academic staff. This 'blurring' of roles, a multi-disciplinary, approach is indicative of approaches to professional development that focus on reforming the entire institution, are integrative, collaborative and focus on reflective practice and organisational learning (Candy et al, 1994; Zuber-Skerritt, O., 1994; Richardson & Sylvester, 1998; Hicks & George, 1998; George & O'Regan, 1998; Adams et al, 1999). Thus, it is inferred that a cohesive approach must also be developed between the two units. This is something we are still working towards.

*Sources of Confusion*

**APPENDIX C: Marking Guides provided to students prior to assessment submission**

<b>HBM110</b>	<b>Assignment (Bread Industry) Marking Guide</b>
<b>Value 30%</b>	

Students: \_\_\_\_\_

Marker: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Level of attainment:</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>H</b>	
<b>Research Task (primary &amp; secondary research)</b>					
• evidence (cited in report)					
• scope					
• relevance					
• use					
<b>Industry Background</b>					
• description of the market including:					
• market size/ structure etc					
• major players					
• critical success factors					
<b>Macro Environment</b>					
• identification theory/factors					
• discussion of impact on the industry					
• appropriate identification of practical examples for each of the macro factors					
<b>Segmentation</b>					
• identification of theory					
• discussion on how & why product group is segmented					
• use of interviews to illustrate how product group is segmented with reference to target markets and marketing mix					
<b>Report Presentation</b>					
• referencing technique					
• business report format					
• word limit					
• expression, spelling					
• overall excellence (originality/creativity/analysis)					

Key to level of attainment scale above: N = not shown L = low M = medium H = high

<b>Overall Grade:</b>				
High Distinction	Distinction	Credit	Pass	Fail

**HBM110 Case Study Presentation and Report Marking Guide  
Value 15%**

Case Study Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

**Oral Report**

<b>Visual Presentation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• quality of visuals</li> <li>• professionalism</li> <li>• pace</li> <li>• interesting</li> <li>• clarity</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <b>Medium</b> <b>Low</b> <b>Not Shown</b>	
<b>Content</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• major issues covered</li> <li>• degree of understanding</li> <li>• relevant &amp; informative</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <b>Medium</b> <b>Low</b> <b>Not Shown</b>	
<b>Class Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• useful</li> <li>• learning achieved</li> <li>• within time frame</li> <li>• well managed</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <b>Medium</b> <b>Low</b> <b>Not Shown</b>	

**Written Report**

<b>Report Presentation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• structure</li> <li>• professionalism</li> <li>• within word limit</li> <li>• scope of research</li> <li>• referencing technique</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <b>Medium</b> <b>Low</b> <b>Not Shown</b>	
<b>Key Issues</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appropriate</li> <li>• reasoning</li> <li>• clarity</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <b>Medium</b> <b>Low</b> <b>Not Shown</b>	
<b>Analysis &amp; Interpretation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• definition of terminology</li> <li>• use of theory</li> <li>• practical examples</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <b>Medium</b> <b>Low</b> <b>Not Shown</b>	

**Overall Grade:**

**High Distinction   Distinction   Credit   Pass   Fail**

## **TEACHING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: ARE STUDENTS READY?**

Aveline Pérez, Reem Al-Mahmood, & Jon Pearce  
University of Melbourne

*As use of the Internet becomes more popular in university courses, we need to ask whether students are able to readily adjust to a different style of learning, and what confusion can arise in this process of adjustment. This paper will outline a second year subject (Networks and Multimedia in Science and Technology) that is taught in the Department of Information Systems at the University of Melbourne, where students work in teams designing web sites for academic clients at the University. The conflict between expectations of online learning and the reality of face-to-face learning was a recurrent theme, which surfaced in the following areas:*

- *Evaluating the role of 'traditional' learning when online learning was also used.*
- *The need to develop new research skills in order to find and use material online.*
- *A strong focus on time management skills, due to the continuous nature of the subject's assessment criteria.*
- *A strong focus on interpersonal skills and low-tech methods in the seminars (taught by Learning Skills Advisers) when the subject's end product had an online focus.*

*As we adopt more online education, we need to ensure that students develop or adapt their skills to cope with new learning demands. It is not a case of 'out with the old and in with the new' but of taking academic skills that work well in 'traditional' learning and modifying these to the demands of online learning. Finally, to avoid confusion, we also need to consider the role of 'traditional' learning in a computer-based learning environment.*

### **Introduction – What are the demands of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

As computer technology infiltrates university learning environments more and more, our task as learning skills advisers requires us to re-evaluate the processes and skills that students need to successfully study. Fortunately this change is a gradual process that allows us to witness and even experience some of the necessary skills' development required in online communication, online research, new genres of writing, and more demanding information management and technical skills. In moving to 'online' learning, we must consider what it does best, and what it is incapable of replacing. Traditional face-to-face learning is far from being replaced by online equivalents (Ryan, 1998). In fact, younger undergraduate students have been shown to express a preference for some face-to-face teaching, especially in small groups (McNaught, 2000, p. 107), and a recent internal University of Melbourne review of the uses of multimedia technologies in teaching also affirms this (James, 2000). If anything, online integrations are being used to supplement traditional teaching. This raises new issues of how students will cope with two competing styles of instruction and interaction. Confusions are bound to arise, and students will inevitably confuse the rules and skills required for each one. As a result, the role of teachers and learning skills advisers is likely to incorporate, even more than at present, the role of an effective facilitator, designer and guide.

## *Sources of Confusion*

This paper will present an example of traditional teaching meeting online learning through our experience of teaching the second year subject, *Computer Networks and Multimedia in Science and Technology* (abbreviated as *Multimedia and Communications*). This subject is taught in the department of Information Systems at the Science Faculty, University of Melbourne. In 2000, teaching staff for the subject included the main subject lecturer from Information Systems who co-ordinated and designed the subject, and computer lab workshop tutors, including a senior lab demonstrator. Due to a history of teaching Professional Skills in the department, two staff members from the Learning Skills Unit were involved in designing and teaching the seminars (which focused on transferable skills, rather than technical content), and also to mark non-technical assessment. Students enrolled in this subject came from various backgrounds, including local and international students, second and third year students, with over 60% of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Information Systems. Other students were enrolled in Engineering or Commerce or doing combined courses. In 2000, there were a total of 174 enrolled students.

As with most traditional university courses, *Multimedia and Communications* consists of lectures, tutorials and labs. However the content and assessment tasks for this course are firmly embedded in the internet. The major group task is to produce, for an academic client, a web site that communicates scientific ideas through the use of multimedia. These client projects culminate in the presentation of the web sites at a student conference at the end of semester. Staff and students in the subject communicate through both face-to-face and online media, and all assessment is submitted and returned electronically. The subject is also supported by a web site (<http://webraft.its.unimelb.edu.au/615280/pub/>) which contains general information about the subject, course content and outline, resources, assessment, and links to student web sites.

Consequently this subject provides an excellent starting point for examining some interesting challenges for students and staff in integrating traditional and online learning. This paper will begin with an examination of the variations of online learning and the online learning skills we felt students needed to be equipped for success. We discuss the issues that arise in online assessment, as this is an area that learning skills advisers are most likely to encounter, and we conclude by considering the confusions that arise for students and the strategies we can offer them to develop and improve their life-long learning skills.

### **What do we mean by online learning?**

Online learning is often used as a 'catch-all' phrase for any teaching/learning interactions that make use of computers and computer technology. It is often contrasted with traditional learning in much the same way that distance education is compared to traditional learning. In fact while distance education would appear to have been revived by the growth of online learning, the number of staff using the Web in teaching courses to students on campus is likewise growing. Furthermore, enrolments suggest that students still prefer to learn on campus (Ryan, 1998, p. 17). In these instances, the boundaries between online learning and traditional learning are frequently blurred.

In analysing the scope of online learning, Driscoll (2000) lists four phases of traditional teaching which can be adapted to online learning: how we present information to students, how students interact with the new information, how they practice what we teach, and how we assess students. This section will address the options and issues that online learning offers in presenting information. The following section considers the skills students need to interact and practise their learning, and this is followed by the changes in assessment practices that online learning requires.

#### *Working with a new medium: how can we present information online?*

Online learning presents a variety of ways to deliver course content to students. This can be arranged into two overlapping continua: the level of online material autonomy, and the amount of student-to-student collaboration (see Figure 1). Within the four quadrants of these

overlapping continua, we can place the four stages of web-based teaching as defined by Hall (2000). At one end of the autonomy continuum there exists traditional material replicated online – only the medium is changed from hard copy to soft copy. Typically this type of online teaching material is designed to stand alone and is usually highly instructive (Pham, 1998, p. 113). This corresponds to what Hall defines as individual self-paced (ISP) teaching (typically used in distance education). The focus here is often on sequential learning of material in the student's own time. It may involve reading, answering questions, completing activities, and undertaking formative and summative assessment. Its nature replicates that of traditional learning, in that it is more material-centred. While well-designed ISP material can also be interactive, especially through the use of multimedia, there would appear to be little difference in this scenario from an active learner working from a textbook.

**Stand Alone Material**  
(presenting information)

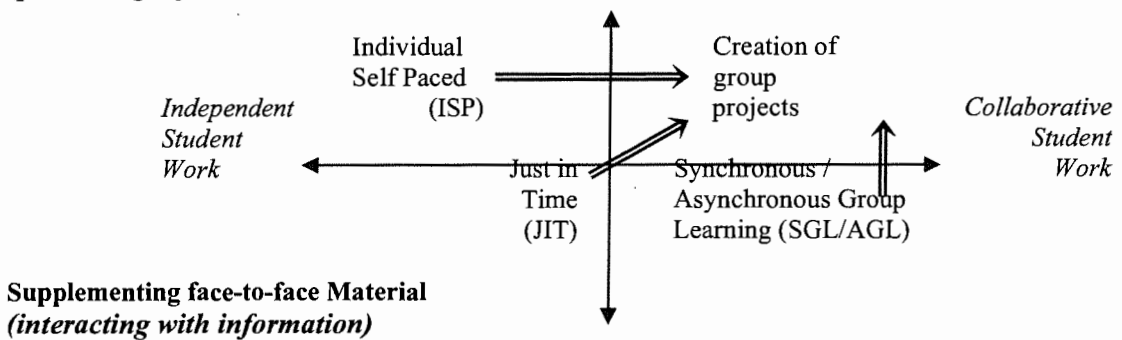


Figure 1. Autonomy of online material and the student's interaction with it.

Not all independent learning materials are designed as completely autonomous. The navigational properties of the web (especially hypertext) encourage the division of material into "blocks of text" (Snyder, 1996: ix). This segmentation allows for the immediate needs of the student on a specific issue to be addressed (Pérez, forthcoming). Thus, while still designed for independent learning, the student is not being provided with a complete set of instructive material. This corresponds to Hall's second web-based teaching type: "just-in-time" training (JIT). While similar to the first type of teaching, in that it is material-centred, the student controls the appropriateness of the content according to need. The focus still remains largely individual but choice of topic is more student-driven. In this way, JIT is less sequential than Independent Self-Paced learning, as there is often freedom in the sequence of accessing modules but still a specific linear structure within each module. Typical content for JIT would include problem solving tasks, and experiential methods.

At the other end of the student interaction continuum, electronic media allow group interaction where the students often determine the content themselves. This corresponds to Hall's third and fourth types of training: Asynchronous Group Learning (AGL) and Synchronous Group Learning (SGL). The former would include discussion and collaboration at different times; that is, at the convenience of the participator with e-mail and discussion lists as the prime focus. Interaction in the latter occurs at the same time and allows for immediate student input and feedback through chat forums (such as IRC, ICQ, etc). In both of these instances the role of the teacher is more one of facilitator and moderator, and student learning is less sequential and more interactive and collaborative (Rowntree, 1995). It would be difficult for synchronous and asynchronous group learning to replace a teaching course, and they are most commonly used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching.

In the final quadrant of Figure 1, we have provided the creation of group projects as a culmination of individual and group interaction. Through collaborative teamwork, and using independent, stand alone and supplementary materials, students produce a stand alone group project, for example, the group web sites students developed in *Multimedia and Communications*. In this way, students are also able to contribute to the presenting of

## *Sources of Confusion*

information in the course, drawing on a variety of teaching styles which allows for the variation in student learning preferences.

Thus, online learning can encompass independent and collaborative work and use varying levels of autonomous material. It would be interesting to know whether students perceive online learning as situated to the bottom and right of Figure 1, where students construct knowledge themselves, rather than towards the top and left hand side, which is more instructional in nature. Rowntree suggests that the focus in online learning is often less on the product (the content) than it is on the cognitive process of “offering up ideas, having them criticised or expanded on, and getting the chance to reshape them (or abandon them) in the light of peer discussion” (1995, p. 207). Certainly in terms of presenting material, confusion can arise for students when they mistake constructivist material for instructivist material, especially if the former is presented in a format that suggests individual self-paced learning.

### *How online was Multimedia and Communications?*

In assessing the subject *Multimedia and Communications* in terms of the above framework, it is certainly not an online subject, but neither is it a traditional subject. The content is clearly based in the online realm, as it considers how Science can be successfully communicated through the use of multimedia and the web. The course aims to develop students’ abilities to produce web sites using a methodological approach that addresses design, construction and evaluation. The course information was presented traditionally in lectures (2 one-hour lectures per week), with supplementary material and resources provided on the subject web site. In addition, students attended a compulsory two-hour weekly lab workshop and a one-hour weekly seminar. While all the teaching material was available online, students were also expected to purchase a printed course manual that included the course description, seminar tasks, lecture outlines, lab tasks, and assessment details. Several different types of tasks were submitted and returned online (either using the web or e-mail) and were due at various times across the semester (most culminated into two ‘Web checks’ at the end of weeks seven and twelve). For the final group projects, students produced a Web site that required them to draw on theoretical principles provided in the lectures, on technical skills learnt in the weekly lab sessions, and also on face-to-face skills, such as client interviewing, that were developed in the seminars.

### **What skills do students need to interact and practise online?**

Rowntree (1995) suggests that online learning provides students with more chances of learner-centred and potentially collaborative interactions. Likewise, Starr (1997) describes the web as operating at its best when presenting constructivist types of learning (such as AGL/SGL). This focus on the student and interactivity is located in the lower quadrants of Figure 1. It is also reflected in Driscoll’s (2000) second and third stages. The second stage, “guiding the student in practice”, focuses on whether the student has understood the concepts presented. In the third stage – “practising by the student” – we see the new skills and knowledge put to use. The traditional realm of this part of the cycle is the tutorial and the laboratory. Here students have the opportunity to interact with staff and check their understandings of the concepts and principles presented.

For *Multimedia and Communications*, students were able to have access to face-to-face teaching for tutorials, labs, and lectures. The online nature of the content and assessment, however, meant that students needed to use many online learning skills. Figure 2 below demonstrates the adjustments students needed to make for this subject.

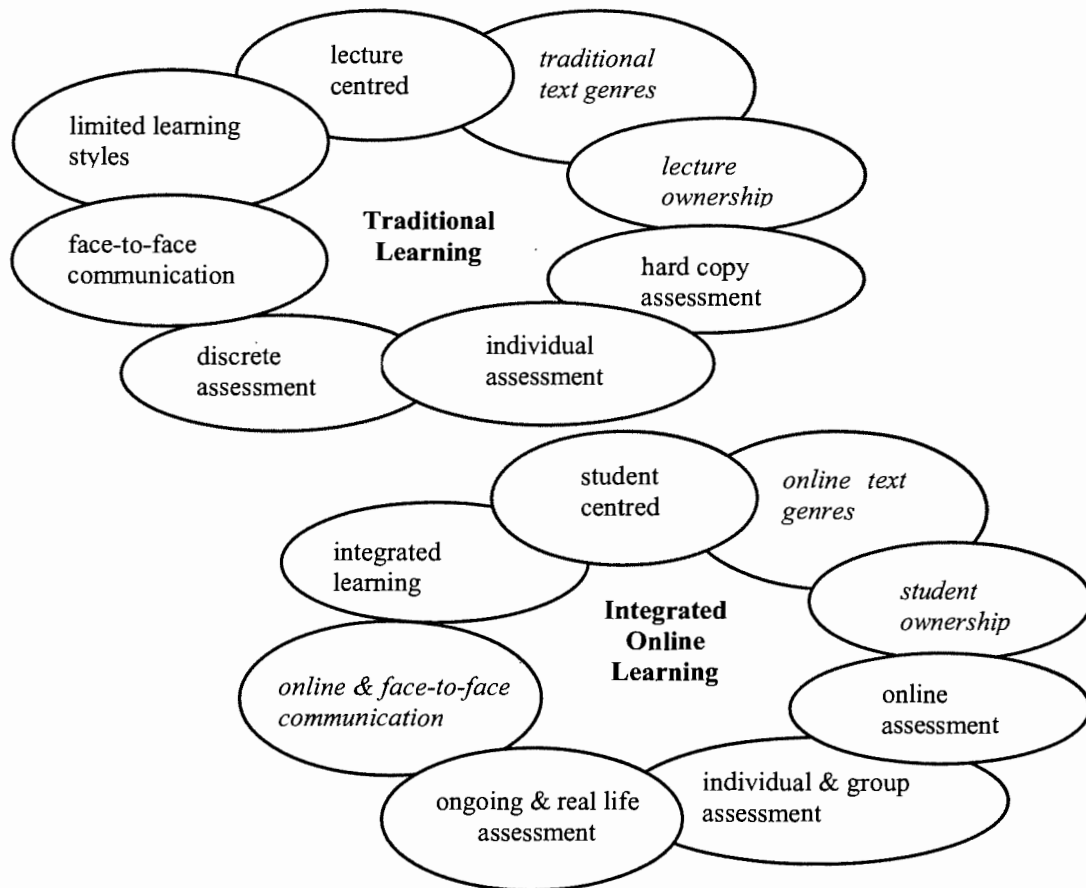


Figure 2. Traditional learning features versus integrated online learning for 615-280 subject.

While students require adaptation of skills for accessing online information (for example, reading online, learning to navigate a stand-alone set of materials), the interaction necessary for online learning seems to require a greater set of skills for both student and teacher (Robbins, 2000). Lack of awareness or instruction in these skills can hinder the success of the students' interactions in the course. Mason and Weller (2000, p. 174) highlight lack of skills training as a major issue for students that featured in the feedback from their online course. According to Rowntree, the key skills areas that students identify as requiring a "steep learning curve" for online learning include computing skills, literacy discussion skills, time management skills, and interactive skills (1995, p. 212-213). Amongst this list, there is a strong focus on self-management and information management (managing workload, setting priorities, and coping with the large volume of Web resources).

The other major area of student concern involves the interactivity aspect of online learning (issues of e-mail netiquette, correct ways of participating in online discussions, and working successfully in groups using online skills). In particular, this raises the issue of electronic communication which has greatly changed the way people interact, in terms of writing style, immediacy of response and accessibility of communicators. The aim of the *Multimedia and Communications* subject was to enhance students' team collaboration skills, technical skills and metacognitive skills. Consequently, students needed to use, adapt, or learn a variety of skills. These are addressed in the following three broad sections of technical, self-management and communication skills.

### *Technical Skills*

A major aspect of online learning involves developing strategies to work with and learn new technologies (Rowntree, 1995). While most of the students enrolled in *Multimedia and Communications* brought at least basic computer skills with them, there were many technical learning challenges along the way. One of the biggest issues for students was working across computer platforms. Most students were more familiar with a PC environment; however, they were now working in a Macintosh environment. Many students found this initially frustrating, especially when work done on a PC at home would not easily transfer in the Macintosh environment and had to be redone. Like most new technology skills, this was initially time consuming – but students had a positive long-term approach to the diversity of skills they were developing, and were frequently keen to enhance their technical knowledge.

In fact, technical skills training is more frequently sought by students in University courses with an eye to broader employment options upon graduation (Mason and Weller, 2000, p. 177). For some students, the motivation for taking *Multimedia and Communications* was primarily to learn or further enhance technical skills. These students would comment that they did not see the need for seminars and lectures, and they wanted to focus mainly on learning technical skills (or if they knew them, assumed they could breeze through the subject). However, the subject aimed to show that beyond technical skills, effective communication was most important to address the needs of clients and to work in a team. Being an excellent solo web designer was fine, but being aware of user testing techniques is an important process of good design. Frequently, this can be done very successfully using low technology methods at the drawing table with such simple tools as butcher's paper, textas, and post-it™ notes (Muller, 1993). Furthermore, through encouraging diverse user feedback, students themselves were becoming evaluators for their peers. This not only enhanced their teamwork skills, but also gave students a chance to further develop their online skills in web site critiques.

### *Self-Management Skills*

The issue of efficient time management appears frequently when dealing with online learning. While asynchronous communication appears time efficient in that participants both send and receive their communication at a time that suits them, it raises a number of time management issues that can leave both students and teachers feeling “overwhelmed” (Mason and Weller, 2000, p. 181). On the one hand, asynchronous communication allows lecturers to deal with all student enquiries in a single session, and allows students the convenience of asking questions when the need arises. However, students have more time to reflect on (and worry about) the issues being presented (Rowntree, 1995, p. 208). In terms of staff contact, this can lead to several emails on trivial issues, which are followed up by further e-mails when the initial ones are not answered promptly. This seemingly unlimited access to teaching staff leads to stronger demands on teacher time than traditional learning (Mason, 1999). It is vital that rules are developed and made clear to students in terms of acceptable e-mail use. Staff also need to use technology to their advantage through the use of stationery templates available on most e-mail programs.

Another area that contributes to this ‘overwhelmed’ feeling surfaces when undertaking online research. We observed that students were often overwhelmed with the quantity of resources available to them, and were tempted to include everything rather than be selective. Ryan (1998, p. 17) likewise notes that students are “often unskilled in assessing the work of their [online] searches”. A prerequisite for coping with online research is not only a good understanding of effective searching techniques and key word selection, but also the ability to critically assess online material (Tillman, 1999). While it was assumed students enrolled in *Multimedia and Communications* had online research skills, it was still necessary to encourage them to use credible library information gateways, and most importantly, adopt the correct referencing of online resources. To further enhance critical thinking skills with regard to online material, we suggest providing students with exemplary web sites. In this way, students will benefit from the identification of best practice in science communication and by

presenting a deconstruction of these sites, we can model a critical evaluation approach to online resources.

The blurring of learning and non-learning times also means that participants are more likely to be considering material away from the computer as well as when at it (Rowntree, 1995, p. 209). In particular, asynchronous communication allows students as much time as they wish to compose a message before sending it (although the fear of someone else providing an answer sooner, can compound the 'being overwhelmed' feelings described above). While this intensiveness is beneficial for improving students' literacy skills (Bellman, 1992, p. 61), online learning can be invasive when there are no fixed study times, and easy to ascribe a lower priority to amongst the many demands of the day. Add to this the continuous nature of the assessment in *Multimedia and Communications*, and the challenge of efficient time management becomes even more difficult. To help students manage their workload, we provided them with a detailed assessment schedule, continual reminders of deadlines, and encouraged them to produce Gantt charts (Eunson, 1994, p. 89 and Sides, 1991, pp. 108-109) to efficiently manage their projects.

Finally, an important and often time consuming aspect of *Multimedia and Communications* for students was the amount of teamwork they needed to complete. A major time management issue confronting groups included the difficulty of finding a common meeting time. Juggling six schedules of group members often resulted in the seminar time being the only time everyone was available for face-to-face interaction. To overcome the problem of meeting in real-time, many groups opted to conduct their additional meetings online. This, together with the problem of differing individual contributions to group work, made keeping accurate records an important priority. To assist in accurate logging of the projects, students were provided with templates for team roles and meeting templates, such as agendas, minute-taking forms, and chairing and action plans. In some instances, the presentation of these time management tools formed part of the course assessment. Use was also made of the security offered by the university server to allow students to keep password-protected individual online diaries of the time spent on tasks for their group project. These were viewed randomly by staff, or used if any disputes arose.

### *Communication Skills*

In terms of communicating within the social world of online learning, there are cultural rules and norms (referred to as netiquette) which students need to learn in order to successfully communicate online (Shea, 1994). For example, in replying to e-mails, it is customary to edit the original e-mail text so only the material being replied to is included. This practice clearly aims at reducing the e-mail overload discussed above. In terms of netiquette, students in *Multimedia and Communications* were most frequently guilty of not identifying themselves adequately through their e-mails. It was common for students to use an external e-mail account, with unidentifiable nicknames; this created confusion in sending replies, as some were sent back to the external account (which students often forgot they had used to submit work) and others to the official university student account.

The lack of non-verbal cues in online writing also makes it easy to misinterpret the tone of the message. As a result, a culture of discourse features such as upper case representing shouting, and punctuation and acronyms to express emotions (emoticons like the smiley face :-)) and ROTFL – rolling on the floor laughing) have arisen. Robbins (2000, p. 149) discusses the inadequacies of online communication in providing emotional support for students. We found that the anonymity of e-mail interactions meant that occasionally students' enthusiasm, anxieties and concerns may have been lost or overly ascribed in the e-mail communication. To counter this it is necessary to not only balance e-mail communication with face-to-face interaction (preferably using the latter first to really get to know the students), but to encourage students to better develop their online writing style.

As well as learning the techniques and netiquette of the e-mail genre of writing, students who compose for the web need to develop a style of online writing which is more informal,

## *Sources of Confusion*

succinct, and scannable. Table 1 below summarises some essential differences between hard and soft copy writing genres. The need for a different approach for online writing stems from research on how users read online. According to researchers on web usability (Morkes and Nielsen 1997; Spool, Scanlan, Schroeder, Snyder & De Angelo, 1999), readers scan web pages; that is they pick out key words rather than scroll through and read the entire text. By raising students' awareness of these online reading patterns, they learn that the job of an online writer is not to produce words, but to communicate ideas through optimal organisation of the information. This also includes increasing the perceived credibility and objectivity of their web sites through good writing, high quality graphics, excellent outbound hypertext links and avoiding 'marketese' or overly promotional language (Nielsen, 1997).

<b>Writing for an essay</b>	<b>Writing an essay on the web</b>	<b>Writing for the web</b>
Paper technology	Screen technology	Screen technology
Primacy of words	Primacy of words...illustrated with media	Media as valuable as words
Foundation first Main message last "pyramid"	Foundation first Main message last "pyramid"	Main message first Foundation last "inverted pyramid"
Linear narrative	Linear narrative with links to references etc	Chunked and linked: the web is a linking medium
Long	Scrolling	Screen by screen
Non-linked pyramid on paper	Linked pyramids in cyber space	Linked inverted pyramids floating in cyberspace
Index	Links and search	Links and search
Monochrome text	Colours for links	Colours for links

Table 1. *Writing Genre Comparisons (taken from Pearce, 2000).*

Lester (1998) highlights the value of reflection in promoting student-centred learning. We believe exposing students to Web site deconstruction promotes reflection on what constitutes good and bad web writing, and allows students to see how to manipulate their own Web writing. In *Multimedia and Communications*, this task was encouraged by getting students to reflect on their own Web writing and design for readability, by writing a summary explaining how they had adapted their writing for the online environment. This worked particularly well for many students as they gained invaluable insights into online writing techniques.

Finally, because of the nature of hypertext, structure and navigation are important issues in online writing. It is vital to have precisely labelled, well-tested navigation with non-ambiguous links for users to follow (Spool et al. , 1999). Interestingly, in designing their web sites, students had to consider how to impart information and think of the range of ways to present information. Students came to realise that there were infinite ways of designing, but that their designs needed to consider issues of learning style and accessibility. Students were reminded of their legal obligations to provide universal access to web pages (for example, by using the Web site *Bobby* (CAST), which is based on the World Wide Web (W3) Consortium's *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines*). This represented a generally new and interesting area for students, as they would have rarely considered this issue as part of producing hard copy assignments. This is an imperative aspect that must be considered for all facets of inclusive Web design to allow universal access for people with disabilities (O'Conner, 2000).

Overall, students enrolled in *Multimedia and Communications* gained valuable metacognitive skills in terms of student learning needs as described by Laurillard (1987). These ranged from information management skills to developing and analysing information by linking theory to practice, collaborative skills, practising the articulation of ideas, developing teamwork and

learning about professional (online) practices. Many of these skills apply to traditional learning, and developing them in traditional media will help students to more readily adapt their skills to an online environment. Broadening our range of learning skills assistance to include an online learning environment is essential in developing students' life-long learning skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **How is online assessment different?**

Laurillard (1993) discusses how interactions between students and teacher, especially through feedback, are an important part of the learning process. Some key features that distinguish online assessment from traditional assessment are reflected in the different medium used to present the piece of work (for example, creating a Web document rather than an essay) and to deliver the feedback to the student (usually by a separate e-mail). The latter contributes just as much to a difference in online assessment. Markers are forced by the tyranny of the blank page (or e-mail screen) to produce coherent and complete feedback for the students. While writing separate documents for each student can be more time consuming than annotating a hard copy of the students' work, again, the use of templates or the stationery feature of e-mail programs can help to lighten this load, but still requires individualisation to be effective.

The final grade for *Multimedia and Communications* was divided into an individual assessment component worth 55%, and the team component worth 45%. The assessment in this subject addresses two areas: technical skill development and an appreciation of using the Internet to communicate scientific ideas. This raises several issues relating to balancing these two criteria, accounting for students' previous knowledge, objectivity in assessing creativeness and student perceptions of assessment tasks. We address these issues in this section.

### *What was being assessed?*

The assessment comprised several different types of tasks: weekly laboratory and seminar exercises; an individual research assignment, and a group web design project. All tasks were submitted as Web documents and were assessed on-line. This raises the question: "how does a student know what was actually assessed by the assessor?" With paper-based assessment it is quite clear—the student sees exactly what the assessor will see. But with Web documents there are the added vagaries of platform (usually two choices) and Web browser (usually two choices, plus several versions), as well as the uncertainties of plug-ins, memory space and processor speed. All these lead to a situation where students cannot be sure how their work will be viewed by a third person.

Instructions can be given to students to minimise these uncertainties (test on both platforms, use both common browsers, design for minimal configurations, test host environment, etc.) but in the end there must be an act of faith on the students' part that their work is viewed as intended. Even providing students with excellent facilities in a lab of Macintosh computers, and a warning that their work will be assessed on a Macintosh using Netscape, does not deter many from working at home on a PC (running Internet Explorer) with the hope that 'all will be well on the day'! To overcome this problem, an important part of any Web design strategy is to emphasise to students that what they design for the Web and what others see of their designs on the Web are often very different.

A further issue in what we assess online is that students can readily plagiarise both content and format using the Web. When students are set tasks to develop multimedia software, it is often difficult to know whether students have developed the code themselves, or copied it from another Web site. While plagiarism has always been a possibility in traditional learning, growth in information resources makes it difficult to monitor the availability of 'answers' online. Here, it is our turn to trust students to view the learning process as equally valuable to the learning product. Avoidance of plagiarism can also be aided by setting tasks which draw on quality more than quantity.

### *Quantity vs quality*

As well as a range of assessment tasks, the nature of the tasks varied too. Some tasks, notably the lab-based ones, required students to satisfy several goals in a lab-style learning process (using skills in *QuickTime* and *Flash*). Students would often get full marks for completing these relatively minor tasks, reflecting that they had put in the effort to learn a new skill that would be rewarded in later assignments. However, other tasks required the application of their skills in a more considered and creative manner, for example, using the program *Flash* to produce exemplary use of sound and animation to communicate a scientific process. This corresponds to Lester's (1998) spectrum of assessment from the purely rigid ("copy the map exactly") to the more open forms of assessment ("produce a new map which is useful"). The former is considered appropriate when testing specific procedures that must be followed to achieve a successful outcome. However, the latter is more commonly associated with university learning as it requires interpretation and judgement.

For *Multimedia and Communications*, it was appropriate with rigid assessment to check off tasks that students had produced in the lab, resulting in many students receiving full marks. However, for the open forms of assessment a more subjective approach to their insights and skills was required. Full marks for this work would indicate absolute brilliance; a more typical average would be 65% to 70% for the set task. This mix of assessment type gave some students difficulties. Rather than taking responsibility for making decisions about *what* they should do within an assignment, many wanted to see a detailed marking scheme and 'tick off' that they had included required components in order to get full marks.

It is hard to determine whether this is an attitude developed by the nature of the work students were doing, or whether it is an increasing trait amongst students in general. Many of our students are full-fee paying and hence have an attitude of wanting to get as high a mark as possible in order to 'get their money's worth'. This desire for hard assessment may also be an attempt by some students to direct the course content towards a set of expertise they feel is easily attainable. By its very nature, Web development creates what Lester (1998) terms the 'expert paradigm' – a knowledge base that is built incrementally. This too might have a bearing on the problem described.

### *What was learnt vs what is known*

One of the unique difficulties in teaching about Web issues is that students come into our courses with more and more knowledge from earlier schooling, or just life in general. In addition, the range of skills and experiences is huge (see Ryan, 1998 for more on students' adeptness with and attitudes to technology). A course such as this one has the challenge of trying to hit a target which is not only moving year by year, but which is very diverse and scattered.

As befits an academic course, we try to achieve a balance between learning the necessary technical skills and showing intellectual insights into the problems at hand. Although many students can produce technically sophisticated Web pages, not many had experience with the underlying issues that become important in more serious Web design: user-centred methodologies, navigation, page layout, site structure, documentation, maintenance, and so forth. In many ways, these are the hard, yet less visible, aspects of Web design. Mason and Weller (2000) also found that focusing beyond the Web *per se* to the implications it has in society forms an important academic focus for any web-related subject. The challenge in assessing students here is to evaluate the development of the student, rather than just the technical level that they achieve. The latter is important, but should not become the focus of the assessment.

### *Subjectivity of online assessment*

Finally, while all assessment carries some subjectivity where the marker devises the criteria, rather than the student (Lester, 1998), trying to assign a mark to something as creative as a

Web site can be challenging. The technical features that one might be looking for are far less obvious than the visible features of the pages themselves. There are no hard and fast rules; few rights and wrongs. Culture plays an important part too, especially in the graphical design features of a page. This raises the challenges of awarding assessment grades that reflect the goals of the course, yet also appear fair to students who might focus more on the surface features of their work.

### **Confusing Student Expectations**

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of this course was that students seemed confused about the “online” presence of the subject. Students had expected to be able to do the work in their own time and not at a face-to-face level. However, this was a face-to-face subject with an online supported environment. Everything was put online because the subject was about online design and construction, but more importantly it was also about balancing the technical, collaborative and analytical skills that it aimed to develop in students. Some of the sources of confusion that arose related to the following areas.

#### *Different content assumptions*

Who decides content in IT based courses? Should we give students what they want in the courses? Students expected this subject to be about technical skills and learning sophisticated techniques. They were perhaps not expecting the level of collaborative and analytical focus that the subject had. Further, what makes the content of the subject suitable for second year university standard? Many students already knew about Web design and had their own pages. However, the difference was that at this level, the sophistication required by students was significantly higher than say a mere: “How to make Your Own Home Page” course. Students were expected to communicate and design Web sites well in terms of structure, page layout and so on. As a result, students were provided with some of the emerging theoretical approaches and frameworks that they needed to consider in designing Web sites.

An important feature of this subject was that it was student-centred and learning-centred. Students found it surprising that they were providing peer review of Web sites to their classmates. Here students learnt valuable skills in terms of providing constructive feedback and reacting to others’ ideas and works. They were developing analytical and self-reflective skills at a metacognitive level. This provided many students with a sense of empowerment and innovation.

#### *The Practicalities of teaching and learning online*

One of the major sources of confusion was that students were often uncertain about whether to rely on the subject Web site or their course manual. So where would they go for the latest and most up-to-date information about the subject? The subject Web site was more up-to-date and had the latest announcements and changes listed on it. This became problematic if students relied on their course manual solely.

Another issue that arose was the role of lectures, seminars and lab workshops. What was the lecturer’s role given that all the lectures were available online? This provided the biggest tension; given that lectures were available online, actual attendance fluctuated. The face-to-face contact provided enrichment which was value-added as there were greater opportunities for spontaneous discussion and questions in real time interactivity. The lecturer provided the human interface for imparting information, and also modelled delivery using Web-based browsers. There was a tension between what to include in the online material versus lectures so that students would still have reasons to attend lectures. The recommendation is that only minimal lecture detail be provided online (rather than the complete lecture notes) to entice students to experience the interactions in lectures.

The seminars provided the space for group formations and interactions and for clarification of issues. Seminars dealt with not only elements of the course content, but more importantly with

## *Sources of Confusion*

group dynamic issues and project management, as well as providing 'the glue' to keep students on task and facilitate and support the group interactions. The seminars were compulsory and facilitated team interactions and peer review processes. For some students, the seminar work was seen as unnecessary as they believed they could just meet their team members in their own times. However, the seminars provided a safety net and a focal point to bring teams together and allow students to have a campus-based experience. The recommendation is to insist that seminars remain a compulsory part of the course as they provide the appropriate environment for controlled and structured social interaction and peer review. In contrast, the lab sessions provided students with the technical skills and were less team focussed as they involved completion of individual tasks.

### *Stress of working online continuously*

A major unexpected issue that arose for both staff and students included the stress of teaching and learning online. For the lecturer, it meant that the subject web site had to be updated on a weekly basis. Seminar leaders also had to remain updated and check the site regularly. In addition, having students submit material electronically increased the volume of e-mails. This also meant that staff had to access web browsers constantly for marking purposes and hence the level of office computer technology available was crucial. In some cases, working with slower machines was extremely frustrating as this increased the time required to view web sites, and even monitor screen sizes were problematic if they were not at least 17 inches.

For students, the stress of finding available computers was a significant issue. The labs were heavily booked and students had to compete to obtain a computer. Students were sometimes unable to work at home because they did not have the appropriate software. For many students working in the labs for hours was a normal part of their day with hardly any breaks, and some even doing overnight stays in the lab to complete work. This also had significant impact for staff and students in terms of eye fatigue, muscle strain and lack of breaks. When teaching any subject with a strong Web focus, regular breaks become paramount, as does attention to ergonomic issues and lighting. Overall, there were some significant changes in work habits.

Another crucial challenge that arose was the need for appropriate teaching environments for new information and communication technologies subjects to be taught in appropriately designed face-to-face physical settings. This is becoming a significant issue in the design of new spaces for teaching the new communication technologies (Jamieson et al., 2000).

### *Accessibility and technical expertise of staff*

It was interesting that students assumed that staff would be available seven days a week. The response to most e-mail queries occurred within 24 hours, if not shortly after the e-mail arrival. Difficulty in finding staff to keep up with the technology for the workshops was also an issue.

## **Conclusion - From Confusion to Meta-fusion**

It is interesting that out of the initial confusion that arose for students in technical, self-management and communication skills, the subject was of immense value in enhancing students' metacognitive insights. Students commented that it was one of the best subjects that they had done and that they had learnt so much because it replicated 'real-life' work scenarios. Even the varying types of assessment encouraged students to distinguish between the subjective aesthetics of

Web design and the higher learning objectives of critical web analysis and design. Out of this confusion, students were able to develop not only the skills we set out to teach, but also the ability to learn about learning— a valuable skill in a rapidly changing technological world. One of the most valuable aspects was that staff and students were collectively on a learning journey, a journey made easier by the enthusiasm of students who assisted in maintaining staff motivation when workload seemed overwhelming.

## Sources of Confusion

Our role as Learning Skills Advisers is to encourage students to develop information management and self-management skills. We need to empower students for collaborative work, integrate professional skills, analyse online writing genres and communication, and empower students to evaluate Web sites critically. In conclusion, it is imperative for Academic Skills Advisers to build and embrace the challenges of online learning issues to aid in students' transition towards this new online culture. Learning to learn in an information rich world requires development of a range of complex and multi-layered life-long learning skills. For students to be ready for learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, staff need to be ready too. It is from the chaos and confusion of integrating face-to-face learning with online learning that a metafusion of skills can occur.

### References

- Bellman, B. L. (1992). Computer communications and learning. In Albright, M. J. & Graf, D. L. (eds.). *Teaching in the information age: The role of educational technology* (pp.55-63). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST). *Bobby*. Retrieved November 19, 2000, from the WWW: <http://www.cast.org/bobby/>
- Driscoll, M. (2000). Ten things we know about teaching online. *Teaching online: Technology for Teaching Newsletter*. Vol (1), 4-5 Lakewood Publications.
- Eunson, B. (1994). *Writing and Presenting Reports*. Brisbane: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hall, R (June 20, 2000). *Web-based tutorial post-work* [handout]. Ausweb2K Roadshow Melbourne Symposium. University of Melbourne: Biomedical Multimedia Unit.
- James, R. (Apr, 2000). *Status report on the impact on teaching and learning of Multimedia and Educational Technology development grants*. (Report prepared for the Teaching and Learning Multimedia and Educational Technology Committee). Retrieved November 17, 2000, from WWW: <http://talmet.unimelb.edu.au/ImpactReview/>
- Jamieson, p., Fisher, K., Gilding, T. Taylor, P. G., Trevitt, A. C. F. (2000). Place and space in the design of new learning environments. *HERD*, 19, (2), July.
- Laurillard, D. (ed.) (1987). *Interactive media: Working methods and practical applications*. Chichester, West Sussex: Ellis Horwood.
- Laurillard, D. (1993). *Rethinking university teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Lester, S. (1998). *Assessment v self-directed learning: a way forward?* Conference held by Standard and the Assessment of Capability on Jun 10 . Retrieved November 17, 2000 from the WWW: <http://www.devmts.demon.co.uk/assvsdl.htm>
- Mason, R. (1999). *IET's Masters in open and distance education: what have we learned*. Retrieved July 14, 2000 from the WWW: <http://iet.open.ac.uk/pp/r.d.mason/MAEval.PDF>
- Mason, R. & Weller, M. (2000). Factors affecting students' satisfaction on a web course. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 16 (2), 173-200.
- McNaught, C. (2000). Flexibility: Focus, fears and fantasy. Keynote paper. In Crosling, G., Moore, T. & Vance, S. (eds.), *Language and learning: The learning dimensions of our work* (pp. 105-112). Melbourne: CeLTS, Monash University.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Morkes, J & Nielsen, K. (1997.) *Concise, SCANNABLE, and objective: How to write for the Web*. Retrieved November 4, 2000, from the WWW: <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>
- Muller, M. (1993). PICTIVE: Democratising the dynamics of the design session. In Schuler D. & Namioka A.(eds.). *Participatory design: Principles and practice* (pp. 210-237). NJ: Laurence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nielsen, J. (1997). *Why web users scan instead of read*. Retrieved November 4, 2000 from the WWW: <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/whyscanning.html>
- O'Conner, B (Nov, 2000). *E-learning and students with disabilities: From outer edge to leading edge*. Keynote paper presented to the NET\*Working 2000 online conference, an initiative within the Framework for National Collaboration in Flexible Learning in VET 2000-2004. Retrieved November 21, 2000, from the WWW: <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/nw2000/keynotes.htm>
- Pearce, J. (2000). *Writing for the web* [lecture notes]. Retrieved March 4, 2000 from the WWW: <http://webraft.its.unimelb.edu.au/615280/pub/presentations/pres2000/w4p2/w4p2.html>
- Perez, A. (forthcoming). Evaluating web-based learning skills support: effective learning tool or distraction. In Webb, J & McLean, P. (eds.). *Academic skills advising: Evaluating for program improvement and accountability*. (forthcoming).
- Pham, B. (1998). Quality evaluation of educational multimedia systems. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 14(2), 107-121.
- Robbins, J. (2000). Electronic delivery of academic skills: Feasible or feckless? In Crosling, G., Moore, T. & Vance, S. (eds.), *Language and learning: The learning dimensions of our work* (pp.145-153). Melbourne: CeLTS, Monash University.
- Rowntree, D. (1995). Teaching and learning online: A correspondence education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 26, (3), 205-215.
- Ryan, Y. (1998). Time and tide: Teaching and learning online. *Australian Universities Review* 41, (1), 14-19.
- Sides, C. H. (1991). *How to write and present technical information*. Phoenix, Arizona: The Oryx Press.
- Snyder, I. (1996). *Hypertext: The electronic labyrinth*. Victoria: Melbourne University Press.
- Shea, V. (1994). *Netiquette*. Retrieved December 20, 1999 from the WWW: <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerule.html>
- Spool, J. M., Scanlon, T., Schroeder, W., Snyder, C., & DeAngelo, T. (1999). *Web site usability: A designer's guide*. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.
- Starr, F. (Januray 5, 1997). Learning theory and use of the WWW resources. Retrieved November 20, 2000 from the WWW: <http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~fstarr/learn.htm>
- Tillman, H. N. (November 16, 1998). *Evaluating quality on the net*. Internet Resources for Education Course 1514F: University of Toronto. Retrieved December 2, 1999 from the WWW: <http://www.tiac.net/users/hope/findqual.html>

## *Sources of Confusion*

W3Consortium. *Web accessibility guidelines*. Retrieved November 20, 2000, from the WWW:  
<http://www.w3.org/TR/1999/WAI-WEBCONTENT-19990505/#Guidelines>

W3 Consortium. *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines*. Retrieved November 20, 2000, from  
the WWW: <http://www.w3.org/WAI/GL/>

**“I’VE READ HIS COMMENTS BUT I DON’T KNOW HOW TO DO”:  
INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF  
WRITTEN SUPERVISOR FEEDBACK**

Mary Lou Ridsdale  
Swinburne University of Technology

*All academics accept that guiding and deepening student knowledge and thinking within their disciplines is part of their responsibility, but guiding and shaping the writing skills needed to display this intellectual development is seen by some academics as outside their territory. This is especially true when the students are from a non-English-speaking background. The comments written on student assignments vary widely in what they address and what actions they seem to imply student should take. Comments and other interventions may address issues of content and/or form, and are therefore an interesting mixture of correction, suggestion, instruction, agreement, encouragement, criticism, warning, exasperation, modelling and provocation to further thought, among other things!*

*This paper reports on a small, exploratory research project to uncover some international postgraduate students’ perceptions of the comments written on their thesis drafts. The purpose was to give students a voice about what they think and feel about written feedback as part of their learning how to write at postgraduate level. The literature of the field and my own observations from within the context of supporting postgraduate students in their writing have led me to make some connections between the written feedback they receive and issues clustered around cross-cultural interactions, English language and what I call “demarcation disputes”. The comments received by my informants often disappointed them and they did not always know how to respond, well-intentioned though the comments may have been. Our challenge, therefore, is to reduce confusion and maximise the potential benefits from written feedback*

**Introduction**

There are two statements I often hear from international students; One of them is “It’s very hard for me” and the other is “I’m very confused”. This paper will consider one of the sources of their confusion – written feedback from their lecturers. Of course some local students are also confused by written feedback (Chanock, 2000), but international student confusion is compounded by language and cross-cultural issues, including lack of experience of written feedback. For both undergraduates and postgraduates, the elliptical nature of much written feedback is perplexing. The tone is hard for them to “read”, so they do not know how to respond, or whether to respond at all. As one student said to me: “I read his comments but don’t know how to do”. Sometimes the type of guidance they are expecting is not given, and sometimes they interpret the guidance as criticism, not help. Sometimes they just cannot read the handwriting!

Firstly I want to make some connections between written feedback and three clusters of issues relating to cross-cultural matters, English language, and what I term “demarcation disputes”. Then I will discuss a small-scale, exploratory research project involving three international postgraduate students, which was informed by thinking about these issues.

### **Cross-cultural issues**

Not everyone has been raised on a feedback diet of exclamation marks in the margin, questions like “Sooo...?” and “Significance?” or remarks like “This reference is 25 years old!” ESB students might be able to guess the benign intention of the writer of the feedback (for surely he or she is trying to help the student), or they might “read” the tone here as ironic, and therefore know what to do about using that particular reference. But I suspect many NESB students, for a range of reasons, can make little sense of the feedback and therefore little use. Many of our international students have not had much experience writing extended discourse, (Ballard and Clanchy, 1996, p. 46) especially in English, and usually the only feedback they received was in the form of a grade or numerical mark. Education in some of their home countries may have led them to see the teacher as the authority who gives information and then tests whether it has been learned. Those students may not appreciate that the remarks indicating something is “wrong” are actually intended to provoke further thought and independence, and that sometimes tutors write purely personal interactions like “Couldn’t agree more!”

Another vexed cross-cultural issue affecting student writing and occasioning lots of feedback is referencing – both the notion of it and the conventions. Short or extended remarks about referencing and citation are among the most common forms of written feedback I see on student writing. Drawing a student’s attention to this feature of academic writing, however, does not always trigger some previous mastery of the mechanics of it, and certainly not an understanding of what lies behind the convention, including reader expectations about the critical use of sources. Mismatches of cultural understandings affect much more than the giving and interpretation of written feedback, however, as has been shown by Ballard & Clanchy, (1988; 1991, pp. 73-78), Nowak, Weiland and Brown, (1997) and Beasley & Knowles (1994, p. 299), among others. Cargill (1994) emphasises the difficulties of giving and receiving helpful oral feedback in cross-cultural situations and Kaplan (1966) and Purves (1998) draw attention to contrasts between the rhetorical features and patterns of different languages.

### **Language issues**

Firstly let us consider the language used by students. What the feedback writer identifies as awkwardly phrased or redundant or grammatically incorrect language may well be the very best the student can produce, so putting a wavy line and writing “Expression!” or “Use your own words” or “Rephrase!” does not help the student writer. Some feedback writers do the rephrasing or re-expressing for the students by making myriad discrete point corrections, inserting and deleting articles, changing tenses and prepositions and pronouns, and rearranging clauses and phrases. Whether they think such corrections help the student to write better next time, or whether they cannot help themselves, I do not know, but students will certainly key in those changes if they are written on a draft or there is an opportunity to resubmit. Research from the language teaching perspective is unclear about whether such feedback or correction has much long-term effect in improving writing skills, and suggests that many students would prefer feedback on their content and ideas (Zamel, 1990; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Kepner, 1991).

The alternative of reformulating rather than correcting the student’s text has several inherent problems. In some cases it takes a very long time because the student’s composition is so tortured. Few markers have the time or patience to untangle all the different things the student might have been trying to say. Reformulation is certainly a viable and legitimate tool in an EAP or ESP context. It gives models to students whose focus is learning to write, both at the grammar and the discourse levels. But in the academic subject context, the students’ focus is on subject content and the concepts of the discipline; lengthy reformulations may not be seen by them as anything other than the provision of appropriate text to be keyed in. This causes the problem of just whose writing is going to be assessed. Meaning may well have been imposed where there had been little understanding from the student. On the other hand, the original composition of much international student writing may be masking a sophisticated

## *Sources of Confusion*

understanding of subject matter and higher cognitive skill than is apparent from the surface of the text, which might show only a very modest control of formal academic English.

When international or other NESB writers try to emulate the sophisticated tone present in almost everything they read for their courses, they often rely very heavily on their sources, and come up with amazing passages of cut and pasted perfection interspersed with ghastly grammatical imperfections. Academics may comment on this with words like “Plagiarism” or “Source?” or “This must be referenced”. This type of feedback is in some ways the least confusing, in that perhaps students at least know they have to include some bracketed information about sources, although the notion of positioning oneself in relation to these sources may be a mystery (Campbell, 1990).

Then there is the language used by feedback writers. It is often highly elliptical, and I suggest, unintelligible to many international students. Examples of this are “Balance?” “In relation to what?” “Do you really do this?” “Clearer explanation needed”. Of course the words would have been written in the belief that the student would read his/her own text in conjunction with the feedback, and think through the implied connections. Unfortunately many students do not really do this, because such remarks are usually written on final drafts and the content and ideas are finished with, because that assignment is finished, so they do not think it is worth the time and effort to go back over their writing in relation to the feedback.

### **Demarcation issues**

The different types of written feedback raise questions about whether we can draw a line between form and content in academic writing (see Pennycook, 1994). I believe we cannot, but in the case of NESB writers developing their skills as they progress through a university course, we have to be realistic. Many academics see their prime responsibility as being the teaching of discipline content and concepts, not the form of the writing which reveals understanding and manipulation of them. Unfortunately, perhaps, for some NESB students, most academic assessment involves their writing in English. English language writing teachers who prepare students for entry into university courses are seen to be responsible for teaching general writing skills at both sentence and discourse levels, but not within particular disciplines. When international students do not conform to the conventions of academic writing as required by subject specialists, they suggest students seek help from a LAS Adviser. This third party sits somewhere between the faculty-based academic and the writing teacher, often regarded by the former as “just concerned with the language”, yet somehow supposed to “fix it up”, which usually involves understanding discipline-specific genres.

Whose responsibility is it to develop the writing skills necessary to display the intellectual skills and content knowledge required of a student at a particular level of academic study? All academics, I am sure, accept that guiding and deepening student knowledge and thinking within their disciplines is part of their responsibility, but many seem to feel what they often call “getting their English up to scratch” is outside their territory, especially when students are from a NESB. As a result, a very common piece of written feedback is “Go and get some help with your English”, despite the fact that it’s “not just a matter of English” (Ginsberg, 1992). As mentioned earlier, if academics themselves decide to “help” the students by painstaking correction and re-writing, where is the line to be drawn between student writing (and therefore thinking) and the supervisor’s writing (see Hall, 1995) as drafts and feedback/correction pass back and forth between the two, as they do in thesis writing?

### **My research**

Thus far I have been speaking in general terms about international student writing, but my recent research involved only postgraduate writing for the thesis. That situation interests me because students write successive drafts, shaping their text towards a final version. The written feedback they receive is intended to be formative. This is not always the case with undergraduate and TAFE assignments, or even with postgraduate coursework assignments where the comments tend to be summative. When students write an assignment for

assessment, it is returned and they tend to look first at the mark/grade they receive. If there is any written feedback, they may or may not give it much attention, especially if the mark is disappointing (MacDonald, 1991), despite the fact that the writer of this summative feedback probably thought it would help the student to write better in the future. The next piece of writing, however, will be on a different topic and may well be in a different discipline and different text-type within that discipline, so the feedback may fail as a pedagogical tool. In the case of participants in my study, the next piece of writing was a new version of the piece the supervisor had responded to. Allowing them to express their perceptions of feedback, I believed, might give some insights into how we need to change, if indeed we do, in order to be better teachers.

### **Literature**

Various issues are raised in the literature of written feedback and NESB writing which is surveyed comprehensively by Storch and Tapper (1997) and Hyland (1998). Many of these studies relate to pre-university language teaching per se, and College Composition courses in the US, not the mainstream academic disciplines. A key issue is whether written feedback actually improves student writing, or whether (when students have the opportunity to submit multiple drafts, as in thesis writing) it encourages dependency (Reid, cited in Storch & Tapper, 1997, p. 246). Researchers have also looked at various factors which impinge on the effectiveness of feedback, for example student attitudes to, and “readiness” to benefit from, feedback, as well as the nature and timing of the feedback.

Some key research by Radecki and Swales (1988) led to the creation of a typology of behaviours that characterise student responses to feedback: receptors, semi-resistors and resistors. They reported NESB university student writers in USA as regarding writing teachers’ comments as less important than the comments on ideas and organisation that they so valued from the experts in their subject areas. One wonders whether Australian university lecturers and supervisors, more than a decade later, are giving the sort of feedback students would seem to receive, semi-resist or resist. However students value feedback, it seems, in Hyslop’s words, “that true growth...is a slow, seldom linear process” (1990, p. 2). The sad thing is, postgraduate students often do not have the time to develop their writing because many Master and even Doctoral programs for international students are telescoped into the shortest possible time. Perhaps if feedback writers responded with “fewer judgements and directives and more questions and suggestions” (Grant-Davie & Schapiro, cited in Hyslop 1990, p. 4), students would be better able to “receive” and respond.

Whilst not ignoring the research mentioned above, the findings are not directly relevant to international postgraduate students in Australia who are receiving written feedback on extended discourse belonging to the genre of the thesis from discipline specialists. Australian researchers such as Comber (1983), Moses (1985; 1994), Ballard (1995), Ballard and Clanchy (1988; 1991), Felix & Lawson (1994), Cargill (1994), Aspland and O’Donoghue (1994), Beasley and Knowles (1994), Craswell (1994), Keech (1996), Cadman (1997), Cahill (1997), Fullarton (1997), Paltridge (1997), Flavell (1998), Kiley and Mullins (1998), and Qinglin, (1999), among others, have contributed greatly to our understanding of postgraduate international students. The particular cohort of such students studying for a master degree by coursework, particularly in the business field, however, has not received much attention. Although considered as a minor thesis, their writing, which attracts supervisor-written feedback as drafts progress towards the final version, requires what is arguably the most demanding form of academic writing.

One relevant study from the USA by Yu Ren Dong (1998) included a quantitative study of the perceptions of assistance in the thesis writing process by 25 paired graduate science students and their respective supervisors. The one thing that both groups agreed on was that the major focus of written feedback had been word use and grammar mechanics, although even in those categories, supervisors believed they had given more assistance than did their students. Supervisors uniformly perceived themselves as having given more assistance in a wide range of areas such as citations, paragraph organising, idea developing, logical presentation and the

drawing of conclusions than did their students. Would research here reveal similar findings? And how do students feel about the feedback? What messages does it give them?

### **Methodology**

There were four questions guiding my research into international postgraduate student perceptions of written feedback from their supervisors. The first two were related to their previous experience of written feedback and their expectations in relation to their supervisors and the other two were about their experience of and response to supervisor feedback. Participants were interviewed, having been given several questions to think about for a couple of days. The interview data were transcribed and subjected to a modified phenomenological analysis using two models - Hycner's (cited in Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 292) and Douglass & Moustakas' (cited in Patton, 1994, p. 407). Participants had previously given me all extant drafts of their theses, some drafts having been thrown out or lost. Thus I could examine the supervisors' marks and comments in relation to the text to which they referred, so that in the interviews I was able to ask the participants about their reactions to specific instances of feedback.

Although student perceptions were my focus, I had my own perceptions of the feedback. I needed to look at it *in situ* - in the margins, inserted in the text and at the end of the writing - to see, for example, whether there really was more feedback about grammar than anything else. Looking at it, inevitably, I had to make some judgements. Prior to the interviews, therefore, I extracted, coded and recoded all feedback on the students' writing, representing in one case, six versions of some chapters. The changes in my categories reflect the fact that on different readings I interpreted the same feedback differently -sometimes as interested comment, sometimes as blatant instruction. Zamel (1985) found, (in another context, admittedly), that feedback is often vague, cryptic and inconsistent, and so some of it seemed to me. Nevertheless I devised numerous categories based on my perceptions of supervisor intentions. They included categories such as "requesting clarification of meaning", "suggesting comment to be included", "alerting students to macro-organisational aspects of the thesis" and "reminders about referencing", as well as "correction of surface grammar, punctuation or vocabulary".

Confidentiality and sensitivity were key issues that made it difficult to obtain participants willing to be involved in this qualitative research. Supervisors, understandably, were very sensitive about the possibility of being identified in forums such as this or in publication, and some students were uncomfortable about seeming critical. Initially they were concerned about jeopardising their results, so their theses were bound and submitted before the interviews. By then, however, many just wanted to put the whole experience behind them and go home or go travelling. Some students I approached said they never wanted to think again about how hard and emotionally draining the thesis writing process had been, especially when they never intended to write another academic document in English! I managed to gain consent from only three students and their supervisors. Students were interviewed and gave me all extant drafts of their theses. Supervisors agreed to have their feedback typed up and possibly included in some publication of mine, although I was an outsider to the relationship in which it was given.

### **Findings and Discussion**

I have called the participants Hiro (a Japanese male) Aimon and Pia (Thai females), to maintain confidentiality.

#### *Previous experience and its effect on expectations*

The dominant form of assessment of undergraduate writing for all three students had been examination, which involved no feedback other than a mark or grade. When there had been assignments, there had been no written feedback for two of the three students. All had studied here in ELICOS so they had had feedback from writing teachers before moving into their

## *Sources of Confusion*

Master level coursework. There, although they did not fail assignments, they were made aware of some shortcomings in their writing, but as they perceived it, not given much help. They therefore expected the supervisors of their research and writing for their theses would give a great deal of oral and written feedback in connection with both content and form.

All three were disappointed, although in different ways. Hiro wanted his supervisor to comment on his content, understanding and approach to his thesis topic. Instead he received mostly correction of his grammar and vocabulary, although he saw that aspect of his writing as his responsibility, so he had been seeking LAS advice since the very beginning of his course. Aimon's expectations were not met either, but she acknowledged that her supervisor "preferred to talk one-to-one", to give his feedback. For Aimon, however, these face-to-face meetings were very difficult, because she felt shy and inadequate, and could not really open up to her supervisor because she felt she had no relationship with him. She had not expected so many written comments (very terse and short) about referencing but they turned out to be the most frequent comments on her work, and she appreciated that, because using sources to support her own argument, and then citing those sources was something totally new for her. Pia expected her supervisor to help with "everything, yeah, everything" (meaning grammar, organisation and thinking systematically). She received by far the most written feedback, covering "everything", but she could not cope with it. It was "too much correction". She had been forced by circumstances to come for LAS advice, which she resented, referring to it as "a last resort". After seeking assistance from Australian and fellow Thai students, she conceded "they can't help at all. Eventually I have to come to see you!"

Lack of previous experience of feedback may not have been the only significant factor here, but the participants had had high expectations of their supervisors, and were disappointed. Perhaps that is part of the postgraduate experience for many students, but I do not think we can so lightly dismiss their difficulties.

### *Student Interpretation and Response*

Students received written feedback in very different amounts and of different types at different stages. Nearly 800 pages of drafts were examined. Many of them had no marks on them, some were covered in handwriting and various marks, and in some cases there were comments written on separate pieces of paper. Later drafts usually had fewer examples of feedback than earlier ones, but in some cases there were global comments rather than the localised supervisor interventions of earlier drafts. This may have been because until students had removed many of the surface errors, supervisors had been so distracted by them that they were unable to concentrate on the thinking behind the writing (see Zamel, 1985).

Each supervisor's comments were idiosyncratic (one in complete and very polite sentences, one in terse instructions and one mostly in the form of ticks). They were an interesting mixture of correction, suggestion, instruction, agreement, encouragement, criticism, warning, exasperation, modelling and provocation to further thought. Grant-Davie and Schapiro's football coach metaphor (cited in Leki, 1990:57) seemed particularly apt. It speaks of feedback-writers' feelings of both responsibility and helplessness, leading to "booing and cheering while pacing the margins of the student's paper, shouting encouragement and tactical advice". The informants reported, however, that they had had a real struggle to lift their game.

Reactions to feedback were very mixed except in one respect. All were completely pragmatic, believing that if they did not write as the supervisor indicated, they would fail. As a result they keyed in every discrete point correction and accepted supervisor reconstructions and reformulations of their sentences, even when they felt that what they meant had been misinterpreted. They were grateful for their supervisors' superior expertise and experience in Australia's academic and business culture, but disappointed that supervisors did not always seem interested in their ideas, which was the interpretation they gave to the fact that so much written feedback related to their vocabulary and grammar choices, referencing or lack of it. They sometimes did not know how to respond to particular feedback, so it was easier to delete those passages altogether rather than try to rework them, or incorporate the feedback.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Participants found it hard to express their negative feelings to me. Emotions were almost palpable during the interviews. Perhaps some quotes from the transcripts might illustrate this. Hiro was very serious and very guarded:

Nearly 90% of students were from Asian countries. Basically their attitude was to respect their supervisor's comments, but, er, it doesn't mean students agree or accept their supervisors' feelings (laugh). It's a matter of culture. So I just wonder if supervisors and students communicate well.

Pia said: "She is a good supervisor but every time I go to see her I just cross my fingers - not too much feedback". She also said: "Sometimes I did not believe her right...for me it just looked like she find fault...until I can't stand. I told her I want to change the supervisor." and later, about suggestions to supervisors:

I suggest they don't correct too much on the student work because this will discourage their student's morale to continue to write. And they feel that...they are afraid of her or afraid of him. Because every time when they write it look like that - wrong, wrong, wrong. Never be right. Yes I feel like this. And if too many corrections, feel frustrated, and, um, daunted. Yeah!

Aimon had had to rely on oral feedback, mostly, because that was her supervisor's preferred mode of supervision, but she said:

I don't think it's good when we only talk about work. I mean, like sometimes we have to take time to talk about something (else), especially international students. Make students feel more comfortable, otherwise they keep silent (laugh). They are not to speak out to their supervisors.

Confusion is not the main response in these comments; it is probably disappointment and frustration. But confusion there certainly was when we looked together at particular bits of feedback. All said they wished they had more time in face-to-face meetings to get explanations, but rarely pressed for them, because they did not feel comfortable (see Cargill, 1994) or felt their spoken English was inadequate, or there was so little time. Participants found much feedback too vague. "Be more succinct" they read, or "You need to be clearer here", or "Expression", or "Reword", or "This is not a rationale". One informant said: "I read his comments but I don't know how to do".

### *Suggestions about feedback*

Pia, who had been most upset by the thesis-writing process, had the least to say about what written feedback would have been helpful to her. She had been bowled over by the demands of postgraduate study, by the demands of a thesis and the responses of her supervisor to her efforts. Her writing skills were clearly inadequate for study at this level although she was a strong oral communicator, albeit unorthodox in relation to grammar. But she was no cut-and-paste merchant. She was really trying to compose her thesis. What confused her completely was that much of what she tried in terms of macro and micro organisation, as well as paragraph and sentence construction was deemed unacceptable, an opinion she derived from the enormously detailed and scrupulously polite feedback she received.

The other two students had suggestions about more detailed and specific comments, and fewer grammar corrections. Both wanted global comments at the ends of chapters, with dot points about strengths and weaknesses. Both also said that regular meetings for oral feedback were essential, so that incomprehension or misunderstandings could be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

My research was qualitative in nature, and therefore not yielding an easy summary, and it involved only three students. Certainly we must not generalise from the findings about their perceptions of written feedback, or assume that pure research students at the doctoral level, or students from all the different cultural and academic backgrounds of our current and future international student cohort would have similar perceptions. Nevertheless it seems to me that we cannot ignore what these students have said about this important aspect of their postgraduate experience in Australia.

Many issues have been raised in this paper, but not resolved. In connection with cross-cultural issues, these include the notion of feedback, previous experience of it, expectations of the amount of help to be given, and different conventions of referencing and rhetorical patterns. Related to language, there are issues of inadequate written language skills which often lead to plagiarism, the effect on language skills of formative and summative feedback, the elliptical nature of some supervisor written feedback and the giving of instruction without explanation. Among the "demarcation disputes" is the proper location of responsibility for the development of postgraduate writing skills and the ownership of text when supervisors make all the surface grammar corrections and virtually rewrite some sections. The emotional and psychological effect of some feedback, and confidentiality and sensitivity issues when discussing the giving and receiving of feedback have also been considered. Underlying all these is the fact that there is so little time for academic literacy skills to develop to the level which is currently expected at postgraduate level in Australia.

Written feedback, supplemented by oral feedback, has long been the major teaching tool used by academics to shape student writing and it seems to be here to stay. Spoken interactions between students and supervisors are not always satisfactory from the point of view of either party. This makes it doubly important that, with an increasing number of international postgraduate students doing master degrees involving the writing up of a supervised research project, we minimise confusion arising from it and maximise the written dialogue between student and supervisor. How feedback writers can best achieve this needs to be addressed.

My findings suggest some directions for future research and possible action. We need to look at the effect of cross-cultural training and other professional development for all supervisors of international students. Specific training in the writing of understandable, specific and constructive feedback (see Fergusson, 1996) needs to be further trialled. The effect of training students to interpret the various types of written feedback needs to be assessed. It is possible, also, that writing competence pre-requisites for beginning postgraduate students need to be enforced more rigorously. Higher writing competence might lead to fewer surface errors to distract supervisors from commenting on issues of macro-organisation and the approach to content.

Whether we listen to our international students or not, they will continue to say whatever they say to family, friends and colleagues from home, and that may not be good for Australian institutions in the long run. We need to listen, and if they say they are confused by some aspect of the teaching they receive, our challenge is to reduce their confusion and negative reaction and maximise the potential benefits of feedback by ensuring that those who write it are aware of the sorts of issues raised in this paper, and those who read it are taught to understand it.

**References**

- Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (1998). *Code of ethical practice in the provision of education to international students in Australian universities*. Retrieved July 26, 1999, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.avcc.edu.au:80/avcc/pubs/code.html>
- Aspland, T. & O'Donoghue, T. (1994). Quality in supervising overseas students? In O. Zuber-Skerrit. & Y. Ryan (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate education*, London: Kogan Page.
- Ballard, B. (1987). Academic adjustment: The other side of the export dollar. *HERD* 6 (2), 109-119.
- Ballard, B. (1996). Advising Honours year students. In K. Chanock, V. Burley & S. Davies (Eds.) *What do we learn from teaching one-to-one that informs our work with larger numbers?* (pp. 5-12). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1988). Literacy in the university: An 'anthropological' approach.. In G. Taylor et al. (Eds.), *Literacy by Degrees*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Beasley, C. & Knowles, S. (1994). Postgraduate writing instruction: General versus specific. In K. Chanock and V. Burley. (Eds.) *Integrating the Teaching of Academic Discourse into Courses in the Disciplines* (pp. 298-317). Melbourne: La Trobe University Language and Academic Skills Unit.
- Business Review Weekly* (2000, July 28). Degrees for sale, pp.72-78.
- Cadman, K. (1997). Thesis writing for international students: A question of identity. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16(1), 3-14.
- Cahill, D. (1997). Postgraduate supervision of international students in the Australian context. Paper prepared for 8th ISANA Conference International Education – In It Together. Melbourne (Personal contact)
- Campbell, C. (1990). Writing with others' words: Using background reading text in academic compositions. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Insights from the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cargill, M. (1994). Cross-cultural postgraduate supervision meetings as intercultural communication. In O. Zuber-Skerrit & Y. Ryan (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate research: Managing the new agenda*. London: Kogan Page.
- Chanock, K. (2000). Comments on Essays: do students understand what tutors write? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 5, (1), 95-106.
- Cohen, A. & Cavalcanti, M. (1990). Feedback on composition: Teacher and student verbal reports. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Insights from the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, L. & Manion, L. (1994). *Research methods in education* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). London: Routledge.

## Sources of Confusion

- Comber, B. (1983). Writing back to writers: A tertiary experiment. *English in Action*, 66, 55-59.
- Felix, U. & Lawson, M. (1994). Evaluation of an integrated bridging course on academic writing for overseas postgraduate students. *Higher Education Research and Development* 13 (1), 59-69.
- Fergusson, G. (1996). Literacy in the disciplines: Giving academics a language to talk about language. In Z. Golebiowski and H. Borland (Eds.), *Policy and practice of tertiary literacy: Selected proceedings of the 1st National Conference on Tertiary Literacy: Research and practice, Vol 1*. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Fullarton, S. (1997). Identifying the needs of coursework postgraduate students: The case of DUPA, MPA, RPA & SUPA. Melbourne: Monash Postgraduate Association.
- Ginsburg, E. (1992). Not just a matter of English. *HERDSA News* 4 (1), 6-8.
- Hall, C. (1995). Comments on Joy Reid's 'Responding to ESL students' texts: The myths of appropriation'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 159-163.
- Hyland, F. (1998). The impact of teacher-written feedback on individual writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7 (3), 255-286.
- Hyslop, N. (1990). Evaluating student writing: Methods and measurement. Retrieved November 19, 2000, from EBSCO database (ERIC Digest) on the World Wide Web: [wysiwig://bodyframe.19/http://glo...w15.global.epnet.com/fulltext.asp](http://wysiwig://bodyframe.19/http://glo...w15.global.epnet.com/fulltext.asp)
- Kaplan, R. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.
- Keech, M. (1996). Literacy, culture and difference: Feedback on student writing as discursive practice. In Z. Golebiowski and H. Borland (Eds.), *Academic writing across disciplines and cultures. Selected proceedings of the 1st National Conference on Tertiary Literacy: Research and practice, Vol 2*. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology.
- Kepner, C. (1991) An experiment in the relationship of types of written feedback to the development of second language skills. *The Modern Language Journal*, 75 (3), 305-312.
- Kiley, M. & Mullins, G. (Eds.) (1998). Quality in postgraduate research: Managing the new agenda. *Proceedings of the 1998 Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference, Adelaide*.
- Leki, I. (1990). Coaching from the margins: Issues in written response. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights from the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacDonald, R. (1991). Developmental students' processing of teacher feedback in composition instruction. *Review of Research in Developmental Education* 8 (5), 1-5.
- Moses, I. (1985). *HERDSA Green Guide No 3: Supervising postgraduates*. Sydney: HERDSA.
- Moses, I. (1994). Planning for quality in graduate studies. In O. Zuber-Skerrit & Y. Ryan (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Nowak, R. Weiland, R. & Brown, T. (1997). Induction programs for international students: Language or metacognitive skills? *Academic Skills Programs. International Education – In It Together*. Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> ISANA Conference, Melbourne.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Paltridge, B. (1997). Thesis and dissertation writing: Preparing ESL students for research. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16 (1), 61-70.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd edition.) Newbury Park, Ca: Sage Publications.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). Beyond (f)utilitarianism: English as academic purpose. *Hong Kong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching*, 17, 13-23.
- Purves, A. C. (Ed.) (1998). Introduction. *Writing Across Languages and Cultures: Issues in Contrastive Rhetoric*. Newbury Park, Ca: Sage Publications.
- Qinling, C. (1999). Expectations and experiences: What do international postgraduate students say? *TIPS Newsletter*, 4 (2), 4-7.
- Radecki, P. & Swales, J. (1988). ESL student reaction to written comments on their written work. *System*, 16, 355-365.
- Storch, N. & Tapper, J. (1997). What NNS and NS university students say about their own writing: Student annotations. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 6 (3), 245-264.
- Yu, R. D. (1998). Non-native graduate students' thesis/dissertation writing in science: self-reports by students and their advisers from two US institutions. *English for Specific Purposes* 17 (4), 369-390.
- Wilson, K. (1997). "International Education" or "Educational Imperialism"? *International education - EJ2*. Retrieved 23 June , 1999, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.canberra.edu.au/uc/educ/crie/ieej2/forum2.html>
- Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (1), 79-98.

**COMPUTER-BASED SPELLING AND GRAMMAR CHECKERS,  
THESAURUSES AND STUDENT CONFUSION**

Jan Robbins

Academic Skills and Learning Centre, Australian National University

*Ignorance and lack of confidence may lead students to rely uncritically on online spelling and grammar checkers and thesauruses. However, these supposedly objective authorities on language use can be misleading, missing incorrect sentences and misdiagnosing correct sentences as errors or suggesting words which do not mean the same as synonyms. A survey of 25 mostly native speaking and later year students shows that about half use grammar checkers frequently. Reasons for use vary from supplementing poor grammar skills to as a proofreading aid. Most students, however, use their own judgement in following the advice given, indicating a healthy scepticism as to its value. Reasons for not using grammar checkers mostly recognise their limitations. Roughly half the sample had been told to use only short sentences, but again most wrote long sentences if they felt the need. Use of an on-line thesaurus was fairly high, although few students rated it as very useful. Students were sceptical of the equivalence of terms offered as synonyms, although few regularly used a dictionary to check the meaning. Most students proofread after spell-checking, although a quarter rarely did so. Students need instruction on how to optimise use of electronic aids and to be taught basic sentence structure patterns to supplement the grammar checker's advice.*

Use of technological aids such as spell- and grammar-checkers is rapidly becoming a required component of information literacy. For example, according to criteria developed by one US State school system, by eighth grade a student should be demonstrating that:

he/she routinely uses specialized word processing utilities (eg., thesaurus, spellchecker, grammar checker, document statistics) in the production of written materials (spell check may be controversial in some districts). (Francour, 1999).

Implicit in such a requirement is the expectation that the computer can act as an authority on vocabulary, spelling and grammar, relieving students of the need to know such details, and thus freeing them to write creatively or analytically as the task requires. However, this expectation is not always fulfilled. For example, one student was asked to resubmit an essay which, despite having been passed by his grammar-checker, contained sentences such as:

1. Investigation of why the king was a target, and how he was depicted along with certain symbols and icons in slanderous caricatures.
- and
2. Argument will conclude with the justification of execution and measures the new republic took to protect themselves until 1794.
- and
3. The French economy on the verge of bankruptcy, after years of wars, poor harvests, and inflated prices for goods started movements towards a revolution.
- and

## Sources of Confusion

4. In practice this involved only the Bourgeoisie with Paris at the centre of France and includes only those who could read or write.

A quick test confirms that the grammar-checker in Word 97 will indeed pass all of these sentences except for number 3, where the checker identified “harvests” as a subject-verb agreement error and suggested substituting “harvest”. Consequently it seems that students would be unwise to rely on grammar-checkers as a substitute for their own grammatical knowledge.

On the other hand, my own experience suggests that, unless they have studied another language, students under 40 are likely to know very little grammar. Usually I can count on some awareness of nouns and verbs, but students’ formal knowledge rarely extends to the basics of sentence structure, so errors such as subject-verb disagreement in sentences with compound subjects are now relatively common, even among native speakers.

Sentence fragments are also common. I have speculated (with corroboration from some students) that the fragments may be due to a combination of their poor grasp of sentence structure along with an attempt to avoid long sentences, apparently to fit advice given by teachers or parents. In addition to the resulting grammatical problems, my concern is that a self-imposed restriction to short sentences is often inimical to developing complex ideas or arguments in the text. If students hold short sentences as a goal, then perhaps they respond to the grammar checker’s advice that a sentence is too long by putting in a full stop near the middle, regardless of whether the results makes grammatical sense.

Students themselves seem aware of their lack of grammatical knowledge and frequently lament it. It is not surprising then, given their low self-confidence in this area, that they come to rely on the easily-used grammar checker that comes with their word-processor. After all, it is even turned on as the default setting. That setting can be very distracting when drafting, a stage at which we suggest concentrating on the content and arguments without even rereading, let alone focussing on the spelling and grammatical errors

Despite directives for the use of electronic aids to writing like the one quoted at the beginning of this paper, criticism of grammar checkers is not lacking. Kate Chanock (2000) found that the grammar checker accompanying Microsoft Word failed to detect many flawed sentences and misidentified correct sentences as wrong. She concludes that the real issue is the uncritical trust which students place in the computer, and advocates action by advisers to help students move from a simplistic acceptance to a more critical and less dependent use of these tools.

Error detection rates and the usefulness of the help screens provided when an error was detected by Word 97’s grammar checker were exhaustively evaluated by Haist (1997). Some of her results are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Rates of error detection by Word 97’s grammar checker

Error type	Errors detected	Correct sentences labelled as errors	Help screens
Fragments	60%	Yes	Some mislabelled as subject-verb disagreement
Run-ons	40%	Yes	Three different explanations
Subject-verb agreement	72%		Some incorrectly diagnosed as comma error. Explanation weak.
Incorrect form of irregular verb	50% (some by spell-checker)		General advice only

## *Sources of Confusion*

Shift in verb tenses	High when applying to same subject	Yes	Advice incorrect when subjects of verbs are different.
Homonyms	10%		Many commonly confused words not on list
Incorrectly placed commas	10%		Good help screens

Earlier, Wong (1996), who studied the ability of Wordperfect Grammatik 5 (with style rules turned off) to detect grammatical errors in ESL texts, acknowledged that the application detected only 19 of the 67 errors present. It also flagged as errors nine sentences which were in fact correct. Nevertheless, Wong concluded that a grammar checker can be useful for ESL students if they are warned to challenge its advice rather than accept it blindly, as this promotes "self-consciousness of grammar". ESL students, however, have at least had a reasonable amount of instruction in English grammar, whereas this is often not the situation for Australian native speakers or Australian NESB students.

It is easy to conclude then, that among electronic aids, grammar checkers at least could indeed be a serious source of confusion. Students with scanty knowledge of grammar might reasonably infer that unmarked sentences are correct when they are flawed, and conversely, that grammatically correct sentences are wrong. However, it is not so easy to infer from the scant literature how serious or widespread this problem is, nor what should be done about it. Should we advise students not to use grammar checkers, as was my own first response, or should we simply work towards their more informed and judicious use as suggested by Wong (1996) and Chanock (2000)?

To help answer these questions I carried out a small exploratory survey on student use of grammar checkers and on-line thesauruses. The survey form was restricted to one page as I was cautious about imposing a lengthy questionnaire on students. As few students responded, the sample was very small until my daughter simultaneously enlarged and biased it by enlisting her friends. There is consequently no pretence that the sample is random. It is biased towards later-year native speakers in the sciences, particularly psychology and physics, and towards academically successful students. Nevertheless, in the absence of other information the results are quite revealing.

### **Sample description**

A total of 25 students filled in the questionnaire. Not all respondents answered all questions and some questions allowed more than one answer. Thus the responses to individual questions do not always total 25. The enrolment pattern of respondents is given in Table 2.

Table 2 *Sample enrolment by degree*

BSc	BSc/ BA	Com (BEC) / Sci	B AsSt	BA	BSc/ BPsych	Act St	Act St/ Comm	Law	PG Sci
9	4	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	2

As shown in Table 3, students' level of study ranged from first year to post-graduate.

Table 3 *Level of student*

First year	Later year	Honours	Postgraduate
4	13	6	2

The majority of students were native speakers of English as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 *Language background of sample.*

Native English speaker	NESB Australian	International student	Unknown
19	2	2	2

Responses from students identifying as having a second language background will be indicated as they occur.

**Knowledge of grammar**

The majority of students claimed to have learnt only a little grammar at school (see Table 5). About half of those who regarded themselves as more knowledgeable had learnt grammar as second language students (but two of those included as “a lot in learning a second language” were actually more modest in their claims). This confirms that many students in this predominantly native speaking sample perceive themselves as knowing little grammar.

Table 5 *Answers to the question “How much grammar have you studied?”*

A lot at school	A lot in learning a second language	A little at school	None
5	5	13	2

**Use of grammar checkers**

Students who rarely or never use grammar checkers slightly exceeded those who always or often use them (although two students who “rarely” use them actually have the grammar checker on all the time but mostly ignore it). There is thus a substantial level of usage of grammar checkers.

Table 6 *Answers to “Do you use the grammar checker on assignments?”*

Always	Often	Rarely	Never
7	4	6	8

Responses to how and when students use the grammar checker are shown in Table 7. These results suggest that the majority of students have switched the setting to check with spelling, rather than using the default “check grammar as you type” setting.

Table 7 *Answers to “When do you use the grammar checker?”*

On all drafts, as I type	On all drafts, but after they are finished/	On later drafts after they are finished	On final draft only	Never
5	4	4	3	8

**Reasons for using a grammar checker**

The answers to the open question: “Why do you use the grammar checker or why do you NOT use it?” from students who always or often use them divided into two distinct groups. Three students indicated that they used the grammar checker mostly as a proofreading aid; for example, “I use the grammar-checker as a way of slowing my proofreading and to remove obvious errors”. All three added in the next question that they used their own judgement or ignored most of the advice. Two students responded more cryptically that they used it “As a guideline” or “Because it is easy to use” (NESB student), but both used their own judgement in taking the advice. One student used it despite being aware of its faults – “Not sure, they don’t help much” – but also only implemented the advice when it made sense. The remaining five students who frequently used grammar checkers implied a lack of confidence in their own grammatical skills. Typical comments were: “My own grammar is rather poor and just to check that my expression is grammatically sound (I assume it is reliable)” and “Because I have to my spelling/grammar is pretty bad” (International student).

## Sources of Confusion

Not surprisingly, comments from students who rarely or never use the grammar checker are much more critical. While a few students used it rarely, but without too much dissatisfaction (eg “For grammar functions I’m not sure of.”), others were quite scathing: “Microsoft Word grammar checker too picky – hard to tell when it suggests something useful or when it is merely extremely fussy” and “Gives ridiculous suggestions so I don’t understand it”. Other responses also indicated that the advice offered was often unhelpful: “Don’t use it ‘cause I don’t know how to correct my errors”. A couple of obviously more confident students implied that they knew more grammar than the application: “Because I think I can do it myself” or “I don’t use it because I tend to disagree with its recommendations”.

### Response to advice

The students’ uses of the advice given by the grammar checker are shown in Table 8, which indicates that the majority of students are inclined to apply critical judgement to the help offered. It may be significant that the two international students in the sample are amongst those more inclined to take the advice, whereas both Australian NESBs used their own judgement.

Table 8 *Answers to the question “How do you respond to the advice given by the grammar checker?”*

Always take it	I take it if I understand it	Use my own judgement	Usually ignore it	NA
1 (IS)	3 (including 1 IS)	14 (including 2 ANESB)	5	2

### Adverse comment from markers

Only three students had had adverse comment from tutors or lecturers marking their papers to changes based on advice from grammar checkers. After using the grammar checker, students had been told by markers that there was “Too much punctuation”, or it “Makes my sentences too short”, and “Don’t use/believe everything that the grammar checker tells you.”

Two students who had not had adverse comment from markers explained this lack of complaint by remarking that “No, but I ignore passive voice advice” and “No, [but] scientists usually aren’t so hot with the grammar.” These comments suggest that the students believed that markers may have had cause for complaint if they had followed the grammar checker’s advice blindly.

### Sentence length

A number of students commented on the grammar checker’s influence on sentence length. Because I was intrigued by the number of sentence fragments I was seeing, I specifically asked: “Were you ever advised at school or university to write only short sentences?” The answers shown in Tables 9 and 10 indicate that roughly half the students had been given such advice, mostly by teachers or parents, but Table 11 shows that, as with grammar checkers, the majority use their own discretion in applying it.

Table 9 *Students advised to write only short sentences*

Yes	Possibly	No
13	1	11

## *Sources of Confusion*

Table 10 *Answers to “If so, who gave you that advice?”* (Some students nominated more than one source)

School teacher	Lecturer	Tutor	Parent	Friend	Not applicable
10	5	1	2	2	12

Table 11 *Answers to “Do you try to keep sentences short?”*

Yes, always	Yes, but I write long sentences if I need to	No
2	22	1

I also asked students how they judged when a sentence was too long. The responses were quite variable. Four students responded that they judged by reading aloud, for example: “Rambly, when reading aloud need to take a breath, no comma”. Another four appeared to relate their judgements to meaning and coherence, for instance: “If it can be broken into two self-contained sentences without disrupting the flow”. Five related over-long sentences to ease of comprehension, eg “If by the end I need to go back and see what I’ve written.”, whereas three appeared to suggest more grammatical criteria such as “More than three commas” or “The number of conjunctives”. The remaining five students used physical length, sometimes in conjunction with other criteria. For example, one student commented “More than 2-3 lines/many subsentences.”

When asked how they would remedy the problem, four students volunteered that they would break it into two or use additional punctuation within the sentence, thirteen would break it into two and seven answered that they would shorten the sentence. The question was not specific enough to reveal whether such decisions were likely to be grammatically sound or whether such a reaction would generate a fragment, except, maybe, for one student who responded “Shove a full-stop in.”

### **Online thesauruses**

Like Kate Chanock (2000), I had noticed a few students using words incorrectly, apparently based on their assumption that words listed as synonyms in an on-line thesaurus could always be used as direct substitutes. Table 12 shows that student use of the online thesaurus is relatively high.

Table 12 *Do you use the thesaurus built into the wordprocessor?*

Often	Rarely	Never
10	10	5

Seven students indicated that they used the thesaurus to avoid using the same word too many times, whereas four indicated a recognition that sometimes a better word might exist (eg “Find a word that better expresses idea”). Two students indicated both reasons. A further four students appeared to recognise the merits of thesauruses, but expressed reservations about the on-line version, for example: “For posh words, to make my essay sound impressive but my brain is usually better than the computer’s thesaurus”. Nevertheless, Table 13 shows that students generally perceived the on-line thesaurus as useful.

Table 13 *Answers to “How helpful have you found it?”*

Very helpful	Some help	Of little help	No help	I don’t use built-in thesaurus
4	11	4 (1xIS)	2	3

## Sources of Confusion

The majority of students recognised that the suggested ‘synonyms’ offered by thesauruses were not always equivalents, suggesting again that they used their own judgement.

Table 14 *Answers to “If a thesaurus (any thesaurus) lists words as synonyms, do you treat them as interchangeable?”*

Yes	Sometimes	No
2	15	5

Students’ use of a dictionary to complement the thesaurus (shown in Table 15) may also indicate use of their own judgement as, among those checking ‘rarely’, one student commented “I usually know what they mean”, and another commented “If I’m about to use one and I don’t understand its exact meaning.” However, for a few students, failure to check may indicate uncritical acceptance of the thesaurus suggestion.

Table 15 *Answers to “Do you check the exact meaning of synonyms in an ordinary dictionary?”*

Always	[often]	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
4 [1x1S]	1	7	6	4

### Proofreading after spell-checking

The majority of students recognised the need to proofread after spell-checking (see Table 16), although nearly a quarter appear to be less rigorous in the practice than I would have hoped. One student commented that she rarely proofread because she was usually running late.

Table 16 *Answers to “Do you proofread after spell-checking a document?”*

Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
10	9	5	1	

### Final comments

A final open question invited comments on any aspect of grammar checkers, thesauruses, or spell-checkers. Only five students responded to this, three commenting that they mainly used spell-checkers. However, one student commented “Spell-checkers are very irritating as they don’t have any of the horrible jargon or mutated words we geologists use (subvertical, recrystallisation, blueschist facies, etc) and there are too many of these words to add them all in! I usually rely on careful proofreading rather than the spell-checker.” This comment raises the limited usefulness of spell-checkers for technical writing, unless students are willing and able to build up a custom dictionary over time.

### Discussion

It seems that while a substantial number of students in the sample do use grammar checkers and on-line thesauruses, the majority are generally judicious in their use, treating the suggestions made by electronic aids with well-deserved suspicion. Nonetheless, I would argue that there is still cause for concern. While the sample is too small to be other than suggestive, there may be differences between native and non-native speakers in their usage of the grammar checker (see Table 17).

Table 17 *Use of grammar checkers among Non-native speakers versus Native speakers*

Native speakers (Later year only)	Non-native speakers (International & NESB)
Always2/Often4/Rarely3/Never7	Always4/Often0/Rarely0/Never0

Further, the comments suggest that native speakers, at least in this sample, may be more discriminating users than non-native speakers, as some frequent users indicated that they use

## *Sources of Confusion*

the grammar checker only as a proofreading aid to assist in catching trivial errors, whereas three of the second language students indicated that they use the grammar checker to check/improve their grammar, and the two international students were inclined to take its advice, although the NESB students used their own judgement. The International Students, having studied more grammar, may be in a better position to apply its advice than native speakers, however, as the advice may be misleading or wrong, this remains an issue. Conversations with dyslexic students reveal that they also often use the grammar checker to insure against grammatical errors. Thus it is possible that the students most in need of help may be exactly those who most use this unreliable aid.

As I suspect that the real issue is one of confidence - that students use grammar-checkers to make up for their perceived lack of knowledge - I was interested to see if there was any indication that students with better grammatical knowledge use grammar checkers less (see Table 18). However, the results (shown in Table 18) are inconclusive:

Table 18 *Grammar checker use in relation to knowledge of grammar (native speakers only)*

A lot of grammar studied	Little or none
Always 0/Often 2/Rarely 2/Never 2	Always 3/Often 2/Rarely 3/Never 5

While more students with little grammatical knowledge “always” use the grammar checker, this category also includes more students who never use it. Nevertheless, their comments give a possible explanation for this, as all five of the latter reflected on the unhelpfulness of the advice (for example, “Because most of the suggestions are not helpful”, or “Don’t use it ‘cause I don’t know how to correct my errors.”). The difficulty of following the advice given is also emphasised by Haist’s (1997, p. 10) comments that the explanation screens and suggestions may be “confusing, misleading and sometimes wrong”. The catch 22 of grammar checkers is that you have to know grammar to make use of the grammar checker’s advice.

Haist (1997) and Chanock (2000) also comment that the grammar checker confuses style and grammatical issues. It responds adversely to passive voice, split infinitives and prepositions at the end of sentences although these are not incorrect. In fact passive voice is the standard academic writing style in the sciences in particular, and students may be marked down by some academics for not using it. This fusion of grammatical and stylistic criteria may further add to student confusion.

It seems that there is a dilemma for students who have learnt little formal grammar in that they recognise a need for some criteria to judge whether a sentence is correct or not, yet also recognise that while they cannot make that judgement, the grammar checker is a poor substitute. There is some indication that some students find more knowledgeable family or friends to edit for them. Some students use learning advisers partly for that purpose. There is reason to suspect, nonetheless, that there may still remain an unmet need.

One possible answer to the dilemma of grammar problems is that many kinds of these errors do not interfere much with meaning and so perhaps are not very important after all. Perhaps they should be downplayed in favour of more macro characteristics of text such as argument, structure and coherence. However, most of us have evidence, like the student mentioned in the second paragraph, that academics do respond negatively to grammatical and punctuation errors. This was confirmed by a formal study of academics’ irritation with surface level writing errors by Kantz and Yates (1994). They found that, at least in the US, academics were indeed irritated by fairly trivial errors which did not affect meaning. Academics varied between disciplines and as individuals in both their detection of errors and in terms of which errors they rated as most irritating, a variability which, based on student comments, probably also exists in Australia, and which could further add to student confusion as to what is correct.

It seems, therefore, that there may still be a need for some level of grammar teaching, if only to provide the metalanguage needed to discuss problems, and to restore students’ confidence in their ability to use language. Indeed, there is a move to return to some grammar teaching in

## Sources of Confusion

schools (see Hudson, 1999) in a more contextually centred and relevant way, using a variety of whole texts rather than isolated sentences. However, for native speakers at least, an individual's errors are usually restricted to a few types, so the need for a broadly inclusive grammar course, or remedial teaching at tertiary level might be questioned. Perhaps one solution is to give individual students some knowledge of the rules they specifically need by directing them to appropriate electronic resources tailored to the common errors. Another is to explore less formal ways of explaining basic sentence structure, or, as native speakers mostly learn English unconsciously through models, use of template sentences for common academic structures.

In the meantime, rather than abandon an aid which is sometimes of use, I believe that we should at least warn students of the inadequacies of the electronic aids built into word processors, and teach them to use them appropriately. For instance, besides ensuring a basic understanding of sentence structure and grammatical terminology, Haist's (1997) recommendations for more effective use include: proofreading before using the spell and grammar checker, as fewer initial errors mean that the checkers become more reliable; use of the "custom" style setting to tailor the grammar checker to the type of text; use of the grammar checker with "Help" turned on; and concurrent use of a grammar textbook. To these I would add building custom dictionaries for technical terms, and use of the far more extensive and accurate paper thesauruses, rather than the on-line versions. Finally, as one surveyed student expressed it, rather than using the grammar checker, "I much prefer to get another human to check my grammar and then teach me the grammatical rules".

### References

- Chanock, K. (2000). The ghost in the machine: Computers as a source of confusion. In Chanock, K. (Ed.), *Sources Of Confusion*. Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Francoeur, J. (1999). *Student technology competency expectations roundtable, May 6, 1999 Meeting Notes*. Retrieved November 7, 2000, from the World Wide Web: [http://www.massnetworks.org/st\\_comp/maynotes.html](http://www.massnetworks.org/st_comp/maynotes.html)
- Haist, C. (1997). *An evaluation of Microsoft Word 97's Grammar Checker*, Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar Monograph. Retrieved November 6, 2000, from the World Wide Web: <http://www2.pct.edu/courses/evavra/ATEG/Mono/Haist/GCHECK.htm>
- Hudson, R. (1999.) Grammar teaching is dead - NOT! in Rebecca S. Wheeler (Ed.) *Language alive in the classroom*. Westport, CT: Greenwood. Electronic version retrieved November 8, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/gtidnot.htm>
- Kantz, M. , and Yates, R. (1994). Whose judgements? A survey of faculty response to common and highly irritating writing errors. Paper presented at the *Fifth Annual Conference of the NCTE Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar*, August 12&13, 1994, Illinois State University. Retrieved November 6, 2000, from the World Wide Web: <http://www2.pct.edu/courses/evavra/ATEG/P5N13.htm>
- Wong, C. J. (1996). Computer grammar checkers and teaching ESL writing. Paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Midlands Conference on Language and Literature, Omaha, NE. Retrieved July 19, 2000, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.coe.missouri.edu/~cjw/portfolio/grammar-checker.htm>

**MONASH TRANSITION TO TERTIARY WRITING PROJECT  
PART TWO**

Harriet Searcy and Steve Price  
Language and Learning Services, Monash University

*The Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project seeks to produce a web-based resource for first-year students to facilitate their transition to the kinds of thinking and writing valued at university. First-year students face a number of challenges in their move from school to university writing. To allow these students a fuller contextual account of the kinds of writing valued by the academy, the project seeks to give students an understanding of the processes by which university texts are constructed, as well as the social purposes and conditions that shape this construction.*

*The web-based resource is made up of ten modules, one for each of the targeted first-year subjects. Each module then divides into three sections with a focus on (i) discursive processes, (ii) institutional practices and (iii) textual structure.*

*This paper focuses on the discipline-related sources of confusion which two of the modules attempt to address.*

**Introduction**

The *Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* is a web-based resource for first-year students aimed at facilitating their transition to the writing modes and styles practised in the university (Candlin, 1998; Lea & Stierer, 2000). The background to this project, and its pedagogical underpinnings, are discussed in a paper by Clerehan, Moore and Vance (2000) also presented in this volume. In the present paper, we focus on two modules currently under development, *Managing People and Organisations* and *Legal Process*, in terms of the discipline-specific features that operate as sources of confusion for students in these subjects. We do this by investigating what staff and students have to say about the experience of writing the major assignment in each module, examining the instructional information given prior to the task, and the resulting student texts. We finish by showing how both subject cohorts overall, were more concerned with the 'process,' rather than the 'product' which their lecturers tended to engage with, and the implications of this for the development of the online modules.

**Module 1 - Managing People and Organisations**

*Subject Background:*

*Managing People and Organisations* is a compulsory management subject for 1<sup>st</sup> year students undertaking Business and Economics degrees (Banking and Finance, International Trade, Marketing, and Management) at Monash University. A substantial international student cohort is enrolled which, together with a local non-English speaking background (NESB) cohort, comprises over half the total course enrolment. Many of these students, as well as local ESB students, will choose a degree within this faculty on the strength of their ability in mathematics and the sciences. This is particularly the case for those enrolled in Banking and Finance degrees. For these students, the language-focussed discourse of Management can prove demanding. In addition, it is also

## *Sources of Confusion*

possible that many students will not have had much, or any, work experience of the 'organisational' kind, unless of course, one counts experience at McDonald's around the world.

There are two assignments: a 1000 word essay early in the semester and a major assignment involving a 2500 word case study. The case study embraces both a professional focus - a business report format utilising the case study method - and an academic focus, the analysis of an organisational problem in terms of management theory. Each of the six case study sections is individually assessed within the overall score, and of these, the Problem Identification section receives the highest weighting (25%), and is the most 'theoretical.' Before investigating staff and student perceptions of the case study task, we briefly describe the support and materials given to students in the subject, as these are the only formal means students have of accessing the discourse-specific features of the task.

Four to five weeks prior to submitting their assignments, students attend tutorials which introduce them to case study methodology. They also receive information about grading, notes on the methodology and format, including brief descriptions of section content, and separate from this, a task summary sheet containing assessment criteria in terms of advice for each section. These latter two documents, however, would appear to contain discrepancies. For example, in discussing the vexed topic of applying theory in the Problem Identification section, the methodology notes below have this to say:

#### 4. Problem Identification and Analysis

In this section you should identify all the major problems in the case in behavioural terms, ie. in Management/OB related terms (it is not a marketing or an accounting case). Try to get to the underlying cause of problems, not just symptoms. Seek advice from your tutor on the layout of this information.

You should link each problem identified to relevant theory and also to actual evidence from the case. Remember you MUST integrate theory and reference all non-original work.

The task summary sheet on the other hand, reads as follows:

#### 2. Problem Identification and Analysis – 25%

- Identification and analysis of management problems including causes.
- Integration of theory and case evidence.

In this section you need to list as many management problems as you can from the information provided in the case. These problems need to be analysed in conjunction with case evidence and using the theoretical knowledge you have covered in the subject. It is essential to use that knowledge in this section to demonstrate to the reader that you have understood what you have covered in the subject to date, and that you can relate this information to an actual situation.

Your tutor will advise you about layout.

## *Sources of Confusion*

If students only consult the summary sheet, they will not be reminded that they need to reference all sources used, an ever-present problem in student writing. If however, students refer solely to the methodology notes, they might well struggle to understand the advice to write about “all major problems . . . in behavioural terms, ie. Management/OB (ie. Organisational Behaviour) terms.” The problem of terminology in instructional advice is further discussed below.

Once assessed, students also receive a feedback sheet with the returned assignment. Of particular note, given the comments from students below, is the fact that no sample, or model, of a case study is available within the course guide, the prescribed text or from the library. A brief survey of online resources linked to the subject website suggested that no models existed there either. While the Faculty does supply a generic guide to style and referencing, the *‘Q’ Manual*, the example of report format it currently contains, does not effectively meet all the conventions of the case study format. This reluctance to provide a model may stem from concerns about plagiarism, although at least one other compulsory 1<sup>st</sup> Year Business and Economics subject does provide samples of good student answers in its subject guide.

### *Lecturer Perceptions*

In the Management lecturer’s opinion, students generally perform satisfactorily, even well, on the assignment. If they succeed in the Problem Identification section, this will usually mean that they will pass on the assignment overall. There are problems, however, from her point of view, as follows:

- the often slapdash, last minute approach taken to the assignment, and possibly linked to this
- the failure to treat all sections of the report consistently, particularly the Recommendations and Implementation sections, in response to the criteria
- the difficulties students manifest in applying and using appropriate theory, including referencing, particularly in the Problem Identification section
- problems of expression and grammar many non-English speaking background students exhibit.

Anecdotal information supplied by other teaching staff also suggests that students do not always understand the purposes of the case study nor its intended audience in the ‘real world’: the business executive. As a result, they may not understand why, for example, conciseness is valued in such texts, and how this and other stylistic features of the business report, such as the legitimate use of bullet points, can be achieved. At the semantic level, many students will not properly understand instructional terms such as “state your assumptions” or “set the scene,” if these are not exemplified in some way. They may also lack the self-reliance that such advice presumes.

### *Student Perceptions*

As part of the project, 65 students were surveyed about their experience of writing the case study, prior to receiving their assignments back. Nearly half (29) of these were international students with the rest being local students, both ESB and NESB. While there were some perceptible minor differences in foci, both groups had very much the same concerns. In terms of the task, students reported that they:

- felt impeded by the lack of complete examples of a case study, especially as a means of determining formatting of the report
- experienced difficulties coping with the length of the case study scenario, and its centrality as their main source of information
- found the research task more demanding than the writing, particularly in terms of finding relevant materials that is, other “real” case studies and solutions
- experienced difficulties determining the amount and the level of research required
- had problems integrating and referencing theory

## *Sources of Confusion*

- experienced problems combining evidence with theory
- felt confused by what they regarded as the “repetitive” nature of the case study, particularly those sections which required the repeated use of theory, and, to a lesser extent,
- found it difficult to identify problems, or symptoms from problems
- were frustrated by the lack of any guides to the correctness of their responses (generally cited by international students).

More thoughtful students noted issues such as the difficulty of converting their research into the discourse of Management or Organisational Behaviour, “creating feasible real-life solutions to problems,” reducing information, and postulating assumptions. The most persistent concern, however, across both groups, was with the lack of “examples”. International students indicated right from the beginning of the surveys, that such examples were an extremely useful resource in their preparation (and presumably, their understandings of what constituted “correctness”), while local students tended to recommend them as a means of quickly understanding formatting requirements. Not unexpectedly, international students were also more concerned with grammar and expression, but language issues were not a preoccupation of the majority of students.

Such comments suggest a concern with processes, often of the pre-writing kind, as opposed to the written product, concerns also noted for the 1<sup>st</sup> Year Law students described below. About half the surveyed students also maintained VCE did not adequately prepare them for 1<sup>st</sup> year Management/university tasks. More astutely, one student observed that although certain structural and formal features might have been covered in the VCE, the “much higher level of perception suddenly required” was not. Alongside this awareness, we need to remember that international students who completed Year 12 in their home countries may have received no preparation for academic tasks in Australian universities at all.

### *Sources of Confusion in 1<sup>st</sup> Year Management Case Studies*

For language and learning advisors, student case studies can also be revealing about what constitutes the sources of confusion in terms of the writing task. These case studies, along with the feedback forms completed by tutors and which accompany each returned assignment, suggest the following areas of concern:

- Application and interpretation of theory in relation to case evidence
- Amount and variety of sources needed, citing of sources and referencing issues
- Writing concisely:
  - Executive Summary
  - Recommendations
  - Statement of Main Problem
  - Implementation
- Ability to respond to stated criteria: ie. through the consistent treatment of all case study sections

None of these seems particularly surprising as learning tasks which first year students need to accomplish. Nevertheless, it might be objected (as the lecturer did), that students’ inability to respond to criteria was “unexpected” given the criteria-driven nature of much VCE work. However, this perhaps is to miss the point that in secondary school classrooms, information about criteria is usually constantly reinforced on an interpersonal level, which is not the case in university tutorials. It also seems likely that many students, out of ignorance or immaturity, simply disregard written instructions and wait for the direct, teacherly input that never comes. In effect, they do not understand that they need to compensate very actively for the more impersonalised approach to information-giving in the university.

## Sources of Confusion

In the following samples, we illustrate how students approach the task of applying and interpreting theory in relation to case evidence, and how their handling of this 'academic' task affects the overall task. The first, taken from the Problem Identification section of the case study analyses communication problems, was written by an ESB background student. It received a HD- sub-score and is fluent and well-controlled. The analysis element is clearly structured in terms of an explicit introduction-comment-elaboration-(conclusion) framework, and comments on the convergences and divergences of the evidence in relation to the theory. Citation and referencing are also appropriately used. The same patterning was repeated by the student across the whole section.

### Sample 1 (ESB): Applying Theory to Case Evidence

Carlopio et al. (1997, pp.232) then observe that the result of being egalitarian and flexible in communication is two-way communication. This concept has not been able to evolve in the firm of Lawton, Langbridge, Lypton, and Lawless solicitors, since the staff in the WPC are not consulted about any issues at the firm. For example, one reason that may explain errors made in written reports could be that solicitors have not taken the time to explain tasks in enough detail. They assume that the staff in the WPC know exactly what they are doing and hence . . .

As no two-way discussion has taken place at the firm, an agreement, the final attribute and by-product of discussion, cannot be reached. Having said all this, it becomes obvious that communication at the firm is extremely poor.

Interestingly, however, the overall case study only received a Credit because the student did not meet the stated criteria for the later sections. Whether this was the result of exhaustion or a failure to understand the precise requirements of these sections is not clear, but it is an interesting example of the inconsistency with which students approach the case study task

In less valued work, students often have problems with aspects of integration and interpretation. Theory will be introduced in the briefest or most perfunctory way, and linking theory to evidence will be done implicitly. There is very often no commentary about the degree to which the evidence diverges from, or converges with, the literature, and no concluding statement; instead, an abrupt move to the next theme or theory to be examined takes place. Typically too, there will be overuse of the case study evidence to fill out the analysis, and referencing and/or citation problems (in effect, plagiarism) will be present. The following example by a local student, assumed to be NESB, illustrates some of these tendencies. It is based on the same case study scenario as above.

### Sample 2 (Local NESB): Applying Theory to Case Evidence

A more recent theory, is that of David McClelland. He believes there are three major motives to stimulate better work. (Robbins, 2000, pg. 555) The girls in WPC need to achieve or strive to succeed. They do this with their data entry and word processing, but perhaps the girls have a stronger desire to succeed with harder and more demanding tasks. The girls need to experience power. The ability to make someone act in a different way or to be in control someone (*sic*) is a big motivator, and lastly, the girls need to feel a sense of affiliation

with other employees, they need to develop interpersonal relations with other staff. (Robbins, 2000, pg. 555)

As can be seen, new theory is briskly introduced, but the student does not instantiate the “three major motives” prior to the reference. Instead, she attempts to stage the instantiation move through the use of case evidence. While there is a partial attempt to interrogate the theory in terms of convergences and divergences (sentence 3) this is the only example, and expression and meaning begin to break down towards the end. There is no concluding statement. The student was failed on this section because she covered only one third of the mandatory three themes (motivation, communication and leadership), but also failed overall, because she provided “insufficient” treatment of the sections that followed.

In the third sample below by a NESB (international) student, citation of theory has been reduced to a bare minimum. There is no reference included after Sentence 1 which would seem to contain an unacknowledged definition from source material. It is also possible that Sentence 2 represents some continuing commentary from this same source ie. “the communication line . . . [is] zero.” However, some awareness of the need to frame his analysis was displayed as, towards the end of this fairly long section (not shown), he explicitly refers to the lack of communication in the case study organisation.

Sample 3 (NESB): Applying Theory to Case Evidence

Lack of Communication

Communication is the exchange of messages between people to achieve common meanings. In this case, the communication line between solicitors and workers in the centre are zero. Not even one of the solicitors know the workers very well, this is because both solicitors and workers in the centre communicate through a middleman that is Mrs. Blakely. All the work given by solicitors will first be examined and analysed by Mrs Blakely before allocating it to different clerks . . .

This really shows that lack of communication between solicitors and clerks will interfere with their jobs.

The introductory use of definitions was typically used by the student throughout the Problem Identification section followed by abrupt and implicit linking to case evidence. While he demonstrated an awareness of the relevant theories, he only provided two references throughout, a cardinal sin, thereby losing marks. That he was capable of fulfilling the criteria was demonstrated in one instance where, in discussing problems of motivation, he provided a much fuller account (eight initial lines) including describing Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of need’ theory by name. He did so, however, without providing a reference. On the other hand, he appeared to have a good, common-sense understanding of the issues involved and demonstrated this through his use of case evidence. Overall, he achieved a ‘Just Pass’ on the assignment.

*Possible Module Tasks*

Below, three online tasks are indicated representing the areas that, pedagogically, would seem the most immediately useful to students writing the 1<sup>st</sup> Year Management case study report:

- Applying and interpreting theory in relation to case evidence:

## *Sources of Confusion*

- introducing (appropriate) theory
- explicitly linking theory to evidence
- commenting and elaborating
- Using and referencing sources
- Writing concisely:
  - Executive Summary
  - Recommendations
  - Statement of Main Problem
  - Implementation

Of these, the first two stand out as a likely main focus in the Management module. The first, applying and interpreting theory in relation to evidence, is the critical academic task in the subject. Here, we will probably compare and contrast an individual sample report with other samples, both more and less successful, with the intention of making students think about the choices they need to make as 'academic' writers. By reflecting on the choices made by the online writers, we hope to encourage a more considered approach that will transfer to the task on analysis in other subjects. The second module task, using and referencing sources, is clearly indivisible from the first if students are to successfully meet assessment criteria in the subject. It is also probably the easiest to achieve given the amount of information that already exists on the Web.

The more difficult module task, both conceptually and in regard to time, would seem to be the third task, writing concisely. This may have to take an interim form that specifically addresses those sections of the case study which Management students often treat poorly – the Recommendations and Implementation. Time permitting, the purposes and discourse-specific features involved in the business report format will be addressed, ideally through interrogating both 'real life' samples and the student texts themselves.

### **Module 2 - Legal Process**

*Legal Process* is a compulsory 1<sup>st</sup> semester research subject within the Faculty of Law at Monash University that introduces students to the principles of legal thinking and practices. At the present time, very few international students are enrolled in first year undergraduate law, but there is a considerable number of local students from non-English speaking backgrounds. In general, these students feel no disadvantage compared to local English speaking background students with respect to their English language skills and pre-university education.

#### *Lecturer Perceptions*

Students' difficulties in writing law essays were perceived by the lecturer in terms of deficit - the failure to display those features desirable in a good law essay. Students were perceived to *lack* knowledge or skills, but the remedy for this is viewed as the provision of relevant knowledge *about* what is required. According to the lecturer, difficulties displayed in the essays included:

- a lack of understanding of what was required
- a lack of understanding of how much time to spend on preparation and research
- a lack of experience with the conciseness and precision of expression required in legal writing
- problems in understanding what was required in terms of originality
- a lack of understanding of the need to refer to primary sources for legal propositions

## *Sources of Confusion*

- an inability to depart from writing requirements of other disciplines (eg. the discursiveness of writing in the Arts)
- an inability to adapt to the writing style required for formal legal writing.

In anticipation of such problems, students are given quite detailed instructions on what is required of them in this first year research assignment. These requirements, and what is entailed in legal writing, are also discussed in class time. It is felt by the lecturer that students obtain ample advice on how to go about things and what they need to produce.

Students receive advice such as the following (these also constituted the criteria by which their writing was judged):

### *2. Analysis and Evaluation*

Each topic requires more than a mere description of the existing law. Students are required to analyse critically the legal position and give personal opinions / evaluations on the strengths and weaknesses of the legal position in question. Such opinions / evaluations should be supported by convincing argument and objective authority from research undertaken by the student.

### *3. Originality*

It is not sufficient merely to repeat the opinions of other writers in a particular topic area. Students should devote enough research and thought to their topic to form their own opinion on the issue(s) in question. But such opinions should be based on research and reasoning. Where opinions of other writers are relied upon to support a student's argument, they should be acknowledged by way of footnote.

### *4. Legal Writing*

Good legal writing is clear and concise. All propositions should be supported either by authority or, in the case of a student's opinion, by well-argued reasons for holding that opinion.

Assignments should have a logical and coherent structure so that it is easy for the examiner to follow the student's line of reasoning from one point to the next. Headings and sub-headings may be used for clarity of structure.

The general standard of English expression, including grammar, spelling and punctuation, will be taken into account in assessing assignments.

Students were advised to consult samples of good students' essays from previous years - kept in the library for consultation - and law journals, to familiarise themselves with qualities of good legal writing. It is assumed students will recognise conventions involved in such things as referencing, footnoting and so on, and ways in which writers are concise, original and so on. Yet, despite such advice, the lecturer sadly commented that each year many students "seem to ignore all this when they start writing."

It is interesting to compare the lecturer's perceptions of students' difficulties with the students' perceptions. While the lecturer notices the deficiencies in the student products by measuring what they produce against an ideal or desirable product, the students fail to refer to

## *Sources of Confusion*

such product features, despite having been well-advised about them. Rather, they perceive their difficulties in terms of the practices they are engaged in. In one sense this is perfectly understandable. The lecturer, speaking from a position within the discourses of law, recognises the extent to which students are failing to conform to, or manage these discourses suitably. The students, who as yet are only at the beginning stages of acquiring such discourses and taking up a position within them, cannot always recognise what their writing lacks. That is, understanding what is meant by writing concisely, or originally, within the legal context cannot be separated from acquiring the skills to do so, or from familiarity with the practices involved in doing so. Thus, until students acquire a position within the relevant discourses themselves, as the lecturer has, they are not capable of *seeing* what is meant by 'conciseness' or 'originality' within that discourse.

### *Student perceptions*

In contrast to their lecturer's perceptions, the students perceived their difficulties in writing the assignment in terms of process. Despite having received written instructions and engaged in class discussion on writing requirements and so on, a large majority of the cohort of 49 students who completed a survey on their Legal Process assignments (carried out after submission), encountered difficulties. In response to a question "which aspects were most difficult in researching and/or writing your assignment", typical comments were as follows:

- Realising what was required, then ensuring all material relevant
- Knowing exactly what to focus on where issues seemed to be broad
- Finding source material relevant to the topic
- Locating Australian law cases and making sure these were the most recent
- Knowing how much time I should spend on the assignment
- Learning where to find initial information in secondary sources to guide my research
- Gauging the depth required in the essay – I did far too much
- Questions were *very* broad (interpreting which I guess is part of the skill)
- Deciding on an appropriate level for my answer
- Knowing how much research was required and how to research the assignment
- Keeping within the word limit
- Change in style of writing from Arts background
- Unsure what was the level expected in law at first year
- Unsure how to structure such a large topic, what areas to concentrate on
- How to understand the essay topic, how much research was needed
- Hard to explain, I had trouble grasping the topic
- Knowing which aspects to focus on, how general to be and how much of my own opinion to use
- Not sure about the level of detail needed for a good essay

While the students' precise meanings may not always be clear, it is evident that many students were unsure about requirements despite efforts by the lecturers to clarify what was needed.

### *Influence of Year 12 Writing on 1<sup>st</sup> Year Legal Process assignment writing*

As students make the transition to first year university, they draw on previous experience in assignment writing. However, this cohort of students, in general, did not find year 12 writing of much assistance. Those who did stated that year 12 writing helped them with grammar, structuring their writing, and making arguments, but most felt that the skills they brought from year 12 were of little help. One student commented "Year 12 helped with grammar, all else was irrelevant", another, rather bitterly, "No way, VCE has strict guidelines, no room for originality. You don't learn how to write, only get guidelines." Other remarks alluded to differences in style, and to the comparative lack of guidance in university.

## Sources of Confusion

### Problematic aspects of student writing

Problems in student interpretation of assignment instructions and requirements were evident in a number of instances in student essays. For instance, as indicated earlier, students received the following written instructions about 'originality':

It is not sufficient merely to repeat the opinions of other writers in a particular topic area. Students should devote enough research and thought to their topic to form their own opinion on the issue(s) in question. But such opinions should be based on research and reasoning. Where opinions of other writers are relied upon to support a student's argument, they should be acknowledged by way of footnote.

Consider the following example, which is the beginning of the introduction to a student essay:

#### Introduction

Whether or not euthanasia is being practised in the community is no longer a topic of debate. Surveys of Australian doctors and nurses have established that requests by patients for a hastened death are commonplace and that compliance with them occurs in around half of these cases. At present, Euthanasia is hidden behind the notion of double effect, that is, that a doctor may legally administer drugs that he or she knows will hasten death if his or her primary intention is to alleviate the pain of the patient. This is a flawed notion in that it is almost impossible to disprove a doctor's assertion of what his or her primary intentions were. It lends itself to the abuse of doctors who seek to hasten the death of a patient without their consent, no matter how altruistic their intentions for doing so are.

It is completely undesirable for the death of a patient to be brought about or hastened without their consent, and we must therefore change the way we view the issue of the legal-permissibility of euthanasia. Our focus must no longer be on the intentions of the doctors making medical end-of-life decisions, but on whether the rational consent of the patient whose death is being hastened has been obtained. Active voluntary euthanasia has become accepted by the majority in the community and can no longer be branded as an immoral and illegal practice. Just as there is a clear distinction between making love and rape, and between a gangster stabbing someone maliciously and a doctor making an incision during surgery, there is a clear difference between culpable murder and active voluntary euthanasia (see below for definition.) In all three cases the consent of those involved "*deprives the act of its anti-social character.*"

Several aspects could be commented on. We could point out that the assertion at the beginning of the second paragraph has so far not been argued for; there is no support for it. Of course, the introduction is not the place where such evidence is provided. The student here is simply stating the position *he* will argue for, and in this sense, is complying with normal conventions of an introduction, and at the same time, meeting the requirement placed on him by the

## *Sources of Confusion*

lecturer that he develop *his* opinion. We could also claim that it is too categorical, and gives no consideration to mitigating factors or arguments. We could suggest it is too subjective a statement. We might therefore suggest to the student that he tone down what he says, and replace it with 'It is arguable that the death of a patient should not be brought about without their consent' or other more appropriate alternatives. Whatever our comments, the student is however, voicing a point of view, there is some originality in the statement, and he is attempting to mark out the direction his essay will go in. In part, he is complying with requirements.

The problem with the writing then is not simply overcome by making explicit certain requirements (the need for a student 'voice', for originality, and so forth), or by pointing out the general inappropriateness of a specific register. Familiarity with the discourse the student is engaging with is important, and this is not simply a matter of knowing about typical, objective features of such a discourse. What is significant here is taking up a position within the discourse, of being constituted as a subject within it, of seeing the world a certain way, and thus being capable of judging in what contexts, and for what purposes, ways of doing things might or might not be legitimate (Kamler & Maclean, 1997).

It is worth commenting further on the issue of register. The categorical tone in the sample introduction above could work well in the conclusion of the essay, after the complexities of the issues had been discussed and the argument substantiated. Consider the following as a possible conclusion to the essay referred to above:

I have argued in this essay that moral considerations and legal consistency demand a change in the present state of law on euthanasia. It is completely undesirable for the death of a patient to be brought about or hastened without their consent, and we must therefore change the way we view the issue of the legal-permissibility of euthanasia. Our focus must no longer be on the intentions of the doctors making medical end-of-life decisions, but on whether the rational consent of the patient whose death is being hastened has been obtained.

The change of context and function can justify a choice of register that elsewhere might appear unacceptable. At stake here, are judgments that derive their validity not from the implementation of rules about writing, but from recognising the kinds of things that work for certain purposes in certain contexts. As such, writers are best able to make sound judgments when they are familiar with the practices of the discourses they are engaging with. The conclusion that can be drawn then, is that students do not grasp the practices of a discourse by being told about them, but by engaging with them. Thus, focus on practices rather than product involves students in a manner that disposes their understanding in relevant ways. The module tasks therefore will attempt to engage students in reflection on the reasons for choices, rather than simply with models as products, in which choices have already been made.

Students not only reproduce but also rewrite the discourses they engage with, though, of course, not just as they please. Exploring these processes would therefore seem to be as important as mastering any specific skills that are seen as relevant to any specific discourse, not because this increases their knowledge of the discourse 'per se', but because it engages students in processes of discourse production and transformation.

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen, the two case studies above from 1<sup>st</sup> Year Law and Management, suggest that despite the distinct differences in the nature and complexity of their disciplines, students in these subjects shared similar perceptions of need at the macro-level. Both cohorts were preoccupied with pre-writing processes, such as the tasks of finding relevant material, and determining the amount and level of research involved. By contrast, academic staff tended to

## *Sources of Confusion*

focus on the written product itself, and its deficiencies, to a greater or lesser degree. There was also concern about the problem texts that emerged given the amount of support /documentation provided. While the availability of model texts certainly represents one signal difference between the two – Legal Process allows students access to these, but none appear available in the Management subject – as language and learning advisors, we would want to provide more focussed support to the instructional information of both subjects.

The online project we are currently developing at Monash may go some way in responding to the problems of transition that students have described above. At the individual subject level, the use of annotated sample assignments could help to satisfy the formatting frustration of Management students; but for both groups, knowledge about the discursive features and purposes of each subject can, more importantly, be clarified further. In the long term, however, the real challenge in creating these online learning tasks will be to engage students in a more sustained reflection on the reasons for their writing choices.

### **References**

- Candlin, C. (1998). Researching writing in the academy. In C. Candlin, S. Gollin, G. Plum, S. Spinks, V. Stuart-Smith (Eds.), *Researching academic literacies*. Sydney: Macquarie University.
- Clerehan, R., Moore, T. & Vance, S. (2000). Monash transition to tertiary writing project: part one. Paper presented at the National Language and Academic Skills Conference, La Trobe University, 2000.
- Lea, M. R. and Stierer, B. (Eds.) (2000). *Student writing in higher education: New contexts*. Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press.
- Kamler, B. & Maclean, R. (1997). "You can't just go to court and move your body": First year students learn to write and speak the law. *Law/Text/Culture*, 3, 176-209.

**WHEN I SAY 'DESCRIBE' I DON'T MEAN THAT YOU  
SHOULD JUST DESCRIBE...**

Alice Sinclair  
Monash University English Language Centre

*This paper discusses the unforeseen problems faced by a group of Indonesian students studying for a Masters in Health Services Management at Monash University. This program was a joint initiative between Monash University English Language Centre (MUELC), the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at Monash University and the Asian Development Bank. The students attained an overall IELTS score of 6, which is below the required entry score of 6.5. Students were accepted on condition that they had English language support in the form of an English language support officer.*

*Very soon into the semester it became clear that the problems and confusion students felt were not so easily defined as being language problems. Students were unclear about lecturer expectations, about what was meant by participation in lectures, about what they had to do to get more than just a pass in a written assignment. They were uncertain as to what exactly was meant by that 'something more' that they were told they had to do. Students were confused when in tutorials they were given questions to consider rather than concrete answers. Lecturers, in turn, were frustrated by the passivity of the students and found the lack of critical thinking disappointing.*

*Much of what is required of students is not explicitly stated. This is true of student behaviour in tutorials and of interpretation of assignment questions. Students are given readings with the expectation that they will see common themes and recognise underlying purposes. These things are rarely overtly stated and non-native English speakers focusing on unfamiliar academic registers and unknown vocabulary do not understand why, after dealing with all this, they still do not understand what is going on in the text. Students lack awareness of patterns of discourse and the fundamental nature of both spoken and written academic discourse.*

*In addition to raising awareness of these problems, this paper will attempt to uncover what exactly needs to be made explicit within the framing and language of assignments and in academic discourse in general. It will also seek to find ways of showing how to overcome the confusion and frustration felt by both students and tutors through working with both groups.*

**Introduction**

This paper discusses the unforeseen problems of a group of Indonesian students currently studying for a Masters in Health Services Management in the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at Monash University. The problems facing non-native speakers of English at English speaking tertiary institutions are, not surprisingly, widely held to be English proficiency based. There is, however, growing opinion that many of these problems may relate to difficulty in adapting to Western approaches of learning. Recent research, and the experiences of language support tutors, would seem to indicate that many international students attending Australian Universities are confused by differences in teaching styles,

## *Sources of Confusion*

lecturer expectations of their role in their own learning, and of what is required of them in terms of their assignments, by the emphasis placed upon learner independence, and by their relationship with academic staff (Bush, 1997; Spack, 1988; Ferris and Tagg, 1996; Pennycook, 1996; Leki, 1995). Comments from students would seem to indicate that these issues relate to the question of identity, or rather the perception of self and the positioning of self within academic discourse (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1992; Cadman, 1997; Scollon et al., 1999).

This is a working paper, in that the language support program discussed is ongoing. It is hoped that qualitative data, gathered at the end of the program, will support the reflections set out in this paper but it is my assertion that real understanding of students' difficulties comes from being involved in the program on a day to day basis. Awareness of staff and student expectations comes from direct experience, direct observation, reflection and group membership. Likewise, development of strategies and resources to equip students to cope with academic life comes from participation.

I will begin by briefly outlining the background to the program and the role of the language support officer, since this relates to the validity of the observations. I will then discuss what I perceive as the key sources of confusion: students' lack of awareness of the underlying purpose of lectures and tutorials and the mismatch between student and lecturer expectations of participation in lectures and tutorials and between student and lecturer expectations of assignments. Through sharing these observations I hope to show how awareness of the ways in which knowledge is constructed can minimise potential sources of confusion.

### **Background**

The reflections shared in this paper relate to the full-time English Language support given to an initial group of ten Indonesian students studying for a Masters in Health Services Management at Monash University. The students are all Indonesian health professionals in the areas of medicine, dentistry and pharmacology. Some of the students are practising health professionals, but others are involved in teaching and medical administration in both the private and public sectors of the Indonesian Health Services. The program is a joint initiative between Monash University English Language Centre (MUELC), the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at Monash University and the Asian Development Bank. All the students attained an overall IELTS score of 6, which is below the required entry score of 6.5. They were accepted on to the course on condition that they were given English language support in the form of a support officer. The students were also given support in the area of computing and they received pastoral care. It was envisaged that students would need support relating to social and cultural problems while adjusting to life away from their families in a foreign country. What were not anticipated were the problems they would have meeting the expectations of the subject teaching staff. The importance of this is indicated by Bush in her paper on lecturer expectations of academic writing.

Student success at a university depends largely upon how quickly they can adjust to the expectations of their lecturers. This is especially so in relation to their writing skills, by which they will, for the most part, be assessed. Students must learn how to write with a style and a content which is perceived to be acceptable and to be within the constraints of the academic discourse community. (Bush, 1997, p. 108)

However, it applies to more than just writing, as students are also judged on their participation, since active student participation involves demonstrating understanding.

The role of the English Language Support Officer was not clearly defined, apart from the fact that the assistance was to be discipline specific and complementary to their studies. It was largely up to the individual to create the role, but in many ways it developed around the needs of the students and staff and the requirement of the assignments.

## *Sources of Confusion*

In order to understand the students' requirements a two stage needs analysis was carried out; a discrete needs analysis followed by an ongoing needs analysis. The discrete analysis involved a breakdown of materials and tasks to discern the linguistic and academic skills required to understand and produce the assignments. The students were also given a self-rating questionnaire (Appendix) and a short writing task based on their responses to the questionnaire. These were followed up by interviews with the students. Finally, direct observation of students' performance in lectures and tutorials was undertaken over the first week. Again this was followed by discussion, with students and with teaching staff. The ongoing analysis involved direct observation of students' performance throughout the course to allow for continuing adaptation of English language support input.

The needs analysis provided information for development of materials for language and academic skills support. It gave insight into what had been previously studied, about how competent the students felt about what they had studied before and about how relevant they felt it to be. Through direct observation it was possible to see if there were discrepancies between what the students felt they could do and their actual performance. The needs analysis also provided direct support for the students, provided an avenue of feedback for subject teachers and helped establish good relationships with staff and students. The needs analysis, in the form of direct observation, also offered an insight into what was expected of the students, something that could not have been entirely gleaned from studying the course materials.

The results of the two-stage needs analysis indicated that students had a range of individual competencies. Shortcomings in these could only be addressed by small EAP workshops and through one to one tutorials. There was also a need for larger, mainly assignment driven, workshops. The former were aimed at dealing with individual needs and were based on error analysis, often using students' work as a starting point. The larger workshops covered items which the majority of the students expressed difficulty with, such as referencing and paraphrasing, and items the English Language Support Officer felt needed to be covered, such as analysis and discussion of parallel texts and critical thinking.

An interesting aspect of the needs analysis was the differences between the students' perceptions of their abilities and their actual performance. Initially, many of the students felt that their academic skills and study skills were good and that English language support should purely focus on improving their grammar. Furthermore, all of the students indicated that they had good presentation skills and that they did not need further support in this area. Indeed some stated that they gave regular presentations as part of their work in Indonesia. As time went on, continuing direct observation, the feedback students got from subject tutors and experience showed students that their perceptions were not always accurate and revision of the English language support syllabus was necessary.

Language support, in addition to the ways mentioned, consisted of comments and correction of written drafts and feedback on assignments. Subject input was in the form of lectures and tutorials. These varied in style according to student numbers and the individual teaching style of the teaching staff, and ranged from large lectures to tutorials involving just the Indonesian students. The students were comfortable with the large formal lectures but expressed considerable anxiety over seminars and tutorials involving smaller numbers of students. The reasons behind this relate to confusion over the purpose of the seminars and tutorials and these in turn relate to degrees of participation and to methodology.

Almost from the very beginning of the course it became apparent that the difficulties the students faced could not be entirely attributed to English language proficiency. There were the kind of language problems one would expect, but the students were also confused by other factors. Students expressed uncertainty and frustration over what was required of them in tutorials and seminars, and these feelings intensified with the feedback they received. The teaching staff, in turn, were disappointed and frustrated by the students' lack of active participation in tutorials and seminars and by the absence of critical analysis. What was needed was not a narrow view of English language support. The lines between subject and

language teaching became blurred and equal focus fell on language and analysis of assignment questions and key issues in subject areas.

### **How It All Fits Together - Understanding The Purpose**

From discussions with the students in Language support workshops and tutorials, it became clear that the students did not understand why they were not achieving the level of success they had anticipated. The students were clearly disappointed, confused and frustrated. Feedback on their performance from the teaching staff only intensified these feelings.

The students were comfortable with the large formal lectures they attended. They were familiar with this teaching method. They understood what they had to do, listen and write down what the lecturer said, and so the purpose was clear. However, in tutorials and seminars the students could not grasp what was expected of them because it was beyond their experience. The students related that their past experiences of tertiary education were passive; they attended lectures and took notes. Teachers in Indonesia, they said, are held in high regard. They are respected and their views go unquestioned. Therefore, despite having completed their undergraduate studies, the concept of critical analysis was new to them. Students were dismayed by the fact that, instead of providing them with answers, seminars and tutorials actually raised questions. Rather than considering why this was so, the students were concerned with where they would find the answers. Further confusion resulted when they found that the readings they had been given did not provide concrete answers, and their reaction was to try and find readings for themselves that would supply these. The students failed to understand the essential relationship between the readings, the assignments and the underlying purpose of the seminars/tutorials, which was not to impart information but to raise issues for discussion. The readings had been selected because the positions of these authors on key health care issues represented current thinking in the health care field and fueled current debate. It was anticipated that the students would draw on their own experiences, synthesise the information they had been given and critically evaluate it. The students, unfamiliar with how academic knowledge is constructed in the Western context, did not initially understand this.

Course and individual lecture/seminar/tutorial learning objectives were explicit, but the students did not have a global understanding of them or of how these objectives were reflected in the tasks they had to do. This was not just a matter of the tutor making this explicit or of the students learning new skills; the whole ethos of these concepts was alien to them. They did not understand what was expected of them because they were unfamiliar with the very nature of this academic discourse, of the role critical thinking plays in academic success and of their role within the Australian academic discourse communities to which most seek to belong (Hyland, 1999; Bush, 1997).

### **Expectations - Participation in Seminars and Tutorials**

In tutorials and seminars, teaching staff expect active participation. This participation involves contributing to the discourse by asking questions, raising points related to the discussion and challenging points. This allows the lecturer to expand on points and build on the discourse (Benesch, 1996). By participating in this way, the students demonstrate understanding and affirm their membership of the group. For the Indonesian students, this type of participation was daunting. Initially they did not understand why the lecturers were disappointed with them but even after this was explained to them, they did not feel able to take part in the requisite way.

Participating in this way requires linguistic skill and considerable self-confidence. Australian students undertaking this Masters are usually health care professionals already holding higher degrees with considerable experience and expertise. They view themselves as experts in their own fields and peers of the teaching staff. This is not how the Indonesian students regard themselves. The Indonesian students voiced alarm at the notion of challenging ideas in

## *Sources of Confusion*

tutorials and seminars and, in course feedback, have indicated that this was the most problematic aspect of their Masters.

The Indonesian students view themselves as students and the teaching staff as the experts. This is despite the fact that, like the Australian students, they are health care professionals of good standing. This view of themselves, combined with the limitations of expressing themselves in a language they do not have mastery of, is disempowering and relates to their sense of confusion about who they are when undertaking assignments. The Indonesian students did not take the stance expected by their tutors. They did not take on the roles of experts critically analysing the work of other experts, but looked to their tutors for clear answers to questions.

The subject teaching staff therefore sought ways of overcoming the 'passivity' of the students and of pushing them to take a stance on the issues raised in tutorials, seminars and in their written work. Where these strategies involved less emphasis on individual participation, they had some degree of success, but strategies which attempted to provoke students into participating and into taking a critical stance largely failed.

A fundamental element of language support is to develop strategies to help students construct academic argument based on research and their own experience. Positioning oneself, taking on the mantle of 'expert', in academic discourse, is a significant element of successful participation and, as I have already suggested, impacts on academic success (Bush, 1997; Cadman, 1997; Pennycook, 1996; Scollon et al., 1999). However, if you do not perceive yourself as having any degree of mastery, then how can you take the stance of 'expert', critically evaluating the work of other 'experts' and expressing and validating your own experiences in relation to the views of others? Clearly students need support in developing an identity from which to position themselves in their assignments. They need to be encouraged to see themselves as insiders, members of their particular discourse communities.

### **Expectations - Assignments**

The concept of finding a voice, and many of the points raised so far, also apply to student assignments, both written and oral. Initially, students were largely unaware of many of the underlying purposes of assignments and were uncertain about what was expected of them, in terms of content and style. What did the lecturers mean when they said "make sure you answer the question and explain your answers"? Had they not done this? They had given more detail and examples as directed, but it still was not right. The students' response was to blame their inability to articulate their ideas in English. Feedback from subject lecturers also mentioned problems relating to style and structuring of answers. The students clung on to this idea and, rather than addressing the real problems, focused on improving their style and structure, and their grammar.

In assignments students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the subject. This involves identifying primary issues and indicating how they are relevant. It involves demonstrating understanding of how theory applies to practice. It is not just about finding the right answer to a question, as many of the students believed. Students also need to be aware of why they are answering the question. Perhaps most importantly, they need to consider why the subject teacher has set them this particular question, why it is important and how it connects to the points being raised in lectures and in the readings. The Indonesian students seemed unprepared for this. The students related that explicitly demonstrating this level of understanding had not been part of their previous educational experience.

To illustrate this mismatch between lecturer expectations and students' awareness, I have used an example from the module on Epidemiology. The students were given an article reporting research findings. They were asked to 'appraise' the article and give 'short answers' to some 'methodological questions'. The students were given about 14 questions on the article similar to the one below:

## *Sources of Confusion*

'Was the cause of infertility related to the risk of any particular cancer?'

The students all answered correctly and said 'Yes'. Most named the type of cancer but none of the students gave the answer the lecturer had anticipated. The lecturer had expected an explanation of the possible connection between the cause and the risk. It had not been explicitly stated, but it was anticipated that the students would understand what was intended by 'methodological questions' and that they would know that at postgraduate level a simple yes or no would not do; they had to substantiate the conclusion they had reached. They were not clear what was meant by 'short answers', so the simple answers they gave seemed appropriate to them. The students took the questions at surface value. They understood the word 'appraise' but did not appreciate that analysis was required.

This typifies the kind of miscommunication that occurred between the students and the subject staff. The students did not fully comprehend what was required of them and subject staff did not think it necessary to say directly what they wanted, and indeed many of the staff were unclear themselves about what assignments should look like. It was often only once an assignment was submitted that they realised what they wanted.

Most subject lecturers were happy to receive feedback from the English Language Support Officer and made changes to accommodate the needs of the Indonesian students. Extra tutorials were timetabled and greater time was put aside for explanations of assignments and tutor expectations. Students were also given model answers to assignments they had completed earlier and directed to examples of previous students' work. Student confusion, pertaining to lecturer expectations of assignments, continued in the subject areas where the lecturers expected the students to make all the accommodation.

An understanding of critical thinking was only one dimension of this problem. What became clear from this assignment and subsequent assignments was the unwillingness on the part of some of the students to engage in critical analysis; they were actively resistant to it. A small minority of the students continued to submit work that was viewed as being purely descriptive and for which they received borderline passes. At first I assumed that this was the result of a language problem; I thought I had been unsuccessful in communicating what was required. However, from discussions it became evident that they had understood, but they had chosen not to engage in analysis. Just because we have taught these things does not mean that students will immediately adopt new ways of doing things. Patterns of learning were not learnt overnight and often there is resistance to abandoning what we know for something new. In their previous experiences of education these methods worked satisfactorily, and they did not feel compelled to change them, something not unique to non-native speakers. They explained politely and patiently that it was 'too difficult' and took 'too much time'. It would also seem that this coping strategy was working; they were getting passes and they were content to go their own way. My role was seen by these students as simply to correct their grammar.

To critically evaluate the work of others, one must understand it and be able to incorporate the ideas of others into one's own work. Was the reason these students found analysis 'too difficult' related to English language proficiency, or was it something else? These students were certainly not the weakest among the ten in terms of their language proficiency scores. Perhaps it relates to the issue raised under participation. If students are uncomfortable about challenging the work of 'experts' and imposing their ideas, then this may be another reason why they prefer to write descriptively and defer to the words and opinions of the author. This could also explain plagiarism to a certain degree (Pennycook, 1996).

### **Conclusion**

The key to the success of language support is a thorough analysis of what is actually required. The needs analysis was useful in gathering information about what should be taught but it also gave useful information about what was actually happening in tutorials and lectures, the ways they were conducted, and how students were performing in these tutorials and lectures. Direct

## *Sources of Confusion*

observation as part of a needs analysis, followed by discussions with those involved, provided the English Language Support Officer with first hand experience and genuine understanding of student and lecturer difficulties and individual discipline prerequisites. This understanding and insight was vital in developing a successful program that met the needs of the students and which dispelled much of the confusion and frustration felt by students and teaching staff.

As has been said, students' success, at least in Western universities, is to a great extent dependent on clear understanding of lecturer expectations (Bush, 1997) and of the academic culture underlying those expectations, but the students also need to be open to adopting appropriate learning strategies for a given academic context. The role of the English Language Support Officer in this program, in addition to offering English language and study skills instruction, involved developing strategies to raise students' awareness of the fundamental purpose of assignments. Students were focussed on the importance of knowing who their audience is and knowing about the expectations of that audience, in terms of both content and format. Strategies which foster critical thinking were also taught and the students were made mindful of the key role played by elements such as citation in the construction of academic knowledge and were alerted to learning aims and objectives.

Based on the experience of this program, a bank of strategies used could include brainstorming of issues, to develop themes and arguments, followed by group discussions, to draw out and validate individual experiences; scaffolding of texts; labelling of texts; model answers and highlighting of discursual patterns, at various levels. All of these strategies were found to be helpful in assisting students to find a stance and a voice and, by making students aware of how discourse operates at distinct levels, this analysis in itself promotes critical thinking. The resources chosen were all highly relevant, paralleling those being used in their subject areas. Indeed much of the teaching materials used in this program were actual course materials. Of course, care must be taken so as not to compromise the integrity of the assignments.

Part of the role of language support is to anticipate potential sources of confusion and to work with subject staff to overcome these. As happened in this program, the English Language Support Officer needs to work closely with subject staff, so that they themselves are clear about what they expect, and then help them to frame assignment questions to reflect their expectations. Subject staff can not assume all students come to them with similar academic backgrounds and experiences. Students lacking knowledge of academic constructs need time to develop understanding as well as academic skills. One of the constraints of this program was the lack of time students had to produce assignments, but the time taken to explain exactly what was expected saved time in drafting and resubmission of assignments. The majority of lecturers and tutors were happy to receive feedback and many to change their methodology to try and make their teaching of the Indonesian students more effective. For example, they allowed the students to work in groups rather than focusing on individual student contributions. Initially lecturers made judgements about students' understanding of lectures and tutorials through the degree of active participation displayed by the students, whether the students asked questions and contributed to the discourse. However, it can not be assumed that students do not understand because they do not participate in the ways anticipated. It may be that risk-taking, such as critically analysing the work of others and active participation in lectures and tutorials, is an important factor in the process of learning but, in the early stages of developing learner autonomy, this needs to be done in a supportive atmosphere. After discussion with the Support Officer other methods were sought and one way was to check for understanding using a quiz. The process of demonstrating understanding in tutorials is undoubtedly valuable but ways of participating that are less confrontational and build self-confidence are desirable and should be fully exploited.

In addition to the students' willingness to adopt new learning strategies, the success of the program to date can be, in no small way, attributed to the acceptance by the teaching staff of the role of the Language Support Officer as a mediator and their willingness to adopt a flexible approach to teaching.

**References**

- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1984). *Study abroad: A manual for Asian students*. Malaysia: Longman.
- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1988). *Studying in Australia*. Melbourne: Longman.
- Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas*. Melbourne: Longman.
- Barrett-Lennard, S. (1997). Encouraging autonomy and preparing for IELTS: Mutually exclusive goals?. *Prospect* (12) 29-40.
- Benesch, S. (1996). Needs analysis and curriculum development in EAP; An example of a critical approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30, 723-738.
- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. Goody, (Ed.), *Questions and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bush, D. (1997). Expectations of academic writing at Australian universities: work in progress. *Academic Communication across Disciplines and Cultures*, 1, 108-116.
- Cadman, K. (1997). Thesis writing for international students: A question of identity? *English for Specific Purposes*, 16, 3-14.
- Culture of Confusion. *The Age*. Nov. 1., 2000.
- Elliot, M. (1997). The teaching of academic discourse: A collaboration between discipline lecturers and academic support staff at RMIT. *Academic Communication across Disciplines and Cultures*, 2, 77-87.
- Ferris, D., & Tagg, T. (1996). Academic oral communication needs of EAP learners: What subject-matter instructors actually require. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30, 31-55.
- Gumperz, J. & Cook-Gumperz, J. (1982). Introduction: Language and communication of social identity. In J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hallett, R. (1997). Promoting language skills through collaboration between content lecturers and language specialists. *Academic Communication across Disciplines and Cultures*, 2, 88-99.
- Horowitz, D. (1986). What professors actually require: Academic tasks for the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 445-462.
- Hyland, K. (1999). Academic attribution: Citation and the construction of disciplinary knowledge. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 341-367.
- Leki, I. (1995). Coping strategies of ESL students in writing tasks across the curriculum. *TESOL Quarterly* (29), 235-260.
- Lewis, R. (1996). Indonesian students' learning styles. *EA Journal*, 14, 27-32.
- Littlewood, W. (2000). Do Asian students really want to listen and obey? *ELT Journal*, 54, 31-36.
- Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing others' words: Text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism.

## *Sources of Confusion*

*TESOL Quarterly*, 30, 201-229.

Scollon, R., & Wong Scollon, S. (1995). *Intercultural communication*. Hong Kong: Language in society.

Scollon, R., Bhatia, V., Li, D. & Yung, V. (1999). Blurred genres and fuzzy identities in Hong Kong public discourse: Foundational ethnographic issues in the study of reading. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 22-43.

Skelton, J. (1997). The representation of truth in academic medical writing. *Applied Linguistics*, 18, 121-140.

Spack, R. (1988). Initiating ESL students into the academic discourse community: How far should we go? *TESOL Quarterly*, 22, 29-49.

**Appendix**

**EAP SKILLS FOCUS**

Name:.....

Please rate yourself against each of the following items by ticking the appropriate box.

	Poor		Fair		Expert
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Time Management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Sentence and paragraph structure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Plagiarism	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Paraphrasing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Summarising	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Skimming and scanning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Presentation Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Essay planning, outlining and organizing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Using references, quoting and acknowledgement conventions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Paragraphing and transition sentences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Academic language	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Conclusions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Cause and effect language structures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Note taking Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Critical thinking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Bibliographies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Sources of Confusion*

17. Making inferences

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

18. PowerPoint skills

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

19. Refuting arguments and persuasion

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

20. Selecting information from long texts

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

Please write around 100-150 words on the following:

How relevant do you think the items you have rated are for your present studies and for your future studies or career?

## THE ROOT OF THE CONFUSION: IDENTITY

Serena Lay Tin Tan Yew and Lesley Farrell  
Monash University

*The sources of confusion Hong Kong international students in Australia universities face in adapting to writing are many: the English language, influences of Chinese, educational background and expectations of writing specific to the discipline. Currently, the approach taken in helping these students treats only the symptoms rather than the root problem, which is identity. Identity is the way people see themselves and their society and understand the world. Identity is a cultural product of the culture-specific practices and values that are held. Identities are reflected in writing. Through writing, readers can establish the kind of person the writer is; what writers view as important; and the kind of perspective they are working from. Hence, reading is an act of identity as well. Research has shown that it is precisely this act of identification which decides the acceptance or rejection of the writer as part of the academic community. Thus to be able to write acceptable academic assignments for Australian Universities, Hong Kong students have to adopt the persona necessary for it. However, it does not mean that Hong Kong students have to give up their ethnic identities. Their ethnic voice can surface and provide an alternative perspective within the acceptable written tradition of the discipline. That will result in satisfaction on the parts of both the students and the academics. This paper also suggests approaches that educators involved with Asian students can adopt to bring about a more fruitful relationship.*

### Introduction

Entering university is a major step in one's educational career. The academic culture is vastly different from high school, especially for international students from Hong Kong commencing studies in an Australian University in a second language. Hong Kong students come focussed on gaining a degree. However, they come with many apprehensions. Performance in English is a common worry, and so is the ability to adapt to living and studying in Australia. Hong Kong embraces cultural practices and values that are very different from those of the Australian. The loss of the strong support from family and friends is also acutely felt. All these social differences make Hong Kong students acutely aware of their Hong Kong Chinese identity. Yet to succeed, they have to acquire an Australian identity that is preferred in Australian Universities, as identity affects the way writers write. Hence they are faced with the dilemma of preserving their Hong Kong identity while having to acquire Australian practices and values in order to be accepted as one of "us". This paper writes about these pressures on self identity and looks at how they affect academic writing. Suggestions on how Hong Kong students can be helped in resolving the root of their confusion, that of an identity problem, are also explored.

### 1. Sources of Confusion

#### (a) *Lack of English Fluency*

The proficiency of Hong Kong students' English has been documented as low language (Brock, 1992; Lau, 1997; Pennington, 1995). Before arriving in Australia, Hong Kong

## *Sources of Confusion*

students hardly use English socially, despite learning it in school. It quickly becomes clear that their inability to function fluently in English becomes a liability in Australia. There is a need to overcome the language barrier, and to be able to communicate orally and in writing, both of which are important to university studies.

### *(b) Different Culturally Preferred Rhetorical Structures*

The drive to master the English language is also complicated by influences from their first languages (Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lado, 1983; Lay, 1982; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Raimes, 1979). Writing is a cultural practice and many researchers have suggested that Australians and Chinese have specific views on what good writing constitutes in particular contexts (Kaplan, 1966; Kaplan, 1995; Li, 1996). Hence cultural contexts would have critical influences on the motives of writing and the writing itself (Matalene, 1985; Reither, 1985; Zamel, 1987). The importance and practices of citation are also viewed differently (Scollon, 1994; Scollon, 1995). Similarly, the role of writers and readers towards the interpretation of intention(s) of the writing are different (Hinds, 1987; Li & Thompson, 1976).

### *(c) Foreign Classroom Culture*

Besides having to overcome the linguistic barrier, the culture shock that Hong Kong students face adds to the confusion. The expectations and relationships among students, with lecturers and tutors are very different from those in Hong Kong. Students are shocked that lecturers are addressed by their first name, allow themselves to be challenged and allow students to be so vocal in their disagreements (Tan Yew, 2000). From personal communication with Hong Kong students, they have commented that Australian students are disrespectful, rude and boastful. They also said that tutors and lecturers are lacking in authority, have little confidence in their own knowledge and are not able to control the class.

### *(d) Contradictory Values: Collective vs Individualistic*

As Hong Kong students are not used to the individualistic classroom culture and find it contradictory to their collective value system, they often remain very quiet. On top of that, their low confidence in the use of English ensures their perceived passivity as they are unable to articulate their thoughts well and are afraid of making mistakes (Brown, 1987; Liu & Littlewood, 1997). The perceived intimidation in a vocal, argumentative tutorial environment would also add to this fear (Chalmers & Volet, 1997). However, this passivity does not mean that these students are not thinking or do not hold opinions (Leki, 1997). Braine (1994) observes that ESL students who are usually withdrawn and silent in mainstream classes become actively involved in classroom activities and discussions in ESL classes, and often ask questions. The silence is due to a changed social environment. In Hong Kong, mutual obligation exists among classmates to contribute to each other's learning (Ho, 1981; Ho, 1986; Salili, 1996; Tang, 1996). The huge change to the Australian system is enough to ensure their silence.

### *(e) Misunderstood Learning Strategies*

Moreover, the learning strategies of Hong Kong students, which have served them all their lives, are often put down in this new environment. Their writing is described as lacking in analysis, criticism, rigour in organisation, and expression of their own opinions (Ballard, 1989; Ballard, 1996; Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Burke, 1986; Burns, 1991; Clanchy & Ballard, 1997; Samuelowicz, 1987). This leaves Hong Kong students confused with what is wrong with their learning and writing strategies. Their self esteem is further deflated as they are told to stop memorising their learning materials, a strategy commonly used in Confucian heritage cultures to understand new concepts. Recent research has demonstrated that students from Confucian heritage cultures employ a deep learning strategy that has been misread by the West in the past (Biggs, 1987; Biggs, 1996; Kember & Gow, 1990; Kember & Gow, 1991; Watkins & Ismail, 1994; Watkins, Regmi, & Astilla, 1991). In these cultures, as in the learning of Chinese 'kung fu', learners practise the basic steps over and over again. It is

through this repeated memorising of these steps that there is a seemingly sudden enlightening of the meaning of the principles behind these steps. Similarly, students are seen to be memorising materials given to them, but that process does lead to an understanding of the materials rather than just rote learning without any understanding of meanings and implications (Biggs, 1987; Biggs, 1996; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Marton, Dall'Albu, & Kun, 1996; Volet & Renshaw, 1996; Watkins, 1996). These repetitive motions are a way of focussing and reflecting on the matter to be learnt.

## **2. Treatment of Symptoms and Root of Confusion/Problem**

Despite the effort put into providing guidance to help international students in Australia adjust to the demands of a tertiary education, there seems to be little real progress in the rate of their adjustment. Is this just the different expectations of the students and Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers? Hong Kong students can easily mistake LAS advisers for the English language teachers they had in schools. They expect LAS advisers to correct their work, tell them what is wrong and teach them how to correct it. On the other hand, LAS advisers see themselves in the role of trying to help these students take ownership of their writing and to use the process of revision as a means to think through the contents of their writing. Both can come out of the process frustrated and confused. All the energy channelled in seems to end up in a repeated cycle, with very little light at the end of the tunnel. Perhaps, the effort is only scratching the surface of a deeper source of confusion. With a wrong diagnosis, and the root problem not dealt with, the problem will persist.

## **3. Root Problem: Self Identities**

What then is the problem? How do we sort out the confusion of not just these Hong Kong students but that of LAS advisers as well as academic staff involved in teaching them? Students' English language has to be polished, the cultural practices of a tutorial in particular and the discipline in general have to be learnt but the more fundamental problem of identity has to be dealt with (Tan Yew, 2000).

When Hong Kong students come to Australia, their difference is highlighted and they feel their ethnic distinction from mainstream Australians. They have taken their identity for granted in Hong Kong where 97% of the population speak Cantonese ((Lau, 1997). These students instinctively congregate to support each other and to preserve their sense of self identities. This complicates the demands for them to absorb and adjust to an Australian identity that is required in their academic writing.

An internal struggle with the questions of 'Who am I?' and 'Who do I want to be?' contribute to their confusion of adjusting to writing in Australian universities. Perceptions of how much they can preserve their ethnic identity and how much Australian identity they need to acquire, directly affect their writing and its acceptability in Australian contexts.

Such multiple-faceted identities revolve around issues of 'us' versus 'them', of acceptance and rejection, and hence of associated power and inequalities (Hall, 1997; Ivanic, 1998; Pennycook, 1999). Writing is an act of identity (Ivanic, 1998). Writing reflects the ways writers see themselves, and understand the society and the world. Hong Kong students coming to Australian universities have to create an Australian self within themselves. However, it does not mean that they have to replace their ethnic selves. Both selves can co-exist as parts of their identities. The different identities are drawn out depending on the social setting. When Hong Kong students write for an Australian academic audience, the students have to assume an Australian self that understands and interprets the world and presents information from an Australian perspective.

Reading is also an act of identity. Research has shown that readers (including examiners and educators) expect writing to be organised in a culturally-preferred rhetorical structure which can be specific to the discipline (Farrell, 1997; Hamp-Lyons, 1990; Ivanic, 1998; Leki, 1995). Also certain values and ways of speaking are upheld and students have to learn to join in the

conversations (Bartholomae, 1985). Through writing, readers are actually trying to establish the identity of the writer. With that information, readers then decide whether the writer is similar enough to be considered as one of the academic community. As readers have the power to accept or reject the writer, the adherence to the institutional self is crucial in gaining admittance to a specific academic community (Casanave, 1995; Geertz, 1983; Ivanic, 1998; Pennycook, 1999; Scollon, 1995).

#### **4. Suggested Approaches**

What then are the implications for the teaching of Hong Kong students in Australian universities and what concrete steps can be taken to resolve this root of the confusion?

##### *(a) Explicit Discussion of Self Identities*

The good work of LAS advisers should be continued but perhaps a new approach can be taken. Certainly, there are Hong Kong students who have managed to overcome the problems of identity and write academically acceptable writing. However, many stumble on the way and an explicit discussion of the issues of identity helps in identifying the source of confusion and realising a strategy to overcome it (Tan Yew, 2000). It also reduces the overwhelming feeling Hong Kong students have of seeing themselves and their stupidity as the root of the problem. Sharing about their difficulties in adopting a new identity and talking about how they can work towards a successful adjustment can expedite their adjustments.

##### *(b) Attitudes towards (i) Asian Students and (ii) their Learning Styles*

Where there is an attitude among academics of being too busy to set aside time for Asian students and where there is a lack of interest in them, as reported by Ballard (1996), it is impossible to reconcile the confusions. It takes willingness and effort on the parts of the students as well as the educators to bridge the different learning cultures. There is also a need to enlighten all academic staff involved with Asian students of their learning strategies and their strengths.

I have personally heard Asian students being told, "This is the way we Australians do things here. I don't want you to do your (country's) way." This dismissive approach may be perceived by the students as suggesting that their cultural practices are inferior to those of Australians. Perhaps Hong Kong students can share how things are done and what behaviours are expected in Hong Kong. This discussion of cultural expectations in the tutorial room and the roles of students, tutors and lecturers can lead to the identification of the values operating beneath them. In Hong Kong, respect and discipline would commonly surface. LAS advisers or tutors can then explain the Australian academic expectations and also focus on the values that are being encouraged. The emphasis on critical thinking, the development of voice and respect for individual thinking might become clearer to Hong Kong students. This explicit discussion could end on the note that there is not one set of values that is superior over the other but a matter of cultural preferences. Also, critical thinking needs not be disrespectful and criticism of one's idea in a tutorial class remains just that after the argument is over. It is not a personal attack and there should be no lingering ill feeling. Hence, differences between the Hong Kong system and Australian system can be talked about and Australian educators can benefit from a deeper understanding of how Hong Kong students work. On the other hand, Hong Kong students can also see the differences and be clear that they have to adopt a different persona while writing in English.

Academics should become more aware of how students from Hong Kong background learn and think, and how best to tap into the strengths of these strategies (Tan Yew, 2000). This should counter the misreading of these strategies and the implicit passing on of such dismissive attitudes to their Hong Kong students. Adamson and Morris (1998) have warned that an understanding of socio-cultural differences is important to avoid the tendency "for educators steeped in Western models of education to interpret schooling elsewhere through their own cultural understanding" (p.202).

### *(c) Tapping into Strengths of Asian Learning Strategies*

Some of the learning strategies of Hong Kong students can also be adapted to Australian universities. Group work can be encouraged or formalised within tutorial groups. Given specific tasks, this would support small group discussion of students' readings (Tan Yew, 2000). Talking about the ideas and concepts within the readings, would contribute towards students' understanding as they tap into each other's interpretation of the materials (Biggs, 1996; Ho, 1981; Ho, 1986; Salili, 1996; Tang, 1996; Winter, 1996). Furthermore, these discussions would be a rehearsal ground for students to practise vocalising their ideas and that would increase their confidence to participate in the tutorial group.

### *(d) Making Explicit Australian Preferred Style*

#### *(i) Critical Reading*

Hong Kong students should also be given opportunities to acquire skills that are critical to academic writing here (Tan Yew, 2000). Critical reading workshops can be organised where value-laden statements or suggestions in texts are highlighted and writers' intentions questioned. A further analysis of how those intentions are achieved would help students acquire an understanding of what a critical approach to reading is. Also within these workshops, analysis of an article, paragraph by paragraph, for the development of ideas would be helpful to illustrate the emphasis on ideas rather than language, while reading.

#### *(ii) Critical Writing and Voice*

The process approach to writing should also be introduced, with the aims of drafting clearly discussed with the students so that Hong Kong students can appreciate the processes of revising of ideas and thinking through writing. They can also benefit from the process of working on the coherence of ideas and looking at the argument of their writing before attending to the mechanics of the language. That way, the individual voice can be developed and Hong Kong students will become more successful in their writing assignments. At the same time, the process approach provides the tutors with an insight into how the students think, and what the students regard as the key issue. This also allows for a negotiated process of what is critical to the assignment.

#### *(iii) Assignments Expectations*

Perhaps, lecturers could, at the beginning of the course, distribute a compilation of past assignments. Both local and foreign students can benefit from the attempt at interpreting these assignments and discussing their requirements in a tutorial. Misunderstandings can be clarified and students can develop a clearer idea of the demands of assignments within their discipline.

Being explicit about the objectives of these strategies and the steps involved would help their acquisition of these new strategies. The opportunity to practise would also aid students in an internalization of the process and a deeper understanding of the principles behind them.

## **Conclusion**

With a clearer idea of the adjustments that Hong Kong students have to make, the task of adopting an Australian self in academic writing becomes easier. At least, these students would not need to struggle on their own and wonder what is wrong with the learning and writing strategies that have served them all their lives. An explicit understanding of self identities would make them understand the adjustment process and thus become confident of making that adoption. A successful adoption of an Australian identity would also resolve most of the social and cultural difficulties they face. With an Australian perspective they can then see and function in an Australian preferred language (English), rhetorical structure, and classroom environment.

In addition, LAS advisers, tutors and lecturers working with Hong Kong students would also achieve more satisfaction in their efforts to help Hong Kong students become successful in the

Australian system if they can help these students resolve their problems of identity. Helping these students will also broaden and deepen the perspective of Australian educators into other cultural learning practices.

Most importantly, Asian students should be assured that their ethnic identity can be preserved. In fact, their ethnic voice can surface to provide a different perspective to conventional thinking if they can manage to write in an acceptable manner for the Australian academic community. This will result in satisfaction for both the Asian students as well as Australian university educators.

### References

- Adamson, B., & Morris, P. (1998). Primary schooling in Hong Kong. In J. Moyles & L. Hargreaves (Eds.), *The primary curriculum: Learning from international perspectives* (pp. 181-204). London: Routledge.
- Ballard, B. (1989). Overseas students and Australia academics: Learning and teaching styles. In B. Williams (Ed.), *Overseas students in Australia: Policy and practice* (pp. 87-98). Canberra: International Development Programme.
- Ballard, B. (1996). Through language to learning: Preparing overseas students for study in Western Universities. In H. Coleman (Ed.), *Society and the language classroom* (pp. 148-168). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the university. In M. Rose (Ed.), *When a writer can't write* (pp. 134-165). New York: Guilford.
- Biggs, J. B. (1987). *Student approaches to learning and studying*. Hawthorn, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Biggs, J. B. (1996). Western misconceptions for the Confucian-heritage learning culture. In D. Watkins & J.B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 45-67). Melbourne and Hong Kong: ACER and CERC.
- Bradley, D., & Bradley, M. (1984). *Problems of Asian students in Australia: Language, culture and education*. Canberra: Australian Government Printing Services.
- Braine, G. (1994). Starting ESL classes in freshman writing programs. *TESOL Journal*, 3, 22-26.
- Brock, M. N. (1992). Made in Hong Kong: An imperialist rhetoric and the teaching of composition. In M. N. Brock & L. Walters (Eds.), *Teaching composition around the Pacific Rim: Politics and pedagogy* (pp. 28-34). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Brown, H. D. (1987). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Burke, B. D. (1986). The experiences of overseas undergraduates. *University of New South Wales Student Counselling and Research Unit Bulletin*(18).
- Burns, R. B. (1991). *The adjustment of overseas students: A study of the academic, cultural, social and personal problems of overseas first year students at an Australian university*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Casanave, C. P. (1995). Local interactions: Constructing contexts for composing in a graduate sociology programme. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic*

## Sources of Confusion

- writing in a second language: *Essays on research and pedagogy* (pp. 83-110). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Chalmers, D., & Volet, S. (1997). Common misconceptions about students from South-East Asia studying in Australia. *HERDSA*, 16(1), 87-98.
- Clanchy, J., & Ballard, B. (1997). *Essay writing for students: A practical guide*. (third ed.). Melbourne, Australia: Longman.
- Farrell, L. (1997). Making grades. *Australian Journal of Education*, 41(2), 134-149.
- Friedlander, A. (1990). Composing in English: Effects of a first language on writing in English as a second language. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 109-125). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1990). Second language writing: Assessment issues. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 69-87). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinds, J. (1987). Reader versus writer responsibility: A new typology. In U. Connor (Ed.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 texts* (pp. 141-153). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Ho, D. Y. F. (1981). Traditional patterns of socialization in Chinese society. *Acta Psychologica Tawainica*, 23, 81-95.
- Ho, D. Y. F. (1986). Chinese patterns of socialization: A critical review. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The psychology of the Chinese people* (pp. 1-37). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discursive construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jones, S., & Tetroe, J. (1987). Composing in a second language. In A. Matsuhashi (Ed.), *Writing in real time: Modelling production processes* (pp. 34-57). New York: Longman.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1995). The teaching of writing around the Pacific Basin. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 6(1), 5-12.
- Kember, D., & Gow, L. (1990). Cultural specificity of approaches to study. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 60, 356-363.
- Kember, D., & Gow, L. (1991). A challenge to the anecdotal stereotype of the Asian student. *Studies in Higher Education*, 16, 117-128.
- Lado, R. (1983). Excerpts from 'Linguistics across culture'. In S. Glass & L. Selinker (Eds.), *Transfer in language learning* (pp. 21-32). London: Newbury House.

- Lau, C. K. (1997). *Hong Kong's colonial legacy*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Lay, N. (1982). Composing processes of adult ESL learners: A case study. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 406.
- Leki, I. (1995). Good writing: I know it when I see it. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic writing in a second language: Essays and research and pedagogy* (pp. 23-46). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.
- Leki, I. (1997). ESL issues and contrastive rhetoric. In C. Severino, J. C. Guerra, & J. E. Butler (Eds.), *Writing in multicultural settings* (pp. 234-244). NY: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Li, C. N., & Thompson, S. A. (1976). Subject and topic: A new typology of language. In C. N. Li (Ed.), *Subject and topic* (pp. 457-489). New York: Academic Press.
- Li, X. (1996). *Good writing: In cross-cultural context*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Liu, N.-F., & Littlewood, W. (1997). Why do many students appear reluctant to participate in classroom learning discourse? *System*, 25(3), 371-384.
- Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G., & Kun, T. L. (1996). Memorizing and understanding: The keys to the paradox. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences*. Melbourne and Hong Kong: ACER and CERC.
- Matalene, C. (1985). Contrastive rhetoric: An American writing teacher in China. *College English*, 47, 789-808.
- Mohan, B. A., & Lo, W. A.-Y. (1985). Academic writing and Chinese students: Transfer and developmental factors. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(3), 515-534.
- Pennington, M. C. (1995). Pattern and variation in use of two languages in the Hong Kong secondary English class. *RELC Journal*, 26(2), 80-105.
- Pennycook, A. (1999). Introduction: Critical Approaches to TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(3), 329-348.
- Raimes, A. (1979). *Problems and teaching strategies in ESL composition (If Johnny has problems, what about Juan, Jean and Ywe-Han?)*. Ann-Arbor, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Reither, J. B. (1985). Writing and knowing: Toward redefining the writing process. *College English*, 47, 620-628.
- Salili, F. (1996). Accepting personal responsibility for learning. In D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 85-105). Melbourne and Hong Kong: ACER and Comparative Education Research Centre.
- Samuelowicz, K. (1987). Learning problems of overseas students: Two sides of a story. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 6(2), 121-133.
- Scollon, R. (1994). As a matter of fact: The changing ideology of authorship and responsibility in discourse. *World Englishes*, 13, 33-46.

- Scollon, R. (1995). Plagiarism and ideology: Identity in intercultural discourse. *Language in Society*, 24, 1-28.
- Tang, C. (1996). Collaborative learning: The latent dimension in Chinese students' learning. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 183-204). Melbourne and Hong Kong: ACER and CERC.
- Tan Yew, S.L.T. (2000). What makes writing difficult for Hong Kong international students in Australian universities? Unpublished Masters, Monash University, Clayton, Australia.
- Volet, S. E., & Renshaw, P. D. (1996). Chinese students at an Australian university: Adaptability and continuity. In D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 205-220). Melbourne and Hong Kong: ACER and CERC.
- Watkins, D. (1996). Learning theories and approaches to research: A cross-cultural perspective. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological, and contextual influences* (pp. 3-24). Melbourne and Hong Kong: ACER and CERC.
- Watkins, D. & Ismail, M. (1994). Is the Asian learner a rote-learner? A Malaysian perspective. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 19, 483-488.
- Watkins, D. A., Regmi, M., & Astilla, E. (1991). The-Asian-learner-as-rote-learner stereotype: Myth or reality? *Educational Psychology*, 11, 21-34.
- Winter, S. (1996). Peer tutoring and learning outcomes. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 221-241). Melbourne and Hong Kong: ACER and CERC.
- Zamel, V. (1987). Recent research on writing pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(4), 697-715.

## POOR EXPRESSION OR POOR COMPREHENSION?

Robyn Thomas  
La Trobe University

*Many markers of students' essays comment that a student needs to improve his/her expression, and in the case of non-English speaking background students it may seem a logical response. But as a language and academic skills adviser, I spend a large portion of my time asking students to explain the content of their topic and all too often I decide that the student does not have a sufficient grasp of the material to write about it clearly. Several samples of student writing will illustrate how a grammatically "correct" piece of writing can nevertheless be almost meaningless. Yet markers seem reluctant to question a student's understanding unless s/he makes an obvious mistake. We need to find ways that will help tutors to look beneath the surface of their students' written expression and to recognise that to improve the quality of their writing will require more than teaching them about the structure of a sentence.*

### **Introduction**

"If we are to write well we need to know (as well as we can) what we are talking about." In this, the opening sentence of Gordon Taylor's (1990) book, *The student's writing guide for the arts and social sciences*, lies the core of my paper. But, perhaps his book should be retitled, "The tutor's guide to understanding student writing" for it seems that many readers of student essays are confused about which particular skills the students lack. I refer, in this instance, to markers' comments regarding "expression" (or the term "literacy skills" which some markers are using lately). Many students are advised to seek help from a language specialist to improve their expression. Most of them believe this diagnosis to be an explanation of why their work is unacceptable. Both tutor and student seem to be hoping for a quick cure under the care of the language and academic skills specialist.

To state what may seem obvious, "writing is a demanding mental activity" (Sharples, 1999, p.6), but I do not think this fact is frankly discussed in classes. Consequently students often blame the essay topic ("It's too hard"), and/or the tutor (for lack of guidance) as they struggle to write. When they receive their work back with a low mark and comments about their expression they shift the blame to yet another cause – their inadequate English expression.

This paper looks at three pieces of student writing described by tutors as unacceptable because of poor expression. In the case of a non-English speaking background student it may seem a justifiable criticism. But as a language and academic skills adviser, I spend a large portion of my time asking students to explain the content of their topic and all too often I decide that the student does not have a sufficient grasp of the material to write about it clearly. It is my contention that students' poor expression is largely a result of their poor comprehension of the concepts and expectations of the discourse community. This lack of understanding of their topic partly reflects the students' attitude and approach to writing, but it also raises questions about the tutors' role in preparing students for their writing tasks and the effect that their feedback has in improving students' writing. Several ways the language and academic skills adviser can work with tutors to assist students to recognise the relationship between the "understanding of the content and their ability to write about it" (Campbell, Smith & Brooker, 1998, p.467) are explored.

### **Student learning and writing**

Educational researchers such as Perry (1968), Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle (1984) and Saljo (1987) have concluded that learning is a developmental process, it is subjective and reflects an individual's social and institutional conditioning. Perry's (1968) study of Harvard University students indicated a developmental sequence in the growth of students' intellectual capacity to deal with the demands of their university education. It also "revealed the wide range...of ways in which they construed the nature of knowledge, the origin of values, the intention of instructors, and their own responsibilities" (Perry, 1968, p.215). Marton et al's. (1984) and Saljo's (1987) work also led them to believe "that there is a *functional* relationship between the mode in which people subjectively construe learning and the way they go about dealing with learning tasks"(emphasis in original) (Saljo, 1987, p.105).

The main way tertiary institutions assess their students' learning is via written work, generally in the form of essays. The strategies students adopt when they write essays has been examined by several educational researchers (Campbell et al. 1998; Hounsell 1984, 1987; Malhaski 1992; Norton 1990). Hounsell (1984, 1987) interviewed psychology and history students about their planning strategies when writing essays, but found that a more important influence than planning on students' writing was their conceptualisation of essay writing. His views are supported by Campbell et al. (1998) in their study of first and third year Bachelor of Education students.

In Norton's (1990) analysis of student writing, she found that "the majority of students saw the main purpose of their essay to be concerned with content and structure" (Norton, 1990, p.431) "Less than a quarter" were concerned with putting forward an argument (p.431). Nearly one third of the students "wrote with no-one in particular as an audience" (p.419). The tutors she interviewed, on the other hand, believed that understanding and argument were the most important criteria for assessment. Consequently, there is "a mismatch between students and tutors on their perceptions of the most important criteria" (Norton, 1990, p.411) that determine the final mark for an essay.

These studies (Campbell, 1998; Hounsell, 1984, 1987; Malhaski, 1992; Norton 1990) were not specifically looking at students' grammatical structures, but they were examining students' attempts to make meaningful written responses to set topics. Yet if students are struggling to conceptualise the ideas and respond in the language of the discipline then their expression will reflect their confusion. This view is supported by Taylor and Nightingale (1990) who examined the types of errors that are common to undergraduate students' writing. They analysed the grammatical errors of first year history students' writing in two separate years, a decade apart. They concluded that "the most statistically significant elements in error-prone writing" relate to "the constitution of meaning" and the problems of "writers who make many grammatical errors... do not lend themselves to 'purely' grammatical solutions" (p.161). They argue that the subject tutors are best able to assist their students to understand and write about the content of their subjects.

Overall, these studies, despite using different methodologies with different student groups, have found that a student's notion of the purpose of an essay is reflected in his/her reading and analysis of pertinent literature, subsequent reflection, and development of an argument. If the tutors' conception of what constitutes a "good" essay is different to that of many of their students', how can tutors help students to develop a more sophisticated approach to learning and writing? The principal means by which tutors can influence their students' learning is through tutorials and via assessment feedback to their students. Thus, the role and effectiveness of written feedback to students is of increasing interest to educational researchers (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hounsell, 1987; Leki, 1990; Reid, 1994; Ridsdale, 2000).

### **Tutor feedback on students' writing**

The majority of students receive written feedback on their assignments. In some cases a proforma is used and the marker rates the students' work according to criteria such as logical development of ideas, use of supporting evidence, identification of issues, originality, clarity of expression and acknowledgement of sources. It would seem that tutors and students often do not have a common understanding of what these criteria mean. It is not unusual for students to come and ask me for an interpretation of their tutors' comments and an explanation of where exactly they have gone wrong. What then are students learning from tutor feedback? Hounsell (1987) refers to the effect of feedback that is "opaque in its signification" as unconstructive feedback and since it "fails to connect, it comes to be viewed as insignificant or invalid" (p.17).

Much of the following research regarding feedback mentioned in this paper concerns non-English speaking background (NESB) students, but equally applies to native speakers of English. Leki (1990, p. 57) uses a delightful analogy likening tutors' comments to those of a football coach "shouting encouragement and tactical advice" while "coaching from the margins". Leki remarks that tutors' comments may be "intended to produce improvement, but what constitutes improvement is not so clear" and that even "draft interventions" do not necessarily translate to "long term improvement" (Leki, 1990, p.58). Similarly, Ridsdale (2000) comments that correcting grammar does not ensure better writing next time. Her study of postgraduate research students' understanding of supervisors' comments indicates that "students have a different perception" to their supervisors of the guidance they have received (Ridsdale, 2000, p.14). Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) studied students' responses to teachers' comments in three different educational settings (two groups were NESB students and one group was English language speakers). Their results showed that even students judged as high performers often did not understand the teacher's comments. Native speakers, however, were more likely to question and disagree with the teacher feedback than were NESB students. One area they believe requires further investigation is what influences teachers in their choice of types of feedback to students.

Discussions regarding the responsibilities of academic staff in relation to students' writing have emerged with an increasingly diverse student population, including students from a NESB, enrolled in tertiary education. Some academics do not see their role as including the teaching of writing skills. Zamel (1998) surveyed academics across the disciplines about their experiences teaching NESB students. With regard to those academics who felt that NESB students were an additional burden to the academics' workload, she had a "clear sense from these [tutors'] responses that language use was confounded with intellectual ability" (Zamel, 1989, p.250).

Another debate surrounds the political correctness of teaching critical thinking to NESB students (See Atkinson, 1997; Benesch, 1999; Ennis, 1989,1990; McPeck, 1990; Pennycook, 1996; Reid, 1994 as examples of the range of issues). Reid (1994) discusses her fear of appropriation of her students' texts by questioning content, suggesting changes to paragraphs or the inclusion/exclusion of ideas, so that she withdrew from writing comments on their papers. On reconsidering the arguments for and against intervention in students' writing she decided that it is the teacher's responsibility "to share her cultural and rhetorical knowledge with her students" (p.278). The teacher acts "as the surrogate academic audience", a coach and a discourse community expert (p.279).

Many students are keen to improve their written work, if only to get a higher mark. They view their tutors as experts and look to them for guidance. Consequently, markers of students' work should be explicit about what they believe their students need to do to improve the quality of their work. Without specific comments to guide them, students are left to guess what was expected of them or they give up trying to improve.

**Three samples of student writing**

In the following three pieces of student writing the markers commented about the student's expression. In none of them did the marker query the student's understanding of the content, key concepts or reading of the texts.

This first sample is typical of many first year students' attempts to grapple with feminist concepts that are integral to some social science subjects.

**Student A (native speaker)**

Characteristics insinuated with masculinity are not inherit, it is a gender, as is femininity, both of which retains numerous principals that are implied upon us at an early age. But these codes are constantly redefined with each generation and they powerfully influence the way in which we behave socially. So it is only fair to say that social background, sexual orientation, as well as religion defines both men and women considerably. Although, in relation to masculinity, it is these elements ascertained by men that may not fundamentally fit into the accustomed ideologies of what it is to be masculine.

The essay continued in this vein and received a fail, with a general note at the end saying that expression had let the student down. This student was floundering in the dark and discussion with me revealed that the student had not grasped the key issues, let alone formed an opinion about them. The effect of the student's lack of understanding of the reading texts is evident in the circumlocution and word confusion. As Zamel (1998, p.252) says, "Language evolves in and responds to the context of saying something meaningful, ... language and meaning are reciprocal." Instead of being told that "expression" was the problem, this student needed to hear from the marker that the student's meaning was unclear and to have some salient questions put to him/her that would indicate to the student that more careful reading and thinking was necessary before writing. "[A]ttempts to improve the quality of students' essays... must spring from and turn upon dialogue about the nature of academic discourse (Hounsell, 1987, p.18).

In the next example the student is struggling to write about computer programming and attempted to follow the example of the set text for the subject.

**Student B (native speaker)**

These objects having common behaviour are defined in the same class, and are called the instances of class. To define a class, we need to know the internal structure of its instances and these methods associated with a group of messages. A class may be defined by adding some features or adjusting some features in a given class. The types of attributes in a class may be class types; if the type of the attribute in a class is class type, then the relationship between the two classes is called client-supplier relationship.

The writing continued in this manner. The marker had written "expression!!" more than once, and returned the work to the student and said s/he should resubmit. To write a description of a process like this requires careful planning of the steps with relevant examples inserted at each point. However, further discussion with the student indicated that s/he was not capable of doing this because s/he did not understand the concepts involved.

The written word is the legal and functional basis of communication in an industrialised society. However, the language in many of the texts the students are required to read is not easy to understand. So perhaps it is not surprising that they give up trying to understand the

## *Sources of Confusion*

content and just respond in what they feel is a similar style to the texts presented to them, hoping to muddle through.

The next two examples are taken from the same piece of writing by a NESB student. The student had shown the tutor a draft of the essay and the tutor had referred to a local product, "Slim Milk", with the expectation that the student would analyse and elaborate on the example. In Paragraph A, the student has attempted to incorporate the tutor's comment, including the colloquial use of the word "holes" (in the sense of a fault or flaw), but the student didn't understand what the tutor meant. It is an example of the need for staff to demonstrate to students the "kind of clarity, accessible language, careful explanation, and effort that faculty want students to demonstrate" (Zamel, 1998, p. 255).

### **Student C (NESB permanent resident)**

#### *Paragraph A.*

Without competitive advantages, a company is waiting to be loss and destroyed. However, with the high competition, there is no guarantee a product can sell, eg. the product from Farmland called "Slim-Milk" against the competitor's "Physical". The product itself simply gave holes for the competitor to attack.

The student could not elaborate on the example of "Slim Milk" and "holes". This student did not have the background knowledge to use the clues given and so the meaning was lost. The tutor needed to engage the student in discussion about the product and the market. As Hounsell (1987, p.118) says, "[f]eedback which amounts to information-giving rather than an attempt to articulate and explore premisses – on the student's as well as the tutor's terms – is unlikely to connect."

Compare the above paragraph with the one below where the same student, despite the use of inappropriate words like "beautiful" and grammatical errors, is much more in control of the writing and the meaning is much clearer.

### **Student C (NESB permanent resident)**

#### **Paragraph B**

In terms of strategy cost management, organisation structure is the bone structure of a company. Missing of any part of the structure will put the company into disadvantage. However, even with a beautiful structure, it does not mean the structure is a healthy one. To determine that, communication within the organisation is the main factor. Before, the accounting personnel and the marketing personnel were the enemies of each other, co-operation only appeared at the table of meeting room. As the product life cycle shorten, the information about the market trend becomes more important for accountants.

Although this would not be acceptable as a finished piece of writing, after working with a language specialist to reduce the number of grammatical errors, this student was able to gain a B and further, s/he could demonstrate understanding of the theories of marketing.

Many students' writing drifts in and out of focus and intelligibility, but I contend that in general it is not their expression per se which causes their obfuscation. It is their difficulty with understanding the concepts they are working with and concomitantly their inadequate preparation for the task of writing that causes them to write sentences that are imprecise and lacking in depth. There are students who write sentences without a subject or a verb, but they are in the minority. There are many more students who lament, "I know what I want to say, I just don't know how to write it". There are students from a NESB who confuse their tenses and misuse articles. When they fail, they exclaim, "It's my English!" Often, discussion with

these students who are both native and non-native speakers of English, reveals that they don't know what they want to say. They have a vague grasp of the material, and they cling to their lecturers' and tutors' words as they try to reproduce verbal forms without understanding them. These are also the students who are at greatest risk of plagiarising other people's ideas.

Although there has been extensive discussion about the differences between tertiary literacy and secondary school literacy in the education supplements in daily newspapers, academic journals and at national education conferences, many academic staff do not seem to recognise the sorts of intellectual challenges that they are presenting to their students. This may lead them to overlook their role in developing their students' writing skills. Students who are undertaking tertiary study for the first time need to be made aware of "the different expectations and demands of the different approaches to evidence, analysis, criticism and argument" (Ballard, 1994, p. 17). I agree with Van der Wal (1999, p. 9) who cites Weddle, De Capite and Costa's recommendation "that the students be informed early in the course as to how the course is being designed not only to foster subject matter mastery but also critical competencies and intellectual traits". If academic staff see an intrinsic value in writing then they need to "adapt curricula goals, teaching and learning methods and assessment practices" that provide "timely and appropriate feedback" (Radloff & de la Harpe, 2000, p. 3) to support student writing.

### **Working with tutors**

How can language and academic skills advisers help academic staff to develop students' thinking about writing so that students do not hand in work like the samples above? Coaching from the margins is too late, because it is after the event (like diagnosing the cause of death) and tutors have expressed their dismay that so many students do not bother to pick up their marked assignments. This latter fact is very telling. Students seem to be saying, "Your feedback doesn't help me. I am finished with your subject and I am moving on".

The mass delivery of content in lectures is often replicated in the large groups faced by tutors and gives students little opportunity to engage in discussion with their tutors or fellow students. Increased workloads mean that fewer opportunities for writing are offered to students and generally the only writing students do is for assessment. This may amount to only one piece of writing plus the exam, for a one-semester subject.

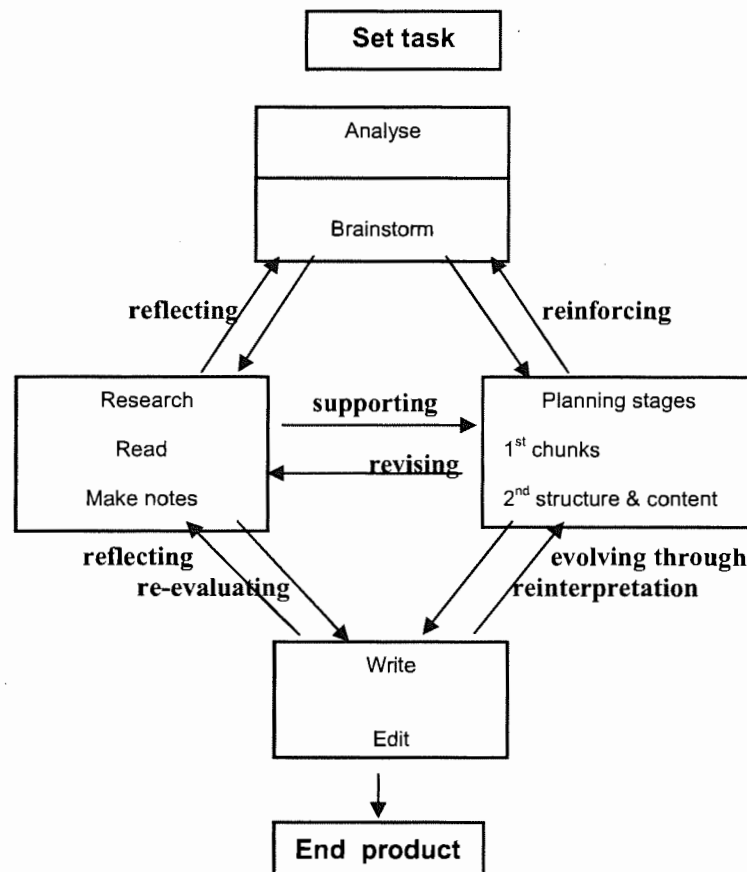
Language and academic skills advisers need to promote discussion with academic staff about their difficulties with developing students writing skills. LAS advisers can suggest how they might link their skills and understanding of students' writing to work with tutors and their students.

### **Suggestions to language and academic skills advisers for supporting tutors**

There are many ways the language and academic skills adviser can support subject specialists: team-teaching, supplementary workshops and sharing ideas about how to integrate discussion about writing, into lectures and tutorials. Some of them are outlined below.

#### *1. Encourage tutors to discuss the writing process*

Writing must be viewed as a developmental process. Tutors need to be encouraged to discuss the thinking, reading, writing process and help their students to practise working and talking different points of view through to a conclusion. And they should give their students help in practising appropriate sequencing on simple questions before requiring them to tackle more complicated topics for assessment.



**Figure 1.** The process of writing.

Figure 1 is an attempt to show the kind of processes that most writers go through from initial reading of the task to finished product. I use this diagram in workshops and with individual students. Illustrating the process in a diagram like this, I believe, helps students to understand the complexities of the writing task. For each of the four boxes I have a series of handouts that form a core of materials which give guidelines on ways to approach each stage. There is nothing new in these materials that a student could not get from the many books giving advice on writing available in libraries and bookshops. What is different is that I make the process as experiential as possible so students can apply the advice to the task at hand.

## 2. Organise workshops for students

Workshops can be run concurrently with lectures and tutorials. The content of the workshops should vary according to the student group, the time allotment and the task the students have been set. In three hour workshops, if possible I use the students' set tasks for an analysis and brainstorming exercise. This is done in groups who report back on their discussion to the whole group. Research, reading and note taking requires discussion about 'active' reading and referencing conventions, where as far as possible I use materials related to the students' task. The planning stage usually is done as a group exercise on the board based on the earlier brainstorming and a bit of imagination regarding the research phase. Often there is little time to talk about the actual writing, and I do not think that matters, because the important part of the writing process has been covered. On occasions there is time to discuss the relationship between topic sentences and the overall argument, writing effective introductions and conclusions and also to share ideas about how to use the library more efficiently.

## *Sources of Confusion*

If the student group is new to tertiary study it is probably better to run a series of workshops to build on different skills. I provide workshops to support a first year subject that has an enrolment of 400+ students. The same workshop is repeated three times each week. The timetable of topics for each week is handed out at the beginning of the year and placed on the Web site for the subject. The topics align with the students' written assignment which includes a literature review.

There are always students who, for a variety of reasons, do not attend any additional classes. If the lecturer in a subject is willing to give up a half or one hour of their lecture time, several weeks before an assignment's due date, then this is a most effective way of addressing key issues about writing. In this time allotment I discuss their essay topics using the writing process diagram discussed above.

### *3. Assist tutors to teach students how to read texts*

Students must become academic readers, that is, active, critical readers. If tutors were encouraged to present a comparative analysis of two or more examples of (relevant) text, they would help to raise their students' awareness of the need for active, critical involvement in their reading. Tutors might usefully discuss with the students:

- the ways other writers develop their argument;
- the sorts of evidence they use to support their key points;
- inherent biases;
- persuasive techniques; and
- the characteristics of a text that make it easy or difficult to read.

### *4. Assist tutors to teach students to ask questions*

Students need to ask questions about the objectives of the subject, the texts, and the tasks set. They need to ask each other questions and to question their own assumptions about the answer they are formulating. The Student Services at the University of Tasmania ([www.utas.edu.au](http://www.utas.edu.au)) has a list of questions on their web site that encourage students to review the intellectual standard of their work. Crescimanno (1991, website), a professor of sociology in the US, structures his course around three key questions-

'What?' is content based. It asks, 'what is the point of this lecture, this discussion, this chapter, this film?'... 'So what?' asks them to consider the significance or the consequences of the course content'... 'So now what?' invites them to consider the application of what they have learned to a course of action...to become more critically aware of their hypothetical and actual choices.

### *5. Encourage tutors to help students to share ideas with each other*

Tutors can be encouraged to use brainstorming activities as an integral part of discussions so students discover the value of tossing ideas around. This can be very effective with large groups which normally make it difficult to hold discussions. Students divided into small groups can become active participants in debates about meaning and may be encouraged to continue their discussions outside the tutorials.

### *6. Encourage tutors to share the process of their own writing with students*

We all must work to disabuse students of the idea that writing is an easy process. By talking about our own struggles with writing and how we arrange and rearrange our ideas and our words so they express exactly what we mean, we can help students to see that writing is a challenge for academics too.

## *Sources of Confusion*

### *7. Encourage tutors to get "good" students to talk about their writing process*

Kate Chanock (2000) in a recent paper provided an important insight into the sorts of comments successful students make about the difficulties they experience writing, including the self doubt, the blocks, and the changes of mind. Tutors could arrange for their students to hear, at first hand, a brief description of the process followed (and the difficulties experienced) by a recent, successful student. I believe this would help weaker students by giving them a realistic concept of the amount of intellectual work they need to invest in a reasoned essay.

### *8. Encourage tutors to critically examine their marking criteria*

There is also a need for LAS advisers to raise tutors' awareness of ways in which their marking criteria, and the language in which they make such criteria explicit to students, can be adapted in the light of the above discussion. Students need a clear understanding of the expectations of the markers in relation to terms like "originality", "critical discussion", "evidence of wide reading", "relevance" and "clear expression" and the weighting given to these categories. Such explanations need to occur when the assignment is first given and continue as an integral part of discussion about the assignment.

## **Conclusion**

In order to develop their learning and writing strategies, students need support and instruction from the academic staff responsible for marking their written work. Poor expression frequently points to a student's lack of understanding of the discipline specific concepts and language and a naïve conception of the purpose of academic writing. Academic staff need to ensure that all their students are prepared for their writing tasks by being engaged in the debate about the construction of meaning and knowledge. If teachers do not engage in debate with their students, their students might just as well watch a video or download a program from the Internet. "Learning is responsive to situations in which students are invited to participate" (Zamel, 1998, p. 260).

At the same time, language and academic skills advisers can provide practical and flexible support to tutors to assist them in the development of their students' writing skills. Such support is best offered concurrently, whether in lectures, tutorials or in additional classes.

Together, academic staff and language specialists need to talk to the students about their writing before the students commence their assignments. The meaning of the marking criteria must be explicit and subject to ongoing discussion during the process of the students' writing. After the return of their essays, all students need encouragement to persist, they need honest appraisal of their ideas, and they have to be convinced that the journey is worth it.

## **References**

- Atkinson, D. (1997). A critical approach to critical thinking in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, (1), 71-94.
- Ballard, B. (1994). The integrative role of the study adviser. In K. Chanock, (Ed.) *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines* (pp. 16-25). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Benesch, S. (1999). Thinking critically, thinking dialogically. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33 (3), 573-580.
- Campbell, J., Smith, D., & Brooker, R. (1998). From conception to performance: How undergraduate students conceptualise and construct essays. *Higher Education*, 36, 449-469.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Chanock, K. (2000). Problems of good students: What can we learn from them, and how can we help. Paper given at the Communication Skills in University Education (CSUE) Conference, 28-29 September, Fremantle, Western Australia.
- Cohen, A.D. & Cavalcanti, M.C. (1990). Feedback on compositions: teacher and student verbal reports. In B. Kroll (Ed). *Second Language Writing: Research insights from the classroom*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Crescimanno, R. (1991) The cultivation of critical thinking: Some tools and techniques from *VCCA Journal*, 6, 12-17 Retrieved July 13, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.br.cc.va.us/vcca/cres.htm>
- Ennis, R. H. (1989). Critical thinking and subject specificity: Clarification and needed research. *Educational Researcher*, 18 ( 3), 4-10.
- Ennis, R. H. (1990). The extent to which critical thinking is subject-specific: Further clarification. *Educational Researcher*, 19 ( 4), 13-16.
- Hounsell, D. (1984). Essay planning and essay writing. *HERDSA*, 3 (1), 13-31.
- Hounsell, D. (1987). Essay writing and the quality of feedback. In J.T.E. Richardson, M. Eysenck, & D. Piper (Eds). *Student learning. Research in education and cognitive psychology* (pp.109-119). England: The Society for research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Leki, I. (1990). Coaching from the margins: Issues in written response. In B. Kroll (Ed). *Second Language Writing: Research insights from the classroom* (pp.57-68). Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Mahalski, P. (1992). Essay-writing: Do study manuals give relevant advice? *Higher Education*, 24,113-131.
- Marton, F., Hounsell, D. & Entwistle, N. (Eds). (1984). *The experience of learning*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- McPeck, J. (1990). Critical thinking and subject specificity: A reply to Ennis. *Educational Researcher*, 19, (4), 10-12.
- Norton, L. (1990). Essay-writing: what really counts? *Higher Education*, 20, 411-442.
- Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing others' words: text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30 (2), 201-230.
- Perry, W. Jr. (1968). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years. A scheme*. USA: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Radloff, A., & de la Harpe, B. (2000). Helping students develop their writing skills - a resource for lecturers. Paper presented at the ASET - HERDSA 2000 Conference, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia.
- Reid, J. (1994). Responding to ESL students' texts: The myths of appropriation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28 (2), 273-292.
- Ridsdale, M L. (2000). Is written feedback really that useful? *Campus Review*, August 2-8, 14.
- Saljo, R. (1987). The educational construction of learning. In J.T.E. Richardson, M. Eysenck, & D. Piper (Eds.), *Student learning. Research in education and cognitive*

## *Sources of Confusion*

- psychology*. England: The Society for research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 101-108.
- Sharples, M. (1999). *How we write: Writing as creative design*. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, G. (1990). *The student's writing guide for the arts and social sciences*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, G. & Nightingale, P. (1990) Students' writing *HERDSA*, 9, (2), 161-175.
- University of Tasmania, Student Services. (n.d.). Critical Thinking: Applying sound intellectual standards to your thinking. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: [http://www.utas.edu.au/docs/student\\_services/lisu/crit.html](http://www.utas.edu.au/docs/student_services/lisu/crit.html)
- Van der Wal, A. (1999). Critical thinking as a core skill. Issues and discussion paper. Paper given at the HERDSA Annual International Conference, 12-15 July, Melbourne, Australia.
- Zamel, V. (1998). Strangers in academia: The experiences of faculty and ESL students across the curriculum. In V. Zamel & R. Spack (Eds). *Negotiating Academic Literacies. Teaching and learning across languages and cultures* (pp. 249-264). London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

**MEETING OUR STUDENTS' NEEDS:  
AN INNOVATIVE ENGLISH CURRICULUM**

Vivien Fiske Wake  
School of Design, Wanganui Polytechnic, New Zealand

*As tutors, we were concerned that the level of English skills of many students entering the School of Design, despite at least twelve years of prior schooling, still were below standard. We decided we needed a curriculum that did more than just repeat yet again, what our students had been taught in school. We discussed the issues with the students and asked them for their in-put for a new curriculum. The students agreed that a review of writing skills was necessary but they also asked for a curriculum that would be lively and relevant to their various fields (computer graphic design, fashion and fine arts) and useful for their future careers.*

*A series of workshops -- each followed by a practicum -- have therefore been created. The workshops, though tutor-directed, are geared toward student-oriented activities. In each practicum, by means of collaborative learning strategies, the students put into practice what they have learned in the workshops. Outside speakers and fieldtrips are also encouraged. The first semester workshops deal with topics necessary for all departments: review of English grammar, usage etc., research skills and presentation skills. The activities of each of these workshops are, however, tailored for each department: for example, research activities include topics for papers suitable for each of the three departments. In the second semester, tutors have the choice (or give the students the choice) of a series of workshops geared toward a particular department. Examples of workshops include: writing for publication (articles for journals, newspapers, illustrated story books, etc.) scriptwriting, technical writing, copywriting, advertising, grant writing, etc.*

*It is emphasised that this curriculum is on-going: tutors are encouraged to share their ideas and write up new workshops in the areas of their expertise.*

**Introduction**

The School of Design at Wanganui Polytechnic in New Zealand is divided into three main departments: Computer Graphic Design, Fashion Design and Fine Arts. All the students of each department in the first year of the three year bachelor's degree programme study Applied English. The course covers two semesters (32 weeks): it is offered in three hour sessions, once a week.

Until recently, the English tutors, in order to satisfy the liberal arts requirements for degrees accredited by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, followed the English curriculum of a nearby university. This course, although excellent in its way, was typical of traditional university English courses: thorough but very academic in nature. It was very suitable for students hoping to major in English or in related subjects but it did not suit the needs of students who were oriented toward careers in the field of design. When, for economic reasons, it was decided to withdraw from the university programme, it was suggested that we write our own curriculum. This proved to be quite a challenge!

### **The Problem**

First, under the direction of the academic manager of the Computer Graphic Department of the School of Design, a committee was set up with myself (the only full time tutor of the CGD department teaching English at that time) as chairperson. Letters were also sent out inviting the participation of the tutors of the departments of Fashion Design and Fine Arts.

At our first meeting, it was noted by all tutors, whether of English or design, that our students' English skills were often below standard. Many of our first year students seemed unable to write a simple communicative sentence with accurate spelling and grammar. Some committee members, therefore, argued for a traditional curriculum strong in the basics of essay writing. Others, however, pointed out that most of our students had already experienced at least twelve years of this type of teaching. As traditional English courses had apparently done so little for them, what was the point of giving them more of the same?

Further and most importantly, these same students, so apparently lacking in writing skills, had presented brilliant portfolios in order to enter the department of their choice. Why was it, then, that these students could not apparently produce communication skills to match? What were we as tutors doing wrong? In what way could we improve?

Some of our tutors asked why we should teach English to these students at all. They argued that this was a design school and most of our students would be seeking careers in the areas of fine arts or graphic design. As Jean Sheridan points out: "In academic life, there is general acceptance of the belief that writing enables learning and that writers clarify their thoughts in the process of writing them down...Students know it is an expectation in most courses and believe that it will help them get and keep a job in their chosen professions." (Sheridan, 1995, p. 5). Sheridan then goes on to quote Fulwiler and Jones, who state that "writing aids students in formulating their ideas...and helps...to organize and clarify the internal thought process, helps the articulation of the writer's message." (Fulwiler and Jones quoted in Sheridan, 1995, p. 5).

Other literature of the field indicated that our problem was shared by other tertiary institutions (Anson, Schwiebert, Williamson, 1993, p. xiv; see also, Robson, 1997, p. xix). As a solution, some institutions offered remedial writing courses (Rose, 1983, p. 109). We wondered if we should do likewise but it seemed unlikely that students who had been subjected to years of failure would suddenly benefit from a remedial course. We were inclined to agree with Rose that such courses "though often well intentioned and seemingly commonsensical, may in fact be ineffective, even counterproductive, for these attempts reduce, fragment and possibly misrepresent the composing process" (Rose, 1983, p.109). Therefore, rather than place underperforming students apart from their peers in remedial classes, it seemed to be more appropriate to help individual students according to their specific subject needs. The Minneapolis College of Art and Design in Minnesota has developed just such a model. Students at this institution may be helped by peer tutors well versed not only in English but also knowledgeable in the various areas of design (<http://www.mcad.edu/fs-index-auhtml>). So impressed were we by this Learning Center, initiated and coordinated by Associate Professor Mary Dunne, that we have since decided to form a language centre of our own as an integral part of our regular classes.

As Kate Chanock suggests, though many lecturers and students still perceive students' needs as being remedial, we, as instructors, are gradually moving away from that idea (Chanock, 1995, p. 9). However, Chanock then points out that other lecturers, rather than worry about students not being able to write a simple sentence, apparently believe that "once a student knows how to think about a particular problem in a particular discipline, her expression will take care of itself" (Chanock, 1995, p. 9-10). However, as Chanock points out, some teachers are not aware of the need to help their students understand the writing requirements of a particular discipline. Therefore, Chanock argues that there is a need for language specialists

## *Sources of Confusion*

and teachers in the disciplines to work together to help students understand how different disciplines interact with the language (Chanock, 1995, p.10-11).

These ideas relate closely to the philosophy espoused by the Writing Across the Curriculum movement (WAC). This movement is believed to have been started twenty-seven years ago at Central College in Iowa by Barbara Walvoord who met with an interdisciplinary group of faculty in order to discuss student writing and possible ways of linking the writing requirements of the various disciplines. Workshops, discussion groups, team-teaching programmes, etc, were planned in order to introduce the WAC concepts to the academic world (Walvoord, 1996).

As tutors of a design school, charged with writing a new English curriculum, how could we best suit the particular needs of our students? Perhaps it was time to approach the students themselves.

### **The Solution**

Students in one class were surveyed for their opinions as to whether English should be taught as a separate subject and if so, how it should be taught. To my surprise and that of the committee, the students generally agreed that English as a separate subject should indeed be taught. In particular, in the students' opinion, there should be a review of writing skills covering the basics of grammar and usage. After all, although their objective was not to be the world's next generation of great writers, they did need to write briefs and memos, they did need to make presentations! However, they insisted that such a curriculum be made lively and relevant to their various fields and, in fact, useful for their future careers.

Students from all three departments were then surveyed informally. The same answers emerged. For example, many of the students suggested that designers need excellent presentation skills to succeed with potential clients. They also suggested that we teach such topics as copy writing, technical writing and script writing. To comply with our students' wishes and to suit the particular requirements of their various departments, it was decided that we needed to produce our own original curriculum.

### **The Process**

First, it was decided to divide the course into a number of workshops offering topics suitable for each department. Each workshop would be followed by a practicum. The workshops, though directed by tutors, would be geared toward student-oriented activities. In each practicum, by means of collaborative learning techniques, the students would put into practice what they had learned in the workshops.

The various departments were then approached to suggest topics for workshops suitable for their particular needs. There were some interesting responses. For example, when I mentioned to the academic manager of the Fashion Design department that we seemed to be short of creative writing topics, she suggested that we have a poetry writing workshop with the objective of writing original poems that would be recited (instead of the usual remarks) as models parade down the catwalk!

Next, the various departments were again approached to provide articles from journals or books in their field that could be used to supplement the workshop materials. Finally, various tutors were approached to write up selected workshops/practicums in their field of expertise. The New Zealand Qualification Authority procedures were followed (including purpose, learning outcomes, suggested teaching approaches, assessment, etc.) This was to ensure that tutors starting new in the programme would have a set of lesson plans as a guide, as well as a set of materials to work with.

### **The Result**

What follows is a summary of the curriculum we have developed — and are, indeed, in the process of developing further.

In the first semester, workshops deal with topics considered essential for all departments, including a review of English grammar and usage, and research and presentation skills. These topics are based on the students' suggestions of what is particularly necessary in the field of design. The activities of each of these workshops are tailored for each department. For instance, each department was asked to contribute suitable topics for research papers peculiar to its area. By the time this curriculum was written, over thirty research topics had been contributed. However, it was decided that students seeking a research topic did not need to limit themselves to their department list, and could not only choose a subject from another department but could plan a research paper, if they wished, on any topic of their choice.

In the second semester, the tutors have the choice (or give the students the choice) of a series of workshops, each with some aspect geared toward a particular department. Examples of workshops include: writing for publication (three workshops covering articles for journals, newspapers, illustrated story books, etc.) script writing, technical writing, copy writing, advertising and grant writing. Most workshops take at least three weeks to complete. Depending on the ability of the students, some workshops might continue for a longer time. It probably would not be possible for all workshops to be completed. However, it is the aim to complete at least three workshops in the second semester.

### **An Example**

A good example of these workshops is Writing for Publication. This is a second semester workshop; the basic skills (outlining, writing bibliographies, etc.) would have already been taught in one of the first semester workshops. Wherever possible, the skills learned in the first semester workshops are reviewed and used in the second semester workshops.

The learning outcomes of this workshop require the students to become knowledgeable regarding journals available in their field (fashion, computer graphic design, fine arts, etc.) to understand what topics are suitable for particular journals and the writing style in which these articles are written. The students then are expected to write suitable articles and submit them for publication.

In the workshop, the suggested learning approaches for the tutor include a tutor-directed discussion based on an actual journal article. It is suggested that the tutor elicit from the class why the editor chose to publish this particular article. Throughout the discussion, it is the tutor's task to elicit and emphasise the following points: the attention-grabbing statement to hook the reader; the thesis statement; the relevance of paragraph topic sentences to the main thesis; the slant of the article (what type of audience is the writer aiming for?); and the suitability of the article for the journal in which it is printed. All of these topics will, of course, already have been covered in the essay writing section of first semester basic English review. It is then suggested that the students, in small groups, consider various journal articles according to the discussion topics above and then present their findings to the class.

Next, it is suggested that the tutor discuss with the class a sample letter submitting an article to a journal and the various stages involved after the article has been accepted. For homework, the students are asked to compose an annotated bibliography of five to ten journals or magazines. Bibliography writing instructions will have been included in the first semester research methods workshop. The students are also asked to write 'outlines' for original journal articles to be submitted to a particular journal for publication. These outlines are to include: the first two paragraphs (with attention grabber and thesis statement); the topic sentences of the back-up article; an annotated bibliography; and organised research notes about the journal

## *Sources of Confusion*

article they are submitting. They must also write letters submitting their articles to actual journals.

In the practicum for this workshop, the following student-directed activities are suggested. A student, as chief editor, should collect the homework and divide the class into four groups of sub editors. The chief editor should then hand out the papers in such a way that all groups receive papers they have not seen before. The chief editor should then direct each group of sub editors to correct the bibliography assignments; check the organised research notes and compare these notes with the outlines presented; assess the 'outlines' for possible development as articles for the journal concerned; write a letter to each contributing writer suggesting ways of developing their outline into a suitable article. Each group of sub editors should then choose one article to submit to the chief editor to be reviewed. It is then the chief editor's decision as to which article or articles will be accepted by the journal.

However, notwithstanding the decision of the chief editor (after all, writers have to be persistent!) it is then suggested that the students write the journal articles according to their notes, the sub editors' advice and the individual help of the tutor. The students should then finish the articles for homework and after having their articles proofread by the tutor, submit them to an actual journal.

As with the Writing for Journals workshop, all workshops are geared in some way to be relevant to the students' future careers.

### **Conclusion**

The new curriculum was first introduced to students who had already experienced one semester of the original, traditional English course. Informal feedback from these students proved, in the main, to be in favour of the new system. When asked what they liked about the course, the students responded with such comments as: "a nice amount of creativity is involved with this subject. It makes the course a lot more interesting for design students...students become more aware of subjects related to English, ie. Copy writing, etc."; "a wider appreciation of different topics and styles"; "learning how to write applications for grants — learning new formats and styles of writing."; "I particularly like how a lot of research skills can be applied to most other subjects."

In order to maintain such a level of student approval, it was decided that this curriculum should be continuously reviewed and evaluated. Therefore, the tutors meet regularly to monitor the needs of their students. They discuss the pros and cons of various workshops and, if considered necessary, seek ways of improving them. New ideas are always welcome and tutors are very much encouraged to share their ideas and to write up new workshops in the areas of their expertise.

### **References**

- Anson, C., Schwiebert, J. & William, M. (Eds.) (1993). *Writing Across the Curriculum*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Chanock, K. (1995). Disciplinary Subcultures and the Teaching of Academic Writing. In Chanock, K. (Ed.) *Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines* (pp. 9-15). Melbourne: Language and Academic Skills Units of La Trobe University.
- Home Page, Academic Depts. U.C. Writing Center. Retrieved February 17, 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.engl.uic.edu/writingcenter>.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Learning Center, Minneapolis College of Art & Design. Retrived February 21, 2001, from the World Wide Web (this site is almost ready to be linked to the main site: <http://www.edu/fs-index-auhtm>). <http://www.Mcad.edu/lc>

Robson, A. (1997). *Thinking Globally*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rose, M. (1983). Remedial writing courses: A critique and a proposal. *College English*. 45 (2), 109-127.

Sheridan, J. (1995). *Writing-across-the-curriculum and the academic library*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press

Student Learning Center Page. Retrieved February 17, 2001, from the World Wide Web: <http://students.berkeley.edu/slc>.

Walvoord, B. et al. (1997). *In the long run*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

**APPLICATION OF SCHEMA THEORY TO ACADEMIC  
DISCOURSE:  
THE SUMMARY WRITING PROCESS**

Dr Heather Winskel  
University of Western Sydney

*In this paper, the application of schema theory to academic discourse, in particular the summary writing process, will be discussed. Schema theory can help instructors focus on the discrepancy between the prior knowledge and experience that students bring to the learning task, and the skills that are needed to successfully carry out and complete the particular learning task. Schema theory can thus help clarify the goals of instruction, and shape what is taught and how it is taught (Derry, 1996; Reynolds, Sinatra, & Jetton, 1996). Four student summaries are examined using a framework based on schema theory, and possible schema change approaches or intervention strategies are discussed.*

**Introduction**

In this paper, the practical applications of schema theory to academic discourse will be discussed. Schema theory can be a useful tool for building up a greater understanding of the processes involved in acquiring the skills associated with a particular academic learning task. Summary writing will be used to demonstrate how schema theory can be applied to academic discourse. First, I will briefly discuss schema theory and then apply a framework based on schema theory to the summary writing process.

Bartlett (1932, 1958) first proposed the concept of schema or schemata (plural). He suggested that memory takes the form of schema, which provide a mental representation or framework for understanding, remembering and applying information. Rumelhart (1980) further developed the schema concept and described schema theory as basically a theory of how knowledge is mentally represented in the mind and used. Schemata are created through experience with the world, and the person's culture, which includes the interactions with people, objects and events within that culture. Schema theory can help us to focus on the prior knowledge and experience, or mental schema, that students bring to the learning situation, and the gaps or discrepancies between what the learner already knows and what he/she needs to know to successfully carry out and complete the particular learning task. Students who are limited by their experiences and do not have relevant schemata have difficulty carrying out the task successfully, hence teachers need to help students to develop and fine-tune the appropriate conceptual systems that are needed to successfully complete the learning task(s).

Summary writing is a complex task, which requires higher order skills. By breaking down a complex task into its sub-components, we can examine the specific task demands and requirements in greater depth and detail (Anderson, 2000). If we apply this principle to the summary writing task, we can break the task down into the following processes: (1) comprehension of the original text, (2) ability to select or differentiate main ideas from supporting details and inconsequential information in the original text, (3) transformation of these main ideas into the learner's written text, and (4) the adoption of the appropriate academic writing conventions (Biggs & Moore, 1992; Hidi & Anderson, 1986; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). The summary writing abilities of novices can be compared against those of experts, which is the level of operation that we ideally want our students to achieve. The progress of students can be monitored and assessed against this benchmark, and a greater

understanding of the specific problems that the student is having within the summarising process can be gained, and then specific schema can be targeted by different schema-change approaches. Schema theory can thus help clarify the goals of instruction and shape what is taught and how it is taught (Derry, 1996; Reynolds, Sinatra, & Jetton, 1996).

The different summary writing skills and processes used by experts in comparison to novices will be examined in greater detail under the two major stages involved in the summary writing process, that is, comprehension of the original text and generation or composition of the student's own summary text. This framework (for a summary see Table 1) in conjunction with the summary writing profiles of individual students, will then be used to analyse the problems that individual students are having with the summarising process, and possible schema change approaches or teaching strategies will be suggested based on this analysis

### **Comprehension of the original text**

Schemata in reading provide mental frameworks, which help the reader to understand the underlying meaning of the text. Different readers have different schemata due to differences in background. Different readers can hence interpret a text in very different ways; for example, experts will make a much richer or more in-depth interpretation of a text than novices. According to Swales (1990), reader-based schematic expectations derive from two types of schemata: content-based schemata and text-based schemata. Content-based schemata derive from prior experience of the content knowledge that is relevant to the original text, whereas text-based schemata result from previous experience of similar text types or genres. Both these types of schemata or background knowledge affect the reader's comprehension of a text and will be discussed further.

#### *Content-based schemata*

The novice academic reader needs the appropriate content knowledge to be able to make sense of an academic text. Often academic text is full of technical jargon and assumed knowledge (Hill, 1991). If the reader lacks the necessary schema set, or if an alternative set is selected, the reader will have difficulty processing the discourse and the text may be incoherent to the reader (Johns, 1986). Often novice students lack the prerequisite content knowledge to comprehend an academic text, which is necessary prior to writing an academic summary. Hence, to be able to effectively summarise an academic text, students need to acquire appropriate content knowledge.

#### *Text-based schemata*

Student learning is affected not only by prior content knowledge, but also by prior knowledge of academic text genre (Francis & Hallam, 2000). The reader's knowledge of text organisational structure plays an important role in comprehending a text, and the identification and use of an organisational plan of a text can lead to more effective understanding (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). Readers' expectations about the genre of a text influence the way that a text is processed and represented in memory and expert readers typically activate the appropriate reading goals for each discourse genre (Zwann, 1994). According to Bazerman (1985), these schematic expectations are a key element in rapid and efficient textual processing and when the reader recognises the match of organisation of a text into a familiar genre then this boosts coherence (Mannes, 1994; Swales, 1990). Both types of schematic knowledge, content-based and text-based, are drawn upon in interpreting and comprehending an academic text. The novice student often lacks both types of schemata, content-based and text-based, and hence has difficulty comprehending the text (see Table 1 for a summary of this).

#### *Reading strategies*

In order to effectively comprehend a text the reader needs to learn to adjust his/her reading strategies to the demands of the specific task and the relative importance of different parts of a text. Skilled or expert readers can apply their reading skills for different purposes and different

comprehension goals (Oakhill & Garnham, 1988). In more effective strategic or expert readers, a reading purpose is established and a plan of action takes place of strategies and approaches to meet that reading goal or purpose. Skilled or expert readers adjust their reading strategies in relation to the purpose or goals of reading and the comprehension difficulty of a text (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). Often students entering university are not strategic readers and rely on one technique for reading a text and do not change their reading strategy depending on the task and purpose for reading (Ruddell & Boyle, 1989). Students need to develop these skills and strategies to become versatile, strategic readers, so that they are able to process and comprehend an academic text effectively (see Table 1).

### *Selectivity*

In addition, it is important that students develop a sensitivity to the relative importance of the ideas in a text (Oakhill & Garner, 1988), and are able to select the amount of information and detail required by the specific task (Rumelhart, 1977). In general, information in a text is hierarchically structured; i.e., the text is focussed around one or more main ideas with subsidiary ideas and details subordinated to the main ones. According to Rumelhart (1977), the specific task determines the amount of detail and information required. This level of detail needs to be decided, and the hierarchical tree structure needs to be cut at the appropriate node level. In relation to academic summary writing, this depends on the genre and length of the original text, and the required length of the summary.

Novices need to be able to discriminate between these levels in a text, rather than giving all propositions an equal weighting. Meyer, Brandt and Bluth (1978) found considerable variation in tertiary students' ability to select main ideas from a text. Typically novice students read a text and underline parts of the text as if every sentence or idea has equal importance (Ruddell & Boyle, 1989), and so are unable to discriminate between macro- and micro- levels in a text. Schemata can direct learners' attention to the important aspects of a text, which are important in relation to the summary writing task. The novice student needs to acquire these appropriate schemata for selecting information from a text, which can then be activated when a summarising task is encountered. These schemata also need to be modifiable to suit the requirements of the summary writing task (refer to Table 1).

### **Generation and composition of the summary text**

#### *Knowledge transformation of text*

In writing, experts tend to apply the knowledge-transformation strategy, where they transform the relationships among ideas, whereas novices tend to list information on to paper with the minimum of transformation (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987; Bereiter, Burtis & Scardamalia, 1988). Generally, experts attend more to global problems than do novices. For example, Hayes and Flower (1986) compared expert with novice writers' approaches to revising or editing texts, and found that experts defined revision as a whole-text task, whereas novices saw revision as a largely sentence-level task. More skilful, strategic writers carry out a variety of problem solving and strategic planning activities related to the writing process.

The SOLO taxonomy is concerned with the degree of knowledge transformation or integration of ideas, with a progressive development from the lower levels -- prestructural, unistructural and multistructural -- to the higher levels -- relational and abstract extended, which include a higher degree of knowledge transformation. Unistructural texts involve a simple serial listing of successive points with few if any links made between the different parts of the text (Biggs, 1988). The focus is on one aspect at a time only, with a heavy reliance on 'knowledge-telling' rather than 'knowledge-transforming'. Multistructural texts have a similar sequential structure to the unistructural texts, but there are elements of integration and development at the local or paragraph level. There is still an emphasis on 'knowledge telling', but there is a move towards 'knowledge transforming'. In contrast, expert writers producing relational texts integrate different aspects of the text into a coherent whole (Campbell, Smith, & Brooker, 1998) (see Table 1).

## *Sources of Confusion*

### *Use of appropriate Anglo academic writing conventions*

Academic discourse has its own particular, socially constructed conventions and norms and context specific practices, which include adapting one's writing for a specific purpose (Flower, 1990) and applying other appropriate academic conventions. Reader-based summaries are written for an external audience and are expected to be short, concise, non-repetitive, to be linear and to not digress, to not contain information external to the text, and to avoid subjective comments (Johns, 1985). Novice students tend to be naïve of the rules and conventions involved in writing an academic summary (see Table 1).

### *Review or check of summary*

A common problem with novice students is that they fail to verify or check that their summaries reflect what was in the original text (Hill, 1991) (also see Table 1).

Table 1 *The skills and background knowledge of novices in comparison to experts in writing an academic summary.*

Novices	Experts
<i>Comprehension of the original text</i>	
<i>Content-based schemata</i>	
Lack of prior domain or content specific knowledge	Have domain or content specific knowledge
<i>Text-based schemata</i>	
Have little prior experience of similar academic text types	Have prior experience of similar academic text types
<i>Reading Strategies</i>	
Limited, typically have one reading strategy which is applied across the board	Strategic and versatile – adapt and change their reading strategy depending on the reading task
<i>Selectivity</i>	
Have poor discrimination skills, an inability to select main ideas and tends to get immersed in the detail	Can discriminate between main points and supporting ideas Can select level of text appropriate to task
<i>Generation and composition of the summary text</i>	
<i>Level of Knowledge Transformation</i>	
Knowledge telling	Knowledge transforming
<i>Application of Academic Genre and Register Conventions</i>	
Have not yet acquired appropriate academic conventions Subjective ideas may be added, writing may be repetitive, not concise, inappropriate subjective reference and selection of register.	Use appropriate academic written conventions
<i>Review or check of summary</i>	
Do not necessarily check original text with own text for accuracy.	Check that their summary reflects the ideas expressed in the original text.

### **Background to the study**

This paper forms part of a larger study, which examines the development of academic summary writing in students enrolled in the university's preparation program. The course consists of two 12-week semesters. The students are mature-aged and ethnically and linguistically diverse. To act as a comparison 'expert' group and to set a benchmark or standard for this group, experts, who were predominantly Learning Advisers, were also asked to perform the summarising task.

The students were required to submit two summary assignments. Their first summary, which is the focus of the present study, was submitted in week 2, and the second summary was submitted in week 4 of the first semester. Both summaries were based on texts from the same content-domain, namely approaches to learning. Readings in this particular content area were selected with the learning objective of encouraging students to reflect on their approach to learning in relation to the research literature, and to encourage students to adopt the more effective deep or strategic approach to learning. The first summary was based on an extract from Biggs (1991, pp.18-21) of approximately 1,300 words in length. The requirement was that both summaries were 250 words in length.

### *Scoring the Summaries*

The expert summaries were used to identify the possible number of main ideas in each text. For the first summary, based on an extract from Biggs (1991, pp.18-21), nine main ideas were identified. Summaries from both novices and experts were scored on the following categories: the number of main points addressed, the number of distortions made of the content of the original text, the incidence or frequency of unnecessary detail, and the degree of knowledge transformation as assessed by the SOLO taxonomy. Adherence to academic conventions was also examined.

Four student summary writing profiles, which represent the different stages of the SOLO taxonomy -- prestructural, unistructural, multistructural and relational -- will be examined (the student texts are included in the Appendix). The relational summary is discussed first, so that it can be used as a comparison or benchmark for the other summaries. Each student profile is discussed in terms of the problems that he/she is having with the summarising process, based on the framework outlined in Table 1, and possible schema change or intervention strategies.

### **Individual student profiles**

#### *Student profile A: A relational summary*

This student has addressed 90% (8/9) of the main ideas and has not made any distortions, included unnecessary detail, or added information not in the original text (see Appendix). This student is operating at a relational level and hence has integrated and transformed ideas expressed in the original text, which is an appropriate academic level for tertiary study (Biggs, 1988). This level of operating is equivalent to the level of an 'expert'. This student's prior knowledge and experience are congruent or compatible with the expectations of the academic culture and the learning task. This student has the appropriate background knowledge, content-based and text-based schemata, and is able to comprehend and process the text effectively. In addition, the student is able to select information at the appropriate level to the task, and is able to use the appropriate academic writing conventions. This is the level or target that we aspire to, for all of our students; hence, this forms a benchmark for the other student profiles, which will be considered next.

#### *Student profile B: A prestructural summary*

This student has produced a prestructural summary protocol, which has addressed 45% (4/9) of the main ideas, has made three distortions of the original text, includes four occurrences of unnecessary detail, and has two occurrences of information not in the original (see Appendix

for the student text). The summary protocol has been classified as prestructural, which indicates that the student has responded in a very basic, rudimentary manner to the task, and is not yet aware of the academic style and conventions of academic summary writing. From this information, we can infer that the student is having problems with comprehending the original text, which is reflected in the low percentage of main ideas that have been addressed (45%), and the number of distortions made of the original text (3). This student does not have the appropriate content-based and text-based schemata. Also the data reveal that the student is having difficulty selecting the appropriate level of the text as revealed by the low percentage of main points addressed and the incidence of unnecessary detail (2) included in the summary. In addition, the student is not yet aware of the academic summary writing convention that information which is not in the text is not to be included.

The prior knowledge and experience that this student brings to the learning task are not compatible with the expectations and requirements of the academic task and culture; hence, the instructor needs to assist this student in acquiring the appropriate conceptual systems or task schemata that are necessary to complete this task successfully. The most essential stages of the summary writing process which need to be targeted are the student's comprehension of the original text and his/her ability to be selective. The student's comprehension of the original text is affected by his/her lack of prior experience and background knowledge of both the content of the text (content-based schema) and the academic text genre (text-based schema).

One teaching strategy which can be used by the tertiary instructor is to make the strategies an expert uses, to solve a particular problem or complete a task, explicit to the novice student, for example by modelling the strategy that an expert uses. In relation to the difficulties this particular student is having comprehending the text, the instructor can demonstrate and model the reading strategies that an expert automatically uses when reading an academic text. Novice students do not necessarily integrate what they are reading with what they already know. Hence, pre-reading strategies can be taught, which activate relevant prior knowledge, so that learning of new information can be facilitated by relating it to existing knowledge structures (Schraw, 1998). During the reading process students can become more metacognitively aware by monitoring their level of understanding of the text by using, for example, the strategy suggested by Schraw (1998) of "stop, read and think". Text analysis can also be used to help the student identify the main themes or macropropositions in a text, and hence gain a more global perspective of the content of the text, which is important for selecting the main ideas in summarising a text. Concept mapping of the main ideas expressed in a text can also facilitate this process. Adherence to academic conventions is an additional problem for this student at this stage of his/her development. This student needs to be made aware of the appropriate academic writing conventions, including the characteristic organisational structure of an academic text, through explicit demonstration and modelling.

### *Student profile C: A unistructural summary*

Another fairly typical student summary profile is to address 80% (7/9) of the main ideas, to make two distortions of the original text, with two occurrences of unnecessary detail, and no information external to the original text is included (see Appendix for student summary). The student is operating at a unistructural level, that is, knowledge telling or listing rather than transforming and integrating ideas. From this profile we can infer that this student has problems comprehending the text as revealed by the number of distortions (2). However, the student is able to select main ideas from the text at a reasonable level, as revealed by the percentage of main ideas addressed and the lack of unnecessary detail; however, the student's comprehension of the text needs to be improved. A particularly useful approach to fostering a deeper understanding of content is to use a form of reciprocal or peer-mediated teaching (McKeachie, 1994; Biggs, 1999). Students in pairs can articulate their understanding of the main ideas expressed in the text to each other. Questioning is also an integral part of reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1983). In addition it is important that the instructor explains the main concepts and terminology in everyday language.

### *Student profile D: A multistructural summary*

This student addresses 90% (8/9) of the main ideas, makes no distortions, and does not include unnecessary detail or information not in the original text (see Appendix). This student is comprehending the original text at a reasonable level, is able to select main ideas at an appropriate level of the text, and is aware of academic summary writing conventions. This student is operating at a multistructural level, and hence is still knowledge telling; however, there is some evidence of knowledge transforming or integrating of information, primarily at a local level. This student needs to be extended, so that he/she transforms and integrates information at a more global level. This particular skill needs to be focused on, for example by demonstrating ways of transforming ideas at a more global level of a text, through modelling and practice.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Schema theory can be a useful tool to apply to understanding the requirements and demands of an academic learning task. The prior experience and knowledge that learners bring to the learning task and the gap between these skills and the requirements of the learning task can be focussed on. In addition, the learning task can be broken down into sub-components and the performance of novices can be compared with experts, so that the development of these skills in novice students can be monitored, and the most appropriate task schema-change approach can be selected. Students, as demonstrated by the four student texts examined in this paper, bring diverse skills, experiences and abilities to the learning situation. Some students come to the learning situation with appropriate or congruent skills, whereas others do not have the relevant task schemata. It is the role of the academic instructor to assist students in acquiring these appropriate conceptual systems, which are necessary to operate effectively in the academic milieu. Schema theory can give greater insights into this pedagogical process.

### **References**

- Anderson, J.R. (2000). *Cognitive psychology and its implications*. New York: Worth Publishers.
- Bartlett, F.C. (1932). *Remembering: An experimental and social study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bartlett, F.C. (1958). *Thinking*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bazerman, C. (1985). Physicists reading physics: Schema-laden purposes and purpose-laden schema. *Written Communication*, 2, 3-24.
- Bereiter, C., Burtis, P.H., & Scardamalia, M. (1988). Cognitive operations in constructing main pointing written composition. *Journal of Memory & Language*, 27(3), 261-278.
- Biggs, J.B. (1988). The role of metacognition in enhancing learning. *Australian Journal of Education*, 32(2), 127-138.
- Biggs (1991). *Teaching for learning: The view from cognitive psychology*. Hawthorn, Victoria: The Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Biggs, J.B. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & O.U.P.
- Biggs, J.B. & Moore, D.J. (1992). *Processes of learning*. Sydney, Australia: Prentice Hall.
- Campbell J., Smith D. & Brooker R., (1998). From conception to performance: How

## *Sources of Confusion*

- undergraduate students conceptualise and construct essays. *Higher Education* 36, 489-469.
- Derry, S.J. (1996). Cognitive schema theory in the constructivist debate. *Educational Psychologist*, 31(3/4), 163-174.
- Flower, L. (1990). Negotiating academic discourse. In L. Flower, *Reading to write: Exploring a cognitive and social process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Francis, H. & Hallam, S. (2000). Genre effect on higher education students' text reading for understanding. *Higher Education*, 39 (3), 279-296.
- Hayes, J.R. & Flower, L.S. (1986). Writing research and the writer. *American Psychologist*, 41 (10), 1106-1113.
- Hidi, S. & Anderson, V. (1986). Producing written summaries: Task demands, cognitive operations, and implications for instruction. *Review of Educational Research*, 56 (4), 473-493.
- Hill, M. (1991). Writing summaries promotes thinking and learning across the curriculum – but why are they so difficult to write? *Journal of Reading*, 34 (7), 536-539.
- Johns, A.M. (1985). Summary protocols of 'underprepared' and 'adept' university students: Replications and distortions of the original. *Language Learning*, 35, 495-517.
- Johns, A.M. (1986). The ESL student and the revision process: Some insights from schema theory. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 5 (2), 70-80.
- Kintsch, W. & van Dijk, T.A. (1978). Toward a model of text comprehension and production. *Psychological Review*, 85 (5), 363-394
- Mannes, S. (1994). Strategic processing of text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86 (4), 577-588.
- Meyer, B.J. Brandt, D.M. & Bluth, G.J. (1978). Use of top-level structure in text: Key for reading comprehension of ninth-grade students. *Reading Research Quarterly* 16, 72-103.
- McKeachie, W.J. (1994). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research and theory for college and university teachers*. Lexington, Massachusetts : D.C. Heath & Company.
- Oakhill, J. & Garnham, A. (1988). *Becoming a skilled reader*. New York: Blackwell.
- Palincsar, A. S. & Brown, A.L. (1983). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-monitoring activities (Tech. Rep. No. 269). Urbana, IL: Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois.
- Reynolds, R.E., Sinatra, G.M., & Jetton, T.L. (1996). Views of knowledge acquisition and representation: A continuum from experience centered to mind centered. *Educational Psychologist*, 31(2), 93-104.
- Ruddell, R.B. & Boyle, O.F. (1989). A study of cognitive mapping as a means to improve summarization and comprehension of expository text. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 29, 12-22.
- Ruddell, R.B. & Unrau, N.J. (1994). Reading as a meaning-construction process: The reader, the text and the teacher. In R.B. Ruddell, M.R. Ruddell, & H. Singer (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading*, Delaware, U.S.A.: International Reading Association.

## *Sources of Confusion*

- Rumelhart, D.E. (1977). Understanding and summarizing brief stories. In D. La Berge & S.J. Samuels (Eds.), *Basic Processes in Reading: Perception and Comprehension*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rumelhart, D.E. (1980). Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In R.J. Spiro, & B. Bruce (Eds.), *Theoretical issues in reading and comprehension*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Scardamalia, M. & Bereiter, C. (1987). Knowledge telling and knowledge transforming in written composition. In S. Rosenberg (Ed.), *Advances in applied psycholinguistics: Vol. 2, Reading, writing, and language learning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schraw, G. (1998). Promoting general metacognitive awareness. *Instructional Science*, 26, 113-125.
- Swales, J.M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winograd, P. (1984). Strategic difficulties in summarizing texts. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19, 404-425.
- Zwann, R.A. (1994). Effect of genre expectations on text comprehension. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 21(4), 920-933.

**Appendix**

**Student Summaries**

The coding of the student texts is as follows: the no. of main ideas are in brackets (); D denotes the occurrence of a distortion of meaning of the original text; UD denotes unnecessary detail; NIT denotes information not in the original text

***Student A summary: A relational summary***

According to Biggs (1991) in his article 'Approaches to Learning', there are three approaches to learning; the surface, deep and achieving approaches. The student's level of motivation and commitment to the task at hand, determines the style of learning they will embrace.

The surface approach is generally utilised by students, who find the subject tedious and unimportant, therefore they learn by memorising the basic facts needed to get them by. In contrast the deep approach is applied because the task is found interesting, consequently a student will research thoroughly and gain meaningful understanding, which results overall in academic success. Thirdly, he describes the 'achieving' approach. The main focus for the student is to plan ahead using optimum time management with their studying to gain the highest marks. According to Biggs this approach can be associated with either a surface or deep approach, finding that a student who uses a 'deep achieving' approach will gain better results having utilized time efficiently as well as acquiring an in-depth understanding of the content.

When these approaches are compared in relation to particular tasks, for example producing an essay, Biggs found that students, who use a deep approach compose essays pertinent to the question, and achieve a better mark. He suggests that the calibre of a student's work is enhanced by using this approach regardless of levels of intelligence. Ultimately, Biggs is proposing an improved method of teaching which inspires students to embrace a deep approach to learning.

profile: 90% (8/9); 0 D; 0 UD; 0 NIT; relational  
word count: 244

***Student B summary: A prestructural summary***

According to John B. Biggs (1991) article it has been explained and greatly researched by a large number of investigators and practitioners and also includes contributions by individuals, some of which the research is clearly theoretical and in other cases the research is more applied (UD). Differences in achievement are related to a student's (1) motivation, values, interests and the strategies of learning including their purposes and intentions. It is believed by Biggs that this has an important bearing towards the understanding and effective processes of learning and teaching (2).

Research has found that a student's approach to learning is affected by cognitive variables. The way in which a student goes about their learning depends on their different motives and intentions (UD - repetitive), whatever the reason may be, to satisfy parents and peers, or simply because they are interested in something and want to learn all there is to learn. To achieve their best or to satisfy their own gratification, these reasons help determine through the process of mental learning the path a student will take towards their learning.

An "Approach" to learning, three of which, the surface, deep and achieving approaches (3) come from the combination of motive and strategy identified by factor analysis and replicated several times (UD). Surface and deep approaches are known to be in similar form (D), whilst a surface approach is to just get through but to avoid failure (4), Students who use this approach

## *Sources of Confusion*

feel miserable (**NIT**). These types of students see learning as an escape from the current situation (**NIT**). The achieving approach, discipline to be the best (**D**), egocentric in gaining the highest grades.

profile 45% (4/9) main ideas; 2 D; 3 UD, 2 NIT; prestructural  
word count: 264

### *Student C summary: A unistructural summary*

According to John Biggs (1991) students have diverse ways that they approach learning, that will help them achieve what they want to accomplish. As outlined in the article there are three different ways to learning (1). There is the surface, deep and achieving with each approach the article explains the bases between them.

With the Surface Approach (2) these students try to avoid failure, and use this approach as quoted by John Biggs (1991) "As a means to an end". In the article there is an example of a student that used the Surface Approach writing a history essay that did not match the criteria that the teacher set out, but still received a high mark because of her "thoroughness"(**UD**). Students that use the Deep Approach (3) find their subject intriguing and personally embrace what they are taught. You will find the Deep Approach the students identify with the "Academic" characteristic (**D**). With the third approach known as the Achieving Approach (4) you will find these students use this method to excel in all subjects to acquire a personal satisfaction. As suggested by John Biggs (1991) that the ambitious students, but not very bright (**D**) will use the Achieving Approach. John Biggs (1991) points out that in some cases you will find that the Achieving Approach may be combined with Surface or Deep Approaches (5).

Biggs describes two levels of approach taken by students, the general approach showing how students approach a particular subject or a student approach to a specific task and outcome (6). Biggs goes on to describe relationships between these two approaches and the surface, deep and achieving students (7).

John Biggs (1991) has included in his article names of writers and researchers who have also written Journals and Articles on the subject (**UD**) and concur with his findings.

profile: 80% (7/9) main ideas; 2 D; 2 UD; 0 NIT; unistructural  
word count: 297

### *Student D summary: A multistructural summary*

In *Approaches to Learning* Biggs discusses combinations of motive and strategy that form different approaches to learning. He draws on the findings of other studies to identify three general approaches to learning and their associated outcomes in the school environment.

The surface approach utilises an extrinsic form of motivation by doing only what is necessary to gain a satisfactory result. The strategy used is to reproduce work from memory. The deep approach utilises an intrinsic form of motivation by gaining maximum understanding of the topic. The strategy used is to read widely and form hypotheses on how it relates to other items of interest. The achieving approach is based on another form of extrinsic motivation by doing what is necessary to get the highest grades. The strategy is to use good study skills and allocate time to each task depending on its importance.

A surface approach can usually be expected to adversely affect performance as the task is seen as a burden. The deep approach on the other hand can be associated with a positive effect stemming from a keen interest. Most academic tasks can be divided into sub-tasks. A deep approach to a given task would address a greater number of more detailed sub-tasks than a surface approach would. This suggests performance may be enhanced not only through

## *Sources of Confusion*

intelligence but also through the approach adopted. The achieving approach can be directly related to performance.

Independent studies indicate a high level of consistency between surface and deep approaches and their outcomes. Biggs concludes that learning may be improved through actively encouraging the use of a deep approach wherever possible.

profile: 90% (8/9) main ideas; 0 D; 0 UD; 0 NIT; multistructural  
word count: 269

**IN THEIR OWN WORDS:  
WHAT MIGRANTS SAY ABOUT SUCCEEDING IN TAFE**

Marie Zuvich  
Canberra Institute of Technology

*Research into the determinants of success for migrant students at the Canberra Institute of Technology found that English proficiency was only one element; awareness of and ability to operate in a different educational culture was seen by a group of successful migrant students as the principal factor.*

*Our research, conducted in 1997-98, consisted of taped focus group discussions and individual interviews of 10 migrant students from a variety of cultural backgrounds studying various diploma programs at the CIT. Students were also asked to write about the differences they perceived between the way they had been educated in their country of origin and that of their Australian TAFE experience.*

*This paper will describe our response to the findings of this research which has involved the implementation of a multi-pronged program of subject-specific, integrated support and staff development. The aim of our program is to increase the success rates of migrant students but a key underlying need is to develop awareness amongst faculty teachers and students of the educational cultural differences between the Australian VET system and that common to many of our migrant students.*

*Using AVETMISS standards we have consistently shown a significant increase in the success rates of migrant students in our program over the past three years. The findings and approaches described in the paper are equally applicable to International students.*

**Introduction**

In 1997 the Canberra Institute of Technology employed a Student Services Officer to implement strategies to enhance the success rates of its migrant student population. This was in response to research (Wapshere, 1996) which had shown that, overall, migrants performed at a lower rate than their English-speaking background counterparts and, interestingly, lower than the International student cohort who had access to subject-specific tutorial support.

One of the main strategies employed was therefore the inclusion of such tutorial support for migrants in courses identified by the research above as particularly problematic for this group. These courses have included the Communication modules which are part of a Diploma in Information Technology and the Law modules included in the Advanced Diploma of Accounting.

This tutorial support was delivered by a team of academic skills tutors working directly with the Student Services Officer. The team consisted of five existing Institute employees: four ESL teachers and one subject teacher, only one of whom had previously worked in our academic support centres. They were chosen because of their cross-cultural awareness as well as for their existing familiarity or willingness to become familiar with the subject they were tutoring in. The fact that they had not worked in the Institute's academic support centres was

seen as an advantage because these centres worked on a drop-in basis with assignment-editing as the basic unit of work, whereas we wanted to trial a proactive scheme where students in need were sought out; where students' existing cultural styles were affirmed and built upon rather than denied; and where tutors worked closely with the faculties rather than in isolation.

Whilst delivering this support, it became obvious to the team that successful module results were not just the product of hard work and proficiency in English. Failure did exist within these parameters and conversely there were instances of students passing whose English was not judged to be adequate.

### **Background research**

The team had some ideas as to what the other determinants of success were, but decided to ask a group of successful students what they thought. Focus groups were run with ten migrant students who were in their final stages of diploma courses. Their cultural backgrounds varied from South East Asian to Latin American and Northern European, and their courses included Information Technology, Civil Engineering and Office Administration. These students were also asked to complete a questionnaire, write freely about their experiences of studying in a different educational culture, and take part in both individual and group interviews which were taped.

What we learnt from the students was what we had anticipated -- that the main issue was one of being able to adapt to a new educational culture. Specifically we found that migrant students needed:

- a clear understanding of the underlying cultural expectations of the course and their teachers;
- knowledge of appropriate strategies to fulfil these expectations;
- an environment in which these strategies could be modelled and practised;
- and the confidence and time management skills to implement these strategies.

Students also identified other factors which they had found to be important in Australian education but not as relevant in their previous educational environment. These included:

- the importance of reading widely on a topic;
- the necessity and value of asking questions in class;
- and the independent learning style requiring students to become decision-makers about their learning.

In addition we were able to identify nine distinct stages of transition that many migrant students seem to pass through in coming to terms with learning in a different educational culture (see Appendix). And, from what we learnt from the students themselves, we could describe strategies useful to both classroom and support teachers in assisting migrants to pass through each stage.

All of these findings have been published as *In their own words: a practical guide to helping the migrants in your TAFE class based on the experiences of successful migrant students*. (Sharma, 1999)

### **Support for migrants**

Knowing that cultural adaptability is a major determinant of success for migrant students, it became incumbent upon us to change our style of tutorial support to reflect this understanding. Moreover, we realised the importance of classroom teachers being able to understand something of the educational culture that these students had previously operated in. In fact, wouldn't it be great if all TAFE students had such an awareness? Gradually it became obvious that it was necessary to deal with all three groups if we were to raise the success rates of our target group.

## *Sources of Confusion*

However, our main target group was still the migrant students in identified modules. And we realised that the traditional drop-in study centres were not going to allow us to offer either appropriate or sufficient support. Firstly these centres rely on students admitting their weakness to an unknown authority, something which is usually anathema to many migrants, and secondly, if a student does ask for assistance, it is often too late and a last minute band-aid solution in the form of assignment-editing is all that can be given. If we were going to make a difference, we had to become proactive in identifying students at risk and this meant becoming a core part of the teaching-learning experience.

The process that has emerged is as follows. An area is first identified as being at risk of having low success rates for its migrant students through on-going statistical analysis and by the number of students self-identifying on the enrolment form as needing help with English. An academic skills tutor is then assigned to a group of modules in this area and becomes part of the mainstream delivery by attending pre-delivery planning sessions, enrolment and orientation sessions as well as the first few lectures and tutorials. This all adds to the tutor's familiarity with the students, their needs, the content of the course and the subject teacher's particular style and expectations.

The tutor will also maintain email or phone contact with the subject teacher to check that the tutorial sessions are directly relevant to the coursework. In addition the tutor may also deliver a guest presentation appropriate to the learning outcomes of the module, for example on cultural inclusiveness or workplace diversity. In this way, not only are the tutors establishing their credibility with the class and the teacher, but they are also contributing to the development of an important group of underlying skills for the wider group.

Weekly tutorial sessions are then established with a group of students studying the modules in question. Here students are given support which has a dual purpose: to assist them in successfully completing the module whilst coming to a clearer understanding of its cultural basis. For example, not only would we revise the elements of a good report as taught by the Communications teacher, but we would also explain the English discourse system and its reader-friendly, linear style and compare this to the students' own discourse systems. At the same time it is made clear that one system is not necessarily better than another, only more culturally appropriate. We have found that it is important here to affirm the value of a student's previous *modus operandi* as this is a strong part of their persona.

It should be noted that the word *tutor* used above does not imply a lesser status than *teacher*. The word is used to differentiate the role of the staff in our support program from that of the subject teacher. Our tutors are all qualified teachers, and paid as such, usually with an ESL background and an ability to cope with the content area of a variety of programs.

Sometimes an allowance of time has to be made for these tutors to feel confident with the content of the modules they are assisting with. In an extreme example, the tutors supporting the Law modules had to spend one semester attending Law lectures alongside the students they were assisting. They were given some allowance for this but it was not possible to fully compensate them financially. However, having worked with various models, we have found it more effective to employ an ESL tutor with a background in diversity issues than to employ a subject specialist. This emphasises the importance we place on assisting our students to get up to speed culturally as well as with the content of the course because the latter will not happen without the former. It is interesting to note that the tutors are usually willing to take on this extra load for a short time because of the job satisfaction that ensues. A model to investigate in the future would be to pay the fees of the tutors to enrol in the modules they are assisting with. This way they at least get the added benefit of skills recognition.

### **Staff development**

It was obvious to the team that staff in the faculties needed to become aware of the cultural differences that impact on a student operating successfully in a new educational environment.

## *Sources of Confusion*

Over the past few years, members of the team had delivered various such sessions to teachers undertaking our internal Certificate IV in Tertiary Education & Training. But this was only reaching a small number of new TAFE teachers and these were not necessarily working in the areas of greatest migrant need.

A change was needed and fortuitously the publication of our book *In their own words* provided the impetus for a new direction. It was seen by some as slightly pretentious to have the book launched by the Chief Minister of the ACT, but this meant that the senior managers of the Institute felt compelled to attend. Whilst there, we were able to showcase living examples of our work: the graphic designer of our book was a former student of our support program who had just landed her first full-time job; another former student played some guitar music from his recently-released debut CD; and a current student thanked the Chief Minister, saying what a difference the program had made to her studies in Law for Accounting.

Invitations to address departmental staff meetings and run staff development sessions started to become more frequent from that time on. In these sessions we aim to explain the areas of difference that students perceive to be the most problematic. We have even invited migrant students in our program to address the group about how they have coped with studying in a different educational culture. From our evaluations it is clear that teachers greatly appreciate hearing about these issues directly from the students.

### **Student body as a whole**

From these successful staff development sessions, teachers are now inviting members of the team to address whole class groups on diversity issues. In these presentations and lessons, we outline the differences between individualist and collectivist cultures and how these differences are manifested in daily life.

We do not have a standard presentation but adapt our knowledge and understandings to the needs of the particular group. For example, this year we have delivered sessions on diversity as related to Reception Protocol and Quality Teams in the Diploma of Office Administration, and sessions on Workplace Diversity, looking at diverse cultures as an opportunity for improvement of service rather than as a drawback, for students in their final year of a Tourism Diploma.

### **Conclusion**

We intend to continue to address the issue of completion rates for migrant students by working with all three groups as described in this paper. With a tightening funding base, our challenge for the future is to maintain our quality service to migrant students, teachers and the whole student body of our Institute, and to find ways of increasing our reach into our TAFE community without actually spending more money.

### **References**

- Sharma, A. (1999). *In their own words: a practical guide to helping the migrants in your TAFE class based on the experiences of successful migrant students*. Canberra: Canberra Institute of Technology.
- Wapshere, D. (1996). *Promoting the successful access and participation of non-English speaking background students in TAFE mainstream courses*. Canberra: Canberra Institute of Technology.
- Zuvich, M. (1996). The Language of Assessment: An investigation into the linguistic appropriateness of assessment tools used in a range of modules in the Canberra Institute of Technology in 1994. In B. Clayton & R. House (Eds.) *Working Away at*

## *Sources of Confusion*

*CBA: Improving assessment practice*\_(pp. 175-192). Canberra: Australian National Training Authority.

**Appendix**

**Stages of transition**

*(Extract from "In their own words" Sharma, 1999)*

1. Lack of awareness
2. Shock and denial
3. Desire to change learning approach; loss of confidence when scope of what is involved is realised
4. Loss of self esteem and ability to value existing skills
5. Overt expression of emotion
6. Exaggerated anger and frustration
7. Orientation
8. Restoration of self esteem and integration of previous skills
9. Extension of personal understanding to a wider audience

## PARTICIPANTS' CONTACT DETAILS

Name	Institution	Email
Claire Aitchison	University of Western Sydney	c.aitchison@uws.edu.au
Reem Al-Mahmood	University of Melbourne	reem@unimelb.edu.au
Jeffrey Barnes	La Trobe University	j.barnes@latrobe.edu.au
Talia Barrett	University of Ballarat	t.barrett@ballarat.edu.au
Alex Barthel	University of Technology, Sydney	alex.barthel@uts.edu.au
Annie Bartlett	Australian National University	Annie.Bartlett@anu.edu.au
Susan Beatty	Swinburne University of Technology	susanbeatty@swin.edu.au
Bernadette Bennett	La Trobe University	b.bennett@aw.latrobe.edu.au
Alison Brown	RMIT	alison.brown@rmit.edu.au
Anna Brunken	Central Queensland University, Melbourne International Office	brunken@mel.cqu.edu.au
Patricia Cartwright	Australian Catholic University, Ballarat	p.cartwright@aquinas.acu.edu.au
Ian Caudwell	University of Melbourne	i.caudwell@elp.unimelb.edu.au
Pamela Champion	University of Melbourne	champ@unimelb.edu.au
Kate Chanock	La Trobe University	c.chanock@latrobe.edu.au
Leslie Chase	University of Queensland	l.chase@mailbox.uq.edu.au
Honglin Chen	La Trobe University	h.chen@latrobe.edu.au
Tanya Clarke	University of Melbourne	t.clarke@elp.unimelb.edu.au
Jessamyn Clarke	University of Southern Queensland	clarkej@usq.edu.au
Rosemary Clerehan	Monash University	Rosemary.Clerehan@CeLTS.monash.edu.au
Marie Clugston	University of Sydney	m.clugston@cchs.usyd.edu.au
Paul Conroy	Victoria University of Technology	paul.conroy@vu.edu.au
Margaret Cook	Victoria University of Technology	
Fiona Cotton	University of New South Wales	f.cotton@adfa.edu.au
Carolyn Cousins	University of New South Wales	c.cousins@unsw.edu.au
Elizabeth Craven		e.craven@bigpond.com
Glenda Crosling	Monash University	glenda.crosling@buseco.monash.edu.au
Rosemary Crosthwaite	Monash University	
Marguerite Cullity	Australian Catholic University	m.cullity@actuinias.acu.edu.au
Dr Martin Davies	Monash Language Centre	Martin.Davies@general.monash.edu.au
Teresa De Fazio	Victoria University	Teresa.defazio@vu.edu.au
Julianne East	La Trobe University	j.east@latrobe.edu.au
Constance Ellwood	University of Technology, Sydney	Constance.ellwood@uts.edu.au
Jan Fermelis	Deakin University	janfer@deakin.edu.au
Lynette Fortington	Monash University	
Helen Frazer	University of Adelaide	Helen.fraser@adelaide.edu.au
Marie Gaspar	Deakin University	jmgas@deakin.edu.au
Ros Gilchrist	Deakin University	Rosg@deakin.edu.au
John Glass	RMIT	john.glass@rmit.edu.au
Christina Graf		
Rosemary Graham	Southern Cross University	rgraham@scu.edu.au
John Grierson	University of Western Sydney	j.grierson@uws.edu.au
Phan Le Ha	Monash University	ha.phan@education.monash.edu.au
Patricia Hacker	Australian Catholic University	
Anna Havir	RMIT	Anna.havir@rmit.edu.au
Fiona Henderson	Victoria University	Fiona.Henderson@vu.edu.au
Elaine Henry	RMIT	elaine.henry@rmit.edu.au
Diana Hiller	La Trobe University	d.hiller@latrobe.edu.au
Barbara Hilliard	Australian Catholic University	b.hilliard@mackillop.acu.edu.au
Christine Jessup	University of Tasmania	Christine.Jessup@utas.edu.au

## Sources of Confusion

Helen Johnston Lila Kemlo Giselle Kett	University of South Australia RMIT Monash University	helen.johnston@unisa.edu.au lila.kemlo@rmit.edu.au Giselle.Kett@CeLTS.monash.edu.au
Peter Kipka Beverly Kokkinn Brenda Krenus	La Trobe University University of South Australia Monash Language Centre	p.kipka@latrobe.edu.au Beverley.Kokkinn@unisa.edu.au brenda.krenus@ general.monash.edu.au
Margaret Kumar Barbara Lasserre Ruth Lee Liz Levin Jennie Lynch Julianne Lynch Jan Manners Judy Maxwell Liz McAspurn Jane McCooey Shem Macdonald Daniel Mc Gill Ursula McGowan Liz McKenzie Gayle McNabb Catherine McTigue Caroline Malthus Helen Marriot	Deakin University University of Technology Sydney Deakin University Swinburne University La Trobe University La Trobe University Charles Sturt University RMIT RMIT La Trobe University La Trobe University Murdoch University Adelaide University RMIT University of Melbourne University of Melbourne UNITECH, NZ Monash University	Barbara.lasserre@uts.edu.au rllee@deakin.edu.au elvine@swin.edu.au Jennie.lynch@latrobe.edu.au Juli.lynch@latrobe.edu.au jmanners@csu.edu.au Judy.maxwell@rmit.edu.au  J.McCooey@latrobe.edu.au s.macdonald@latrobe.edu.au danielmc@cleo.murdoch.edu.au Ursula.mcgowan@adelaide.edu.au Elizabeth.mckenzie@rmit.edu.au gaylej@unimelb.edu.au cmctigue@unimelb.edu.au cmalthus@unitech.edu.nz Helen.Marriott@arts.monash.edu.au
Geoff Millar Jean Mitchell Nancy Moncrieff Jane Moodie	University of Melbourne Vista University, Sth Africa Swinburne University Monash University	millar@unimelb.edu.au jeanmitch@Intekom.co.za nmoncrieff@swin.edu.au jane.moodie@CeLTS.monash.edu.au
Tim Moore Judith Morgan	Monash University Monash University	Tim.Moore@Arts.Monash.edu.au Judith.Morgan@CeLTS.monash.edu.au
Karin Moses Helen Murphy Barbara Neale Diana Nicholson Elizabeth Ninnis Bett Norman Elizabeth O'Connor Jennifer Ongalo Kerry O'Regan Vicky Osborne Mara Pavlidis Amanda Pearce Elisabeth Peden Alisa Percy Aveline Perez Ross Phillips Jan Pinder Elizabeth Powell Steve Price Anne Prince Michael Read	La Trobe University, Bendigo Victoria University c/o C. Chanock UNITECH Swinburne University Swinburne University La Trobe University Victoria University University of South Australia University of Melbourne Monash University Victoria University University of Sydney University of Wollongong University of Melbourne La Trobe University RMIT Australian Catholic University Monash University Swinburne University Deakin University	k.moses@bendigo.latrobe.edu.au Helen.Murphy@vu.edu.au c.chanock@latrobe.edu.au dnicholson@unitech.edu.nz eninnis@swin.edu.au enorman@swin.edu.au e.o'connor@latrobe.edu.au Jennifer.Ongalo@vu.edu.au kerry.e.oregan@unisa.edu.au v.osborne@elp.unimelb.edu.au Mara.Pavlidis@sci.monash.edu.au Amanda.Pearce@vu.edu.au Elisabeth@law.usyd.edu.au alisa@uow.edu.au a.perez@elp.unimelb.edu.au ross.phillips@latrobe.edu.au Janice.pinder@rmit.edu.au epowell@patrick.acu.edu.au Steve.Price@law.monash.edu.au aprince@swin.edu.au

## Sources of Confusion

Margot Reeh Jenny Reeves Jan Regan Martins Reinfelds	University of Sunshine Coast La Trobe University, Bendigo Southern Cross University University of Wollongong	mreeh@usc.edu.au  jregan@scu.edu.au martins@uow.edu.au
Clare Rhoden Andrea Rhodes-Little Mary Lou Ridsdale Jan Robbins Toni Roberts  Meg Rosse Josephine Ryan Meg Schneider Ann Scott Harriet Searcy  Annette Sharma Sue Shaw Diana Simmons Alice Sinclair Kirsten Slifirski Erika Stahr Sue Starfield Marion Tahana Michelle Tamala  Serena Lay Tin Tan Yew Joanna Tapper Linda Thies Robyn Thomas Elizabeth Thomson Holly Thomson Rosalie Thomson Sheila Vance  Rosemary Viète  Vivien Wake David Waters Barbara Wheatman  Michaela Wilkes Heather Winkler Marivic Wyndham Beth Zielinski Marie Zuvich	University of Melbourne La Trobe University  Swinburne University Australian National University Monash University  La Trobe University Australian Catholic University Swinburne University La Trobe, Bendigo Monash University  Canberra Institute of Technology Southern Cross University Australian Catholic University Monash University University of Melbourne Monash University University of New South Wales The Waikato Polytechnic, NZ Monash Language Centre  Monash University University of Melbourne Deakin University La Trobe University University of Wollongong Deakin University University of Sydney Monash University  Monash University  Whanganui Polytechnic, NZ University of Tasmania 382 Howden Rd. Howden, Tasmania 7054  University of the Sunshine Coast University of Western Sydney Australian National University University of Melbourne Canberra Institute of Technology	c.rhoden@elp.unimelb.edu.au a.rhodes-little@latrobe.edu.au  mridsdale@swin.edu.au Janet.Robbins@anu.edu.au Toni.Roberts@CeLTS.monash.edu.au  m.rosse@latrobe.edu.au j.ryan@patrick.acu.edu.au  Harriet.Searcy@CeLTS.monash.edu.au Annette.sharma@cit.act.edu.au sshaw@scu.edu.au d.simmons@mary.acu.edu.au fossard@hotmail.com  esta22student.monash.edu.au s.starfield@unsw.edu.au esmht@twp.ac.nz Michelle.tamala@general.monash.edu.au tiongser@ozemail.com.au j.tapper@language.unimelb.edu.au lin@deakin.edu.au r.thomas@latrobe.edu.au Elizabeth.Thomson@uow.edu.au holly@deakin.edu.au R.Thomson@cchs.usyd.edu.au Sheila.Vance@CeLTS.monash.edu.au  Rosemary.viete@education.monash.edu.au vwake@mail.cgd.whanganui.ac.nz David.waters@utas.edu.au  mwilkes@usc.edu.au h.winkler@uws.edu.au Marivic.Wyndham@anu.edu.au  Marie.zuvich@cit.act.edu.au



