

# Learning support literacy: Promoting independent learning skills and effective help-seeking behaviours in HE students

**John Hamilton**

*Academic and Peer Support Services, Deakin University, Melbourne Victoria 3000, Australia*

Email: [john.hamilton@deakin.edu.au](mailto:john.hamilton@deakin.edu.au)

(Received 22 February, 2020. Published online 27 November, 2020.)

This paper proposes the concept of ‘learning support literacy’ (LSL), and explores what it might entail. It considers this in the context of providing one-to-one language and learning support to Higher Education (HE) students, seeking to identify key student behaviours and capabilities that contribute to effective and meaningful learning support consultations between students and Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers. In doing this it draws on the concept of ‘feedback literacy’ (Carless & Boud, 2018), the capacity to seek and make effective use of assessment-based feedback on performance, applying aspects of this to the academic learning support context. One-to-one learning support includes both face-to-face and technology-mediated consultations, for example those involving online, telephone or email interaction. The paper outlines five broad areas which may impact on student capacity to engage effectively with academic learning support: cultural capital, capacity for evaluative judgement (Boud, Ajjawi, Dawson & Tai, 2018), interpersonal skills, digital literacy and capacity for self-regulated learning (Panadero, 2017; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). It argues these represent a useful starting point in identifying factors influencing LSL. Some behaviours and attitudes that can limit student capacity to effectively access and utilise learning support services are also identified, as well as learning support practices themselves that may inadvertently reinforce dependent behaviours in students.

**Key Words:** learning support literacy, help-seeking behaviours, self-regulated learning.

## 1. Introduction

As an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) adviser one of my roles is to provide one-to-one assistance to students. Traditionally this has been done face-to-face, however increasingly it includes technology-mediated consultations involving online, telephone or email interaction. While in the past these consultations were sometimes open-ended in terms of time, increasingly they are time-restricted to ensure the service is available to as many students as possible. At my university an online booking system is used, with students self-booking, and with most appointments of 30 minutes duration.

What has become evident in all forms of consultation, but perhaps particularly so for technology-mediated ones, is that some students are more effective than others at getting what they need in the time available. This has always been the case to some extent, and there are many reasons and factors accounting for differences in how appointment times are utilised. However, it seems

worthwhile to consider those student practices and capabilities that may influence the effectiveness of these consultations. Doing this is not to suggest that responsibility for creating effective learning support interactions lies solely or primarily with students, nor that when learning support interactions are ineffective it is due to student deficiencies. Clearly, it is incumbent on universities to provide effective, inclusive learning environments that cater to a diverse student population, and this includes in the learning support context; an important component of this is for universities to continually interrogate their own practices to ensure they are optimum and not creating unintended barriers for students. I argue that the topic of this paper is worth exploring precisely because one step in achieving an inclusive learning environment is a better understanding of how to empower students with the requisite help-seeking and independent learning behaviours required to effectively transition into and succeed at university.

While acknowledging the need to carefully examine our own practices I argue there is value in exploring how student behaviours and awareness influence learning support consultations, and what can be done to further equip students to make best use of the available learning support services. This paper reflects on what makes some students effective learners and users in the learning support space, as well as what student attitudes and behaviours may act to limit their capacity to gain value from this resource. It also takes some first steps in identifying elements that contribute to what could be termed ‘learning support literacy’ (LSL). Carless and Boud (2018) use the term ‘feedback literacy’ to denote the capacity to seek and make effective use of feedback on performance, particularly in relation to writing, and with a particular focus on feedback from discipline educators; the term ‘learning support literacy’ extends aspects of this framework to the learning support context.

## **2. The consultation process – A Tale of Two Consultations**

As mentioned above, there is considerable variation in how students use one-to-one consultation time, including variation in both their awareness of how best to use this time and skill in articulating their needs and desired outcomes. In terms of preparation and behaviour, at one end of the continuum are students who do some or all of the following:

- Provide an explanation of their area of study and the reason for the appointment (in advance)
- Introduce themselves
- If seeking feedback on an assignment draft:
  - provide a copy of the draft (whether in soft or hard copy) at time of booking
  - provide a copy of the relevant assignment instructions and marking guide
  - briefly explain any issues with the assignment and/or the desired focus of the feedback
  - bring a hard copy of the draft to the appointment, or have a soft copy that can be readily accessed
- Are on time for the appointment (whether face-to-face or technology-mediated)
- Use the technology involved in the consultation in an effective way
- Are aware of particular issues with which they need support, and are able to articulate these to the ALL adviser
- Are aware of what the ALL adviser can and cannot do to assist them, and have a realistic conception of what can be achieved in the time available
- Anticipate future needs and make subsequent appointments based on these

At the other end of the continuum to the ‘ideal’ student described above, are students who appear unclear about the service being offered, have not prepared for the appointment, may not be aware of the issues impacting on their learning or performance, have difficulty interacting effectively using the technology and computer programs required and/or are unable to articulate their needs

to the ALL adviser. Students in this category may be seeking feedback on an assignment draft, but for whatever reason be unable to provide a copy of the draft, assignment instructions or marking guide. Students in this category may also be late to an appointment, or unreachable at the allocated time (e.g. for online and telephone appointments). They may show little insight into their learning approaches and learning needs. Their focus may be on a ‘quick fix’ rather than skills development or deeper learning.

What is clear when comparing the two scenarios above is that, in addition to the student’s own organisational attributes and inherent capacity to manage their learning, use of the consultation time is heavily influenced by the student’s understanding of the consultation process, role of the ALL adviser, and insight into their learning needs. Further related factors may include the extent to which students view the consultation as a learning activity (as opposed to a functional exchange) (Gurney & Grossi, 2019), whether they are expecting to be active participants in a collaborative process involving dialogue or passive recipients of a one-directional monologue, and the extent to which they view the information provided in a consultation as *transferable* to other aspects of their learning rather than relating only to the immediate context for the consultation (e.g. preparing a final draft of a specific assignment response).

### 3. What constitutes Learning Support Literacy?

Universities are increasingly moving away from a “broadcast model of higher education” (Tapscott as cited in McCluskey, Weldon & Smallridge, 2019, p. 2) and exploring ways to more directly provide students with ‘what they need to succeed’, including the “...connections, cultural capital, capabilities and knowledge they require to become confident and independent learners” (McCluskey et al., 2019, p. 14). This involves adoption of less traditional and fixed modes of delivery and learning, as well as potentially less rigid divisions between a range of teaching and support roles, including those of discipline academic, ALL adviser, and Technology Enhanced Learning Designer (TELD).

Gurney and Grossi (2019) advocate a move away from a (not always conscious) conceptualisation of academic literacy support and development as either a means to an end, a way to ensure that more students pass their assessments and more students stay the journey (the success and retention agenda), or as nothing more than a necessary evil needed to underpin the massification of higher education. With this context and these drivers in mind, this paper seeks to identify some key factors influencing the apparent presence or absence of the attitudes, behaviours and skills outlined above, with a view to understanding how to better prepare students to make the most effective use of the learning support provided. These are not claimed as an exhaustive list and are proposed simply as a starting point for on-going discussion and investigation.

## 4. Five factors influencing Learning Support Literacy

### 4.1. Cultural capital

While the concepts of social and cultural capital developed by authors such as Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam (Field, 2016) have been questioned for potentially reinforcing deficit views of some students (Clegg, 2011), they continue to provide a broad context for understanding student preparedness for the experience of HE. According to Abel (2008, p. 2) cultural capital refers to a suite of resources acquired through both socialisation and education. These resources influence an individual’s social ability and “competence for action”, and include linguistic style, operational skills, values and norms. They both help define a person’s social status and influence his/her effectiveness in operating within a particular social class or milieu (Abel, 2008). In the higher education context it has been argued that students with less cultural capital are disadvantaged, particularly given that universities tend to “privilege middle-class norms and behaviours” (Jack, 2016, p. 2). Clegg (2011) notes research suggesting middle class students (as opposed to those from less privileged backgrounds) are more able to “de-code” (p. 95) the hidden curriculum and

have greater capacity to further develop cultural capital throughout their HE journey. However, it is reasonable to infer from Bourdieu's writings, and his view that cultural capital is often acquired unconsciously, that even taking class differences into account a significant number of HE students also have the potential to *develop* cultural capital through extended exposure to the university teaching and learning environment (Bourdieu, 1986). From this perspective lack of cultural capital has particular significance and potentially greatest impact on learning for *commencing* students.

As noted, despite some inconsistencies and limitations to the cultural capital concept, for example in the ways in which cultural capital is acquired (Jack, 2016) and how it impacts on the learning experience (Clegg, 2011), it does provide a context to begin to explore perceived differences in how students engage with and utilise the learning support opportunities and resources at their disposal. "Sharing similar values, knowing how to approach other members properly, [and] the ability to use appropriate language and communication styles" (Abel, 2008, p. 3) all can help students to develop positive relationships with learning support staff and act as valuable culture-based resources for achieving desired outcomes. Conversely, absence of some of these attributes and skills can have the opposite effect. There is a significant difference between the student who opens a learning support consultation with "I want you to check my mistakes" with one who says "I would like feedback on my language use and whether I have effectively answered the question and addressed the assignment requirements". The second is inviting and expecting a much more sophisticated response, showing an awareness of what is valued and significant in the Australian academic learning context. The former is inviting a response that may not begin to address the potentially most significant issues with their assignment draft. This paper argues that cultural capital may be a factor in how students frame their learning support consultations and influence the expectations they bring to them.

Cultural capital potentially plays a part in students' understandings of the learning support context, as well as in how they interact with those providing the support. It is likely to contribute to their familiarity with institutional practices and conventions, their sense of agency to influence those practices, as well as the presence or absence of the skills needed to do so effectively. Cultural capital may therefore impact in several ways on a student's facility to guide the interaction in advantageous ways that make best use of the time available. As such, it seems reasonable to assume that an understanding of the learning support context, learning support services and the role of ALL advisers contributes to LSL. Furthermore, heightened cultural capital is likely to contribute to deeper understandings not just of the processes and formal roles common in the learning support space at university, but in particular of the unstated, unacknowledged, and often unconscious culturally based norms for social interaction and negotiation.

As mentioned above a possible limitation of the cultural capital conception is that it may (inadvertently) reinforce deficit views of some students and fail to take account of other influences on success and retention. For example, Clegg (2011) puts forward a compelling case for consideration of agency as well as what she calls "community and familial capital" (p. 93) as *other* factors influencing the student experience of higher education, and further investigation of these is certainly warranted. Another caveat on the cultural capital perspective is the increasingly international nature of higher education, with considerable movement of students between countries. To a significant extent much of the writing on social and cultural capital has been conceived in the context of inequality and diversity *within* societies, and in particular those of Europe and the United States; in the Australian context international students make up a significant group within the higher education sector (Maldoni & Lear, 2016), and the extent to which writings on cultural capital apply to their complex HE journey is not fully understood, investigated or theorised.

#### **4.2. Capacity for evaluative judgement**

Assessments in HE often fail to cultivate in students a capacity for evaluative judgement, defined by Tai, Ajjawi, Boud, Dawson and Panadero (2018) as "the capability to make decisions about

the quality of work of self and others” (p. 471). This capacity for evaluative judgement may be a factor noticeable in those students who most effectively use academic language and learning support consultations. It may help them to identify what aspects of their learning (and writing) are effective, and what are the areas where they would most benefit from assistance and support. Ajjawi, Tai, Dawson and Boud (2018, p. 8) argue that traditional HE assessment practices tend to develop in students a ‘learnt dependency’, and that this is counter to the development of evaluative judgement. Extended to the language and learning support context, this may translate into a tendency to wait to be told what is ‘wrong’ with their academic writing, rather than initiating and participating in a dialogue on areas for improvement and ways to better meet assessment expectations and requirements. As noted by Gurney and Grossi (2019), academic support practices may themselves contribute to this type of thinking in students, with consultations sometimes treated by both students and ALL advisers as simply ‘correction’ rather than learning opportunities. This will be discussed further below.

### 4.3. Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills cover a wide range of areas. In the learning support context, some fundamental elements that could influence interactions are emotional intelligence, cross-cultural awareness, and cultural pragmatics. According to Paltridge and Starfield (2007) the term cultural pragmatics alludes to cultural differences in communication behaviours and rhetorical strategies and the knowledge and understanding to operate effectively in cross-cultural communication contexts. As such, a part of cultural pragmatics is the capacity to access “socially-appropriate language for the situations encountered” when communicating across cultures (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p.37). Put simply, an implication of cultural pragmatics is that behaviour and language considered polite and appropriate within one culture and context may be viewed as impolite and inappropriate within another. Further, communication strategies that are effective within one cultural context may prove less effective in another. For example, Paltridge and Starfield (2007) have noted the potential for misunderstandings in communication between international Higher Degree Research (HDR) students and their Australian supervisors, in the absence of cross-cultural pragmatic awareness and skills.

The importance of cross-cultural pragmatics applies equally to the undergraduate learning support context, for example to interactions between students and ALL advisers. According to politeness theory, “politeness serves to both reflect and regulate social distance” (Stephan, Liberman & Trope, 2010, p. 268). As such, student language and behaviours will often reflect the perceived social distance between themselves and their teachers, and this social distance is largely culturally determined. Ironically, in addition to the linguistic challenges involved for international students in selecting appropriate language and behaviours to convey politeness, in the Australian HE environment excessive politeness or an overly formal tone may serve to reinforce or increase social distance, which may not be in the interests of students in developing effective working relationships with their teachers. Behaviour and language use tend to push ‘cultural buttons’ which lead to judgements and impressions, *even when* the recipient is cross-culturally aware and understands that no offense is intended. As noted by Cargill (cited in Paltridge & Starfield, 2007) despite meeting language entry requirements international students are frequently under-prepared for the face-to-face interactions with academic staff required of them in the Australian HE environment. Particularly in relation to international students, helping them to develop the cross-cultural pragmatic awareness to interact effectively and appropriately with both their discipline teachers and ALL advisers may be one important aspect of LSL.

### 4.4. Digital literacy

Put simply, engagement with the support services at universities is for the most part mediated online. Capacity to navigate university websites and Learning Management Systems increasingly impacts on whether a student is able to ‘find what they need’. In addition, as more and more resources and services are accessed and delivered online, including study support consultations,

digital literacy becomes a factor in access, engagement and effective utilisation of the learning support available to students. In this context it is sometimes wrongfully assumed that all students have a high level of digital literacy, or that the ability to use social media (for example) necessarily translates into effective digital literacy in the educational context. Increasingly factors such as having the right hardware and being able to access fast internet connections impact significantly on learning, as does capacity to navigate and engage effectively with online learning. Stricker, Weiber and Wissmath (2011) have noted that digital literacy is one important predictor of likely success in an elearning environment, influencing students' capacity and willingness to be "active participants in their own learning" (p. 502). This clearly has implications for how they access and interact with learning support, particularly given a gradual shift toward more technology-mediated approaches.

#### **4.5. Capacity for self-regulated learning**

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) note that when students acquire a capacity to be self-regulated learners, they take control of their learning. They use the term self-regulated learning to mean "an active constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behaviour, guided and constrained by their goals" (Pintrich & Zusho as quoted in Nicol & Macfarlane, 2006, p. 202). A capacity for self-regulated learning therefore works to empower students and reduce dependency on external teacher support, not only in terms of knowledge and cognitive development but also at the affective level (Nicol & Macfarlane, 2006). Panadero (2017) also notes a positive link between the goal setting which is a feature of self-regulated learning and student self-efficacy. Panadero (as cited in Panadero & Broadbent, 2018) argues that from the teacher perspective self-regulated learning offers "a framework to explain how students learn and what we, as teachers, can do to ... promote student learning" (p. 81). Related to this argument, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) note that making learning processes more explicit can help students to develop a capacity for self-regulation, as can providing opportunities for reflection and building self-regulated learning elements into formative assessments and feedback processes. This suggests that addressing LSL is not simply or even primarily the domain of ALL advisers; undoubtedly students' experiences of discipline teaching and learning have the capacity to strongly influence their awareness of and capacity for self-regulated learning.

### **5. ALL practices that reinforce student dependency**

Most experienced ALL advisers will be aware of how challenging it can be to balance supporting students to achieve short term success, while empowering them to become independent and self-regulated learners. Dependence on the available support can quickly develop, particularly for vulnerable students. This may be to an extent inevitable and unavoidable in some cases. However, it is incumbent on us to continually examine our practices to ensure that in supporting students through their assessment challenges we do not lose sight of longer-term goals. Just as learned dependency may be a product of traditional HE assessment practices that largely privilege the educator to make judgements of quality and position students in more passive roles (Ajjawi et al., 2018; Ellis, 2018), so learned dependency may be a product of learning support interactions in the absence of student LSL, particularly where ALL advisers reinforce limited conceptions of their role.

In relation to the approaches to learning framework Gurney and Grossi (2019) note the influence of student focus and perception; they argue that if the students' focus is primarily on short term performance rather than on learning per se, this influences how they engage with learning support and the extent to which they seek or choose to participate in a dialogue on their learning. This presents a dilemma in terms of learning support practices. While emphasis on individual assessment tasks is often valued by students and used by ALL advisers as a strategy to gain student engagement, for Gurney and Grossi (2019) it represents a double-edged sword, in that it may

reinforce limited, one-dimensional perspectives on the ALL adviser role. In addition to ensuring their practice fosters independent learning skills a goal for ALL educators should be to more clearly articulate both to their students and academic colleagues how they can contribute not only to students' short-term success but to their longer-term learning and growth, and why approaches consistent with this are sometimes adopted.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has proposed the concept of LSL and shared some preliminary thoughts on what may constitute it. Five key elements or factors influencing LSL have been examined — cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), capacity for evaluative judgement (Boud et al., 2018), interpersonal skills, digital literacy and capacity for self-regulated learning (Panadero, 2017; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). These are not presented as an exhaustive list, but rather as a starting point for further discussion and investigation. The paper argues that identifying the components of LSL can help us to better understand how to prepare students to make best use of the learning support services provided to them at most Australian universities. While this paper has focussed on student behaviours and capacities, it also acknowledges the extent to which the learning support consultation process is determined by institutions and influenced by the behaviour of the discipline teachers and ALL advisers involved. It cautions institutions and practitioners to interrogate their teaching and learning support practices to ensure that they are not inadvertently promoting dependency in students. A key goal in exploring the elements of LSL is to identify practices and approaches that will help students to become independent, self-regulated learners, and acquire the knowledge, awareness, and skills to take control of their learning. A next step in exploring this topic could be to more closely examine ways discipline teachers and ALL advisers can work together to promote the acquisition of LSL in their students.

## References

- Abel, T. (2008). Cultural capital and social inequality in health. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 62(e13). <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2007.066159>
- Ajjawi, R., Tai, J., Dawson, P., & Boud, D. (2018). Conceptualising evaluative judgement for sustainable assessment in higher education. In D. Boud, R. Ajjawi, P. Dawson & J. Tai (Eds.), *Developing evaluative judgement in higher education* (pp. 7-17). London, UK: Routledge.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Mahan-Taylor, R. (2003). Introduction to teaching pragmatics. *English Language Forum*, July, 37-39.
- Boud, D., Ajjawi, R. Dawson, P. & Tai, J. (2018). *Developing evaluative judgement in higher education*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson. *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Carless, D. & Boud, D. (2018). The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), 1315-1325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354>
- Clegg, S. (2011). Cultural capital and agency: connecting critique and curriculum in higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(1), 93-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.527723>
- Ellis, C. (2018). The practicalities of using assessment management to develop evaluative judgement. In D. Boud, R. Ajjawi, P. Dawson & J. Tai (Eds.), *Developing evaluative judgement in higher education* (pp. 127-35). London, UK: Routledge.
- Field, J. (2016). *Social capital*. Routledge/Proquest. Ebook Central. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/deakin/detail.action?dicID=4740836>

- Gurney, L., & Grossi, V. (2019). Performing support in higher education: negotiating conflicting agendas in academic language and learning advisory work. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1609916>
- Jack, A.A. (2016). (No) Harm in asking: class, acquired cultural capital, and academic engagement at an elite university. *Sociology of Education*, 89(1) 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040715614913>
- Maldoni, A. & Lear, E. (2016). A decade of embedding: Where are we now?. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*. 13(3). Retrieved from <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol13/iss3/2>
- McCluskey, T., Weldon, J., & Smallridge, A. (2019). Rebuilding the first year experience, one block at a time. *Student Success*, 10(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v10i1.1048>
- Nicol, D.J. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199-218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572090>
- Paltridge, B. & Starfield, S. (2007). *Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Panadero, E. (2017). A review of self-regulated learning: six models and four directions for research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00422>
- Panadero, E., & Broadbent, J. (2018). Developing evaluative judgement: A self-regulated learning perspective. In D. Boud, R. Ajjawi, P. Dawson & J. Tai (Eds.), *Developing evaluative judgement in higher education* (pp. 81-89). London, UK: Routledge.
- Stephan, E., Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2010). Politeness and Psychological Distance: A Construal Level. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(2), 268–280. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016960>
- Stricker, D., Weibel, D., & Wissmath, B. (2011). Efficient learning using a virtual learning environment in a university class. *Computers & Education*, 56, 495-504. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.09.012>
- Tai, J., Ajjawi, R., Boud, D., Dawson, P., & Panadero, E. (2018). Developing evaluation judgement: enabling students to make decisions about the quality of work. *Higher Education*, 76, 467-481. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0220-3>