

Boundary crossings: student responsibility for academic language and learning at tertiary level

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This paper focuses on Principle 3 of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (DEEWR) *Good Practice Principles (GPP) for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities*. Here DEEWR (2009) notes that students have "responsibilities for developing their language fluency during their study at university" and should be advised of this prior to their enrolment. Arguably, Principle 3 is applicable to all students if the notion of "language fluency" is broadened to incorporate English, academic and disciplinary language. It is argued that while ALL professionals may conceive of students having a responsibility for academic language and learning, we know very little about how they conceive of that responsibility, assuming that they have a conception. Further complicating the issue is the personal nature of conceptions of learning, and students' linguistic, educational and cultural diversity. This complexity can potentially constrain our pedagogy such that we become very didactic in our teaching. However, equally it has the potential to free us up to explore and negotiate the boundaries to a shared conception of responsibility for academic language and learning with students. In this article I explore what we could say to new students about their responsibility for academic language and learning in line with DEEWR's Good Practice Principle 3, and argue that students need to cross the boundaries of their understandings to work with the network of ALL assistance we offer, as do we as ALL professionals.

Key Words: student responsibility, academic language and learning, international.

1. Introduction

Principle 3 of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' ([DEEWR], 2009) *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* notes that students have "responsibilities for developing their language fluency during their study at university". For academic language and learning (ALL) professionals, this has resonance. We know in essence that to take responsibility for learning means the development of "learning to learn" proficiency. And by default we also know, as Grubb and Cox (2003, p. 98) point out, when students do not succeed academically, "invisible disjunctions between the students and teachers' understandings [can] become the students' responsibility". Bensimon (2007, p. 464) takes this further: "the dominant scholarship attributes success [or not] to individual effort". If then DEEWR (2009) is expecting that students should be informed of their responsibilities prior to commencing a program of study, and if the notion of student responsibility lies at the heart of metacognition "which ... is essential in order to develop reflective thinking and lifelong learning" (Devlin, 2002b, p. 138),

to what extent can ALL professionals explicate student responsibility for learning to students? Daily we teach young undergraduates with competent, rather than fluent English language skills, and this directly impacts on our work with them on ALL issues; in particular their ability to be metacognitive about their learning. We cannot commit to this Principle unless it is possible to develop a shared conception of student responsibility, and do so in a way that recognizes competing social, cultural and economic contexts.

The ten DEEWR (2009) *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency (GPPs) for International Students in Australian Universities* represent a concerted effort on the part of DEEWR, universities and stakeholders to seek ways of demonstrating commitment to the quality of student learning, particularly with respect to the role of English vis a vis employment, and “the fundamental nature of language in learning and academic achievement in Australia” (DEEWR, 2009). English language proficiency is defined as the ability of university level international students

to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts [ranging from] ... discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. (DEEWR, 2009, GGP3)

The Principles are necessarily broad given the diversity of student populations and university contexts, and although not all international students speak English as an additional language, the GPPs arguably offer an opportunity to review and improve practice for all students. At issue then is how might students and ALL professionals explicate student responsibility for learning?

Taking heed of Devlin (2002b, p. 126), I acknowledge at the outset that from the ALL professionals’ point of view “one’s conception of learning is a personal construct and learning therefore cannot be defined in any absolute way that will make sense equally to a range of individuals”. As a corollary, students’ conceptions of their responsibility are also personal and impact on the ways in which they approach their academic environments. This makes reaching a shared conception of responsibility for learning difficult. Further, I broaden the notion of language to include English, academic and disciplinary language in recognition of the ways in which students need to be literate in a range of languages and genres – in other words, they need to be multiliterate, which necessitates a move away from a purely language-centred approach to learning. Below I draw on selected research from the United States (US), Europe and Australia to draw out some of the complexities of conceptualising student responsibility.

2. Student responsibility: US and European considerations

Pace (1990) surveyed US college undergraduates in the 1980s. His respondents indicated that they knew that if they were to benefit from college, they had to engage with it, and make a significant effort – it was a personal investment by choice. Australian research strongly supports that view (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis 2005; Brinkworth, McCann, Mathews, & Nordstöm, 2009). Pace’s (1990) respondents knew that they had to make, and did make, conscious choices to improve their ability to think critically, logically and analytically, and to test their ideas. This research is significant in a couple of ways. First, it is one of the very few research projects that actually consults students about how they conceptualise student responsibility for learning. Secondly, student respondents assumed that they had to consciously *improve their abilities* in certain areas, rather than they assumed innate ability. This is important if we envisage learning as developmental, and if we are to work with students on the basis of what they know and can do – rather than what we think they should know and be able to do. Finally, the notion of improving one’s ability to think critically, logically and analytically and to test those abilities (including, for example, through academic writing, seminar presentation, and exams) fits well with our work in academic language and learning.

Also in the US, Bacon (1993) explored what student responsibility meant to middle school students in accord with six assigned categories: doing the work; obeying the rules; paying attention; learning or studying; trying to make an effort; and acknowledging that responsibility

is something given or taken. Bacon's students knew it was better to hand in "something" even though it was not done properly; they believed they had to pay attention (this did not necessarily mean listening); they were focused on "getting through"; and making an effort was sometimes seen as synonymous with studying or learning: "as long as they handed in something, credit for effort was somehow due" (Bacon, 1993, p. 207). In terms of submission of academic work, Bacon's students were likely to blame someone else for their failure to complete assignments, rather than take responsibility for learning themselves. Overall, Bacon found that students in his study had a concept of student responsibility, but that they often chose not to take responsibility. There are resonances here for ALL professionals: we all know of students who are merely focused on passing courses, who believe that not doing well academically implies that they are not studying hard enough (vs. effectively enough), who want to know all that is "needed", "who want the answer", and who expect that academic success is somehow "due to them", rather than earned. The difficulty highlighted here is the disjunction between how Bacon's respondents' views create a discord with ALL professional practice and the notion of developmental learning. Do tertiary students conceptualise their responsibility for learning in the same ways, or are tertiary students' conceptualisations deeply at odds with how we might conceptualise them?

Knoxville Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee explicated to students a concept of student responsibility for learning that positions students as being active, reflective, and strategic agents of their own learning:

Taking responsibility is doing away with excuses for not performing. It is accepting that you must take action or make change. In order to take responsibility for learning you need to be able to understand your learning style, and the styles of others, value differences between individual styles, and learn from these differences. You need to be able to identify your strengths and weaknesses, identify strategies for learning, and know when existing strategies are not working or when they are challenged. (Ford, Knight, & McDonald-Littleton, 2001)

Pace's (1990) respondents conceptualised themselves as critical, analytical thinkers, prepared to test their approaches to learning, and strategically adjust them in the face of challenges. Ford et al. (2001), however, assume students – "have" the ability to take responsibility for learning – they are silent on the notion of a developmental approach to learning.

In Europe there has been a considerable research focus on the concept of "learning to learn", its indicators, and how those indicators might be measured and monitored, but very little explication about what student responsibility for learning entails. The European Union Educational Council has defined the concept of "learning to learn" as the

[a]bility to pursue and persist in learning, to organize one's learning, including through the effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups ... This ... includes awareness of one's learning process and needs, identifying available opportunities, and the ability to overcome obstacles in order to learn successfully. This ... means gaining, processing and assimilating new knowledge, and skills, as well as seeking and making use of guidance. (Hoskins & Fredriksson, 2006, annex, paragraph 5)

In an ideal world, these characteristics of "learning to learn" resonate best with ALL professional practice: they are all characteristics of an active, reflective student, responsible for his/her own learning. This is what we concern ourselves with in our teaching – whether in class or consultation – and what is significant here is that this ideal student "seeks and makes use of guidance". The first difficulty, however, is that this conception of responsibility for learning again assumes students "have the ability": contrast this view with that of Pace's (1990) respondents conceptualizing student responsibility as being developmental, that is, to *improve* their ability. The second difficulty is that this conception is not necessarily shared by all students. A third difficulty is that this conception is silent on student voices. I would argue that a

conception of student responsibility for learning, therefore, needs to incorporate the notion of a developmental approach, needs to incorporate diversity, and needs to be articulated by students.

3. Student responsibility: Australasian considerations

In the Australian higher education context, McInnis (2001) and Devlin (2002a) have been relatively lone voices on both the conception of student responsibility for learning, and within that, the silence of students' voices. There is considerable first year experience literature documenting how to target, facilitate, mentor, connect, support, and engage students. Considerable reference too has been made to appropriate student characteristics – time management, organization, motivation, balance, adjustment, determination and commitment – but few of these explicate how students conceptualise and take responsibility for their learning. Very often student surveys attempting to elicit how students approach their studies do so by asking about activities (e.g., how often to you write down your academic goals? use a study schedule?), or the characteristics of good learning (e.g., are you a self directed learner? are you communicative in discussions?). However, such questions do not provide significant insights into what students consider to be their responsibilities for learning. In relation to the process of transition from school to university, McInnis (2001, p. 112) noted, “we researchers have not ... asked students enough questions about the relative importance of what we have assumed is important”. Devlin (2002a) would concur.

Devlin (2002a) challenged the design of student survey instruments, in particular the Perceptions of Learning Environments Questionnaire (PLEQ), arguing that its design obviates against learning from students what they perceive their responsibilities to be. Extending the PLEQ to PLEQ II, Devlin developed questions to gauge student perceptions of their responsibility for learning. She surveyed 100 undergraduates in 1998, finding that respondents perceived themselves “to have much more responsibility for their own learning, than they do their teachers, colleagues, or other people or factors, and than all these factors combined” (2002a, p. 298). From the respondents' perspective, more than half of the responsibility for learning (56%) rested with the students themselves, and what Devlin noted was that this represented a shared notion of learning between teachers and students (p. 298). Twenty-four percent of respondents identified their own behaviour as being a major contributor to – or detractor from – their learning. Tentatively, given the small sample size, Devlin concludes that this positions respondents as conceiving of themselves as having significant responsibility for learning, despite the fact that they may or may not take up that responsibility.

Most recently, Bright and von Randow (2008) surveyed the experiences of later year ESL/EAL students in the New Zealand higher education context. Although a small number of respondents, these later year students reflected on what advice they would give to commencing students in relation to developing their English language proficiency. Their advice revealed their conceptions of responsibility: to work at their language studies consistently; to take the initiative in mixing with native speakers; to identify language strengths and weaknesses and act upon the weaknesses. Advice does not necessarily translate – as Bright and von Randow's students experienced – into “taking responsibility” for learning in practice. These were later year respondents who had not initially taken such responsibility when they had commenced their studies. What Bright and von Randow bring to the mix however, are cross-cultural student voices. As Bright and von Randow (2008) point out, it can be extremely difficult for students to take responsibility for learning when it is not part of the educational culture from which he/she comes. These are the students with whom Stanton-Salazar (2001) is particularly concerned in his research: young students who may have no concept of taking responsibility for learning, and even if they did, may choose not to take it. Stanton-Salazar researched the psychological orientations of low status migrant Latin American youth, many of whom have orientations “that either prevent them from seeking help or render them unreceptive to the supportive actions of significant others” (2001, p. 3). For all adolescents in his research – high/low achievers, domestic/recently arrived – psychological orientations were frequently “more about self-protection and the guarding of self-esteem than about network-building and the necessity of accessing key forms of social and institutional support” (2001, p. 212). Students taking

responsibility for learning is clearly mediated by cultural factors that as ALL professionals we need to directly and explicitly address.

The whole notion of student responsibility for learning is complex, and our work as ALL professionals is complicated, and often times, compromised by such complexity. Undergraduates – particularly first years, and those for whom English is an additional language – reflect a continuum of diversity, confidence, ability, expectations and engagement. We need to explicitly facilitate their taking responsibility for learning: they are as diverse as are their conceptions of taking responsibility for learning. Students with English language competence, rather than fluency, for example, may not have the language with which to express their metacognition. Other students may not know how to learn effectively, quite apart from entertaining the notion that they can be responsible for it. Still others may self-impose barriers to the successful realisation of their academic potential, claiming, for example, that their poor learning outcomes are the university's fault and/or the teachers' fault. For these students, responsibility for becoming active, responsible, critical learners, for being academically successful, for developing language proficiency and so on, does not reside within the control of the student. And it is the case that while some students may be aware of their responsibility for learning, it is the case that they may encounter barriers to assuming that mantle of responsibility because of other factors (e.g., trauma, casual work commitments).

While Australian universities have adopted, if not embraced, ALL centres, the assumption is that “responsible” students will take advantage of them for their own academic “good”. Yet often we have all heard the lines: “we told them; we recommended they do these things – but they don't take advantage of them”. If we are to blame students for not taking responsibility for learning, then we need to be clear about what responsibilities we are expecting them to take and ensure that our assumptions about that responsibility match those of the students. Here we encounter an enormous silence. What do students think? We simply do not know. Yet the notion of “student responsibility for learning” is critical to student learning. One of Bacon's (1993) key conclusions was that if students had a conception of responsibility, and more importantly, if it was a shared conception, it offered a starting point for educators – ALL professionals – to create the conditions which could assist students to take that responsibility. Moreover, we need a shared starting point, given our diverse tertiary contexts and student cohorts, and our need to account for students who have not been brought up with the same educational ethos, who have not been socialized into learning expectations, who speak English as another language, and who come straight from high school.

Importantly, conceptions of student responsibility in Pace's research were coming from students who, as Pace (1990, p. 151) points out, chose to study at university. There are strengths in this. At the Australian National University, the Academic Skills and Learning Centre provides direct ALL teaching to over 8,000 students who choose to attend our consultations, courses and workshops each year. These are not courses for credit, nor are students compelled to attend. In other words, students are actively choosing to take responsibility for learning how to improve their academic skills and learning. This understanding is critical to informing the ways in which we conceptualize students and student responsibility. We need to start from the premise that students in higher education are demonstrating initiative, not compulsion: they do want to develop their academic skills and learning abilities, and they do want to be at university, even though, in our view, for some students it may not be their best option at this particular point in time. These strengths provide a beginning. Other strengths include the fact that, compared to respondents in earlier Australian first year experience surveys, the latest first year experience survey¹ (2004) respondents indicated a sense in which they were better prepared for, and had a clearer appreciation of what university required. They were increasingly more informed, more likely to seek assistance, and more likely to work with fellow students on course subject areas where they had problems (Krause et al., 2005). More recently, respondents in Brinkworth et al.'s (2009) research recognised that successful transition was dependent on academic ability,

¹ A total of 2,786 surveys were administered, with an effective response rate of 28%.

but also on “an ability to make a rapid adjustment to a learning environment that requires greater autonomy and individual responsibility than students expect” (p. 168). These respondents were aware of the importance of taking responsibility for learning. From these strengths, then, how might we work with students – including those with a first language other than English – to conceptualise their responsibility for learning, in particular, for developing “their language fluency during their study at university” (DEEWR, 2009, GPP3).

4. Student responsibility: towards a conception

In preparation for this discussion, it has not been possible to set up a systematic and robust survey to explore the question of student responsibility for learning from the students’ perspective on a meaningful scale. However, it has been possible to reflect on ALL professional practice and the ways in which we might begin to encourage the conditions in which we can facilitate a shared understanding of student responsibility for learning with students. I am not sure that we can conceptualise a single concept of student responsibility for learning per se: our student cohorts are too diverse, and approaches to learning too personal. Thus, while we might agree with DEEWR’s (2009) Good Practice Principle 3, that “students have responsibilities for developing their language fluency”, and more broadly, that *all* students do, and even more broadly they *all* have responsibilities for developing their academic language and learning skills, it is less clear how we might articulate those responsibilities to students prior to their commencement of studies – particularly as we do not know how students understand, if not conceptualise, those responsibilities.

If it is not possible to articulate a conception of taking responsibility for learning that resonates with all students, what then can be done? In relation to ALL teaching, individual consultations (ICs) offer an extremely important context in which to work with students on the notion of taking responsibility for learning. In ICs we can work with students such that they begin to understand what taking responsibility for academic language and learning means in terms of their own approach to learning, and the disciplinary contexts in which they are learning, and then negotiate the kinds of strategies they can use to take up that responsibility. In induction advice to new ALL staff I suggest that working with students such that they take a shared responsibility for learning is a key principle of our professional practice. As staff, we need to agree – amongst ourselves, and with students – that there are limits to our professional expertise and mandate, and that we cannot teach or act in ways that are beyond them. For example, we are not trained English language specialist teachers, nor are we tasked within the university to provide English language teaching. As a consequence of recognising these limits, we have systematically and deliberately moved away from English language teaching, discontinuing our delivery of the University English Language Program (UELTP), some five years ago. Interestingly, much of what was taught in the UELTP program – seminar presentations and participation, listening to lectures, vocabulary building – is now being delivered as part of regular academic skills and learning courses/workshops, and is attracting both native English speakers and speakers of other languages. This has been a critical success for a number of reasons, not least of which has been to dissociate us from English language teaching per se in the minds of those students who would see us as the “fixers/editors” of their English. This shift away from a language-centred view of academic language and learning has enabled us to encourage students to develop notions of multiliteracy, that is, to encourage students to “engage with a multiplicity of communications channels and media” (Cope & Kalantzis (Eds.) 2000, p. 5), a pedagogical approach explored in relation to the ALL profession by Craswell and Bartlett (2001).

Further to encouraging student responsibility for learning, although not necessarily always understood in similar ways by all amongst students, we have been clear in all our publicity that we:

do not offer a proof reading or editing service. Even if English is not your first language, the Adviser’s role is to clarify points of language and help you to develop good independent editing strategies, not proofread or edit for

you. You need to develop your own editing strategies. (Academic Skills and Learning Centre, The Australian National University)

Nationally, this sentiment is echoed by a range of ALL centres/units:

The Writing Centre is not an editing or grammar checking service ... (Writing Centre, University of Adelaide); Please note that we are not an editing service ... (Academic Skills Unit, University of Melbourne); Please note that we do not proofread and correct your essay for you (Learning Centre, University of New England); We don't edit your work for you ... (STUDYSmarter Team, University of Western Australia); [We] do not offer a proof-reading or editing service ... (Learning Skills, Charles Sturt University).

At the same time, ALL centres/units suggest what can be done:

Skills Advisers can assist you to develop your skills in structuring assignments ... [and to] develop your own study and editing skills (Learning Skills, Charles Sturt University); The focus of the appointment is ... on giving feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of your writing and what you can do to further develop your skills (STUDYSmarter Team, University of Western Australia); Our aim is to teach students the academic skills and techniques they will find helpful for a University education, and to help students develop independent learning skills and succeed with their studies (Learning Centre, University of New South Wales).

This does not necessarily prevent students from identifying their key ALL needs as being “English”, or from misconstruing our teaching of ALL issues as being “fixing their English”. But in our publicity statements to students and staff, we can create the preconditions for conversations about what we do, and what it means for students to take responsibility within their own contexts of learning which students can understand. Very often a student or staff member hearing that we do not proof read/edit, will ask, “Well what do you do?”, which lends itself to a conversation about responsibilities for teaching and learning.

To share responsibility for learning means that students must first have the ability to do so, and then to make conscious choices about improving their ALL skills, including language skills. There needs to be a willingness on the part of students to engage with our teaching and guidance. Given that students at the Australian National University are not compelled to attend Academic Skills and Learning Centre courses or individual consultations, our work is made considerably easier because, in the main, students are consciously choosing to seek our assistance. Nevertheless, there will always be students who, having attended a class or consultation, choose neither to learn nor accept advice. That is their choice. Encouraging shared responsibility for academic skills and learning also implies that when we meet with students in individual consultations, we make our professional practice explicit to them so that they can make a conscious choice about whether they wish to make use of our expertise. Together with the student, it is important to agree on the macro concerns on which we shall advise them: in our Centre we specifically comment on focus, wide and critical reading, reasoned argument, and competent style and presentation. In this we can encourage students' conceptions of responsibility for learning as articulated by Pace's (1990) respondents: to think critically, logically and analytically about their strengths and weaknesses, and to act on their weaknesses in academic language and learning. We can also encourage them to actively test their ideas with us about their ideas of, for example, ALL issues (e.g., writing introductions, developing coherence, presenting seminar papers), or with their peers and disciplinary teachers through intellectual engagement.

In individual consultations too we can be clear that ALL issues are relevant to macro concerns such as focus, critical reading, reasoning and style and presentation, and should not be considered as related to “English language” per se. This in essence conveys to students that English language fluency is not the primary determiner of their grade, and that we are not

responsible for editing – or re-writing – their work. We can be clear that responsibility for proof reading, editing and reworking English language issues lies with them, not with ALL professionals. The question of whether the student chooses to take that responsibility lies with the student, and unquestionably, there are some students who choose not to assume that responsibility – hence choices to cheat, plagiarise with intent, or seek other significant input. But from our point of view, the integrity and responsibility of the student for authorship is upheld. Equally we can challenge the view of some markers/supervisors that they need to spend considerable time re-writing a student's work: this is ultimately disempowering to students and suggests to students that responsibility for learning is not theirs; that is, re-writing by someone other than the students themselves, does not serve a developmental approach to learning.

In the context of individual consultations with speakers of languages other than English we can also encourage the notion that improving one's academic language and learning, including language fluency – English, academic or disciplinary – is developmental, takes time and is the result of flexibly adopting a range of appropriate strategies. Here we can return to Bright and von Randow's (2008) student voices on the overarching principles: to work at language consistently, to take initiative and to identify strengths and weaknesses – and act on the latter. To this end we can draw out a range of strategies to suit the student's individual approach, context and needs. At the end of the conversation we can also ask students what action they now intend to take – that is, what have they prioritised, and to what extent are they going to take responsibility for developing their academic language and learning. This has a double effect: encouraging students to understand, develop and act on their responsibility, and for us as teachers, checking the degree to which students have understood our teaching.

Understanding the degree to which students have taken responsibility for learning is important feedback for us. In measuring this, the Knoxville Centre for Literacy Studies lists three categories:

Fluency of performance – level of effort or ease required ... to retrieve and apply what [the student] knows in order to take responsibility for learning.

Independence of performance – extent to which [a student] needs direction or guidance in organizing, solving and communicating [his/her] learning goals; strengths and weaknesses and achievement of learning goals; and

Range of performance – both how well a [student] can use learning skills and whether [he/she] can transfer learning from one context to another. This includes both a range of kinds and complexity of tasks and a range of contexts and audiences for tasks. (Ford et al., 2001)

These criteria are potentially very useful in gauging whether a student has understood and taken responsibility for academic language and learning, and how well we have facilitated that understanding. The criteria encourage us to directly address the needs of students who have limited performance fluency – be that in academic language and learning more broadly, or in particular areas (e.g., academic essays, tutorial presentations) – and recommend appropriate strategies and action. They encourage us to directly address the need for independence in learning, which can only be achieved as students develop their metacognition and ability to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as a learner. And finally, they encourage us to directly facilitate a broadening range of ALL performance, whether that performance relates to cross-disciplinary academic writing, delivering conference papers, writing journal articles, web pages, or blogs and all the attendant issues of audience and context. As ALL professionals this offers the opportunity to work towards a pedagogical framework that truly incorporates the concept of multiliteracy (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001).

What could we say to new students about their responsibility for academic language and learning in line with DEEWR's Good Practice Principle 3? First, to students we might say, you are not *just* students: you have the power to engage with, shape, and master ALL strategies such that you can become critical, analytical, reflective lifelong thinkers. Second, we can ask them what their understanding of their responsibility for learning is, and help them see the benefits of this, as well as negotiate ways they can begin to take it such that they can become more active,

reflective learners. In this, as Bueschel (2008, p. 2) notes, we can “accomplish a great deal when [we] treat students as valuable partners in improving teaching and learning”. Third, we might encourage students away from a purely language-centred view of their academic skills and learning responsibilities, and encourage them to recognise their need for multiliteracy. Such conversations are essential if students are to understand and knowingly construct their responsibility for learning. As ALL professionals, we are uniquely placed to contribute to this process because as Stanton-Salazar (2001) points out, full realisation of responsibility for learning can only be achieved through students engaging with and mobilising networks of assistance. In other words, students need to cross the boundaries of their understandings to work with the network of ALL assistance we offer, and vice versa.

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