Academics and First-Year Students: Collaborating to Access Success in an Unfamiliar University Culture

JILL LAWRENCE
Faculty of Arts/Student Services
University of Southern Queensland
Australia
e-mail: Jill.Lawrence@usq.edu.au

ABSTRACT *This article argues that the contemporary Australian university constitutes a new and unfamiliar culture for the increasing numbers and diversity of students accessing it. Traditional approaches have viewed language development and literacy acquisition as key factors in dealing with this diversity, conceptualising disadvantage in terms of scholastic deficits and a lack of academic literacy. Inherent in these approaches is the assumption that there is one mainstream discourse and that languages and literacies other than those of the dominant mainstream represent a deficit or a deficiency on the part of students who do not possess them. An alternative approach, utilising Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and cross-cultural communication theory, re-conceptualises the contemporary university as a dynamic culture, subject to ongoing and rapid change and encompassing a multiplicity of diverse cultures and sub-cultures. The students' transition to it is then re-positioned as one of gaining familiarity with, engaging and mastering the new culture's multiple discourses and multi-literacies. This article will argue that the use of key socio-cultural competencies constitutes the means by which students can achieve this familiarity, facilitating their successful transition to university culture. The article will additionally argue that academics also have a responsibility in this process, collaborating with students to help them access and negotiate the unfamiliar discourses.*

The Contemporary University

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the 'elite-mass' and 'investment-cost' paradigm shifts irrevocably changed the nature and purposes of university education in Australia. While the first shift widened the participation of the student body, the second shift redefined the parameters of responsibility for this participation. The wider participation rates have meant, for example, a corresponding increase in the diversity of the student body signifying 'the expansion in participation of the critical mass of identifiable subgroups that were formally significantly under-represented in universities' (McInnis & James, 1995). The 'investment-cost' shift depicts the changes to Federal Government policies and funding arrangements since the mid-1990s. According to the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, 1999) these changes have increasingly shifted the responsibility for higher education expenditure from public (state) to private (individual) funding.

Universities are also beginning to exhibit the tensions embodied in these shifts - in the dramatic and ongoing pace of change. The literature on higher education, for example, documents the difficulties experienced by the increasing diversity of students. A National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) funded study, *Towards Excellence in Diversity*, for example, found that 'a clear trend is the lack of progress of the socio-economically disadvantaged and people from rural and geographically isolated areas' (Postle *et al*, 1997, p.xii). The literature also documents the responses developed to explore and overcome these difficulties (Postle *et al*, 1996 and Beasley, 1997). Postle *et al* (1996) argues that these approaches emanate from two main research focuses. The first research strand has concentrated on the determination of socially or culturally inappropriate curricular and teaching methods: how programmes and services might be more responsive to the cultural academic needs of students (see for example NBEET, 1995). The second research strand has attempted to understand how programmes and services could assist students to better adapt to the demands of university education (Beasley, 1997; Postle, Sturman & Clarke, 2001).

While both approaches help students adjust to university requirements and demands, their underlying assumptions remain essentially unchallenged. These include assumptions about the political, economic and cultural contexts impacting on both higher education and the experiences of students; assumptions about the nature of university languages, practices and policies; and the assumptions made by academics about their roles as university teachers. Long-held assumptions about the nature, characteristics and abilities of the 'typical' university student in the early stages of the

twenty-first century as well as the tensions inherent in the contrast between lecturers' perceptions of the traditional 'elite' student and the 'actual' student, for example, remain largely unexplored. The current approaches also reflect the pedagogical or curriculum focus assumed by much of the research literature; the focus on policies, programmes, systems and organisational support. Positioning the debates within a theoretical context, however, might present alternative ways of conceptualising the experiences of the diversity of students participating at university.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a theoretical frame that is useful in re-positioning the experiences of students participating at university. CDA is appropriate as it is able to reveal the discursive practices that operate as power relationships in an educational context, focus attention on the role of discourses[1] in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society, and connect local texts and cultures, theoretically and empirically, to power and ideology configurations operating in the broader society (Fairclough, 1995). As such CDA has the capacity to provide a systematic means of linking the students' experiences to the wider external forces which operate on and influence both the localised site (the university) and the students who inhabit it.

CDA is able to contextualise the tensions rising, for example, from the ideologies currently informing and driving higher education in Australia. These are evident in the confrontation between traditional scholarly ideals and entrepreneurial, corporate, business practice (see Coady, 2000). The economically driven political agenda has meant that the university is now operated from an economic rationalist platform, which is market and outcome driven, prioritising managerialism and consumerism (McInnis, 2000). This has resulted, for example, in increased budget constraints, the demands of which are currently and increasingly dictating pedagogical decisions. Quality control measures and strategies designed, for example, to help make explicit, and more transparent, the expectations of markers and the 'hidden' curriculum have been eroded. This situation is compounded by the fact that, at the same time as strategies designed to empower students have been eroded, pressures have increased on those staff who are most in a position to support students new to the university culture. McInnis (2000), for example, documents the increasing casualisation of staff involved in first-year teaching. Students too are under pressure. McInnis *et al* (2000), for example, report that the most striking difference between the 1994 and 1999 snapshots of the first year at university in Australia was the increased proportion of students who are enrolled full-time and engaged in part-time work, and the increase in the average number of hours students are employed. At the same time, outcomes and throughput, in minimum time, are prioritised. These pressures also provide consequences for student retention. McInnis *et al* (2000) found, for example, that one-third of the students in their snapshot of the 1999 cohort seriously considered deferring or withdrawing during their first semester.

CDA is also able to contextualise the ideologies currently informing the debates about equity in education, about the role of 'social justice' and about the nature and meaning of higher education in Australia. Much of the rhetoric emanates from the Federal Government's move to transfer the responsibility for the 'infrastructure of learning' from the state to the individual: from public to private funding (DETYA, 2000). There are the changes to government funding to universities, to the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and to AUSTUDY regulations; changes that reinforce the idea that higher education had entered 'hard times'. Emanating from the 'investment-cost' paradigm shift, this 'public-private' shift also redefined the meaning of both social justice and educational equity in the higher education context (Postle, Sturman and Clarke, 2000:16). In 1990, *A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education That's in Everyone's Reach'* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, DEET, 1990) reflected the notions that educational disadvantage constituted a social/public responsibility and that the links between social positioning and educational disadvantage were pivotal. However, in Howard's Liberal Government, the funding arrangements for higher education are becoming increasingly delineated as a 'cost' (see Coady, 2000 and DETYA, 2000). Under this mindset, educational disadvantage is reshaped as the fault/responsibility of the individual and unrelated to social positioning. A failure to realise potential represents a loss to the individual only. While the difference in the redefining of equity is subtle, the results may be 'profound for those in society who are most disadvantaged, especially during their first year of study when nurturing and concerted support remains critical to retention and ultimate success' (Postle, Sturman and Clarke, 2000:18).

CDA also unveils the role of discourse in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society (Van Dyjk, 1997: Fairclough, 1995). By providing insight into the fact that language is not only socially

shaped, but that it is also socially shaping or 'constitutive', it encourages an investigation of the ways in which subjects are constituted and reconstituted through discourse (Fairclough 1995, p.132). CDA thus provides a means of understanding the familiarity or lack of familiarity some groups have with university culture. Critical researchers (for example, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Connell 1994; Scheurich, 1997; and Young 1998) see the relationship between education and social positioning as pivotal. The social and cultural capital of some groups, they argue, helps them endow their children with the cultural knowledge and discourses more in tune with mainstream university culture. These include the shared preferences, beliefs and attitudes which families transmit to their children as well as the ways in which parents help define and shape the future of their children. There is the time spent reading with children and beliefs in the importance of education as well as the encouragement of critical and analytical thinking skills. These groups, also, may be more prepared to invest in their children's education, for example, by investing in private schooling. This may be significant, as there is an emerging body of research in Australia correlating types of schooling with the likelihood of university participation (Jamrozik, 1991 and Beasley, 1997).

Alternatively the experiences, beliefs and values of other groups may be less in tune with mainstream university culture, and may even 'marginalise' them - exemplifying the consequences of a social positioning which can act to exacerbate educational disadvantage. Some groups, for example, may have a cultural aversion to the accumulation of debt (a characteristic which becomes more critical as students themselves become more responsible for funding their tertiary education), have negative experiences of school, poor study habits/facilities and lack the family/peer reference groups which have knowledge of and value tertiary education. These groups may de-value education and the benefits of education generally. This is demonstrated in my own research (PhD thesis, ongoing):

> 'My mother and father both left school early and have grown up with the belief that schooling is generally economically 'useless'! My mother would praise me for doing well at school but was unlikely to take a day off from work to watch me take part in school performances while my father showed very little interest towards my schooling. My parents encouraged me to secure a job as soon as possible, even if this meant leaving school before my senior schooling was completed. They believed that securing a job was much more important for my future than a high level of education. I realised early on in my high school education that because of my parents' values and beliefs, I would not be attending university. This idea was simply ridiculous as to them, university was 'a pure waste of time and money'. I found that this affected my schooling and I left high school half-way through year 12.'
> (Low SES student)

> 'My uncle and aunt say I am mad, 'What are you doing, you will never be able to pay it off? What do you want a job for, you'll just start working and you'll be married with kids'. My family thinks you don't need any education.
> (23 year old rural student)

The lack of cultural familiarity displayed by the diversity of students attempting to access the new university culture is woven through the literature on the first year experience (see, for example, Williams 1987, Connell 1994 and Postle *et al,* 1997). Beasley (1997: p29) argues 'universities have cultural values and norms to which new students must adjust, and students come with their own unique but varied cultural values'. This literature echoes that of the critical theorists. For example Gee (1990) contends 'the ways of communicating within an academic setting are not easily grasped and are often more difficult for students whose backgrounds seem to differ from, or even conflict with, the ways of writing, knowing and valuing favoured within a university context'. Students themselves verbalise this notion; 'it's a society which is totally different from what most of us are used to' (cited in Beasley, 1997, p182).

The question of how this lack of familiarity is dealt with thus becomes pivotal if these groups are to persevere and succeed at university. CDA also helps here as it can uncover and address the power relationships that operate in and guide the choices made, for example, by academics in university contexts. Fairclough (1995) argues that not only is education itself a key domain of linguistically mediated power, but it also mediates between other key domains for learners. So how is diversity perceived and dealt with by Australian academics? The most recent study of 2,609 academics in fifteen Australian universities reported that 'high proportions of academics' were reportedly negative about the calibre of students, with 69% of respondents considering the provision of academic support a major cause in the increase in staff work hours (McInnis, 2000: p24). The fact that there were 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' was delineated as a

'problem'. Other studies have found that, while most staff in tertiary institutions acknowledged the benefits of having the diversity of students entering courses at their institution (altruism, social justice, student diversity) they demonstrated little knowledge about these students (Postle *et al,* 1996 and Beasley, 1997). Postle et al's (1996) study, for example, revealed that the staff interviewed believed that these students should be treated no differently from other students and that existing academic support mechanisms should be resourced to provide any remediation that was deemed necessary. That the staff gave very little support and credence to value-added teaching as an indicator of good teaching involving these students also reinforces the ascendancy of the deficit approaches to dealing with diversity. Such attitudes reinforce the dominance of the mainstream academic discourses resonating through them. Inherent lies the assumption that there is one mainstream academic culture, with one mainstream discourse, operating within an unchanging, static and consistent organisational context.

This mindset provides implications for both higher education and for the students attempting to access it. The first is the recognition that higher education institutions, particularly in times where government policies are driven by liberal/individualist ideologies, are inherently conservative, demonstrating an unwillingness to examine their policies and attitudes as a first step in initiating changes that could serve to facilitate students' success. The second is that the institutions in themselves may not be able to redress inequalities in society, given that their policies and practices currently not only do not question the sources of inequality but in fact can be perceived to be maintaining them. The third implication is that, under this mindset, students who do not succeed or who have difficulties in accessing and mastering the mainstream academic discourses are labelled, perhaps 'blamed', as being under-prepared or 'intellectually deficient', revealing a 'sink or swim' approach to the issue of diversity. It is accepted that it is the students' responsibility if they fail, with academics perceiving that they have little role in, as well as little responsibility for, the retention and ultimate success of students.

Rethinking Diversity: the 'Deficit-discourse' Shift

The New London Group (1996: p72) argues that such deficit approaches involve 'writing over the existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture'. They are representative of models of pedagogy that had emerged from the idea that cultures and languages other than those of the mainstream represented a deficiency, a shortcoming. Further, they deny the implications provided by the existence as well as the potency of the concept of the multiple linguistic and cultural differences. An alternative approach, incorporating the notion of meta-literacies or multi-literacies, characterises the university as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of subcultures, each imbued with their own discourses, literacies and practices. Students' transition to the new culture can, then, be re-conceptualised as one of gaining familiarity, and ultimately mastery, of these discourses. Lankshear *et al* (1997) contend that, to feel comfortable in and perform with competence within a culture, means becoming literate in that culture - becoming familiar with and engaging the multiplicity of new discourses within the culture. As Bartholomae (1985: p134) argues:

> Every time a student sits down to write for us he or she has to invent the university for the occasion - invent the university, that is, or a branch of it.....The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community.

CDA thus provides the grounds, the rationale and the impetus for re-theorising both the transition to university and the first year as processes. Processes which intrinsically involve the familiarisation, negotiation and mastery of the discourses and multi-literacies of a new, often unfamiliar, dynamic and rapidly changing university culture.

However, the approach provided by CDA also has limitations. CDA, as a form of analysis, is able to identify the (hidden) discourses in institutional/organisational communication. This is an important first step in helping students raise their awareness of the power relationships operating in that context as well as in alerting them to the importance of engaging and mastering the languages/discourses of the institution. However CDA, in itself, with its emphasis on analysis, is not able to provide a recipe for actively changing organisational behaviour, for actively empowering students. It doesn't encompass the capacity, for example, to develop strategies which students can utilise to help them access, engage and master the unfamiliar discourses of the university. A further theoretical perspective, that provided by cross-cultural theory, may be able to provide the means by which these aims can be accomplished.

Cross-cultural Communication Theory

If, as this article argues, the contemporary university is re-conceptualised as an unfamiliar, dynamic and often fragmented culture, encompassing a multiplicity of sometimes inconsistent and abrading subcultures, each with their own discourses and languages, then a second theoretical perspective may be applicable: cross-cultural communication theory. The use of this theory, facilitating as it does a means of making a transition into an unfamiliar host culture, may be able to provide an action framework that can be utilised by students negotiating their transition to the new university culture. Its use also provides implications for academic staff whose roles and responsibilities in helping students access success in the new culture gain momentum.

Cross-cultural communication theory is usually applied, in a university context, to international or English-as-a-second language students adjusting to an unfamiliar host culture (Barker, 1993; Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1999; Mak & Barker, 2000). The literature contends that in order to reap maximum benefits from an unfamiliar educational system, international students need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with mainstream students and teachers: an adjustment similar to that demanded of the diversity of local students entering an unfamiliar university culture. Boekaerts (1993) sees that adjustment involves learning processes which refer to the ways in which individuals require knowledge and skills, essentially enlarging their personal resources to cope with the new context. Involved is the students' self efficacy, the belief that they can successfully perform or complete social behaviours in academic and everyday situations and thus master the relevant discourses and literacies of the culture (Bandura, 1986).

Bandura's (1986) social learning model is utilised as the basis of a cross-cultural communication programme called *ExcelL: Excellence in Experiential Learning and Leadership* (Mak, Westwood, Barker & Ishiyama, 1998). *ExcelL* is an experiential, skills-based, practice-focused programme, which 'enables people who have recently arrived in a new culture to be competent and effective in dealing with members of the host culture' (Mak *et al,* 1998: p4). The significance of this programme is twofold. It not only establishes the grounds for prioritising the role of socio-cultural competencies in helping students adjust to an unfamiliar university culture; it also provides a theoretical frame for prioritising particular socio-cultural competencies – specifically those of seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, providing feedback, both positive but particularly negative feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request.

The efficacy of these competencies has been firmly established, validated by a number of studies conducted in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Shergill, 1997; Mak, Barker, Logan & Millman, 1999; Pearson 1999; Mak & Barker, 2000). Their application is however wider than their use in the programme. Firstly, that they are validated as facilitating a successful transition to the unfamiliar university culture for international students reinforces their efficacy in other cross-cultural situations in the university context. For example, in the case of the diversity of local students now participating at university: low socio-economic or rural and isolated students engaging an unfamiliar university culture; mature-age students negotiating unfamiliar academic literacies; and alternative entry students confronting unfamiliar discipline discourses. Secondly the competencies also possess daily currency - we all use them, to varied effects, in our personal, social and work lives. Students do not necessarily have to undertake a programme to utilise them effectively. Their significance is reinforced however by the fact that they are able to provide students with a means of engaging and negotiating the multiplicity and diversity of the new discourses and specific literacies that are crucial to their success – for example, communication technologies, referencing systems and research methodologies. Students themselves acknowledge the difficulties of accessing these new discourses and literacies:

> 'One difficulty was how to research because what I am used to and what the expectations are here are two separate things.
>
> (My) mathematics was not up to the standard required. It was very difficult and the course content was not explained before I embarked on it' (cited in Yorke, 2000, p38).

These competencies are also able to facilitate more meaningful exchanges and dialogue between the many different cultural groups present within the culture (for example, locals, staff, older people and younger people, people of different cultures, different socio-economic levels and different genders).

An essential feature of the competencies is that they are socio-cultural: that they are socially and culturally appropriate or attuned to the particular culture, subculture or discourse being engaged. The specific verbal and nonverbal means of asking for help or refusing a request differ, for example, from culture to culture,

from subculture to subculture, from discipline area to discipline area. Observation - listening and watching - and reflection (for example in relation to the specific verbal and nonverbal practices of a culture or discourse) are essential features of the competencies. Observation and reflection are also inherent in the theories developed, for example, by Giddens, when he discusses enhanced reflexivity, and by Fairclough, who argues for a critical awareness of language. Giddens (1994: p90), for example, emphasises the ability to study and reflect on the social, cultural and educational practices of each culture or subculture, to engage in a consistent monitoring of them, and as a consequence, accumulate new and better understandings of them. Fairclough, (1995: p220) talks about the importance of critical language awareness – which he argues has the capacity for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself, including 'the capacity to promote social awareness of discourse, to encourage critical awareness of language variety and to promote practice for change'. Observation and reflection form the basis of the socio-cultural capacity of the competencies. Utilising them is a first step in enabling students to not only fine tune the competencies to the specific culture or subculture being engaged, but also to achieve new understandings about the new discourses and cultures they are confronting. The socio-cultural competencies thus provide students with the means to encompass the diversity present within the evolving and often fragmented university culture.

The Role of Socio-cultural Competencies in Facilitating Transition to an Unfamiliar Culture

Seeking help and information

The ability to seek help and information, for example, is a crucial socio-cultural competency that needs to be consistently demonstrated by students in and across a variety of university cultures and sub-cultures. Students need to be able to canvass a wide range of resources and be able to determine which one will best meet a specific need for specific discipline areas. They need to be able to access for themselves, locating, utilising and assessing for example, information gleaned from handbooks, booklets and websites, as well as discipline specific assistance such as peer assisted learning programmes, consultation with tutors and lecturers, library and computer support services, and study skills sessions. They also need to know how to access learning enhancement support and the personalised coping mechanisms to help them negotiate the bureaucratic infrastructures in a variety of departments and faculties. There is also the help and support available from a plethora of counsellors: careers, peer and clinical counsellors. Pearson (1999) argues that accessing these kinds of remedial and crisis oriented intervention is essential in supporting students in reaching their goals or in repairing the devastation that occurs when failure is experienced as a total loss of confidence in personal and cultural identity (cited in Mak & Barker, 2000). These kinds of support can make the difference between retention and withdrawal. It is one prioritised by the participants in my research:

> 'The ability to ask for help is 60 – 70% of passing a unit of study.'

> 'The skill of seeking help would be the highest priority, crucial.'

Further:

> 'Asking for help is the basis for study because if you can't get help then what are you doing? If you don't understand, what have you learnt – nothing.'

> 'My advice to someone starting university is to go and ask questions, what do I need to know, how does the university operate, what do I do. The mechanics of the university are more important than the study. In the first semester the mechanics of the university are subjects in themselves.' (a mature-age female)

Another student of mature age who had been in the military, comments:

> 'One thing the military did bash into me was the ability to ask for help. After you are taught the first time around they are going to ask you to do it within three minutes. For example, with a weapon you really have to ask if you don't understand. So I have transferred it to here and it has been helpful. I think I will transfer it to the rest of my life as it actually saves you time in the long run, it helps speed up the learning curve, rather than waiting until a problem becomes too big and uncontrollable.'

Although this socio-cultural competency is considered to be crucial in cross-cultural adjustment (see, for example, Mak *et al*, 1998) it is not as straightforward as it seems. The cultural belief systems or values underlying an individual's use of this skill are many and varied. Some students may consider it to be a sign of weakness, for example, or equate help with 'remedial' intervention or a 'loss of face'. They may feel they may not have the

'right' or lack the confidence to ask, especially as they make their transition to the new culture. For example:

> 'I don't feel confident enough to speak to my lecturer or tutor about the essay question because they might think I am stupid or something.'

There are also problems related to the under-utilisation of support services by some students, as well as the implications consequently provided for retention. These are issues which are beginning to be addressed in the literature (see for example Coles 2001) and are also reflected in the development of a number of early warning intervention programmes. Shiplee and Wilson, from the University of West Florida, and Dietsche, Flether and Barett, from Humber College, Canada, presented papers on this issue to *The Fourteenth International Conference on the First Year Experience* held in Hawaii in July 2001.

Making social contact and conversation

Also pivotal is the ability to make social contact and social conversation, in socially and culturally appropriate ways, across a multiplicity and diversity of cultural groups. This competency is crucial as it facilitates the development of study groups, writing groups or learning circles, as well as study partners, mentors and friends, and perhaps, the support of a 'significant other'. The literature surveying student retention argues, for example, that social isolation is the key factor determining student withdrawal (McInnis & James, 1995; Tinto, 1995). McCann (1996) argues that social isolation plays a significant role in causing difficulties in transition. The features she sees as significantly contributing to student participation and success include academic support strategies, access programmes and social networks (McCann, 1996). Benn (2000) maintains that the 'presence of a significant other' was the most significant variable facilitating continued perseverance at university in Britain while a study conducted by Watson, Teese, Polesel and Golding, pinpoint alienation as one of the main reasons for dropping out in Australia (cited in Illing 2000). McInnis and James (1995, p.118) also contend that there are differences in academic performance between those students who interact with other students and those who do not. They suggest that particular reference should be paid to the role and significance of the social context of learning as 'successful learning and the development of a positive view of the university experience did not occur in a social vacuum'.

> First-year students' orientation towards learning is in a formative stage and inextricably linked to the pursuit of identity and self-efficacy developed in a peer group (p119).

There is also their finding that 'personal connection with other students and academics was far more important than a lot of people imagine' (cited in Illing: 1995, p47). Clulow and Brennan (1996, p33) argue that there is a positive relationship between personal support and persistence with study and that there is a significant correlation 'between a group of people never spoken to and withdrawal or failure in a subject.' Kantanis (2000) argues that, without friends, students have fewer resources at their disposal to assist them in the process of transition. Students themselves confirm the importance of the competency:

> 'The most helpful support at university were the friends I made.' (Rural and isolated student)

> 'Friends are crucial in getting the best out of yourself.' (Alternative entry student)

> 'At first I was completely confused doing full time study but I wanted to be a teacher and Brian was emotionally very supportive – I absolutely couldn't do it without him. Also I made a good group of friends and we often met at the coffee shop to talk over things and help each other along.' (A female, mature-age student who won a university medal)

Participating in a group or team

The ability to participate in a group or team is another socio-cultural competency pivotal to perseverance and success at university. This ability can generate feelings of confidence and belonging in a diversity of classroom settings and contributes to the critical and questioning engagement essential to academic success. Students themselves acknowledge the importance of this competency in developing feelings of confidence and connection:

> 'Every single time I have been involved in a study group, I have achieved a distinction or high distinction. Just talking about the objectives or an assignment for an hour a week reinforces key points and examples in your memory. They are definitely well worth the effort.' (Mature-age female student)

> 'We push each other to learn from each other and I found that quite useful and helpful.'

> 'I just did x unit and hated it. There were no tutorials at all and it was horrible....I didn't have people around that I could talk to and complain to and this affected my confidence and study.'

The importance of this socio-cultural competency is reflected in the efficacy of learning communities, peer collaboration or peer cohorts, all of which are gaining in popularity and credence, particularly in the United States (see *Program and Proceedings: The Fourteenth International Conference on the First Year Experience* held in Hawaii in July 2001).

Seeking and giving feedback

In the transactional model of the communication process, feedback is integral. A crucial socio-cultural competency includes the two–way feedback process, again in culturally and socially appropriate ways as providing negative feedback, in particular, is often a 'risky' behaviour when used in relation to a high status professor for example. This competency hinges on the ability to both solicit constructive feedback and give negative criticism, and conversely, give constructive feedback and solicit negative input. For example students need to be able to ask lecturers for advice on how to improve a draft plan or the structure or body of an assignment. At the same time they need the skills of explaining the difficulty of anticipating the lecturer's requirements in the absence of a Marking Criteria Sheet. Or being able to ask for guidance about research sources, while providing, in a socially and culturally appropriate way, negative feedback, for example in relation to the quality of the learning environment - illegible transparencies, lack of constructive feedback on assignments or the use of unexplained technical language. The ability to give and receive feedback is integral to perseverance:

> 'Thank you for taking the time to look at and give me feedback on my drafts and assignments. Your support and advice was crucial to my understanding and to my development as a student but best of all helped me to attain better marks. The emphasis you placed on understanding what was expected and sticking to the topic assisted my interpretation of the question. As a first-year student it was difficult to know if I was on the right track so your help reduced my fears and guided my actions.'

> 'In one unit I am studying there are no lecture notes and the examples that are given aren't explained in a way that relates back to theory. I am having difficulties learning and so are most of the other students. There is no student evaluation form so next year's students will experience the same things.'

Expressing disagreement and refusing a request

The final key competency relates to the ability to express disagreement or to refuse a request, again in socially and culturally appropriate ways. This is vital, for example, in organising a timetable, in maintaining discipline, in being assertive and in preventing stress in a variety of contexts and situations. It is also an essential ingredient in fostering flexibility, an important feature when an increasing number of students are working part-time. A mature-age female notes:

> 'I had a few dramas organising a few things next semester because academics in different departments don't communicate with each other. I got a letter saying I couldn't do five units but when I questioned this they let me (this student completed a double degree within two and a half years by doing four rather than five units each semester and by studying during summer term, semester three).'

These are then the specific and key socio-cultural competencies, which, if utilised by students, enable them to construct a more effective means of negotiating and mastering the unfamiliar discourses of the new university culture. They enable students to demonstrate the appropriate inter-cultural competences and specific literacies necessary for perseverance in the new university culture and, in particular, they empower them to exhibit the knowledge and characteristics which successful students possess and display.

The Role of the Academics: Collaborating to Facilitate Students' Transition to an Unfamiliar Culture

The re-theorisation of university transition, however, also demands responses from the other party involved in the communication process – the academics. A possible first response is to re-think university beliefs and practices in relation to diversity, to re-conceptualise diversity as a 'resource' rather than as a 'problem'. Such a repositioning could result in a shift in focus from the deficit view to one which takes into account the ways in which academics can help facilitate students' familiarity, or overcome a lack of familiarity, with the culture and its discourses and multi-literacies.

The re-definition of diversity raises a number of questions about the nature of university practices. Questions, for example, about the potential 'blame' attached to students who are considered 'inadequate' or 'under-prepared' by

teaching staff immersed in the dominant academic discourse. Questions, also, about the roles of university teachers in terms of their responsibilities as educators, as communicators. Involved here, firstly, is the need for academics to accept and embrace their responsibilities in terms of student retention. They also need to acknowledge that they teach students as well as, or perhaps instead of, teaching subject matter. A further responsibility for academics is to acknowledge that successful students are those who are 'expert' at being students. This involves the understanding that the students most likely to succeed are those who actively seek to become enculturated into the teaching/learning styles, life, procedures and practices of the new university culture (Kantanis, 2001). This article would argue, in fact, that 'expert' students are those students who utilise, in socially and culturally appropriate ways, the socio-cultural competencies outlined above. Academics can assist them in this process by not only raising the students' awareness of the importance of these competencies, but also by actively facilitating their use. For example, raising the importance of utilizing student consultation times, on-line discussion groups, e-mail and news groups, telephone tutorials, video conferences, study partners and study groups, learning communities and learning circles which can constitute resources of help and information as well as sources of feedback. The use of icebreakers, group exercises, networking opportunities, dialogue across cultures, problem-solving activities and role plays, and opportunities for class interaction also helps students develop their abilities to participate in a group or team and to make social contacts and connections. On the other hand, the incorporation of feedback loops and different forms of evaluation, as well as the encouragement of the use of consultation times, can provide students with the opportunities to voice their concerns and simultaneously, enhance their membership of the learning community.

Pivotal, however, is the need for academics to make their discourses explicit. To not only explain and make clear the rules, but also to make explicit the hidden agendas, the covert or hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations as well as the expected (but not stated) behaviours intrinsic to students achieving success in their discipline (Benn, 2000). Boud (cited at the Researching Widening Access: International Perspectives Conference, held in Glasgow in June 2001) argues that academics have expectations, but fail to articulate them and then make judgments about students who fail to demonstrate them. Model or sample assignments, formative assessment related to structure and process, constructive feedback, marking criteria feedback sheets and draft proposals constitute ways in which academics can make explicit their expectations. Assessment targeted early, both to provide students with a gauge about the degree and speed of their adjustment and to implement early warning strategies, is also important (Kantanis, 2001).

The key to teaching/learning, for academics, is, then, as much the 'process', as it is the 'content', with an acknowledgement by academics that retention relies in part on what the academic does in the classroom, as a professional educator. An important thread can therefore be woven into the philosophy of university teaching. It lies in recognising, participating in and facilitating the processes by which students learn to negotiate and integrate a number of competing discourses and multi-literacies - the university, faculty, department and discipline discourses they are engaging. Pivotal is the need for academics to actively seek and look/listen for feedback about the effectiveness of their curriculum planning and teaching strategies. Also important is the need to develop a more coherent university-wide teaching and learning framework, including the development of policy in relation to the first year experience, transition and diversity. The 'deficit-discourse' shift thus reinforces a further driving impetus of this paper; that academics have a vital role in the process whereby students learn to negotiate the multiple linguistic and cultural differences of the university – a process which is central to their abilities to persevere and succeed in a new, and often unfamiliar, university culture.

Conclusion

This article has applied CDA to illuminate the ideologies that are currently informing the higher education community in Australia and to analyse the power relations that maintain their influence. It focused attention on how these power relations are realised through the university discourses, both to challenge the assumptions of deficit which underpin many of the responses to the increasing diversity of the student body, and to establish the potency and applicability of the role of multiple cultures, multiple discourses and multi-literacies in the university context. This analysis made possible, even imperative, a re-theorisation of the transition to the new university culture by first year students. It provided the grounds, the rationale and the impetus for its re-theorisation as a process of gaining familiarity with the unfamiliar discourses of the university. The article then challenged both the students and the university. It challenged students to recognise that to demonstrate mastery of these discourses, the

use of key socio-cultural competencies must be evoked. It also challenged academics to collaborate with students: to identify and make explicit their discourses - the university discourses and multi-literacies that the students need to master in order to succeed.

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Notes

[1] I mean discourse in its most open sense to include all forms of talking and writing. By critical discourse analysis I mean analysis of any of these forms of discourse, at research which involves looking critically at language and texts in order to understand the meanings, social relations and cultural processes underlying them.