Re-conceptualising attrition and retention: integrating theoretical, research and student perspectives

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Abstract

Higher education is becoming increasingly pre-occupied by issues relating to student attrition and retention. There are active debates about the reasons for attrition and the effectiveness of retention models and strategies. These debates are largely expressed through political and empirical perspectives but lack theoretical perspectives capable of providing integrated understandings of the processes involved. This paper integrates research and theoretical perspectives to generate a re-conceptualisation of the processes of retention. This re-conceptualisation takes the form of a theoretical shift, the deficit-discourse shift, and two conceptual representations, the *Framework for Student Transition and Retention* and the *Model for Student Success Practices.* The shift and the framework illustrate the student-institution relationship by connecting students' transition and retention with their engagement, mastery and demonstration of mainstream institutional literacies/discourses. The model introduces practical strategies that students can use to facilitate their transition to and engagement with the new university culture. A third perspective, the student voice is provided to give insight into these processes. The integration of the three perspectives challenges both universities and students to become more committed to and involved in students' transition and retention.

Introduction

Whereas the literature on attrition and retention had burgeoned since the 1990s, theoretical perspectives underpinning/explaining these issues have been slower to emerge. This paper attempts to redress this imbalance by applying the theoretical perspectives provided by critical discourse analysis, constructivism and cross-cultural communication to the processes of attrition and retention. A third perspective, the student perspective is also presented to give credence to insights achieved through the integration of research and theoretical perspectives.

The integration of the three perspectives re-conceptualises the processes of transition and retention at university, revealing the complexities of the institution-student relationship. The re-conceptualisation generates a theoretical shift, the deficit discourse shift, and a conceptual representation, *Framework for Student Transition and Retention*, both of which challenge institutional and student

practices. The institution is challenged to better understand and address issues related to transition and retention whereas students are challenged in relation to their construction of a means of engaging the university culture. The paper, again using theoretical perspectives, develops three dynamic practices which may assist students to achieve this engagement. The practices are embodied in a second conceptual representation, the *Model for Student Success Practices*. The paper also outlines the model's implications for institutional and student practices.

Research perspectives

Major research on attrition/retention has been conducted over several decades, primarily in the USA (Astin, 1997; Braxton, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993) and Britain (Yorke, 2000) but also in Australia (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000; Walker, 2000) and New Zealand (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003). Early research concentrated on attrition, the non-success or failure of students, focusing on issues related to barriers, reasons attributed for withdrawal and strategies developed to reduce increasing attrition rates (Postle, Taylor, Bull, Hallinan, Newby, Protheroe & James, 1996). More recent research has acknowledged the complexity involved in the first year experience: that involved are social and personal as well as academic transitions (Beasley, 1997; McInnis 2003). Much of the current research on retention draws on Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure which centres on the interactions between students and other individuals in the university community and how students' interpretations of these contacts affect their decisions to persist at the institution (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Braxton (2000 cited in Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003) suggests that much of this research (for example, Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton & Lien, 2000; Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997) aims to revise and improve Tinto's theories by focusing on an assimilation process—fitting the student to the institution. The research has also largely investigated these issues from the teachers' or policy makers' perspectives. It does not focus on the students themselves, or at least has done so only in response to or in tandem with other stakeholders in the environment (Postle *et al.*, 1996).

There is a second emerging strand in the literature on retention. This strand goes beyond integration to investigate whether student outcomes can be improved when institutions adapt their cultures to meet their students' needs (Burton & Dowling, 2005; Kantanis, 2001; Kift & Nelson, 2005; McInnis, 2003). Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) argue that these theoretical directions attempt to modify integration to include adaptation, where institutions change to accommodate diverse students. In this emerging discourse, Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) add, student attrition is seen to be influenced by students' perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued and accommodated and how differences between their cultures of origin and immersion are bridged.

There are also studies which integrate the research strands on attrition/retention. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003), for example, have developed a matrix which focuses on student needs variables to enhance student outcomes. The matrix has, at its base, students' social and academic needs. The horizontal dimension identifies three ways in which institutional policies and actions support student success by meeting these needs, reflecting Tinto's interactive model. The first, integration, describes how student assimilation into an institution will lead to improved outcomes. The second, institutional services, outlines how institutions, through their student services, can support students' social and academic needs. The third brings together themes from an emerging discourse describing how institutional values and actions can create a learning climate that impacts on learning. It

synthesises how institutions can recognise, value and adapt to the challenges posed by student diversity. According to Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003), the matrix not only integrates the social and academic, it also identifies the importance of the inter-relationships between students and institutional and pedagogical factors. More recently, Braxton and Hirschy (2005) have modified Tinto's theory by offering three organisational constructs—institutional commitment to the welfare of students, institutional integrity, and communal potential—as antecedents to social integration.

While such research is very useful, integrating research strands investigating attrition/retention, much of it lacks an overarching theoretical frame explaining how and or why these models are effective in addressing attrition.

Theoretical perspectives

Whereas the literature on retention is burgeoning, much of the research does not stem from a theoretical framework. Such a theoretical framework, however, may be able to generate new ways of understanding retention and attrition. Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997), for example, suggest that constructs derived from different academic disciplines may provide fruitful grounds for re-theorising attrition and retention. This section advances two theoretical constructs, critical discourse theory (CDT) and constructivism, in an attempt to address this conceptual deficiency.

CDT is useful as it contributes three main insights for clarifying issues in relation to retention and attrition. First, by visualising pedagogical practices and outcomes as discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1995), CDT highlights the role played by discourses in higher education (HE) teaching and learning practices. Luke (1999, p.67) argues that if the primacy of discourse is acknowledged then mastery of discourse can be seen to constitute a principal educational process and outcome. With this insight, the processes of transition and retention can be visualised as a journey of gaining familiarity with and engaging mainstream university discourses. The retention focus can then be seen to encompass the ways in which the processes of familiarity and engagement can be prioritised and made more explicit. Secondly, the application of CDT reveals the role of cultural diversity and the presence of literacies, or multiliteracies in the university culture (Cope & Kalzantis, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Pandian, 2001). If the university is perceived as a culture, then student engagement can be viewed as becoming literate in this culture. This insight makes more transparent the crucial nature of the interrelationships between students' cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1999) and institutional discourses, as well as the consequences for transition and retention (Burton & Dowling, 2005). Thirdly, CDT focuses attention on the discursive practices that can operate as power relationships in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in the university context (Fairclough, 1995). This understanding is critical in an academic setting where the power imbalances between institutional practices and students can affect student engagement, providing consequences for student attrition (Cox, 2003).

Constructivism can also provide insights into attrition and retention. Constructivism, developed from the Piagetian individual development paradigm, accommodates the Vygotskian paradigm of cognitive development within a social setting (Azzarito & Ennis, 2003). Its application to HE raises awareness about how the social setting and culture influence the individual cognitive process, and thus meaningful learning, and suggests that the HE context can be viewed as a community of learners (Plourde & Alawiye, 2003). Student learning can thus be

seen to take place in a social setting, occurring through peer interactions, student ownership of the curriculum and educational experiences that are authentic for students (Azzarito & Ennis, 2003). Constructivism can assist in emphasing the role played by students' social and academic interactions and the consequences for attrition and retention described in the research perspectives drawing on Tinto's theories.

Student perspectives

A third perspective is used in this paper to provide insight into the processes of attrition/retention: the student perspective. This perspective draws on qualitative data collected during a research study conducted by Lawrence (2004). The study investigated the experiences of alternative entry students as they strived to access and participate at a regional Queensland university (USQ). The study took a meta-disciplinary perspective, applying critical discourse theory, constructivism, communication and cross-cultural theories to contribute insights into the experiences of the students as they engaged and negotiated the university culture. It sought to determine how these students constructed their means of succeeding, of being retained at university. The methodological structure of the research comprised a collective case study design (Simmons, 1996; Stake, 1994), encompassing critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Geertz, 1979) and action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 participants over the duration of their degree studies, with the interviews audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using a thick layered approach (Martin-McDonald, 2000). The student perspective is used to support the integration of research and theoretical perspectives advanced in the paper.

The deficit-discourse shift

The application of CDT and constructivism and its re-conceptualisation of the processes of transition and retention can be encapsulated in a theoretical shift: the deficit-discourse shift (Lawrence, 2004). The shift draws on the primacy of discourses and literacies in the university context and on the roles of the social setting, culture and peer relationships in student learning. It characterises the university as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of subcultures, each with its own discourse/literacy. Students' transition and retention at university can be depicted as one of gaining familiarity, and ultimately mastery, of these discourses and literacies. Lankshear, Gee, Knobel and Searle (1997) contend that to feel comfortable in and perform with competence within a culture means becoming literate in that culture—becoming familiar with the multiplicity of new discourses in the culture. Bartholomae (1985, p.134) 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.

The deficit-discourse shift is illustrated in a conceptual representation: the *Framework for Student Transition and Retention*.

Framework for student transition and retention

The *Framework for Student Transition and Retention* (see Figure 1) characterises the university as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of subcultures, each with its own discourse or literacy. Students' transition is symbolised as the processes of negotiating these discourses and literacies and retention as the processes of mastering and demonstrating them. The framework illustrates the student-institution relationship, connecting students' transition and retention with their engagement, mastery and demonstration of mainstream institutional literacies/discourses.
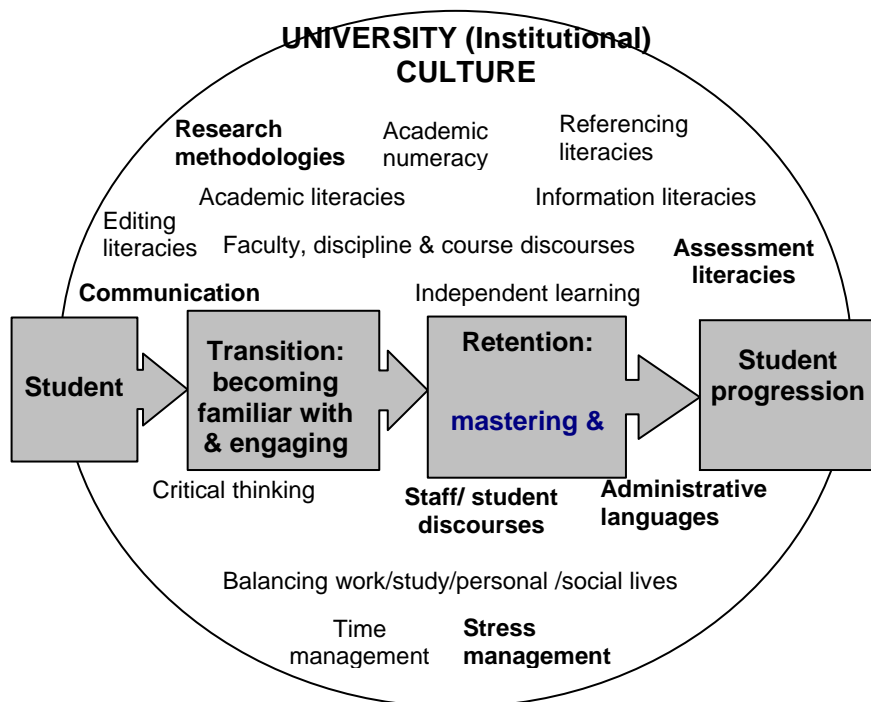
Subject discourses

Among the first, and most critical, of the discourses/literacies students need to engage and demonstrate are their first semester subjects—each of which encompasses specific cultural knowledge and practices. Each subject, for example, has its specific prerequisites and/or assumed entry knowledge; subject matter (content or process orientated, text-bound, oral or computer-mediated); language (jargon/formulas/technical language); texts (study packages, lecture notes, PowerPoint notes, WebCT documents, CD ROM); cultural practices (ways of dressing and showing respect—Professor, first names); attendance (lectures, tutorials, practical sessions, clinical sessions, external/internal/online); behaviours (rule-governed/flexible, compulsory/optional attendance, consultation times, electronic discussion groups); class participation (passive, interactive, experiential); rules (about extensions, participation, resubmissions, appeals); theoretical assumptions (scientific/sociological); research methodologies (positivist/interpretive/critical, quantitative/qualitative); ways of thinking (recall, reflective, analytical or critical, surface or deep); referencing systems (APA, Harvard, MLA); ways of writing (essays/reports/journals/orals); structure (particularly in relation to assessment); tone and style (word choice, active/passive voice, third/second/first person, sentence structure, paragraph structure); formatting (left/right justified, font, type, spacing, margins); and assessment (formative/summative, individual/ group, exams/assignments/clinicals/practicals/orals).

To pass the subject, students need to become literate in (engage, master and demonstrate) the subject's discourses and cultural practices.

Figure 1: Framework for student transition and retention

Source: Adapted from Lawrence (2004)

Multiple discourses

Their subject discourses/literacies are not the only discourses/literacies that students need to engage and master if they are to persevere. The university culture can be seen to encompass multiple discourses/literacies.

Each subject, discipline area, section, faculty, group of students and staff group, for example, has its own discourses/literacies. These include administrative discourses; academic and/or tertiary literacies; academic numeracy; research discourses/paradigms; computer systems (at USQ these include USQConnect, USQAdmin and USQAssist); communication and information technologies; library and database literacies; faculty, department, discipline and subject discourses; learning and teaching environments; student discourses (school leaver, mature-age, international, on-campus, external, online); and learning styles (independent and self-directed learning styles):

> I found learning to use computers, the web, and referencing, technical jargon (anatomy and physiology), academic writing, medical calculations and maths so overwhelming that I wanted to leave. It wasn't helped that I had to get along with many younger students and get used to different methods of learning and teaching. (Nursing student)

Their academic transition is not the only transition students need to make. Students also need to acknowledge the crucial role of their social and personal transitions—the study/work/family/life discourses—which are often critical in terms of retention (McInnis, 2003; Tinto, 1993). These discourses include time and stress management practices as well as the accommodation of a range of 'life's demands', for example the need to engage and to learn to balance work, social and personal demands. A mature age psychology student explains:

> It's got a lot tougher for me. I haven't got the support that I thought
> that I had. So that made studying a lot more difficult…it was a huge
> disappointment. Been extremely difficult to keep going…It comes
> down to the nitty gritty of how much work that you need to put in and
> how much sacrifice you need to make in your personal life. Others
> around me didn't comprehend that I was going to be so involved and
> have so little time for them.

The recognition that the discourses students encounter are also often inconsistent and fragmented adds to the complexity of transition/retention. The requirements, expectations and demands inherent in the discourses and literacies that students need to master and demonstrate differ, for example, across the university and across faculties, disciplines and courses. There are different referencing, writing and reading systems, different research paradigms, different knowledge (theory) systems and different teaching and learning styles. A psychology student, undertaking a combined degree, commented:

> My science subjects were so different and difficult in comparison to
> the psychology subjects.

There is also the recognition that students do not have much time to make these transitions. They are under pressure to gain, simultaneously and rapidly, the necessary, technical, interpersonal and self-presentation skills central to their success. Kantanis (2001, p. 2) contends:

> Students have to adjust simultaneously to the environment, teaching
> and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and disciplines of the
> university…[and]…due to the nature of the course structure students
> do not have the luxury of adjusting to the new culture over an
> extended period of time.

The processes of transition/retention, as emerging research perspectives document, are further complicated by diversity, both in the student profile and in the university culture. Both the research and theoretical perspectives generate the understanding that the specific literacies and discourses each student engages vary from individual to individual, reflecting the individual's own choices, aspirations and levels of cultural capital. Some mature-age students may need to master computer technologies and research literacies whereas others, as a consequence of their professional and workplace experiences, may be not only familiar with computer technology but also proficient in its use. That school leavers' experiences vary (reflected most recently by an emerging discourse on Generation Y), both from one another and from those of other students, further emphasises the presence of diversity within the culture. The framework confirms the notion that the relationships among the students, the university and the multiplicity of literacies and discourses students negotiate in their university journeys are always dynamic, subject to the particular student and to the particular discourses and literacies students encounter and engage.

Another of the issues for transition/retention, illuminated by the application of theoretical perspectives, stems from the growing diversity of the student body. The research (Beasley, 1997) argues that transition is more difficult for the increasing diversity of students accessing university. One consequence is students' increasing unfamiliarity with mainstream university discourses/literacies. These include students unfamiliar with the university culture, international students, students

from the designated equity groups, students who are the first generation of their family to go to university and mature-age students. Transition is also more difficult for those students whose capital may not be in tune with mainstream university discourses. Their parents or friends may de-value education and its benefits; have an aversion to getting into debt; have negative experiences of school/poor study facilities; and may lack family/peer reference groups which have knowledge of and are familiar with university. The framework is able to accommodate these understandings in its capacity to embrace the notion that students, as they enter university, embody and bring with them not only their own socio-cultural but also their own academic/linguistic and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1999) and that these may, or may not, be in tune with mainstream university discourses (see Smith, 2003). Gee (1999) suggests that the ways of communicating at university are not easily comprehended and are often problematic for students whose backgrounds differ from, or even conflict with, the ways of writing, knowing and valuing favoured within a university context.

Implications: Institutional practices

The re-theorisation of transition/retention embodied in the shift and the framework has implications for institutional practices. It highlights a shift in focus from the deficit view to one which acknowledges the importance of facilitating students' familiarity with the culture and its discourses and multiliteracies. The potential 'blame', for example, attached to students who are considered 'deficient' or 'under-prepared' by institutional staff immersed in dominant, mainstream 'elite' discourses is questioned. Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002, p. 76) argue that the induction of students into the particular cultures and discourses in the university context often happens implicitly and randomly, rather than with the explicit and well structured intent that is necessary if the induction is to be successful. Awareness is a crucial first step, involving the identification of the specific (and multiple) literacies and discourses (the requirements, rules, practices, behaviours and expectations) that students need to engage, master and demonstrate in order to pass each course of study. Institutional staff also need to accept responsibility in relation to their roles as educators and communicators. In fulfilling these roles it becomes the staff's responsibility, for example, to make their discourses explicit— not only to explain and make clear the rules, but also to make explicit the hidden agendas, the covert or hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations and the expected (but not stated) behaviours intrinsic to achieving success in their discipline (Benn 2000). Boud (2001) argues that academics have expectations, but fail to articulate them and then make judgments about students who fail to demonstrate them. Central is the recognition that both students and the institution have responsibility for student transition and retention.

The re-theorisation of transition/retention embodied in the shift and the framework therefore assists staff to identify the (often less explicit) discourses in institutional communication—an important first step in helping students raise their awareness of the university culture as well as in alerting them to the importance of engaging and mastering its multiple discourses/literacies. However, in themselves, the shift and the framework are not able to provide a recipe for actively empowering students. They don't encompass, for example, practical strategies which students can use to help them engage and master the unfamiliar discourses and literacies.

Student success practices

Three interrelating, dynamic practices—reflective practice, socio-cultural practice and critical practice, which stem from the application of theoretical perspectives, may be able to provide the means by which students can gain familiarity with and engage university discourses and literacies.

Reflective practice

The notion of reflective practice, as it is understood in this paper, emerges from both educational (Boud & Walker, 1990; Schön, 1987) and sociological (Giddens, 1996) literature. Reflective practice gives emphasis to students' capacities to observe, to watch and listen to the cultural practices occurring at the site. Students verify the efficacy of observation through the following comments:

> I watched what a few others were doing, thinking, yea, that's a lot more sensible than what I'm doing. (Business student)

> I basically asked a lot questions. I talked to other people I knew out here and I also just listened and just basically figured it out. (Psychology student)

The understanding of reflective practice also encompasses the concepts of 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' (Schön, 1987) as well as 'reflection before action' (Boud & Walker, 1990). Through these processes of reflection, practitioners continually reshape their approaches and develop 'wisdom' or 'artistry' in their practice. Reflection before action, for example, is a pro-active tool for simultaneously improving communication and providing insight into priorities prior to reaction, focusing on the person's attitude to experience rather than on the experience itself (Boud & Walker, 1990).

> Each semester, I further refined my method of attack to succeed in my studies. I analysed what my weak points were and worked on them to improve. Overall, I discovered that the transition is a continual on-going process throughout the degree on a daily basis. Each new subject requires some level of transition from the previous subject, and each year makes you stretch just that bit further than the previous year, and so the growing pains never stop. (Education student)

Socio-cultural practice

Socio-cultural practice stems from cross-cultural communication theory (CCT). Commentators argue, for example, that becoming familiar with the new university culture constitutes a cross-cultural process (Dearn, 1996; Eijkman, 2002). Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002, p. 75) contend:

> Tertiary educators are increasingly coming to recognise that, even for local students and regardless of ethnic background, the transition from high school to tertiary education is still a 'cross-cultural experience', with the potential for substantial problems.

CCT is usually applied, in a university context, to international or English-as-a-second language students adjusting to an unfamiliar host culture (Bandura, 1986;

Ferraro, 2002; Hofstede, 1997). CCT contends that, in order to reap maximum benefits from an unfamiliar educational system, students need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with mainstream students and academics. An adjustment similar to that is demanded of the diversity of local students entering an unfamiliar university culture. Integral to these learning processes is an individual's self-efficacy, the belief that he or she can successfully perform social behaviours in academic and everyday situations (Bandura, 1986). Bandura's (1986) social learning model is utilised as the basis of a cross-cultural communication program, *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (Mak, Westwood, Barker & Ishiyama, 1998). *ExcelL* 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). *ExcelL's* significance is twofold. It not only emphasises the role of socio-cultural competencies in helping students adjust to an unfamiliar university culture, but also prioritises specific socio-cultural competencies: those of seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing requests.

An essential feature of the competencies is that they are socio-cultural i.e. that they are socially and culturally appropriate or fine-tuned to the particular culture, subculture or discourse being engaged. The specific verbal and nonverbal means of asking for help or refusing a request differs from culture to culture, from subculture to subculture, from discipline area to discipline area. For example, in terms of verbal communication, students need to consider the appropriate words to use. For instance whether to ask directly or indirectly or include explanations or reasons or not.

> It's not a good idea to just walk in and say "Look this is crap". You can't bulldoze your way through: you have to be tactful about it…"Look, I agree with this, but I think I've been hard done by with this bit for this reason". (Nursing student)

When making social contact, some topics are 'taboo' in some cultures but acceptable in others (for example, in many cultures it would be considered 'rude' to discuss personal information on first acquaintance). In terms of nonverbal communication students need to think about body language—whether their nonverbal behaviours like posture, eye contact, tone of voice, pace, volume and pitch, how close they stand, etc, are appropriate to the situation and to the task.

The use of the competencies is also more complex than it first appears, dependent on the capital and belief systems and understandings each student embodies. Seeking help, for instance, may not be 'culturally' valued (eg. in individualist self-reliant cultures), or an indication of weakness or a lack of confidence in others. Some students may feel they do not have the right to ask, or equate help as 'remedial', or perceive it as a sign of 'sucking up', or 'uncool. This is reflected in the comments below.

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

> When I went to school it [asking for help] was a sign that you weren't coping or you weren't achieving. If you asked for help it wasn't looked on as a very good situation. (Nursing student)

> I felt that asking for an assignment extension was making excuses. I
> didn't want an unfair advantage. (Music student)

Students nevertheless documented the benefits of socio-cultural practice. In
relation to seeking help and information they reflected that:

> I asked the lecturer for help: "Am I on the right track?" It helped to a
> ridiculous degree, to the point that—is this all it takes to do well? Is
> all I need to do is ask for help and ask questions…a big epiphany. I
> asked for and got help and things were clearer. (Arts student)

> My advice to someone starting university is to go and ask questions:
> what do I need to know, how does the university operate? The
> mechanics of the university are more important than the study. In the
> first semester the mechanics of the university are subjects in
> themselves. (Business student)

The importance of participation in a group was similarly highlighted:
> 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. (Education student)

> We were able to bounce ideas off one another, which helped me to
> understand better and adjust my experiences to the demands of the
> course's language. (Arts student)

Students also discussed the role of group participation and making social contact in
helping them to 'fit' better with the university culture and to engage more
effectively with their studies:

> Friends are crucial to getting the best out of you. (Business student)

Students' practice of making social contact facilitates the development of study
groups, writing groups and learning circles, newsgroups, mentors, friendship
networks and 'significant other' and develops more resources/sources of help
(Smith, 2005; Yorke 2000). Its role in helping students adjust is confirmed by the
popularity of learning communities in the United States and by the retention
literature on the role of social interaction and the social context of learning (Tinto,
1998).

The socio-cultural practices of seeking and giving feedback, expressing
disagreement and refusing a request are 'risky' in that there is a potential for
offence (for example in relation to a high status lecturer) however they nevertheless
remain vital means of facilitating success in the university culture. Students
reflected:

> It is necessary to have skill in approaching the assessor and presenting
> your case for disagreement with the marks. If I was too shy to
> approach the assessor or had no skill to express my disagreement, then
> my marks would have remained unchanged and my overall results
> would have suffered. (Arts student)

> I was playing with a guy who drank a lot and realized that the musical
> lifestyle was prone to self and substance abuse so I said, "I'm not
> going to do that". (Music student)

Student evidence suggests that students' use of socio-cultural practice equips them to enter and achieve more meaningful exchanges and dialogue with the many cultural groups present within the university environment (for example, locals, staff, older people and younger people, people of different cultures, different socio-economic levels and different genders). The student perspective also demonstrates that socio-cultural practice encompasses concrete practical strategies that can facilitate students' familiarity with university literacies/discourses and that their use enables students to develop and improve their learning practices and provides them with a gauge to better judge their performance more effectively. Students' voices also reveal how socio-cultural practice empowers them to adjust more effectively to the university culture, to organise and manage their learning environments to best suit their needs and to better manage the stress arising from the impact of the life/work/family collisions influencing their study goals. The perspective also illustrates how socio-cultural practice enables students to establish their support networks and sources/resources of assistance, assisting in facilitating their retention.

Critical practice

Critical practice encompasses twin capacities: people's capabilities for a self-awareness of their own belief systems and cultural practices (critical self-awareness) and their awareness of power configurations impacting on the processes of transition/retention (critical discourse awareness). This awareness includes students' capabilities for language critique including 'their capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself' (Fairclough, 1995, p.1).

Kelly (2003, p. 3) suggests that critical self-awareness requires a "continued attention to the place from which we speak" whereas Gee (1999) describes it as the need to make visible to ourselves who we are and what we are doing. It incorporates people's capacities for unpacking their own cultural perspectives and belief systems (their socio-cultural capital), as well as their readiness to challenge these and to transform them if the need arises. Alfred (2002, p. 90) maintains:

> …we must acknowledge our own socio-cultural histories, identities, biases, assumptions, and recognize how they influence our worldview and our interaction with members of a diverse community. Such awareness results from intense personal reflection and critical analysis of our work as practitioner or scholar.

Critical discourse awareness differs from critical self-awareness in that it concentrates on the power configurations operating in the context or setting and underscores the role of social/cultural critique of the discourses operating at the educational site (Fairclough 1995).

Students provided evidence of the importance of applying critical practice (of both self and discourse) at university:

> I've always worked in jobs where I've told people what to do. Now I'm in a role where I'm being told what to do and that is hard. (Business student)

The 'academic game' is what I call having to placate course leaders and markers, sometimes in very different ways, to achieve any decent result. Often there is an assumption you can read their minds and will produce exactly what they think you think they know you should produce—yes, it's that confusing. (Arts student)

It doesn't matter what the student wants, the student must adhere to what the lecturer wants and must submit the assessment accordingly. You cannot try and reinvent the wheel to suit yourself. Many people think that university is the place to express your true opinions and feelings, but it is not the appropriate place to do it: instead you must express yourself and justify what you say. (Arts student)

I asked for help and was told that "No, I'm not giving you the lecture notes, because I don't know whether you went to lectures or not, and you'll just give them to your little network of friends that didn't go, and that will help them pass the exam". Their idea assumes that not coming to the lectures means you were going down to the pub drinking beer or something….There are implications for a mature-age person with a job. (Arts student)

As a student I was a hindrance to those whose role it was to teach. It took a while to understand advancement for lecturers is via research and publications and teaching students is a by-product of this advancement. To feel utter stupidity because, as a student, I did not fully comprehend something that one person had spent many years focusing singularly on was a surprise to me. (Business student)

I found the first week at university so deflating—every lecture contained substantial time going through the people who fail the course. I can tell you as a result of failing a course myself, not everyone who fails is a "failure and does not put in any effort". There are many reasons people fail courses. (Education student)

Dynamic practices

The three practices are dynamic. The successful use of one of the practices often depends on the use of another and, if implemented together, they can be more effective in assisting students to achieve their goals and objectives. For example, observation and reflection are pre-requisites for fine-tuning the socio-cultural competencies to the particular culture or sub-culture being engaged. Likewise, the socio-cultural properties of the competencies rely on students' capacities to reflect and provide (appropriate) feedback about the cultural practices operating at the site of the communicative exchange. The socio-cultural properties of the competencies also depend on students' capacities to appraise not only their own cultural assumptions and expectations but also the external, and often hidden, assumptions and power configurations impacting at the site of the exchange. The capacities of students to challenge and, where it is possible, to transform unhelpful policies and practices operating at university also rely on students' use of the socio-cultural practices of offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request.

The three practices can be presented as a model, the *Model for Student Success Practices* at University (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Model of student success practices

Source: Lawrence (2004)
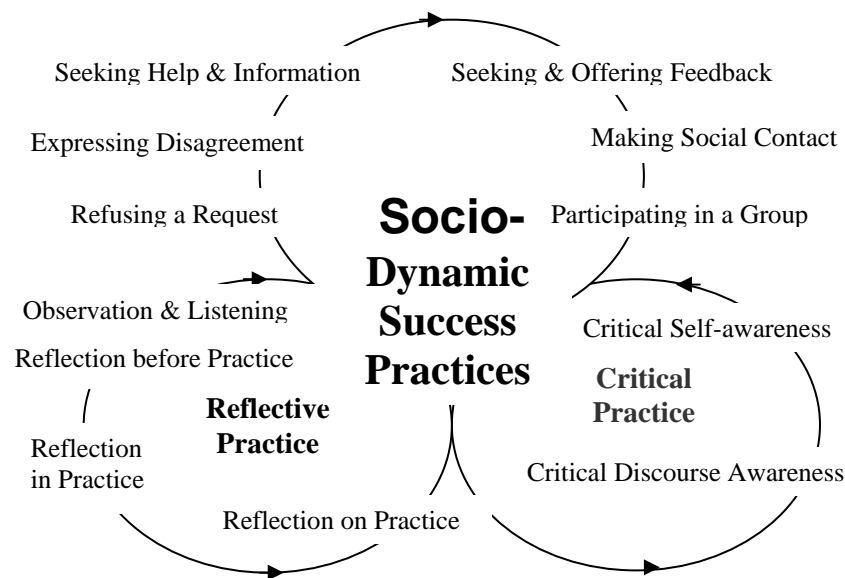
Implications: Institutional staff

Institutional staff can assist their students in negotiating a successful transition to the university culture by actively facilitating students' use of the three practices and by assisting first year students to become enculturated into the educational and cultural *modus operandi* (Kantanis, 2001) of the university. Staff can provide supportive learning environments where it is 'safe' for students to exercise the practices, encourage students' use of the practices and establish their credibility by linking them to students' capacities to pass their courses. Additionally, staff can help students develop partnerships with agencies such as Student Services, Learning Centres and across Faculties—which can assist students to fine tune the practices to the particular discourse/literacy being engaged. Staff can further assist students' use of the practices by ensuring their own accessibility through the use of consultation times and feedback loops and their flexibility in terms of accessibility as well as by setting up opportunities, via phone, e-mail, in person, in-groups or in tele-tutorials for students to access help and feedback. Staff can also facilitate interaction in tutorials and discussion groups, fostering dialogue between cultures and different cultural groups, and encourage group/team exercises as well as chat groups, learning communities, study groups, study partners, learning circles and mentors. 'Networking' opportunities and connections in and out of class can be encouraged and their importance in relation to the students' university, future workplace, career and promotional success emphasised.

Conclusion

This paper had integrated research, theoretical and student perspectives to re-conceptualise the processes of transition and retention at university. The integration of the three perspectives generated a theoretical shift and the two conceptual representations: the deficit-discourse shift, the *Framework for Student Transition and Retention* and the *Model for Student Success Practices*. The shift and the framework illustrate the student-institution relationship by linking students'

engagement and mastery of mainstream university discourse/literacies with transition and retention. This re-conceptualisation challenges universities to identify the (often less explicit) discourses and institutional practices involved in transition and retention. The shift and the framework also challenge institutional staff to recognise that retention relies, in part, on institutional policies and practices.

The *Model for Student Success Practices* represents three inter-related and dynamic practices that can assist students to make their transition to the university culture. Students' use of reflective, socio-cultural and critical practice can constitute their means of engaging, mastering and demonstrating mainstream discourses/literacies. The model also challenges institutional staff to accept their responsibility in relation to transition and retention. Staff can actively encourage students' use of the three practices, for example, by providing supportive learning environments and by linking students' use of the practices to their capacities to pass courses.

The shift, framework and model present the means by which the institution and students can become more committed and involved in the processes of transition and retention. As Tinto (2005, p. ix) has commented: "....the broad dimensions of a theory are beginning to emerge. Among other things we can say with a good deal of confidence that academic preparation, commitment and involvement matter".

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