The 'deficit-discourse' shift: university teachers and their role in helping first year students persevere and succeed in the new university culture.

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Abstract

This paper argues that the contemporary Australian university constitutes a new and unfamiliar culture for the increasing numbers and diversity of students accessing it.

Traditional university responses to this increasing participation, however, often conceptualise diversity in terms of scholastic deficits or a lack of academic literacy. Inherent 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) 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. This paper will argue that academics share a responsibility in this process, collaborating with students to help them access and negotiate, and ultimately, to succeed, by mastering and demonstrating the new university 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 and 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, simultaneously delineating it as a 'cost' rather than as an 'investment'.

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) argue 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 programs 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 programs 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, programs, 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 now participating at university as well as the responses of academics to this increasing diversity.

Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a theoretical frame that is useful in re-positioning both the experiences of students participating at university and the role of the academics. 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 [i] 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 its teachers (their choices and practices) as well as the students who inhabit the site.

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). 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 employment hours. 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 also unveils the role of discourse in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society (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 and Passeron 1977 and Connell 1994) 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. These groups, also, may be more prepared to invest in their children's education, for example by investing in private schooling and more overtly shepherding them towards tertiary education. 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:

> My mother and father both left school early and have grown up with the belief that schooling is generally economically 'useless'. My parents 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' (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, Connell 1994 and Postle et al 1997). Beasley (1997, p.29) 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, p.182).

The question of how this lack of familiarity is dealt with in the university context 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, p.24). 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 reveal the dominance of the mainstream academic discourses resonating through them, reinforcing 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 implication is that, under this mindset, students who do not succeed or who have difficulties in accessing and mastering the mainstream academic discourses are labeled, 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, p.72) 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 multiliteracies, 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 a process of gaining familiarity, and ultimately mastery, of these discourses.

> 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 (Lankshear et al 1997).

As 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.

Students also acknowledge the presence of these new discourses:

> 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, p.38).

They also recognize the need to also consistently engage and master new discourses: When my science subjects commenced, they were so different and difficult in comparison to the psychology subjects.

Mak and Barker (2000), too, note the pressure that students are under pressure to gain, simultaneously and rapidly, the necessary technical, communication, interpersonal and self-presentation skills central to their success in the new university culture. Kantanis (2001) adds that due to the nature of the course structure in Australia, students do not have the luxury of adjusting to the new culture over an extended period of time. They have to adjust simultaneously to the environment, teaching and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and disciplines of the university. A mature age nursing student in my own research commented, for example, about the difficulties in accessing and mastering, simultaneously, a plethora of new discourses:

> I found learning to use computers, the web, referencing, technical jargon, for example 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.

University teachers' roles in facilitating transition: making their discourses explicit

The 'deficit-discourse' shift not only places increasing demands on teaching staff, it also challenges the nature of university and teaching practices. It challenges, for example, the efficacy of the 'deficit approach'; the potential 'blame' attached to students who are considered 'inadequate' or 'under-prepared' by teaching staff immersed in the dominant academic discourse? It also challenges the roles academics play in helping students develop a familiarity with, or overcome a lack of familiarity, with the culture and its multiple discourses and multiliteracies? Intrinsic here are questions about the academics' roles as educators and as communicators as well as questions about whether there is a need for academics to not only accept, but also to embrace, their responsibilities in terms of student retention.

Pivotal 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, June 2001) argues that 'academics have expectations, but fail to articulate them and then make judgments about students who fail to demonstrate them'. Awareness is a crucial first step, involving the identification of the specific literacies and discourses (the requirements, rules, practices, behaviours and expectations) that students need to access, engage, master and, in fact demonstrate in order to pass each unit/course of study. Also involved is the identification and, ultimately, the implementation of the methods by which these can be made clear and explicit not only for students but also for teaching and marking teams.

Lectures, for example, are often overwhelming for new students. Hoey (cited in Lawrence et al. 2001) argues that lecturers can facilitate their students' learning by making transparent their often-implicit expectations regarding:

- Objectives - by explaining the basis of objectives in the first lecture, by commencing each lecture with competency based objectives, and by identifying the relevance of meeting each objective;
- Lecture notes - by providing a summary of main points/written outline and/or whole lecture (on discussion boards, in library) ahead of the lecture to help students to pre-read and to structure notes;
- PowerPoint - by providing presentations on the web at least a week before lectures; by encouraging students to print PowerPoint presentations and annotate directly; by including images from textbook whenever possible; by building concepts and diagrams; and by including video segments to add variety and interest);

Burton (cited in Lawrence et al. 2001) also describes some useful lecture techniques for guiding students and helping them to navigate a course of study. (These, coincidently, also encourage student participation, cater for a variety of learning styles, provide stimulating learning experiences, engage students in the learning process and challenge them to become independent learners). They include:

- Interaction - by posing problem solving activities, reflective discussion points, class demonstrations, group work and role plays;
- Discussion - through electronic discussion groups, telephone tutorials, video conferences and residential schools - to reinforce material, particularly for external and international students, by posting issues for understanding, discussion and reflection;
- Accessibility and consultation - through structured discussion groups, set consultation times, and flexibility in contact opportunities;
- Review and feedback - actively seeking and looking/listening for feedback about the effectiveness of their curriculum planning, teaching resources and teaching strategies, incorporating student feedback in the process through the use of anecdotal observation and questioning, quality circles, use of student representatives and evaluations;

Assessment encompasses a diversity of different and sometimes conflicting demands and requirements. As a result, learning to write good assignments is a difficult and often arduous process that can be helped by academics (AKA, markers) making their expectations and requirements clear by using:

- Model or sample assignments providing guidelines about structure and process;
- Formative assessment, including drafts and proposals;
- Marking criteria feedback sheets, clearly explained, linked to objectives and provided ahead;
- Assessment targeted early, coupled with constructive and realistic feedback both to provide students with a gauge about the degree and speed of their adjustment (Kantanis 2001, p.8) and to implement early warning systems and strategies;
- On-line interactive learning experiences, including self-test exercises;
- Opportunities for feedback, through structured discussion groups, set consultation times, incorporating a variety of contact opportunities;
- Constructive, consistent and clear feedback, incorporating referrals and encouragement to seek out sources of help and information if there are difficulties in accessing the discourses of the discipline;
- Re-submissions permitted and encouraged for failing first assignments, as well as referrals as above.

The role of socio-cultural competencies in facilitating transition

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 and learning styles, life, procedures and practices of the new university culture (Kantanis 2001). If, as this paper argues, the contemporary university is re-conceptualised as an unfamiliar and dynamic culture, encompassing a multiplicity of subcultures, each with their own discourses and languages, then a second theoretical perspective may be applicable: cross-cultural communication theory. Cross-cultural literature contends that in order to reap maximum benefits from an unfamiliar educational system, new students need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with mainstream students and teachers.

Bandura's (1986) social learning model, for example, is utilised as the basis of a cross-cultural communication strategy 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, p.4). This model's significance is twofold. It not only establishes the grounds for prioritizing 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, making social contact and participating in a group.

The ability to seek 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 web sites, as well as discipline specific assistance such as peer assisted learning programs, consultation with tutors and lecturers, library and computer support services, and study skills sessions. They also need to know how to, and, essentially 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 and 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……….
> 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).
> …………..I think I will transfer the ability to ask for help 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

The ability to receive help and feedback about assessment is also integral to academic success:

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. 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.

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 programs. 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.

Teachers, however, can be pivotal in helping students utilise this crucial skill. They can provide supportive/encouraging learning environments where it is safe to ask/seek help and feedback, encourage students to ask for help, establishing its credibility and extolling its virtue, and develop partnerships - with Student Services, Learning Centres, across Faculties. They can also reinforce their accessibility - through the use of consultation times, feedback loops, and their flexibility in terms of accessibility - by setting up opportunities via phone, e-mail, in person, in-groups, or in Tele-tutorials.

The ability to make social contact and social conversation

The ability to make social contact and social conversation, in socially and culturally appropriate ways, across a multiplicity and diversity of cultural groups is also an essential ability for a new student. 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 and 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 programs and social networks. 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 (p.119).

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, p.47). Clulow and Brennan (1996, p.33) 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 this competency's importance:

> The most helpful support at university were the friends I made (rural and isolated student). …………..Friends are crucial in getting the best out of your self (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).

Teachers have a responsibility in helping their students to develop and utilise this crucial skill. They can facilitate interaction in tutorials, fostering dialogue between cultures and different cultural groups, encourage group/team exercises as well as chat/discussion groups, study groups, study partners, learning circles and mentors. They can also encourage 'networking' opportunities and connections in and out of class, emphasising its importance in relation to university, career, work and promotional success, as well as the importance of developing their oral and interpersonal communication skills in these contexts.

The ability to participate in a group or team

The ability to participate in a group or team is another pivotal socio-cultural competency. This ability can generate feelings of confidence and belonging in a diversity of classroom settings, contributing 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.

The reverse is also pertinent however:

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, 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). Teachers can play a crucial role in developing this socio-cultural competency by incorporating ice breakers, especially in early classes, group work and problem-solving activities, by developing interactive learning environments, and by encouraging, and making safe, active class participation. They can also implement group assignments, discuss the importance of teamwork in future professional contexts and in their careers and most importantly, have fun in class.

Changes to philosophy and policy in relation to diversity

Academics, then, can assist their students in negotiating a successful transition to the new university culture by both making their expectations explicit and by actively facilitating students' use of particular socio-cultural competencies. The 'deficit-discourse' shift, however, also challenges university teachers in terms of their philosophies and policy development, both individually and in partnership. In terms of philosophy, for example, academics can further assist first year students to become enculturated into the educational and cultural 'modus operandi' (Kantanis 2001) of the university by:

- Re-conceptualising diversity as a resource. Another response to the 'deficit-discourse' shift is to re-think university beliefs and practices in relation to diversity, to re-conceptualise diversity as a 'resource' rather than as a 'problem' (Allen 2001) To engage the students' own discourses. Gee (1997) argues that each student enters university, and each class, with their own cultural ways of knowing and that, to override these, would be to impoverish the spectrum of diversity present. A tutorial or workshop, utilising the diversity of its students to make connections and to build understandings, thereby acknowledges and integrates its cognitive, social and cultural complexity.
- Re-theorise the transmission model of teaching: to teach students not subject matter. Teachers need to acknowledge that they teach students as well as, or perhaps instead of, teaching content (Kantanis 2001). The key to teaching/learning, then, becomes as much the 'process', as it is the 'content', with an acknowledgment by academics that retention relies in part on what the academic does in the classroom, both as a professional educator and as an effective communicator. An important thread can therefore be woven into the philosophy of university teaching. It lies in recognizing, participating in and

facilitating the processes by which students learn to negotiate and integrate a number of competing discourses and multiliteracies - the university, faculty and discipline discourses the students need to engage to pass.

- Re-think the blame attached to failing students. This encompasses the blame perhaps apportioned to the secondary sector for not adequately preparing students for higher education, or to entry policies that accept 'below-standard' or students with 'low' tertiary entrance scores. Kantanis (2001) argues that it is important to accept the reality that first year students in a mass education system present.

In terms of policy, university teachers can, both individually and collectively:

- Develop policy in relation to, for example, the first year experience, transition and diversity, at department, faculty, institutional and national levels;
- Develop a more coherent university-wide teaching and learning framework;
- Integrate support systems into the institutional mainstream, widely discussing them to enhance their credibility, efficacy and use.

Conclusion

The 'deficit-discourse' shift thus reinforces the driving impetus of this paper. That academics have a vital role in the process whereby students learn to negotiate the multiple linguistic and cultural discourses of the university - a process which is pivotal to their abilities to persevere and succeed in a new university culture. Academics can help this process by making their expectations clear and explicit, by assisting students to use socio-cultural competencies that are central to their negotiation of a successful transition to the new university culture, and by examining both their philosophies and policies in relation to diversity. University teachers can, in fact, make the difference: helping their students to develop the skills that 'an expert' student demonstrates, attuned to and learning confidently and competently in the new university culture.

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Notes

[i] 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; research which looks critically at language and texts in order to understand the meanings, social relations and cultural processes underlying them

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