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## Puzzling experiences in higher education: critical moments for conversation

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The discourses of academic disciplines in higher education can be confusing and mysterious for those who are new to university study. The confusion can be particularly great for students coming from cultural and language backgrounds that are different to those underpinning the dominant ideologies of higher education institutions. This article explores the experiences of international students at a UK university who were on one-year master's courses in areas related to business, finance and management. There is a particular focus on the literacy and learning experiences related to written assignments. Through listening to the voices of international students and academic tutors on the different academic courses, potential gaps in expectations are identified and important moments for conversation are highlighted. The article emphasizes the social nature of learning and argues that, when opportunities for dialogue are created, tutors should respond flexibly to the needs of students by providing varying degrees of explicit guidance and less conspicuous facilitation, through interaction and participation. It is also argued that, within this space for dialogue, there is great potential for all the members of a learning and teaching community to learn from the rich mix of cultures which internationalization brings.

### Introduction

A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts', of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role. (Gee, 1996, p. 131)

When students cross the threshold of any university in the world for the first time, they enter an unfamiliar domain, a domain that will make demands on them that they have not experienced before. Each discipline, course and module within a university will have its own discourse, and different students will become integrated to a greater or lesser extent into the ways of their respective fields of study. Lillis (1999, 2001) talks of 'an institutional practice of mystery' to refer to the confusion experienced by many students when trying to decipher the conventions of academic writing and the expectations of their tutors with regard to academic assignments. It is the mysterious nature of these different academic discourses which can preclude easy access for many students.

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The confusion caused by higher education discourses is likely to be greatest amongst students who do not have the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) which is valued in a higher education context. It is often the case that it is the students who have not had similar language, literacy and learning experiences to those encountered in the higher education environment who do not have the cultural capital needed to succeed quickly and easily in the new domain. In other words, the cultural capital they bring with them is not of the kind which will bring them a high return in the form of good grades on their assessed work and recognition by their tutors.

It is, of course, possible to argue that the dominant ideologies and ways of being that exist in higher education institutions should be challenged and broken down to allow for more inclusive university education (Clark, 1992; Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Ivanic, 1998). Genres and discourses of academic disciplines are indeed in a constant state of flux, in that their purpose, content and form are both constituted by what has gone before and constitute what is to come in the future (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Gee, 1996; Clark & Ivanic, 1997). And both students and staff can contribute to this change. However, I believe that it is those who are already confident insiders in academic discourse communities who are most likely to be in the position to change these dominant ideologies, and we are doing those without the valued cultural capital a disservice if we do not consider ways of opening the doors to higher education discourses which may often seem to be locked. It is like Alice trying to reach the key for the door to an inaccessible garden (Carroll, 1865). There can be many seemingly nonsensical events to work through before a door opens in the most unpredictable of circumstances.

Once familiar with the common learning, language and literacy practices in a discipline, a student can then opt to conform or challenge the conventional ways of being from an informed position rather than from a position of possible confusion. This accords with what Chase (1988) refers to as 'resistance' as opposed to 'opposition', resistance being a deliberate act on the part of an individual to challenge dominant conventions with the aim of opening up access to academic discourses.

A significant amount of recent research from a range of different countries has emphasized the alienation that international and non-traditional students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds can feel when trying to make sense of higher education conventions and expectations (for example, Belcher, 1994; Prior, 1995; Spack, 1997; Ivanic, 1998; Zamel, 1998; Benesch, 1999; Cadman, 2000; Lillis, 2001; Boughey, 2002). This article reiterates and confirms these issues of concern and, in addition, through a juxtaposition of international student and tutor voices, highlights particular points when gaps in expectations between tutors and students often occur. Ways are suggested in which socially situated opportunities for conversation (Benesch, 1999; Lillis, 2001) at critical moments can enable learning of unfamiliar academic practices to take place. Moreover, I argue that within the context of social interaction and participation, tutors can respond flexibly in teaching and learning situations along a continuum of explicitness. At one end of the continuum, the practices which may be causing confusion can be made explicit, and,

at the other, more unobtrusive acquisition through encouragement and questions can take place.

### **Background to the research**

This article is based on a small-scale research study at a UK university, the aim of which was to gain insights into the teaching and learning experiences of international students and their tutors. The research was conducted by the department in the university which provides EAP (English for Academic Purposes) support for international students. A qualitative approach was adopted when collecting and analysing the data, in the same vein as in a number of recent studies exploring international student and academic tutor perceptions of teaching and learning experiences in higher education institutions (for example, Belcher, 1994; Prior, 1995; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1998; Benesch, 1999; Cadman, 2000). Qualitative research here is broadly viewed as being a concern 'to elucidate the meaning of a situation or entity in terms of how it is perceived by the individual person' (Ashworth, 2003). In this study, the perceptions sought were those of international students on one-year master's courses and their tutors. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and a survey of different assignment types and the writing guidelines given to students.

Contact was maintained with 38 students who attended a pre-session EAP course in the summer of 2000, and who started on master's courses at the same university in September that year. They completed questionnaires at the end of the pre-session course and were sent three further questionnaires by email in October 2000, January 2001 and April 2001.

To supplement the data from this group of students, questionnaires were also given to 18 students attending in-session EAP courses, and in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with two international students approaching the end of their programmes of study. The respondents were all doing master's courses in areas related to management, business and finance. Approximately half were on courses with an explicitly international focus, e.g. international marketing or international hospitality management. The majority of students were from south-east Asia, with a small number from European, African, South American and Middle Eastern countries.

The questionnaires consisted mainly of open-ended questions, and in both the questionnaires and interviews the respondents were invited to reflect on their experiences of both academic and EAP courses. There was a particular focus in one group of questions on their perceptions of assessed work and feedback.

To complement the student voices, eight in-depth semi-structured interviews took place with some of the academic tutors on the relevant management and business related courses. Although I prepared questions in advance, significant space was given for participants to raise their own particular concerns. The focus of these interviews was on tutor perceptions of student strengths and weaknesses on their courses. In particular, I was interested in their perceptions of the language, literacy

and learning practices which are likely to result in them giving successful grades for assessed pieces of work.

The technique adopted for analysing the data drew on aspects of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 159), in the sense that the significant themes identified were grounded in the data and 'a constant comparative method' was used to integrate the data from each questionnaire and interview into categories identified in earlier interviews and questionnaires. The themes were therefore developed inductively from the data through a cyclical process of coding and revisiting the interview transcripts and questionnaire responses. As Ely *et al.* (1997) describe, qualitative analysis and interpretation of data is similar to climbing a mountain. One gradually achieves a broader view of the data which is likely to be wider than that of the participants themselves. The wider view in this study involves a juxtaposition of student and tutor voices on related themes.

When considering the implications of the themes which were identified, I draw on a number of writers who have suggested ways of introducing newcomers to unfamiliar practices in new sociocultural domains. These can loosely be grouped under the umbrella of socially situated apprenticeship approaches (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 1996; Hannon, 2000). In particular, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' and Vygotsky's (1978) 'zone of proximal development' are significant. The former emphasizes the importance of learning through increasing participation and involvement with established members of a sociocultural community, and the latter argues that effective learning of specific cultural practices occurs as a result of sensitive scaffolding through social interaction at the appropriate moments. When drawing on these approaches, I believe it is important not to think in terms of unilinear acquisition of more sophisticated literacy practices but instead of 'an ever-widening repertoire of functions, without assuming a hierarchy among them' (Ivanic, 1998, p. 52).

The aim of this research is not to make generalizations based on a representative sample, but instead I follow principles advocated by many who favour a case study approach (Simons, 1996; Stake, 1998; Bassey, 1999). The findings are intended to provide rich insights into the complexities of participation in higher education discourses, rather than draw hard and fast conclusions. As the significance of disciplinary difference is widely recognized (Becher, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998), it is not suggested that the insights are relevant to all academic discourse communities. However, it is hoped that most readers will be able to recognize familiar moments in the situations mentioned by the participants in the research, and to make their own connections with similar and different experiences. Although the focus is on international students, the critical moments for conversation which are highlighted are also likely to be of significance to many other students in the higher education context.

### **Cultures of learning**

stated, it can be a particular challenge for many international students adapt to unfamiliar learning styles and cultures when studying in

the UK. Two students sum up their feelings in the following ways.

The most difficult thing was to get used to a different kind of academic work. In my country students are not required to express their own opinions but they simply have to study from books—lessons are just an explanation about what studied. I also found English system not flexible at all. Even if there are so many international students they have to get used to the English system, not the contrary. This means that if in my country I was asked to know a lot about theories now I'm asked to know more about technical/practical things, ... and discuss about that. This scared me a lot because I'm not prepared and I don't feel comfortable to express my opinion as I feel I'm talking about things I really don't know. (Italy)

I haven't had experience of having to think outside what has been taught ... I'm better at repeating what I already know ... it's difficult to apply it. (Nigeria)

Thus, although many students may be aware of the unfamiliar approaches to learning in the particular academic discourse community in which they find themselves, they may not have the confidence or the life experience to participate easily. A number of different tutors made the following observations about expectations on their courses.

... we are actually asking them to investigate the issues in a problematic area and ... we're not saying this is best or that's best.

I think there's this feeling that there has to be a right way of doing it and sometimes a feeling that we should say this is it rather than get them to come up with their own kind of evaluation.

[Some students] don't get outstanding marks because they don't question. They've got a tendency to be very descriptive in what they say about other people's work.

... we expect students to be ... independent learners, to be critical.

It therefore appears that to be successful in these particular academic contexts, students should adopt a questioning approach to the material they encounter, they should form opinions, and be assertive about expressing these viewpoints, both in seminars and in their writing. It is important for students to be aware of the contestable nature of the knowledge they meet, and the expectation is that they should be able to support a position in relation to this knowledge with adequate evidence and reasons. As indicated by the student voices above, this represents a fairly frightening and unfamiliar scenario for many.

A number of the tutors mentioned the importance of reciprocal understanding and the need to be aware of where different students are coming from in terms of learning styles and culture.

I think ... it's an understanding of culture and I think it's got to be both ways. I think the students themselves have got to understand how their culture affects them in the way that they actually interpret data. But I think we've got to do that as well. We've got to ... be given some instruction on the different cultures, get together to discuss the different cultures to get an understanding of where the different students are coming from, how they're going to be interpreting what we're saying. I think if you have the lecturer understanding how you think they're going to be interpreting things and they

understand how the bounded rationality is going to affect the way they interpret things you'll probably get a stronger interaction between the two.

As Jin and Cortazzi (1996, p. 215) point out, 'every culture of learning offers an alternative perspective on how to do things academically, and the ability to see such alternatives is arguably part of British academic culture'. If we accept this idea of alternatives, it is important to eschew an approach where student needs are viewed as a deficit on their part. One tutor used the metaphor of 'open doors' effectively and emphasizes the importance of making links with what students bring with them to the higher education context in the UK:

quite a few of us do try to keep as many doors open as possible for international students to get through. One of the ways I think about that ... If I haven't got a means of access to something I'm stuck. I need a concrete way of getting in there. So I'm not assuming everybody else is the same as me ... but everything I do has space to have doors in it and you can open it because it's labelled 'this is something that you know about so come in through here and let's get to grips with it'.

Sensitivity and understanding between tutors and students are therefore fundamental to overcome the clear differences in expectations between students and tutors which exist particularly in the early days of an academic course. Jin and Cortazzi (1996) mention the danger of academic tutors taking their own academic culture for granted, which can result in them finding it difficult to know what they need to articulate. If the potential points of confusion and challenge can be identified, then the moments when interaction and participation can be offered will become more obvious.

### **The focus on written assignments**

Because this study particularly focused on student and tutor perceptions of the learning and literacy practices related to assessed work, there is an emphasis on conventions and activities related to writing in the sections that follow. Although the research revealed a number of different means of assessment on academic courses, such as presentations, time-constrained assessments, self-evaluations and role-plays, 3000–6000-word written assignments still constitute a significant proportion of assessments on the courses included in the current study.

When discussing student writing I adopt an 'academic literacies' approach (Lea & Street, 1998), which views academic reading and writing practices as being socially situated in different disciplinary contexts, each of which has its own variety of ways of constructing knowledge. The meanings and understandings of these literacy practices differ according to the context in which they are used and, as Lea and Street show, this variation and contestation can be a source of difficulty for students. They argue that a student's experience of learning in higher education will involve 'negotiation of conflicting literacy practices' (1998, p. 172). The data presented below confirm this viewpoint, and I also emphasize the importance of interaction and participation in the specific disciplinary discourses to enable this negotiation to take place.

Some students expressed the following fears about the length of assignments.

I have found writing assignments is difficult. In my country, our education system doesn't require us to write 3000 words. (China)

Written assignments are difficult because I've never done them before. (China)

In the first few months I have faced some hard pressure. For example, I have to read and start to think about assignments which is the first time for me in this type of conditions. However, after the first assignment I felt that pressure became lower. (Saudi Arabia)

These perceptions of assignment writing reveal insights into what is 'new' about academic literacy demands for many international students. They suggest the need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration throughout the assignment writing process to enable students to become acclimatized to the nature of the task.

The following sections examine four specific points of confusion that have been identified from the juxtaposition of tutor and student voices, namely, ambiguity in assignment titles, the purpose of written guidelines, the meaning of criticality, and the visibility of writer voice. In relation to each of these, I build on the insights gained from the identification of the gaps in expectations between tutors and students to make observations which may be of relevance for teaching, learning and acquisition.

### **Unravelling assignment titles: ambiguity as a point of tension**

Students commented on how they perceive the assignment titles they are given. Their thoughts reveal the apprehension that is often provoked by the open-ended nature of some of these:

Sometimes I don't understand the questions and I don't have an idea to write. Therefore it is difficult. (Taiwan)

I think how to design or manage a good structure and absorb the knowledge are difficult. To target assignment requirements is also difficult for me. (China)

English is my second language. A good assignment need a good language presentation and clear strategy ... to understand the assignment requirement and manage a good structure are difficult for me. (China)

I have come across questions that mean two different things. You just write it and come up with what you think is the best way. (Nigeria)

Some tutors gave their perceptions of successful approaches to assignment titles. These insights suggest an expectation on their part that students will have the confidence to analyse, question and challenge:

What we would want on our course are a number of strengths really. One of them would be that they can understand, they can problematize the question appropriately, so they don't see it just as a descriptive question or they don't answer it descriptively. They see it as a deeper, more problematical issue.

Well first of all [students need to be sure] that they've clearly understood the nature of what they're being asked to do in terms of unpicking the question. ... I gave them a



quotation to start [an assignment question] off and they ignored the quotation ... except a few who've said well there is a quotation here that prefixes the question, so why is it there. So they just ignored the quotation which meant they ignored answering a basic part of the question. Without answering that which was the framework for understanding the answer they're not going to fail but they're obviously not going to do as well as they should have done.

It is apparent that from the perspective of many academic tutors, assignment titles are intended to pose a challenge and therefore may be deliberately opaque. The following quotations suggest that the interpretation of a question is part of the assessment.

The one in my unit is very very general, it is something which is deliberately designed to explicitly require them to bring in materials from all the sessions ... It's very ambiguous. They can write it very much as they want to. Really good answers can look very very different.

Tutors ... are basically saying take the risk, unpack the question in the way you want to do it.

One tutor described a successful approach to a challenging assignment title.

[The student] started by saying, this piece of work was prefixed by this quotation, is this a valid premise anyway this quotation? Let's look at this in relation to our work departure. This question is quite broad and therefore I think this allows me to interpret what the tutor is trying to get at here. So I'm going to be bold and actually challenge the very premise of this question. I'm going to do this by looking at x, y and z who have said the premise that has been put forward is a false one.

It is clear, therefore, that deciphering an assignment title is an integral part of the academic discourse of this particular module. However, *ambiguity* is a source of confusion for students even though for many tutors it is part of the challenge and therefore part of the assessment process. This can be seen as a point of tension in that it reveals a gap in the expectations between tutors and students. The analysis of the assignment title is a potential moment of anxiety for students, the moment when they have to work out what the question is asking them to do; a moment when they could very easily lose their way.

It could be argued that explicit support in relation to the analysis of assignment titles is a pivotal moment when clarification can be given. The concept of challenging a statement in an assignment title is likely to be an unfamiliar approach to assessed work for many international and non-traditional students. Therefore, formalized time and space allocated to specific discussion about the nature of potential student responses to assignments could introduce these strategies.

To address this issue, small group brainstorming sessions are a possible forum where students can break down assignment titles into constituent parts and discuss the focus of each element. In the early assignments on a course this could involve more scaffolded support and guidance from a tutor than in later assignments. Some students may respond well to facilitative scaffolding in the form of encouragement and questions, whereas others may look for more explicit instruction and examples

from a tutor. I would argue that the important aspects of this activity are that students are socially engaged in small group discussion, and proactively constructing their own interpretations of the title with tutors responding flexibly to the needs of different groups. In view of the fact that many students come from significantly different learning backgrounds, sensitivity towards the struggles that the ambiguity in some questions may cause is important. A conscious effort could be made for the early assignments to be concise and explicit in the way they are written. As one tutor aptly puts it:

My guts tell me, I can't prove it, my guts tell me there is so much going on for a group of full-time students in semester 1, never mind international students, that you're very wise to give them material which is straightforward rather than especially demanding in that period.

Hence, a critical moment for dialogue both between peers and with tutors is at this moment when assignment titles need to be unravelled. This is a moment for interaction (Hannon, 2000), participation and performance (Lave & Wenger, 1991), sensitive scaffolding (Gee, 1996) and dialogue 'aimed at talking the student-writer into essayist literacy practice' (Lillis, 2001, p. 132).

### **Limitations of explanations and written guidelines: the need for active participation and interaction**

Explanations alone do not appear to guarantee that students are all able to implement what has been said. Neither does the provision of written guidelines which specify learning outcomes and assessment criteria mean that all students will respond to them successfully. The tutors' comments below reflect a certain bewilderment as to why this is not the case.

After the first assignment ... I had a chat with one of the students who seemed quite able in the class ... but when we actually went to look at what he'd done in the assessment and I went through it with him, some of the things we'd talked about not doing, he'd done. And when I went through it on a one-to-one basis afterwards, he said, yes I see what I've done.

One of the puzzles to me on my second semester unit is that for the units now I give them very specific information, a marking grid, of what they've got to do against each learning outcome for the score in each of the mark ranges from fail through to 70 + . And it appears they do not read that information. If they do, they do not understand what they've read because they submit assignments where they've ignored large chunks. You know, this is one of the learning outcomes to be tested like show evidence of being able to access, interpret and evaluate information from electronic sources. And they make no reference to such information let alone evaluate it. But it clearly says in the grid, there's 20 marks so they're going to be marked out of 80 not 100 if they don't do that ... So what is it that's going wrong?

The course guide is very specific about giving examples about how you reference and the university regulations actually are very clear. They don't read them, that's the trouble.

The confusion in this instance is that of the academic tutors, and the gap in expectations concerns the role played by written guidelines. The quotations suggest

that dialogue and collaborative engagement with tasks related to the assignments are necessary to supplement written guidelines and explanations, thus emphasizing once more the importance of opportunities for involvement (Hannon, 2000), and participation and performance (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in the appropriate academic discourse. One tutor described how support is offered to groups of students while they are in the process of producing assignments, which gives an example of how this interaction might be instigated. By enabling students to work in groups with others from similar language and cultural backgrounds, this tutor felt he was able to address their needs effectively because members of the group tended to have common starting points.

Initially I used to [ask students] to speak to me but no one would so now I say get together in a group, think up your questions and I want you to come and arrange to meet and that makes them do something because they get together in a group and they get braver in a group.

What I do is speak to the groups ... I ask them actually to form their own groups and ... I go along and I speak to them. ... So I had three different groups that I actually saw separately to talk about the assignment and that works quite smoothly. But that was outside the actual allocated time. But I found I had to do that.

I explained the assignment and the criteria that were needed for it in the ordinary run of the mill lesson. But then I asked them to go away and do some investigating and come back if they had any further questions. So that is really them questioning me sessions, you know they come back with a series of questions. It's noticeable that the Taiwanese came back and they were saying but there are so many theories. And they just weren't used to the numbers of theories. And you lead them into how can you make sense of these theories. You don't have to lead them very far ... they know that they've got to build up a framework to analyse it. It's the first time they've been asked to do that and ... you say how are you going to make sense of these different types of theories and they come up with a pattern somewhere, and you lead them towards some of the base theories that underpin it, the social theories that actually underpin the theories about human resource management.

These quotations illustrate how a tutor used small group tutorials to build bridges between the previous learning experiences of students and the expectations in the current domain. He spoke of leading the students just far enough to enable them to continue independently of tutor guidance. Within this process a sensitive tutor can identify the extent to which they need to act as a facilitator or as an instructor (Hannon, 2000) when leading groups of students into workable academic practices for a particular assignment. By recognizing what students have achieved themselves, and leading them forward through questions and suggestions, it could be argued that a tutor is working with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of *the zone of proximal development*. This entails the identification of what students are able to do alone and what they can do with support and scaffolding their progress on the assignment accordingly. As part of this procedure, tutors can also be alert to the importance of listening and learning from students and absorbing different ways of interpreting academic discourses. The space is created for collaboration and negotiation between tutors and students.

Another effective strategy when working on assignments can be collaboration between peers. An example is described below of how a group of students worked very successfully together when preparing for a written assessment.

The students had sat down and said 'what they keep telling me is ... what they want to know is for me to develop my understanding of my answer' and they went out and they did their own reading, their own research, their own arguing with each other about what the terms meant and fortunately they came up with good sensible answers to that. The result was extremely original pieces of work. They went and acted on their own.

This illustrates the potential of dialogue amongst peers which can take place during the assignment writing process. Interaction at this time is crucial but, as the above quotation shows, it does not always involve a tutor. The issue of significance here is that it is important to recognize when and for whom explicit guidance is needed and, when this is the case, to provide the appropriate space and time for conversation.

### **Talk around reading and its integration into writing: what is criticality?**

Because it is usually the written assignment or the seminar presentation which is the product that is assessed on an academic course, it is common to focus on the difficulties apparent in the written or spoken product when offering advice or support. However, as du Boulay (1999) has argued, reading is the foundation for the writing, the means to an end, and therefore strategies and effective practices in this area are important if one is to feel comfortable in an academic domain. Similarly, the importance of the whole process of the written or spoken product coming to fruition cannot be underestimated.

In relation to their reading, students mentioned some of the challenging aspects of tackling their assignments. Firstly, they focused on searching for information and identifying what is relevant to read:

To find out and read the books or journal article which can support my idea from the vast source [library stock]. (Japan)

It's difficult for me to do some research in the specialist areas by myself. (China)

When I go to the library and I'm looking for a topic and I can't find the book I just go to where the book ought to have been and I pick up any books around there which are probably related topics and then I probably go into the contents and see if I can find anything that ought to have been in the other book. (Nigeria)

An investigative approach to the selection of reading and the open-ended nature of the choices which have to be made about what to read are new approaches to literacy for many students. They may need to be guided to the appropriate gateways from which to go further when searching for relevant information. The quantity of reading, especially when it is a language which is not their first, also frightens students:

I found it difficult to deal with the piles of assignments. Also the mountains of readings drove me crazy. (Japan)

The technicalities of referencing as well as critical engagement with the reading are not transparent for many students:

The way we have to reference all we say; always say where we have found our sources, ideas; always reference our sources. (Italy)

How to change book words into my own words. (China)

I can describe some really difficult essays. We did have a course which I thought at the time was not so difficult but when I read the assignment I thought it was very difficult because my understanding of the question was different from what the tutor wanted. But I didn't get that explanation during any of the classes and I always felt I was in the right direction ... I always had this impression that it was supposed to be an explanation of what was being thought because there were like 10 schools of thought. We were supposed to implement it to the working environment. I think what ... happened was to debunk each school ... so I did it that way and it came out very very bad. So I still don't know what ought to have been done. (Nigeria)

In this case, the student had used the literature extensively but not effectively in her tutor's view. The effective use of reading in writing is therefore an academic literacy practice which is often challenging and it can take time to adapt and extend previous experiences in order to meet the expectations of tutors or gain the confidence to question the expectations. It appears that this student had interpreted the word 'critical' to mean 'to debunk each school', as she said. She had not fully understood that she was expected to evaluate the relevant reading in terms of identifying strengths as well as weaknesses, and that she should relate her analysis to a professional situation. This again is a clear illustration of a gap between tutor and student expectations, this time in relation to the practice of *criticality*.

Cadman (1997, 2000), speaking in the context of Australian postgraduate study, suggests there is much to be learnt from the perspectives on critical thinking that international students can offer. These views can reveal insights into the changes in identity that are entailed in a move towards a more critical approach to study, and raise awareness amongst western academic staff about the culturally embedded nature of criticality. This underlines the importance of not assuming that certain ways of approaching academic study are common sense and straightforward to all.

This, therefore, suggests that many students would find it helpful to have some explicit guidance on the practice of critical analysis within the context of their discipline. It appears that both tutors and students can readily highlight the difficulties which occur in this vein, but the identification of effective ways of initiating students successfully into the literacy practices which involve linking the reading with the writing is not so easy to do. As Lea and Street (1998) point out, tutors are often unable to articulate the relationship between the underpinning epistemologies of a discipline and the expected writing conventions.

The following quotation from a tutor suggests a way of creating an opportunity for sensitively scaffolded support through social interaction:

We were splitting into small groups, getting them to work on a case and then getting them to present something. So they were getting lots of practice of evaluating and relating it to the literature.

This example of hands-on practice is a way of encouraging students to proactively engage with the process of linking their reading with a professional situation in a constructively critical way. It helps students develop their own opinion about a scenario, and understand how to draw on ideas from the literature to support and justify their suggested solutions or recommendations. Without real practice and input from a tutor to illustrate how they might extend or alter what they are doing, many students will find it difficult to appreciate what the expectations are in this regard.

### **The value of feedback on drafts: what voice should I reveal?**

The value of looking at student drafts was recognized by some tutors interviewed and the benefits of feeding this into the learning process were advocated. An example is given below of a situation where students do a particularly unfamiliar type of assignment involving personal reflection. Because, from experience, the course tutors have realized that this style of writing is difficult for many students, they build a submission of drafts into the assignment process.

They submit a draft first time round and get feedback on that before they submit the final draft ... it doesn't matter how much you brief them they have to go through a sort of pain barrier to understand what to do.

On this particular course, tutors ask for a draft and give comments, recognizing that it is through active involvement with the task and subsequent communication with a tutor that students begin to understand and engage with this different approach to an assignment. Here again we see the relevance of the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The pain barrier referred to by the tutor above is peripheral participation in the discourse of this module, but this must be complemented by interaction and support from established members of the discourse community in order that students can engage in dialogue about the expectations.

Some of them don't write it in the first person. They distance it which is fascinating.

This shows the confusion many students feel about using the first person in academic writing. It is apparent from the data collected in this research that many tutors and students still believe that the use of first person pronouns in academic writing is not always appropriate. This is, therefore, puzzling for students when they encounter a task which involves self-evaluation and they are expected to reflect in the first person.

Points of confusion around when and how to reveal one's own *voice* can be seen here. It is through the voices that are made visible in writing that one's identity can be explicitly revealed. Lillis (2001) highlights the mixture of voices that student writers are juggling with in their assignments, those that they bring from their life experiences and those that they are responding to in the institution. The institutional voices, Lillis argues, dictate acceptable language and content and often students have to invent what they think these institutional voices are saying (Bartholomae,

1985), especially if there is not enough access to participation in the appropriate academic discourse. In the particular situation referred to in the quotations above, the institutional voices are changing the goalposts between assignments. In the assignment mentioned, students are being asked to draw on voices from their own histories and experiences, and to speak about this explicitly through the use of 'I'. However, in other assignments the expectation is that they should defer more to the authority of others. The interpretations that students make in one situation do not necessarily work in another (Lea & Street, 1998).

Thus, the voices of international students and tutors quoted above reveal gaps in understanding that can arise between tutors and students. These can typically occur in relation to *ambiguity* in assignment titles, the role of written guidelines, *criticality*, and *voice*. The creation of space for conversation, active involvement, and negotiation in the discourses of the field are needed in order to allow for possible clarification and the social processes of acquisition and learning to take place.

### **A continuum of implicit to explicit clarification through conversation**

In response to the recognition that students arrive at university with different amounts of cultural capital, it is helpful to consider the different ways in which the unfamiliar practices encountered in a higher education context can be acquired and/or learnt within these important moments of dialogue. Gee (1996, p. 127) argues that the subconscious acquisition of a discourse (appropriate 'saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations') is more likely to enable an individual to operate effectively in a particular social group than explicit learning. Using the discourse of the law school in the USA as an example, he explained that it would be impossible to put the complex mix of appropriate social practices overtly into words, and that effective acquisition of the law school discourse can only occur through immersion in the procedures and interactions which take place in this context. It is 'exposure to models in natural, meaningful and functional settings' (1996, p. 144), rather than explicit teaching that enables acquisition.

However, although acquisition by a process of participation and osmosis may arguably result in more effective integration into an academic discourse community, it is the students who come from backgrounds with the most similar language, literacy and learning practices to those operating in the higher education context that are most able to benefit from this process. International students and non-traditional students, for example, may find the practices they need to engage in on their academic courses too mysterious to acquire implicitly.

I refer again to the writers mentioned earlier who have suggested ways of introducing and including newcomers in the unfamiliar practices of new discourse communities. For example, Hannon (2000) outlines a framework that illustrates a means of access to the language, literacy and learning practices of a target domain, arguing that learning is a social process. For students new to particular academic discourses, this would involve *opportunities* for involvement in academic practices, *recognition* by members of the academic discourse community of involvement and achievements, *interaction* with peers and tutors while engaging in the new academic

practices, and *models* of the practices in action, for example, in the texts which are read or seminar presentations which are listened to. In a similar vein, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest increasingly active participation and performance within the context of communities of practice, and Gee (1996) advocates sensitive scaffolding of learners' emerging abilities by teachers, as ways of supporting acquisition of unfamiliar practices.

Within these social approaches to learning, the extent to which explicit teaching takes place can be viewed as being somewhere on a continuum between facilitation and instruction. Facilitation by a tutor is more likely to result in implicit acquisition, as in the American law school example given above, and instruction is more likely to result in explicit learning. Different students at different times will benefit from one or other or both of these approaches, and a sensitive tutor will be able to respond to individual student needs accordingly. Explicit meta-language to describe expectations may be helpful to some students in some situations, but space is also important for a more subtle absorption of the 'ways of being' (Gee, 1996) of an academic context. This suggests a flexible approach where degrees of explicitness are possible.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, to demystify higher education discourses, there are two sets of issues that can be considered. Firstly, academic staff in a higher education institution can question whether expectations are fair and reasonable, whether dominant ideologies should be changed, and in what ways it is possible to learn from and build bridges with the different learning cultures students bring with them. Secondly, there is a need to become aware of and be able to articulate the underpinning epistemologies of a discipline, and thus become sensitive towards ways of enabling access for newcomers to the current conventions in a particular academic discourse community.

From this study, the advantages of building in space for communication between tutors and students, and also amongst students themselves, as part of the process of doing an assignment can be clearly seen. The provision of written guidelines with assessment criteria is valuable, but not enough in itself to enable all students to tackle their own assignments successfully. Formalized time to unpack the title with support from a tutor if necessary, and the opportunity to consult with tutors in groups or as individuals about the reading, and the structuring, argument and language of the writing, are additional ways which can help when working on an assignment. As Lillis (2001) forcefully argues, it is important that students have the opportunity to enter into a dialogue with their tutors while they are actually doing an assignment. She also illustrates ways in which this space can be used to discuss drafts of student writing in a manner which need not only be tutor-directed, but can allow for student intentions and wishes to emerge so that they can express in writing what they truly mean. It is often only when actively engaged in a task that the confusion and the questions become apparent. And it's within the context of a real assignment that clarification is likely to have the most effective meaning for students.



Complete integration into the discourse of a particular higher education discipline may not always take place but the opportunity and invitation to participate should be there. If implicit acquisition through participation and immersion in the discourse is difficult for some students, opportunities for explicit learning within the same social framework should be made available by providing access to the keys which will unlock the doors to the various higher education discourses. As a Taiwanese student explained:

Nothing is easy for foreign students. Probably it is easy to make friends. It is easy to get tutor help, especially English language teacher and my course leader. By the way, thanks for them.

This captures the idea of the challenges and the struggles experienced by some international students, and it also captures the appreciation felt when support is offered which helps demystify the unfamiliar academic discourses in which they are immersed. And if the doors are genuinely open, it should be possible to walk through them both ways, giving space for mutual learning between cultures and allowing for the emergence of new and valued higher education discourses incorporating aspects of each one.

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