Assessment: The master key unlocking deep learning and language

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Abstract
When International students from non-English speaking backgrounds (INESB students) choose to study in an Australian university, they come, like any student, with hopes, expectations, and understandings. Their teachers also have hopes, expectations, and understandings regarding these students. In fact, it appears that students and teachers are generally hoping for the same things, namely, that students will pass their subjects, understand the concepts, and improve their English. However, while both parties appear to be hoping for the same outcomes, there are significant differences in the *extent* to which they hope for these things. And, more critically, there exists a fundamental mismatch between students' and teachers' *expectations*, and their *understandings* about how these outcomes might be achieved. This paper presents an overview of these hopes, expectations and understandings and discusses how they are either reinforced or reconsidered by students and teachers following the critical moment of assessment. It also considers how this influences a student's choice of deep or surface learning strategies. It suggests that assessment itself may be the master key unlocking the level of achievement, the level of understanding, and the level of language that these students, and their teachers, are hoping for. Finally, this paper presents a practical suggestion of how these outcomes might be achieved.

Key Words
Assessment   Deep/surface learning   English language   Learning Journals   Discourses

Introduction
One of the themes of this conference is Academic Outcomes. And one of the questions asked under this theme is 'How can Australian institutions become more mindful of the need to adjust methods of presentation, use of materials, the learning environment, and assessment procedures to accommodate the needs of a changed student body?' Certainly, student bodies of Australian universities are becoming increasingly 'changed'. Last year, for example, Charles Sturt University made offers to students from 70 countries to study on-campus in regional New South Wales. Such diversity offers immense potential for rich and mutually beneficial, cultural exchange. Indeed, one of my colleagues refers to the international students as 'our learning arc' (K. Eustace 2004, pers. comm., 25 May), which stretches across and links the many countries represented in his classroom. As Calhoun (cited in Smith, 2001, p.242) points out, this wonderful cultural diversity can lead to "reflective self-awareness" and "creativity" which, in turn, 'can create a better world' (Smith, 2001, p.242). However, despite the potential benefits, seeking to accommodate the needs of such a diverse student body presents formidable challenges, not only for the institution but for the individual teachers and students who make up that institution.

My research seeks to understand more about these challenges facing INESB on-campus students, *and* their teachers, as they negotiate[1] the many cultures, languages and contexts, which constitute academic discourses[2] within the Anglophonic 'society' of an Australian, regional university. This negotiation process is undertaken in a variety of situations, contexts and occasions such as lectures, tutorials, texts, and

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[1] For the purpose of this research, the word 'negotiate', or any of its derivatives, will have one, or more than one, of the following three meanings, depending on the context in which it is used, namely:-

1. The *process*, undertaken by students, *of making meaning* as they learn to traverse the complexities of disciplinary cultures, languages and contexts which constitute academic discourses in Australian universities.
2. The *process*, undertaken by teachers, *of facilitating, understanding and assessing* the meaning made by students.
3. The *process of giving and taking*, undertaken by stakeholders, in order to establish mutually agreed upon, acceptable and appropriate *common ground.*

[2] James Gee (1996, p.viii) refers to 'Discourses' as being 'ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted … by specific *groups of people* …of a certain sort'. I suggest that this list could include 'teachers of a certain sort' and 'students of a certain sort'. As Gee (1996, p.viii) points out, 'Discourses are ways of being 'people like us'.

consultations, and precedes and sometimes follows, the critical moment of assessment. *Assessment*, therefore, has been chosen as the focus for observing the negotiation process (including key moments of feedback and re-negotiation), and as a means of identifying associated challenges[3].

Challenges face any new student entering university. As Wertsch (1983: pp.35-36, cited in Gee, 1996, p.55) points out, 'a student is involved in learning a set of complex role relationships, general cognitive techniques, ways of approaching problems, different genres of talk and interaction, and an intricate set of values concerned with communication, interaction, and society as a whole…'. Additionally, within the 'society' of an Australian university, there exists a myriad of cultures, languages, and discourses, which vary among faculties and disciplines (Elbow, 1998; Reid, 1996; Zamel & Spack, 1998). Many students have difficulty negotiating these discourses (Singh, 2002; Lawrence, 2002; Lovejoy, 2001). For those whose first language is not English, negotiation becomes even more challenging (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999).

Challenges, however, also confront universities as they seek to balance the internationalisation of curriculum with quality assurance measures (Kell, 2003; Lankshear, 1998; Pennycook, 1994; Reid, 1996; Roberts, 1999). Academics grapple with pedagogical, social, political and economical dilemmas daily. They debate how to provide culturally appropriate pedagogies, and how to guarantee rigorous (yet equitable and meaningful) assessment methods. They question how much time is fair and ethical to spend with these students to ensure they develop prescribed graduate attributes (King, Hill & Hemmings, 2000; Morris & Hudson, 1995; Pennycook, 1994; Singh, 2002; Zamel & Spack, 1998). They contemplate, with varying degrees of comfort, the evolving role of the academic in it all.

In order to gain a balanced understanding of these challenges, I have spoken with students, teachers and other staff members of Charles Sturt University. Undergraduate and postgraduate students of both genders from a wide variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds have participated in semi-structured and informal interviews. The students referred to in this paper, however, are from Asian[4] countries, that is, they are Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learners (Curro, 2002). Teachers of both genders and from a number of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, representing five faculties and a range of disciplines, have also been interviewed. Staff members from Student Services, Student Administration, the International Office, and the English Language Centre have also contributed to the study. To date 48 semi-structured interviews have been conducted including 24 students, 18 teachers, and 6 other staff members. 18 countries are represented. Data collection is continuing.

One of the reasons I chose to involve participants from many different ethnic backgrounds is not only to reflect the diversity of students and staff at Charles Sturt University, but to investigate the possibility that *common challenges* exist for both students and teachers, regardless of their country of origin or ethnic background. For this reason, countries of origin, generally, are not identified in this paper.

Cultural diversity

Cultural diversity refers to a far broader range of categories than simply ethnic background. As Kalantzis and Cope (2002, p.17) point out, 'all our cultures have multiple layers, each layer in a complex and dynamic relation to the other.' Cultural diversity includes such categories as class, gender, socio-economic status, regional differences, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and age, elements of diversity, which 'have an impact on access and participation within society' (Kalantzis and Cope, 2002, p.17), even the 'society' of an Australian university. As different ethnic or cultural groups are made up of individuals, so too are there individual differences and preferences for ways of communicating and learning, different values, different

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[3] This study of the negotiation of culture and language will be based on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (dialogism/ social); Basil Bernstein (curriculum/pedagogy/assessment); James Gee (Discourses/discourses/literacies); Jürgen Habermas (communicative action); and Robert Young (culture/critical education). While the study explores the implications of negotiation on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, the focus of this paper is assessment.

[4] Asia comprises 37 countries. For the purpose of this paper 'Asian students' will refer to students from East and South East Asia and, in general, to Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learners. It is acknowledged that such generalisation is fraught with danger.

skills and experiences, and different ways of seeing the world, all based on individual backgrounds. Today, more than ever, educators are expected to cater for the needs of individual *students*, not just individual *cohorts*.

When it comes to international students, however, we tend to generalise. We talk about the 'Asian' students, forgetting, perhaps, that Asia incorporates 37 countries. We discuss the 'Indian' students, including in this classification the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Nepalese and Sri Lankans - not to mention the internal caste systems which are still very much alive and well, even in our classrooms. Indeed, there is a very real danger when considering the needs of students, that universities classify them according to 'ethnicity' or 'country of origin'. As Hofstede (2001) points out, one of the first pitfalls of cultural research is to group individuals according to their cultural background. Kember and Gow (1991, p.118, cited in Ramburuth, 2000, p.4) also warn that '… there is a need to proceed with caution when making generalisations about the learning approaches of students from other cultures', while Kalantzis and Cope (2002, p.23) question '… the usefulness of broad and generic cultural categories such as 'Australian' and 'Asian'', suggesting that such categorisation creates stereotypes and 'glosses over the complexity of diversity'. I bear these warnings in mind.

Nevertheless, within these cultural differences, there exist 'dimensions of culture' and 'dimensions of difference' (Hofstede, 2001, p.29) wherein similarities can be identified. If we consider the *similarities of the challenges* within these dimensions of difference, rather than focussing entirely on the *challenges of the differences*, we will be much better placed to design pedagogical and support practices effective for all stakeholders. Certainly, from the data collected to date, similar challenges are emerging. However, similarities are also evident in students' hopes and expectations, and these need to be considered first.

Why students choose Australian universities

Briefly, students cited a number of reasons why they chose to study at an Australian university. They said, for example, that they want to experience Australia, to improve their English, and to graduate with a degree from a Western institution. Another oft-cited reason is that Australia is cheaper than America or England, a very real consideration for many students. One would hope, however, that the quality of service and education we provide, is world-class and that students are in no way regarded as 'cash cows' as reported in *The Australian* recently (Maiden, 2004). Perhaps it is all too easy, at times, for universities to be driven by the economically lucrative and highly competitive nature of international tertiary education. Bearing in mind that income generated by *on-shore* students alone in the last financial year exceeded AUD$5.6 billion (S. Bush 2004, IDP Education Australia, pers. comm., 1 October), it is easy to see how dollar signs could blur otherwise visionary and exemplary teaching practice. And while Australia has been a successful player in international education to date, the market is highly dynamic and any one country's share cannot be taken for granted (DETYA, 2003) particularly if there is any truth in the 'cash cow' allegation, or students detect so much as a whiff of racism. If Australia is to secure its position in the international education game, it must ensure that students' hopes and expectations are met or, at least, that students have no doubt that everything is being done to meet those hopes and expectations.

Students' hopes and expectations

Very broadly, and based on what students are saying, international students have three basic hopes and expectations regarding their academic experience in Australia. These relate to their grades (that is, assessed achievement), their understanding (that is, deep as opposed to surface learning), and their English language[5]. Firstly, apart from wanting to pass their subjects, these students hope (and generally *expect*) to achieve high grades. It should be added that many Asian students have families who *also* expect them to achieve high grades. As one (NESB) lecturer commented, 'Parents may not even know what their child is studying, but they expect to see Distinctions and High Distinctions' (Participant no.7). This places additional pressure on these students to perform, especially Chinese students from one-child families who have no siblings with whom to shoulder the load of real, and perceived, expectations. As one female student told me, 'I really want to get distinctions to show back home to my parents' (Participant no.16), while another lamented, '… so far I

[5] The political, cultural and ethical debate regarding the use of English as an academic language is beyond the scope of this paper. This is based on the fact that all students with whom I spoke, indicated that one of the reasons they chose to study at an Australian university was to improve their English language skills.

just can get Distinctions. I can't get any HDs. And this is my problem …I don't just want to pass. No way ... Every parent, they wish their children will be good in every aspect' (Participant no.18).

Secondly, students want to *understand* the concepts being taught. The majority of students stated firmly that there was more to being a successful student than achieving high grades. Most said, without hesitation, that 'understanding' is far more important than 'remembering', and while many still 'want a high score' they believe that 'understanding is more important' (Participant no. 44). As one student explained:

> 'The problem with the spoon-fed education system [in my country] - it causes us to become like that. The lecturer gives you the concept, but he doesn't explain how the concept evolved. So in the exam you just give everything he has told you. We are looking at the results [of the exam] but very good results don't mean that you know [understand] everything. Sometimes it's very embarrassing because we get asked about something we are supposed to know, but we don't know how to answer because we don't know [understand] the concept. Sometimes it is just a basic thing, but we can't answer. This is a problem' (Participant no. 19)

Another student had similar feelings: 'The main problem [in my country] …we are not really told the concept - we just taught ourselves to *remember* everything *about* the concept, so we just cannot *use* the concept to apply to another context' (Participant no. 21), while another commented: '… we can work well in exams, but it doesn't really mean that we understand the concept' (Participant no. 20).

It is critical to note, however, that while these students hope and *want* to understand the concepts, they do not necessarily *expect* to do so, acknowledging difficulties that may prevent this. As one student pointed out:

> 'The books [in my country] are in [my language]. I read once, and understand. But here the textbook is too difficult for me … the sentences are very long. I try again and again, but I don't understand. That strategy is not very useful here. I have to change the strategy … After lectures, I go to the library and get some simple books on the same subject … get the simple concepts, then read the textbook again. It is very much more time-consuming' (Participant no. 14).

Another student said, '[In my country] they just spoon-feed us and we just eat and eat and eat and then vomit everything out … But this is a habit, so it's hard to change it' (Participant no. 21), while another added, 'It is good, but we need time to learn. This is new to us. We *want* to learn this way, but we don't know. We have learnt this way [memorisation] for many years' (Participant no. 19).

Thirdly, these students hope, and *expect*, to improve their English language skills. Every student indicated that this was important to them and would improve their chances of finding work when they return home. As one student said, 'It is very important … almost the most important reason … to study abroad' (Participant no. 17). And another student pointed out, 'I want to take advantage of my time here to practice listening and speaking English. This is my aim to come here … I want to improve my English and learn about the different cultures here' (Participant no. 14).

The improvement of *academic* English, on the other hand, was less critical to most students who generally only saw it as important 'If it [was] going to get good grades' (Participant no. 46). Another post-graduate student, after sighing heavily, lamented:

> 'It is quite important and necessary for me, but I can't do that. So, the way I do is, I use normal English, try to expand academic English to normal English, try to expand everything simple - easy to understand - I can't remember - what IS that? - I can't remember some words - I use many dictionaries - try to convert it into my language - [my language] to simple - I try to speak it simple - [my language] to simple. So some lecturer is still OK, but some lecturer he say he would *cry* if this is academic!' (Participant no. 27).

When asked if he believed he was marked lower because of his English, he cried, 'For sure! 100% for sure! I think 75% [of markers] comment on my language' (Participant no. 27).

Teachers' hopes and expectations

Although teachers also voiced a variety of hopes and expectations, both for themselves and their students, they appear to want the same things for their students as the students want for themselves. Firstly, teachers

want students to pass their subjects and even to achieve high grades (although they do not always expect it). Secondly, teachers hope their students will understand the concepts being taught (although they do not always expect that either). And thirdly, teachers hope students will improve their English language skills, particularly *academic* English (and that is something most *do* expect). Thus, while it appears that teachers and students want the same outcomes, there is a difference between the *extent* to which they hope for these things, as well as a fundamental 'mismatch' between their *expectations* and *understandings*. One reason this mismatch occurs, is because of common perceptions regarding international students, and Asian students in particular.

Common perceptions of Asian students

It became apparent from talking with teachers that, while their hopes and expectations varied, most had general perceptions about INESB students, and Asian students in particular. Teachers indicated, for example, that Asian students were 'extremely motivated', 'always attended class' and, in some cases, were seen to 'have a positive influence on other, less-motivated students'[6]. Most teachers commented that, although Asian students generally had a 100% attendance rate, they were 'less willing to participate during tutorials', they 'avoided asking questions', and it was 'difficult to get anything out of them'. It was also commonly reported that Asian students tended to 'recall and repeat', resorting to rote-learning or memorisation, and lacked critical analysis and interpretative skills. As one teacher commented: 'We have a lot of open book exams which tends to reflect the fact that they'd [Asian students] rather take the material straight out or transpose it rather than thinking about its application' (Participant no. 40). Similar 'concerns' were voiced by Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Advisors and English language teachers.

Certainly, these general perceptions agree with Kember's (2000, p.108) comment that there are 'widespread beliefs that these students prefer to be passive learners and resist the introduction of forms of teaching which are not didactic and require them to play an active role in their own learning.' However, growing numbers of studies are revealing that academics' perceptions of Asian students and their approaches to study are based on misunderstandings (Biggs, 1990; Kember & Gow, 1991, cited in Ramburuth, 2000, p.3; Kember, 2000).

A comparative study by Ramburuth (2000, p.6), for example, of 248 international students and 719 local students at the University of New South Wales, found that 'there were no significant differences between the two cohorts in their deep approach to learning'. In fact, the study showed that international students from Asian backgrounds not only engaged in deep learning but did so, perhaps even more than their Australian counterparts (Ramburuth, 2000, p.7). Interestingly, Scollon and Scollon (2001, p.152) claim that Asian cultures and their thinking about language, have been influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and traditions of communication without language, where it is thought that the most important things cannot be communicated in language, and that the ideal language is to 'purge one's speech and one's writing of everything but the essential information'. As they point out 'one might expect the average Asian to be somewhat more sceptical about the value of direct, informational communication, and to place a higher value on thinking deeply about a subject' (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.152). Certainly, this confirms students' comments regarding the hasty and shallow coverage of the broad range of topics at university, rather than deep coverage of a narrower range. It also seems to contradict the general perception by Westerners that Asian students lack deeper - or, perhaps, higher order - thinking skills.

Ramburuth (2000, p.3) draws our attention to further studies involving Asian and local students in Australian universities (Niles, 1995; Ramburuth, 1997; Volet & Renshaw, 1996) which also confirmed that 'the approaches to learning of Asian students were not vastly different from those of their local Australian counterparts'. In fact, Volet and Renshaw (1996, cited in Ramburuth, 2000, p.3) concluded that 'Chinese students' approach to study was, like that of their Australian counterparts, influenced by their perceptions of course requirements rather than any 'typical' personal or cultural characteristic' (Ramburuth, 2000, p.3).

It must be said, however, that Asian students are *conditioned* by their previous study experiences, to use surface strategies such as rote-learning and memorisation. And it must also be said that rote-learning and other surface learning techniques are not only used by Asian students. As Kember (2000, p.108) points out, 'It is, rather, a universal phenomenon.' I agree, although personally, I feel that 'phenomenon' is not quite the

[6] In one case, however, the opposite was true. As their teacher explained, 'they [the Asian students] hit the ground running, but when they saw the local students strolling, they slowed down.'

right word. It seems hardly strange to me, let alone ‘phenomenal’, that students choose those study strategies, which will result in the best academic outcomes for them. Students choose to use specific ‘study’ strategies (as opposed to ‘learning’ strategies, since ‘study’ does not necessarily equate with ‘learning’) for a specific purpose - namely, to pass an assessment task. As Kember (2000, p.108) points out, ‘Students will adopt a surface approach if they perceive that is what the course and assessment requires or if that approach best enables them to deal with the demands of the course.’ More specifically, students choose surface approaches, because it enables them to deal with the demands of *assessment*.

How (mis)perceptions are perpetuated

The implications of this choice, however, need to be considered more carefully. These students come to Australia with hopes and expectations, realistic or otherwise. Shortly after commencing their studies, they begin to experience challenges associated with the complex negotiation of languages, discourses, and ways of doing things in the academy. They realise - and sometimes with a shock - that their English language skills are, perhaps, not as strong as their pre-entry IELTS test indicated. They begin to realise that their hopes and expectations may have been somewhat unrealistic. Many of these students are also aware of pressure on them not only to perform, but to perform well. They know their parents and families expect high grades. Their conditioning from previous study experiences leads them to believe that their teachers also expect them to achieve high grades. As one student told me, ‘…I am learning to be a better daughter for my parents and I have to learn to be a better student for my lecturers’ (Participant no. 18). They begin to face a very real conflict involving their hopes and expectations of achieving high grades, and their hopes of experiencing deep learning. Students are forced to quickly re-assess their positions, and re-prioritise their hopes and expectations.

A university degree undertaken by an international student costs tens of thousands of Australian dollars. Contrary to another common perception, these students are not all from wealthy backgrounds. Surprisingly often, these students have parents and families who are making enormous sacrifices in order to send them to a Western university. While they may be relatively ‘well-off’ at home, exchange rates mean that costs associated with their education in Australia are exceedingly high. As one male student pointed out, ‘… the exchange rate is about seven of our currency to $A1 - everything times seven - $A200 per month equals my common salary [in my country]. Per month! Not per week’ (Participant no. 17). And a female student said, ‘…I hope I can find some money to rest my father’s burden’ (Participant no. 18). Often - and always for Chinese students as the result of the ‘one-child family’ policy - the pressure they feel to pass their course can become almost debilitating[7]. As one Chinese student told me, in tears, ‘My father is sick … my mother has had to return to work …I am very worried’ (Participant no. 5).

The most important thing for these students now, is that they pass their course as quickly and economically as possible. If the demands of the course are such, if the pressures upon these students are sufficiently great, they realise that they must reconsider their hopes and expectations, and even relinquish some of them. Their need to *pass*, overrides their hopes for meaningful learning experiences. Instead of holding a number of hopes and expectations in each hand, they have to let go and grasp with both hands, the solitary hope of passing. As one student told me, ‘I just want to pass,’ and more telling still, ‘I just want to survive’ (Participant no. 27).

It must be remembered that the majority of these students have been high-achievers or, at least, successful students, in their home countries. When they arrive at our universities, they are highly motivated and often hope, and expect, to be successful here also. To their chagrin, however, they come to realise that some of their teachers consider that they are scarcely ‘up to the mark’. In fact, a number of these students, who are sufficiently motivated to study unbelievably long hours, have told me that feedback on assignments has included comments such as ‘Fair effort’. And nothing more.

However, the critical point is that students now have changed hopes and expectations. They have relinquished their hope for high grades - now they just hope to pass. In some cases, they do not even *expect* to pass. They still hope to understand the concepts and experience deep learning, but feel this may be an unrealistic hope, especially within the timeframe they have to complete assignments. So they relinquish that

[7] Rulings held by the Department of Immigration and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) concerning student visas, adds another dimension to the pressure felt by these students. This matter is worthy of a paper in its own right.

hope also. This is a crucial point because it confirms in the *students'* minds that, although they initially *hoped* to experience deep learning, they did not necessarily *expect* it.

Students also reconsider their hope and expectation to improve their English language. As one student commented:

> 'I think it is our language problem, so maybe just improve the language, that's the only way. But you cannot improve the language in such a short time. It takes a long, long time. So, in this moment, we do not write well. But, for us, we cannot do anything. We just try our best and try to express ourselves so our lecturer understands. But if he misunderstands, we also cannot do anything about it' (Participant no. 19).

It seems that teachers' hopes and expectations are also reconsidered about this time, if somewhat less consciously. Their hope that students will pass is reinforced, as is their expectation that students will not achieve high grades. Their hope that students will become deep learners is overruled by their expectation that they will *not*. This is also a crucial point because it confirms in the *teachers'* minds, their perception that these students are not deep learners. As Kember (2000, p.107) points out, 'When students perceive the demands of the course they adopt a surface response. The instructor observes this and a self-fulfilling prophecy comes home to roost.'

And finally, the teachers' *hope* that students would improve their English language skills is also overruled by their initial *expectation* that students would improve. Teachers *expect* students' English to improve and when it does *not*, it results in comments on assignments such as, 'You must improve your English'. And *that*'s all. When we consider students' and teachers' hopes and expectations now, there is but one common denominator, namely, the hope that students pass. Thus, *assessment* becomes the over-riding and critical factor, both for students, and teachers.

Assessment

According to Ritter and Wilson (2001, p.5) 'Assessment is an area of on-going scholarly debate and there are neither absolutely risk-free processes nor perfect outcomes.' They also point out that assessment 'is a dominant determinant of learning behaviour, an integral part of the teaching and learning process, and a significant contributor to learning outcomes' (Ritter & Wilson, 2001, p.5). If, therefore, students are motivated more by a need to *pass* an assessment task than by a hope to *understand* concepts, then it stands to reason that *how* we assess these students will impact directly on the type of study strategies they adopt. And while it is imperative that there needs to be changes to curriculum, adoption of more inclusive approaches to teaching and learning styles, and modification of teaching styles to accommodate students' diverse learning styles (Ramburuth, 2000, p.7), it is even more critical that there is a change in *how* we assess, *what* we assess, and what *constitutes* acceptable assessment.

In order to achieve those learning outcomes stakeholders want, pedagogies are researched, developed and grounded in proven theory and sound teaching practice. Learning experiences which are relevant, authentic, and transferable to other contexts, are designed to develop students' thinking skills in higher, deeper and more critical ways. Innovative learning activities are designed to help students understand concepts, rather than merely memorise them. And, depending on the teacher, learning activities are sometimes negotiated to ensure students experience deeper and more meaningful learning. Sometimes, however, these somewhat *informal* pedagogies collide with highly *formal* assessment methods such as structured academic writing tasks and invigilated examinations. This incongruence not only places conflicting demands on the students, but hinders them from gaining fully from the learning experience. Assessment methods *must* reflect pedagogies. As Kember (2000, p.118) points out, teaching, curricula *and* [my italics] assessment, must be designed to foster a deep approach.

Encouragingly, the Assessment Handbook of my university states that 'No one knows your subject and your students as well as you do', and that 'In the end, your methods of assessment and grading must be the product of your professional decisions' (Ritter & Wilson, 2001, p.6). However, if professional decisions are based on misperceptions of the learning behaviour of students, then those decisions may be misguided.

Hopes and expectations revisited

Earlier in this paper it was suggested that cultures are dynamic and evolving and that cultural diversity refers to far more than a variety of 'ethnic backgrounds'. The danger of making generalisations about students based on their country of origin was noted. It was also suggested that there exist 'dimensions of culture' and 'dimensions of difference' (Hofstede, 2001, p.29) wherein similarities can be identified. Certainly, from the current data, three fundamental hopes have emerged for both students and teachers, namely, for students to pass, to understand concepts, and to improve their English. Nevertheless, the multi-dimensional nature of cultures and differences reveals that there are:

- dimensions of achievement
- dimensions of understanding, and
- dimensions of language.

The question of how to accommodate such *multi-dimensional* diversity becomes even more of an enigma.

It must be said, however, that universities are seeking to answer this question in multi-dimensional ways. Preparatory subjects and orientation-to-university courses are available to students before they commence their studies. A wide variety of support services including supplemental instruction, study groups, support groups, study-buddies and cross-level mentors have been trialed and implemented. LAS Advisors provide one-on-one support, and tailor workshops to identified group needs. Information on Writing Conventions, Time Management, Referencing and Plagiarism, Analytical and Critical Reading, What Lecturers Expect, Thinking Like a University Student, and Writing a Tertiary Essay (please note capitals), are available on-line or as colourful leaflets. Recognising that English language skills impact significantly on academic outcomes, universities provide further support via Academic Writing Workshops and courses in English for Specific Purposes. Many models of teaching English exist under this 'support' umbrella, including deficit models, transition models, bridging models, integrated models, genre-analysis models, and combinations of each.[8]

While this support is invaluable and necessary, a consistent drawback with many of these methods is the additional time (and, sometimes, cost) required for students to undertake them. Additionally, some students regard these programs as remedial and feel they do not, or should not, have to participate, especially when IELTS testing indicated they already have the necessary language skills. In the light of these considerations, means should be sought to develop general English and discipline-specific English at the same time as subject content and concepts. If this were done, there could be significant benefits for students (including local students) and teachers.

Learning journals

One way of improving general English while being exposed to subject content, concepts, and discipline-specific English, could be through the use of Learning Journals. The use of Learning Journals is not new and I acknowledge an extensive literature base that I must explore more thoroughly. Nevertheless, the *way* in which Learning Journals are used, and the *purpose* for which they are used, *could* be new. I believe Learning Journals can contribute substantially to the achievement of those fundamental outcomes that students and teachers both want. The following, cursory overview of how Learning Journals can be used, is offered with a view to stimulating discussion. I look forward to comment and critique from my colleagues.

Dimensions of achievement

Continuous assessment

Learning Journals can be used as an alternative form of continuous, ungradeable, assessment - a means of *combining* assessment, teaching and learning (that is, assessment *and* pedagogy) for on-campus students in their first semester of coursework study, whether undergraduate or postgraduate. Learning Journals attract a Pass/Fail grade only, as a compulsory component of tutorial participation. Learning Journals are not submitted to be marked but are assessed during tutorials when students are present and have opportunity to speak. Learning Journals can be used across disciplines, providing a common, communicative baseline from which students, teachers, and other staff (such as LAS Advisors) can negotiate, allowing strategic targeting of needs of individual students or whole cohorts.

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[8] Genre-based, discipline-specific models are proving to be very successful. See, for example, the Integrated Bridging Program (IBP) University of Adelaide, SA and the Introductory Academic Program (IAP) James Cook University, Townsville, QLD.

Grades

Students lose marks for poorly written English. Technically, because fluency in *written* English is not a prerequisite, students should not be penalised (Curro, 2004) but, often, they are. In the context of Learning Journals, however, students are not penalised for errors of grammar, punctuation or spelling. Writing in such a non-threatening environment allows fluency and creativity of thought and language. This enhances language development and clarification of concepts, increasing the likelihood for higher grades in other, more formal assessment tasks.

Dimensions of understanding

Concepts

Learning Journals allow students the time and space they need to formulate questions to raise in tutorials. This encourages 'quiet' and 'reticent' students to participate more actively, questioning concepts in a risk-free environment. Questions raised in Learning Journals also generate discussion during collaborative group work, helping teachers to more accurately identify any weaknesses in a student's thinking. This helps teachers assess students' *real* understandings, particularly if they are given opportunity to explain their understandings orally. Learning Journals allow far more accurate tracking and assessment of students' thought processes than many other forms of assessment (such as essays or examinations[9]). This communicative interaction helps clarify concepts and misunderstandings, of both students *and* teachers. It also strengthens students' listening and speaking skills, which are sometimes overshadowed by mountains of academic reading and writing.

Situated contexts

Learning Journals give opportunity for students to think about how new concepts might be applied and situated in their own countries, leading to generalisation and transferability to other, more relevant, contexts. As Macrorie (1988, p.8) points out, 'free writing … finds for us genuine voices, in which we can speak with authority'. Permitting and encouraging students to write about new concepts, with their *own* voices, in their *own* contexts, allows them to write with authority. This is an extremely exciting prospect when one considers the potential discussion which can be generated by this 'learning arc' of students.

Dimensions of language

Written English

The sort of free writing required in Learning Journals, allows students to improve their general English and develop discipline-specific English, without having to deal with the intricacies and demands of formal, academic writing. When teaching English to speakers of other languages, writing or speaking lessons generally aim for accuracy or fluency. When aiming for accuracy, it is important to correct students' miscues. When aiming for fluency, students are encouraged to be creative, expressing their ideas in free writing without being concerned about language form. Accuracy will improve with practice, and can become a focus in later contexts. At this point in the students' experience, it is more important that they understand the concepts, experience deep learning, develop higher order thinking skills and raise any questions, thoughts, ideas, musings, and doubts they may have. As Macrorie (1988, p.2) suggests, rather than worrying about punctuation or spelling, adult students should concentrate only on telling some kind of truth.

Diverse writing styles

Learning Journals encourage students to draw on their own truths, their existing knowledge and skills, and to write in ways which suit their styles of thinking and learning. While students should use English in their Learning Journals (since the purpose *is* to improve their English), they should not be discouraged from also using other languages as a means of clarifying thoughts and understandings. Allowing students to use their own languages, as well as English, assures them that their prior knowledge is recognised, valued and respected and does not 'discount the diverse literacy practices that students bring to these institutions' (Reid, 1998, p.viii, cited in Hirst, 2002, p.2).

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[9] It is acknowledged that some courses (eg, law and accountancy) are governed by Australian societies and institutions which prescribe examination of prospective members (that is, students) as part of their degree. However, many lecturers advocate invigilated examinations, seeing them as a means of overcoming plagiarism, overcoming collaboration, and finding out 'what's actually in the students' heads'.

Plagiarism and collaboration

Learning Journals relieve the need for referencing norms when students are struggling to understand content and concepts in another language. Freeing students of the obligation and pressure to reference their work, not only alleviates plagiarism but gives students time and place to learn what plagiarism *is* and how to avoid it. Additionally (and this is another conflicting message for students), although we encourage collaborative group work during tutorials, we shun collaboration in assessment. Learning Journals allow teachers to track students' progress, helping to identify whether later submissions are, in fact, the students' own work.

Spoken English

By providing time and space in a supportive and positive environment for students to practice speaking English in an academic context, teachers can establish that students are developing discipline-specific language and appropriate communicative skills. Language is learned by using it and if students are not given time and opportunity to practice, the process becomes much slower. Furthermore, if teachers never hear their students speak, they cannot be sure they are developing these skills and understandings.

Academic English

Learning Journals allow students to improve their English in functional ways, while learning the language specific to their discipline. As students become familiar with discipline-specific language and more comfortable with the types of thinking and conventions required of them, other forms of assessment can be introduced such as reflective opinion papers or more formal academic essays. However, according to Fasal Rizvi (2003, pers. comm., 13 December) Learning Journals are far more useful, pedagogically, than essays ever could be. That is, unless what actually constitutes an academic essay is negotiated[10].

Other considerations

Of course, there are other considerations regarding the use of Learning Journals. For example, when, where and how often should Learning Journals be used? Should Learning Journals be used for every subject? How will Learning Journals impact on a teacher's workload? Will Learning Journals be an accurate reflection of a student's understandings? Additionally, writing a Learning Journal can be difficult for students (even those whose first language is English) and they will need guidance in developing reflective writing skills. However, this genre provides a 'risk-free' environment in which students can learn, not only how to write journals, but language, content and concepts at deeper and higher levels.

Conclusion

I acknowledge that my present findings are based on limited data (so far). Nevertheless, when considered in conjunction with other, more substantial studies (eg, Kember, 2000; Ramburuth, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 1996) the implications become more compelling. My findings suggest, for example, that teachers should *not* believe that Asian students lack existing, well-developed, academic skills. On the contrary, these students have considerable and highly-developed skills which simply may not be transferable, or appropriate, to the Western university context. Furthermore, teachers should *not* believe that these students are surface learners who lack deeper - or higher order - thinking skills, or who do not want to understand the concepts (or worse, that they are not *capable* of doing so). On the contrary, these students value deep and meaningful learning very highly, but are often under considerable pressure from a number of sources to produce what an assessment task requires. Learning styles do not differ significantly between cultures, but rather different educational systems *condition* students to adopt certain study strategies to achieve certain ends. Additionally, students choose those learning strategies most likely to meet the demands of assessment. These students are not only *capable* of more active forms of learning, but they *want* it.

Students need time to learn and if we are serious about wanting students to experience deep learning, then we must allow them time and opportunity to do so. If assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process, then assessment practices *must* promote a celebration of learning, language and culture which is mutually enriching for all stakeholders.

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[10] Reactions from academics regarding the essay (and plagiarism) have been markedly different. When asked the definition of an "essay", opinions varied across disciplines and from lecturer to lecturer. While some academics strongly resisted any deviation from a conventionally structured piece of academic writing, others were open to negotiation. As one (NESB) lecturer remarked, 'Structure? Who cares about structure? I just want dot points. I want to know the students understand the concepts. I am not concerned with their English.'

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