

Embedding ‘Learning Guides’ in a flexible delivery model: A pilot study to improve international students’ academic acculturation at an Australian university

Velliaris, Donna
Academic Learning & Language
The University of Adelaide
Email: donna.veliariis@adelaide.edu.au

Warner, Richard
Academic Learning & Language
The University of Adelaide
Email: richard.warner@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract

International students transitioning to Australian universities are required to fulfil academic expectations while positioned on the margin of the academic community, coupled with engagement in discipline-specific language prior to significant exposure to the discipline. Adding to this challenge, oftentimes academic expectations and expert discourse must be accomplished in their non-native tongue - English. This paper focuses on the creation of an environment that provides international students with greater opportunity to achieve learning outcomes and academic acculturation through access to a plethora of integrated academic support services. To elevate the provision of such access and as part of an ongoing process, Academic Learning and Language (ALL) staff at the University of Adelaide have developed a series of ‘Learning Guides’. These guides not only articulate learning requirements and scaffold international students’ capacity to understand and embrace scholarly processes, but are becoming embedded across their support offerings, thus enabling more fluid and rapid acculturation to academic life at this institution.

Key Words

Learning Guides, international students, higher education, academic acculturation

Introduction

Although the increasing multicultural composition of Australian university campuses has brought much social and financial benefit, it remains ‘beset by a number of challenges’ (Bodycott & Walker, 2000 p.80). Prime among those challenges is the ability of international students to acculturate to Australian higher education, often characterised as student-centred, self-directed, problem-based, real-world, and peer-assisted learning. These academic discourse patterns may contradict any expectations international students have previously encountered and the switch between different institutional cultures, coupled in many cases with English as a Second Language (ESL), carries with it ‘a particular kind of vulnerability’ (Hellstén, 2002 p.10).

International students transitioning to Australian universities, particularly at the undergraduate level, are expected to adjust to discipline-specific language without yet having had exposure to the discipline in question, and to demonstrate academic proficiency whilst situated on the periphery of the Australian academic community. Successful transition into a new educational environment requires adaptation to the teaching and learning culture of the host institution (Hellstén, 2002; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005). While not directly explored in this paper, ‘culture’ is implicit to this discussion as international students must negotiate meaning through interactions within the sociocultural environment, which in this case is the higher education context (Bodycott & Walker, 2000 p.83). In this scenario, the dominant culture is seen in terms of academic expectations and interpretations which are often taken for granted.

It is from this perspective that Academic Learning and Language (ALL) staff in the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) at the University of Adelaide, are piloting a new series of ‘Learning Guides’ (LGs). ALL have recognised the need to ‘create teaching approaches that lessened [international students’] feelings of learning frustration and language alienation’ (Bodycott & Walker, 2000 p.83) and are taking important steps toward demystifying educational practices they face as learners in an unfamiliar context. These guides are helping to articulate learning requirements and scaffold international students’ capacity to acculturate

to academic life at this institution. For the purpose of this paper, 'acculturation' refers to Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits' (1936 p.149) seminal definition:

Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.

This paper addresses the pilot stages of ALL's 'Learning Guides Project' in facilitating students' acculturation to academic disciplines at the University of Adelaide, with particular reference to international students.

Literature Review

The transition process into Australian higher education has been well researched. In this way, the notion of transition generally indicates a shift from the 'familiar to the unfamiliar' (Hellstén, 2002 p.3) and involves 'adoption of new cultural, social, and cognitive challenges' (Prescott & Hellstén, 2005 p.76). For international students from linguistic backgrounds other than mainstream Australian-English, swift disciplinary acculturation to Australian universities is often through English as a Second Language (ESL). Moreover, language issues are accentuated by cultural unfamiliarity with Australian pedagogical preferences.

Oftentimes, academic staff regard the culture inherent in their discipline as apparent and for that reason, expectations about learning and assessment, for example, are rarely made explicit (McLean & Ransom, 2005). However, as Sawir (2005 p.568) posits, it is inevitable that international students will be predisposed to 'the kinds of pedagogies that were used before coming to Australia'. Angelova and Riazantseva's (1999) work titled "*If you don't tell me, how can I know?*": A case study of four international students learning to write the US way, emphasises how, on the contrary, international students would benefit from explicit dialogue concerning the expectations of the discourse community. Difficulties in assessing independent learning notwithstanding, getting international students to articulate their learning needs which closely correlates to issues of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994), is in itself problematic. That is, they may not necessarily be aware of what their needs might be. It is therefore through inclusive pedagogical practices that international students can acculturate to Australian university life and come to connect with the academic literacies of their chosen discipline (Russell, 1991; Schneider, 1993).

By virtue of their entry into a different societal and organisational culture, international students may face the dilemma of performing below their true capabilities. In particular, their academic English language proficiency may cause some academic staff to consider them a 'homogeneous group' of learners (Chalmers & Volet, 1997 p.87) and to some extent 'remedial' in ability level. In the absence of any guidance or positive affirmation, '[international] students often accept and internalise misinformed negative views of themselves as lacking in initiative, linguistically impoverished, and passive or 'rote' learners' (Dawson & Bekkers, 2002 p.2). The reality is that when international students are faced with discipline-specific academic texts their ability to process the information may become overshadowed by language-related barriers. An enormous array of higher-order vocabulary has most likely been woven into a sophisticated argument that is 'culturally bound' (Corson, 1997 p.673). That is, the culture of academic literacy is frequently a 'product of institutional forces and experiences not shared by all cultures. Accordingly, they are hardly logical and rational in every setting, because they represent sectional interests' (Corson, 1997 p.675).

For international students, engagement with their chosen discipline and increased exposure to the institutional culture, would help them transcend surface-level learning and develop the ability to express their understandings (Vardi, 1999 p.8). Such engagement is centred on the enhancement of international students' deep-level learning in the discipline. Surface-level learning is when students direct their attention to an academic text and are only capable of reproducing the contents. 'A surface approach, then, is characterised by the intention to memorise without any attempt to understand. The outcome can be, and presumably normally is, little or no understanding' (Kember, 1996 p.341). Deep-level learning, on the other hand, is when students are able to direct their attention to the inherent meaning(s) of an academic text. In order to achieve deep-level learning, international students are expected therefore, to 'cope with holding the frame of reference at the same time as pursuing a line of analysis' (Northedge, 2003 p.172) and to achieve this skill of their own accord, somehow through 'passive osmosis'.

Academic acculturation necessitates adjustments on the part of the institution with the goal of creating greater alignment between teaching and learning styles, and establishing effective student-teacher partnerships. Two practices that can increase alignment and bridge the learning gap are 'integration' and 'scaffolding'. In this context, integration involves the 'process of linking new knowledge to old and modifying and enriching existing knowledge' (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995 p.11). By increasing the number of access points international students

have to new information, they will be more likely to comprehend and retain new learning. Complementarily, scaffolding can provide exposure to model readings and assignments where evidence of critical thought is explicitly highlighted thereby reducing ambiguities inherent in the discourse community. Scaffolding can operate at a controlled, guided or independent level, with variation in the degree of exposure to and use of academic English needed at university (Hawkins, 2008; Turner & Pointon, 2009).

In combination, these methodological approaches would help to foster effective student-teacher partnerships, not merely to get everyone involved, but to demonstrate genuine efforts to enact long-term outcomes (Epstein, 1992, 1995; Epstein & Hollifield, 1996; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). ALL is endeavouring to promote such partnerships at the University of Adelaide. Increasing and embedding academic learning and language support resources and programs is helping to advance international students' ability to assimilate new ideas and to learn at a deeper-level through exploration of how concepts relate to their prior knowledge. By attempting to enhance the learning experiences of international students, ALL is better able to address issues that may lead to academic anxiety and withdrawal (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001 p.187). ALL staff will continue to explore international students' many different cultural ways of learning and to uphold the advantages of inclusive practice in their successful acculturation.

Learning Guides Project

Context

The Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) assists the University of Adelaide community to improve staff teaching and student learning through development programs and research. Established in 2002, the CLPD combines the expertise of the former Advisory Centre for University Education, the Online Learning and Teaching Unit, and the Mathematics Learning Centre (The University of Adelaide, 2009). At present, the CLPD comprises two major programs: (1) *Professional and Academic Staff Development Program*, which incorporates Learning and Teaching Development, Assessment and Evaluation, and Online Learning and Teaching support; and (2) *Student Development Program*, which incorporates the Maths Learning Service (MLS) and Academic Learning and Language (ALL).

In 2008, ALL staff evaluated their delivery of academic support services and made the decision to revisit the role of its LGs by examining the ways in which they could be more effectively employed. The original LGs had a focus on specific study skills. Titles included *Avoiding Plagiarism*, *Exam Preparation*, *Making Notes*, *Reading Effectively*, *Time Management*, *Writing Essays*, and *Writing Research Reports* (Table 1). The previous situation was that the LGs were developed and delivered in an *ad hoc* manner with a resultant lack of association to other ALL resources and programs.

International students transitioning to university were first introduced to the LGs in *Doing Uni* lectures during Orientation Week, as part of an information rich timetable of presentations and events. As unconnected documents, large copies were printed and distributed with little purposeful explanation. The LGs functioned as 'handouts' to those who, for whatever reason, were unable to attend the sessions on offer. This scenario did not allow for any meaningful support and still required international students to make broad philosophical leaps in understanding. By perpetuating the format and style of ALL's original LGs, there was the danger of being overly assimilative and not recognising the needs and learning experiences of the entire student body (Prebble et al., 2004). As a result, the LGs were revamped to make them more appealing and inclusive of the student population, '[r]ather than seeing this situation as an indication of falling standards, or of the need to 'dumb down...'' (Haggis, 2006 p.522).

To be sustainable, there was early recognition of the need for the LGs to reach a student demographic often characterised as being less engaged with learning than students of previous generations (Krause, 2005). In addition, an increase in local student numbers has been matched by an equally significant rise in the number of international students. According to Hellstén (2002 p.3), '[t]he fact that international students make up a large proportion of Australian universities today is becoming an expectancy rather than an exception'. Hence, the audience accessing the LGs has grown and evolved to be considerably more diverse than in previous years. In actuality, as ALL 'make adjustments and changes to meet the needs and expectations of the present generation of university students, these needs and expectations are continually changing' (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001 p.198).

As a consequence of increased student diversity and with the recognition that the probability of learning through osmosis has even less tenability, development of the LGs has been primarily based on learning in a university context. That is not to imply that there is no longer a focus on study skills development. Rather, there is additional scaffolding; the bigger picture in terms of the literacy of learning. To better meet the learning needs of

the international student cohort, there is an ongoing focus on developing LGs that target issues of academic acculturation. Such guides, which are either already available or in the pipeline include *Academic Voice*, *Assessment Types*, *Learning in a University Context* and *The Value of Feedback* (Table 1).

Anecdotally, the new series of LGs appear to be offering greater opportunity for international student engagement within the prevalent academic culture, albeit one which is in flux. Through utilisation of these and a plethora of other anticipated topics, international students are given insights into what drives learning in the university context and what values are inherent within such a system. It is anticipated that international students will become better able to contextualise their specific course-related learning tasks and the skills needed to perform them, into the bigger picture of academic values as guiding principles in the process of learning.

Paradigm shift in international student support role

The evaluative process referred to above involved not merely regarding the guides as overview documents covering a range of ‘common’ study-related skills, but contemplation of how ALL could embed them as part of a broader integrative teaching and learning strategy. The situation faced by ALL at the University of Adelaide has been one whereby international students have attempted to access, what is for many, a new academic culture with all its demands and expectations (Peterson & Spencer, 1990), and who are able to draw upon limited institutionally sustained pathways to successful acculturation. Yet, ‘tertiary institutions have a social responsibility to design learning environments which foster students’ development of inter-cultural adaptability as one of the major aims of the internationalisation of higher education’ (Volet & Ang, 1998 p.21). Increasingly, ALL has adopted a more practical and pragmatic response to its role and its potential to enhance the student experience, taking special account of the academic vulnerabilities of international students.

ALL’s ‘paradigm shift from what is produced to what is consumed’ (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000 p.88) has been profound. This paradigm shift relocates ALL’s academic support services from one of *ad hoc* dissemination of resources and programs, to the more pedagogically-sound provision of differentiated and inclusive resources and programs. A three-pronged approach to upgrading the LGs as part of a more integrated learning process continues to involve: (1) extending the scope of the LGs to learning, not just study skills; (2) ensuring that the LGs are better targeted to the broad demographic; and (3) making the LGs integral to other ALL delivery mechanisms. By enhancing the learning experiences of international students, ‘some issues that lead to withdrawal will be alleviated, and more students will achieve greater success’ (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001 p.187). An integrative strategy is allowing for the reconceptualisation and promotion of ALL support and ‘[a]s a result, learning is deeper, more personally relevant, and becomes a part of who the student is, not just something the student has’ (Zhao & Kuh, 2004 p.116).

Integrative strategy and flexible delivery

A defining element of the 2008 evaluation of the delivery of ALL services was the perceived need to create more interactive and cohesive linkages among their other support offerings. While the LGs may be used for self-directed study purposes, international students are benefitting from having them embedded in a range of learning scenarios. Integrating diverse academic activities into a meaningful whole is enabling authentic learning. At this point in time, the LGs have been linked to: (a) one-to-one consultations in ALL’s Writing Centre; (b) face-to-face sessions in ALL’s Semester Seminar Series; and (c) online modules on the university’s *MyUni* intranet which is operated by the CLPD’s Online Learning and Teaching Unit.

Positioned in the Barr Smith Library, ALL’s Writing Centre is a drop-in centre whereby students are able to meet one-to-one with an ALL lecturer and receive feedback on any aspect pertaining to their academic learning and language skills development. The agenda of each consultation session is largely determined by the student and the individualised nature of consultations allows for use of the LGs in a post-session capacity. Most student throughput to the Writing Centre is self-initiated, but international students in particular, are often referred by faculty concerned with aspects of their writing. Used in conjunction with one-to-one consultations, the LGs are therefore, reaching international students who may not otherwise engage with learning support, either faculty-based or non-aligned.

The decision was made to thematically link LG topics to ALL’s lunchtime Semester Seminar Series. These 50 minute seminars, held four days per week during each semester, now cover many of the same topics. These free, non-discipline specific sessions are offered to all students currently enrolled in the university and are also conducted in the Barr Smith Library. Despite there being more LGs than there are sessions in the Semester Seminars Series, each guide is gradually and carefully becoming embedded. It is important to note that while each four-page LG overviews the content of such sessions, or part thereof, it does not entirely duplicate it. LGs

do, however, function as a summary of the Semester Seminar Series for international students who may struggle with simultaneous active listening and note-taking in ESL.

International students unable to attend ALL's Writing Centre or lunchtime Semester Seminar Series have additional learning pathways they can access and follow. There is an extension function inherent within the LGs through which further examples and links to recommended sources are listed. The LGs provide a printed overview of some of the university's *MyUni* intranet content and can be used either as a direct overview or in conjunction with online modules. A prime example can be seen in the guide titled *Avoiding Plagiarism*, which is linked to a Semester Seminar of the same name, as well as an online module called *Plagiarism and Referencing*. The latter allows for multimedia engagement with issues pertinent to those concepts raised in the relevant LG, the Writing Centre and the Semester Seminar Series.

Though not implemented at present, more advanced features such as online *Discussion Boards* and *Interactive Quizzes* will be introduced in the future. Such engagement may utilise the strengths of the computer literate student cohort and perhaps the preference of the current 'Net Generation' (Dziuban, Moskal, & Hartman, 2005). Indeed, IT is allowing formerly separate processes to be capable of integration so that ALL resources and programs are seamlessly delivered.

Table 1: Summary of ALL Learning Guides August 2009

Revamped Learning Guides	New Learning Guides	Anticipated Learning Guides
Avoiding Plagiarism Editing Your Own Work Exam Preparation Making Notes Managing Your Time Participating in Tutorials Reading Effectively Writing a Research Report Writing an Abstract Writing an Article Review Writing Essays	Academic Posters Active Listening General Study Habits Group Work Introductions & Conclusions Mind Mapping Multiple Choice Exams Objective Language Oral Presentations PowerPoint Presentations Practical Study Habits Procrastination and How to Beat it Reporting Verbs Short Answer Exams Source Credibility	Academic Voice Assessment Types Data Collection Methods Learning in a University Context Learning to Learn Lifelong Learning Literature Review Mentoring Problem Based Learning Self Efficacy The Value of Feedback

The LGs (26 at last count) are offering greater opportunity for international student engagement within the prevalent academic culture (see columns one and two Table 1). International students are not constrained in how they engage with the guides and their media nexus. Integration of learning and language support programs provides international students with greater opportunity to achieve academic acculturation and positive outcomes. Moreover, a flexible delivery model is fostering a differentiated and inclusive pedagogical approach to help them manage academic expectations and expert discourse at the University of Adelaide.

Proposed Evaluative Research

Since 2008, upgrading the LGs as part of a more integrated learning process continues to be underway. As part of ALL's self-reflection for advancement, the learning needs of international students in transition and beyond, is an essential factor for continued consideration. The intention is to elicit international students' feedback pertaining to the value of the LGs as part of the scaffolded learning process, through a formal survey. It is anticipated that by mid-2010, as part of ALL's desire to maximise the benefits of its LGs, formal and systematic online surveys will enable both local and international students to share their views on how integrating and embedding them across the range of ALL academic support services has enhanced their learning experience.

It is envisaged that such a survey will focus on two principal aspects: (1) ascertaining who is using the guides and in what ways; and (2) gaining insights into how the guides may reach a wider target audience and better meet the needs of international students. At present, contemplation and planning for that data collection has not been addressed in detail. It is envisaged that during the next phase of this project, lessons learned by ALL should

have implications for academic staff and especially for those challenged by movements toward internationalisation in higher education.

Conclusion

While LGs in various guises have been part of ALL's armoury for over two decades, it was not until careful evaluation of its academic support services in 2008 that any systematised attempt was made to link them to other delivery mechanisms. Part of the impetus for change was the recognition that student demographics at the University of Adelaide have seen greater numbers, nations and ability levels of international students enrolling for studies in higher education. Understanding their cultural perspective, in terms of what educational offerings mean for them, is one direction that can be taken towards establishing a more effective student-teacher partnership and equitable responsibility. Improving strategies that encourage international student reflection, autonomy, and performance success, together with appropriately integrated learning and language support, will not only benefit international students, but aid in augmenting the potential of every student transitioning to Australian university programs. It is hoped that forthcoming evaluation by international students will confirm that ALL's aims are being achieved through this pilot project at the University of Adelaide.

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