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Naming trouble in online internationalised education.

Short title: Naming trouble online

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**This article reports original empirical work that has not been published or
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Naming trouble in online internationalised education.

ABSTRACT:

This paper offers an analysis of cultural politics that emerged around naming practices in an ethnographic study of the interactions within an online MBA unit, offered by an Australian university to both 'local' Australian students and international students enrolled through a Malaysian partner institution. It became evident that names were doing important identity, textual and pedagogical work in these interactions and considerable interactive trouble arose over the social practices surrounding names. The analysis uses sociolinguistic concepts to analyse selected slices of the online texts and participants' interview accounts. The analysis shows how ethnocentric default settings in the courseware served to heighten and exacerbate cultural difference as a pedagogical problem. These events are related to the larger problematic of theorising the context of culture in times of globalisation and increasingly entangled educational routes, with implications for the enterprise of online internationalised education.

Introduction – problematic visions

This paper tells a story in two ways. Firstly it tells an empirical story of how problems arose around naming choices in an online internationalized Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program. At the same time, this parable of (mis)namings tells a theoretical story about the cultural politics involved when educational institutions go global and differently oriented identities interact within the virtual time/space of the online internationalized classroom. The analysis focuses on three aspects of online internationalised pedagogy that need more attention – cultural politics, the necessary medium of language, and interactive trouble. The term ‘interactive trouble’ (Freebody et al., 1995, p.297) is used here to denote aspects of the online pedagogical interaction that produced empirically evident complaints, questions, uncertainties, or discomfort.

This study is situated at the intersection of two agendas shaping Australian higher education in current times. Firstly, there is a growing enthusiasm for online delivery of education, fuelled by hopes of invigorated teaching, lower costs, increased flexibility and larger student catchments. Secondly, universities continue to pursue international full-fee paying students in order to augment shrinking public funding. Online internationalised higher education has thus become increasingly thinkable, desirable and possible (Cunningham et al., 2000; Ryan & Stedman, 2002) more with regard to the profits on offer than to any cultural politics potentially involved (Allport, 2000).

The practice of online pedagogy has been sustained thus far by a literature rich in practitioner anecdote and visionary promise (for example, Maeroff, 2003; Tiffin &

Rajasingham, 2003) while short on rigorous analyses (Laurillard, 2002; Wallace, 2003). Constructivist interactivity is routinely celebrated, and virtues are made of online necessities (Doherty, 2004). In contrast, this study purposefully builds from Burbules and Callister's (2000) 'post-technocratic' frame, understanding the online affordances as offering 'working spaces' (p.277) for pedagogical use, 'for better *and* for worse' (p.287).

Studies of internationalised higher education with regard to face-to-face settings in either on-shore and off-shore programs have engaged closely with the pedagogical implications of cultural difference to the point of producing reified constructions of the international student as a problematic learner constrained by cultural learning styles (for example, Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; see Doherty & Singh, 2005, for a critique). In contrast, the business imperatives driving online internationalised offerings have tended to opportunistically gloss over potential complications of students' cultural diversity in their enthusiasm for new technologies and frontier markets. This oversight is ironic, given on one hand, the high value placed on interactivity evident in much of the 'how to do online pedagogy' literature (for example Howell, 2001; Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000; Murphy, Walker, & Webb, 2001) and on the other hand, the orthodox construction of the Asian⁽¹⁾ international student as insufficiently interactive (Doherty & Singh, 2005; Nichols, 2003).

Online pedagogy also inherits another, larger visionary project, whereby cyberspace is imagined to be a zone free of embodied biases and prejudices (Wertheim, 1999). This utopian dream has been challenged by work such as Nakamura's (2002) expose of how logics embedded in the technology itself can 'cybertype' individuals,

‘transcoding’ them into their online representations. Any liberatory potential of disembodied interaction has equally allowed the proliferation of dated stereotypes by users who are ‘neither revolutionary nor perfect, armed with ordinary ways of understanding each other’ (Burkhalter, 1999, p. 74).

This study was concerned with exploring the interactions of online internationalised pedagogy, to see whether cultural backgrounds do come to matter and how cultural identities might be produced and performed in these visionary settings, to what end. It is in this frame that troubles around names emerged as a significant issue. In this regard, this paper contributes to the growing pool of research that argues afresh that cultural difference is a necessary pedagogical consideration in online internationalized education (Bates, 2001; Evans & Henry, 2000; Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez, & Mason, 2001; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Leask, 2000; Williams, Watkins, Daley, & Courtenay, 2001; Ziegahn, 2001).

Cultural theorisations of globalization foreground the complexity and contradictions within cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996) and their potential to produce convergence towards sameness, hybridity, and divergence in difference at the same time. The instantaneous electronic interactions of network society (Castells, 1996, 1997) are deeply implicated in these flows of knowledges, people, ideologies, finance and technologies into new spaces and new relations. Globalisation is hence as much about the production of difference through the process of ‘relativisation’ (Robertson, 1992), that is, the growing awareness of co-existing difference, as it is about convergence or ‘Macdonaldization’ (Ritzer, 2004). When previously separate lifeworlds intersect, their differences inevitably produce ‘hermeneutical problems’,

and ‘uncertainty as to how the situation ought to be read and what response is likely to bring the desired results’ (Bauman, 1990, p.146). Cultural scripts and conventions become unsettled: ‘Taken-for-granted tacit knowledge about what to do, how to respond to particular groups of people and what judgement of taste to make, now becomes more problematic’ (Featherstone, 1995, p.5). The internationalised university is an important part of global processes and networks (Robertson, 1992) and is not immune to such practical problems.

The study

The data are drawn from a larger study of the production of cultural difference in the design and conduct of a core MBA unit offered online in 2003 by an Australian university to an internationalised student group (Doherty, 2006). The research drew methodologically on critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996). Carspecken recommends a careful five phase process, both ontologically rich and epistemologically cautious, to reconstruct a sense of ‘the’ world of shared events, ‘my’ world of the participant, and ‘our’ normative world of the group involved. The five phases involve: a primary observational record; reconstructive analyses at increasing levels of inference; the generation of dialogical data through interview; an investigation of other related contexts; and investigations of wider social constructs. To build such an ‘evidential basis’ (Stones, 1996, p. 232) for the study’s claims and its descriptions, empirical data came from three main sources:

- ‘Observational’ data, being the electronic text generated across the duration of the semester. This data was routinely monitored, stored and logged and gave access to ‘the’ world of what happened.

- Dialogic interview data around the design and conduct of the online case study unit. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the lecturer and educational designer before, during and after the selected unit. Additional semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-selected students on completion of the unit. This data gave access to the subjective ‘my’ world of each actor, and also insight into the norms of ‘our’ world, that is, the social order produced over time by these interactions.
- Documentary data, such as the publicly available marketing brochures, websites, course materials and policy statements which contextualised the research site. These documents were systematically sought from the particular institution, and from the larger context of national policy, regulatory frameworks, relevant markets and public media representations.

The design was also informed by Hine’s work (2000) on adapting ethnographic methodology to virtual contexts, ‘translating an approach traditionally applied in specific bounded social settings to a communications technology which seems to disrupt the notion of boundaries’ (p.10). For Hine, the virtual ‘site’ is defined by its nexus of connections not by its spatial boundaries. As researcher, I had electronic access to observe the online ‘site’ carefully over its sixteen weeks, but was not a participant in the interaction. The research had ethical clearance to collect the data and conduct the interviews from both my university and from the case study university.

As well as 107 local and expatriate Australian-nationals (of whom 83 completed), 37 international students (of whom 29 completed) were enrolled in the unit through a partnership agreement with a parallel Malaysian institution. These students were

located in Malaysia at the time of the unit and included citizens of both Malaysia and the Peoples' Republic of China. 'Online' delivery meant that, by design, the lecturer communicated with all students in this unit only through the web-based courseware in 'discussion forums', or by email ⁽²⁾. In Table 1, the 2152 postings in the course website over the semester are broken down by their virtual location and by calendar week to give a rudimentary overview of the interaction. The shaded areas highlight where particular zones were relatively active, so the chronological progress of the unit across its sequence of modules and assessment tasks is evident. Zone A contained the students' and lecturer's self introductions. Zones B, D, G, and H were devoted to 'on task' discussion of the unit's curricular material. Zone C handled general technological advice and access issues, and Zone E was where the lecturer elicited feedback on the unit's design. Interaction in Zone F was markedly different in that it was driven by students' questions and became the preferred venue for students' complaints and assessment concerns. Activity peaks in Weeks 4-6 and Weeks 9-11 were due to assessable participation in the peer-moderated small group discussions. Student participation elsewhere was optional.

<<INSERT TABLE 1>>

Over the conduct of the unit, the ethnography revealed that names were doing a lot of identity and pedagogical work in the online interactions and considerable overt interactive trouble arose over social practices surrounding names. In particular the default settings for how the online courseware construed name fields did not suit the conventions associated with Chinese names which are commonly tripartite. In addition, such traditional practices were at the same time being eroded by the proliferation of new, hybridised naming practices adopted by students in the online space. The following analysis has selected slices of the online texts and participants'

interview accounts regarding what choices participants had when it came to naming themselves and others, with their reasons and design behind the choices they made. It demonstrates how naming practices were instrumental in building competing models of teacher/student relationships, and how ethnocentric default settings in the courseware served to produce and exacerbate cultural difference as a pedagogical problem.

Hine (2000) approaches virtual ethnography as an analysis of both interaction and of text. To this end, the paper identifies moments of interactive trouble in the interaction and then draws on sociolinguistic concepts drawn from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)⁽³⁾, in particular the concepts of *tenor* and *mode* (Halliday, 1978) to analyse the naming choices and practices displayed in the 2152 texts of the online interaction. SFL relates any text to its context of situation, that is, the immediate matter and relations at hand in the textual moment. This *context of situation* is understood to nest within, and construe, its larger *context of culture*, being the shared, sociolinguistic conventions, discourses and genres which allow mutually intelligible communication to take place. These two contexts are not separate but rather understood as existing in ‘symbiosis’ (Hasan, 1995, p.184). Online internationalised education however offers an interesting case of textual production in a makeshift and temporary social gathering, which ‘renders problematic an assumption of a common community of language users’ (Firth, 1996, p.239).

Any text will be realized through the *register* produced in the particular context of situation. The register is the wordings selected that satisfy the text’s *field* (its subject matter), its *tenor* and its *mode* of communication. The *tenor* of a text refers to the

styling of the interpersonal relationship between writer/speaker and reader/listener, in particular, pitching the text to the relationship's desired level of 'status, formality and politeness' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 631). The *mode* refers to how the text is to be communicated (for example, talk, writing, phone or email) and how that choice of conduit shapes the text. The strength of SFL for this analysis is to highlight how wordings are choices from a network of possibilities. In this study, the *tenor* of student-teacher relationships was consciously manipulated through naming choices, while at the same time, names were also having to do the important work of knitting cohesion across texts within the online *mode*. On top of these textual responsibilities, names were also serving as symbolic markers of cultural identity.

The paper now presents a series of analyses. Initially, an explicit complaint about confused naming practices is analysed using SFL tools to establish and illustrate the nature of the trouble emerging in the online interaction. This is followed by analyses that unpack and highlight the intricate textual work names were necessarily doing in these online interactions, in order to make sense of why misnamings came about and why that mattered. The first two focus on how names were implicated in the online *mode*, firstly to establish who is talking to whom, and secondly to evoke a notional face to the online voice. The third analysis focuses on how names were also intimately involved in orchestrating the desired pedagogical *tenor* in the interaction.

Writing about names produces ethical difficulties. In order to protect confidentiality, this paper uses pseudonyms⁽⁴⁾ that attempt to replicate the cultural heritage of the original name, as well as any diminutive form that was encoded in the original as this becomes pertinent to the analysis.

A naming complaint

By the beginning of Week 4, a student had lodged the following complaint in an email to the lecturer:

Dear Mr [Smith] ...

In Malaysia, it is common to call people (especially the Chinese community) by the surname. For instance, my colleagues and friends call me "[Lee]". But as far as the [University] website is concerned, I am called "[Lee]", "[Wen]" and in the discussion group "[Lee Yeu]". Hope they don't call me "Harry Potter" next! (just a joke, Sir). In summary, I prefer to be called "[Lee]" but I would like to be listed in the discussion group as "[Lee Wen Yeu]"...

Thank you very much Sir. May you have a great day ahead.

[Lee Wen Yeu]

(From Malaysia)

This student's complaint reported hermeneutical problems around naming, preferences and the variety of situations for naming within the unit's online interaction. In SFL terms, the *circumstance* of being 'In Malaysia' was prominent as *marked topical Theme* in the message's body, and reiterated at the bottom for emphasis. This *circumstance* was distinguished from other *circumstances* which were again highlighted in their position as *marked topical Themes*: 'as far as the university website is concerned', 'in the discussion group'. He was effectively asking that all the circumstances should be considered congruent, as he is 'In Malaysia' and the practices for 'in Malaysia' should apply equally and legitimately in the virtual university. Through this text this student has tactfully asserted himself, his cultural identity, and his local scripts in opposition to the default settings and biases encoded

in the host university's systems. This complaint resonates with Nakamura's (2002) study of cultural frames embedded in the logic of internet forms. How his name came to be (mis)construed across the courseware at various interfaces (the courseware's initial log on page, the unit's portal, and then group listings within the unit) is explored in more detail later. Here it is significant that his community's traditional naming practices were to be considered as legitimate in this globalised virtual space as any hegemonic Anglo script. This student as a paying customer of an internationalised program, who has engaged with the global product within his local setting, felt no obligation to adjust to the institution's default scripts.

To understand the symbolic meanings behind this complaint, we need to understand the kind of work names do in text and interactions. Names and terms of address offer optional linguistic resources with which to realise and fine tune the *tenor* in any situation. There are however no universals governing naming practices or terms of address across language communities (Braun, 1988). Thus, how other traditions may encode gender, ethnic identity, status, relationship or age in their naming/address conventions (McConnell-Ginet, 2003) often remains opaque and semiotically unavailable to outsiders. The fact that names and naming came to matter so early and so much in this globalised context of situation may not then be surprising, especially when we consider what extra work names were doing for this textually-mediated *mode*.

Invoking vocatives for *mode*: Who is talking to whom?

The unit's online interaction was carried out in the one dimensional *mode* of electronic print enabled by a commercial courseware platform. The interface offered

no control over font or visual aspects of its display beyond the use of all uppercase letters (conventionally equated with yelling) or other email textual conventions such as emoticons, though these were rarely used in this site. Attachments of documents using other software were possible, but again only rarely used by the participants. The design and discourse of such online pedagogy draws heavily on a metaphorical equivalence between oral communication and online practices favouring constructivist notions of learning through high levels of peer ‘discussion’ (Doherty, 2004). This *mode* of interaction however differs from oral discussion in a number of important ways, which impact directly on what work names do in this *mode*.

Firstly, like email, any posting was framed, positioned and mediated by the software’s production of names. The courseware automatically produced a meta-data header on any posting. This header logged the date and time of posting; identified the contributor by name as entered in the student information systems of the university; and indexed the posting by its title, hanging it from its precursor in a relation of hierarchical dependency if constructed as a reply to a topic, or parallel independency if constructed as a fresh topic. The database of postings could be sorted chronologically, by name of author, or by title, and any index displayed these three fields: title, date/time and name of author. The automated naming of the contributor was possible as participants had to log on with designated usernames and passwords which articulated with and interrogated the student management information system. The data for such information originated in the students’ enrolment form – which at the time offered data fields of ‘title’, ‘family/surname’, ‘given/other names’, and ‘preferred name’ for self-naming. These categories displayed and encoded as default the Anglo cultural convention for sequencing names, and did not at this stage

accommodate different cultural practices – for example where family/surname also serves as preferred name, as for the student quoted above. This technological naming of the contributor was switched on as a default setting, but could be turned off by the site administrator in an ‘anonymous’ option, which this lecturer activated later when soliciting course evaluations. Otherwise, the name produced in the header served to identify who was ‘speaking’ using the format, [Family name, First given name], and the indexing of the postings served to identify to whom they were ‘speaking’. In this way the header’s naming gave a ‘face’ (Dunkling, 1977) to the posting.

Unfortunately, in the case of the student in Malaysia quoted above, the header name thus produced had inappropriately construed the data fields, sampling and sequencing the name items by the Anglo tradition when producing a header naming. To complicate matters, the student portal, through which students logged on to access their various courseware sites, also produced an automatic greeting, but this one was more informal than the posting header, set to greet students by their preferred name, which was presumed to be interchangeable with their personal name. These layers help to explain the multiple naming formats the student reported in the above complaint.

Secondly, electronic mail should be understood as a hybrid *mode* (Moran & Hawisher, 1998) drawing on both spoken and written conventions, while being neither one nor the other. Thus contributors, in their contribution to ‘discussion’, usually used an opening and closing in their postings as conventionally employed in letters. The opening would name the person to whom they were addressing their posting (for example, ‘Hello [William] and fellow studiers’), and the closing would name themselves (for example, ‘Cheers [Gayle]’). This naming was potentially less

constrained than the official *tenor* of the meta-data header name, and could better negotiate relationships and identity in the immediate context of situation. Thus any re-naming of self or others in the body of the posting was potentially a more active expression or design of the text's *tenor*.

Unfortunately, the bureaucratic format the automatic header produced, with family name before the first given name, and separated by a comma, was not distinguished from other naming formats by some students in Malaysia. These students continued to address their Anglo-named colleagues in the body of their postings using such a sequence: 'Hi my friend, dear [Smith, Joanne]', or construed the first name thus presented as the personal name 'Hi, [Thompson], your case is very good ...' As such mis-namings became more evident to all parties, some students started being self-conscious about naming others, and pre-emptively apologising if they hadn't produced the correct name: 'Hi [Chen] (I hope I've got your name in the right order).' It is significant that despite the risk of possible offence, they still felt the need to include a naming in the text of their posting, to indicate to whom they were replying in this online *mode*.

Invoking vocatives for *mode*: Names for putting a face to the voice

In this electronic context of situation, namings were prominent and any name came to carry what it could of the interpersonal meanings that may have been carried by face, accent, dress, tone and gesture, had the interaction been face-to-face. Identities were thus being constructed, expressed and read within the limited textual means available. Names became one of the few clues to the cultural identity of who was 'talking', and to whom one was 'talking': 'From your name, it is highly likely that you are a

Malaysian student. That being the case....’ Other identity clues observed in the texts included overt explications of identity (‘I am a Malaysian Chinese living in Kuala Lumpur’), descriptions of cultural heritage (‘I am originally from Papua New Guinea’), and the surface flaws that mark usage of English as a second language (‘Resources does .. and people is....’). Reading difference from such symbolic markers, names in particular, could well lead to presumptuous assumptions of difference/sameness. Any of these aspects could indicate diversity within the domestic student cohort as much as it might distinguish an international student. Similarly, many of the international students enrolled through the Malaysian partner institution were business managers living and working in transnational businesses using English daily, so their English language competence and workplace narratives would not necessarily mark them as different to the domestic enrolments.

It would also be overly simplistic to describe any cultural naming conventions as static, fixed, and mutually discrete. Tan (2004) identifies waves of both ‘Englishisation’ and ‘Mandarinisation’ in naming conventions in Singapore over time. The former, associated with the adoption of English-based given names in formal namings, and the omission of Chinese given names, is considered a homogenising force as the Chinese ethnic community in Singapore adapt to colonial histories and global pressures. The latter, considered a reactionary, heterogenising force, reflects the effort to reinvigorate and re-centre the Chinese identity by promoting Mandarin language and naming practices, omitting English-based names, and employing *pinyin* conventions for romanised orthography. Tan suggests that Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia would share similar processes over time, given their common history as British colonies.

Thus, names themselves also became problematic indicators from which to read cultural identities. Amongst the names of the students, one could recognise Anglo family and personal names, three part Chinese heritage names, and the multi-part Arabic names of presumably Muslim students in Malaysia. However, it became evident as students shared their experiences, that Anglo names were also being used by students in Malaysia for this online context of situation, while their formal meta-data naming reflected a Chinese heritage naming ('My name is [Ong Nan], if u feel hard to remember my name, u can call me [James]'). Thus the Western name served as a contingent identity used temporarily and strategically to reduce difference and symbolic distance and thereby facilitate the situation's interpersonal relations. In other words, some actors chose a different virtual face/ voice to expedite situational relations in their online interactions.

In addition competing accounts were given regarding how to treat Chinese names, and how they differed from the Anglo-naming practices. The enrolments through the Malaysian partnership were delayed because of administrative hiccups, so the students in Malaysia did not appear until it was well established (the first being 106th in a total of 141 introductions posted online). However, it is significant that the first student in Malaysia to post a self-introduction felt obliged to include some briefing on the social practices regarding three part Chinese heritage names: 'My name is [Tsai Sheng Yun] and I am a Malaysian Chinese living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Most of my friends call me [Tsai] (it's my surname/family name and it's common in Malaysia to call a Chinese by surnames)...Cheers [Tsai].' By doing so, the student relativised the default Anglo practices that had operated up until that time. The next

student to post further complicated this cultural briefing by offering a different account: 'My name is [Chang Gyi Wei] but people usually address me as [Gyi]. ... best regards, [Gyi]' inadvertently producing uncertainty rather than clarifying how to go about appropriate naming. The third student in Malaysia to introduce himself used an Anglicised first name with a three part Chinese name in the family name position: 'My name is [David Lee En Si] ... Cheers [David]'. The complexity continued to grow as each student in Malaysia offered a permutation of how naming resources and choices applied in each of their individual cases.

Soon after these introductions, the lecturer posted an announcement for all students, explaining that 'in Chinese format my name would be 'x...y...' and you would call me 'x...'. If you are unsure, I'd suggest you ask your fellow students how they prefer to be addressed.' He thus offered the 'traditional' script, but also alerted students to the uncertainties arising in the variety of accounts and hybridised practices employed by the international students. Thus even this 'traditional' format became a presumptuous or dubious assumption in these conditions, reflecting the growing, fractal diversity within such cultural scripts.

These competing versions, compounded with the technology's treatment of name fields, produced spiralling uncertainties in the conduct of the unit, as reported by the lecturer:

I made it my business to get to know the names. Even though (laughs) everything was conspiring against me. I couldn't get a proper set of names. Anywhere. I wanted the list. Where's the list of their actual names? So at the least I can interpret, the ones, whenever I print a list out, and they had a different name on their email

account as from the name that we called them within the [courseware] system. Um, and then, to even complicate things further, the people, we were dealing with through colleges in Malaysia ... what they're doing, and the students are doing it themselves. Some of them, Chinese names are using the Western format of putting their family name last, and it's just very confusing.

The discussion thus far has outlined how names were crucial in this online *mode* to textually allow participants to know who was talking to whom, and to knit coherence across the many postings in any forum. In this online *mode*, names were also projected and read to give a 'face' to the voice, in the absence of other semiotic markers of identity. The next section outlines how names were also manipulated to produce the desired *tenor*, but how such tactics were often mis-interpreted.

Invoking vocatives for pedagogical *tenor*

As well as contributing to (mis)understandings regarding who was interacting, any choice of names was doing important work by linguistically shaping the desired *tenor* for the pedagogical relations. Any naming choice encodes and negotiates the three interpersonal dimensions of power, social distance and affect/attitude (Poynton, 1989). The relationship thus constructed can either reflect the existing relational status or promote how the participants' relationship might desirably be construed. Peers in dialogue typically reciprocate with congruent forms. In contrast, the choices available to the superior in an unequal relationship are less constrained and more ambivalent than those available to the inferior, and 'the superior party may manifest that superiority in part by acting as if social distance was minimal' (Poynton, 1989, p. 63). In English, status markers are generally becoming less prevalent given the

surface ‘democratization’ of institutional discourse (Fairclough, 1995). In the US, Britain and Australia, first name address seems to have become the prevalent form, while honorifics are rarely used, including in academic settings (Dickey, 1997), in contrast to many other language communities. Thus how the powerful name themselves and address others can be both strategic and deceptive in regard to their status in interactions. In a pedagogical relationship, such a ‘democratized’ *tenor* for the teacher/student relationship may on the surface suggest an ‘apparent’ parity of control (Bernstein, 2000, p.13) but does not necessarily displace the lecturer’s power over the interaction.

In this regard, the lecturer set the tone for the desired *tenor* in his initial introductory posting. The first direction students were given to get the course interaction underway was to introduce themselves: ‘saying who they are, where they are from, what they do etc.’ To this end, the lecturer posted the first such self-introduction. The automated header named him as ‘[Smith, William]’ while his posting gave the title ‘Introducing [Bill]’. He opened the body of the text without a greeting, starting: ‘My name is [Bill Smith] and I’m Professor of ... at [Uni A]’, and closing ‘Cheers, [Bill]’. Titles were not included in any meta-data namings. His final self-naming chose not to include any of his official titles (‘Dr.’, ‘Professor’) which would have highlighted his status and authority (Poynton, 1989), though reference had been made to this status in the text. Rather he chose the diminutive and more familiar form, the equivalent of ‘Bill’, not ‘William’.

In Australian English, Anglo names can be truncated or augmented in conventional ways to produce diminutive or familiarised forms that purposefully reduce social

distance. These changes can be patterned, for example by adding ‘y’ to the first syllable (thus ‘Suzy’ for ‘Suzanne’), or more idiosyncratic, as in ‘Betty’ for ‘Elizabeth’. Personal names in English are also typically gender-marked, though this is not morphemically evident (as Italian ‘-a’ or ‘-o’ suffixes would be). Rather it is an arbitrary cultural system, ‘largely learnt item by item’ (Zwicky, 1974, p. 788). Thus those ‘in the know’ can relate the diminutive ‘Bill’ to its full form, ‘William’, and will understand that it refers informally to a male.

The *tenor* constructed through his self-naming choice, by the lecturer’s account, was an important and conscious aspect of his pedagogical design, and contributed to the model of teacher/student relationship informing his pedagogy:

... and this is part of accessibility, you sound very informal, ah, very ah relaxed rather than, you know, ‘Here’s directions!’” boss of the course. ... some people prefer the professor to be much more learned ... I deliberately work to play that down. ... I ah, you know, encourage people to call me [Bill] and so on.

In Australian English, diminutives are typically used more often for women regardless of their age or status (Poynton, 1989). Thus, the choice made by the high status male lecturer in this case study to consistently name himself by a diminutive form should be considered more marked than it would be for a female lecturer in an Australian context.

Using the device of naming choices, the lecturer purposefully constructed the relationship between himself and his students on a more equal footing, with the semblance of parity, masking the power and status of his role and downplaying his

instructional authority. It is significant that in the first days of this unit, he also purposefully requested that his meta-data naming in the university's information systems be reset to match this informal-by-design self-naming:

... if you go back and see the first postings, I was "[William]". The system had me listed as "[William]", and ah I contacted them ...But I just said to the people, "Look, I've been teaching as "[Bill]" for a long time and ah, I think it's just confusing to people who don't know the difference...

By this account he is carefully working to accommodate the cultural Other to whom the range of Anglo naming practices may not be familiar, while asserting his preference for the informal form. In an interview, he reported that some Malaysian students were 'uncomfortable' with this informality. The Malaysia student's e-mail complaint above, with its use of respectful use of titles of address, 'Mr.' and 'Sir', also suggests that some were unconvinced by, or perhaps unaware of, this nuance in Anglo naming choices. However, over time, it became evident that some international students became more comfortable with the short informal naming, and those participating in the optional zones came to use this form without any titles.

Following the lecturer's self-introduction, many Australian students proceeded to post self-introductions, which frequently opened with a similar greeting and their self-naming: 'Hi everyone. I'm [Ann Jones].' The self-naming in their closings often chose truncated informal versions of the formal header name. However, some of the students chose to address the lecturer with his full first name, '[William]', rather than reflect the informal version back, thus re-constructing the imbalance in relative status.

Interestingly, none of the Malaysia students addressed the lecturer by his full first name form, '[William]', suggesting perhaps that the choice of '[Bill]' had not carried the lecturer's intended meaning of offering a more informal relationship. One student addressed his self introduction to 'Mr Bill Smith and all coursemate', another with 'Hello Professor Bill', mixing formal and informal forms of address. Tan (2004) similarly notes the lack of distinction between formal and informal forms in the English-based names adopted in his corpus of Singaporean university graduates.

At the same time, in consideration of who/where the fellow students were, another student in Malaysia, reported avoiding culturally appropriate namings when posting a workplace scenario for group discussion. In his email interview, he reported 'translating' the varied and nuanced practices of his local setting to accommodate international peers:

Researcher: (you wrote)"I think when you communicate, you are much more aware that what you will be saying may not make sense to some international students."

Could you give me some examples of how this aspect affected your choice of wording/content when you made a posting?

Student: The first thing that came to my mind was terminology. For example, for names, we have Indian, Chinese and Malay people. So when I write my case narrative, I try not to use Chinese, Indian and Malay names. Also, when we address a Malay gentleman, we use En. (short form for Encik, translated as mister) while we would use Mr. if the gentleman is Chinese or Indian. So if you write your case narrative with En. Ahmad for example, your reader would be wondering what is En. and even Ahmad which is the name of the gentleman.

To facilitate relations and understanding in the small group discussions, this student was thus prepared to disembody his work scenario narrative from its local context, and render it in a translated form the ‘domestic’ students could understand.

These moments of purposeful design, uncertainty, and trouble over naming produced larger effects. Following the opening student complaint, the lecturer alerted his university management to the inappropriate treatment of culturally different names embedded in the technological system defaults and the risk of cultural offence that might jeopardise the university’s efforts to build its ‘future as an international provider’. This was thus considered a small matter with large symbolic ramifications, given the policy of pursuing international enrolments and contracts. The faculty have since altered their enrolment form, doing away with the ‘preferred name’ field, now asking for ‘formal name for official documents’ to allow students to represent themselves according to the sequencing of their choice.

Meanwhile, in a small group discussion online for the second assessment item, an Australian student opened interaction with a self-introduction that presumed no defaults, and offered the suggestion that group members ‘call me [Max]’. He then asked how his group members wanted to be addressed, but received no explicit response, with other members relying on the header’s automated naming to identify their contributions. When questioned about this in an email interview, this student confessed feeling at a loss: ‘I am not sure if asking for direction was somehow offensive. I was particularly confused by the different forms of address and in the end tried to avoid using any name at all.’ This was a small symbolic effort, with confusion and loss of certainty as the outcome.

What's in a name?

The micro-analyses above have outlined the finely textured work naming choices accomplished in the online internationalised pedagogic interactions. They have also described the incommensurability of such nuances across linguistic and cultural communities, and the added complication of hybridised and temporary practices adopted to expedite relations at the global interface. In their detail, these troubles exemplify Featherstone's (1995, p.5) observation: 'the problems we encounter in everyday practice because culture fails to provide us with a single taken-for-granted recipe for action introduce difficulties, mistakes and complexity'. Given the prominence of naming in this electronic *mode*, mis-namings produced by default settings mattered enough for some students to protest about the treatment of their identities, and assert their right to culturally appropriate naming. Significantly, they invoked their local cultural practices, and insisted on their own terms. Featherstone makes the additional point that: 'We should not consider cultures in isolation, but endeavour to locate them in the relational matrix of their significant others' (1995, p. 112). Thus the symbolic micro-act of insisting on 'my' own terms should not just be understood as being about 'me' but, more pointedly, about the relation between 'me' and 'you' in these interactions, producing and asserting the difference understood to lie between. In this seemingly small issue of naming choices, the virtual ethnography thus captured and demonstrated the growing uncertainty and hermeneutical problems in the interaction amidst competing global alternatives.

Communication in such situations cannot be presumed to nest neatly within a shared *context of culture*, but rather needs to be understood as forming a temporary interface

between spaces and places, a brief intersection of cultural trajectories which will unsettle a lot of previous assumptions. Some students have come to this virtual moment while firmly anchored in past, traditional or local scripts. Others have come happy to adapt to the present tense moment and adjust how they name themselves, to further their interests in this shared moment. Still others are more prospective, and intend to be fully included in their future community of choice. There will be no singular or stable script for 'how to name' as people from different backgrounds and settings meet in, and flow through, these virtual spaces. Though no 'domestic' students offered to re-name themselves in order to lubricate the interaction, they were nevertheless affected by the proliferation of possibilities, and the relativisation of their own heretofore unexamined or default scripts. The ground had shifted under them.

Rather than seeing names as a minor administrative issue, this paper has demonstrated that they carry symbolic investments and pedagogical significance in the enterprise of online internationalized education. The local university that aspires to a global market is necessarily transformed and de-centred by that choice. Default settings and routine practices need revisiting and undoing to make sure that any new constituency can participate on their own terms, though these terms may well be unpredictable, unstable and complex. Patronising practices such as inviting international students to adopt an Anglo name to simplify interaction should not be endorsed, but on the other hand, international students who choose to temporarily take up an Anglo-named identity should not be deterred. As educational worlds become increasingly entangled, institutions and their agents can expect more such adjustments, unpredictability and challenges to the settled default conventions of their textual '*context of culture*'.

Endnotes:

(1) In Australia, the vast majority of international higher education students come from North East and South East Asia, in particular Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, China and Indonesia (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005).

(2) During the same semester, the lecturer was also involved in delivering this unit to a group enrolled through a partner institution in China. For the students located in China, blocks of face-to-face lectures had been negotiated in the contract, and these students did not participate in the online interaction. Thus the lecturer spatially moved between Australia and China while conducting the online interaction which was 'observed'. All student groups used the same English language curriculum materials and English was the language of instruction.

(3) Hereafter, SFL terms are reproduced in *italics* for clarity.

(4) I am grateful for the assistance of Jung-Hsiu Lin and the editor in the preparation of pseudonyms for the Chinese heritage names, and for explaining to me the intricate varieties in Chinese-heritage naming practices given diverse orthographic systems, dialects and national styles.

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