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Academic practice as explanatory framework: reconceptualising international student academic engagement and university teaching

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This paper joins growing interest in the concept of practice, and uses it to reconceptualise international student engagement with the demands of study at an Australian university. Practice foregrounds institutional structures and student agency and brings together psychologically- and socially-oriented perspectives on international student learning approaches. Utilising discourse theory, practice is defined as habitual and individual instances of socially-contextualised configurations of elements such as actions and interactions, roles and relations, identities, objects, values, and language. In the university context, academic practice highlights the institutionally-sanctioned ways of knowing, doing and being that constitute academic tasks. The concept is applied here to six international students' 'readings' of and strategic responses to academic work in a Master of Education course. It is argued that academic practice provides a comprehensive framework for explaining the interface between university academic requirements and international student learning, and the crucial role that teaching has in facilitating the experience.

Keywords: practice, international students, higher education, second language learning, learning strategies, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

In Australia, enrolments of international students have risen dramatically since the 1980s when Higher Education moved from aid to trade and became a saleable product. Students from overseas now comprise almost 21 percent of the total Australian tertiary student population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008a), over 2.9 million students were in enrolled in university courses outside their countries of citizenship in 2008, an increase of more than 50 percent since 2000. For students and sending countries alike, an overseas tertiary education is seen as broadening students' horizons and developing their knowledge of languages, cultures and business systems, as well as enhancing their labour market leverage in globalised economies and societies (OECD, 2008b). Student mobility has led to the greater presence of international students in university programs, and institutions are increasingly compelled to consider curriculum and teaching methods for a more

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culturally- and linguistically-diverse student population (OECD, 2008b). Around the world, research has been directed at the impact of internationalisation on academic programs and university operations.

In Australia, research since 1980s has focused on various areas including university teaching and learning (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Nichols, 2003), internationalised curriculum (e.g. Rizvi & Walsh, 1998), and social cohesion among domestic and international student cohorts (e.g. Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000). Successive waves of research studies have mirrored the perspectives and academic predilections of the times. Initial studies focused on students' learning approaches and emphasised educational, cultural and linguistic differences as obstacles to successful study in Australian programs (e.g. Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Samuelowicz, 1987). Later research reacted with empirical data to argue individual and cultural heterogeneity and student skill development to overcome difference and to adapt (e.g. Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Renshaw & Volet, 1995). More recently, studies have shifted the focus to the university and critiqued institutional mechanisms that aggregate power and privilege within certain types of knowledge and student identities (e.g. Bullen & Kenway, 2003; Ninnes, 1999). The research trends reflect similar trajectories in fields such as migrant English as a Second Language (ESL) research that have replaced and/or augmented diagnostic, individually-located psychological perspectives with culture-oriented social-psychological explanations, and more latterly sociological orientations that stress issues of differentiated 'power'.

Yet despite 30 years of research, there continue to be discussions and debates about the response to diverse educational, linguistic and cultural profiles within universities. Frequently asked questions in academic forums and popular media emphasise English, academic standards, teaching and academic support, and institutional responsibilities to students. Still little is known about the resources (linguistic, emotional, intellectual, technological, strategic) that students mobilise to manage their overseas study experience; how they synthesise new and unfamiliar teaching and learning approaches with previous educational experiences; and the roles and responsibilities of the university. It is argued here that greater explication of the demands of university study and student responses to them can provide a more detailed understanding of student engagement and make explicit places where institutions can assist. The concept of *academic practice* is proposed here as a means of foregrounding the multiplicity and intensity of the socially- and historically-contextualised elements of academic work in current Australian university courses and negotiation of them by international students.

The paper begins with a definition of *academic practice*. Next, it canvasses previous representations of international students' learning approaches from the 1980s until recently. It then presents findings from a study of six international students enrolled in a Master of Education course at an Australian university. It concludes with the implications of an *academic practice* perspective for understanding student learning and recognising teaching possibilities within the internationalised university.

Defining academic practice

The notion of *academic practice* as it is presented here can be seen as part of a growing body of theoretical work that is interested in practice as a means of moving beyond the dualisms of structure and action, and of emphasising, instead their interrelations (e.g. Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny, 2001). Multiple and at

times conflicting positions exist on practice but central to most is the nexus between person, activity and society. Key contributors to the conceptualisation of practice include Marx (1975), Wittgenstein (1953) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999)/Fairclough (2001, 2003). Marx (1975) emphasises *praxis* and regards thought and the world as always connected through human activity. For him, practice is both the result of the social and historical world and the ongoing production of it. Wittgenstein (1953) foregrounds language and sees language as both practical and social; social practices encompass meanings that give rise to linguistic terms that in turn, create meaning. He sees participating in a social practice as akin to playing a game; it involves not only knowing the rules but also being able to use them (Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow, 2003). This relation between the social and practice and its implication for learning, which is salient for this discussion, has been argued as follows:

> Practice is both our production of the world and the result of this process. It is always the product of specific historical conditions. The important contribution of this tradition is its insight that practice is a system of activities in which knowing is not separable from doing, and learning is social and not merely a cognitive activity. (Nicolini et al., 2003, p. 8)

The emphasis on social practice as the pivotal point of human life where social conditions and language mediate each other to create meanings is also a foundational principle in discourse analysis (e.g. Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003). This body of work concentrates on explicating the elements of social practice and their realisation in language and other semiotic resources. Its theoretical detail and methodological approach provide a useful framework for this discussion.

According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), a social practice is a relatively stable configuration of social elements that are undertaken by people acting together in particular times and places. Social elements include types of activity with particular purposes, actions and interactions; particular knowledges; particular objects, tools and materials; particular persons with histories, experiences, knowledges, beliefs and values, and their social relations; and particular semiotic resources including language. The elements are organised together in a dialectical but irreducible relationship which means that the elements internalise each other but are not reducible to each other (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Harvey, 1996). Their relationships to each other and their configuration are historically-, socially- and institutionally-contextualised. The dialectical relationship between the elements means that a change in one element may indicate a change in the social and institutional context. This can lead to a shifting and realigning of all the elements and a redefining of the practice.

This discussion adopts the principles of social practice defined above for the purpose of conceptualising academic work. *Academic practice* is seen as academically-contextualised practice. An example of an *academic practice* is lecturing, which is constituted by a particular constellation of elements. A technological innovation such as PowerPoint can lead to changes in the practice through the realignment of the constitutive elements. For example, the introduction of PowerPoint can mean the following: the restructuring of knowledge to comply with slide sizes and templates; the increased repertoire of semiotic resources such as animation features for representing and transmitting knowledge; the reorganisation of architectural space and the introduction of objects such as a data projector; the expanded role of the lecturer to include technology user; and the changing of literacy demands for students to accommodate multiple forms of visual, graphic and aural

information. In other words, the dialectical relationship between the elements constituting the practice of lecturing means that a change in one element leads to a shift in others and a redefining of the overall practice.

Another feature of the concept *practice* is that it has 'felicitous ambiguity' (Fairclough, 2001) which means that it can refer to an individual action and also a homogenised convention (Fairclough, 2003). In both cases, practice foregrounds action and social participants; it is 'done' by people. As van Leeuwen (2009) notes, practices are what people *do* (italics in original). Crucially they must always be seen as responses to the prevailing contextual conditions and mediated by the people's personal resources and values. In an academic setting, *academic practices* are those complex sets of elements that characterise academic work. Lecturing as described above is one such practice. Other examples that characterise seminar-style MEd courses are class discussions, self-generated critical essays, and oral presentations, sometimes in groups. Each of these is a response to the dominant values operating in the field of postgraduate Higher Education in Australia. They reflect and at the same time, reproduce the dominant values about knowledge, actions and interactions, and identities. Currently, an ascendant discourse is the valuing of co-constructed and collaborative learning. It is operationalised in classrooms as groupwork and realised through particular interaction patterns, oracy features, teacher/student roles, and beliefs about knowledge (Doherty, Kettle, May, Caukill, in press).

The definition of an *academic practice* as a dialectical configuration of diverse elements negates the view of academic work as a set of generic skills such as summarising, paraphrasing and referencing – the province of many English academic preparation (EAP) programs. Rather, an *academic practice* view regards a practice such as contributing a point in a class discussion as a complex undertaking, requiring multiple axes of engagement. As an orally-oriented practice, it requires a certain set of talk-related actions, performance modes, presentation styles, roles, resources, and management of time and space (van Leeuwen, 2009, pp. 148-150). It requires securing a turn in the talk and 'inhabiting' the floor, initiating the topic, elaborating on the topic and finishing the turn. It requires a performance mode that is seen as collegial and not aggressive. It is about knowing what it is relevant and being able to articulate it clearly and coherently, that is, 'voice' as physical and metaphysical. Additionally it is about managing time and space – adhering to the accepted time-limit and distributing eye contact. Impacting on all elements is language: the presentation of the ideas, the representation of self, and the 'right to speak' as a legitimate member of the class community (Cazden, 2001).

In the academic field, language has greater salience than other elements. In most practices associated with academic endeavour, written and/or spoken language feature prominently. This has implications for students operating in a language other than their home language, in which they have reduced proficiency (Horwitz, 2008). The dialectical relationship between the elements in an *academic practice* means that there is acuteness around language use which impacts on other elements; language has a 'determination effect' which may be stronger or weaker depending on the student's perception of their proficiency level and capacity to perform effectively in the second language.

Performance in a second language, particularly in front of native speakers, has been recognised as contributing to anxiety and reticence. Tsui (1996) maintains that second language users are anxious because they are performing in a language that they are still mastering. They feel vulnerable to negative evaluations and threats to self-concept because they are unable to adequately represent their knowledge and

personality with their limited linguistic resources. Moreover, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) argue that anxiety and reticence are heightened by apprehension about whether one can understand others and make oneself comprehensible to them. From the social perspectives of identity and agency, self-representation for ESL students is linked to the ways that they are 'heard' and given legitimacy in institutional settings (Miller, 2003). Students' access to particular activities is linked to their linguistic resources and their opportunities for participation provided by supportive and more powerful 'others' (Kettle, 2005). The concept of *academic practice* brings to the fore the complex interplay of elements such as linguistic resources, self-representation, interaction, values of participation and speaking rights, and 'supportive others' notably the lecturer and colleagues. It explains in detail the level of demand facing students, particularly second language-using international students.

The discussion thus far has focused on the internal relations between elements of a practice. However, also crucial to the concept of *academic practice* are external conditions that are in a reflexive relation with an *academic practice*, that is, they generate and shape academic practices and in turn, are constituted by them (Fairclough, 2009). In a Higher Education context, external conditions are the international, national and institutional discourses and their associated political, financial, educational, cultural, social and linguistic agendas that impact on universities. Currently in the Australian context these include the convergence of discourses of marketisation and internationalisation (Marginson, 2006); the contraction of government funding; the calls for standardisation and accountability; valued forms of knowledge and knowledge creation centring on synthesis, critical inquiry and collaborative learning; the prominence of English (Smolicz, 1995); and ongoing responsibilities for nation-building and national self-reflection (Sidhu, 2002). *Academic practices* are the point at which these contextual discourses materialise – in course content and assessment requirements; in student profiles and class cohorts; and in classroom organisation and teaching approaches. Equally, it is within these practices that international students encounter the prevailing discourses and contribute to a reconfiguring of them.

Academic practice has been theorised above and I turn now to theories of uptake, enactment, learning and teaching. According to Fairclough (2003), practices take hold gradually – from initial 'imaginings' of what a practice might or should be, to enactment when the imaginary becomes real. A person may be able to talk about the elements of a practice and even use them but may remain self-consciously distanced from them. This is rhetorical deployment and can occur prior to enactment (Fairclough, 2003). Inculcation is when the person effectively 'owns' a practice and is able to act, think, talk and see themselves in terms of it.

Fairclough's theory is not a learning theory and therefore does not attempt to explain what he calls the 'mysteries' of the process by which 'self-conscious rhetorical deployment becomes "ownership" ' (2003, p. 208). Suffice that he proposes a notion of Members' Resources (MR) (Fairclough, 2001) that links a person's internal, 'in the head' resources with the external conditions: 'People internalise what is socially produced and made available to them and use this internalised MR to engage in social practice' (p. 20). Learning theorists can extend this understanding. Barton and Hamilton (2000) argue that learning and the acquisition of new and changing practices is achieved through informal processes of sense-making as well as formal education and training. Making sense of new practices is a crucial aspect of learning and involves, in part, the internalisation of social processes through learning strategies and situated understandings (Barton &

Hamilton, 2000). Learning strategies include metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies that enable self-regulation and independence, and more socially and politically-oriented strategies that promote participation in and membership of a particular community (Oxford, 2003).

Crucial to the process of internalisation and learning in academic contexts is the teacher. Researchers argue that academic proficiency is enhanced by teacher scaffolding of learning and direct instruction, explication and modelling of significant meanings, linguistic features and strategies (Cummins & Man, 2007). Additionally, teachers have a crucial role to play in providing participatory opportunities for students to engage with content and become legitimate members of the learning community (Cazden, 2001). Through repeated opportunities and facilitation, enactment is increasingly habitualised and competency established (Gee, 2002).

The discussion thus far has used *academic practice* to foreground individual instances of academic work as complex configurations of diverse elements in dialectical relation to each other. It then draws on social and teaching and learning theories to explain how students might engage with these multiple demands that define postgraduate study. I now utilise this theorisation to explain six international students' accounts of undertaking a Master of Education (MEd) course at an Australian university.

The study

The data presented here was generated in a case study of the six students' international experience. The students were from Argentina, China, Mozambique, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam; four were in their first semester and two in their second. English was the first language of only one student (Singapore); for the others, it was their second or in some cases, third language. The lecturer on the course was a senior academic with a reputation for excellence in teaching. The data for this paper is from student interviews at the beginning and end of the course. Interview questions related to the course content, assessment, teaching, life as an international student, and study skills.

Analysis was conducted using the linguistically-oriented method of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001, 2003). The theorisation of the method has been explained above; in terms of analysis, the dialectical relations between language and other elements in a social practice means that language choices instantiate the meanings in the social event and context that produced the language. In other words, the linguistic relations of socially-contextualised language, or text, are not arbitrary but rather realise the social relations of the context. It follows that analysis of the linguistic features of a text can highlight key social meanings, notably valued representations of the world, valued actions, interactions and relations, and valued identities (Fairclough, 2003). Analysis requires description of the linguistic features; interpretation; and explanation of the social conditions that produced the interaction and in turn, the text (Fairclough, 2001).

Initial analysis of the student interviews identified a clustering of lexical items around themes including the difficulties of extended writing, English, managing class participation, the lecturer's explicit teaching of academic reading and writing, the lecturer's support of international students, and personal goals and aspirations. Temporal references indicated changes in practices as knowledges, skills and identities shifted over time and with the assistance of personal and lecturer-facilitated

strategies. Attributes with negative values showed levels of emotional difficulty and marginalisation but in some cases, with time-mediated shifts to positive self-representation. Metaphors conceptualised the intricacy and unfamiliarity of academic work. For all of the students, course practices were multiplex, requiring the interplay of multiple elements. For some, English had an overwhelming and determining effect. In the following section I present the analysis, highlighting the students' meanings and responses to valued knowledge, actions/interactions/relations and identities in the course.

Valued knowledge and ways of representing the world

The students consistently noted an emphasis on critical thinking, flexibility of assignment topics, the importance of literature, and Western-oriented knowledge. For the student from China, critical thinking was one of the defining features of the course and indeed, Australian study; she regarded Australian education as facilitating good thinkers, whereas education in China emphasised good students. She linked critical thinking to class participation and the need for a *voice* and *to be her true self: The course helps you to be more critical because when I participate in the discussion in class, I begin to think*. Like a number of other students, she used the metaphor of 'deeper' to conceptualise critical thinking and attributed her increasing capacity to critically analyse the literature in part to modelling by the lecturer: *When I'm reading, I think why does the author have this opinion and what's my response to this. Actually the lecturer's helping us to develop this habit – asking questions and questioning the author*.

Metaphor was a common feature in the students' accounts as they appropriated concepts from other domains to explain their new experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For the student from Argentina, sourcing references for literature reviews was an 'octopus', where one reference led to another. Constructing a critical review of the literature was 'making a salad', with different authors' positions reconstituted into a new and personally-relevant argument: *When you put different ingredients on all the salad, you're making a new thing. So I realise I'm using other people's voices to make a new voice which is what I want to say*. He used the music metaphor of 'jazz' to highlight the differences between approaches to learning in his MBA program in Argentina and the MEd course in Australia. Jazz foregrounded the improvised and self-generated nature of assignment topics, albeit constrained within academic generic conventions: *The lecturer sets the main topic but you can play the way you like. You have a main theme but you can jazz around*. He noted key differences between his two Master's programs: *The way I study here is really different to the way I study in Argentina. Here I've learned how to think and research and how to look for things, and I've learned how to learn, rather than learning about the content*. The Australian course demanded a more independent approach that was driven by student ideas, interests, and skills and encouragement from the lecturer.

While the Argentinean student relished the autonomy, the student from Vietnam struggled with what he perceived as a lack of structure: *There's the problem that I need more conference time with the lecturer, especially on the assignment topic, to narrow it down to a workable, do-able load*. The Chinese student similarly noted a need to grasp the main content yourself and conceded to being lost at the beginning. With time and the use of strategies such as reading a broad literature, however, she identified a change in herself: *I think I got used to that kind of method*.

The Chinese student noted a clear Western focus in the course: *The content is mainly focus on developed countries, globalisation in western countries*. The contradiction was also noted by the Mozambican student who noted the disjuncture between the emphasis on literature-based arguments and the lack of available materials on her country. She also noted the paradox in the demand for critical thinking and the strictness around academic conventions: *It's like contrasting the encouragement that we are being given that we have to think critically and analytically, and at the same time there is a very established way of doing things*.

The students' accounts of valued knowledges as they are presented here show traces of other elements including references to home-based educational practices; activity skills such as sourcing and synthesising information; identity work – voice and critique; and the 'supportive other' in the lecturer. Indeed the lecturer's explicit teaching was noted by all students and is encapsulated in the words of the Chinese student: *One of her unique methods is she's teaching you something like techniques of reading or writing. That's good especially for those Asian or international students who are not quite used to this kind of writing style. She's helping us gradually to adapt to this kind of writing*. Engaging with course-contextualised knowledge appeared to be a nuanced affair: it involved a commitment to 'adapting' but did not preclude metacritical evaluations of the inherent Western focus and the contradictions between critique and convention.

Valued actions, interactions and relations

Dominant actions and interactions identified by the students were lecturer/student and student/student interactions in class, and class and group discussions. The Thai student was particularly troubled by class participation: *In Thailand, there's no problem if a student just sits and listen but here I don't have any participation in class just like I am nobody. It's very hard and uncomfortable*. However he acknowledged that after six weeks in the course, he had experienced a change: *Right now I think I'm better. I know more what (the other students) want to express and what still a problem for me and how to express my ideas*. The Chinese student indicated a similar transition. Resonating the literature on second language performance anxiety with additional concerns about genres of talk, the Thai student added: *I worry about I don't understand some points, so my English, it is like how to do in class; if I say something that's irrelevant, it's nonsense*.

He acknowledged that his anxieties were reduced by the lecturer's technique of 'naming' students*: I think (the lecturer) conducts the classes very good because I found she try to motivate students to participate in lessons just like she names somebody student to say something.* Her technique was a form of cued elicitation (Mercer, 1995) in which the student was nominated by name and invited to contribute to the discussion, with scaffolded support if necessary. Such techniques draw students into the class dynamic, particularly ESL students who might otherwise be 'lost' in the 'noise' of the class (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Naming was also noted by the Chinese student who enjoyed the challenge despite discomfort about questions she couldn't answer.

Interaction with the lecturer and colleagues was significant for other students, although for different reasons. For the student from Singapore, contributing to class discussions led to learning, despite the performance anxiety: *Not ever is English a problem but when I speak up in class, I get clammy palms and my heart beats really*

fast because I'm putting myself out on the line and putting up new ideas that are new even to me and just totally vulnerable to criticism and to attacks. Her concerns were not English but the unfamiliar theories and concepts of the field. A powerful class session for her was one on poststructuralism when the lecturer used the interaction to scaffold understandings of power and resistance: *In sessions like these where the interactions with the lecturer and with my classmates – the formula was all correct; people were really contributing and the learning was really focused*. The Argentinean student acknowledged the lecturer's scaffolded interactive teaching through the metaphor of 'conductor': *It's like she knows who to ask at the right time*.

The students' accounts prioritise interaction as the medium by which participation in class and group discussions is conducted. Intricately associated are the elements of knowledge and the relevance of ideas, and the genres of classroom talk – the 'how to' of dialogic university classrooms. Additionally, the pressure of public performance in classroom interaction impacts on bodies and sets off corporeal responses such as clammy palms; for students concerned about English, the responses are more acute. Threats to self-concept – *I am nobody* – are evident. Again the lecturer's teaching approach was acknowledged as a significant element in the facilitation and appropriation of practice.

Identities

The students' accounts contained high levels of reference to self-monitoring, self-management and personal change. For the Thai student, representing himself as nobody was directly related to his second language performance and concerns about a loss of legitimacy within the class. Like the Chinese student, he represented himself as strange on arrival: *In the first semester I am strange. I don't know much about educational system here, how to study Master's degree and Australia foreign country – different language, different culture. So I learned and get more familiar. I should adapt myself into the new environment and if I still afraid, I can't get anything from here, so right now I have to start*. For the Chinese student, growing confidence in her English proficiency linked to changes in thinking: *I begin to think in a slightly Australian way*.

The students with less concerns about English indexed their self-representations to new ideas and the developing control of elements such as learning strategies and academic skills and a growing sense of competence and confidence. Change was manifestly attributed to time. The lecturer's teaching approach was also significant. For the Singaporean student, the course led to a profound shift in worldview: *I remember one day after our first assignment telling the lecturer that I had actually moved onto the next level of thinking and the way I look at the world will never be in the same pattern again*. She listed the elements contributing to this learning as: *You need the setting, the content to stimulate the dialogue and then the questioner – the person that can really probe you with particular questions to really set you thinking and from then on really grow, I mean mentally*.

For others the experience was more context-bounded: the student from Mozambique acknowledged that she had not changed markedly, despite new learning: *I learn to behave differently but I have my way of behaving; when I go back, I'll go back to it again*. The Vietnamese student identified himself as a self-starter and was initially frustrated by what he perceived as the lack of explicitness in assessment

topics. By the end of the course, however, he indicated a better understanding of task requirements and how to meet them.

Valued identities are noted throughout the students' accounts from being a self-manager of one's own learning, to someone who is a class performer, to a competent user of English. These identities are dialectically networked to other elements, as discussed above. Implicated also is a consciousness about one's experience and a monitoring and evaluation of change and the uptake of class practices.

Discussion

The analysis presents the valued ways of knowing, doing and being in an Australian MEd course as identified by six international students. The representations and meanings constructed by the students indicate an intricate configuration of elements: valued knowledges are heavily indexed to particular genres and ways of reading and writing, the conventions of written English, and identity-related critical positions; valued ways of interacting are indexed to normatively-prescribed 'relevant' knowledges, oral English, genres of classroom talk, and identity; valued identities hinge on autonomy and self-managed learning, critically-filtrated reading and writing, oral participation, and personal change. Together they present a picture of an Australian postgraduate course that reflects discourses prioritising autonomy, critique, Western-oriented knowledge, oracy, and collaborative and co-constructed learning.

For the students, their efforts at negotiating these crucial aspects of the course are characterised by varying levels of recognition and enactment, enabled by strategies often conceptualised as metaphor. Metaphor is, after all, the use of concepts from existing domains to explain new and unfamiliar experiences. Many of the students signalled time as mediating the gradual process of moving from unfamiliarity to increased automaticity of practice. One learning strategy evident in the students' accounts was a metacognitive referencing of existing 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzalez, 1992) against the new academic expectations and task demands. Also acknowledged as promoting learning was the lecturer's teaching approach: her explicit teaching of academic genres; modelling critique; activation of student knowledge through interaction; nomination and management of student participation; overt support of international students; and scaffolded learning.

The lecturer's explicit teaching of reading and writing practices and critique resonate with points by educational researchers that teachers have a responsibility to teach the rules of academic discourse to students from minority groups who might not otherwise have access to them (e.g. Boughey, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Boughey (2002) argues that minority students' academic difficulties are often blamed on their language issues. This position pathologises the student and ignores teaching practice. It allows the institution to abrogate its responsibility to teach the valued discourses and practices of power. In the Australian research literature, English language and academic issues are often conflated. Indeed a number of authors (Ballard, 1987; Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987) have noted that if Asian students are having problems with their studies, both they and their lecturers assume that the fault lies with the students' language deficiencies. The resilience of this view was evident in a 2002 report for the Australian State Government of Victoria (Auditor-General, 2002) that found 66

percent of academics surveyed from three major universities attributed difficulties in assessing international students' written work to under-developed English skills.

The research presented here underlines the benefits of teaching. This was teaching for learning, not just content transmission. The teaching made explicit institutionally-contextualised demands and provided students with opportunities to practise new and unfamiliar ways with words in an environment of support. The students identified that it afforded them a physical 'voice' as well as the opportunity to 'voice' ideas: it provided a protective contact zone within which to 'taste' and try to make their own the words that 'sound foreign in the mouth' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). The oral articulation of the words and their new 'ways to mean' (p. 346) was consistently acknowledged as being conducive to thinking and learning. For its part, the lecturer's explicit teaching expedited the recognition and enactment of course practices. It can be argued that the teaching approach, along with the students' agentive strategy use and personal resources contributed to the 'conditions of possibility' (Foucault, 1984) for learning. The implication is that teaching for learning in a Higher Education context can significantly assist the academic and social induction of international students into a community of practice. It makes university teaching an issue and challenges the view that developing academic competence is primarily linked to English proficiency and the sole responsibility of the student.

The students' commitment to succeeding in the course is not to suggest that they adhered blindly to the philosophy of 'west is best' or that they were all successful. They were mindful of the context-boundedness of course practices and their international education generally. All indicated personal and professional investment (Norton Peirce, 1995) in the course and each engaged their available resources to achieve this end. There was the sense that the new set of practices contributed to but did not replace their existing repertoires of practice. Most of the students were highly successful in the course: four (from Singapore, Argentina, China and Vietnam) received grades of High Distinction (7); one (from Mozambique) received a Pass (4); and one (from Thailand) failed. The Thai student's failure is best explained by the multiplicity of demands inherent in course practices: the nexus of demands exceeded his existing repertoire. He resisted the lecturer's advice to resubmit a failed assignment and chose instead to repeat the course successfully the following year.

Conclusion

This paper utilised the concept of *academic practice* to foreground the complex configurations of elements involved in academic tasks and international students' responses to them. Practice is currently of interest to researchers wanting to bring together social structure and individual agency. An academically-contextualised view of practice foregrounds the intersection of institutionally-produced academic, social, cultural, linguistic and educational conditions and international students' agency, that is, their interpretations and strategic responses as they manifest as course practices. Crucially it throws into stark relief the role of 'supportive others' within the nexus, in this case the lecturer.

The analysis drew on research interviews with postgraduate international students to highlight the complexity and interconnectedness of elements impacting on students' enactment of valued course knowledges, actions/interactions/relations, and identities. It showed the benefits of university teaching that acknowledged

responsibility for international students' academic transitioning and learning. The concept of *academic practice* extends previous research literature on international student learning approaches to foreground the nexus between institutionally-contextualised academic demands and students' strategic negotiation of the demands. Of note for universities is the facilitative potential of teaching. It is hoped that this explanatory framework will contribute to more inclusive and conceptually-enriched teaching and learning outcomes for university lecturers and international students alike.

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