

# ANCHORING OUR PRACTICE: perspectives, partnerships, projections



Cath Fraser • Lin Ayo • EDITORS

The Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors  
Aotearoa/New Zealand

**ATLAANZ**

VOLUME 2

**Anchoring our Practice:  
perspectives, partnerships, projections**

*Proceedings of the 2006 Annual International Conference of the  
Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa/New  
Zealand (ATLAANZ)*

*21 - 23 November, Tauranga, New Zealand*

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# Anchoring our Practice

ISBN: 978-0-9582889-0-3

Published 2007 by the *Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa/New Zealand* Inc, ATLAANZ

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Page layout and design      Berni Cooper, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic  
Printed by                      Kale Print and Design Limited, Tauranga, New Zealand

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## Preface and acknowledgements

In 2006, Gabrielle Grigg and Carol Bond oversaw the development and production of the very first volume of refereed proceedings from an ATLAANZ conference. This was launched at the 2007 conference held in Tauranga, and unanimously endorsed by all present as a vital professional initiative for showcasing the work of learning advisors. The editors of this second volume acknowledge the debt owed by our association to these pioneers, and to the efforts and enthusiasm of several long-serving members of the Executive, led by Emanuel, who have consistently advocated the need for such a publication. We sincerely hope that this new collection will continue the high standards so clearly established.

All the articles accepted for this publication have undergone a double blind refereeing process, using at least two referees. We are extremely grateful for the expertise of these referees and the support and assistance they have offered to authors, for some of whom this was a completely new experience. The quality of these reviews has made a significant contribution to the calibre of the articles, and we gratefully acknowledge the following referees:

Susan Carter	Carol Hunter	Mary Silvester
Susan Crozier	Emmanuel Manalo	Lois Wilkinson
Ruth Gorinski	Martin McMorro	Ema Wolfgramm–Foliaki
Heather Hamerton	Barbara Morris	
Jerry Hoffman	Ruth Smith	

We would also like to thank the authors who submitted their papers for review, and then worked to effect the revisions and incorporate the suggestions of the reviewers. On some occasions this took a number of drafts, and we appreciate their commitment to achieving a successful outcome and supporting this publication.

Finally, we would like to thank our fellow members of the Kahurangi Student Services team (formerly the Education Development Centre) at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic for their assistance hosting the conference, without which this book could not have happened!

Cath Fraser, Lin Ayo and Berni Cooper  
Kahurangi Student Services, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic

## Foreword

I am often asked by acquaintances what my job is at the Southern Institute of Technology. With some trepidation, I reply that I am a Learning Advisor. The next question is usually, “What do you do?” I smile, gather my thoughts, then spend the next ten minutes explaining what the role encompasses. Often the individual who posed the original question is sorry they ever asked.

How do we define ourselves as Learning Advisors? One definition was ably put forth by Emmanuel Manalo in the 2006 proceedings when he noted in the foreword that “the development of student skills and capabilities is what Learning Advisors do” (p. iv).

Defining ourselves takes on an interesting perspective when we consider who employs us as Learning Advisors. Our employers can include universities, polytechnics, institutes of technology, private training providers and other related tertiary educational organisations. There is such a huge range of institutions that differ in size, scope and philosophy. Then again there is the range of students with whom we work. As tertiary institutions have grown, so has the diversity of the student population with whom Learning Advisors work. Considering this diverse range of roles, institutions and students, it is no wonder that it is often hard to define who we are and what we do. This diversity of contexts can also complicate how we in the profession develop as a community.

However, one very important common bond within the profession is the research that we are engaged in and the writing we do for journals such as this one. Casazza and Silverman (1996) discuss research as it relates to the learning advising field. They note:

As we reflect on our current practices and articulate the principles and theories that guide them, it becomes clear that we need to strengthen the research component of our field. Our experiences are significant, and in order to ensure they become part of the growing body of literature dedicated to learning assistance and developmental education, we need to validate them formally (p.213).

Research has been one of the cornerstones of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ). Research by Learning Advisors has underpinned previous ATLAANZ conferences for well over a decade. It has been a very important step in our growth as a profession that we now have a refereed journal; this helps ensure that our research becomes “part of the growing body of literature.”

To all the contributors of this journal, thank you for the effort you have made in making this second edition possible. To all those who helped with the refereeing, this journal would not have been possible without your efforts. And most of all, thanks to

Cath Fraser, Lin Ayo, Berni Cooper, and their team at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic for all their hard work.

The next time someone asks me what my job as a Learning Advisor encompasses, I am not sure I will be able to give them any more of a specific answer. However, based on the contents of this journal, it will surely be a better informed one.

Jerry Hoffman  
ATLAANZ Executive  
October 2007

## References

Casazza, M. and Silverman, S. (1996). *Learning Assistance and Developmental Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Manalo, E. (2006). Foreword. In G. Grigg & C. Bond (Eds.) *Supporting Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Proceedings of the 2005 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa/New Zealand* (pp iv-v). Auckland: ATLAANZ.



## Editors' introduction

The 2006 ATLAANZ Conference theme *Anchoring Our Practice* was inspired by Mauao, the mountain anchored by the dawn, and submissions were invited which explored the three strands emerging from that narrative: perspectives, partnerships and projections. As well as the individual writers' perceived themes, other trends have emerged which reflect the challenges of the current educational climate, the complex role of the learning advisor, and the increasing sense of professional location within the sector. From post graduate study to ESOL, 'remedial' and developmental, the role for our profession is both complex and multi-layered, working at every level of educational institutions. On occasion the role may be unrecognised and the remedying of this is discussed by several writers in positive and affirmative strategies.

### *Perspectives:*

Susan Crozier leads the volume in exploring the institutional perspective. She notes that while one useful model is to embed skills within the curriculum, there also needs to be recognition that many of the skills are generic. Her concern is that a change of focus is required to recognise the importance of 'developmental' education and the need to contextualise interdisciplinary academic skills.

Jerry Hoffman advocates for a better understanding of the students' perspective to aid adjustment to tertiary anxiety and stress. He believes that it is critical learning advisors work from the understanding that personal and academic concerns go together, and that relationships must be developed.

Higher education is a global growth business, with doctoral programmes moving to increase their numbers particularly in Europe. Susan Carter identifies the increasing homogeneity in international qualifications and the inevitable influence here, with learning advisors facing an increasing need for generic skills and teaching on relevant subjects within discipline areas.

Mary Silvester's study of nursing students both from an EFL and ESL perspective highlights the difficulties that can arise from a lack of experience with the colloquial use of language. An extensive vocabulary assists in student achievement and Silvester describes different models of operation which can contribute significantly to improving practice.

Catherine Mitchell asks another question central to our practice - what really underpins our work? Mitchell, as a new learning advisor, identifies herself as taking on at least 10 roles per session, and recognises that we intuitively shape our approach to individual students, as a prescriptive approach is almost impossible. In response, she advocates a range of induction approaches.

Victoria Trembath extends Mitchell's multiple role concept and encourages us to look more deeply at our practice. She contends that both critical and supportive roles are necessary and that they are not analogous but complementary; as professionals we

need to recognise the roles in order to balance them. In this it is imperative that the field of knowledge is supported and developed by practitioners and institutions.

*Partnerships:*

The bicultural nature of Aotearoa/New Zealand informs educational models for enhancing the success of all partners, particularly Maori. Simon Lambert identifies the need to increase the numbers of Maori in post-graduate study through appropriate partnerships and demonstrates this in his work which effectively links rural Maori communities with research and higher study. For learning advisors, it emphasises yet again that practice must be needs-specific to individuals and groups.

*Projections:*

Learning advisors help to promote significant learning, producing change in the learner. Emmanuel Manalo argues that both institution and learning centre must enable students to develop appropriate skills. He explores several local and national examples, and reflects on how improved measurement and documentation will provide more accurate evidence for the central nature of learning development within academic institutions.

An international overview of the profession from Annie Bartlett identifies that while practitioners in the area of learning development are generally clear about the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of the profession, others in the institution may not be, a concern voiced by several writers in this volume. Considerable complexity also surrounds the ‘how’ of our practice, particularly for newcomers. She believes that it is time to explore the broader theoretical underpinnings of our work, and suggests avenues, as well as strategies for evaluating progress.

A definitional ambiguity surrounds the characteristics associated with learning difficulties. Barbara Morris contends among our student body, a percentage of international and ESOL students will have potentially unidentified learning difficulties, presenting learning advisors with a significant issue.

Providing appropriate feedback which is specific, timely and developmental in nature is assisted by new technology and software programmes such as Martin Freney and Denise Wood’s CAFAS programme. From a learning advisor’s perspective, collaboration with academic staff on curriculum and teaching assessments is enhanced, with an increased ability to identify suitable strategies for achieving assessment outcomes.

Throughout the volume, authors reiterate the necessity of developing as a professional community which merits widespread national recognition. Learning advisors need to be in the forefront, identifying the ongoing challenges of tertiary learning for students, contributing overtly to the strategic direction of their institutions, and advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning. We hope that this publication will assist in these endeavours.

## **Perspectives**

# **“Out damned spot”: Removing the taint of the remedial from learning development**

Susan Crozier  
Unitec  
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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the problems associated with the view of learning centre work as remedial and reflects on the complexities of seeking to overcome such a view. To see learning centre work as exclusively remedial assumes that the majority of students don't face any difficulties with their learning, when in fact most students wrestle with the challenges of learning to some degree. A number of learning centres in Australia and New Zealand have sought to promote a mainstream view of learning development that emphasises both the ways in which it is integral to tertiary study and the importance of improving academic skills and understandings at every level. In this paper the problems associated with the notion of remediation are examined and some of the ways that learning centres are now presenting themselves are analysed.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the problems associated with the view of learning centre work as remedial and reflects on the complexities of seeking to overcome such a view. In naming this paper “out damned spot” I am indebted to some recent work by Stirling and Percy (2005) in which they invoke the notion of remediation as a taint or stain, and summon Lady Macbeth as a figurative representation of the struggle learning advisors have to wash their hands of that stain. Of course, in Lady Macbeth we have a woman who is tortured by guilt over her involvement with a number of murders so, on closer examination, the analogy hardly stands up: learning advisors are notoriously kind and helpful types who are scarcely likely to be involved in any such activities!

What does stand up about the analogy, however, is the fact that remediation is an idea that is terribly difficult to get rid of in the context of institutional understandings of tertiary learning development. Commenting on this, Zeegers (2004) contends that learning centres “are mostly viewed as having a remedial role and existing in the main for the benefit of a minority of students, these being students at risk, those who need extra tutoring in English language, or those who require academic ‘counselling’” (p. 32). As the self-conscious identity of learning development practice has grown, efforts have been made to assert a broader understanding of learning centre work beyond the remedial. Yet, Stirling and Percy (2005) describe the learning advisor as haunted by “the persistent view of our work as remedial” and observe that every time

the label seems to have been shaken it “reemerges with a vengeance” (p. 179). Their point is that in the institutional imagination there is a series of connections that link deficits in student abilities with a perceived need to offer remedial education and an understanding that this work is properly the province of learning or academic skills centres.

At my own institution the learning centre is frequently discussed as a ‘support’ service, which helps students who have problems with their studies, although we officially removed the word support from our name some years ago. The implicit assumption behind the construction of the learning centre as a support service is that only a minority of students have problems with their learning, when in fact most students wrestle with the challenges of learning to some degree. After all, if learning at tertiary level were easy it would hardly be worth doing. However, there are reasons why the notion of the problem student persists in the institutional imagination with such tenacity: Stirling and Percy (2005) argue that locating deficits within students “deflects attention away from university recruiting policies and practices” (p. 180). By making such remedial work the province of learning centres, the flaws and failings of tertiary education are partially quarantined from the academic disciplines themselves. This, however, as a number of authors have noted, has consequences for the status of the learning development profession itself, which is engaged in a long standing struggle to emerge from the margins of academic life (Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2004; Zeegers, 2004). The conceptual link between problem students, remedial education and learning centres, signalled by Stirling and Percy’s work, merits more detailed consideration.

## **How the notion of remedial instruction positions students**

The student who is deemed to be in need of learning support is pathologised by the idea that this support is remedial, rather than integral to an effective engagement with learning in higher education. A consideration of some definitions is revealing of the conceptual associations that circulate around the work that learning centres do and the students who access learning centre services. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the term remedial in the following way:

Designating or pertaining to special classes, teaching methods, etc., in basic educational skills to help school children who have not achieved the proficiency necessary for them to be able to learn other subjects with their contemporaries (Oxford English Dictionary, 2006).

This definition tells us much about the problem with the remedial label in the context of tertiary learning development. To begin with, it is associated with children and it implies therapeutic interventions that figure the student who accesses learning services as inadequate in some way. To the degree that the remedial is an infantilising concept, as the definition suggests, it may well be the case that in the institutional imagination those in need of remedial help at tertiary level can be seen as less competent as adults.

There are also socio-cultural judgements behind the setting apart of learning centre work as remedial. Another much used term for the student deemed in need of remedial instruction is 'at-risk' (Wingate, 2006, p. 457; see also Zeegers, 2004, p. 28), which has overtones of psycho-social and behavioural problems and would thus seem to be an extremely unfortunate term to attach to learners. The fact that those termed 'non-traditional' students (mature students, students from minority cultural groups, those with English as an additional language, as well as those from less affluent social groups) have been the targets of learning centre work adds to the conceptual weight that learning centres' focus is to work with those who are somehow outsiders to mainstream education. The marginalising effect of such conceptualisations is evident in Northedge's (2003) description of the way in which those in need of remedial help are viewed as "'charity' cases". He writes that tertiary institutions provide a special "paupers' wing" added on to "the stately home of elite education" and continue to see "'proper' students" as those who are not in need of the same kind of assistance (p. 17).

The persistence of the remedial label, and the associated presumption of incompetence or otherness on the part of service users, has damaging effects in terms of access to learning services. If it is imagined that there are two groups of students, those who need remedial help and those who don't, it is entirely understandable that students would like to see themselves as belonging to the latter group. For this reason it is essential to address the ways in which services are framed and promoted within the institution. Attewell, Lavin, Domina and Levey (2006) note that the term 'developmental' is preferred over the term 'remedial' by many educators. In a discussion of the term 'developmental education', Boylan, Bonham and White (1999) argue that it "reflects an emphasis on the holistic development of the individual student and is rooted in developmental psychology" (p. 87). The idea behind developmental education is that instructional activities are targeted, specific to the learner and based on a comprehensive assessment. While remedial courses are intended as catch-up courses to get students to an entry level, development instruction is about developing a wide range of learner competencies across the tertiary setting (Boylan et al., 1999).

Even the notion of developmental education is problematic, however, because it contains the remedial within it. As Boylan et al. (1999) put it "developmental education is the whole of which remediation on the one end and learning assistance on the other end are both a part" (p.88). Nevertheless, it seems possible to deploy 'developmental education' in conceptually different ways to 'remedial education.' Developmental education implies a process in time that any learner might be involved in, as opposed to the special case of those needing remedial instruction in order that they might be able to cope in higher education. Zeegers (2004) positions learning development as utterly central to the competencies and qualities that higher education should develop in students. He writes that:

the principal role of student academic support is developmental, that is, the development of the key skills of literacy and numeracy, critical analysis and

professional communication, which are the cornerstones of higher education, as well as for successful life-long learning (p.27).

Furthermore, a developmental, rather than remedial, view of the services learning centres provide is informed by an understanding that a mass education system cannot trust that the cream will rise and allow the rest to fall by the way (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004). Instead, approaches to teaching and learning have to be responsive to the needs of a globalised and mass education system without pathologising learners (Northedge, 2003).

## **Remediation and institutional understandings of teaching and learning**

Another problem with charging learning centres with the particular responsibility for working with struggling students is the way that it tends to leave institutional practices and even educational policies unexamined. Such practices include, for example, loose interpretation of admission criteria so that ill-prepared students are allowed to enrol on courses that they cannot succeed in. Behind this, of course, is a funding policy that links dollars to numbers enrolled, so that departments are driven to stretch their own admission criteria in ways that produce the very effects they supposedly want to avoid.

Policy aside, at the more local level of instruction, the notion that those who do not automatically succeed are in need of special, remedial help may enable the refusal, or inability, of discipline teaching staff to improve or amend their teaching practices in order to assist students to develop as learners within their subjects. It would appear that the recognition that it is unacceptable to corral the acquisition of the academic literacies that all students need to acquire into the remedial pen has been relatively slow to dawn. Ideally, discipline staff should take up responsibility for the identification and transmission of academic literacies so that students are inducted into the disciplines through the naming of, and training in, the often tacit activities that each discipline involves. This would facilitate the process of students achieving membership of the discourse community that shares exchanges of, and discussion around, specialist knowledge.

In this sense, developing the skills and understandings that one needs to succeed in tertiary education should be integral to one's course of study, rather than an extra, remedial dimension. This is the argument that Wingate (2006) asserts and although the sentiment is laudable, the reality is that the teaching offered by some academics doesn't always live up to the ideal. Students often struggle because of the lack of such effective teaching, so they are forced to deal with problems that do not entirely reflect a deficit in their skills or understandings, but are a function of poor academic acculturation within the disciplines. At least some of the work that learning centres perform involves dealing with learning problems that originate in failings within discipline teaching.

However, it would appear that the very fact of existing outside of the disciplines is what contributes to learning centres' marginal status. Wingate (2006) sees stand alone study skills instruction, in which students are sent outside of the discipline for help, as remedial (as well as unhelpful). Indeed, the fact of being outside of the discipline appears to be the definition of 'remedial' that she is working with. She argues that the acquisition of disciplinary understandings and practices should not be a 'bolt-on' phenomenon, but should be integral to teaching in the disciplines (Wingate, 2006). As I have already signalled, this is a worthy ambition, although in Wingate's case it is based on a poor understanding of the quality of generic instruction offered by experienced learning development practitioners. The best forms of such instruction will be linked to a context, even a hypothetical one, or involve activities that allow students to provide the context by working with examples from their own studies.

The difficulty, however, of Wingate's requirement that all study skills and learning development be delivered within the disciplines is that it doesn't allow for a variability in the capacity of discipline staff to engage in the kind of metacognitive reflection that would make them good at passing on such understanding. In the interests of providing students with an equitable encounter with the disciplines, the best kinds of instruction offered by learning centres should provide students with some conceptual and practical tools to tackle the difficult project of mastering disciplinary practices and conventions.

### **The concept of remediation and the status of learning centres**

Thus far it has been argued that a view of learning development as remedial belittles and pathologises the students who would use our services and it leaves both teaching and institutional practices unexamined and unchanged. It is, of course, true that there are students in tertiary education today who do need some substantial help to be able to survive in their studies. In this sense, as was noted above, developmental education may often have a remedial component within it. However, there are problems for learning centres in being seen as the providers of remedial instruction. Most discipline staff and most students do not understand the niceties of the distinction between remedial and developmental education, so that learning centres can find themselves relegated to a marginal place in the ambitions of the institution as a whole. However, the association of learning centres with remedial education also has consequences for learning centres and for the learning development tutors who work in them.

To begin with, a view of learning centre work as remedial does not value the specialist knowledges that we as learning development tutors bring to our work. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) link the remedial view of learning advisors as those who correct mechanical errors in students' work with a notion that "anyone with a modicum of intelligence can do this job" (p. 18). One senior academic of my acquaintance insists that he defers to me in all matters of grammar, as though my main function was to render his postgraduate students' writing comprehensible by correcting their English, when in fact I do very little of that and work with students in a much more inquiring way, making interventions that are much more to do with the development of critical



thinking and an understanding of what makes arguments work. Yet so far I have been unsuccessful in communicating this idea to my colleague.

Some might argue that the sorts of interventions I make in my work with students should come from the discipline lecturer or supervisor. However, those people are not always able to do this work. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) point out that learning development tutors “may have specialist knowledge that discipline teachers do not have” (p. 13). In fact, much thinking and writing in the disciplines is acquired as though by osmosis and highly successful academics may lack the kind of meta-knowledge that would enable them to identify and to teach disciplinary practices and conventions to their students.

Our work involves knowledge of a range of disciplinary conventions, but may also involve a sound grasp of “textual design meanings” (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, p. 13). The best kind of intervention that we make on a piece of writing is not the remedial correction of errors. It demonstrates, rather, an ability “to identify precisely what has gone wrong with a text, why it has gone wrong, and how problems might be addressed so that the student acquires both improved understanding of discourses generally and greater textual control in context” (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, p. 13). As Craswell and Bartlett observe, academics don’t necessarily have this kind of knowledge. They add that “there is often insufficient recognition by the academic community at large that meaning does not reside in disembodied knowledge... that exist independently of how we speak and write these knowledge(s)” (Craswell & Bartlett, 2002, pp. 15-16). The point is that most students are inexperienced writers in the disciplines and they must learn how to create arguments that work, and the academic specialists who can assist them with that task are housed in learning centres. Yet, rather than validating learning development as an academic specialty, institutions frequently see their learning centres as service units, akin to a counselling service and sometimes housed in the same offices and employed on general, rather than academic contracts.

## **Promoting a post-remedial view of learning centres**

There is a growing body of scholarship that signals efforts to claim the specialised work of learning advisors as a distinct and unique contribution to the academy (Bartlett, 2005; Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2004; Melles, 2002; Webb, 2002). Webb (2002) indicates some of the ways that learning centres could be understood: “as catalysts for systemic change, as facilitators of organisational learning, as partners in the transformation of university teaching and learning” (p.17). It is an understanding that moves us a long way from the remedial. In the last part of this paper I want to suggest that the scholarship dealing with the unique contribution that learning advisors and learning centres make is reflected in developments in the ways that these centres define and describe the work they do within the institutions in which they are located. This contention is based on an analysis of promotional material that learning centres produce about themselves at a number of tertiary institutions from both Australia and New Zealand.

The first example is the Student Learning Centre at the University of Auckland, whose website clearly signals a move away from a notion of the remedial:

The Student Learning Centre (SLC) provides professional development for University of Auckland students. The Centre facilitates the acquisition of effective academic learning and performance skills in students, and helps those who encounter difficulties in their studies. Academic tutors teach process skills that are crucial to academic success. The Centre's programmes cater for the learning needs of all students from first year undergraduates to postgraduates (Student Learning Centre, 2006).

A key term which is interesting in this example is 'professional development', which indicates that students coming for assistance are, rather than incompetent and infantilised, implicitly figured as sensible nascent professionals who need to up-skill. Indeed, the centre documentation states that it teaches "effective academic learning and performance skills" (Student Learning Centre, 2006).

Although the centre "helps those who encounter difficulties in their studies" it is clear that the centre seeks to position its work as integral to the tertiary environment when it claims to "teach process skills that are crucial to academic success" (Student Learning Centre, 2006). Similarly, offering to work with students at every level, from first year undergraduate through to postgraduate level, is a key marker of the fact that the centre's work is fully embedded in learning at each stage and is not limited to those who are struggling to make the adjustment to tertiary study. Further exploration of the site indicates that the Student Learning Centre still appears to focus on the provision of generic skills and workshops, but seeks to position its work as integral to learning and teaching at the University of Auckland.

The second example to be considered is the ELSSA Centre, which is the learning centre at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). The centre is clearly pursuing a model of integrated, contextual delivery and moving away from generic workshops to focus on delivery within faculty-specific groups wherever possible. This is evident in the Centre's mission statement, which signals an intention to work on integrated, custom-designed forms of delivery. At the same time the mission statement claims the professional, academic status of the centre's staff through an emphasis on "research" and "intellectual contributions" in the areas of teaching and learning:

#### **Mission statement**

The ELSSA Centre enhances teaching and learning at UTS through a focus on academic literacy, which involves reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking and cultural knowledge.

We do this by:

- collaborating with faculties to integrate the development of students' academic literacy in their area of study

- teaching custom-designed programs to meet the specific requirements and changing needs of students and staff
- offering consultative advice to academic staff on language-related matters
- fostering interest in, and knowledge of, literacy and learning through research, intellectual contributions and professional development
- valuing quality, diversity, internationalisation and flexibility as we serve the wider academic and professional communities (ELSSA Centre, 2006).

In 2005 the ELSSA Centre launched a university-wide project to promote integrated and collaborative teaching of academic literacies and communication competencies. A closer examination of the material relating to this project indicates the ways in which staff development across the university, along with developmental and remedial components of student instruction are involved (ELSSA Centre, 2005). The project draws together embedded forms of delivery that are aimed at all students on a given course, as well as targeted intensive delivery to those who are assessed as being in need of remedial instruction. The intention behind this approach has been to increase the number of students who receive developmental input, while more visibly and more actively reaching those in need of academic support, and all of this at no extra cost. Interestingly, personal communication with one member of the ELSSA team indicated that increasing the visibility of the service through embedded forms of delivery, which might be expected to be a more efficient way of reaching more students, had actually increased the demand for one-to-one services.

What the ELSSA Centre approach seems to achieve is to promote learning services as integral to the development of the wide range of competencies that graduates should be expected to attain, as well as identifying and addressing the needs of those most in need of support in order to be retained in their courses. In other words, both developmental and remedial ends of the learning continuum are addressed in the context of a collaborative and embedded approach. This approach emphasises the professionalism of the ELSSA team and its potential impact on teaching and learning across the institution.

Finally, I turn to consider the centre where I work, Te Tari Awhina, Learning Centre at Unitec New Zealand, where I think we are struggling to distance ourselves from the most damaging associations of remedialism. To begin with, it should be acknowledged that our Centre has a very limited web presence, which we do not control ourselves and it is a key objective of our centre to create and maintain our own web presence. At present, staff and students can get to our online materials and information about our services through a limited access electronic teaching system called Blackboard. However, from the Unitec corporate website visitors can access Te Tari Awhina through the heading 'Unitec experience', then they have to choose 'Support'. Here Learning Support is listed with together with the Conciliator, Disability Support, Financial Support and Gay Support. By choosing Learning Support, a searcher will find that Te Tari Awhina, Learning Centre is one of four services, including the library that support learning at Unitec. It is fair to say at this

stage that Te Tari Awhina, Learning Centre is not considered a key marketing feature for the institution.

This marginal web presence may be because of the centre's association with remedial learning. Once a visitor finally reaches the web page devoted to Te Tari Awhina, there are several mentions of help and helping:

Make time for us in your study schedule! Te Tari Awhina offers a free service for Unitec students at all levels. You may have general concerns about tertiary study or maybe you are looking for *help* with a specific task.

Whether you are returning to study after a long break, studying in New Zealand for the first time, or need *help* developing new skills relating to your studies, *help* is available at Te Tari Awhina.

Our experienced learning development teachers are committed to *helping* you develop the skills you need to study independently and succeed in your chosen programme (Te Tari Awhina, 2006, italics added).

Clearly what is required here is a conceptual shift that would enable us to position ourselves within the institution as professional academics with a significant contribution to make to the development of excellence in teaching and learning. The emphasis on helping in our promotional materials reflects a desire to be accessible to those students who are most in need of assistance. However, the emphasis on helping is unhelpful in so far as it exacerbates the tendency to see Te Tari Awhina as a remedial service, with all the problems this paper has signalled could follow from that. What the developments in the other centres I have mentioned seem to indicate is that access might be improved by positioning the centre as integral to the experience of higher education, so that our services are seen as something that any student who hopes to do well might take advantage of. This is the direction I hope that Te Tari Awhina can take.

As it stands, at present Te Tari Awhina is still offering a full range of generic workshops, as is Auckland's Student Learning Centre, while UTS has moved away from the generic to focus on faculty specific delivery wherever possible. However, at Te Tari Awhina we're taking every opportunity to offer contextual forms of delivery, offering custom-built workshops focused around the specific learning challenges or assessment tasks that students are involved with. This requires extra research and preparation on the part of our staff and because of this we need to be involved in ongoing professional development to broaden our understanding of the generic conventions and practices across a range of disciplines. It is potentially a resourcing challenge, but given the merits of moving towards an understanding of our service as integral rather than remedial it seems a worthwhile project.

The basis on which the shift towards an integrated, developmental understanding of learning centre work needs to stand is an understanding of the specialist status of learning development lecturers as interdisciplinary academics (Craswell & Bartlett,

2002). Learning development work, at its best, involves knowledge of a range of disciplinary conventions and of the way that writing and thinking in the disciplines is developed. Students may benefit from a broadened appreciation among discipline staff of the fact that learning development academics have knowledge of how discourses are produced that may give us a unique insight into how academic literacies are acquired. Such appreciation may be hard won in many institutions, and it may have to be repeatedly negotiated, especially where there are challenges to the value of our work. However, it is worth continuing to attend to the ways that we are understood in the belief that it might help to prevent learning centres' relegation to a marginalised, remedial service.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that there are costs associated with the view of our work as remedial. It has pointed out the pathologising and infantilising view of students it promotes, the way that it leaves institutional and teaching practices unexamined and the way that it downgrades the expertise of learning development professionals. Learning centres are increasingly striving to position the contribution they make as integral to the experience of learning in tertiary education. This may improve access because it doesn't require students to frame themselves as needy and helpless in order to take advantage of services. It is also based on an understanding that learning centre work is academic, scholarly, professional and integral to teaching and learning in tertiary education today.

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# **An examination of adult students' past experiences and anxiety from the learner's perspective**

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## **Abstract**

One of the themes of the 2006 ATLAANZ conference is 'Learners' Perspectives'. This paper investigates adult students' past experiences, anxiety and stress from the student perspective. Many students who seek out assistance from learning support practitioners may have had negative educational experiences and are anxious about their tertiary study. Research indicates that both these areas play an important part in determining outcomes for success. Knapper and Cropley (2000) note that both students' past educational experiences (many times negative) and anxiety may influence the type of support the student needs in the tertiary educational environment. The paper will also discuss some practical solutions and strategies that learning support practitioners can employ when working with these students.

## **Introduction**

For the purposes of this paper, the description of adult students will be those characteristics identified by Knapper and Cropley (2000). The authors note that adult students are usually older than their mid-twenties, and have discontinued formal education after high school. Adult students are more likely to be in some type of employment and more likely to have a partner and children.

The quality of past educational experiences can have an influence on adult students' future learning and studying. If students have negative past experiences, then developing a positive self-image may be difficult. Confidence in themselves and their abilities stems from a variety of life experiences, including the development of beliefs about family, friends, work, education, religion and culture (Knapper & Cropley, 2000). The way in which students view themselves is an important factor for learning support staff to consider. Ashcroft, Bigger and Coates (1996) note: "Students learn better if they feel empowered and value themselves and their abilities" (p. 67). Older students are usually psychologically prepared for tertiary study because of their life experiences, but have difficulty in recapturing the techniques and strategies learned many years before (Erickson & Strommer, 1991; Williams, 1995).

Like students' past experiences, anxiety and stress can also play an important part in students' learning and studying. Although students may have developed coping mechanisms for dealing with life's problems, this is not always necessarily the case for



academic problems. The fear of returning to higher education, a lack of self-confidence, and the fear of failure may affect students' ability to learn. Knapper and Cropley (2000) observe that anxiety in adult students is caused by problems with self-esteem and self-doubt in relation to studying in a formal educational setting.

## **Students' past experiences**

Adult students may sometimes stereotype themselves as being too old to learn. They may believe that existing societal norms imply that learning is for children not adults, and that adult students are incapable of learning. Peelo (1994) notes: "Late returners to formal education often believe that they are stupid and, indeed, may have built their pre-degree lives round a specific, non-academic, image of themselves" (p. 11). Knapper and Cropley (2000) emphasise that adult students have often had negative educational experiences, and special provisions need to be made to assist them. This provision can be in the form of learning support. These negative experiences may cause students to feel inept in an academic environment. Indeed, past failure may influence performance years later, as these experiences can erode confidence to succeed at a tertiary level of study (Peelo, 1994).

Like Peelo, MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) notes that adult learners often question their own abilities and competencies. These negative views may cause students to become anxious, which is manifest in feelings of apprehension and hesitancy. Yet, older students successfully complete their courses and achieve positive academic results (Richardson, 1995). Helping students to identify and solve problems is one of the primary functions of learning support intervention, because it can influence students' ability to deal with their study problems. There may be more demand for the 'support' aspect of the learning support role when students are feeling apprehensive and hesitant about their ability to face the complex problems of balancing a return to higher education with the responsibilities of adulthood. Ashcroft et al. (1996) note that students' learning is improved if they have a sense of self-worth about themselves and their capabilities. Ollerton (2002) reaffirms the points made by MacKinnon-Stanley, Richardson, and Ashcroft et al. when he notes:

Students enter higher education with a range of preconceptions and expectations of what it will be like to study at that level. Prior experiences as learners may cause trepidation and possible misconceptions. Some students will try to fulfill parental wishes...a central responsibility for higher education teachers is, therefore, to acknowledge the existence of this range of differences and to work with it (p. 124).

Peelo (1994) notes that in some family situations an individual may be ostracised by other members, especially if this student is the first family member to embark in higher education. This criticism of the student by family members can be detrimental to an individual's self-esteem. Webb (1993) also discusses the negative impact family situations can have on an adult student's confidence. Again, this is especially true if

there has been little history of family members attending a tertiary institution, as the family is not fully aware of the demands required at a higher educational level and does not make allowances for the time and effort needed.

The following quotes from adult students involved in learning support emphasises some of the points raised in the previous discussion. These quotes were taken from interviews with students involved in a learning support research project in 2002.

Maggie has no formal high school qualifications and this is her first attempt at doing any tertiary study. She is attending a local polytechnic. Maggie notes how her past experiences and her family situation influenced her outlook:

I didn't do good at high school...there was pressure from home. I think the lack of confidence came from my family. My father believed you should be out working, you shouldn't be sitting around inside [polytechnic]. And that was it.

This "lack of confidence" coming from within the family can hinder adult students from succeeding. This is especially true if they are first time students like Maggie. As Peelo (1994) and Webb (1993) have noted previously, family dynamics can be very important factors to adults students when studying at a tertiary level.

Another adult student, Tania, also comments about her lack of past tertiary educational experience. Tania, has a high school certificate and also attends a polytechnic. She notes about her tertiary experiences:

I have this tendency to think, well I don't really want to face that [academic work] maybe I shouldn't be here. It is a self doubt thing and you know maybe I've left my run too late. I feel like a baby and I want to ignore the problem. I don't want to start anything, I'm scared! I left coming for help because I don't couldn't bear being thought stupid.

This feeling of being apprehensive when returning to tertiary study is a common response for many adult students (Dawson, 2006). Students, like Tania, may have many successful life experiences yet when it comes to doing tertiary study there is still a lack of self-confidence. This is noted by Tania when she remarks, "it is a self doubt thing and you know maybe I left my run too late".

## **Anxiety and stress**

Like students' past experiences, anxiety and stress for students who use learning support services should be given due recognition. Anxiety and stress can be characterised in that these "students often realise that they have inadequate educational backgrounds and fear failure" (Roberts, 1990, p. 197). In relation to anxiety and stress, Knowles (1985) notes:

Even though adults may be totally self-directing in every other aspect of their lives – as workers, spouses, parents, citizens, leisure time users – the minute they walk into a situation labelled ‘education,’ ‘training,’ or any of their synonyms, they hark back to their conditioning in school, and assume the role of dependency and demand to be taught (p. 9).

The following quotes from Ellen and Fay, again from interviews with students involved in a learning support research project, demonstrate how anxiety and stress can impact on students. Ellen is an adult student enrolled on a fulltime, certificate level course at polytechnic. She notes about her anxiety and stress especially as it relates to exams:

I didn’t really cope. I wasn’t coping very well. I would go into an exam and I would be so tense. [After the exam] someone in the class said to me, ‘I can’t believe that’s all you got, you know that work’. But I sat in the exam and didn’t do very well.

Fay, like Ellen, comments on her need to deal with the stress of writing an essay. Fay is also an adult student and is enrolled on a full-time degree course at university. She would like to be able “just to take the tension out of doing it [essays] and to become more relaxed about approaching these things”.

Learning support practitioners need to be aware of the anxiety and tension that students like Ellen and Fay may be experiencing. Brown (2002) comments about students like Ellen and Fay:

The system works well enough when students are functioning effectively... however, when they are blown off course... then panic can set in. For the individual student, not being able to work means not being able to do what he or she has always been good and successful at before. This can result in the student finding him or herself in scary, unknown territory, which can lead to a feeling of being very lost and unable to cope (p. 144).

The previous sections have outlined how past experiences and anxiety and stress can impact on student learning. This has been reinforced by using the ‘voices’ of students themselves. The next section considers how learning support staff can assist students who have had issues with past experiences, anxiety and stress.

## **Strategies to help students**

Tutors in learning support can develop appropriate strategies to assist students to adjust to tertiary education. Williams (1995) suggests that the primary aim for new students should be to reduce their anxiety about returning to study. A proactive scheme could offer a pre-entry programme covering the basic academic skills,

strategies on making the adjustment to tertiary education, and developing an understanding of the expectations of tutors and lecturers.

Ollerton (2002) observes that one way of helping students with stress and anxiety is through students working in groups. If adult students can discuss their experiences in groups they may find a common bond. Students can offer each other support, and if necessary a learning support practitioner can act as facilitator to help the group deal with issues that they themselves have identified. A consequence of this approach may be an 'Adult Student Group' where students meet either formally or informally to help support each other. For example, students can discuss their anxiety about exams with other students and with the guidance of learning support staff they can learn how to overcome this. In doing so, students may feel less isolated by realising that other students may have the same fears and anxieties, and that there are ideas and strategies to help deal with these concerns. If learning support practitioners can introduce these students to a more collaborative and interactive method of learning, anxiety may be reduced as students gain the skills to help them to be more academically successful.

Past experiences such as those discussed by Maggie, Tania, Ellen and Fay should be considered by learning support practitioners when seeking to assist students. This is because learning and experiential histories will affect future educational outcomes. If adult students can overcome past feelings of self-doubt about their ability to cope at a tertiary level, then they can master the skills necessary for future success. Also, self-confidence will often increase as students achieve more success with their study. The ability to manage setbacks may also increase as students come to the realisation that they can cope in a tertiary setting. Webb (1993) underscores this point when she remarks: "When students are encouraged to value their current knowledge and past experiences their self-esteem and confidence are enhanced and this process, in turn, contributes to the student reaching their potential" (p. 26).

In advising adult students, learning support tutors may need to be aware of why these students are returning to study and of their current circumstances. Some students may be attempting to create the opportunity for a tertiary education that was not available earlier in their lives, while for others it may be for personal development or because they feel discontented with their status in life (Bell, 1996). These students have past experiences to draw upon, and as Williams (1980) observes, these experiences are vital for successful learning. By having an understanding of these issues, practitioners may be in a better position to help students achieve successful outcomes.

The gathering of information on the needs of adult students by learning support personnel can be accomplished in a number of ways. Formally, tutors could use some type of questionnaire or inventory. Informally, the gathering of information can be accomplished by discussion and observation. During this process staff can ask students about their educational backgrounds and life experiences. The important part is that students are active participants in this assessment process.

Anxiety and stress, like students' past experiences, may be overlooked by practitioners in the learning support domain as important aspects in student success. This paper argues that these factors should be taken into consideration when working with adult students. To promote successful learning, advising students may require staff to encompass personal issues and not just focus on the immediate academic concern. Staff should establish an environment where the adult student feels comfortable in discussing personal issues and this may take more time than simply addressing their academic needs. Adult students' personal concerns may often not be clearly separated from their academic concerns: an important factor that needs to be acknowledged within the learning support field.

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# Reflection on best practice: A kiwi perspective on 'new dimensions for doctoral programmes in Europe'

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## Abstract

The 2006 United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) summer conference has implications for learning advisors who support doctoral students. European mapping of new dimensions of doctoral research affects Australian and New Zealand universities. This article reflects from a learning advisor's perspective on the implications of some of the issues raised at the conference, such as increased doctoral output; equity; excellence; transferable skills; flexibility and the market model of the knowledge economy research boom. 'Best practice' is a focus of the article. Nonetheless this term is found to be problematically stretched across a set of tensions inherent in the current desires and responsibilities of universities. Doctoral programme support is placed on ground zero of many of these tensions, with potential for growth along with some new challenges.

## Introduction

As Europeans mapped out new dimensions for doctoral programmes, where would they position learning advisors? I went from New Zealand to the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) Summer Conference, 6-8 July 2006, *New dimensions for doctoral programmes in Europe: Training, employability and the European knowledge agenda*, seeking useful pointers for the Student Learning Centre doctoral programme I coordinate in Auckland, New Zealand. With a kiwi learning advisor's perspective, I went as something of a pilgrim from the provinces, hoping European discussion of doctoral programmes would usefully inform my own practice.

As I had hoped, this conference turned recurrently to search for best practice. Best practice is nicely defined as 'the pursuit of world class performance...a moving target...The concept of continuous improvement is integral to the achievement of best practice' (Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program 1994, cited in Wilson & Pitman, 2000, p. xvii). Best practice, then, despite the superlative suggesting nowhere further to go, seeks continuously to be better. The conference faced the challenges to doctoral programmes and 'best practice' rang as a confident chorus. Like my own institution (where 'best practice' is also a litany), universities around the globe are almost universally exerting themselves to attract more research students, to attract better research students, to improve retention and completion rates and to assist doctoral students into worthwhile research employment upon completion. Such

ambitious goals make best practice's continuous improvement and the self-reflexivity implied by this essential. Learning advisors are likely to be part of the institutional drive for best practice, and to be concerned with their own employment of, and contribution to, best practice. Individually and collectively we must better our best.

Yet best practice is not a straightforward term, despite its optimistic self-assertion. This report looks at the conference from the perspective of one seeking best practice direction, yet finding confirmation that other educationalists grapple with familiar sets of tensions and ambivalences. Davies (2003) complains that "teachers who work in pedagogical institutions are multiply inscribed, subjected to discursive lines of force pushing and pulling in contradictory directions. Multiple discourses operate in a palimpsest of overlapping meanings that do not totally occlude with each other" (p. 101). Where does best practice sit amongst the fault-lines of conflicting interests, and multiple responsibilities? If learning advisors are able to take advantage of institutional desire for doctoral support best practice, where do we want to go with this opportunity in terms of our own professionalism, job satisfaction and personal fulfilment?

## **The conference**

The UKCGE who organised the conference is an independent body that champions graduate education, promoting the development of its quality, and quality measures, ensuring effective leadership and management of postgraduate students, equal opportunities and effective infrastructure in graduate education in the UK (Cameron, 2006). To this purpose, member universities collaborate in developing good practice at the same time formulating policy advice for the government. Thus the conference organising body is well placed to act as a beacon for other universities outside of the UK who strive for the same broad goals (and indeed, my institution regularly looks at the codes and guidelines that come out of UKCGE work).

This is the first time the UKCGE have opened their conference to those from outside the UK. About 160 delegates came from Australia, Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Spain, and the USA as well as from within the UK (home to about half the delegates). Papers were not called for; instead strategically chosen key-note speakers addressed best practice within the framework of the Bologna process agenda, with discussion following each address.

## **Bologna process: the European perspective**

The Europeans were engaged in the task of meshing with close neighbours. "With an increased political, economic and cultural integration...research and innovation are seen as strategic tools to promote European competitiveness in a more globalised world" (Andersson, 2006, p. 79). European delegates were seeking to promote graduate education in light of the Bologna Process, named after the place of the



proposal, in 1999, to harmonise academic degree standards and quality assurance standards throughout Europe (Weber & Duderstadt, 2006, pp.11-13). The process began with lower levels of education and had worked its way slowly up to the doctorate, on the agenda from 2003's Berlin meeting. There are currently 45 signatories to the Bologna agreement, with considerable diversity of practice as a result, and thus the need for discussion to promote and share good practice in the process of harmonisation (Ritchie, 2006). The European perspective is one anxiously based on the difficult administrative task of homogenisation. Lee and Green (1998) identify continuing recent interest in "theorising and understanding postgraduate pedagogy more generally" (p. 6); the European need for unity intensifies this discourse around the doctorate. Thus for most delegates, system change for unity motivated their close scrutiny of doctoral programmes and practices.

### **The perspective from down under**

No island is an island (as Ginzberry, 2000, observes in his title). Many of the themes that emerge overtly from the European need to 'harmonise' resonate with interests in New Zealand and Australia despite our lack of the homogenising drive. We want our systems to be compatible, our standards comparable, with those of our international colleagues. As long-standing practice is defined, qualified, and quantified in Europe, we too are likely to do more self-auditing and reflection. Arguably the globalisation of education makes further homogenisation inevitable, even for those of us who do not have an overt agenda of unification. We are affected by what the European Union does. More to the point, though, the European discussion, intense because based on a practical need for unity, rather usefully pulls together ideas on practice, and on best practice. If we can afford to be mere spectators, and this is unlikely in the long term, we can benefit from listening in to European discussion.

Our institutions are likely to eye the European direction, but the discussion generated by the UKCGE is also relevant to learning advisors, my subjective perspective in attending the Florence conference. In a recent call for Australian and New Zealand learning advisors to consider mapping their own best possible future, Trembath (2006) raised possible directions for the profession, suggesting that we need to steer a direction for where we want to be in the future. Tectonic shifts in international doctoral support are worth considering. What might the European perspective suggest for our own practice? Could we be better placed to respond to recent disruption to learning centres in both Australia and New Zealand if we position our work in an international context?

### **Imperative to increase: double, double**

Some factors became apparently common at the UKCGE summer conference: for example, universally, universities plan to increase doctorate completions. There is a national interest in keeping up at an international level, expressed for example in the Irish fear that 'the lack of a sufficient supply of doctoral students could seriously hinder Ireland's aim to create a research-intensive university system and stimulate

higher levels of ...research and development' (Walsh, 2006), perhaps undermining that country's current strong position (Jones, 2006, pp. 94-96). Ireland hopes to more than double the number of doctoral students by 2010. Data from 18 countries showed that all were increasing, and intending to further increase, their doctoral research completion output (Powell, 2006). Floud (2006), Vice-President of the European University Association, identified higher education as a 'global growth business,' projecting that 45% of the population might be participating in higher education in many European countries in the near future. It is not new to note that "A knowledge based economy ...means that most productive activity will require higher levels of skills and knowledge" (McNair, 1997, p. 29). The bar of higher education is rising. My own institution's goal for doubled doctoral completions by 2012 reflects international trends. Similar objectives are likely to affect most learning advisors. Grant (2006) noted that neoliberal education is good for learning advisors. The desire for increase suggests good business for learning advisors who support doctoral students.

### **Generic support increase**

Another commonality emerging from the conference is that universities are establishing and developing generic support programmes for doctoral students. "Graduate education should enable the provision of generic skills training to all researchers to meet the challenge of interdisciplinary training" (Walsh, 2006). Higher educationalists contrast the value of generic skills teaching (termed 'bolt-on' by Wingate, 2006) to teaching skill sets embedded within course/discipline boundaries (termed 'built-in' by Wingate, 2006). Gilbert (2004) finds "considerable evidence that the development of generic skills in research higher degrees is supported by many research students themselves" (p. 381) but cites literature that is critical (p. 383) and notes that some students and staff have "expressed concerns about the kind of instrumental approach to doctoral training that has spawned generic skills development" (p. 383). Reid (1998) proposes that "a student researcher needs to be engaged in the practice of research *alongside other practising researchers*, in order to learn the generic practice of research" (p. 62). Whatever the theoretical stance, in practice generic skills education is on the increase, recognised as a way to improve completion and retention rates. The recognition is likely to mean more uptake for learning advisors' expertise.

The next few years will probably see more initial training, life-long and career training of doctoral candidates, with taught modules on topics of professionalism including intellectual property law, contractual obligations, accountability, ethical principles, and project management (Bingen, 2006). The doctorate is shifting from a master/apprentice model to a more structured programme that makes "doctoral education a planned, goal-centred training through structured programmes / research schools" (Steinwall, 2006). Generic support to supplement discipline-based support was generally recognised as a way to improve completion and retention rates.

An example is the UK Graduate Programme, a national generic supporter of graduate students with a vision “for all postgraduate researchers to be fully equipped and encouraged to complete their studies and make a successful transition to their future careers” in an environment where “better researchers do better research” (Pearce, 2006). Personal Development Planning, defined as ‘a “structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect on their own learning, performance and/or achievement to plan for their personal, educational and career development”, fostered a culture of self-awareness necessary for the development of quality higher education (Pearce, 2006). Postgraduate and doctoral support from learning centres in Australia and New Zealand is likely to enable universities here to hold their own in an international context.

## **Greater flexibility demanded**

Learning advisors may consider giving advice to students about marketing their own research and themselves both as discipline-based and interdisciplinary. Flexibility and an ability to mesh are likely to be important doctoral attributes. Nilsen (2006) reiterated that transferable skills needed identification, skills such as large projects formulation, ethical awareness, failure control, networking competence, complex problem solving, knowledge extraction and synthesis, and the ability to intelligently face the unknown. Graduate schools needed to facilitate these thematic approaches. The possibility of joint degrees between universities was seen as important, as was a move towards research done by groups rather than by the lone researcher. Opportunity exists for learning advisors to expand their repertoire of sessions. We might also take on the advice that we need flexibility as we market our expertise.

## **Toil and trouble: equity, excellence, devaluation**

### **Equity and excellence**

Universities want more doctorates, often double the amount that they produced a year or two back. Long after Macbeth’s weird sisters first muttered “double, double...” doubling is still linked with toil and trouble. Learning advisors have opportunity, but also challenge.

Doubling of output requires that excellent candidates (which was generally defined as fast completers who had good publication) be recruited in greater numbers, so that ‘a meritocratic stratification is produced’ (van Vught, 2006, p. 71). However, exclusion of non-traditional student groups is one evil associated an increased need for speedy completion. Doctoral scholarship funding policies based on high Masters grades may exclude some groups. The UK wants women and minority groups, currently under-represented, to come through as scientists and engineers (Cameron, 2006; Wong & Sanders, 1983). Demographic under-representation in science and engineering is also reported as a US concern (Weber & Duderstradt, 2006, p. 23), as is racial inequality in US doctoral output (Cross, 1998). Powell (2006) pointed out that post-graduate research reflected, and ideally should address, social issues, citing Australian concern

that indigenous Australians are poorly represented (see too McConville, 2002) as are Africans in South Africa (where the concern is being addressed; see Gourley & Brennan, 2006, pp. 51-53). The New Zealand PBRF doubling of the amount that universities receive for Maori and Pacific Island post-graduate degrees makes a striking example of Powell's point (although the policy is not without critics). The need for speed may compete as a priority with the responsibility to ensure equity support.

Further, new kinds of inequity ensue from systems intended to foster excellence. The UK Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice spells out what universities *must* do to avoid losing funding. The result of strict policy aimed to ensure professionalism is that, in the UK, the top thirty-one institutions take 80% of funds, leaving 20% shared out amongst the remaining 147 institutions. Data showed similarly that in Canada, 6 out of 48 Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) grant more than 50% of doctoral degrees, while in the USA 49 out of 400 HEIs grant more than 50% of all doctorates (Powell, 2006). "An increasing concentration of the delivery of PGR [post-graduate research] by a limited number of institutions" was noted (Powell, 2006), a new kind of elitism that tends towards monopolisation. Van Vught (2006) also discusses "an increase of wealth inequalities amongst institutions" (p. 70).

New Zealand may be moving to a similar position under changes to our funding under Performance-Based Research Funding (PBRF), with each institution prone to a cycle of incremental growth or decline according to initial performance rating. Some universities may end up in a poverty trap. One of the difficulties with that phrase 'best practice' is that any practice usually gives something away as well as having benefits. Funding designed to reward and promote best performance is likely to create inequity even as it rewards excellence.

The polarisation of equity aid and excellence reward exists at the edges of the middle ground that universities occupy, and that learning centres and learning advisors occupy. The student learning centre that employs me was created in the 1980s to address equity by equipping non-traditional students with basic study skills, the lack of which previously prevented their access to higher education. Since then the centre has shifted its focus towards supporting excellence, nowhere more obviously than in the doctoral programme's drive for improved completion rates.

## **Devaluation**

Devaluation of the doctorate is another danger of doubling research output (Cameron, 2006). Massification has meant that "The advance of higher education and the retreat of high academic culture have been synchronized—paradoxically so" (Scott, 1997, p. 15). Already there is often a "lack of a national framework for research careers; poor recognition of 'researcher' as a profession" and a need for a "substantial cultural change in the way researchers are perceived, managed and conduct themselves. The recognition of research as a profession - with researchers recognised as well as

recognising themselves as professionals - is the key aspect of this change in perspective” (Cameron, 2006). His comments sit with my experience that frequently research students are unable to recognise and articulate the wide range of transferable skills that they have on completion of their doctorate.

## **Jobs for the docs**

The Vice-President of Eurodoc, the European students’ organisation, gave a student’s perspective, with main concerns being the quality of supervision, labour conditions for doctoral students as they progress through their degree, mobility, and future career prospects (Ejdrup, 2006). Supervision practice is an issue I do not address here, but one under scrutiny in most universities. Employment was a common concern throughout the conference: where will all these doctors find careers? Doubled output makes this question pressing. Doctors are likely to have to find employment in new areas. More support with professionalism was also being provided along with generic support, with institutions recognising responsibility to ensure that doctoral students connect with future employers and are prepared for employment along the doctoral process.

Recurrently surfacing was the question of whether or not education should be shaped by fiscal imperatives rather than by a long-standing humanist responsibility to keep knowledge alive, free and pure (see too Barnett, 1997, 2003; Minogue, 2005; Walker, 2006; Walker & Nixon, 2004; Weber & Duderstadt, 2006). The new managers of new managerialism - which “views higher education as a commodity-providing service in which needs and priorities can be measured and monitored” (Bundy, 2004, p.165) - are likely to have doctorates. The Senior Research Manager of Nokia Corporation in Denmark, Vandrup, presented a market-model view of what doctoral graduates needed for employment in a global environment. Nokia employs thousands of researchers with doctorates. Vandrup saw globalisation as a competence game, spelling out a shift from multi-nationalisation to meta-nationalisation, where one produced goods in countries where production was cheap, but marketed back home or to markets similar to home: unlike the situation with multi-nationalism, ‘sameness is not a source of value, diversity is.’ Interculturalisation has a hard-nosed fiscal drive. Researchers must be able to work in this frame, which required trust of others, unseen in different countries, but working on the same project. Whereas “the knowledge of facts and skills was important...the knowledge of social relations or networks...may be of greater importance to innovation than knowing scientific principles” (Johnson, 2006, p. 100). Vandrup (2006) and Johnson (2006) both envision projects where researchers around the globe develop ideas and projects on a 24 hour basis in collaboration. Learning advisors interested in promoting social networking skills and interculturalisation have an opening here.

Mobility between universities, and multi-disciplinarity were important under a model of meta-nationalism. “Doctoral students should have a foreign exchange as a compulsory part of their training...It is crucial to have an understanding of more than

one discipline in order to see the possibilities they provide in combination” (Vandrup, 2006). Learning advisors might already be supporting international and interdisciplinary students and be aware of some of the additional challenges these students face.

The observation was made in discussion that innovation is risky (which matches my own perception that we want inter-disciplinarity and innovation in our rhetoric but candidates can find them problematic in practice). Flexibility, mobility and innovation have price tags in a competitive market. Again there are challenges in turning the rhetoric into practice, but opportunities for learning advisors to develop their support.

However, Vandrup was clear that researchers should focus on marketability. He rejected the idea that universities foster what he called ‘hobbyist doctorates’: those doing a doctorate out of interest. (Into this category, I extrapolated gloomily, fall doctorates in subjects with no likelihood of financial gain, like medieval literature, for example, and probably much of humanities and social science). Vandrup’s extolment of the highly entrepreneurial doctoral candidate was the strongest statement of an undercurrent of the conference: that the universally sought boom in doctoral completions was in the interest of a knowledge *economy* that literalised Friere’s (1998) ‘banking model’ of education. Scientists and engineers were frequently cited as doctoral candidates in models of best practice. Those of us within the humanities and social sciences felt uneasy with this model, and there was some discussion that the ‘research to receipt,’ market-driven model Vandrup energetically advanced was flawed in its exclusion of many traditional disciplines. Some also saw the spectre of “academics becoming dupes to technological reason” (Barnett, 1997, p. 176).

## **Research on research**

The conference reiterated a desire that data be collected about doctoral students in order to reflect on best practice. Some data was made available. Floud (2006) found across a spectrum of countries that the ratio of women to men is shifting consistently and radically. Statistics from 1975 charted against those from 2000 showed a reversal in ratios. Women have overtaken men as research students in all of the countries surveyed (and in my own institution). Floud (2006) also showed that the average age of graduates is rising.

Nerad (2006), from the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE), dispelled five myths about post-graduate employment through a longitudinal study following the progress of doctors after completion. The five common assumptions that her statistics disproved are that all PhD students want to be professors; that the best (defined by fast completion and many publications) do become professors; that PhD recipients’ career paths are linear and smooth; that faculty enjoyed the highest job satisfaction; and that all graduates would take the best job offered to them.

Nerad found that the ratio of doctoral candidates who aspired to professorships varied across disciplines, with English 81% at the top end and Electrical Engineering 19% at the lower end. She also found that often extroverts wanted employment outside of academia, introverts within it (suggesting that the ivory tower really is a refuge for the socially unwilling). Top students often worked outside of academia (which confirms Vandrup's model of the ideal doctoral candidate). Career paths frequently careered wildly, with travel and family commitments interrupting the progress, and also meaning that doctors did not take the best job offered. Women especially tended to consider their husbands' situation as a major factor in their own job acceptance. Finally, tenured professors rated fourth most satisfied in their jobs after business managers and executives, academic administrators and academic researchers. Temporary academic staff, unsurprisingly, expressed low levels of satisfaction.

The magnitude of the CIRGE study was impressive, the data illuminating, but Nerad confessed that this research was enabled by a huge grant in the millions from the Ford Trust. Although universally institutions want to know the outcome of their policy and practice, the reality is that only the larger institutions with generous gift funding are realistically able to produce data as telling as that shown by Nerad. America seemed most likely to be the place where such figures could be gathered. However, learning advisors who hanker to do research on research may find it a little easier to get approval and funding to do so.

## Summing up

Challenges and opportunities for learning advisors become more evident in the light of the European doctoral discussion. On one hand the conference confirmed Walker's (2006) rather densely packed summation that

Market idolatry is captured in higher education's contemporary dominant emphasis on: 'knowledge is money' (Bernstein, 2000: 86); decontextualized transferable and key skills; measurable learning activities and outcomes; the splitting of teaching from research (see Barnett, 2003); processes of 'quality' assurance of teaching (see Morley 2003); lecturer training to improve teaching; and a discourse of teaching and learning rather than curriculum and pedagogy (p. 11).

Those who come from humanities and social sciences may see the negatives of knowledge economy's new managerialism: "the reduction of critical thought and responsible dissent, the pervasive subliminal fear and anxiety, the sense of personal pressure and responsibility combined with a devalued sense of self, the shift of value away from personal and professionalism towards the single consideration of the economy' (Davies, 2003, p. 94). Yet despite reservations about the ethics of education's neo-liberal ideology, it allows us to do what we want to do perhaps for other reasons, such as because we believe in the *social* value intercultural discourse, in equity and in excellent. We believe, perhaps, that equity *is* excellence (Hadfield,

personal communication, November 2006), or we want to embrace unity and enjoy diversity (Dey, 2005). Probably we will need to market ourselves just as doctoral students must (as Crozier, 2006, considered, critiquing the language by which learning centres describe themselves), but if we can do so successfully the future looks interesting.

The desire for more-finely calibrated knowledge of higher education suggests research opportunities for learning advisors. Cameron (2006) saw “the renewal of academic culture itself,” a reminder of the promise that this interrogative discourse holds. Learning advisors might have “a guarded optimism about higher education as a site for personal engagement, transformation and change through individual development” (Walker, 2006, p. 1). “Academics may be involved in ‘knowledge production’ - with its echoes of the conveyor belt - but their toolkit also includes imagination, scepticism and open-minded enquiry” (Bundy, 2004, p. 174). We are likely to expand our repertoire of sessions to meet new demands. The bettering of best practice opens up potential for self-realisation and agency.

We will also need to negotiate tensions. What is really new here? As the UKCGE seeks to contribute to a general unification of Europe, their quest for ‘best practice’ exists within the drive for convergence. Convergence requires compromise, despite the superlative ‘best’. I came home aware of how much in line with the European process my institution is, as we negotiate the tensions between nests of conflicting impulses: equity (with its own kind of excellence) versus excellence (where excellence equates with speed); innovation (highly valued but risky) versus massification (and speed in the road well travelled); the market model versus the humanist one; and the intellectual flexibility made possible by global homogenisation versus the integrity and authenticity of specific idiosyncratic approaches. In the future, ironically, institutions down under, and learning advisors within them, will continue to achieve best practice only by continuously negotiating a series of compromises.

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# **Tortoise's slow-but-sure strategy: A case study of undergraduate nurses' beliefs, reported use and actual use of vocabulary learning strategies.**

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## **Abstract**

This case study investigates what first-year EAL<sup>1</sup> nursing students believe about vocabulary learning, what strategies they report using, whether there are patterns in their actual use of vocabulary learning strategies as they read technical texts, whether there are discrepancies between reported and actual use of particular strategies and which types of words caused universal difficulties. An affective interview, a background interview, three observations using think-aloud protocol, a stimulated recall session, receptive vocabulary tests and receptive and productive medical vocabulary tests were used to provide evidence of reliability (Bachman, 2004). Although beliefs were relatively homogeneous, different patterns of strategy use emerged depending on whether learners had studied in a NZ high school, and whether learners were immigrants or international students. Feedback from tutors indicated that despite their EAL background these learners were passing their coursework well.

## **Introduction**

Chung and Nation (2003) found that technical words make up a significant component of academic texts, and that learners need to apply effective strategies to master this technical vocabulary. Although familiarity with a particular subject text genre contributes to success (Coady & Nation, 1988; De Groot, Dannenburg & Van Hell, 1994; Parry, 1993), a minimum 95% knowledge of running words in a text is a prerequisite to effective use of contextual clues (Nation, 2001). Huckin and Bloch (1993) note that reading the textbook is a potent secondary source for information missed in a lecture, and that “lack of vocabulary knowledge is the largest obstacle for second-language readers to overcome” (p.154). A rich receptive knowledge of a word and transition to confident productive use requires both intentional focus and incidental exposures to a word in different contexts (Gu, 2003b; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000a). This study set out to investigate the beliefs of first year EAL nursing students about vocabulary acquisition, to observe which strategies they actually use, and to note any correlations with their vocabulary competence and educational background.

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<sup>1</sup> English as an additional language

## Literature review

Although teachers can contribute to the repertoire of effective strategies (Nation, 2001; Robinson, 1993), successful language learners are distinguished by autonomy, reflection and metacognitive assessment of this process as they skilfully choose, use and monitor vocabulary learning strategies (VLS)<sup>2</sup> depending on the purpose, task and context (Gu, 2003b; Rivers, 2001). Studies consistently show that good learners flexibly use a wide range of strategies, whereas poor learners use fewer strategies in less effective ways.

Gu and Johnson (1996) identified groups of strategies under beliefs about vocabulary learning<sup>3</sup>, guessing from background or immediate context, dictionary use for looking up or understanding a word or for extension, a slew of memorisation strategies, note-taking on meaning or usage and lastly metacognitive strategies like self-initiation and selective attention. Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) described two other metacognitive strategies – perseverance and avoidance - and Schmitt (1997) noted social strategies of asking people for meaning or a translation.

### *Perceived usefulness of strategies*

The first step in using vocabulary learning strategies is recognizing and valuing particular strategies. Fan (2003), Schmitt (1997) and Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) all investigated this area with EFL<sup>4</sup> students and found that the bilingual dictionary was rated most useful for discovering meaning, and that various forms of repetition were preferred for consolidating knowledge. However, limiting oneself to these strategies and focussing only on the target word and its immediate context were linked to poor success in an ESL context (Padron & Waxman, 1988; Porte, 1988).

### *Use of strategies*

Self-reported strategy use in EFL contexts did not necessarily correspond to avowed preferences for particular strategies. Fan (2003), in Hong Kong, found that the most used strategy was guessing, followed by using linguistic clues, dictionary use, asking someone and repetition. Schmitt (1997), in Japan, found that although dictionary use was the most-used strategy for new words, guessing from context and asking classmates were close behind and written and verbal repetition were used often.

Some earlier studies (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Chern, 1993; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1993) assumed that Asian students used rote learning and would need coaching to be more analytical and critical in their study. However, later studies (Gu, 2002; Gu, 2003a; Gu, Hu & Zhang, 2005; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Huckin & Bloch, 1993) showed

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<sup>2</sup> Vocabulary learning strategies

<sup>3</sup> Beliefs – “memorisation is important”, “words should be learned in context (bottom-up)”, “words should be learned before use (top-down)”

<sup>4</sup> English as a foreign language. Learners study English while living in a non-English-speaking environment.

that Chinese students were using a wider range of strategies than previously supposed, and that even memory strategies were processed more deeply.

In Gu and Johnson's (1996) study, a self-report questionnaire was completed by 850 non-English major Chinese undergraduates. Meaning-focused strategies were used more than rote strategies. The most proficient learners used a wide range of strategies, particularly metacognitive strategies. A study of 645 Chinese undergraduates by Gu (2002), showed that women consistently used more strategies than men, and that arts students focused more on global context strategies while science students focused on analytical strategies. Use of immediate context clues was more marked than using dictionaries or repetition. This pattern of strategy use was not significantly different to that exhibited in other cultural groups.

Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) used a self-report questionnaire with 74 ESL<sup>5</sup> and 62 EFL adult students. ESL students scored higher in independence whereas EFL students scored higher in use of review strategies. Studies using ESL participants (Chern, 1993; Huckin & Bloch, 1993; Nassaji, 2003; Sanaoui, 1995) revealed much more use of background knowledge, reference to the immediate context and independent strategies. This is unsurprising given that ESL learners live and learn in an English-speaking environment where they must continually assess the interest, relevance and meaning of words they encounter.

Qualitative studies examined detail of the affective responses of students to different vocabulary learning strategies and their actual use. Numbers of participants in these studies were smaller, and included ESL learners. Most of these studies also used some form of receptive vocabulary test and in some cases a proficiency test to measure productive language use. They relied on coding observed behaviour to give a comprehensive description.

Five of the studies (Chern, 1993; Gu, Hu & Zhang, 2005; Huckin & Bloch, 1993; Lawson & Hogben, 1996; Nassaji, 2003;) relied on an introspective 'think-aloud' protocol, where participants completed a vocabulary task, usually decoding new words encountered in an unfamiliar text, learning a list of new words or translating, while verbalizing their thought processes. In all instances participants were trained in the think-aloud procedure prior to the target session. Other researchers (Chern, 1993; Gu, 2003b; Huckin & Bloch, 1993; Parry, 1993) used case studies, while Porte (1988) used interviewing and Sanaoui (1995) used ethnographic interviewing in combination with journaling.

In both qualitative and quantitative studies of vocabulary learning, a trend was apparent, ranging from a preference for memorisation/repetition strategies evident in

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<sup>5</sup> English as a second language. Learners are studying English while living in an English-speaking environment.

EFL, IFL<sup>6</sup> or recent migrant ESL participants, to extensive use of context and metacognitive strategies in ESL participants who were studying in English at a tertiary level. It was also apparent that good learners flexibly used a wide range of strategies, while poor learners used a narrower range inflexibly.

This study set out to discover which strategies first year EAL nursing students valued, reported using and actually used to cope with their academic reading. Although self-report questionnaires have been used extensively in this field, the case study using a think-aloud protocol was chosen as the most suitable methodology to explore affective responses and observe actual practice. Authentic texts were used to gain insight into which words were most likely to cause difficulty. Background information was collected to explore any correlations with proficiency and strategy choice.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Participants were five ESL women of varying ages, ethnicities, backgrounds and residency, recruited from a regular study group of first year nurses.

### *Instruments*

The case study methodology was chosen as most appropriate to yield a substantial description of each person's beliefs and approaches to learning without "placing preconceived notions on the data" (Adams, Fujii and Mackey, 2005, p. 84), given the small size of the accessible sample population. Reliable and valid triangulation of findings was ensured by combining a background information interview, diagnostic vocabulary tests administered at the beginning and end of the research period, an affective self-report interview, three observational tasks at three-weekly intervals, during which both audiotapes and notes were recorded, and a brief stimulated recall session two weeks after the last observational task (Bachman, 2004; Holliday, 2004; Huckin & Haynes, 1993).

### *Interviews*

Two interviews – a background interview (see Appendix A) and an affective interview (see Appendix B) – formed part of the first session with participants. A structured interview was considered to be a more authentic task than filling out a questionnaire (Adams, Fujii & Mackey, 2005). The background interview questions covered age, languages spoken, read and written in, educational level in their own country, years of EFL, years of ESL and years of study using the medium of English.

The affective interview elicited self-reported beliefs and practices of vocabulary strategies. Questions were pared to a minimum to counteract fatigue, and were based on Fan (2003), Gu and Johnson (1996), Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999), Schmitt (1997) and Schmitt and Schmitt (1993).

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<sup>6</sup> Italian as a foreign language.



### *Task*

The observational task consisted of reading a set passage from a current textbook, highlighting challenging words and using a think-aloud protocol to verbalize the strategies that were being used. This procedure took place on three separate occasions, using a different text each time, to confirm any patterns in individual participants.

### *Text*

Passages from a recommended text *Human anatomy and physiology* (Marieb, 1998) were chosen for the three tasks. Participants read a clear copy with original formatting intact. The texts came from the chapter introductions, and contained much simpler language than that of the body of each chapter. Analysis of the difficulty of these passages showed that the Academic Word List items (Coxhead, 2000) in the passages ranged from 12.17% to 13.64%, technical words ranged from 19.91% to 23.77%, and the combinations of these in individual texts ranged from 32.82% to 35.94%.

### *Think-aloud protocol*

An introspective think aloud protocol was used during the three observational tasks to glean what students were actually thinking and doing as they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. The assumptions were that talking about a task while doing it does not influence the completion of the task and that responses do not include automatic, subconscious thought (Zimmerman, 1987). Simultaneous protocols where learners are asked to verbalize their thoughts are a good investigative tool (Adams et al., 2005) with which to “get beyond performance analyses to process analyses” (Haastrup, 1991, p.38). As the researcher was also observer and interviewer, and is not fluent in any of the first languages of the participants, all of the sessions were in English.

Although the nature of the task and the fact of being observed were unfamiliar, the observer was well-known to the participants. Participants quickly became habituated to the tiny microphone used to record the think aloud commentary. Interaction only occurred at a participant’s request. These precautions were intended to reduce the observer’s paradox (Labov, 1972).

Retrospection was not deliberately included in the design of the observational task, although participants usually commented after each task, most commonly on the retarding effect on comprehension of having to read and think aloud. This perceived unnaturalness of the think aloud procedure is mentioned by Adams et al. (2005). Participants tended to verbalize less as they became absorbed in the task.

### *Diagnostic tests*

The *Vocabulary Levels Test: Version 2* (Schmitt, Schmitt & Clapham, 2001) was used in both pre-test and post-test. Two different versions of a medical receptive<sup>7</sup> vocabulary test were used, both covering the same 36 word parts and affixes. A

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<sup>7</sup> Designed by the writer to capture the slightest knowledge of the target word parts.

medical productive<sup>8</sup> test was used only as a post-test to confirm how well known the most common 12 of the 36 word parts were.

### *Stimulated Recall*

Participants expressed interest in discussing their results. They had the opportunity to discuss their completed profiles and clarify points arising from the interview and observations two weeks after the last task. These sessions were also recorded.

## **Procedures**

Diagnostic pre-tests had already been administered in a class context in early June, and the five participants completed post-tests immediately after the last observational interview in late September.

At the initial individual session, participants first answered background questions. The responses to these questions were clarified and recorded by the researcher. The researcher then demonstrated the think aloud procedure using a text in French, during which all unknown words were highlighted and an attempt was made to demonstrate the full range of potential strategies, including asking the participants for help.

Following this demonstration, participants then did the first observational task. They had been encouraged to bring their favourite aids, and to feel free to ask the researcher questions in English. Highlighters and hard copies of English/English, Mandarin/English, two different Arabic/English and, for the third session Khmer/English were provided.

The affective interview followed, after a short break accompanied by refreshments. The objective was to both relax participants and to minimize the effect of interference between the observational task and affective interview.

The researcher took notes as well as audio-taping each session, and each participant's highlighted and annotated text was collected at the end of each session. The second and third sessions occurred three and six weeks respectively after the initial session. The second session involved only a think aloud task, and the third session involved a think aloud task followed by the diagnostic post-test. Participants were reminded to think aloud, but no repeat training occurred in the second and third sessions. Participants were given the opportunity of commenting on their profiles in a stimulated recall session two weeks after the final observation and testing.

Transcripts were collated into five parallel student transcripts and coded. A colleague also coded one of these task transcripts to check rater reliability.

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<sup>8</sup> Designed by the writer to test the quality of recall of the target word parts.

## Analyses

### *Coding*

Each text was analyzed using Range (Nation & Heatley, 2004), and coded for 1K<sup>9</sup>, 2K<sup>10</sup>, AWL<sup>11</sup> and technical vocabulary. VLS codes were based on categories from Gu and Johnson (1996), Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999), Schmitt (1997) and Schmitt and Schmitt (1993). However other refinements and distinctions arose from the first round of observations and affective questions, and these were incorporated into the coding system to more closely reflect the data (Adams et al., 2005). A full set of strategies and their codes is in Appendix C.

### *Inter-rater reliability check*

A trial of inter-rater reliability showed a 76.5% degree of conformity in the affective interview, and a 75% degree of conformity in the first observational task. Differences were mainly attributable to the nuances discerned by the observer.

## Results

### *Participant profiles*

#### ***Nia***

Nia had studied EFL for 320 hours before emigrating to NZ. She spent 2000 hours studying ESL in a NZ high school, before 1500 hours of study using English as a medium at a tertiary institution.

### *Affective responses*

Nia emphatically believed that vocabulary learning is an individual process, was relaxed about the gradual acquisition of words and had a clear rationale for studying technical and colloquial words. She would persevere, often reading at the expense of eating.

Her favourite strategies were guessing from context, background knowledge and linguistic clues and asking a Kiwi friend. At home she used hard-copy English/English, bilingual and technical dictionaries, but didn't take them to class as they were too heavy. The frustration of learning vocabulary was apparent "I use a dictionary when I don't know the words and there's no-one to ask or I'm too angry to ask".

Nia's productive medical vocabulary score indicated secure knowledge of 67%. The combination of 93.3% at 2K level, 91.7% in the Academic Word List and 94.4% in the medical receptive test enabled Nia to cope relatively confidently with her academic

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<sup>9</sup> First thousand common words

<sup>10</sup> Second thousand common words

<sup>11</sup> Academic word list – the 570 common headwords which occur across every discipline of academic writing.

reading. She had gained 3.7%, 22.2%, 26.9% and 41.7% respectively between pre and post-tests. A table of the proficiency scores for all participants is in Appendix D.

### *Observations*

Over the three observations, Nia guessed about a quarter of the words using linguistic clues, and another quarter using wider context. Before moving on to the next sentence, she would usually ask for confirmation or meaning, and sometimes consult an English/English dictionary. She was interested in the nuances of meaning and usage, and reintegrated the meaning back into the context. This reflected the ‘in-class’ pattern she reported in her affective interview.

### **Ney**

Prior to emigrating to NZ, Ney studied EFL for 200 hours. On arrival in NZ, she studied ESL for 1200 hours and used English as the medium for study for 1000 hours in a NZ high school setting. She then studied a further 1500 hours using English as the medium in a tertiary institution.

### *Affective responses*

Ney believed words should be acquired in context as an “every day life process”. She used immediate clues, guessing from wider context. In class, she preferred the multilingual electronic translator or asking someone “if it is urgent.” She was keen to browse in the Mandarin/English bilingual dictionary (not her L1<sup>12</sup>) and English technical dictionaries.

Ney’s combination of strong (93.3%) 2K and (86.7%) 3K levels compensated to some degree for a lower (72.2%) AWL score. Her receptive medical vocabulary knowledge was sound at 91.7% and her productive medical vocabulary score was 75%. She made modest gains of 21.7%, 8.3%, 0% and 10% in 2K, 3K, AWL and receptive medical words respectively. She copes well with her course reading, although she reported difficulty with academic words and colloquial language.

### *Observations*

Ney attacked each word before moving on. Over 60% of the time she used linguistic clues, and a third of the time used wider context clues. Although she did sometimes ask directly for the English meaning, she was more likely to ask for confirmation of a guess or a hint. In some cases she reread the whole sentence in order to guess, or had a guess then looked up the word in an English/English dictionary. She noticed word parts, adverbial and adjectival endings, whether a word was colloquial or academic and used lookup strategies. Although dictionaries were used sparingly, in line with self-reported behaviour, she would often use the dictionary more than once for a word, digging deep into words and integrating meaning. There were no annotations.

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<sup>12</sup> First language

## **Alisa**

Alisa had only studied EFL for 160 hours before emigration. She studied ESL as an adult in NZ for 4400 hours and then studied using English as the medium for 740 hours in a tertiary institution.

### *Affective responses*

Alisa believed in both acquiring words in context and in putting words to use. She studied six days a week, read medical romances every evening and watched English movies on her days off study “to get listening practice”. She enthusiastically collected words, repeating and rewriting them several times.

Although she preferred an electronic L1 bilingual translator with English/English as a back-up, she admitted that “although the electronic dictionary is very quick it is sometimes not correct.” Academic words were identified as the most difficult although “they’re no problem to use.”

New words were guessed from context and from linguistic clues. Notes on meaning and use were in L1 and sometimes in English. She planned her vocabulary learning and was aware of the gradual acquisition process.

Alisa’s diagnostic tests showed 100% mastery of 2K and receptive medical vocabulary, 93.3% in 3K, 97.2% in AWL and 75% productive use of medical vocabulary. This vocabulary profile meant that she coped competently with her academic tasks. She had made gains of 15.4%, 33.3%, 29.6% and 20% in 2K, 3K, AWL and medical receptive vocabulary.

### *Observations*

Alisa brought her L1 translator. She read the entire passage, making preliminary guesses using linguistic clues and background clues. Rereading the word was sufficient to trigger a solution for many words. Guesses were refined on a second pass, using the L1 translator and checking back into context (sometimes a couple of times) or occasionally asking for confirmation.

## **Jay**

Jay was the only true ‘international’ participant. She had done 1198 hours of EFL, 1000 hours of ESL as an adult in a language academy in NZ, and studied for 1500 hours in the medium of English in NZ in a tertiary institution.

### *Affective responses*

Jay paid attention to recurrent and bionursing words. In the lecture context, she filtered the relevance of words using her translator, and was relaxed that the meaning of the word would become clear in context in classes other than bionursing. Although the translator was convenient and fast, she acknowledged that it was “fast, not deep” compared with the English/English dictionary. She browsed dictionaries and utilized incidental opportunities for vocabulary expansion, read fiction, and watched TV episodes and movies several times over.

The connection between correct pronunciation, spelling and remembering or encoding a word was vital. She used word cards and labelling and also visualized and rehearsed target items before sleep. However, she had realized the value of some notes on usage as well.

Jay scored 63.3% on 2K, 80% on 3K, 47.2% on AWL and 83.3% on receptive medical words after gains of 11.8%, 50%, 21.4% and 20% respectively. Her medical productive result of 16.7% indicated a less secure grasp of these words. This combination of scores corroborates her report that “Technical vocabulary is the most difficult. Medical words are pretty hard.”

### *Observations*

Jay brought her translator. She first guessed from the sentence context and used word parts and grammatical clues. Occasionally she asked for the correct pronunciation or for confirmation. She divided the text into sections of one to three paragraphs, corresponding roughly to headings in the text, and never went past the end of a section without checking any unknowns, although she could still “catch the main idea.” On her second pass over each section, there was a pattern of translator use followed by a note on meaning in her L1. Towards the end of the passage, initial use of translator and L1 glossary occurred much more frequently.

### *Affo*

Affo had studied EFL for 640 hours prior to emigration. She studied ESL in adult classes for 4250 hours in NZ, and then studied 3000 hours using English as a medium in a tertiary setting.

### *Affective responses*

Affo was concerned with correct pronunciation and its relationship to recognizing, remembering, spelling and encoding a new word. She was selective in which words to focus attention on “It’s important if it is in the subject.” Rereading sentences was useful. She preferred “a good English/English dictionary like Oxford Advanced” and linguistic clues such as word parts. Notes about correct usage were as important as meaning. Regular use was important. She devoted time to learning new vocabulary “I do work so many times with it...It’s very hard work.”

Affo’s perfect mastery of medical receptive vocabulary was confirmed by her excellent 83.3% medical productive result, and probably is due to her familiarity with the medical field, having worked in a medical setting in NZ for five years. However the underlying 86.7% 2K, 70% 3K and 72% AWL scores after gains of 30%, 50%, 18.2% and 28.6% explain why she found academic vocabulary difficult and academic reading so time-consuming.

### *Observations*

Affo read through to the end of the passage, highlighting words, and guessing mainly using linguistic cues. On her second pass over the passage, she used an

English/English dictionary on all unknowns, linguistic clues on some words and some rereading. On her third pass over the passage, she used an L1 bilingual dictionary on the remaining unknowns and asked for meaning of the remainder as a last resort. She reported that she habitually followed this procedure “It takes me a long time to study, honestly.” The use of looking up strategies worked well on inflections, but less well on alternative meanings, especially when the L1 dictionary was “not good enough to understand the subject.”

## **The universally difficult items**

Each participant had a different set of unfamiliar words. However, the set of universally difficult items - words that every participant found difficult - were all technical words, defined in this study as words not in the first two thousand or academic word lists. Three of these words - *concrete*, *architecture* and *sophisticated* - were in the three thousand word list. Two of the words – *sustaining* and *spectrum* were in the four thousand word list. *Garbage* was in the six thousand word list. *Turbine* was in the seven thousand word list. *Tangible* and *torrent* were in the eight thousand word list, and *elusive* and *amoebas* were not in any list.

In context, the five adjectives *concrete*, *sustaining*, *sophisticated*, *tangible* and *elusive* were redundant to the passage. Both technical words *spectrum* and *amoebas* had definitions in preceding or following sentences. The last four words, *architecture*, *garbage*, *turbine* and *torrent* were all used in illustrative metaphors that were not directly relevant to the anatomy and physiology context.

More confident readers tended to make a contextual guess or read on to the end of the passage to give context a chance. In the process, they decided whether it was important to confirm guesses by using their favourite dictionary or asking. This particular selection of universally unknown words was interesting because participants moved rapidly through the word-solving process compared to time spent using a larger number of strategies on some of the other words in the texts which fewer participants found difficult. This is probably due to the redundancy around these eleven particular words.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study set out to investigate what first-year EAL nursing students believed about vocabulary learning, which strategies they reported using, whether there were patterns in their actual use of vocabulary learning strategies as they read technical texts, and whether there were discrepancies between reported and actual use of particular strategies. Although participants were relatively homogeneous in their beliefs, they showed individual styles in their reported and actual strategy use. There was some overlap in patterns of strategy use.

### *Beliefs*

Beliefs clearly related to the students' context as ESL, English as the medium of instruction undergraduates. They were relaxed about the fact that words would arise several times in real life, and were confident to judge whether a word deserved attention. Their favoured strategies comprised focused attention on potentially useful items such as medical word parts and academic word lists, browsing in medical dictionaries and checking up on interesting words in case they were encountered again. Belief in memory strategies was conspicuously absent.

### *Reported use*

All participants espoused selective attention, use of word-based strategies such as word parts, and use of background knowledge. They all took advantage of opportunities to expand their vocabulary, in conversations, films, TV, recreational reading, dictionary browsing and word-smithing. Alisa noticed collocations and good medical writing exemplars and used these to write appropriately for the genre. Baker (1988) had previously noted this successful writing strategy.

Reported use of English/English and bilingual dictionaries was even, except for a preference for the bilingual translator in the case of the international student. The two older participants reported heavy use of repeating strategies, and the international participant used word cards extensively. All reported taking notes of both meaning and use, with a preference for use. They were concerned with correct pronunciation, reflecting the importance of oral skills in Lepetit and Cichocki's (2002) survey of intending health professionals. The two NZ high school experienced participants strongly advocated social strategies.

### *Contrasting patterns of use*

Participants showed distinctly individual patterns of strategy preference and use. However, there was a marked contrast in style between participants who had experienced the NZ high school environment and those who had not. Nia and Ney, the NZ high schooled participants, were interested in colloquial vocabulary, curious about the details of unfamiliar words, and were more likely to stop and explore each new word than to read on. They guessed from background knowledge twice as often and asked for meaning, confirmation and hints a third of the time as opposed to hardly or not at all for the others. Their scores for use of immediate context clues were similar to the other group.

In contrast, the two older participants, Alisa and Affo, read to the end of the passage 81% of the time before checking in their preferred dictionaries on a second pass. They both checked for inflections when they used dictionaries for about a third of the words. Guesses were almost exclusively from immediate context clues and averaged 40% of unknown words. They used multiple strategies on words. Despite these similarities, their dictionary techniques differed. Alisa used her bilingual dictionary on all of her unknown words, and then checked an English/English dictionary for 5% of these words on a second pass. Affo used the English/English dictionary for 60% of



unknown words, and then checked a third of these in her bilingual dictionary on a second pass.

The remaining participant, Jay, the only international student, tended to read sections of text, and then use her electronic translator to check about 60% of the unknown words. She did not use an English/English dictionary at all. Only 5% of her guesses used background knowledge, and she guessed about a quarter of all unfamiliar words using immediate context clues.

### *Similar patterns of use*

All participants used the successful strategy of rereading whole sections of text rather than repeating a word, thus enabling chunking of meaning (Nassaji, 2003) and noticed and delved into salient words. These factors correlate with higher retention rates (Fraser, 1999; Kramsch, 1979).

The stimulated recall sessions revealed that participants were reluctant to ask for meaning or clarification in front of the whole class, although they all considered that pursuing a tutor for this purpose after class was acceptable.

### *Correlation with proficiency*

Participants who scored more than 85% in the 2K, 3K and medical receptive tests found reading much easier than those who scored less than 85% in the 2K and 3K levels, even where their medical receptive scores were comparable. Lee and Muncie (2006) noted that the use of the first two thousand words remained stable, and that 29% of new vocabulary was retained, 14 days after explicit focus. This certainly applies to this group, who had concentrated on medical and academic word list words over the previous three months, and made substantial gains in these words. However, the difference between receptive and productive use of this vocabulary was more marked in the individuals who were less secure at the 2K and 3K level.

## **Conclusion**

The pattern emerging from this study is that vital words tend to be amplified or signalled in the text, and thus become self-explanatory. Although adjectives were difficult to decode, they were rarely crucial to the comprehension of the passage. The most problematic area was the use of metaphors that were unrelated to the topic or the background of the participants.

One striking observation was how time-consuming the task of reading a textbook was for students. Participants commonly read a passage at least twice, and often used more than two strategies to decode problematic words. They often found their bilingual dictionaries inadequate for the task. This affected the older students more, as their dictionary use was heavier, compared to the NZ high-school educated students who relied heavily on context clues and asking people for definitions or hints.

In Æsop's fable of the tortoise and the hare, the tortoise accepts the hare's challenge to race, the hare complacently naps and the tortoise wins by dint of steady perseverance and self-awareness (Jacobs, 1894). Although these participants never expected to out-sprint native-speakers in the academic stakes, it has transpired that their blend of perseverance and skilful use of vocabulary learning strategies has enabled them to more than hold their own. As learning advisors, we can recommend that they also relax a little, secure in the knowledge that important words will be signalled, adjectives are often redundant and irrelevant metaphors can be safely disregarded.

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## **Appendix A: Questionnaire - Part 1 Background information**

What is your age?

Under 20  20-29  30-39  40-49  50-59

What is your first language?

What other languages do you speak?

What other languages do you read?

What other languages do you write?

What is your highest level of study in your own country?

How many years of study have you done in English?

## **Appendix B: Questionnaire - Part 2 – Affective questions**

What do you believe is the best way to learn vocabulary?

Which ways do you think people should use?

How many hours do you spend reading your textbooks?

How many hours do you spend reading other kinds of books or magazines?

Which words do you find difficult?

How do you decide if it is important or not to know a new word?

What do you do when you meet a new word?

What clues from the word itself and the words around it do you use to guess the meaning of a new word?

When do you use a dictionary?

What sort of dictionary do you use?

Do you read a dictionary for fun?

What sort of notes do you make about the meaning of a new word?

What sort of notes do you make about the use of a new word?

What ways do you use to make sure you remember a new word?

How do you plan your vocabulary learning?

## Appendix C:

Table 1: *Codes, amplifications and sources*

BEL-WMEM	Words should be memorized.	Gu & Johnson (1996)
BEL-WBUP	Words should be acquired in context: bottom up	Gu & Johnson (1996)
BEL-WTDN	Words should be studied and put to use: top down	Gu & Johnson (1996)
BEL-INDV	People learn vocabulary in individual ways	Silvester(2006)
META-SI	Metacognitive regulation: self-initiation	Gu & Johnson (1996) Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown (1999)
META-PERS	Metacognitive regulation: perseverance	Schmitt & Schmitt (1993)
META-SA	Metacognitive regulation: selective attention	Gu & Johnson (1996)
META-SAAV	Metacognitive regulation: avoidance	Schmitt & Schmitt (1993)
META-PL	Metacognitive regulation: plan learning	Silvester(2006)
META-DF	Metacognitive regulation: read dictionary for fun	Silvester(2006)
GUESS-BKWC	Guess using background knowledge/wider context	Gu & Johnson (1996)
GUESS-BKRP	Read to end of paragraph then guess	Silvester(2006)
GUESS-BKRE	Read entire passage then guess	Silvester(2006)
GUESS-LCIC	Guess using linguistic cues/immediate context	Gu & Johnson (1996)
GUESS-LCRS	Read to end of sentence then guess	Silvester(2006)
DICT-COMP	Dictionary strategies for comprehension	Gu & Johnson (1996)
DICT-EXT	Extended dictionary strategies	Gu & Johnson (1996)
DICT-LUP	Looking up strategies	Gu & Johnson (1996)

DICT-L1BI	L1 bilingual dictionary	Silvester(2006)
DICT-LOBI	Other bilingual dictionary	Silvester(2006)
DICT-EE	English/English dictionary	Silvester(2006)
DICT-EET	English/English technical dictionary	Silvester(2006)
DICT-TEL1	Technical English to L1 dictionary	Silvester(2006)
SOC-EEM	Ask someone for English meaning	Schmitt (1997)
SOC-TEL1	Ask someone for L1 translation	Schmitt (1997)
SOC-CONF	Ask someone to confirm a guess	Silvester(2006)
SOC-HINT	Ask someone for a hint	Silvester(2006)
SOC-AE	Ask someone to pronounce the word so you can auditorily encode it.	Silvester(2006)
MEM-RWL	Memory rehearsal – using word lists	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-ROR	Memory rehearsal – oral repetition	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-RVR	Memory rehearsal – visual repetition	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-ASEL	Memory – association/elaboration	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-IMAG	Memory- imagery	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-UISE	Memory –visual encoding	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-AUDE	Memory – auditory encoding	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-WSTR	Memory – word structure	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-SEME	Memory – semantic encoding	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-CONE	Memory – context encoding	Gu & Johnson (1996)
MEM-ACTI	Memory – activation	Gu & Johnson (1996)
NOTE-MEAN	Notes- on meaning	Gu & Johnson (1996)
NOTE-USAGE	Notes- on usage	Gu & Johnson (1996)
VOC-ACAD	Academic words	Silvester (2006)
VOC-TECH	Technical words	Silvester (2006)
VOC-CQ	Colloquial words	Silvester (2006)

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## Appendix D:

Table 2: *Proficiency test results*

	Nia	Ney	Alisa	Jay	Affo
2K pre-test %	90	76.7	86.7	56.7	66.7
2K post-test %	93.3	93.3	100	63.3	86.7
% gain	3.7	21.7	15.4	11.8	30
3K pre-test %	60	80.0	70	53.3	46.7
3K post-test %	73.3	86.7	93.3	80	70
% gain	22.2	8.3	33.3	50	50
AWL pre-test %	72.2	72.2	75	38.9	61.1
AWL post-test %	91.7	72.2	97.2	47.2	72.2
% gain	26.9	0	29.6	21.4	18.2
Receptive medical vocabulary pre-test	66.7	83.3	83.3	69.4	77.8
Receptive medical vocabulary post-test	94.4	91.7	100	83.3	100
% gain	41.7	10	20	20	28.6
Productive medical vocabulary %	66.7	75	75	16.7	83.3

# **A + B = 1:1, formula required? Reflections on learning development and one-to-one teaching from a new learning development tutor.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides some reflections on my first year of practice in learning development. It takes the form of a personal narrative interwoven with a review of literature from this field of study and culminates in a number of recommendations for introducing new practitioners to learning development work. From the outset of my time as a learning development tutor, I have been met with a wide range of new and challenging situations and I was concerned that my teaching should be consistent with, and to the same standard as, other more experienced learning development practitioners. I sought a formula or prescription that could guide my one-to-one teaching in particular. As kind and willing to assist me as my colleagues were, I found them strangely disinterested in providing me with this formula! What has become apparent to me over the last year is that a student-centred approach that recognises each student's specific learning challenges and allows for a tutor to engage his or her own personal teaching style and professional judgment may be more important than consistency of approach.

The role of a learning development tutor is complex (Bartlett, 2005) and often misunderstood by those outside the field (Devlin, 1995). Those entering the learning development arena come from a variety of different educational backgrounds and frequently enter without specific learning development qualifications (Percy & Stirling, 2004; Sherpa, 2000). The highly variable dynamics and processes of one-to-one consultations represent one area that can be challenging to the new learning development tutor. This paper seeks to consider one-to-one teaching from the perspective of someone new to the learning development field and provides a short narrative exploration of my experiences as a learning development 'neophyte'. While more scientific approaches to research in the learning development field are important, the use of personal narrative as a research method has its strengths for thinking about the complex processes of induction to one-to-one learning development practice. Writers such as Holman Jones (2005) see personal text as a form of critical intervention in the social, cultural and political realms. She believes that "looking at the world from a specific, perspectival, and limited vantage point can tell, teach and put people in motion" (p.763). It is hoped that the recommendations included in this paper will be valuable for the induction of new learning development tutors.

One of the most significant features of one-to-one work is the conversation about learning that takes place. Many authors have spoken about the importance of conversation in learning development. Varvara Richards, in her keynote speech at the 2003 ATLAANZ conference observes that “whether it is concerned with syntax or calculus, in whatever discipline at whatever level... our main mode of teaching is through conversation”. Murphy and Sherwood (2003) also point out that tutoring “is collaborative” and “grounded in interpersonal transactions” (p.1). This aspect of learning development practice, that is, the ability to work closely with students and engage them in conversations, is part of what attracted me to a learning development role in the first place.

Indeed, my journey into learning development began about two years ago with a series of conversations with two remarkable women. Both women possessed a significant breadth of experience in tertiary teaching and shared their knowledge with me in numerous generous ways. In our conversations I talked about my love of learning, my desire to work closely with students (*kanohi ki te kanohi*) and my desire to work in a field where I could help (*awhi*) others in a tertiary education setting. I expressed particular interest in working with students coming from non-traditional backgrounds similar to mine. Both of these women, in different ways suggested tutoring, foundation studies work and importantly for me, learning development work. It was a life-changing suggestion because, prior to this, I had only a limited awareness of the student learning centre at the university where I was working and like many others in the academy, did not fully understand what was involved in a learning development role (Devlin, 1995).

Through my friends’ coaching, mentoring and support I began to seek out a position in learning development. This led me to Te Tari Awhina at Unitec (Unitec is an Institute of Technology located in Central Auckland, New Zealand. It has a dual sector focus and provides degree-level programmes and vocational training). Te Tari Awhina, like many other learning centres, provides a range of academic support services to students. Tutors teach a variety of workshops (both generic and course-specific); provide a drop-in service and online resources, in addition to one-to-one consultations. Tutors at Te Tari Awhina do not teach course content, but work with students to develop their academic skills in a variety of areas such as academic writing, referencing and critical thinking.

In terms of staff time, a significant part of the work of a Te Tari Awhina tutor is made up of one-to-one consultations. One-to-one sessions can be 25 or 50 minutes in length and can be focused on a variety of academic skills or literacies. In most cases, students make bookings with the Te Tari Awhina administrator before meeting with a tutor.

As I undertook my first one-to-one sessions I realised how rich and diverse my role would be. It also became very clear that learning development work demanded a significant array of skills and competencies. This is particularly true in the one-to-one context as, in the normal course, a tutor does not see a student’s assignment before

meeting with them and therefore needs to be able to make decisions quickly about the best way to work with the student and their writing. While I brought with me some experience of teaching in this way, I was concerned about how to undertake these teaching sessions in a learning development context.

My colleagues offered me their time and support and as the first days and weeks went by I began to seek specific guidance in how to approach my one-to-one teaching. My colleagues spoke about the values and philosophies they thought were particularly important and I was gradually acculturated into my role. However, it became clear that they would not give me a formula or blueprint for this kind of teaching.

I became concerned about a number of aspects of my one-to-one teaching and looked for greater direction. I was particularly concerned about the difficulties I was experiencing in finding language to structure a session. I was unsure about where boundaries lay in terms of the support I was providing to a student and wondered whether I was providing too much or too little help. I was also unsure about what was common practice in our centre, for example I wanted to know if it was acceptable to consult with another tutor during a one-to-one consultation (with the student's permission). I questioned whether, if I found a one-to-one session difficult, it was because I was doing something wrong, or because there were clear challenges in working with a particular student? I also wanted to know whether I was providing a similar standard of service to that provided by other more experienced tutors. Of course, I asked questions about some of these issues. However, sometimes I did not feel as though I could ask certain questions for fear of exposing my ignorance, or I was not sure exactly what my questions were.

Ideally, one-to-one teaching as part of learning development practice should be located in the theoretical landscape of learning development. My engagement with this literature is a retrospective one, made more difficult by the fact that, as Percy and Stirling (2004) claim, "the foundational principles informing LAS expertise are by no means apparent to a newcomer to the field" (p. 53). Olliver-Richardson and Bowker (2003) similarly note that a significant issue facing a new learning advisor is an apparent lack of comprehensive literature that discusses one-to-one teaching pedagogy or provides practical strategies for one-to-one teaching. This leads a new learning development tutor to wonder if one-to-one teaching is something that is straightforward, or is something one should be able to do intuitively. However, Grasha (2002) is of the view that rather than being something simple, "one-to-one teaching involves close and professionally personal relations which are complex" (p. 139) and this complexity has contributed to a lack of literature on this subject. He goes on to identify up to ten roles a one-to-one teacher can play in a session including that of a "prescriptive advisor; questioner, mini-lecturer, coach, role model, active listener, discussion facilitator consultant, resource person and provider of feedback" (p.141).

As I reflected on my initial reactions to my first one-to-one sessions it became clear to me that a prescriptive set of rules would not fit well with the work of a learning development tutor. As Silverman and Casazza (2000) state, “learning is best experienced in settings that acknowledge the uniqueness of individuals” (p. xi). In other words, learning development is student-focused and the approach taken when working with a student is shaped by the individual’s situation, personality and needs.

In addition, a detailed set of prescriptive approaches or processes does not allow for a tutor’s professional judgement or personal teaching style. Biggs (1999) notes when discussing tertiary teaching, “there is no one single all purpose best method of teaching” (p. 2). He is of the view that teachers have to adjust their methods to suit the particular subject they are teaching, the resources they have available and their own individual strengths and weaknesses.

Moreover, some of the literature that does address approaches to one-to-one teaching can seem contradictory. On the one hand, writers such as Brooks (2003) advocate for a hands-off approach by tutors. Brooks notes that tutors should not be editors and rather, should encourage the student to own their paper and “take full responsibility for it” (p.170). However, others such as Shamon and Burns (2003) take the view that these student-centred, non-directive practices can become orthodoxy and that directive tutoring is often an effective approach. Obviously, these viewpoints reflect an ongoing debate within the learning development field on how student learning can best be facilitated, however, for a new tutor they can add further complexity to what is an already complex issue.

Over the course of my first year of practice, I have conducted many one-to-one sessions and learned a lot from the students I have worked with. I also had a number of conversations with my colleagues about my practice. These conversations led me to reflect on my first year in learning development and identify what was helpful in guiding my development and what I think I could have benefited from. Drawing on this experience, I have some suggestions to offer about how to support a new learning development tutor and to promote their one-to-one teaching skills. These suggestions are intended to be practical and by that I mean they are things that could be done without large inputs of staff time or other resources.

Firstly, I suggest that a resource folder be given to a new staff member containing key handouts organised by learning development subjects such as academic writing and exam skills. This means handouts are easy to find and peruse and I found this was immensely useful for me when I first began. In addition, I believe providing a new learning development tutor with a list of questions that are often used in one-to-one sessions could be very useful. Using questions in the one-to-one context is important for the engagement of a learner and a new tutor may struggle with finding appropriate questions. Another addition to a resource folder could be a list of carefully selected readings about learning development practice and one-to-one teaching. For example, I found the piece ‘*Learning to talk one-to-one 101*’, (Olliver-Richardson & Bowker,

2003) written from the perspective of new learning development tutors to be particularly worthwhile and would include it on a reading list for new tutors.

Another suggestion to help a new learning development tutor would be to ask the administrator, where possible, to gather extra information about the learning development subject a student wants to focus on, when the student makes a booking. A brief note could be added in the booking information for the tutor to check before seeing a student. This could be done in the first few weeks of a tutor's tenure and would give the tutor an opportunity to prepare for a session.

Although I did not observe my colleagues teaching in a one-to-one context, I would also like to suggest that 'shadowing' experienced colleagues during these sessions could be extremely helpful. When observing a one-to-one session the new tutor can pay attention to their colleague's use of language and the way the more experienced tutor interacts with a student and builds rapport. Although this may involve some input of time and organisation, particularly in terms of seeking a student's permission before a session, its potential return for a new tutor makes this undertaking worthwhile.

What I benefited from most was participating in conversations about learning development practice with other tutors. Professional conversations between colleagues can be thought-provoking and can foster reflective processes which result in learning (Haigh, 2005). Palmer (1998) comments when discussing teaching, that "the growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it" (p. 144) and it is clear that conversation as a tool for professional development has been explicitly identified as being important in several teacher training initiatives (Haigh, 2005).

In addition to making time available for staff to interact in informal and unstructured ways, it is important to have team discussions about one-to-one teaching. Participating in these discussions was highly beneficial for me. This can be facilitated by setting some time aside, perhaps, in a fortnightly or monthly meeting where there is a structured discussion. Each person in the team can speak to specific questions and these can provide focus to the session. In our centre we have used the following questions as prompts for discussion:

- What enjoyable or positive thing(s) have you experienced in your one-to-one teaching?
- What difficulty (ies) have you experienced in your one-to-one teaching?
- How did you deal with this difficulty (ies)?

These questions can serve to stimulate the conversation and often allow for quite interesting reflection. A session such as this can go a long way towards helping a new tutor understand the issues surrounding learning development practice. It can shed light on a lot of the concerns that a new learning development tutor can have,

particularly in terms of common difficulties or challenges all staff may face in the one-to-one context and can provide opportunities to identify useful strategies. Feedback from other staff in our centre was that they too found these sessions to be affirming and useful. As Clark (2001, as cited in Haigh, 2005, p. 10) notes: “Good conversation feeds the spirit; it feels good; it reminds us of our ideals and hopes for education; it confirms we are not alone in our frustrations and doubts, or in our small victories”.

As I draw to a close I would like to raise a question for those in the learning development field. Would the creation of a set of practice notes or guidelines about one-to-one teaching be helpful? Could a set of guidelines that addresses one-to-one teaching contribute to a learning development pedagogical framework in the New Zealand context? I am wary of advocating for anything that could contribute to what might look like a ‘cookie-cutter’ approach to working with students and I am not sure how these possible guidelines would be generated or deployed. However, on the basis of my experience and given that the work of learning development tutors often includes a significant amount of one-to-one tutoring, in addition to the complex nature of this kind of teaching, it seems clear that a set of non-prescriptive teaching guidelines would be useful.

In conclusion, further conversations should be had about how we support those entering the field and how we construct our work. It is hoped that my reflections can stimulate some conversations about one-to-one teaching and how new learning development tutors can develop their skills in a supported and effective way. As Biggs (1999) states “through reflection we come to some conclusion about how we may do our particular job better” (p. 2). Finally, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues from both Te Tari Awhina and Maia for anchoring my practice in my first year as a learning development tutor in what has been for me, largely uncharted waters. This support has allowed me to grow into my role and I look forward to my next year in learning development with great enthusiasm.

Ngā mihi nui, ngā mihi mahana ki a koutou.

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# **Professionalism: An anchor to the past or a way to the future?**

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## **Abstract**

Learning advisors wear a Joseph-coat of many colours. Our work includes elements of both support and challenge as we become motivators, counsellors, teachers and critics to the students we work with – sometimes all in the same session! What prepares us for the challenges these multiple roles bring? How do we deal with this multiplicity? How can we, as a profession, ensure that our work is safe, ethical and, above all, recognised by those we work for?

This paper argues that we need to move to heighten the professional standing of what we do, especially in light of the recent changes in the tertiary sector in New Zealand. It suggests that we can look to the experiences and practices of other helping professions such as teaching and counselling, and explore the need for professional supervision. It presents a brief review of the literature but is primarily designed as a springboard for ongoing discussion and debate as to the future of our work and the role that ATLAANZ might play in determining such a future.

The 2006 ATLAANZ conference marks, almost to the month, the end of my twelfth year as a learning advisor. I started in ‘learning support’ with The Open Polytechnic and then moved to the Auckland College of Education. Then, as now, there was no specific training for this work; no particular qualification required. One of the most interesting things about this work is the diversity of people who do it. As I am the membership officer for the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ), I can tell you how many learning advisors there are in the association – but that would only approximate the numbers of learning advisors there actually are. Some very interesting questions arise as I reflect back and think forward about the work I do. Who are we? Why do people do this work? How did they get into it? What is the work we do? Are we professionals? If this is so – what makes it so? What role should ATLAANZ play in the development of the profession of learning advising? It is these questions I will explore in this paper.

## **Who are we?**

In 2006 there were 166 learning advisors who were members of the national association ATLAANZ. There must, of course, be others who work in this field but we have no way of knowing this information. Since ATLAANZ was formed in 2000, 281 unique membership numbers have been issued. 2006 saw the highest number of active memberships in our history (See Figure 1).

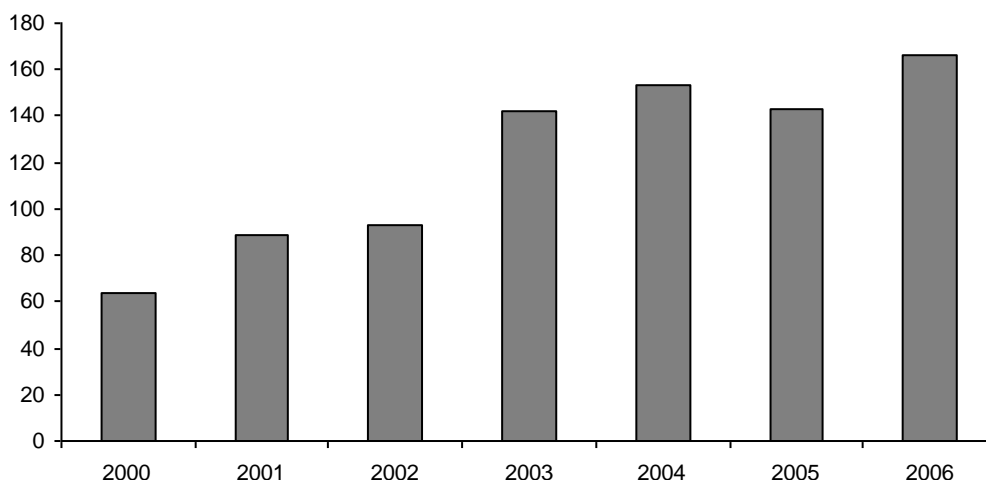


Figure 1. ATLAANZ membership by year

Of the 166 members in 2006, 24 have been members for the entire seven years of the association's existence and 36 were new to the association this year. Beyond these simple statistics we have little other information about our membership. Simple arithmetic would then tell us that 115 people have been members of ATLAANZ but are not now. Retirement would account for some but perhaps there are other reasons for why people come and go as they do. Firstly, as our work contains a 'teaching' element, the reasons for leaving may be similar to those given by teachers who leave in the first few years, citing three main reasons: the job was 'not for them'; the low status of teaching and associated low levels of pay; and, burnout and stress (see, for example, Baldacci & Johnson, 2006; Cosgrove, 2000; Troman, 2000).

As well, it could be related to the whole "finding yourself in your working life" thing. It has been said that people entering the workforce now can expect to have multiple employers in their lifetime (Grimaldi, 2006). This period in history has been described as a time of 'precarious employment' characterised by the rise of temporary and unpaid work as part of a career path (Connell & Burgess, 2006). Most recently the theory of the 'boundary-less career' has arisen, where career choice is strongly driven by market forces. At the same time, however, in an apparent paradox, people must be concerned about the meaning and purpose of what they do and remaining employable rather than being connected to the notion of a single, life-long career (Lips-Wiersma & Mcmorland, 2006). Perhaps leaving learning advising is related to the work we do. This is the next area for discussion in this paper but before leaving this section about *who* we are I would suggest that we don't really know, and that ATLAANZ has a role, perhaps even a responsibility to its members, to find out why people join us and why they leave.

## What do we do?

Most would agree that the work of learning advisors contains elements of many things – teaching, encouraging, motivating, coaching, counselling, facilitation, advocacy,

research and professional development. We work primarily with students but also with academic colleagues, administration and faculty. An interesting paper by Spillet and Moisiewicz (2004) about the roles of a dissertation advisor (the equivalent of an academic supervisor in New Zealand) struck a chord. The similarity between the roles they discussed, described, almost completely, my work with students. Not my whole job, but certainly a large part of my day-to-day work.

They describe four roles played by an advisor. There were the two support roles of cheerleader and counsellor, and the two challenge roles of coach and critic. As a cheerleader, the advisor provides support and encouragement, demonstrating an interest and belief in the student's work and a willingness to help. Cheerleaders offer time and access, build trust and encourage effort and, with "frequent acknowledgements that the student is making progress help to sustain student persistence" (p. 249), their role is vital to both the student and the institution.

The counsellor helps students become aware of obstacles and blocks related to their work and provides information to the student on self-management techniques to help overcome these blocks. They focus on the student's 'mental game' by building confidence, maintaining motivation, helping with stress management, challenging old study habits and fostering reflection. They can also encourage the student to normalise their experience and provide a sense of perspective.

In the two challenge roles, the coach directs the work and breaks it into small, achievable steps, connects to the 'big picture' and builds skills to increase the "students' sense of do-ability and can-do-ability" (p. 251). The critic gives students a constructive evaluation of their work, encouraging positive change and empowerment. In addition, the critic develops students' thinking and their voice and ownership of the work through questioning to clarify ideas and ask for explanation, and generating discussion about why the work is the way it is.

All these roles are clearly different, but they are also interdependent with blurred boundaries. For example in the cheerleader role, the advisor builds trust which then enables the critic to be more effective. However, there must be a balance of the roles – too much of any one of them will not lead to positive outcomes for the students. Powerful learning occurs when advisors provide high levels of both support *and* challenge (Spillet & Moisiewicz, 2004).

Working with students is the bulk of what we do – despite the clamour for 'embedding'. But the world of academia is changing. Few of us present at the 2006 conference have escaped the effects of reshaping, restructuring and redundancy. It is not new, of course – I was made redundant from TOPNZ in 1996 – but it is still here. Student numbers in tertiary education in New Zealand are changing as a 'baby blip' moves into the sector. Recently, mature students have become a lesser proportion of the student population (University of Auckland, 2006) and this too may affect our work. The financial commitment of the government to education is coming with more

strings attached, most notably about teaching and learning, and retention, and there is a noticeable air of belt tightening. In the past two years we have seen Colleges of Education merged out of existence, several polytechnics facing crippling financial shortfalls, and faculties in many universities shedding staff.

And when the squeeze is on, never for one instant should we forget that we are “fringe” dwellers and in a precarious position, even if we have justified our existence and embedded ourselves to the n<sup>th</sup> degree, there is every indication that we too will be expected to do more with less.

Our lives *are* impacted by our work. Stress is a large part of our lives and we are as prone to burnout as any other of the ‘helping professions’. In the past we have eschewed any relationship between learning advising and student health and disability, striving to ensure that we are seen as academics, avoiding like the plague the word “remedial” and working to dispel the notion of “deficit” in our work. However, this may not always be a helpful way to be. We can probably learn quite a lot about how to be professional from the health and counselling fields and what do they do to stay sane, healthy and motivated, both individually and as professional groups. But are we actually a *profession*?

### **Are we a profession?**

Colloquially, the term ‘professional’ encompasses notions of commitment, self-organisation, ethics, expertise and status. In his discussion of the status of lecturing, Elliott (1998) summarises the debate around the concept of lecturing as a profession. He notes that to compare professions on the basis of status, autonomy or esteem has “little more than curiosity value” (p. 162) as the concept meets with little consensus among practitioners or the literature. He suggests that lecturers maintain the ‘myth’ of professionalism because it serves a need related to public confidence and faith in performance. However Elliot (1998) does suggest “the value of professionalism as a notion ... may be found in its potential to legitimate autonomy” (p. 164).

Elliot also cites key literature that views professionalism in two radically opposed ways. Firstly, the work of Illich (1973) suggests that the key agenda for professionals is the defence of their profession, which can therefore limit their commitment to those who receive their services. This is in stark contrast to the views of Carr and Kemmis (1986) who suggest that the “distinguishing feature of professions is that the overriding commitment of their members is to the well-being of their clients” (p. 8 in Elliot, 1998, p. 163).

Other literature links professionalism to ethical behaviour (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2007). Corey et al. note however that although professionalism has a relationship with ethical behaviour, a person can act unprofessionally and still not act unethically. For example, not returning phone calls in a timely fashion is probably unprofessional but is not unethical.

Professionalisation has become a rallying cry for learning advisors. I've noted how careful many of us have been to include the word in this conference, for instance. It is blithely and glibly spoken of, but can we truly claim it? If so, why? If not, why not? In comparison to other helping professions we may have some way to go to prove this – if indeed we need to! But I think we can learn from them without competing. With such ambiguity in the literature, perhaps this is another area that needs further debate within our association.

One area of interest to me in all of this discussion of professionalism is the concept of 'supervision' – what is this and what role could it play in our work and professional lives?

### **What is supervision?**

Supervision has been a central component of the move to professionalising other groups such as nursing and the clergy (McMahon, 2003). According to Morrissey (2005), supervision “plays a central role in promoting and maintaining best practice” (p. 313) but to be effective it must be based on a shared understanding of what supervision is and the roles each participant plays in the supervisory relationship. Hawkins and Shohet (2000) add that supervision “can be a very important part of taking care of oneself” (p. 5) and that it can help counter the “staleness, rigidity and defensiveness that can easily occur in professions that require us to give so much of ourselves” (p. 5). But what exactly is 'supervision'?

Supervision comes in many forms and is a debated issue in many ways. Depending on what you read, supervision can be trauma counselling, professional development, reflective practice, mentoring or an apprenticeship scheme. One of the biggest issues in the debate is that if professionalism is truly equated with autonomy, why is there a need for supervision (Grauel, 2002)?

Perhaps we need to reframe supervision as reflective practice (Yegdich, 2002) and move away from the more medical, deficit and power differentiated concepts embodied in the word 'supervision'. This leads to the notion of self-supervision, a new force gaining strength in other fields, which is “the ability and the desire to question one's practice” (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000, p. 193) and become aware of our own motives and practices. Yegdich suggests that reflective practice is the process portion of supervision and as such is “unsuitable for those with no experience” (p. 256). She goes on to note that although reflection is useful, it must occur within a supervision framework as “we are unable to be objective about ourselves in a way that others can” (p. 258).

However, McMahon (2003) has noted “‘niggles’ of discontent” (p. 178) about supervision, finding evidence that it makes little difference to practice and that the outcomes, proclaimed in the rhetoric, have yet to be realised. She found in her research that the respondents who participated in supervision benefited from it but how

much those benefits made a difference in practice was unclear. She concluded that “while those who receive supervision experience personal benefits, this does not amount to a case for advocating for supervision across the profession” (p. 185) and that many helping professions are now questioning the need to adopt supervision as a requirement for professional practice.

However, to leave all professional development solely to individuals may be counter-productive and the words of Dewey sound a warning here. If we reduce our work to an individual’s artistry and expertise then we are relinquishing the notion that learning advising has a cumulative tradition with a specific, professional knowledge base (Tanner & Tanner, 1987) and so what learning there is will “tend to be born and to die with that person” (Dewey, 1929 cited in Tanner & Tanner, 1987, p. 172). At the very least, their accumulated wisdom will be lost to the rest of the profession when they leave. Again, what role does a professional association need to have to preserve the accumulated wealth of wisdom of its members?

### **What is the Role of ATLAANZ?**

From what I have covered so far it seems that perhaps the real role for ATLAANZ is to help answer the previous three questions: Why do people do this work? What is the work we do? What makes us professionals?

McMahon and Patton (2002) contend that the role of professional associations in the helping professions is a leadership one – where the way forward comes from “within”. We must first acknowledge and respect our current stores of knowledge. Second, we must ensure that our association develops a vision for learning advising and that we work toward that vision. We must continue to enable and empower learning advisors across the country and ensure that strong professional networks are built and maintained. Our annual national conference is, I believe, a key and critical element to this. This conference, as it has always done in all the years I have been coming, has re-inspired me, reassured me and restored me to continue to work for one more year. I hope that it will continue to do that for all learning advisors in the future.

I believe we have made a good start in the work of defining our profession and we are to be congratulated for our solid, if modest, beginnings in many areas. We are a small group but contain a great strength of purpose within our number. I have been heartened to see moves toward the development of professional qualifications in our field, the increased use of research related to our practice and the publication of this research, and the gathering of critical data about our past and present practice. I have been moved by the support we have been able to give our colleagues when they have most needed it and I hope we never lose this caring and aroha for others. I have one last plea though – please get involved, respond and debate as it is critical is that we *all* work for the common good. Only then can we move forward and continue to create the profession of learning advising.

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## Partnerships

# Māori Writing Retreats: Advancing Māori Postgraduates

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## Abstract

Māori representation within postgraduate ranks has increased dramatically over the past few years. Within this group, those initiating research degrees often find themselves isolated from traditional whanau/hapu/iwi support, particularly during the actual writing. Reports suggest the retention of Māori into postgraduate study and the completion of research degrees are concerns. Māori institutions are initiating their own response to this problem. This paper details strategies implemented by regional Māori postgraduate supporters in their efforts to increase both the retention of Māori students and their timely progress to completion. Key features of successful strategies are a) Māori academic mentors of proven abilities scaffolding thesis students, b) extended contact time with these mentors and peers, c) community collaboration and support.

A corollary development to individual progress is the opportunity to anchor Māori postgraduate activities within Māori communities. This offers opportunities for knowledge exchange, normalises advanced research in marginalised communities, and reminds potential future Māori leaders of the social base from which Māori development emanates.

## Introduction

The marginalisation of indigenous peoples from full participation in all areas of human development has been extensively documented if poorly addressed (Coates 2004). For Māori, underachievement in education has been a result of the dominant interests of *Pakeha* excluding and systematically undermining Māori interests (Simon, 1998; Simon and Smith, 2001). Smith (2000) has also described the history of this marginalisation, identifying ‘structural impediments’ to Māori self-development implanted by the processes of colonisation and subsequently ‘reproduced and perpetuated’ in the education sector. Māori participation and achievement in education has been a fundamental concern for many Māori as well as being the focus of many government strategies.

Beginning in the 1970s, a renaissance in Māori society and culture has been evident. While gaps remain, and many have widened following neo-liberal reforms in the 1980s and 90s (Ministry of Social Development, 2006), Māori cultural revival has been manifested at all levels of education: *Te kohanga reo*, language nests for pre-schoolers; *Kura kaupapa Māori*, primary; *Whare kura*, secondary; and *Whare*

*waananga*, tertiary. The so-called Māori renaissance is evident in mainstream tertiary enrolments. The numbers of Māori enrolling in universities, polytechnics, wananga and private training establishments has steadily increased over the past decade (Jeffries, 1997). However, Māori tertiary graduates have historically been weighted towards lower level qualifications. Ministry of Education figures (2006, p. 106) paint a broad picture of the Māori postgraduate context:

- Māori make up 8.8% of all postgraduate students (comprising 0.6% of the Māori population, compared to 1.0% the rest of New Zealand);
- 42% are doing Masters studies, 10% doctorates;
- 80% are enrolled in a university, 7% in wananga;
- Wahine (women) outnumber tane (men) by 2:1, and are more likely to complete;
- 33% are studying society and culture; 18% management and commerce; 15% health; 12% education;
- 5 year completion rate for Māori at university is 53%, 29% at wananga.

Furthermore, while nearly 10% of Pakeha domestic students completed postgraduate degrees in 2004, only 2.7% of Maori students managed this (Smart, 2006, p. 21). While the numbers of enrolled Māori students may have increased, those initiating research degrees may find themselves isolated both within their tertiary institutions and from traditional whanau/hapu/iwi support (Reid, 2006). Within tertiary student support services, concern has been expressed on progress, supervision, poverty, and increased pressures from family and work (*ibid*; Armstrong, 2004). Of course, such experiences are by no means confined to Māori. However, with Māori predicted to comprise 17% of New Zealand's population by 2026 (Ministry of Education, 2006), and given the integral role an educated population has in contemporary development issues (Clark, 2007), the poor representation of Māori in postgraduate studies has serious implications for New Zealand.

Universities and polytechnics have sought to support Māori by a wide range of strategies and tactics that involve Māori and non-Māori staff and students. Often these initiatives have relied on the goodwill and unpaid efforts of Māori themselves. Even the simplistic exercise of conducting Treaty workshops for new staff have, at one South Island university, declined from 9 such workshops in 2005 to just one by June 2007 (University of Canterbury, 2007, p. 28). The author's experience of working as a Maori postgraduate advisor in that same institution is of poorly supported, poorly understood short-term, fixed-contract work. However, the example that follows shows that positive outcomes are possible and is drawn from the author's experiences as a member and coordinator of a regional Māori doctoral support programme, and as an employee contracted by a tertiary institution to coordinate support for Maori postgraduates.

## The Māori and Indigenous (MAI) Doctoral Support Programme: a brief history.

MAI developed from a Masters-level tutoring programme that operated at the School of Education at the Auckland University in the 1990s. It involved passionate Maori postgraduates and their supporters working closely in support of each other's studies, juggling the demands of whanau and institution to complete research qualifications. Following a successful 2002 bid for Centre of Research Excellence funding (CoRE) by Nga Pae o te Maramatanga (also based at Auckland University), MAI has been run as a national programme. There are six sites: Mai ki Tamaki Makaurau (University of Auckland), MAI ki AUT (Auckland University of Technology), MAI ki Waikato (Waikato University), MAI ki Poneke (Victoria University Wellington), MAI ki Otautahi (Christchurch), and MAI ki Otakou (Otago University) (see Figure 1 below). Each site draws in students from a wide academic 'hinterland'. For instance, the Christchurch site has students and staff who are enrolled in three different tertiary institutions; from 2006, the South Island sites of Otautahi and Otakou were administered by Te Tapuae o te Rehua as the Tu Mai Paerua programmer. In 2006, the national network was retitled MAI Te Kupenga: the National Programme for Māori and Indigenous Post-Graduate Advancement.



Figure 1. MAI Te Kupenga sites (NB: Mai ki AUT is also located in the Tamaki region).

Source: MAI TE Kupenga webpage

[http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/sites/index.cfm?S=M\\_MAI](http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/sites/index.cfm?S=M_MAI)

Nga Pae has initiated a number of support programmes for Māori researchers and postgraduates, research funding, scholarships/fellowships, post-doctoral funding, knowledge exchange support, regular conferences and publishing options. Writing retreats, where students and staff spend time alone and together discussing and undertaking their writing, have also become an important part of the support and

networking opportunities offered by Nga Pae. Two subtly different retreats will be discussed in some detail next.

## **Māori Writing Retreats**

Nga Pae o te Maramatanga initiated an annual retreat at Hopuhopu, utilising the well-appointed facilities developed by Tainui. The purpose of the retreat was to provide ‘quality conditions and stimulation’ for Māori doctoral students to complete a ‘substantial piece of scholarly writing’ (Nga Pae o te Maramatanga, 2003). The first retreat was held from January 28 to February 5 in 2004, with attendees choosing the length of their commitment and being responsible for travel to Hopuhopu. Meals and single rooms are provided, with meals being communal but with no compulsion to join. People are instead encouraged to make the most of their ‘isolation’ and complete pre-planned writing goals, whether to complete a proposal, a thesis chapter, or a paper for publication.

As a part of the support offered to postgraduates who attend Hopuhopu, seminars are held on fundamental postgraduate issues such as supervision, writing skills, and working with Māori communities. Opportunities for networking with senior Māori academics are also important, not least to demystify the process of doctoral research. Significant numbers of Māori staff and students meet to discuss their work; the second retreat saw a total of 35 Māori doctoral candidates attend. The support offered through these writing retreats mirrors the scaffolding instruction described by Vygotsky as the “...role of teachers and others in supporting the learner’s development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level” (Raymond, 2000, p. 176). Scaffolding is intended to be temporary with support progressively withdrawn as the learner’s abilities increase. The external scaffolds can be removed because “...the system of knowledge itself becomes part of the scaffold or social support for the new learning” (*ibid.*).

A second example of a Māori writing retreat has been initiated by the South Island sites, i.e., Otautahi and Otakou, in conjunction with MAI ki Poneke. The inaugural event was held at Takahanga marae, Kaikoura, over four days in May 2006. Three staff and ten students were accommodated within the *whare nui*, with tables for writing set up in a large adjoining room. Meals were communal, with everyone attending; *tangata whenua* passed through and joined students for meals and conversation.

Students at Takahanga were surveyed by the coordinators to aid planning for subsequent retreats. Responses were universally positive, describing how the experience contributed to their understanding of their own research and possible career pathways. For example, one student commented on what they found valuable:

Meeting new people in different areas of research and discussing similar problems that occur across the board. I found it great to get some perspective

on my thesis as well as some new ideas on pursuing an academic career. I also enjoyed discussing Kaupapa Māori research techniques as a different approach that can be employed in research and also seeing its application in not only the social sciences.

Networking with peers was also mentioned as an important outcome:

The opportunity to meet other PhD students and hear their stories.

Each time I had discussions with students about their research the more it became evident that one day we will have network and potential collegial opportunities in the work context.

The highlight of the Takahanga retreat was the opportunity for interaction with tangata whenua, the local Māori community, who organised a short fieldtrip around several local resource management projects that were components of one MAI student's PhD research. As one student said of these interactions:

Such events remind me of why I'm doing what I'm doing. He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

It is this potential for writing retreats to offer opportunities for contact between Māori communities and Māori postgraduates that is a considerable advance on the support historically offered by tertiary institutions which themselves have minimal contact with these communities. Indeed, such experiences could be said to extend the concept of scaffolding to the area of cultural resilience. Such resilience contributes to a broader interpretation of sustainability by valuing cultural diversity (World Commission on Culture and Diversity, 1995) in the manner by which biodiversity is valued. Through extended contact between Maori communities and Maori thesis students, communities can begin to offer the expertise of their local resource management to broaden the professional development of those Maori postgraduates who intend to continue their careers working alongside Maori communities.

## **Conclusion**

In response to the difficulties experienced by Māori postgraduates within New Zealand tertiary institutions, Māori themselves have attempted to provide peer support to those Maori students attempting theses. The establishment of regular writing retreats for Māori thesis students marks a significant advance in this support, and stems from the establishment of targeted resourcing for Māori research and a realisation of the importance of initiating networking opportunities for Māori students who are isolated within their institutions.

The support provided through writing retreats takes the form of expert advice, peer support and the provision of time and space in which Maori cultural practices are both

possible and encouraged. This paper has presented two examples of writing retreats for Māori doctoral candidates. Hopuhopu is a regular event and attracts significant numbers of Māori staff and students; important outputs include papers that are intended for publication as well as progress towards theses completion. The South Island/Te Wai Pounamu retreat is smaller and more intimately linked with tangata whenua development. Locations for this event will move around Te Wai Pounamu and seek to build on links with local communities and demonstrate the positive effects of collaboration between Māori postgraduates and Māori communities, helping to anchor the work of the former within the needs of the latter.

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## Projections

# How Learning Advisors Promote Significant Learning

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## Abstract

This paper examines how learning advisors, through their work with students, help in the promotion of significant learning (or learning that is important enough to produce change in the learner). Using Fink's (2003) six categories of significant learning (i.e., foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn), examples are drawn from current and previously reported work of learning advisors in New Zealand to illustrate how the different facets of significant learning are addressed in the day-to-day provision of learning instruction and support. Possible future directions for enhancing the facilitation of significant learning at the tertiary level are discussed.

## Introduction

In the last two decades, tertiary institutions in general have started to pay more attention to teaching and learning issues impacting on student academic performance. This development has come about largely because of internationalization and the increasingly globalized education environment in which we operate – where establishing a favourable profile and finding a competitive niche are imperative for institutions to survive. As Trowler and Bamber (2005, p. 81) noted, one of the purposes that the production of higher education teaching and learning policies serve is simply to enable those that produce them to say “Look, we are doing something!” There is also a current trend for government and other funding to be linked to ‘activities’ in this area. For example, in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education has clearly indicated during the past few years that tertiary funding in the near future will change to take greater account of student retention and completion. Further, the establishment of a government funded National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence in order to “promote and support effective teaching and learning across the entire tertiary sector in New Zealand” (Tertiary Education Commission, n.d.) is another example of government interest in teaching and learning issues.

Despite all the ‘talk’ about teaching and learning, there is a common tendency to lose sight of the students themselves and the learning that they undertake. Questions, for example, about the development of skills to enable students to take full advantage of the instructions they receive are rarely investigated. However, seeking answers to such questions are necessary if improvements in students’ actual study performance are to be achieved. Focusing only on teacher development, and neglecting the students who need to effectively learn from those teachers, is simply not adequate. Such

inadequacy is underlined by the fact that “no direct causal relationship between lecturer training and student outcomes has been firmly established” (Trowler & Bamber, 2005, p. 82).

The work of tertiary learning advisors focuses on the development of skills to enable students to learn effectively – and thus achieve success in their studies. It is important to understand this work better as there are clear indications that such work in teaching and supporting students has a clearer and more robust link to actual student outcomes (see, e.g., Acheson, 2006; Manalo, 2006; Manalo & Leader, 2007; Manalo, Wong-Toi, & Henning, 1996; Webb & McLean, 2002). In this paper, such work will be examined using Fink’s (2003) framework of significant learning.

## **Significant learning**

Fink (2003) described ‘significant learning’ as learning that produces some kind of lasting and important change in the learner’s life. Fink elaborated on this notion by pointing out that significant learning produces one or more of the following benefits. It could enhance our experience of life through, for example, the enjoyment of art and music, or the development of a more meaningful philosophy of life. It could enable us to make greater contributions to the many communities we belong to, such as our family, our local community, our religion, our special interest groups, our country – and even the world. It could also prepare us for the world of work, so that we develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to succeed in our chosen fields of work.

Fink devised a taxonomy of significant learning which comprises six major categories: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. He based this taxonomy on his own observations and conversations with students and teachers. He also constructed the taxonomy partly to provide another way of describing learning – one that goes beyond the cognitive aspects of learning that Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy provides (evaluation, synthesis, analysis, application, comprehension, and knowledge). The following section briefly outlines each of Fink’s six categories.

### *Foundational knowledge*

Fink’s (2003) category of *foundational knowledge* combines remembering and understanding of information and ideas (which are two separate categories in Bloom’s taxonomy, 1956). Fink stressed the need for students to have in their possession the necessary knowledge and understanding which form the basis upon which other kinds of learning can be established.

### *Application*

*Application* (also a category in Bloom’s, 1956, taxonomy) pertains to learning how to perform various kinds of skills, whether they be intellectual (e.g., critical, creative, practical thinking skills), physical (e.g., playing the piano), or social (e.g., effective

communication). Fink (2003) pointed out that application learning is crucial because it enables other kinds of learning to be useful.

### *Integration*

The third category of integration (which is synonymous to Bloom's, 1956, 'synthesis') occurs when students perceive meaningful connections between different things. These new connections learners perceive may be between different ideas, different realms of ideas, people, different realms of life (e.g., between school, work, and/or leisure life), or any combination of these. According to Fink (2003), integration provides intellectual power to learners.

### *Human dimension*

*Human dimension*, the fourth in Fink's (2003) taxonomy, pertains to students learning something important about themselves and others. As a consequence, this kind of learning enables students to "function and interact more effectively" as they "discover the personal and social implications of what they have learned" (p. 31). Learning about the human dimension gives students new opportunities to better understand who they are and what they want to become. It also provides opportunities for understanding others, including how and why others behave the way they do – which is necessary for effective social interactions.

### *Caring*

*Caring* refers to experiences whereby new feelings, interests or values are formed as a consequence of the learning that occurs. It incorporates both caring more about something or caring in a different way. According to Fink (2003), caring is important because it provides the energy necessary for action – whether it be to learn more or to incorporate the new learning into our daily lives. Without the energy for learning that results from caring, "nothing significant happens" (p. 32).

### *Learning how to learn*

The sixth and final category in Fink's taxonomy of significant learning, learning how to learn, pertains to "students learning about the process of learning itself" (Fink, 2003, p. 32). It includes learning how to become a better and more effective student, how to engage in inquiry and find out more about a particular subject or topic, and how to effectively become self-directed learners. The value of this kind of learning lies in enabling students to continue learning "and to do so with greater effectiveness" (p. 32).

## **Learning advisors' facilitation of significant learning**

Ideally, the teaching and support work that tertiary learning advisors undertake with students ought to promote more lasting effects – in other words, such work should promote significant learning as Fink (2003) described it. This section examines the ways in which the work of learning advisors facilitates significant learning in students, and provides some examples of such work.

*Foundational knowledge*, which we usually conceptualise as the subject content – whether this be a particular procedure in chemistry or an important theme in an English novel – is usually dealt with in subject departments. This comprises knowledge that students need to demonstrate they can remember and understand in order to pass their courses. Most learning advisors would be quick to point out that they deal more with the ‘learning processes’ rather than such content. However, whilst learning advisors do not usually teach subject content in the same way that professors, lecturers, and tutors in subject departments do, many learning advisors teach and advise on methods that help enable more effective retention and understanding of the subject content. Doreen Hartnall, for example, presented a paper at the 2003 ATLAANZ Conference on the use of co-operative learning as a strategy to promote mathematics and statistics development (Hartnall, 2003). She described the use of a problem solving method in these co-operative learning situations to help students develop a deeper understanding of math concepts and procedures. This kind of work clearly contributes to the establishment of foundational knowledge.

*Application* pertains to how we use knowledge, and involves the development of new skills. When learning advisors teach and advise students how to manage the many complex and demanding aspects of their courses of study, they are in effect promoting application learning. For example, at the University of Auckland’s Student Learning Centre, an intensive preparatory course is offered in November each year to English as an Additional Language (EAL) students who are intending to undertake a thesis or dissertation in the following year (described in Manalo, 2006). The course deals with how to effectively manage the complex tasks of designing, conducting, and reporting a research project – something that most postgraduate students launching into thesis or dissertation research for the first time may have little experience in. It deals with writing issues, and examines potential problems and how to avoid and/or solve such problems. When learning advisors engage in this kind of work, they are assisting students to develop the application skills necessary to utilise knowledge they have gained through their courses of study.

When we achieve *integration* in our learning, we see and understand connections between different things. This includes interdisciplinary learning, the connections we make through learning communities, and insights we get about the relationships between our academic work and other areas of our life (e.g., personal, social, work). Tertiary learning advisors promote the establishment of these connections when they encourage students to reflect on their learning, when they facilitate effective group work, and when they provide mechanisms for students to teach and learn from each other.

For example, Nisarg Dey described a language exchange programme at the 2004 Communication Skills in University Education Conference (Dey, 2005). In the paper, she detailed how the programme provided a way for students with complementary language skills and needs to help each other: for instance, a Japanese student who wants to improve her English language skills could be paired with a native English

speaking student who is studying Japanese and wants to improve her skills in that language. Tutors of the programme match students, provide guidelines for mutually beneficial exchanges, and monitor the progress that students make. Through such work, learning advisors facilitate learning integration at a number of different levels. They facilitate connections between students, between study materials and use in real life settings, between the students' knowledge about their native language and corresponding aspects of the language they are learning, and so on.

The *human dimension* category of significant learning pertains to discovering the personal and/or social implications of what we learn. This includes, for example, understanding how and why others behave the way they do. The human dimension of learning is important because it enables more effective interactions with our own self as well as with others. A lot of the work that tertiary learning advisors carry out in advising students – whether it be about how they might effectively approach a lecturer to ask a question, or about how they might best conduct meetings with their research supervisors – facilitates this kind of learning. Nina Pelling and Tafili Utumapu-McBride presented a paper at the 2004 ATLAANZ Conference in which they dealt with the issue of breaking down barriers and empowering Maori and Pacific students at the tertiary level.

The work they described exemplifies the critical role of learning advisors in promoting the human dimension of learning. In their presentation, and the resulting paper (Pelling & Utumapu-McBride, 2005), they stressed the importance of the relationships between Maori and Pacific students and their teachers – and that understanding those relationships is a key to promoting their success.

The *caring* category of significant learning involves changes in feelings, interests and/or values – for example, changes that might occur in the way we feel about a subject and consequently wanting to find out more, enjoying coming to lectures, thinking about the subject matter more, and so on. It may entail caring more or differently about the subject being studied, about the ideas relating to that subject, about our own self and/or others, or even the process of learning involved. Jerry Hoffman's paper at the 2003 ATLAANZ Conference provided an example of how learning advisors have a potentially powerful effect on the extent to which students care about their studies. His paper described the impact of the individualised support provided by learning advisors on students' views about themselves, their courses of study, their institution, and so on (Hoffman, 2003).

Facilitating *learning how to learn* amongst students can be considered as core business as far as the work of tertiary learning advisors is concerned. Through orientation and other induction-type courses (e.g., O'Neill & Harker, 2003), learning advisors clarify for students the expectations associated with tertiary level study, the specific ways in which things work in their institutions (and sometimes in their particular area of study), and the major pitfalls to avoid. Through skills development workshops (see, e.g., Acheson, 2005; Manalo, Wong-Toi, & Henning, 1996), learning advisors explain

and provide practice to students on how successful learning can be undertaken – including effective alternative strategies that students could use (e.g., alternative methods of notetaking from texts). Learning advisors also provide individual support (see, e.g., Morris, 2002; Olliver-Richardson & Bowker, 2003) and learning resources (such as handouts and guides) that can often turn a problematic situation for students (e.g., not knowing how to complete an assignment) into one where they feel they can manage (e.g., having a better understanding of the steps involved in successfully completing an assignment – including the one they are working on).

## **Considerations and implications for future research and practice**

In the literature to date, there has been little explanation about *how* the work that tertiary learning advisors undertake impacts in significant and positive ways upon student learning. Examining such work through the theoretical and applied constructs of models like the one used here – Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning – may be useful not only in helping learning advisors understand their own work, but also in helping others (e.g., subject discipline instructors, other tertiary level service providers, institutional managers) understand and appreciate the value of such work. As noted earlier, working with students to enable them to take full advantage of the instructions they receive appears to have a clearer and more robust link to student outcomes, than a sole focus on lecturer training. However, for skills development to be firmly established as a central, indispensable component of institutional teaching and learning initiatives, the theoretical basis and practical value of such development need to be better understood. Promoting this understanding is crucial: for example, as Radloff (2006, citing earlier comments made by Webb, 2004) noted, those in senior management positions within tertiary institutions may have “little or no interest in supporting learning skills advisors and their work” (p. 13) as they do not understand the value and significance of such work in relation to the core business of running the institutions.

There are likely to be many other perspectives that could contribute towards this understanding – either through further exploration of the factors involved in significant learning (including related theories and models), or through different approaches to understanding the processes and resulting benefits involved in the provision of learning instruction and support at the tertiary level. This could involve for example, investigating the cognitive developmental processes involved, or the parallels with other support practices such as counselling.

As far as research in student skills development and significant learning is concerned, it would be beneficial to look into more efficacious ways of promoting all the different aspects of significant learning. For example, could tertiary learning advisors do anything more (or differently) to better promote *application* learning or the multi-facetted aspects of *caring* in learning? Reflections about, and investigations into, methods for more effective measurement (both quantitative and qualitative) and documentation of how significant learning is facilitated through the learning



instruction and support that is provided would equally be important in future research in this area.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief exploration of one way of understanding tertiary learning advisor work. Examples of published descriptions of ATLAANZ members' work were used to demonstrate how such work promotes all six of the major categories of significant learning (as portrayed by Fink, 2003). In the current tertiary education environment, where greater accountability about student academic performance is increasingly becoming an established requirement both within and of institutions, this kind of understanding is important at different levels. Learning advisors need to continue developing and promoting such understanding so that their work does not remain in the marginalised state that other authors (e.g., Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004; Radloff, 2006) have noted. Senior managers within tertiary institutions need to be open to such understanding so that they can in turn make appropriate and unbiased decisions about the establishment of learning environments that really do produce learning. And students need to gain a sufficient degree of such understanding to predispose them towards taking full advantage of the instruction and support that tertiary learning advisors provide.

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# **Anchoring practice: how do we learn the profession of academic language and learning advising?**

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## **Abstract**

Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advising in Australia has come a long way in the ten years since Garner, Chanock and Clerehan (1995, p. 5) expressed the collective sense of ‘what is it we do and why?’ The profession is much clearer about ‘what?’ and ‘why?’ What is less clear is *how* newcomers to the ALL profession learn what to do. Given that it is still relatively rare to encounter newcomers who have had advising experience, how can they be successfully inducted into their professional role and its responsibilities such that they develop expertise over time? As Percy and Stirling (2004) cogently note, “the foundational principles and theories informing [ALL] expertise are by no means apparent to the newcomer” (p. 38).

This paper argues the need for systematic induction for ALL newcomers such that they develop the professional expertise with which to teach academic language and learning and know where the boundaries lie. Because there is no ALL ‘training’ institute, and no ‘Dos and Don’ts Manual’, the anchoring and development of ALL expertise necessarily relies on the preparedness of supervisor, colleagues and newcomer to take responsibility for making explicit the nature and complexities of the work, and for developing ways of extending professional knowledge, reflecting on practice, and developing a basis on which to make professional judgements in relation to academic language and learning.

## **Introduction**

Academic Language and Learning (ALL) newcomers in Australia are tasked with developing expertise in providing high quality academic language and learning assistance to higher education students, particularly assistance related to learning, communication and reasoning (see for example, Bartlett and Chanock, 2003; Deller-Evans and Zeegers, 2004). Some advisors may be specifically employed to deliver quantitative reasoning and methods advice. Over time, the newcomer is usually expected to become fully informed about the academic demands and expectations of particular disciplines and specific courses, as well as manage the more general skills relating to successful study. They must be capable of working in intense individual consultations, as well as capable of leading small group courses, presenting seminars and lectures, assisting in academic staff development, representing the unit and institution, and initiating and co-ordinating specific courses for specialised groups.

Ultimately, it is highly desirable that newcomers develop the expertise with which to contribute to institutional level policy. In essence, the newcomer's role and practice is to serve as an intermediary between students and academic staff, and as an interpreter of the academic culture of the university and its disciplinary sub-cultures for students (Ballard, 1994).

In developing this expertise the newcomer must simultaneously learn how to provide academic language and learning assistance for students via consultations, workshops and courses, develop professional insight, gain an overview of the academic territory, plus co-operate and negotiate with disciplinary and professional staff. It is not an easy role, as Craswell and Bartlett (2001) note: “[the] job . . . requires specialist knowledge and skills, great flexibility, hard work and strong commitment to students’ learning development” (p. 18). This is complex, demanding work, and it is useful to be reminded of the students with whom we work: they often enter tertiary education with limited expertise in the ways of negotiating disciplinary sub-cultures and traditions, taking responsibility for their own learning, and being able to orient/re-orient themselves. Generally speaking, in their roles and work practices, ALL professionals challenge the assumption that students should do all this by osmosis and/or trial and error. However, osmosis tends to characterise ALL newcomer induction. As Percy and Stirling (2004) point out, the field is “so practice based that the bodies of knowledge on which we draw to inform our practice often tend to become invisible, even to ourselves” (p. 40).

This paper focuses on how ALL principles and practice need to be made explicit to newcomers via systematic induction so that they can be anchored into the ALL community of practice, and develop the necessary professional expertise with which to know *how* to do the job with which they are tasked. Induction into the community of practice at the institutional and unit levels necessarily relies on the preparedness of the supervisor, colleagues and newcomer to take responsibility for making explicit the complexities of the work, extending professional knowledge, reflecting on practice and developing a basis on which to make professional judgements in relation to academic language and learning.

Trowler and Knight (1999) define induction as “professional practices designed to facilitate the entry of [newcomers] to an organisation and equip them to operate effectively within it” (p. 178). However, they argue that traditional approaches to induction - orientation, formal induction programs, mentoring, and handbooks and so on - are insufficient to achieve organisational socialisation, that is, “an accommodative process which takes place when [newcomers] to an organisation engage with aspects of the cultural configurations they find there” (Trowler & Knight, 1999, p. 178). Traditional approaches, in their view, prioritise the overt, the corporate, the formal and the structure, over the tacit, the local, the naturally occurring and action. Their view has resonance for ALL newcomers. Given that ALL newcomers are often employed without prior ALL teaching experience, induction necessarily has two components: that which inducts them into the new institutional environment and its processes, and

that which has to develop both post-entry expertise, and engender cultural change as result of negotiating shared meanings. Such an induction is complex, challenging and resource-intensive, and requires careful reflection on the part of all involved in the process.

### *Induction into the ALL community of practice: shared perspectives and practices*

Australian ALL professionals can be characterised by the notion of a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002): there is ‘a domain of knowledge’ - academic language and learning - which encompasses issues such as writing across the disciplines, genre analysis, multiliteracies, supervision, writing cross culturally, academic progress and so on. Further, there is a community of people who care about this domain, and the shared practice - individual consultations, teaching, research and publication, if not lobbying - that they are developing to be effective in their domain (McGowan, 2005; Webb, 2002). As a community of practice, ALL professionals can be seen as “responsible for the maintenance of the community of practice, for inducting newcomers into it, for carrying on the tradition of the past and carrying the community into the future” (Brew, 2003, p. 12).

Thus, in terms of initial guidance to the newcomer, there needs to be a strong sense that he/she is entering into a community of practice, and belongs to a professional association. Only in 2005 was the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) in Australia launched, and there is still a sense in which some ALL professionals may not see themselves as necessarily part of the Association. Nevertheless, it has been a huge professional step forward, with the AALL Mission Statement establishing the basis for the ALL community of practice. A newcomer reading the Mission Statement would become aware that his/her professional responsibilities include providing constructive learning experiences for students; supporting the development of core disciplinary academic skills; promoting quality and diversity; contributing to internationalisation; and informing the wider academic community about ALL philosophies and practice (AALL Mission Statement, 2006).

However, whilst we can anchor onto the AALL website, which foregrounds our professional presence, our understandings of ourselves, and the issues with which we have most concern, it does not necessarily describe in ways adequate to the newcomer *how* we do what we do because ALL professional practice is diverse - nationally, within tertiary institutions and within units. Thus in order to induct the newcomer into the community of practice, as a first step we need to be able to direct him/her to ALL conference proceedings which document the development of practice(s) over time, and, specifically, to papers that chart the development of the profession. These, regrettably, are few and far between. We all tend to ‘just know stuff’ - about how we began; how, over time, we have named what we do; and why we have adopted certain practices - but we rarely coherently communicate this. At past conferences and in publications, there has tended to be a reporting of local ALL practices, rather than the exploration of broader theoretical and philosophical conceptions of our practice and

role. There is an important genealogy of knowledge that is yet to be explicitly communicated to ALL newcomers. Yet, even with this, while the newcomer will have a stronger sense of being part of the community of practice, and a stronger understanding of its ways of working, he/she will not necessarily know *how* to advise - individual students, across disciplines (or within) and across the multiplicity of academic tasks and encounters with which students are grappling.

### *Induction into the broad institutional contexts*

For ALL newcomers, a key induction issue may well be a mismatch between their expectations in relation to their classification and role within the unit. Funding arrangements, working conditions, institutional locations, classifications and payment levels vary, and understanding that variation is critical to the newcomer. In Australia, for example, ALL classifications are split approximately 50/50 between either General or Academic staff (Barthel, 2005). This means that there are very different work, promotion, pay and leave entitlements. Inducting the newcomer into this area of ALL professional work is particularly crucial given that Australian research by Thomas and Bennett (2002) found that lack of research time was identified as ‘always’ or ‘often’ a problem by 78% of ALL respondents. Thus, understanding the broad institutional contexts and the different conditions under which ALL advising has taken root in particular institutions is a key anchor point in induction.

Equally, there is divergence as to whether ALL delivery is centralised or devolved, broadly discipline-specific or embedded within the disciplines. This can create confusions and frustrations for newcomers. Much depends on the structure of the institution, its positioning of ALL units/centres, and the ways in which it is possible (or not) to resource expectations. ALL unit position and response papers to institutional demands can help to educate staff about the ways in which decisions are made. Thus, ALL units need to document and communicate their evolution over time - how they became anchored within their institutional contexts, why, and with what interventions, changes, and rationales. Equally newcomers need to familiarise themselves with not only ‘what is’, but also with ‘why it is’ such that they can understand the ways in which the unit operates.

Induction into the institutional context must also account for the rights and responsibilities of the newcomer *vis a vis* legislation, institutional policies and codes of practice, and student rights and responsibilities. This mantle of professional obligations governs the ways in which interactions occur - particularly with students - in terms of privacy, confidentiality, discrimination, harassment, occupational health and so on. Privacy concerns, for example, relate not only to gathering data from students and record-keeping, but to email contact, professional diaries, staff offices, discussing student cases with colleagues, and the use of student work for teaching and publishing purposes. Privacy also relates to the need to inform students about what records are kept, students’ rights to access them, and the conditions under which student matters are discussed with non-ALL staff. In accord with Trowler and Knight’s (1999) conception of traditional induction, induction needs to make

institutional rights and responsibilities explicit to the newcomer as they relate to the institutional context in which he/she is anchored.

ALL newcomers also need to be inducted into the codes of behaviour and practice made explicit by the institution, whether the codes are in relation to teaching and learning, acknowledging sources, being ethical in research practice, using gender-neutral language and so on. In the contexts within which we work, there are strong professional and moral responsibilities, and often wide discretion in dealing with students. Such responsibility and powers of discretion necessarily carry obligations across a range of areas, including standards of professional knowledge, and the observation of appropriate ethical standards regarding our work with students and other staff members in the unit and the institution. If we expect that students will observe their rights and responsibilities in this regard, we must also be aware of our own rights and responsibilities and practise them ourselves. So identifying key institutional documents, becoming familiar with them, and negotiating shared meanings comprises a significant part of the newcomer's induction.

Finally, induction needs to focus on the newcomer getting to know how the institution is structured and where power lies. This is often fraught given restructuring and changing power bases and allegiances, but it is important in relation to understanding why units make the kinds of decisions they do. The institutional structure, history, rights and responsibilities, behavioural expectations, and the underpinning resources provide clear direction as to the fundamentals of induction into the broad institutional context. Such understanding takes time to develop and can be confusing and bewildering at the best of times but, without it, the newcomer will be unable to negotiate appropriate outcomes for students, or deliver appropriate services and resources to them.

### *Induction into ALL unit practice*

The ALL newcomer encountering a unit's practice for the first time might well ask 'But how do you all know what to do?; how do I learn *how* to do what needs to be done?' These are questions managers need to tackle head on.

As with the broader professional practice, it is important to have a unit-negotiated and agreed-to conception of the role of the advisors - a Mission Statement - outlining the unit goals and, within that, an explanation of how the professional work is conceptualised and publicised. The Academic Skills and Learning Centre (ASLC) at the Australian National University, for example, has three key goals: to teach students to take control of their learning, to contribute towards an effective learning environment, and to maintain a high standard of professional practice and expertise. Each of these sets the basis for how we do what we do. Teaching students to take control of their learning implies that we do not edit or proof read; rather we work developmentally with students. A developmental approach starts with what students know and can do; uses modelling (is explanatory); provides positive reinforcement (constructive, manageable, do-able critique); recognises the limits to expertise (e.g.,



we are not subject/content specialists); and challenges the student to become a responsible independent learner, countering the view that ‘your job is to fix this’. Internalising a developmental approach, therefore, assists the newcomer in knowing where to ‘draw the line’ on academic language and learning advising.

An ASLC newcomer is also expected to contribute towards an effective learning environment, characterised by the Australian Universities Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (2002) as “the outcome of a collaborative partnership between teachers and students” (p. 12). This ‘collaborative partnership’ takes place in an environment organised along institutional lines, structured into degree programs within the ANU Colleges, and is mediated by assessment requirements. In contributing to an effective learning environment, the newcomer is expected to develop and provide programs that assist students to understand and navigate their way through the academic environment, consult with disciplinary and professional staff in the university, and contribute to teaching and learning policy where appropriate. Thus, the newcomer needs to become familiar with students’ learning needs, assessment protocols, key disciplinary staff, and university policies as they affect what students can and cannot do.

At the ASLC, familiarity with students’ undergraduate learning needs is fostered through maintaining a cross-disciplinary Essay and Assignment File in which copies of marked work, donated by students, are kept. Advisors (and students) are able to review the ways in which markers comment over a range of grades from Fail to High Distinction. At postgraduate level samples of theses, sub-theses and essays provide a similar resource. Each year we collect course outlines that enable us to anticipate and respond to students’ assignment expectations and needs. In this, where we are invited to deliver particular sessions for student cohorts, we also consult with the disciplinary staff to identify areas of need, expectations, and the ways in which we can best target academic language and learning needs. Equally, where there are significant changes in university policy - most recently for example, to Academic Honesty - we discuss, consider and respond to it. From time to time, on ALL related issues, we are invited to have input into the development of policy. These are all rich sources of newcomer induction.

Maintaining a high standard of professional practice and expertise - the third plank of the ASLC Mission Statement - also alludes to how an advisor should work with students. Although not as clearly defined as Hafernik, Messerschmitt and Vandrick’s (2002) notion of ‘right behaviour’, ALL professional practice requires adherence to Hafernik et al.’s (2002) four categories of ethics: *respect for an individual’s rights, responsibilities and dignity*. In this, for example, the newcomer is expected to actively practise his/her responsibilities in relation to student privacy and confidentiality, as well the student’s right to make decisions about what action he/she will take as a result of an individual consultation/academic language and learning session.

*avoidance of causing harm, including social harm.* The emphasis here is on the newcomer recognising the importance of respecting what a student knows and can do, as opposed to what they 'ought' to know. It also implies that singling out, gossiping, stereotyping or acting as gatekeepers for the institution are unacceptable practices.

*justice/fair treatment.* This can be a particularly difficult area for newcomers working across disciplines who have been or are disciplinary specialists: they must be cognisant of the risk of advantaging students from those disciplines. There must also be a recognition of the boundaries of competence and expertise - difficulties may arise where trained English language newcomers focus predominantly on English language issues to the detriment of, for example, argument and reasoning, or where the newcomer is expected to provide personal counselling, or comment on expected grades.

*professional integrity - accuracy, honesty and truthfulness; expertise, preparedness, punctuality and responsiveness.* This almost goes without saying with respect to the newcomer. Yet difficulties can arise, for example, in relation to hearing the 'truth' from students/disciplinary academics as they report what they understand (e.g., on supervision issues), and how they report the 'truth' of their experiences with us to others. Equally, in relation to this category, if our professional practice is to advise students to be prepared, think ahead, time and project management and so on, the newcomer must become an exemplar.

Hafernik et al.'s (2002) categories make good sense and it behoves the staff with whom the newcomer works to demonstrate and model the practice of these professional ethics so as to reinforce induction into the community of practice.

A Code of Conduct can augment ethical practice. The ASLC's Code of Conduct (2006) is a negotiated and agreed-to document. We acknowledge that we are primarily teachers, and that we accept the responsibility that comes with the role of teaching. Equally we accept that there is an administrative responsibility in relation to secure data collection and record-keeping. Importantly too, staff agree to remain up-to-date with university policy (and it changes frequently) with respect to relations between staff and students as they apply to our work (for example, research ethics, discrimination, privacy). The Code of Conduct suggests that acting co-operatively, sharing workloads, negotiating decisions, taking responsibility as a group for induction and training of newcomers, and using one another's strengths for the benefit of students - and ultimately the institution - are key, agreed-to, ways of working.

Further, the ASLC's Code of Conduct (2006) specifically sets out that advisors will

actively seek to improve and extend [their] professional knowledge, teaching ability and skills via appropriate study opportunities (including Professional Development), workshop and conference attendance, professional interchange with other individuals in [similar] area(s) of expertise, and through keeping . . . up-to-date with relevant educational and teaching literature.

Developing expertise, then, is ‘part of the job’ and most ALL professionals would see it that way. But the tricky induction part is the caveat that often there are not the resources - time and money - with which to undertake research and professional development. In their 2002 survey, Thomas and Bennett found that in terms of work demands, lack of time for research was a key stressor for ALL professionals in Australia. So here we have a paradox: ALL professionals wanting to undertake research and publication, and it being part of the ‘job,’ but the unit not having the wherewithal to deliver the opportunity. Here a critical part of induction may lie in persuading newcomers that the professional development opportunities ‘have to go round’ - that a unit can afford, for example, to finance only one staff member to attend a conference per year, or that the institution will not fund unless the staff member presents/publishes. It is incumbent then on units to foreground other forms of professional development - staff ‘Think Days,’ focus groups with students, cross-disciplinary text analysis, materials development, joint publications, local staff exchange opportunities and so on. While conference attendance and publication have their place, there are other rich veins of professional development with which to anchor the newcomer into the community of practice, including hosting professional development - at the local and national levels.

Yet having a unit level Mission Statement and a Code of Conduct do not account for two other extremely important forms of newcomer induction and professional development. First, daily experience - not just in the initial period of employment, but over time - is an essential, and often overlooked, basis for developing professional expertise. Shadowing staff in their daily practice, not once, but over several iterations and contexts, as well as the newcomer’s active reflection (individually, and with colleagues) can assist in understanding what goes on, why, and how, and the ways in which different encounters create questions/complexities with which we all grapple. Successful induction implies then that the newcomer has a reduced teaching/consultation load so that there is more time available for the first six months for shadowing, reflecting on, and negotiating professional practice. In that time it is important that the newcomer researches how academic texts are produced both within and across disciplines in order to develop a basis on which to develop the expertise necessary to advise and teach students, and understand the multiplicity of academic practices with which students may be engaged.

Second, whilst discussion of, and reflection on, daily experience lends itself to understanding the *how* of advising, it must not overshadow the importance of developing a multiliteracies approach. Craswell and Bartlett (2002) have argued elsewhere that academic language and learning pedagogy would benefit from being framed a multiliteracies approach - one that in Cope and Kalantzis’ (2000) view “engages with the multiplicity of communications channels and media . . . [and] with the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” (p. 5). In other words, this approach “extends the traditional concepts of text and literacy to include meanings constructed in a range of semiotic systems” (Abu-Arab, 2005, p. 21). Such an approach recognises that ALL advisors do not confine academic language and learning

advising and teaching to texts - although it is a large part of our work - and that we need to be multiliterate in order to respond to students' academic skills and learning needs, particularly given students' language and cultural diversity.

Students' linguistic diversity can be particularly challenging for newcomers. Thomas and Bennett (2002) found that, in terms of work demands in the Australian context, dealing with students with linguistic diversity - characterised as 'low literacy' - was a key stressor for ALL professionals. This arises from a combination of factors: the student's expectations, the student's difficulty in meeting the demands of academic work, the advisor's skills and expertise, the lack of time and resources and institutional decisions with respect to English language proficiency. Thus, the newcomer must be inducted in ways that openly acknowledge that interplay of factors, and develop expertise in constructively navigating the interaction. In this, scenario work, discussion, de-briefing, and strategising with colleagues are key components of the induction process for the newcomer.

## Conclusion

If the first aim of induction is, as Trowler and Knight (1999) identify, "to facilitate the entry of [newcomers] to an organisation and to equip them to operate effectively within it" (p. 178), evaluation should focus on how well the newcomer is managing workloads, coping with pressures, adhering to protocols and so on. In a sense this is a quite straightforward analysis. However, if the second aim of Trowler and Knight's (1999) notion of induction is accepted - and in relation to ALL advising it is the most important - evaluation should also focus on how well the ALL newcomer is engaging with the tacit, the local, the naturally occurring and taking appropriate action. In other words, we would do well as a community of practice to consider how well the newcomer has been socialised into a culture of shared ALL practice; to what extent he/she has been socialised to recognise the need to develop specialist ALL knowledge and skills, and with that to adopt a multiliteracies approach to the ways in which they respond to student academic skills and learning needs. Evaluation should also focus on whether there is a developing confidence in sharing ALL practice and a willingness to reflect, seek feedback and negotiate meaning. Such an evaluation lies at the heart of knowing whether the newcomer has been successfully inducted into the ALL community of practice. In this there must be a willingness on the part of all staff involved, and the ALL community of practice, to reflect, negotiate, and act together with the newcomer.

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# **Murky waters: English speakers of other languages with learning disabilities**

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## **Abstract**

Based on Monarez's (1992, as cited in Root, 1994) claim that there are 5 to 15% of all students across cultures with learning disabilities, it can be presumed that many English speakers of other languages (ESOL) present with a learning disability (LD) as a reason for their difficulties in coping with tertiary education. Issues surrounding ESOL LD are complicated by the multitude of inconclusive, interdisciplinary interpretations of etiology, definition, and assessment of LD. The aim of this article is to attempt to clear some of this mist of uncertainty by exploring both concepts in an attempt to identify those characteristics that arise from cultural difference inherent in ESOL learners and those that closely resemble the characteristics of LD. Once these are better understood it is then possible to focus on the learner's strengths and potentials for success, strengthening learning centre involvement in the success and retention strategies employed in New Zealand tertiary education today.

## **Introduction**

As growing numbers of ESOL speakers visit or live within New Zealand shores, so do the numbers within tertiary education. This in turn has given rise to both mainstream and English language school tutors referring international students to learning centres. These students have presented their tutors with a puzzling dilemma: some of these students seem bright enough but have considerable trouble learning and/or completing their programmes. Some of these students present with underlying characteristics indicative of a LD. This presents problems for the learning centre staff because often they may not be trained or equipped to assess, identify or know how to intervene in such circumstances. To add to the dilemma, LD as a concept, in the western world, is fraught with uncertainty and professional dissention. Consequently, exploration of ESOL LD presented challenges that inspired a desire to find professional guidance for supporting such a potentially large group of students now and in the future.

The opening case study introduces the complexity of the concepts of ESOL and LD. Exploring both concepts individually reveals the difficulties of their co-existence, emphasising the importance of learning skills tutors' early identification, assessment and intervention.

## **Case study: ESOL LD**

He walked into the office, cheerful and confident, really believing that he had paid for his course and would pass. A phone call from his frustrated classroom tutor, 5 minutes earlier, had portrayed a very different picture; the tutor had not been able to communicate to this ESOL student, that despite having a potentially well paid job in Auckland upon successful completion of the degree, success was not guaranteed unless the final 5000 word, self directed project was completed on time. The project supervisor had given up on the student after: 8 months of nothing written other than 'some scribbling on scraps of paper' that constantly got lost; not being able to get him to any meetings on time (if at all); the general persona that there was nothing wrong and that it was the tutor's role to teach him and get him through the course requirements. The International Learning Skills Tutor had been unable to break down the barriers and progress had been negligible. His lack of progress meant that his failure seemed inevitable!

He was the first of several such international students, over the last three years, who graced my presence because all other efforts had failed. These experiences aroused a personal curiosity because many such students displayed characteristics that are traditionally, within western society, associated with learning disabilities. Because of cultural differences, traditional assessment and identification methods produced inconclusive results although the underlying manifestations seemed to indicate that such conditions co-existed. Reflection on this and similar experiences created a desire to find answers as to how such students could be identified early in their courses thus reducing the last minute anxiety for all (both students and tutors) and was to provide new insights, and an international perspective, on a life long interest in LD.

## **Background**

During 2003, the New Zealand Ministry of Education, in the Adult ESOL strategy, noted that 50,700 residents' spoken English was not strong enough to carry on a basic conversation about everyday things and that 200,000 - 210,000 adults from non-English speaking backgrounds had less than adequate levels of literacy. In April 2006, the Ministry also noted that there were 54,025 visiting international students within the New Zealand education system (Ministry of Education, 2006). Such statistics indicate that currently approximately 250,000 internationals living in New Zealand have the potential for learning issues. Monarez (1992, as cited in Root, 1994) suggests that between 5 to 15% of the population, across all cultures, have learning disabilities which potentially equates to a least 12,500 – 37,500 ESOL in the aforementioned group.

The New Zealand tertiary education sector "is committed to ensuring that all New Zealanders achieve their potential in life, ... are able to engage in critical analysis of the world around them", and that it is the responsibility of the education sector to match the diversity of learner needs to appropriate provisions (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 6-7). In theory, all learners can expect that the tertiary system will meet



their needs. Studies in this area are deemed not only necessary for student success and retention but also for meeting the requirements under the Ministry's guidelines. However, research has revealed difficulties associated with identification of not only ESOL LD but with LD itself, as worldwide, the LD concept presents real problems in areas of determining what it is. There is a consequential lack of unified definition, assessment and identification processes.

**Learning Disabilities (LD)**

A review of the literature reveals that at least seventeen definitions have arisen from between 1962 to the present day. Definitions vary according to the writer's discipline and the need to meet specific political requirements for funding and accommodation of learning issues (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2001; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2005; Lerner, 2006; Lyon, 1996; Payne & Irons, 2003; Stevens & van Werkhoven, 2001; Tsuge, 2001; Vogel, 1998).

The conceptual development of learning disabilities has traversed many approaches, theories and disciplines. Figure 1 summarises this fragmented and often conflicting field.

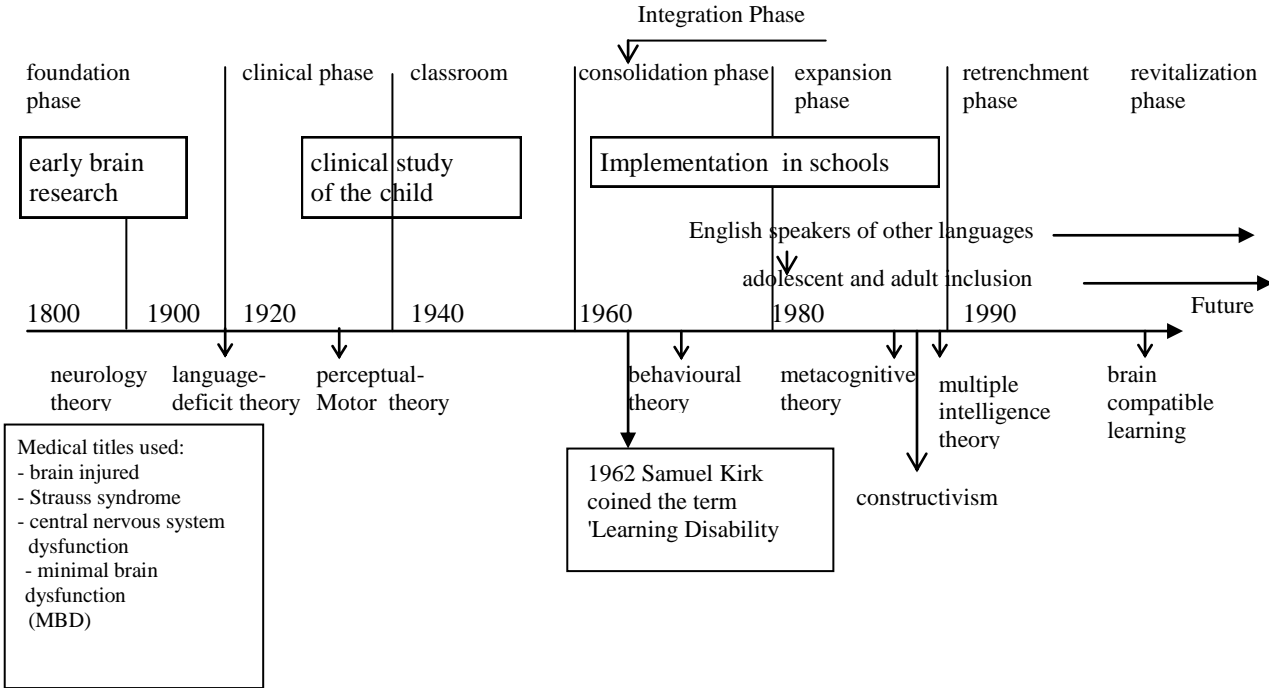


Figure 1. Time line: Learning Disabilities historical phases and theoretical perspectives (Adapted from Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Bender, 2004; Lerner, 2006).

Shaywitz (1996, as cited in McLoughlin, Leather, & Stringer, 2002) attempts to simplify matters, describing LD as "an unexpected weakness in a sea of strengths" whereas Ysseldyke, et al. (1983, as cited in McLoughlin et al., 2002) suggest after five years of trying, that describing LD with any precision is impossible and that it "can

best be defined as whatever society wants it to be, needs it to be, or will let it be at any point in time" (p. 89). The importance of recognition relates specifically to how the assessment provides the entrance to further accommodations and services.

Despite the dissention in the field, what has emerged from amongst the definitions is a set of generally agreed commonalities:

1. That LD exists throughout the life span
2. The recognition of intra-individual difference and its heterogeneous nature
3. That it appears to be a central nervous system dysfunction/difference
4. The learning problems are associated with learning processes
5. There is linkage to academic learning issues
6. There are frequently other conditions linked to LD
7. There are co-existing (co-morbidity) or excluded disabilities

(Myers, 2007).

The use of these seven commonalities as descriptors is not without critics but it does provide a foundation for determining an understanding of what LD is.

Essentially, LD is a learning difficulty/difference that can occur within any person, at any age. It is seen as specific, unexpected, uneven underachievement, manifesting itself in any subject area/s (while not in others). It is not caused by other disabilities such as loss of sight, hearing, etc., but can co-exist with them; it is intrinsic to the individual and can be demonstrated through a variety of differences/impairments in processing information as demonstrated in Figure 2 (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1993; Vogel & Reder, 1998; Walcot-Gayda, 2004).

Both historic and current research shows clearly there are two factors that have heavily influenced this field of study for adults. Firstly, the assessment and intervention processes are largely child-based and the idea of LD being a life long consideration is relatively new. Secondly, the bulk of this research is heavily reliant upon the US experience and modernistic approaches which are based on the demand for empirical evidence in an attempt to determine eligibility for education-based intervention.

The development of assessment tools has been directed by the differing historical perspectives (figure 1), making "[t]he assessment and diagnosis of traditional college-age students and adults with learning disabilities ... one of the most controversial topics in the area of postsecondary ... services delivery" (Brinckerhoff et al., 1993, p. 90). The assessment has elements of each of the seven phases (figure 1) and it is almost as if there is an attempt to cover all options with no finite answers provided as to who has/has not got a LD. This has resulted 117 different possible tests (Lerner, 2006) with 76 specifically for adults (Brinckerhoff et al., 1993).

Aptitude tests (IQ tests) have come under the closest scrutiny because the results are inconclusive, especially for ESOL learners, as such tests are greatly affected by life experience, culture and native language, and often ignore the unique learning

characteristics of the individual with LD (Lerner, 2006). Their focus is on learned skills not potential skills (Seigel, 1999 as cited in Wong & Hutchinson, 2001). Brinckerhoff, et al. (1993) as well as Ross-Gordon, Plotts, Joesel, & Wells (2003) have suggested that today, the assessment process has become so complex that the resultant reports generated are almost too complicated and overwhelming for either the prospective teacher or the adult with the learning disability to fully understand.

There are many reasons why an ESOL student may have difficulties making progress in a tertiary learning environment. It may be that their literacy levels in their first language (L1) are limited or absent; a mismatch of transferable skills between languages; a lack of efficient study habits; stress or trauma associated with the reasons for moving to an English speaking country; cultural disharmony; sporadic attendance in class; or the lack of opportunity to practise the skills learnt outside of the classroom, etc. Intervention may involve the need for counselling and support to help with adjustment and/or to change personal behaviours that are hindering progress (Learning Disabilities Association [LDA], 2002).

The need to identify and understand ESOL LD is twofold. Firstly, for the student, it can: provide an explanation for the difficulties with learning English; guide their understanding of their preferred learning style; and identify other contributing factors such as home sickness or visual/hearing impairments which may provide the basis for further referrals. Removing personal responsibility for causation often has a positive impact on the learner's self esteem. Secondly, for the tutors (both classroom and learning support) it provides foundations from which to raise awareness of causes and intervention/accommodations. Many tutors lack training in working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners - even fewer in LD and as the diversity of students intensifies, such knowledge is imperative for successful classroom experiences for both tutor and learner (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Schwarz & Terrill, 2000).

## **Cultural Difference**

Working through situations such as the case study quoted above, has raised awareness of the importance of understanding how cultural beliefs and ways of knowing frame the learning experience. ESOL students bring with them not only a different culture and language but different learning processes for language learning. Identifying LD within ESOL students presented far different challenges than anticipated. The focus on Asian students in the next section of this paper, more specifically Chinese students, is deliberate as these were the students who mainly influenced personal learnings. Therefore, the discussion that is presented here has at least one major limitation: it necessarily reflects the viewpoint of a middle-class European female with all the cultural bias that this entails.

To understand how cultural difference impacts on adult education, there has to be a basic understanding that culture provides the blueprint for all beliefs, values, attitudes,

Figure 2 goes here....

role expectations and practices of a group of individuals who share a common worldview. Furthermore, such a worldview has been handed down through generations, and is reinforced and perpetuated by the language of that culture (Hofstede, 1986; Pitt, 2005) for both teacher and learner.

Culture is dynamic as it constantly changes through contact with other ideas and other cultures but generally the foundations provide the basis for life within the culture (Cheng, as cited in United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2003; Li, n.d.). Since the first contact between cultures, cross cultural learning differences have arisen and often, because each is so engrained in its own culture, "cross cultural learning situations can be fundamentally problematic for both [tutor and student]" (Hofstede, 1986, p. 302). Consequently, what is considered a successful pedagogy in one culture may lack transferability to another.

Although a simplification, Ziegahn (2001) identifies five main dimensions of culture that impact on the adult learning context and which are considered the cause of many misunderstandings and tension. Firstly, *individualism versus collectivist thinking*; this emphasises differences in personal action and motivation. Individualism focuses on actions for personal gain whereas collectivist thinking centres on the importance of community. One perspective admires self reliance and individual autonomy, the other looks to the importance of group efforts in harmony, where everyone knows their place in society. Secondly, *monochronic time versus polychronic time*, where personal interaction can be sacrificed to scheduling for efficiency, or where involvement with people and completion of activity is valued rather than preset schedules. Thirdly, *egalitarianism versus hierarchy*, where fairness and equality of opportunity for all are valued (although this is often more a social ideal than reality), rather than open acknowledgement of innate differences and inequalities. Fourthly, *'action' orientation versus 'being' orientation*; this often involves sacrificing personal interaction and moving straight to action, rather than taking time to appreciate the moment. Lastly, *change versus tradition*, where the culture looks to the future while resisting a historical perspective or alternatively reflecting on the lessons of history as an important guide to the future.

Where student and tutor cultures arise from opposing dimensions, conflict can arise. Consequently, it is not enough for the tutors from the dominant culture to just value diversity at personal, educational and social political levels, there is a need to know how to adjust instruction and communication so that all students "feel visible and valued" (Li, n.d, p. 1).

Hofstede (1986) further identified four cross communication teaching/learning factors that are influenced by cultural difference. Firstly, how the student and teacher are viewed socially within each society. Secondly, differences in expected patterns of tutor/student and student/tutor interaction. Typically roles played are rooted in values and "lead to feelings of good and evil, right and wrong, rational and irrational, proper and improper" (p. 305) often not associated with cultural relativity. These lead to

premature judgements and are evident in virtually all cross cultural learning/teaching situations. Thirdly, differences in profiles of cognitive abilities between populations from which tutor and student are drawn. "Cognitive abilities are rooted in the total pattern of a society. In China, the nature of the script develops the ability for pattern recognition; it also imposes a need for rote learning" (Redding, 1980, p. 212). Where cognitive ability profiles differ between what the student and teacher are accustomed to, it can be educationally problematic and require different teaching methodology. Fourthly, the difference in relevance of curriculum in the two societies. Hofstede (1986) asks how useful it is for Chinese students working and studying in Beijing to know British organisational behaviour (unless they are working in the export industry)?

Ballard and Clanchy (1997) summarise the impact of these differences into four discrete approaches to teaching and learning: attitudes to knowledge; learning approaches; teaching strategies and learning strategies (Figure 3). The *reproductive* approach links most closely to what Asian students bring with them to western society. The *analytical* approach seems strongly related to graduate levels in western society whereas the *speculative* links most closely to postgraduate studies. What these models seem to present is that the base structure and attitudes to government, knowledge/power relations, comfort with structured/unstructured learning situations, the power of teachers/learners, and learning behaviours that are rewarded or admonished, are culturally based and impact on cross cultural learning.

Siegel (as cited in United States Department of Education, 2003) stated "that each language of origin has a unique impact on the ESL student" (p. 16). An example of how this impacts on learning could be related to the different graphical representations of language not just the Chinese/ Asian ideograms versus western alphabetical systems, but also the directionality of written language and the transferability of language learning from one cultural context to another: two characteristics often associated with LD. Pitt (2005), an American teacher, stated that when learning Chinese characters her "L1 (first language) often seemed to be a stumbling block rather than an advantage" (p. 106) because her approach was based on her previous successful language learning style, her concept of progress and her knowledge about literacy. The discovery that previous assumptions were completely misguided made her very uncomfortable. The reverse is also true when moving from Chinese to English or other languages with different written forms.

The understanding of the importance of firstly recognising our own values while appreciating that students may not share them, is crucial to unlocking our own "prejudice and bias, our stereotypic behaviours and their impact on our actions and to 'hear' [the student's] needs over our own preconceived beliefs" (Chew-Ogi, 2002, p. 93).

The challenge for many Asian American students is that they come to institutions that value individual achievement and survival of the fittest. However, the voices from

their hearts tell them that they are pursuing higher education to bring honour to their family by what they learn from elders at the college and university. Asian American students are looking for guidance, but few members of the institution understand the cultural conflicts that these students encounter on campus (Chew-Ogi, 2002, p. 94).

Student failure in these circumstances, whether it is because of intellectual, physical emotional or LD reflects not only on the learner but on the whole family and may, if not approached sensitively, bring disgrace. Related discussion could cause complete communication breakdown. The importance of 'saving face' for the student is a particularly significant example in relation to the importance of understanding cultural differences and of how communication can cement a relationship or function as a barrier (Matsu & Ting-Toomey, 1992).

## **ESOL LD**

Existing literature has provided a starting point for the identification of ESOL LD. Burnette (2000) suggested utilising the same basic process as for L1 LD with the addition of L2 translators/interpreters. Others such as Schwarz and Terrill (2000) suggest a more relaxed approach utilising interviews, tutor-answered questionnaires and portfolio development. Barrera (as cited in USDOE, 2003) raises the importance of curriculum-based assessment. Vogel and Reder (1998) suggest the use of questionnaires which are "validated with the student [for] without this important step, the process is seen as biased and subjective" (p. 116). Underlying non-linguistic information processing skills (*manifestations*, figure 2) are one area that Kohnert (as cited in USDOE, 2003) believes hold promise as identifiers.

The literature offers both support for and rebuttal of each of the systems (Abrams, Ferguson, & Laud, 2001; Burnette, 2000; Henning, 2005; Learning Disabilities Association, 2002; Warner, Dede, Garvan, & Conway, 2002). Problems with existing assessment tools relate to cultural and linguistic issues resulting in conflicting ideas about the appropriateness of English as the tool but this also causes concern as where tests have been translated, there are often validity issues. Taking into account the number of languages, the size of the task of ensuring equity would be enormous, if not impossible, as would finding the personnel to meet the linguistic requirements. Where tests have been in L1 language; they are producing results that suggest that LD may look different in different languages, therefore questioning the usefulness of such practices (Schwarz & Terrill, 2000).

Questions used, whether in informal assessment or questionnaires, frequently require cultural knowledge which L2 learners may or may not have. Other assessments such as oral vocabulary tests frequently are more a test of English, than vocabulary. Phonological processing tests may be affected by elements in the learner's first language and discussion about previous education and life experience may be culturally uncomfortable and lead to unreliable answers (*ibid*). Rooney (2002) stated

Figure 3 goes here...



that "one instructor reported that it took her almost a semester to break down the student's cultural 'wall of politeness' so he could open up about his needs" (p. 10).

There are serious concerns about cross cultural assessments that use traditional assessment tools such as IQ and standardised assessments (Abrams et al., 2001; LDA, 2002; Burnette, 2000; Henning, 2005) and that the length of exposure to English is a major consideration. It is interesting to note that exposure to English for a period of 7 - 10 years usually produces L2 English efficiency. It is equally notable that L1 children with LD are not usually formally assessed until they are 7 or 8 years old (E. Rutherford, Speld/educational psychologist, personal communication, August 8, 2006) due to LD characteristics being part of the normal development of a L1 English speaking child. Also noted is that the natural trajectory of learning in other cultures has little written documentation. Is it possible that there is a correlation between these factors?

It has also been noted that LD affects the acquisition of language skills; ESOL students with LD will be challenged when trying to master the mechanics of a new language but may manage the content. This has been demonstrated aptly with many of L1 LD participants in studies, who demonstrate higher levels in comprehension than reading (Schwarz & Terrill, 2000).

What does become apparent is that working from the known to the unknown may reveal a way through this maze. What is already known relates to the moving from one culture/language to another as mentioned previously, and if barriers can be recognised and lowered, this may help. LD affects specific areas of the learning process (Figure 2) and these are manifested in outputs such as reading and writing which become apparent in the tertiary classroom.

Schwarz and Terrill (2000) have suggested the following questions may guide identification:

1. Has the problem persisted over time?
2. Has the problem resisted normal instruction?
3. Does the learner show a clear pattern of strengths and weaknesses inside and outside the classroom?
4. Does the problem interfere with the learning or a life activity in some way to a significant degree? (p. 2).

They further suggest that if the previous questions were answered affirmatively that identification should be confirmed through the use of:

1. interviews (with the aid of an interpreter) encompassing "educational and language history, social background, learner's strengths, and the learner's perception of academic problems" (p. 2)
2. a portfolio to include measures of progress, samples of reading and writing, other classroom work, attendance data, teaching methods and materials and

- with the learner, a report of their success (or lack of success), and autobiographical information
3. results of recent vision and hearing testing to rule out sensory problems.

This framework, the authors argue, should provide a useful profile that assists the monitoring of learning behaviours, progress and guidelines for appropriate support. This is an approach that personally has appeal as it avoids many of the pitfalls previously mentioned.

Maybe the answer is something much simpler, such as looking for the answers in the non linguistic (executive functioning) characteristics of LD (Figure 2) or a combination of these? What is clear is that it is not as simple as looking at "an island of competence in a sea of weaknesses" (Brooks, as cited in Root, 1994, p. 2). Alternatively, it may be that a 'definitive identification' of an ESOL LD learner, may be virtually impossible at this point in time (Rance-Raney, 2000, as cited in LDA, 2002).

For the student in the opening scenario, the LD assessment used involved an interview; classroom observations; a basic mix of standardized diagnostic tools (content understanding was undertaken). The process targeted personal and classroom goals through his strengths (he could write 500 words and not lose track of what he had written). Intervention addressed identified underlying weaknesses such as his sequencing and organisational skills which impacted on everything from his time management, to organising the essay, to spelling. Enquiring about his progress in his home tongue revealed only embarrassment. He passed his project with a 'C+' but the tutor noted that if the guidelines throughout the process had been met a 'B' would have been achieved.

The journey of assisting such learners has only just begun but experiences like this one have provided guidelines for the process now in place. A concluding thought in relation to identification processes - no matter what the assessment process looks like, no matter which tools are used, irrespective of what any assessor believes about any assessment process, none of these are as important as the student and guiding them to achieve their goals. All too often the assessment process is determined by the rules surrounding accommodations. My own belief is that this is a shame, for in my 20 years of working in tertiary education, I have never found any person who wanted to use a reader/writer who hadn't really needed to - because it can be a most frustrating experience.

## **Conclusion**

The broadening and sharing of learning skills tutors' studies are crucial to the services they provide, not only for policy purposes but for the betterment of students. Such actions can and do have a positive effect on both student and institutional success and retention. Reflecting on current practices relating to identification and assessment of

ESOL LD has identified the disparity and complications within the current assessment processes, suggesting that maybe it is appropriate to consider abandoning or at least being very selective about how this area is approached. The inclusion of Schwarz and Terrill's (2000) five questions are a welcome addition to the assessment process as they highlight the differences between assessing L1 and L2 students with LD and also the importance of probing unexpected underachievement. If LD is suspected in any learner it is important to provide multiple assessments to determine an appropriate intervention process, for as Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1997,) suggest, "there is no recipe for assessment – no single battery of tests, form of observation, or specific rating scale that can tell us everything we want to know about any student. .... Only if all students had the same kinds of problems could there be one right way to assess them". Assessment must be flexible and "tailored to the individual and to the nature of the instructional setting" (p. 349). The addition of ESOL to LD has had a huge impact on the existing confusions within the LD experience creating far 'murkier waters' than LD ever did on its own.

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# Computer Aided Feedback and Assessment Systems: a tool for Learning Advisors

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## Abstract

A new system for providing feedback and assessment using information technology has been developed. It replicates common “paper-based” proformas that are often used in tertiary education for providing extrinsic feedback and assessment. However, the digital nature of this system has particular benefits for teachers and students as it helps teachers align course objectives and learning outcomes with specific assessment criteria, it records student achievement of these criteria, it automatically calculates grades based on a weighted performance continuum, while also enabling teachers to deliver detailed feedback in a variety of ways. Students benefit from the timely return of detailed feedback and assessment information in which their performance against the assessment criteria is made explicit, particularly when the system is used for formative rather than summative assessment. This paper reports on initial trials of the system at the University of South Australia with teaching staff across a range of disciplines, and explores the potential of the system as a tool for learning advisors who are working collaboratively with teaching staff on curriculum and assessment issues, and at the same time providing learning support to students needing guidance on strategies for meeting assessment expectations.

## Introduction

The field of computer aided feedback and assessment is relatively new and very few systems are currently available. The literature refers to this field as “Computer-Aided Marking” (Sondergaard & Thomas, 2004) or “Computer Assisted Assessment” (Denton, 2003). Denton (2003) outlines four main types of Computer Assisted Assessment: (1) Objective Testing such as multiple choice or text match type questions delivered via the Web; (2) Electronic Submission enabling students presenting work to their tutor via email or threaded discussions that enable students to contribute to an on-line debate; (3) Free Text Analysis including plagiarism detection tools that can be used to check for similarities between electronic text files and software designed to automatically grade free text; and (4) Marking Assistants that can aid in the computation of student marks.

Marking Assistants could then be categorized into those that generate reports and those that generate proformas. Electronic Feedback and Mindtrail are examples of those that generate reports that include some statistical data regarding grades and performance.

Computer Aided Feedback and Assessment System (CAFAS) and Assessment@yourfingertips are examples of systems that generate a proforma. A proforma or “template” provides space for comments to be added and performance to be indicated (e.g. via slider bars and tick boxes in the case of CAFAS or via a Rubric in the case of Assessment@yourfingertips). The advantage of the proforma system is that blank proformas (devoid of comments etc) can be published to students in course handbooks. This has been accepted as best practice at the University of South Australia and has been mandated for 2007. The beneficial effect this has for students is that they can very clearly see how assessment will be conducted because typically proformas include all the assessment criteria and a brief description thereof. Weightings for assessment criteria are also included and penalty marks can also be specified which has the effect of warning the student of critical things that they must not do. There is also a beneficial effect for teachers because it requires that they consider the assessment criteria, weightings etc during the development of assessment tasks. In effect systems such as CAFAS become a tool for teachers to develop rational assessment schemes. The real benefit of this is that the assessment process relates directly to the assessment task and therefore students are not as likely to be surprised and disappointed by assessment results and assessors are clearly and consistently focused on particular aspects of the student’s work.

## Teaching and Learning Benefits

The current CAFAS prototype addresses many important aspects of assessment and feedback. These are discussed in the following sub-sections.

### *Developmental, diagnostic and summative assessment and feedback*

The CAFAS system enables academic staff to efficiently and consistently provide developmental, diagnostic and summative feedback and assessment to students via online methods (for example, email or website). The current embodiment of the CAFAS prototype is designed to enable staff to document feedback/assessment via eight interrelated mechanisms:

Table 1. *Feedback and Assessment Mechanism Types Contained in CAFAS*

	Name of Feedback/Assessment Mechanism	Description of Mechanism
1	“Performance Continuum” for each assessment criterion	Formative feedback which indicates the general performance for each assessment criterion.
2	“Comments” field for each assessment criterion and for ‘Deliverables’ and ‘Grade Penalties’ checklists	Formative feedback comments which specifically addresses particular assessment criteria.
3	“Summary Comments” field	Formative feedback comment which sums up the overall performance in the assignment.
4	Overall grade	Summative assessment which reports the overall grade for the



5	Assessment Criterion Descriptor field	assignment. Explanation of the scope and standards for each assessment criterion.
6	“Performance Indicators” graph (with editable descriptor fields)	Formative feedback addressing generic performance indicators.
7	List of “Grade Descriptors” (with editable descriptor fields)	Explanation of the basic requirements for each type of grade.
8	“Class Feedback” sheet	Formative feedback aimed at the whole class.

### *Online Assessment*

Online assessment is integral to the system. Denton (2003), inventor of “Electronic Feedback”, has shown that using email to provide feedback online is advantageous. As he explains, “Surveys of students indicate that they appreciate receiving feedback via email, even in the absence of their original script” (2003, p. 24). These findings have been corroborated in recent trials undertaken by the authors in 2006. First and third year students studying in the Program of Industrial Design (approx 100 students) and second year students in the Program of Media Arts (Multimedia) (approx 200 students) were surveyed via an anonymous online survey instrument. The types of assignments in these courses included text based reports, technical drawings, and graphics-based website design proposals. Many students reported that the online delivery of feedback via CAFAS was greatly appreciated due to the convenience of accessing and storing feedback/assessment and for the quality of feedback. In response to the question, “Digital Feedback and Assessment Sheets were emailed to you (PDF file) for each assessment. What are the benefits/disadvantages of this new system for providing feedback and calculating assessment?”, students commented:

“Very clear, can see exactly where you lost marks, which is helpful to know what you need to improve on”.

“Convenience — I can receive them at home instead of going to Uni. Detailed comments were great, so were the graphs”.

“Very beneficial — detailed exactly where strengths/weaknesses were”.

“This was a really good method of feedback. They provided in depth explanation of all facets of the assignments which enabled you to see exactly where you went wrong, or what could be improved”.

“It was fantastic to receive such comprehensive feedback. Since I spent a lot of time on ensuring my assignments were at a high standard, it was nice to know that course staff made the effort to undertake a detailed review of my assignments and provide valuable feedback”.

“This was very beneficial and excellent feedback! Just having a single comment and a score isn't very helpful, but having this digital feedback explains every assessment criteria, as well as percentage weightings, the grade and comments. This feedback should be kept this way”.

“This was genuinely useful in seeing where criteria was and wasn't met and what to improve or look out for in future assessments”.

“Yes, this was a new way of providing feedback to students. The assessment sheets themselves were very comprehensive and allowed for thorough, detailed feedback, which is greatly appreciated. I think overall, the system was beneficial to students, it was just different to see graphs and charts on a marking sheet. Different, but comprehensive = good”.

From the students' viewpoint CAFAS seems to be particularly useful in two contexts. It provides a convenient way for them to access their feedback, and it provides a variety of useful information that they perceive as being useful to their learning and understanding of their assessment.

### *Assessment of large classes*

Assessment of large classes is improved by two mechanisms: (1) large classes are often assessed by multiple tutors — this raises the issue of consistency of assessment. This issue is addressed by a “moderation” function which enables the course coordinator to quickly adjust the grades of a group of students which were assigned by a particular tutor (for example, in the event that a tutor has been “too harsh” or “too soft” in their assessment of student work); (2) a list of standard feedback comments can be generated by the “marking team” or course coordinator prior to assessment. This enables all members of the marking team to rapidly and consistently supply feedback to students via drop-down menus (or similar). More specific, personalised feedback can also be entered as necessary and new “standard comments” can be added “on-the-fly” during the assessment process.

### *Supporting students studying at a distance*

Clarke (2000), while highlighting the importance of teaching staff providing prompt quality student-centred feedback to students studying at a distance, cautions that there is also greater potential for students to misinterpret advice and feedback from academic staff when staff and students are separated by distance. Clarke further suggests that open and distance education adds to the pressures on academic staff because of the need for fast turn-around on assessment and returning feedback, the need to individualise assessment and the problems in achieving consistency and reliability of marking. CAFAS addresses these concerns through the efficient use of automated grading, the ability to add comments quickly using drop-down menus, while still retaining the ability to personalise comments for individual students, and the convenience in being able to return feedback and assessment to students electronically.

CAFAS also addresses these concerns in the context of post graduate students who are typically in the situation of studying at a distance.

### *Minimising academic misconduct*

Although not the main focus of CAFAS, the system has the potential to assist with deterring students from engaging in academic misconduct such as plagiarism. It is possible to include a “Penalty” field titled “Academic Misconduct”. This acts as a reminder to staff and a warning to students; staff must discuss and explain this important issue with students, and, students are warned that academic misconduct is a serious issue — by default a 100% penalty is stipulated for academic misconduct.

### *Peer review*

Peer review as a means of formative assessment is an approach embodied in three of the courses in which CAFAS was trialled. These courses focused on Multimedia design in the Program of Media Arts. In these courses, students are encouraged to submit their assignments for peer review via an online threaded discussion, and to modify their work in response to the feedback they receive prior to final submission of their assignments for formal summative assessment. CAFAS provides a more structured approach to this process, enabling students themselves to use the marking assistant within this cooperative learning environment. By providing students with the tool prior to summative assessment, they are better able to focus on the expected learning outcomes and become strategic adapters who are able to adjust to their peers' comments while also developing higher level learning skills as critical reviewers (Liu, Lin, Chiu, & Yuan, 2001). Providing students with access to the tool in advance of summative assessment also addresses one of the issues raised by students in the initial trials who reported that while they were pleased with the detailed feedback they received in response to each criterion, they would have preferred to have had access to a sample final report prior to submission of their assignments.

### *Potential as a tool for Learning Advisors*

Kokkhin and Stevenson (n.d.) suggest that many students at university experience difficulty in understanding and meeting academic expectations and that assessment is the point where students experience the greatest challenge. As they explain, learning support therefore needs to focus on making academic expectations explicit, and as Bartlett (2005) suggests, this may involve necessarily involves collaboration with academic staff on curriculum, teaching and assessment issues. While CAFAS has been developed primarily to assist teachers and students, the system may also assist learning advisors in supporting students and teaching staff to meet these challenges in a variety of ways.

The system may incorporate a “link” to the learning advisor in the form of an instruction or a suggestion to the student to obtain assistance from a learning advisor (Figure 1). Another possibility, and a more definite “link”, would be an automatically generated email to the learning advisor, which alerts them to the student’s learning needs. This could be quite specific, for example, suggesting the student get help with

English as a second language, or it could be a non-specific suggestion to visit the learning advisor. Although these schemes have not been trialled, technically they are possible and seem to be a logical step in the constantly evolving online learning environment. Further consultation with learning advisors, university policy makers and students will be necessary to ensure that the automatic reporting “link” to learning advisors would not be perceived by students as being an unwanted, unsolicited intrusion on their studies. In some institutions it might also be a breach of the confidential nature of student assessment and feedback information.

<b>Summary Comment</b>	
James, you have demonstrated your understanding and skills for the majority of the assessment criteria however you need to focus on improving your referencing skills - poor performance in this area has lowered your grade for this assignment. I suggest you see a learning advisor for further help with this. Regards, Marty	
<b>Help from Learning Advisor</b>	
If one of the boxes to the right has been ticked it is suggested that you contact a Learning Advisor for help with your next assignment. A copy of this feedback sheet has been copied to them so that they are aware of the topic you need help with.	<input type="checkbox"/> English as a second language <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling and grammar <input type="checkbox"/> Essay Writing skills <input type="checkbox"/> Report Writing skills <input type="checkbox"/> Academic Misconduct <input type="checkbox"/> Time Management <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Referencing <input type="checkbox"/> Other
<b>Grade</b>	<b>P1</b>

Figure 1. Sample feedback to student

### Standard Comments

Another area where a learning advisor may be of assistance is with standard comments. CAFAS has the ability to quickly insert standard comments, however the effectiveness of the comment in terms of communicating to the student is determined by the structure of the comment: for it to communicate to the student effectively it must be clearly and concisely articulated. Indeed many lecturers and tutors have developed a notebook of standard comments which they refer to when they are writing feedback to students; however, many teachers have not taken this initiative and this is where they could benefit from the combined assistance from a learning advisor and a marking assistant. The learning advisor will be able to help “craft” a highly communicative standard feedback comment and, via the use of the marking assistant software, enable the teacher to quickly access and enter that comment for a particular student. Indeed one of the services provided by the Flexible Learning Centre (the administration unit at the University of South Australia responsible for academic staff development and student learning support) is the provision of exemplars of “rubric” feedback forms which contain standard feedback comments. These rubric forms can

be used directly or adapted to a particular assessment. These forms are a ready source of standard comments that could be easily incorporated into the various comments box drop down menus in CAFAS.

**Analysis of Assessment Results**

Marking assistants are, at their core, a database of assessment results. Grades, marks and comments are recorded and can be displayed in a variety of ways. The authors have found that students greatly appreciate a graph which shows the grade distribution for an assignment (assessment) – refer to Figure 2. A graph such as this clearly indicates to the student how they have performed in the context of their peers’ performance. The mean grade and mark for the class can also be automatically calculated and displayed. This provides a powerful feedback mechanism and may provide great motivation to students; either to improve or to maintain their current position in the class. The traditional way of publishing this information is a table of student ID numbers and grades. Displaying this information in the format of a graph makes it easier for students to understand – conventional lists of grades do not clearly display the distribution of grades.

**Feedback and Assessment Summary**



Program	Industrial Design
Course	Industrial Design Studio 6
Assignment	Assignment 2 - DFM Concept Generation
Weighting	35%

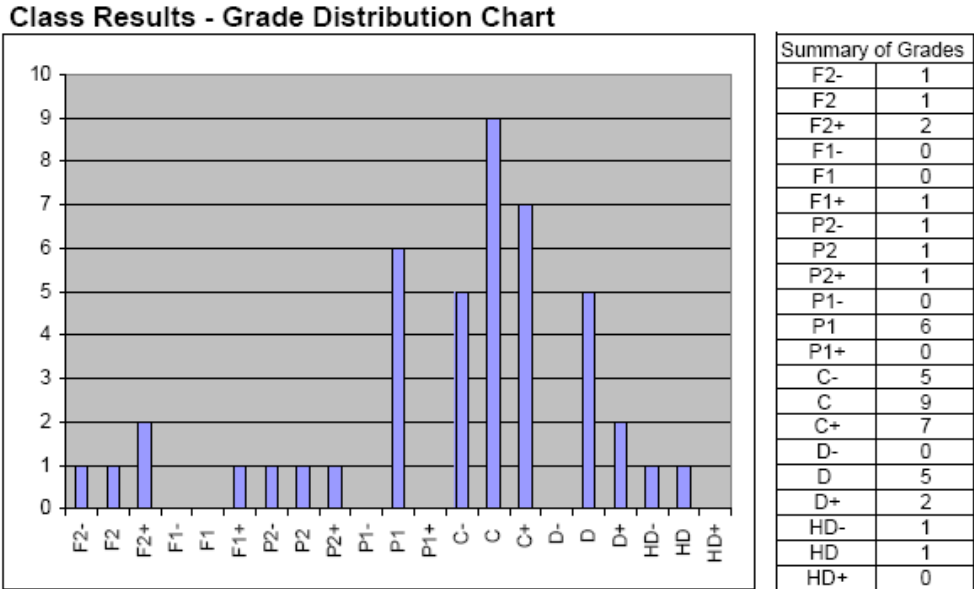


Figure 2. Sample of class grades available to students.

Another useful way of analysing the assessment and feedback data is via the mean mark/grade for each assessment criterion. Figure 3 shows a table of marks for two assessment criteria. Each assessment criterion shows the mean mark for that assessment criterion. This information is potentially very useful to the teacher as it

clearly indicates where students are performing poorly: a low mean mark for a particular assessment criterion indicates that many students are struggling with that aspect of the assessment task (assignment). Teachers can react to this appropriately, perhaps by preparing a “revision” lecture to address the misunderstood topic. Or, a learning advisor may be able to work with the teacher to unravel the causes of the students’ misunderstanding. A list of student names could be generated automatically to assist with organising the remedial teaching session and the software could email the students automatically to alert them of the need to attend an extra teaching session.

Student Id	Student Name	Ideation	Gr	Tech Drg	Gr
100002	Names obscured for confidentiality purposes	80	D	65	C-
100019		57	P1-	50	P2-
100029		70	C	67	C-
100017		70	C	65	C-
100037		0	F2-	0	F2-
100016		60	P1	56	P1-
100018		70	C	58	P1
<b>AVERAGES</b>		<b>45.3</b>		<b>30.3</b>	

Figure 3. Table of student grades for particular assessment criteria

Also of interest to the teacher is the individual student’s progression with the subject material. If subsequent assessment tasks (assignments) are being assessed by the same assessment criteria it is possible to monitor how a student is progressing with particular assessment criteria as the course progresses. It would also be possible to generate an end-of-course report which clearly displays this information (via graphs). Although not currently possible with aforementioned marking assistant software applications, it is conceivable that the software could automatically alert the teacher to particular students who are failing to progress, or are “going backwards” with particular assessment criteria. Currently this is something that is rather difficult to monitor and most teachers do not have the time for this level of scrutiny. It may also be something that students lose track of too, so by displaying this information, in graph format, on feedback proformas students can clearly see how they are progressing (or regressing!).

Given the obvious benefits of these types of information it is likely that the next generation of marking assistants will provide this functionality. Currently, the first two data sets (refer Figures 2 and 3) can be generated with CAFAS, although it takes some time and basic know-how to set up the Fig 3 table in the Microsoft Excel environment.

## Conclusion

CAFAS has many advantages for higher education. The online system is efficient and can assist with reducing heavy workloads of teachers and improving student satisfaction and learning outcomes via reduced turn-around times. It should be noted

that staff who have embraced this system are typically more adept with computers in general than those who prefer the paper-based method of providing feedback and assessment. Funding has been received from the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education to develop the CAFAS system as an open-source, “user-friendly” application, maximizing the likelihood of uptake by academic staff. Mechanisms for improving consistency of feedback and assessment, and for moderation of grades, can facilitate collaboration between multiple markers (teachers) and ensure that the calculation of students’ marks is as fair as practicable. It offers students the benefits of clearly understanding the assessment regime by spelling it out using easily understood graphs, scroll-bars, tick boxes, and text entry boxes. It provides the convenience of receiving feedback in digital format and the flexibility to be used as both a formative and summative assessment tool.

The next generation of marking assistants could provide a link to learning advisors and this possibility will be investigated during the Carrick funded project. There are numerous benefits of a database of information that students, teachers, learning advisors and management can access. By building in a link to learning advisors, students are reminded that they may be of help to them and learning advisors could be alerted to the student’s needs. It is analogous to a general practitioner referring a patient to a specialist . But in this case the “specialist” could have access to a rich database of information relating the “patients” history; this equips them with useful information and should greatly assist with their diagnosis and treatment.

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### **Further Information about CAA systems**

*Assessment@yourfingertips* has been developed by Alistair Bruce Campbell of Edith Cowan University.

Denton's *Electronic Feedback* can be downloaded from;  
<http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/cis/software/feedback.asp>

Freney's *CAFAS* system is under development via a Carrick Institute grant and will be released in February 2008. Email [martin.freney@unisa.edu.au](mailto:martin.freney@unisa.edu.au) for more information.

*Mindtrail* is commercially unavailable as Mindtrail Pty Ltd was liquidated in 2003.



## Appendix 1: Statistics relating to the refereed proceedings

A total of 42 presentations were included in the 2006 ATLAANZ conference programme. Fourteen were submitted to be considered for inclusion in the published refereed proceedings of the conference. Thirteen referees contributed 28 reviews; Table 1 shows the distribution of referees' recommendations across the categories available.

Table 1. *Distribution of referees' recommendations by category*

Category	Number of recommendations
Accept for refereed publication as presented	1
Accept with minor revisions	15
Accept after major revisions	7
Reject for refereed publication but accept with revision for non-refereed	2
Reject	3
Total	28

Three papers were rejected by one, or both of the referees; each of these three papers was sent to a third referee, and in each case, the outcome remained unchanged. The 11 remaining authors were all able to make the revisions required.