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Journeys of international students’ adaptation to disciplinary writing practices in higher education

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Abstract

The case study reported in this paper has examined the adaptation of international postgraduate students from China and Vietnam in two disciplines, Education and Economics, at an Australian university. It focuses on how individual students mediated their disciplinary writing practices and their personal values. Based on the discussion of the students’ experiences, it will be argued that the accommodating process they go through seems complex and multifaceted. The study highlights the different forms of adaptation the students made in order to gain access to their disciplinary communities of practices. It indicates the need to unpack the ‘hidden aspects’ underpinning the commonly presumed notion of adaptation of international students. The paper concludes with some implications for the university communities to help empower international students in their participation in academic discourses and make the curriculum more accessible to the increasing number of international students.

Introduction

The number of full-fee paying international student enrolments onshore in Australian higher education in 2005 was 163,930, which represented over 20% of the total student population (Australian Education International, 2006). The accelerating flow of international students to Australian universities has led to the university’s commitment to making the curriculum more accessible and facilitating the participation of students from a diverse range of countries in institutional practices. The study reported in this paper has examined the writing experiences of international Masters students from China and Vietnam in two disciplines, Education and Economics, at an Australian university. Based on the discussion of the international students’ experiences, it will be argued that the accommodating process they go through seems complex and multifaceted. The findings of the study indicate that there seems to be a need to make visible the variables underpinning the process of adaptation of individual international students to their disciplinary practices in the Australian higher education sector.

Given that the internationalization of higher education has become an issue of growing focus and academic writing plays an important role to students’ success in Australian universities, international students’ experiences in participating in disciplinary written discourse have been of increasing attention. Issues concerning the cultural values (Sawir, 2005; Samuelowicz, 1987; Robertson et al., 2000) and the disciplinary beliefs (Becher &
Trowler, 2001; Coffin et al., 2003) surrounding student writing tend to be often taken into account. However, there seems to be a lack of literature focusing on students’ specific processes of adapting to their chosen disciplinary discourse practices. Moreover, research into the challenges of international students in Western institutions tends to essentialize Asian students, including Chinese and Vietnamese students, into homogenous groups (Elsey, 1990; Lacina, 2002; Robertson et al., 2000; Samuelowicz, 1987). This study, which aims to explore what is really involved in the accommodating process of Chinese and Vietnamese international students in specific disciplines, attempts to respond to the above gaps of the current literature.

This paper first discusses the different views on the images of international students in Australian higher education. Next, arguments for the development of the transdisciplinary framework for analyzing the international students’ voices and lecturers’ perspectives within institutional practices, which integrates two analytical tools, Lillis’ (2001) talk around text and positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), will be provided. Specific instances of Vietnamese and Chinese international students’ adaptation to their disciplinary writing practices will be discussed. The paper concludes with the suggestions for the university to help empower international students in their journeys to gain entry to their disciplinary community.

Rethinking the images and experiences of international students in higher education

A large body of literature tends to be concerned with a “deficit model”. Challenges facing international students in Western higher education have often been assumed to be related to language and cultural differences. The discourse of cultural differences contributes to some extent to our understandings of some of the preferred learning ways and values international students may bring with them into Australian institutions. However, within the current changing global context, relying too much on the link between cultural factors and the images of Asian students may limit the possibilities to explore the complexities, variables as well as silences in international students’ processes to participate in Australian institutional practices. An emergent line of literature has thus challenged the common stereotypes about the cultural learning styles and experiences of Asian students (see, for example, Biggs, 1996; Doherty & Singh, 2005; Jones, 2005; Kettle, 2005; Rizvi, 2000). As a further step, in contesting the images of Asian students as passive, rote learners, some research investigates how international students can be viewed as “agents” who may be capable of transforming their own situation in order to gain access into the practices of Western Universities (see, for example, Kettle, 2005). Highlighted in these studies is the need to avoid oversimplifications and to investigate the complexities in the students’ experiences of adapting to their institutional practices. The study reported in this paper is an attempt to contribute to this area of knowledge.

A growing trend of literature is concerned with the need to challenge the monocultural assumptions of the teaching practices and the seemingly ‘pure’, ‘authentic’ Western pedagogy in Western universities (See for example, Doherty & Singh, 2005; Morris & Hudson, 1995; Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). There seems to be a trend to universalize the education practices of Western Anglo-Saxon countries (mainly the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia) since internationalizing education is fostered
widely in these countries (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004:418). Hellsten and Prescott (2004:349) argue for the significance of ‘inclusivity as a dynamic negotiation, as opposed to the domination of one over another’ and of the accommodation of diversity in the process of internationalizing the university curriculum. Based on a study about foundation programs for Asian international students at an Australian university, Doherty and Singh (2005) critiqued the pedagogical practices of internationalized higher education curriculum, which tend to privilege the purity of teaching ‘how the West is done’. Such practices thus seem to locate international students in the discourse of cultural differences and treat them as “Other” students. Doherty and Singh (2005) argue that “these retrospective discourses work to create/reassert a cultural script of an authentic, pure and essential pedagogical tradition, in active denial and suppression of any emerging hybridxity” (p.69). International students’ challenges in engaging in those dominant discourses have been described in various research studies (Elsey, 1990; Lacina, 2002; Robertson et al., 2000; Samuelowicz, 1987). However, in practice, how international students actually accommodate, negotiate or resist specific requirements and expectations embedded in particular disciplinary discourses remains largely unexplored. This study is concerned with investigating how Vietnamese and Chinese international students mediated between different interpretations of academic writing in their process of gaining access to their disciplinary community. It focused on seven students from two disciplines, Economics and Education, in an Australian university. The findings show the complexities in their journeys of adapting to the disciplinary demands in terms of academic writing.

Recent research has brought a broader lens into the understanding of the motivations and experiences of international students through the concepts of investment and imagined community (Doherty & Singh, 2005; Norton, 2001). Norton (2001:166) the learners’ motivation or investment in the course needs to be interpreted in relation with their life histories and personal visions of the target community. Through the notion of investment, she also indicates that motivation is socially and contextually constructed. Learning can be viewed as participation in particular communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Jongbloed (2002:423) integrates the business concept of (student) customer-led provision into higher education and suggests the need to rethink what counts as quality. His argument indicates the shift of focus from quality as academic excellence to quality as fitness-for-purpose, which is centred on accommodating the student customers’ purposes in their investment in higher education. The relationship between investment and operative discourse is significant since it offers an alternative conceptual tool from which to examine how the international students’ motivations and investment in their course affects their intentions and potential choice in constructing knowledge in writing for their target community in higher education.

Research Framework

This paper is part of a larger study which examines Vietnamese and Chinese international students’ experiences in participating in disciplinary written discourse. The data collected for the case study involved seven students and four lecturers. Yet, within its limited scope, this paper focuses only on five students. The students whom this paper focuses on have been selected because they meet the research criteria of this study. They are Chinese
and Vietnamese students enrolled in Masters of Education or Economics. They volunteered to participate in the study and were willing to reflect on their experiences of writing their first text at the Australian university. The respondents presented in this paper have been given pseudonyms. The university where this study was conducted has been referred to in this paper as the Australian university for the purpose of preserving its anonymity.

A modified version of Lillis’ (2001) heuristic for exploring student meaning making is adopted for the data collection and data analysis of this study. The students were invited to an one-hour interview in which they were asked to talk about their text as the first assignment for their course at the Australian university. The talk aims to engage students in an exploration of their experiences of writing these texts. The *talk around text* was centred on the student's first written assignment at the university because it appears to represent the most challenging for the international students. Moreover, this study includes the positioning interviews for the students, which allow space for them to reflect on any changes with regard to their interpretations and expectations on meaning making they may experience as they progress through their course for one semester. The positioning interview was conducted 6 months after the *talk around text*.

I have developed a framework for exploring students’ agency in mediating their writing and lecturers’ views on student writing and disciplinary practices. The analysis framework drew on two interpretive tools, a modified version of Lillis’ (2001) heuristic for exploring student meaning making and positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). The integration of these two analytic models represents a trans-disciplinary approach (Fairclough, 2003) for social analysis of student writing experiences, lecturers’ views and discourse. The modified version of Lillis’ (2001) heuristic focused on the questions: what/how the students think they can write; what/how they want to write and why they think they can write so/why they want to write so. These questions help to unpack the tensions between students’ intentions underpinning their specific ways of writing and their potential choices in writing through. Positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) has been used to assist Lillis’ model for the analysis of students’ voices within the institutional structures and how they may shift their ways of academic writing as they progress through their courses. This theory highlights the aspects of dominant discourse rules and conventions, rights, duties and obligations in discursive practices (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). It thus allows an exploration of how the Chinese and Vietnamese students exercise their personal agency through making choice among different ways of meaning making, accepting, accommodating or rejecting dominant conventions. Positioning theory is also adopted to interpret students' writing and the institutional practices from the lecturers' perspectives, which are not addressed by Lillis’ (2001) *talk around text*. The trans-disciplinary framework used in this study is presented in Figure 1.
Students’ journeys of adaptation

This section focuses on the different forms of adaptation which the students in this study made in order to gain access to their disciplinary writing. The data from interviews with the international students in the study included various points at which these students tended to adapt to their disciplinary writing requirements. However, the accommodating process they went through seemed multifaceted and they had different capabilities of doing so. Wenger (1998) argues learning can be linked to participating in a particular community of practice. Some students attempted to adapt to their disciplinary conventions in order to become an insider of the disciplinary community and they feel positive about the shift in their conceptual knowledge and ways of writing. For example, in the process of writing her first assignment for her course, Wang, the Chinese student in Education, struggled to shift from her former habit of writing to the new way of expected in her discipline in Australia. She explained:

I explicitly express my view there... and I tried my best to make it more objectively... I think there is certainly, the Western and Chinese ways are different but I prefer the Western one. I think with the introduction, conclusion, all the subtitles and you become very direct. This is one thing I learnt and it is very useful.
I think what I learn from the Western academic writing is that I know how to use evidence to support my position... but in Chinese you don't have to. I like this way.

In light of the analytic framework presented in figure 1, what/how Wang thought she could write appeared to match with what/how she personally wanted to write. She attempted to accommodate what was expected of her in terms of academic writing in the new learning environment at the Australian university. She revealed that she valued the new ways of writing she was exposed to in her discipline.

Like Wang, Vỹ, a Vietnamese international student, elaborated on the shift in her perception of critical thinking, which she was expected to demonstrate in her first essay in Economics at an Australian university:

At first I feel it's [critical thinking] very hard because the piece of writing is really beautiful and I find it difficult to criticize that and later on I learn that we can just criticize by our own knowledge and experience but using supporting ideas and those ideas can come from other sources, for example ideas from authors or data to criticize. Later on I found that it's constructive... and that's why I found critical writing is not that hard. I remember when I did my assignment at home, what we do is we try to prove the idea. We do not have the habit of criticizing and supporting other ideas. We try to support the idea that's already formed... You do the research but you tend to support the idea that is already there, you just follow it.

The above extracts illustrated that Wang and Vỹ clearly reviewed their writing reflecting on their new understanding of the disciplinary requirement. Hence, when confronting different ideas about academic writing in their discipline, they shifted her former belief and negotiated ways of writing the introduction in light of the new belief in an attempt to satisfy the lecturers’ expectation and take control of their academic practice. The talk around text analysis (Lillis, 2001) of what/how/why Wang and Vỹ wrote in their text indicated that the ways they mediated their writing to gain access into their disciplinary world were influenced by their awareness of the academic writing requirements in the discipline they were operating in. It would appear that discourse power (Fairclough, 1995), which in this context is related to the disciplinary requirements and the lecturers’ expectations, was at the centre of these students’ practice of academic writing. Both Wang and Vỹ deliberately self-positioned (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as those who desired to fully adapt to the community practice of their current discourse since they found the approaches they were expected to accommodate useful and valuable.

In the new academic discourse community, like Wang and Vỹ, other students also actively reshaped their interpretation and positioned themselves in a more powerful position through employing an accommodating strategy. However, underneath their adaptation was the tension between their actual ways of writing which they reflected in their texts and their personal values or potential choices in meaning making. For
example, Xuân, a Vietnamese student in Education revealed she felt forced to adapt to the conventional ways of constructing knowledge in her course:

Usually we think it's safe to go with that way [the way expected by her lecturer] rather than try something different... Like if you try to make a joke, you have to make sure that your joke can make people laugh, otherwise you don't make the joke. Yeah, sometimes I want to write in a different way... I wish it [the academic writing convention] were not so structured like this.

Xuân chose ways of constructing meaning in light of new interpretations in the attempt to gain access to the academic world. That belief was inherent on the surface of her writing but what seemed invisible from her writing was her desire for having space for being on her own: creativity as she referred to. Different from Wang, who was willing to adapt to the new requirement and happily shifted her former belief, Xuân still cherished her preference even though on the surface, she forced self-positioned (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as a student who conformed to what she perceived as being required of her in terms of academic writing. That is, she felt an obligation to respond to the disciplinary demand in terms of academic writing.

The talk around text (Lillis, 2001) analysis of the writing account of Lin, a Chinese student enrolled in Masters of Education, revealed that there was a mismatch between what/how she thought she was expected to write and what/how she wanted to write. For example, she reflected on her way of constructing knowledge in academic writing in her discipline: “I tend not to use my own opinion because I think it's not encouraged here. In Chinese writing, you can randomly invert your own experience and your own source into your article”. The quote indicated that Lin tended to abandon the way of writing which valued personal experience and personal source she had been socialized into in her home country. Within the analytic tool presented in figure 1, Lin empowered herself through making decision about how to write based on her perception of what was (not) encouraged to include in disciplinary writing (what Lin thought she could write). Unlike Wang who was satisfied with the shift in her accommodating process, Lin nevertheless did not feel so and expressed her wish to be able to embrace personal experience into academic writing in Australia:

I would like to do that [to include personal experience into writing] because while I am writing, I always want to write about something related to my background, something I am familiar with and something I can use later, something can be useful to my future.

Lin’s personal desire in constructing knowledge appeared to be in conflict with her actual way of meaning making she employed in her text. In fact, what/how she wanted to write was embedded in the purpose of her investment (Norton, 2001) in the course and her long-term objective, which was linked to her plan for future career. The changing nature of higher education within the context of internalizing the curriculum necessitates the articulation of both longer-term objectives and immediate needs of students (Doughney, 2000). Lin’s account revealed that her attempts in accommodating what she interpreted
as the disciplinary practices might satisfy her immediate need through enabling her to gain membership in her disciplinary community but did not appear to meet her long-term objective.

Hao is a Chinese student doing Masters in Economics who felt her adaptation to the way of writing expected in the Australian university to be like a coping strategy rather than a real transformation in her practice of meaning making. In her first text for her course at the Australian university, she tended to be direct in communicating her ideas and she often signalled what she was going to discuss through employing such linking words as firstly, secondly, thirdly, fourthly to introduce her points. For example: Firstly, top management has few understanding and support for SHRM... Secondly, line managers lack commitment and involvement of SHRM... Thirdly, HR practitioners are not qualified... Fourthly, Cultural conflict leads to barriers... (Hao's text). However, in fact, she did not personally feel positive about her above way of expressing ideas.

Of course, I think in Chinese, it's stupid to say first blah blah, second, blah blah... We should use some better words. We should use some different words to stand for firstly, secondly... But if you use first, secondly, thirdly like this [like what she used in the text at the Australian university], I think that is not good writing.

In the above specific instance of writing, Hao attempted to accommodate what she thought to be expected of her in terms of communicating ideas at the Australian university. However, her account of writing was compelling since although nothing appeared to be unusual on the surface of the paper regarding the ways she adopted these linking words to express her points directly, the talk around text revealed that she did not seem to value the above way of writing. In comparing with her Chinese rhetorical conventions, Hao did not perceive her way of communicating ideas in the text to be good and sophisticated writing – “I think that is not good writing”. In light of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), through Hao's act of employing what she did not personally value in her actual construction of meaning in her chosen course, Hao tended to forced self-position as a student who made a superficial shift to respond to her disciplinary requirement in order to gain a satisfactory result for the assignment.

**Conclusion**

The students’ experiences in interacting with disciplinary writing indicate that their initial interpretations of essay writing seemed to be challenged when they embarked on their first assignments at the Australian university. The discussion above highlights specific instances whereby the students adapted to the new ways of writing expected in the academic context in Australia and empowered themselves in an endeavour to fit in the institutional structure. However, their individual processes of adaptation appear to be multi-faceted and multi-layer. As illustrated in the accounts of Xuân, Lin and Hao, it seems to involve changes at the face value only to enable them to participate in the academic discipline and ensure good returns on their investment in the course (Norton, 2001). Yet, their former interpretations of writing which seem invisible on the surface of writing are still emerging and nurtured as their personal values. In particular, the new
ways of writing they follow are sometimes not what they believe and feel positive about. In other cases of Wang and Vỹ, it is a complete shift in the students’ perception from a certain value to a new one as they see the later one superior to their former one. Their different journeys in constructing their academic identities indicate that when the students face new challenges in academic writing, which differ from their former belief about writing, their adaptation to the new interpretation could be related to a superficial adaptation in some case or an engaged adaptation in another case.

The differences in the processes of participating in institutional practices of the international students in this study suggest the need to question the common assumptions about international students’ adaptation to Australian universities and unpack the complexities around their accommodating processes within current context of internationalizing higher education. The students’ personal desires and potential choices in constructing knowledge in higher education need to be more focused by the university communities in their commitment to rethinking what counts as quality in teaching and learning and to implementing policies on the internationalization of the curriculum. It seems necessary for the lecturers to not only make their expectations more explicit to the students but also seek ways to have more insights into the students’ challenges as well as their values. These steps contribute to ensuring reciprocal relationships between students and the academics and enhancing the inclusive practices of the institution.

References


