

# Supporting International Students' Transition to University



**Dr Jeanne Dawson**

Learning Support Network  
Curtin University of Technology

**Ms Grace Conti-Bekkers**

Learning Support Network  
Curtin University of Technology

*This paper addresses two transition challenges that face international students and their teachers: firstly, managing culture shock within an academic context and, secondly, validating existing knowledge and experience as a precondition of developing strategies to negotiate new knowledge and experience. It describes the strategies practised in the Pathfinder Program at Curtin's CEA Learning Support Centre to help international students negotiate these two aspects of transition.*

## Introduction

International undergraduate students typically come to Australian universities with high expectations, well-specified career goals, and the will to work hard and succeed. However, for many, the first months are characterised by a range of transitional difficulties that are not only stressful but also have the potential to impede their long-term development as autonomous, self-confident learners (CBS FLOTE Project, 1999). This paper addresses learning support responses to two transition issues: firstly, helping students manage culture shock within an academic context and, secondly, validating students' existing personal and educational knowledge and experience.

Over the past two decades there have been both an increasing appreciation of cultural diversity as a positive characteristic of contemporary tertiary education and a recognition of the effectiveness of student-centred learning, with the focus shifting away from standardised teaching to individual student learning (Biggs, 1996). Nevertheless, many university teachers still respond to international students' transition difficulties with an assimilationist approach that encourages students, both implicitly and explicitly, to 'get over' their past experiences of education and to 'move beyond' their habitual way of perceiving what is expected of them as learners (Samuelowitz, 1987; CBSFLOTE Project, 1999). In other words, these teachers attempt to reduce difference, to make international students more 'like' Australian students or, more accurately, like some notional construction of the Australian student.

Such a deficit approach implicitly equates difference with deviance; it seeks to normalise, to reduce anomalies, to coerce the international student into conformity. And it operates at a time in which the international student sojourner is at her or his most vulnerable - newly arrived and experiencing the early, stressful stages of culture shock. In the absence of positive

affirmation, these students often accept and internalise misinformed negative views of themselves as lacking in initiative, linguistically impoverished, and passive or 'rote' learners.

For instance, in structured reflection learning journals in which a group of seventy first-year international accounting and finance students from a Confucian heritage cultural background were asked to reflect upon their experiences of learning in their home countries, the term 'spoon-fed' appeared over thirty times (Dawson, 2001). Interviewed further, these students said that they felt at a disadvantage to their Australian colleagues because they were often uncertain about what was expected of them and, partly because of this uncertainty, lacked confidence in their own capacity to meet lecturers' expectations (Volet, Renshaw, & Tiesel, 1994). One result of this uncertainty is that many international students are tentative in their approach to learning and do not engage fully in assignment tasks; they are not confident enough to take intellectual risks in exploring their subject areas but, rather, concentrate on complying with the more explicitly expressed components of assignment instructions (Dawson, 2001).

Interestingly, only one of the seventy students in the sample raised the possibility that lecturers might have a major role in minimising uncertainty. Most perceived that any confusion they as students experienced was a result of their own inadequacy in understanding; many attributed this to the fact that English is not their first language or because they were used to a system in which they were 'spoon-fed'. In some circumstances, acknowledging one's inadequacies may be a useful first step to overcoming them, but only if effective corrective actions are taken. In this case, when questioned about how they might improve their performance as learners, most students responded by suggesting such remedial strategies as working more diligently, taking additional English lessons, and getting private tutoring to overcome their disadvantages as non-Australian students. While all of these strategies have the potential to enhance students' academic performance, they are informed by a deficit model, and as such do not address the crucial issue: developing international students as confident, autonomous, motivated 'deep' learners.

### **Validating international students' experiences of culture shock**

Perhaps the most immediate experience that international students need to have validated is the experience of culture shock (Williams and Westmeyer, 1986). Culture shock in its different manifestations is well-recognised and more or less competently managed by universities' psychological counsellors and other health professionals (Harris, 1997). It tends, therefore, to be perceived as belonging to an extracurricular pastoral discourse rather than to an academic discourse. If, however, the concept of culture shock is put more directly into an academic context, it can also be worked through and reflected upon as a positive growth stage in the international student's development as a successful learner.

It is useful for both international students and their teachers to think about the process of culture shock in terms of the General Systems Theory of Cultural Adaptation (Kim and Ruben, 1988), which regards people as individual systems that function through interaction with their physical, cultural, and human environment, and react to a changed environment. Cultural dislocation, however well-managed, always involves an increased awareness that the match between internal subjective experiences and external objective experiences is not fixed and stable but contingent upon the environment in which the individual finds her- or himself (Gudykunst and Kim, 1992). In the early stages of culture shock, individuals may experience high levels of stress as they try to reconcile their inner subjective experience with a changed

objective environment. Put into the context of university learning, the international student's internal subjective experience of her/himself as a successful matriculant may be contradicted by an external objective experience of disorientation, uncertainty, and fear of failure as an undergraduate.

Individual students negotiate this stressful stage with different degrees of success and over different periods of time. Many international students, especially those who come to the university as part of a group sharing the same cultural background, support each other and are more likely to pass quickly through the initial stressful stages of culture shock, moving on to stages of adaptation and growth. Because culture shock tends to be cyclical, however, even these individuals may later encounter situations of cultural uncertainty that undermine their earlier confidence in the accuracy of their perceptions and the appropriateness of their responses. Nor is it only international students who experience culture shock: mature-age students returning to study after several years' absence, students from rural and isolated backgrounds, and even school leavers also experience the stresses of uncertainty as they adapt to the university environment. Nevertheless, given the role of language as the nexus between inner subjective experience and the objective world (Whorf, 1956), those students whose first language is not English are likely to experience the highest levels of stress.

Culture shock, at whatever level it is experienced, is not only inevitable but is also a necessary catalyst to adaptation and growth, and thus to effective learning. A useful role for university teachers is therefore not to assist students to *avoid* culture shock but, rather, to support them through the early stressful stages, so that stress does not become *distress*, which, as Gudykunst and Kim imply, is a serious impediment to psychological health as well as to learning. The most effective way of supporting students through the early stages of the process is by acknowledging and validating their experience of culture shock, and offering them strategies for understanding and managing the experience in their own terms.

### **Addressing Culture Shock in the Curtin Pathfinder Program**

Culture shock is one of the concepts that students address in the Curtin Pathfinder Program, a six-week cultural/study skills transition program offered at Curtin University's CEA Learning Support Centre. The support strategy begins with a discussion with students of the processes of culture shock, emphasising, firstly, that these processes are simultaneously universal (everyone who relocates experiences them) and individual (everyone experiences them in their own way); secondly, that they are cyclical rather than linear; and, thirdly and most importantly, that they have the potential for generating psychic and social growth.

Working in groups of four, students are invited to identify any aspects of culture shock they are presently experiencing or have in the past experienced. As a group, they are asked to list some of these experiences and share them with the larger group, without disclosing which member has offered each example. From each of the small group offerings, we compile a longer list for the seminar group to consider, taking each item separately, deciding where it might fit into the culture shock process as a whole and how it might be used for moving on to the next stage. At no time do we suggest that any of these items is a problem to be solved; rather, we recognise each as a valuable learning opportunity that may be responded to in more or less productive ways. We are also careful in our facilitation of the seminar to construct a professional academic environment: we aim to create a warm classroom climate in which students feel safe to disclose, but we focus on culture shock not as a pathological syndrome but as an objective phenomenon that can be interpreted, analysed, and managed rationally.

As a follow up, we introduce students to the practice of structured reflection by offering them possible frameworks through which to evaluate their experiences. Students are encouraged to keep a structured reflection journal, describing incidents or experiences related to culture shock, and reflecting upon responses to these incidents and experiences and the outcomes of such responses. Students are not required to hand in these journals for our comments, but many do so. One of the very gratifying aspects of reading these journals is to see that having articulated their experience in writing, students are more able to think through and respond to issues more productively. For instance, a postgraduate design student from Indonesia wrote:

I find the education system here is so different from Indonesia. I think because I am a post-graduate student I should know what to do but I cannot. My lecturer say I must not expect them to take my hand because I have studied before. But somethings I am asked to do I do not understand. Sometimes the lecturer speaks fast and looks angry. I feel like I am in kindergarden class. I worry that I waste my father's money on my study.

Having articulated his present concerns in this way, the student was then able to separate them into five individual issues: the mismatch between his prior experience of education and his present experience; his practical concern that he was not getting the educational guidance he needed; the worry that he might have to return to Indonesia, having spent \$7000, without a postgraduate qualification; the related fear of disappointing his father; his loss of self-esteem. Recognising that these five issues were in part related to his situation of cultural dislocation, and not to personal failings, helped this student to make a rational decision to consult a student advisor in his School, and explain his need for more useful educational guidance during his transition to the Australian education system. In a later journal entry he wrote:

I used the assertion strategies we practise in Pathfinder. I went to J.T. and I said, 'I know the lecturers are very busy but when I cannot get help I feel disappointed with the university for recruiting me as a student and then not giving me a chance to succeed.' (I did not say it as clear as I practise it, but J.T. she understood and she helped me to find examples.) I spoke quiet and we also had a joke together.

As well as encouraging students to develop critical metacognitive skills and to manage the stressful aspects of culture shock more effectively, these structured reflection journals give us valuable insights into students' experiences and responses and help us devise further strategies.

### **Validating International Student's Knowledge And Experience**

A central insight of student-centred learning (Biggs, 1993; Marton and Saljo, 1976) is that students process new knowledge through reference to prior knowledge; what they already know, think, believe, and have experienced are essential elements in their process of negotiating new knowledge. It is important, therefore, that in supporting international students to become confident, autonomous learners we validate their existing knowledge and experience. Prior knowledge and experience need to be recognised as significant pre-learning or 'presage' factors that have a measurable effect on the learning process and on learning outcomes.

The relationship between student presage factors and the processes and outcomes of university learning is articulated in Dunkin and Biddle's 'presage-process-product' ('3P') model of teaching and learning (1974). This model is further refined by Biggs (1996, 1999), who implies that no matter how well-constructed the curriculum, how proficient the teacher, or how reasonable the outcomes expected, the system will not function at optimal efficiency if the student's pre-learning profile is excluded from consideration; effective constructive alignment of the learning system cannot be achieved without acknowledging and understanding student presage factors.

One factor that Biggs does not explicitly mention, but which in fact implicitly informs his discussion of presage factors, is *cultural subjectivity*. The concept of 'the subject', as I use it here, is derived from psychoanalytical theory and has been taken up by post-structuralist cultural studies to represent the individual's self-consciousness as it is constructed through discourses of gender, race, class, ethnicity, education, and so on (Foucault, 1982). In other words, the individual's sense of her- or himself is generated not from within but from outside, from the discourses through which s/he is enculturated. These discourses give individuals not only their sense of who they are and how they are positioned within their society but also their ways of perceiving the world and of interpreting their experience of it. The cultural aspects of presage, therefore, are not simply cognitive acquisitions; they are also essential elements in the construction of the student's subjectivity and of their sense of self. If we ignore the culturally constructed presage factors in international students' learning we effectively marginalise cultural difference as deviant and subordinate (Althusser, 1971; Said, 1994). By contrast, if we validate these factors, we also give international students' permission to negotiate their learning in terms of their own subjectivity.

### **Addressing Cultural Presage Factors in the Curtin Pathfinder Program**

Many of the culturally constructed presage factors operating in international students' learning may be potentially incompatible with what is required of them in an Australian university teaching context. For instance, a student whose subjectivity has been constructed in a culture that favours a high-context communication style will need to develop strategies for negotiating the low-context communication style of the Australian university classroom. As a student from a Confucian heritage cultural background wrote in her structured reflection journal,

I have been assigned to a group of Aussie students. We have to discuss the homework question. I sometimes have ideas but when I think of the words, my groupmates have moved to next topic. They speak loud and argue. When I disagree I keep my idea inside. I think I will not get a good participation mark for this unit.

Our response to this issue is two fold: on the one hand, students do need to acquire 'Australian academic group skills' to succeed in their course of study; on the other, they need to know that conforming to the Western academic conventions of the Australian university is a matter of pragmatics and that these Australian conventions are not *per se* superior to the conventions of the culture or the education system of the countries from which these students have come. Consequently, in Pathfinder we address such group-work skills as 'addressing an audience', 'diverse task and maintenance roles in teams', 'filling your space', and 'appropriate assertion' to succeed in their courses of study. As they learn these skills, students

are also invited to relate them to their previous experience of working in groups of various kinds: we emphasise that our aim is not to replace the students' existing group skills with alternative 'Australian group skills' but, rather, to add new elements to their prior repertoire of group skills so that they are able to apply them appropriately in a diversity of situations.

We further reinforce the notion of cultural relativism by contextualising the difference between 'Australian group skills' and students' prior group skills in terms of such cross-cultural dimensions as high- and low-context communication, collectivism and individualism, culturally differentiated styles of turn-taking, and so on. In doing this, we explore and reflect upon concepts of cultural relativity in a way that validates each student's cultural identity in a multicultural environment.

As this last point emphasises, the insights, ways of thinking, and practical strategies that international students develop in Pathfinder are not simply remedial measures to assist them through their transitional difficulties. They are an affirmation that Australian universities are culturally inclusive spaces in which every student is respected and every student's experiences are valued.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the key to supporting international students through their transitional period is to acknowledge and validate their personal and cultural identities and their individual prior and present experiences. In following this approach to supporting students in the Pathfinder Program, we believe we have demonstrated that with appropriate intervention, transitional difficulties that international students experience also have the potential to be the catalyst to ways of thinking that enhance students' long-term development as autonomous, self-confident learners.

## Bibliography

- Althusser, Louis 1971, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Brewster, Ben (trans), New Left Books, London.
- Biggs, J. 1993, What do inventories of students' learning processes really measure? A theoretical view and clarification, *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 63, pp. 3-19.
- Biggs, J. 1996, Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture, in *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological, and Contextual Influences* (Eds. D. Watkins and J. Biggs), CERC and ACER, Hong Kong and Melbourne.
- Biggs, J. 1999, *Teaching for Quality Learning*, SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham.
- CBS FLOTE Project 1999, Curtin University of Technology, Perth.
- Dawson, J. 1997, Overcoming cultural imperialism: towards a postmodern classroom, *University Teaching and Learning for Tomorrow's World: The Asia Pacific Experiences Conference Proceedings*, Malang, Indonesia,
- Dawson, J. 1998, Giving international students a voice: enabling participation in the culturally diverse classroom, *Australian Communication Skills Conference Proceedings*, Melbourne.
- Dawson, J. 2001, Life is Not a Multiple Choice Test: Motivating Structured Reflection, *New Horizons in University Teaching and Learning: Responding to Change* (Eds. M. Kulski and A. Herman) Curtin University, Perth.
- Dunkin, M. and Biddle, B. 1994, *The Study of Teaching*, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York.

- Foucault, M. 1982, The subject and power, in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Gudykunst, W.B. and Kim, Y.Y. 1992, *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), McGraw Hill, New York.
- Harris, R. 1997, Overseas students in the United Kingdom university system, *Higher Education* 29, pp.77-92.
- Kim, Y.Y. 1988, *Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation: An Integrative Theory*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.
- Kim, Y.Y. and Ruben, B.D. 1988, Intercultural transformation: a systems theory, in *Theories in Intercultural Communication* (Eds. Y.Y Kim. and W.B. Gudykunst), Sage, CA.
- Marton, F. and Saljo, R. 1976, On qualitative differences in learning – 1: Outcome and process, *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 46, pp.4-11.
- Said, Edward 1994, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London.
- Samovar, L and Porter, R.E. 1991, *Communication Between Cultures*, Wadsworth, Belmont CA.
- Samuelowitz, K. 1987, Learning problems of overseas students; two sides of a story, *HERD* 6, pp.121-134.
- Volet, S.E., Renshaw, P.D., Tiesel, K. 1994, A short-term longitudinal investigation of cross-cultural differences in study approaches using Biggs' SPQ questionnaire, *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 64, pp.301-318.
- Whorf, B. 1956, *Language, Thought and Reality*, John Wiley, New York.
- Williams, C. and Westmeyer, J. 1986, Psychiatric problems among young Asian refugees, *Pacific/Asian Mental Health Research Centre Newsletter* 4 (3/4), pp. 22-24.

