

# SHIFTING SANDS, FIRM FOUNDATIONS

## Shifting Sands, Firm Foundations

Mai rā anō te papakāinga mo te tangata. Rerekē tō tohorā.

Long ago, the people had homes. Different from the whales.  
(Don't build your house on the back of a whale)

SHIFTING SANDS, FIRM FOUNDATIONS



Vanessa van der Ham, Lilia Sevillano and Lily George • EDITORS

The Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors  
Aotearoa/New Zealand

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MASSEY UNIVERSITY

ATLAANZ 5

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*Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the  
Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand  
(ATLAANZ)*

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Editors

Vanessa van der Ham, Lilia Sevillano and Lily George

Student Learning Centre  
Massey University Albany



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All the articles accepted for this publication underwent a double blind refereeing process using at least two referees. Statistics are included in the Appendix to the proceedings. We are enormously grateful to the referees who contributed their time and expertise to the process of review. Many of the contributing authors expressed their appreciation for the valuable feedback in their correspondence with us. Our referees were:

Susan Carter	Barry White
Emmanuel Manalo	Deborah Laurs
Caitriona Cameron	Jerry Hoffman
Cath Fraser	Marcus Henning
Janet von Randow	Andrea Haines
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Hamish Cowan	David Parker
Shirley Porter	Mary Sylvester
Lois Wilkinson	Martin McMorro
Lily George	Lilia Sevilano
Vanessa van der Ham	

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Finally, we extend a special thank you to Lisa Stewart for her suggestion that we make the 2009 conference a 'learning conference' incorporating structured feedback and discussion sessions. The knowledge-sharing activities facilitated by this innovative format reflected the spirit of inter-institutional collaboration embraced by ATLAANZ.

Vanessa van der Ham, Lilia Sevilano and Lily George  
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## Foreword

The theme of the 2009 ATLAANZ conference – *Shifting Sands, Firm Foundations* – summed up well the situation in which most Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) in Aotearoa/New Zealand find themselves.

Over the past two decades there has been considerable change in New Zealand universities and polytechnics – in the student cohort, in the structure of the institutions and, as a result, in the role and practice of TLAs. Often, these changes have had a negative impact on our profession. Many TLAs are in a marginal position within their institution and thus, in an era characterised by restricted funding and continual restructuring, are particularly vulnerable. Not all of the impacts have been negative, however. As we have evolved to accommodate greater diversity in the student cohort and increased expectations of our institutions, firm foundations have developed within our community of practice. We have forged a strong sense of identity as TLAs in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We have developed a well-defined and wide ranging practice. And, perhaps most significantly, we have strengthened the research base for our work.

Increasingly the focus of that research has turned to ways we can demonstrate our effectiveness in improving student retention and maintaining academic quality. In shifting times we need this evidence if we are to establish a firm place for TLAs in our institutions. At the 2009 conference we launched a publication, sponsored by Ako Aotearoa, which documented the value of programmes delivered by TLAs. Other evidence was provided in the wealth of presentations in the conference programme. In this way, the conference – and the published proceedings that is its tangible record – has consolidated the firm foundations that anchor our profession.

All of us owe a huge debt of thanks to the team at Massey University Albany for their efforts in hosting the 2009 conference, a conference which embraced both ATLAANZ traditions and lively innovations. Our thanks go, also, to the contributors to the conference proceedings for the time and effort they have put into their papers, and to the referees for their invaluable role in helping to prepare those papers for publication. Their combined efforts have produced a valuable publication to underpin our identity, practice and research.

Caitriona Cameron  
ATLAANZ President  
2009

## Editors' introduction

The 2009 ATLAANZ conference *Shifting Sands, Firm Foundations* was chosen to reflect our challenge as Learning Advisors to locate ourselves and our practice within a rapidly evolving tertiary environment. Shifting institutional structures, relationships and requirements, ever-dwindling funding and increasing demand for tangible results present both challenges and opportunities for Learning Advisors in helping our diverse student population develop a sound foundation in academic literacy and numeracy skills. Our choice of the Māori proverb: *Mai rā anō te papakāinga mo te tangata. Rerekē tō tohorā* which can be translated in this context as: “Don’t build your house on the back of the whale,” reflected our belief that through exchange of ideas at the conference, the ATLAANZ community would further our understanding of best practice in establishing firm foundations in changing times.

We set out to run a ‘learning conference’ which featured a structured knowledge-sharing component through each presentation. To this end, presenters were required to incorporate activities designed to facilitate audience discussion around the relevance or application of the presenter’s research to their own contexts. This provided an opportunity for presenters to receive feedback on their initiatives and gave all participants the opportunity to share their own experiences and concerns.

Contributions to the proceedings cover a wide range of issues for Learning Advisors, including: collaborative work with other university staff; evidence of tangible impact of programmes; pedagogical, ethical and ownership issues in subject specific skills development and individual consultations; addressing linguistic and cultural concerns; and locating university study and support in a changing global environment.

Ann Pocock argues that a centralised learning support unit needs to work in collaboration with university staff, the lecturers and Learning Advisors, in order to meet the ever more diverse and increasing demands of students. She shares some of the collaborative experiences of the Student Learning Support Service at Victoria University of Wellington.

Creative arts students have tended to view academic standards for their written assignments as constraints to their creativity. Berni Cooper and Simon Maxwell describe a collaborative team teaching programme at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic aimed at addressing this attitude and fostering individual motivation in these students.

Deborah Laurs investigates the possibility of collaborating more closely with doctoral supervisors in order to best support doctoral students. She argues that Learning Advisors have the capacity to contribute impartial, institution-wide expertise as sounding-boards through the doctoral journey.

Cath Fraser, Emmanuel Manalo, and Jenny Marshall report on an inter-institutional ‘Writing Hui’ which sought to identify and report on student learning support

programmes that demonstrate a tangible impact on student retention, pass rates, and/or completion. The collation of these stories of success provides a valuable source of information on best practice for academic support staff.

Catherine Mitchell and Caroline Malthus conducted a critical survey of recent materials developed to teach the complex skills of paraphrasing and developed an understanding of which features a comprehensive resource might contain. They report on the study, their subsequent design of materials encompassing these features, and the feedback they received on these materials.

Using students' narratives about their systems of study and considering the role of academic advisors in higher education and their systems for exploring the student self, Marcus Henning examines the notion of the student self in terms of motivational and self-regulatory systems of study.

Susan Carter addresses the problematic area of individual consultations and the ethics that underpin practice for Learning Advisors in this area. She discusses the results of two surveys of ATLAANZ members, one aimed at identifying their definition of boundaries in the consultation process and the other revisiting their ideas on some of the issues that emerged from the earlier study.

Kerstin Dofs and Moira Hobbs describe a series of studies focusing on support for independent language learning conducted at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology. The studies examined student usage of the Language Self Access Centre at the Institution, implementation of recommendations based on the results, and subsequent individual support practices at the Centre.

Programmes based on Māori cultural concepts can be useful for helping Māori students with their transition into the sometimes alien environment of university study. Lily George, Gail Allan, Mavis Barratt, Sheree Thompson, and LeeAnne Tatana describe two initiatives at Massey University's Albany campus which emphasise the supportive elements of whanaungatanga (collective support). They argue that the cultural care provided at such sessions can be an integral component of Māori student retention and success.

A worldwide decline in the mathematical competence of students entering tertiary study in the last two decades has necessitated the introduction of targeted support for both mathematics students and non-specialist students (those whose courses contain components of mathematics). Janet Harris describes support workshops and online support in mathematics offered to all students at Waikato University and reflects on her role as a learning developer in mathematics.

Working with a small group of students from diverse backgrounds doing a Management Mathematics paper at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic provided Shirley Porter with an opportunity to identify their individual needs and examine their learning patterns. She

reports on a study which examined students' perceptions of effective mathematics teaching and learning practices in a course which involved applications to economics and management.

A study by Janet Counsell identified strategies which international postgraduate students were taught in their intensive language course (DEAP – an internal entry pathway for ESOL students) and attempted to ascertain which of these strategies were seen as useful by the students and which ones they actually used in writing tasks in their discipline specific courses.

Patricia Strang and Andrea Haines describe the planning and facilitation of a twelve-week series of workshops at Waikato University designed to meet the varied academic needs of mature undergraduate and postgraduate international students facing the challenges posed by cultural and linguistic difference. The co-taught workshops were underpinned by reflective practice.

Barry White explores the issue of why disciplines in universities defy normative definition and why they can only be apprehended *in re*, in the process of becoming. He explains that disciplines are the dominant principle around which universities currently are organised.

In her second contribution to the proceedings, Susan Carter focuses on generic doctoral support in relation to the recent European Union Bologna process that seeks to firm up doctoral education in an increasingly fluid global environment. Carter considers that while doctoral education in New Zealand is robust, what is happening in Europe as the sands shift there, potentially redefines borders which affect us here.

# Carry on Student Learning: Shifting what we do, how we do it and where we do it

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## Abstract

Delivering effective student learning support for the increasing numbers of university students continues to be a challenge. This paper argues that a centralised learning support unit cannot afford to work in isolation. Collaborative methods of delivery are necessary both to ensure organisational survival and to meet the ever more diverse and increasing student demand. By collaborating with university staff and forming campus wide collegial relationships with people who lecture to students, write the assessments or provide other academic resources (such as the librarians) or student services, Learning Centres have a greater opportunity to seamlessly deliver to a wider range of audiences. This paper shares some of the collaborative experiences of the Student Learning Support Service at Victoria University of Wellington to highlight the importance of developing firm foundations to ensure this student centred approach mitigates the shifting sands within the university. The collaborative efforts have been designed so those involved in higher education work more effectively together for the benefit of the students.

## Introduction

The management structure of university student learning support units throughout Australasia varies within each institution. The most common structure is to have a centralised unit, often referred to as a Learning Centre. This is usually aligned with other support services within the university, as a way of coordinating similar groups who have a common goal. The primary function of the Learning Advisory staff is to work with students in lectures, workshops and individual appointments to develop their academic writing and study skills for university study. Within our university, the Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) forms part of the Student Support Services and the management structure is closely aligned with seven other support units (Health, Counselling, Disability, Student Finance, Te Putahi Atawhai and Careers). This structure provides many opportunities for staff in these units to collaborate and support students through a well established referral system, transition programmes and fortnightly meetings. Over time, staff from these services have become well versed in the learning and performance requirements of students.

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<sup>1</sup> Pocock, A. (2010). Carry on Student Learning: Shifting what we do, how we do it and where we do it. In V. Van der Ham, L. Sevallano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 1-8). Auckland: ATLAANZ.



They have found the relationship in this closer 'family' group helpful for providing effective support for making the student learning experience positive. As Gadja (2004) argues, "collaboration is a powerful strategy to achieve a vision otherwise not possible to obtain when independent entities work alone" (p. 76). The SLSS has utilised its firm foundations and cross-institutional collaboration to develop broader representation and enrich student learning.

Initially the SLSS only provided individual consultations and a handful of generic study skill and academic writing skill workshops. However, there has been dramatic growth over the past decade in the range of services and programmes that the SLSS provides to all postgraduate and undergraduate students, and staff. Growth in the service has only evolved with careful and proactive management and university support. The SLSS now has funding for 15 staff, teaching facilities and resources. While the academic support for individuals and academic skill development workshops are still core to its service, it now has well established online resources, programmes and support for international and postgraduate students and for equity groups such as Māori, Pasifika, Disability and Distance students. Through transition programmes such as Smart Start, New Start, UniPrep, International orientation, NZAid, postgraduate orientation, mature student orientation, Halls Head Start, Māori and Pasifika orientation and Campus Coaches, SLSS staff are in contact with up to 5000 students during the first few weeks of the semester. This 'integrated transition' (Kift, 2008) spans the whole university and involves support staff and academics. During this period, academic teaching staff can request subject specific resources and Faculty/School workshops. Obviously, this extensive range of services can only be delivered and maintained with well qualified, professional staff. At each programme or initiative step, staff need to have an integrated approach in ways which encourage team work. We see this as being essential for the effectiveness of the SLSS and as a way of encouraging awareness of our service.

Building a collaborative culture is beneficial for a professional learning community. The integrated approach becomes a systematic process whereby staff can work together through purposeful conversation to promote and develop a healthy work and learning environment. Collaboration enables the group "to address the specificity of the challenges that face our students", and encourages "better understanding and collaboration between the writing centre, [other support staff] and discipline teachers" (Chanock, 2006, Abstract). Similarly, Krause (2003, p. 5) argues that the opportunity to work together to propose and plan initiatives "is a very important way to integrate different areas of expertise to achieve positive outcomes." At the same time, the broader representation of diverse groups provides multiple perspectives and allows staff to "usefully challenge assumptions and long standing practices" (Shushok, Henry, Blalock, & Sriam, 2009, p. 12). Invariably, Learning Centre staff have found they share similar and common concerns for particular students or student groups. As well as having input into the decision making, staff can learn from other people how they are managing the issues they are trying to solve and "share ideas for new programmes and practices" (University of California, Los Angeles, 2009, p. 27). There are times

when this requires some compromise and negotiation, but experience has shown this is a powerful way of working together that affects our practices. In the long term, this use of staff expertise can help reduce the duplication of services, resources and personnel and thus help the Centre to be economically sustainable.

On the other hand, developing a coordinated effort to work together requires effort, time and hard work. First, the SLSS needs to have clear strategic goals which support the university Learning and Teaching Plan (Victoria University of Wellington, 2009b), the Equity plan (Victoria University of Wellington, 2009a) and the university's mission (Victoria University of Wellington, 2004). From these documents the aim is to "identify and professionally fulfil the various roles essential to student learning" (Arminio, Roberts, & Bonfiglio, 2009, p. 16). However, it has taken time to build trust and respect within our working environment. First, it was important to build a highly functional and well supported SLSS using sound adult learning practice and effective management practices. In addition, the internal relationships within the 'family' need to be highly operational and well utilised by the students. Each SLSS staff member also needs to play an active role in helping the SLSS to achieve its strategic goals but this is more achievable if they feel empowered and confident about their own work responsibilities. Within our support service, staff have some autonomy to manage responsibilities to negotiate, plan, prepare and facilitate workshops, for example. During this process they often work with their immediate colleagues and academic staff. Over time as their confidence grows, they develop wider relationships throughout the University with people who share a common goal. The initial communication is often simply through phone and email, but as their working relationships develop more face to face communication takes place. By having similar staff groups working together, the SLSS has fostered a more effective student referral system with other support services (such as Health, Counselling and Disability) and this provides a more seamless delivery. We believe the shared approach helps staff to work more effectively in the best interests of the student.

No Learning Centre can afford to be marginalised and work in isolation: "We need to move beyond the exclusionism philosophy to generate more opportunities to collaborate, jointly lobby on issues and identify ways in which we can mutually promote more effective tertiary outcomes" (Debowski, 2008, p. 45). Student learning lies at the heart of our institution's mission so this creates a foundation for academic and support staff to build on. The manager is responsible for the work of the staff with targeted groups throughout the university to promote "stronger collaboration across discipline and organisational boundaries" (Debowski, 2008, p. 42). With any holistic and 'walk the talk approach' everyone needs to gain ownership to make the initiatives work, but we are mindful that initiating and sustaining them also takes commitment, dedication and persistence (DuFour, 2004). Having said that, collaborating with a larger group of colleagues with differing views has allowed us time to share a greater variety of approaches we can use to enrich the student learning experience. Arminio et al. (2009) argue that "In order to create effective learning environments, all educators must be able to take advantage of the gifts and contributions of others" (p. 20).



Professional advice from colleagues has helped us achieve more positive outcomes through shared knowledge and the exchange of ideas. Fortunately, we have a big unit so staff can regularly share and develop ideas; however, this way of working requires “concerted, respectful and positive involvement” (Arminio et al., 2009, p. 17). With a wide range of skills and experience, we also have more opportunities to prove our skills to a wider audience and to be proactive in how we operate. The greater the collaboration the easier it is to show that the Learning Centre plays a valuable role across the university in student success. Networking therefore enhances recognition for what we do.

The SLSS now works in diverse ways to liaise with a wide range of people throughout the university. One important way of collaborating is by embedding academic writing skills into lectures. This is now well established in a first year Commerce course (FCom110) and Faculty academics view this as an essential component of their programme. In line with the course objectives of students researching, planning and producing written assignments to meet academic standards, academic staff and the SLSS work together to design a programme so that “the writing course supports these objectives by providing students the basic skills needed to write at tertiary level” (Mabin, 2010, p. i). Students learn and practise their writing skills throughout their course. Academic study skill and writing support operate in other programmes but on a smaller scale. In one case, a course specific academic writing and study skill booklet has reduced the need for SLSS time and resourcing. In another case, a close liaison has been developed with library staff. Through this link a SLSS Academic Writing and Study helpdesk was established in the main campus library. Staffed by SLSS advisors for four hours per day during the semesters, these quick (15 minute) drop-in sessions provide timely advice which is easily accessible students. Due to its popularity (12 to 15 students for each four hour session), further developments are planned for similar support in libraries on other campuses. A ‘one stop shop’ is envisaged – largely utilising the skills of the librarians and technology to disseminate SLSS information. In the longer term “this new library development could act as a prototype for two other libraries at Victoria” (J. Stewart, personal communication, February 8, 2010). Our integration of the SLSS with the library has helped to expand our range of service delivery. However, these objectives have only been possible because SLSS staff formed a close relationship with library staff who wanted to achieve a similar outcome. The success of these initiatives shows how collaboration is beneficial both in supporting academic teaching staff with their programmes and in supporting student learning.

The scope and influence of the SLSS can also be increased by widening our focus to other areas within the university. One way is through senior students. Student leadership is a core attribute for Victoria University students (Victoria University of Wellington, 2004) and opportunities are fostered in the SLSS. SLSS staff train Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) leaders, Campus Coaches, Conversation leaders and Peer Writers. These activities contribute to the ‘Vic Plus Award’ so the students’ service to the university and the community is recognised when they graduate. Whether these leadership roles are paid or voluntary, we always celebrate the students’ contribution

and their work as these all play an important role in expanding our ability to support more students. Other relationships have been established with people who have a shared goal. They include central service units such as enrolments, course advice, teaching and development as well as Outreach programmes and staff mentoring sessions. Our marketing and publications are also important collaborative efforts. For first year students, “A systematic approach is needed that draws together different elements of FYE [First Year Experience] to enhance both the students’ academic and personal life at university” (Brown & Adam, 2009, p. 47). At Victoria, the university-wide publication *Campus Connections* is generously funded and provides a useful way of coordinating all of the workshops and activities on campus. This twice yearly publication results from extensive collaboration, is well established and is a popular resource for staff and students. High demand necessitates frequent reprinting to top up the first print of 9000 copies.

Collaboration, while not without its problems, has benefits for the SLSS. The integrated approach provides a healthy work environment in which “there is more knowledge sharing, a broader representation of ideas from more diverse groups” (Arminio et al., 2009, p. 16) and it has proved to be a powerful way of working together. The diverse input contributes to the decision making and there is satisfaction in knowing that multiple perspectives have been listened to and considered. At times that means having to make compromises and requires some tough negotiating but this is all in an effort to reach a common goal. It has also been cost effective. The library, for example, funded the helpdesk, telephone and the computer in a high profile spot in the library entrance. Our helpdesk staff-member, rather than working with one individual per hour, works with four students in the same time period. This method of practice, although busy, raises the SLSS profile and increases awareness of our other services. Any student needing more complex support makes a longer subsequent appointment with a Learning Advisor at the SLSS, so the system is also supporting students who might not have sought out SLSS help if it had not been so obviously accessible. Increased rapport is a further benefit of having the library staff working alongside the SLSS helpdesk staff. SLSS staff utilise the skills of the library staff to create new resources or work together to facilitate database and library skill sessions. This way of working, as well as collaborative meetings, has raised our profile with library staff.

To increase awareness of our collaboration and its potential, as part of the ongoing SLSS reflective practice, the manager (Jan Stewart) facilitated a recent staff development exercise to review how well we operate as community partners within our own small community. This provided an opportunity to “reflect, review and redesign ... [and helped] identify different mechanisms by which groups and individuals may share knowledge and generate social community” (Blackwell & Blackmore, 2003, p. 7). To do this, we identified which groups had the closest working relationship with SLSS and those which were only spasmodic. The people and groups who have a close working relationship with SLSS seemed to be either aligned within the management structure or where the staff had identified a common need to work together. Several

other people or groups were identified as having a spasmodic or distant working relationship. While it is very important to sustain our closest partners, the manager's exercise allowed staff to question the reasons for the evident distance of the groups. For the distant groups, we were able to determine whether it would be important to develop those relationships, how we might do this and for what benefit (J. Stewart, personal communication, November 19, 2009). However it soon became evident that part of the reason the relationships had not been developed was due to a range of factors such as "it being easier to develop individual relationships than with the whole faculty, the resistance of some staff and the time it takes to establish the relationships" (Student Learning Support Service, 2009). These factors are barriers and can prevent the collaboration process.

The obstacles to building closer relationships with some other groups within the university need to be overcome by using a systematic approach. Once the targeted group has been identified it is then time "to progress from the level of passionate and innovative ... to informing or driving ideas ... to decision making (Krause, 2003, p. 5). We believe that if all staff share responsibility for student learning it spreads "a pervasive attitude that the campus is a learning organisation ... and [has] a widespread willingness to adapt to changing conditions" (Arminio et al., 2009, p. 17). There is no doubt that the university staff seek positive student outcomes for an increasingly diverse range of students, but to achieve this requires organisation, planning and a high level of teamwork. We also have to make sure it does not compromise our current services. With a throughput of 18,000 student visits per year in the SLSS, staff members have to be realistic about how much time and energy and how many resources are invested in the process. The process is completed when the staff can "coordinate (within the institution), communicate (with the stakeholders) and connect (with the students)" (Krause, 2003, p. 5). These processes and some success stories help make us believe the SLSS has gone some way to showing the service is central to tertiary learning and it is a joint responsibility with academic and support staff.

Our reasons for across-institutional collaboration are therefore many and varied. It is putting collaboration into practice (being able to 'walk the talk') and sustaining and enhancing our partnerships that will always be the true measure of how well collaboration works in reality. It has been vital for the SLSS to move beyond the walls of just our 'family' but this requires time, energy and persistence. Our experience has shown it is necessary to use a coordinated and cooperative approach to build a stronger community with our 'friends' and 'acquaintances'. It has taken time to build firm foundations and strength within SLSS programmes and services but strong leadership, professional staff and university support has enabled the unit to shift its focus and spread its services. While there has been more success with building relationships with some staff than with others, a decade of this practice has also shown that the positive working relationships can enrich the outcomes for students. While time, energy and costs are factors influencing this process, if there is vision and a willingness to drive the ideas to get a stronger learning and teaching community we can create seamless

and diverse learning environments. In the same spirit, interaction with a wide range of people requires hard work but that is part of keeping the Learning Centre on everyone's horizons.

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## Increasing the relevance of academic skills for students in the creative arts

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### Abstract

Creative arts students at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic have traditionally been relatively resistant to adhering to academic standards, particularly in writing academic essays and reports. Some of the students' arguments against academic constraints in the creative arts include comments indicating that these constraints stifle their creativity and have no relevance to their industry. Additionally, there seems to be an "impending sense of doom" (student) when faced with writing tasks, especially essays. In order to combat this perception, and to create a strategy for enhancing individual motivation, a collaborative team teaching initiative was trialled in Tioriori – Certificate of Music Production and Performance – at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic. The collaboration took place between an academic staff member who is a Learning Advisor in Kahurangi Student Services and a new part-time teacher who is also the director of Island Films with 25 years of industry experience in music video production. The teaching took place on a revised module: Whakaaroaro – Communication for the Creative Arts. The two teachers wrote the overall objectives, assessments and course outline. The aim was to provide a relevant, fun module in communication that had clear industry-relevant outcomes for the students, whilst embedding a firm foundation of academic skills and standards in order to increase student retention and success in the academic areas of the creative arts.

### Background

Students' academic essay writing skills have been an area of concern for the Music Production and Performance teaching team at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic in Tauranga. According to Group Leader, Mary Stewart, these students have not, in previous years, paid much attention to cultivating their academic writing skills, as they questioned the relevance of essay writing skills to the development of their music and music careers (M. Stewart, personal communication, October 19, 2010). In 2009, an initiative was developed to improve the students' academic writing skills in a core communications module (Whakaaroaro – Communication for the Creative Arts) in the Certificate of Music Production and Design (Tioriori), the first year of a two year

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<sup>1</sup> Cooper, B., & Maxwell, S. (2010). Increasing the relevance of academic skills for students in the creative arts. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevilano & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp.9- 17). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

diploma. The initiative included collaboration between two teachers: an industry expert with 25 years of international experience in music video production (Simon Maxwell), and an academic Learning Advisor (Berni Cooper). The two teachers rewrote the module's objectives, outline, lesson plans and assessments to embed academic essay writing skills in practical, relevant industry skill requirements. The delivery took place in Term three of the year and comprised eight lessons. The essay writing was interspersed with communication content and oral presentation practice. This collaboration between a Learning Advisor and a content teacher, to embed academic skills development, has shown positive outcomes on student success and retention in other studies in New Zealand, such as Te Tari Āwhina, the Learning Development Centre's successful initiative with Bachelor of Health Science students at the Auckland University of Technology (Naeem & Day, 2009).

### Team teaching

Successful collaboration provides benefits for both students and tutors. It has been used in areas when material from two diverse topic areas needs to be combined. Many examples can be found in literature; for example, Schlosberg and Sisk (2000), a political theorist and an ecologist, respectively, team-taught an interdisciplinary course at Northern Arizona University to focus on the impacts of science on policy and vice versa. Another team, Helms, Alvis and Willis (2005), combined management perspectives and accounting viewpoints on an MBA programme at the University of Tennessee. There are many examples of successful collaboration between Learning Advisors and classroom tutors (Brackley & Palmer, 2002; Heke, 2008; Naeem & Day, 2009; Te Moana, 2009).

Many of the students who enrol in Music Production and Performance are experienced performing musicians whose knowledge of the industry may meet or exceed that of their tutors. Game and Metcalfe (2009) found that more than one teacher in the front of the class diffuses the position of the knowing tutor and can open opportunities for students to join the team as teachers and learners. Other benefits to students from team teaching have included: improved teacher-student relationships, improved learning outcomes, higher achievement levels, greater retention rates, improved interpersonal skills, stimulated creative thinking, and critical thinking skills (Alvis & Willis, 2005; Heke, 2008; Helms, 2005; Letterman & Dugan, 2004; Te Moana, 2009).

Team teaching can also promote diversity, particularly if the two tutors/lecturers are different genders and/or from different cultures (Heke, 2008; Letterman & Dugan, 2004). Letterman and Dugan found that students were intrigued by the dynamic interactions between two lecturers and that lively debate between them energised student participation and interest. Teachers benefit from team-teaching as the combination can produce a synergy in the classroom, making the teaching more enjoyable, as well as beneficial, for the students. The mix of teaching skills and styles can also provide learning opportunities for the tutors and can lead to a more robust faculty (Helms et al., 2005). Another potential benefit apparent in the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic partnership was that the classroom tutor was a new tutor with extensive

industry experience but little experience of the academic world. The team-teaching experience could therefore presume to provide a mentoring vehicle as well.

### Planning the initiative

Working together, the authors wrote the course objectives, outline, lesson plans, and assessments. In conjunction with the Group Leader Creative Arts and the Programme Coordinator of Music Production and Performance, we brainstormed the barriers that the music students encountered in the past on their academic journey. We identified that many of the barriers to academic success were attitudinal: the students, and also the Programme Coordinator, did not perceive the relevance of academic writing in a music qualification; and many of the students did not feel confident in their ability to write academically. As a result of both of these factors the students did not possess motivation to master these skills. The following hypothesis was developed: an increase in perceived relevance, confidence and motivation could increase the quality of academic essay writing. The following model summarises the purpose of the initiative:

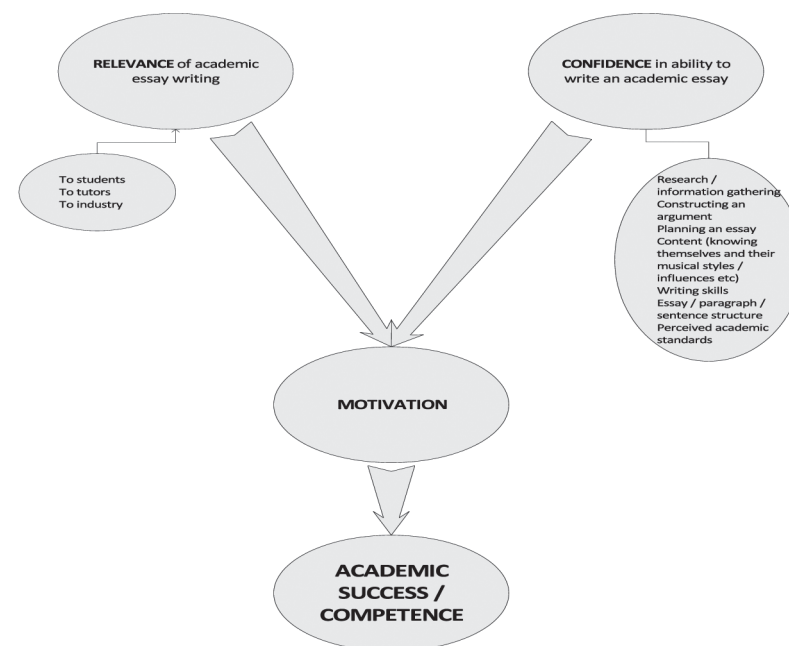


Figure 1. Tutors' assessment of factors leading to academic success for students enrolled in Tioriori - Certificate of Music Production and Performance



### *Redesigning the programme*

In order to provide industry relevance to learning academic essay writing skills and to communicate this relevance to the students, we wrote three course objectives: 1) to improve/enhance students' communication skills to enable them to present themselves effectively to gain employment in the music industry; 2) to develop critical thinking and research skills by researching music festivals, showing how students' musical talents synthesise with these festivals; and 3) to hone writing skills by presenting these findings in a formal written format.

The previous essay assessment had been theory based. We re-wrote the assessment with the following aims:

- Students would gain knowledge about music festivals, particularly music festivals at which they may be able to play in the future. This knowledge would include: when and where the music festival was held; how to gain entrance to play at the music festival; the festival's main demographic; the genre of the festival; who the important contacts/festival organisers were.
- Students would relate these festivals to their own music. Students would gain knowledge through self reflection and analysis of their music. This information would also be useful in terms of writing a biography later on in their programmes and would also provide the foundation of a musician's curriculum vitae. The students were to identify the following aspects of their music: the genre; main demographic/target audience; history/development of the band/artist; and previous gigs/album releases.
- In identifying the above and presenting it as a formal academic essay, the students would develop their research, synthesis and academic essay writing skills.

### *Essay writing workshops*

It is advantageous for students to be provided "the opportunity to learn about academic skills in the context of the demands of a specific paper (practising literature searches, reading and note-taking of relevant articles for the purposes of writing a compulsory assessment) [as it] contextualises these skills [and] offers personal contact with TLAs [Tertiary Learning Advisors]" (Naeem & Day, 2009, p. 27). Thus, the essay writing workshops we ran were based around the essay assessment. In order to increase the students' ability and their confidence in their ability, the process of writing an essay was broken down into smaller steps. Each step was first practised in class, and completed at home by the students. Three formative assignments were set, based on these exercises, so that we could monitor the students' progress and make recommendations on an individual basis to ensure they were mastering each step before continuing on to the next step in a scaffolding process. The first two formative assignments were based around the exploration and analysis of the students' own music and music festival research. The final formative assessment was an essay draft.

The teaching sessions were run as student-centred interactive workshops in line with adult learning theory, facilitated by both of the collaborating tutors. The Learning Advisor demonstrated the academic skill and the content expert translated it into industry jargon and usefulness, often with a story of how he had used the particular skill in reality, in his industry. These stories often contained famous names and added real interest, and often humour, to the workshops. When the content expert demonstrated a skill, the Learning Advisor subsequently broke it into academic requirements. The interplay between the two tutors meant that the students were often entertained, gained multiple perspectives and also felt part of the class and engaged with the tutors and other students. Many of the essay writing activities related directly back to the students' music. One example was a workshop activity designed to encourage the students to think critically about their own musical influences and genre. In this activity the students selected a piece of music which described their life, or had an influence on their life, or was influential at a certain period in their lives. They also needed to explain the reason. The tutors played snippets of the music randomly and the class had to guess whose piece of music had been played and why. The owner of the music explained his/her motivation to the class. This activity then led to the first formative assessment as students applied these skills to their own music.

### **Evaluating the initiative's impact**

The Certificate of Music Production and Performance, 2009 class consisted of 19 students: three female and 16 male students ranging in age from 17 to 53. Five students identified themselves as Māori, two as British and the rest as European New Zealanders. One student did not attend any sessions and withdrew from the Certificate altogether.

### *Questionnaires*

A questionnaire was circulated in the class following the submission of the academic essay. The students were advised that completing the questionnaire was voluntary. The purpose of the study was communicated to the students from the beginning of the course. Twelve questionnaires were completed.

Students' self-rated feelings of confidence in essay writing improved from the beginning of the course, to the end of the eight lessons. Four students reported no change in their confidence, although these students reported feeling confident in their essay writing abilities to begin with (ratings of 8, 9, 9 and 10, where 10 is very confident) (Figure 2). The largest increase in confidence was a difference of five points on the scale. The average increase in confidence was 1.5 points on the scale. In response to the question "What about the course so far has surprised you the most?", three students expressed surprise regarding the essay writing process, commenting: "I done an essay", "I started off not wanting to do the essay, felt it was a waste of time. In the end I actually enjoyed it", and "...it's easier to write essays and communicate than I 1st thought [sic]".

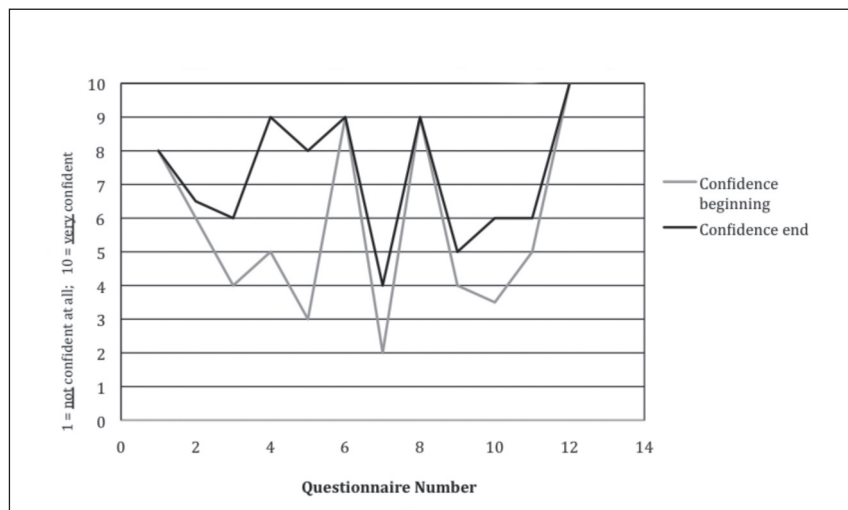


Figure 2. Students' self-rated confidence scales about their essay writing skills at the beginning of the course compared with their perceived confidence at the end of the eight lessons on essay writing. 10 is very confident, 1 is not confident at all.

Half the respondents questioned the relevance of writing an academic essay. However, in response to the question "what about the course so far has surprised you the most?" two people expressed surprise at the relevance they perceived in the end.

Attendance was generally poor; only two students attended every class (eight classes) and one student only attended the first class. Reasons cited for poor attendance included lack of perceived relevance, overseas travel, illness, the time of day (9am), work commitments and boredom.

#### Essay assessment

Sixteen essays were received; two students withdrew from the course. The grades ranged from two failures to five A pluses. The majority of the grades were high (nine students; 69% of essays marked). The average grade was 75.2% (see Figure 3).

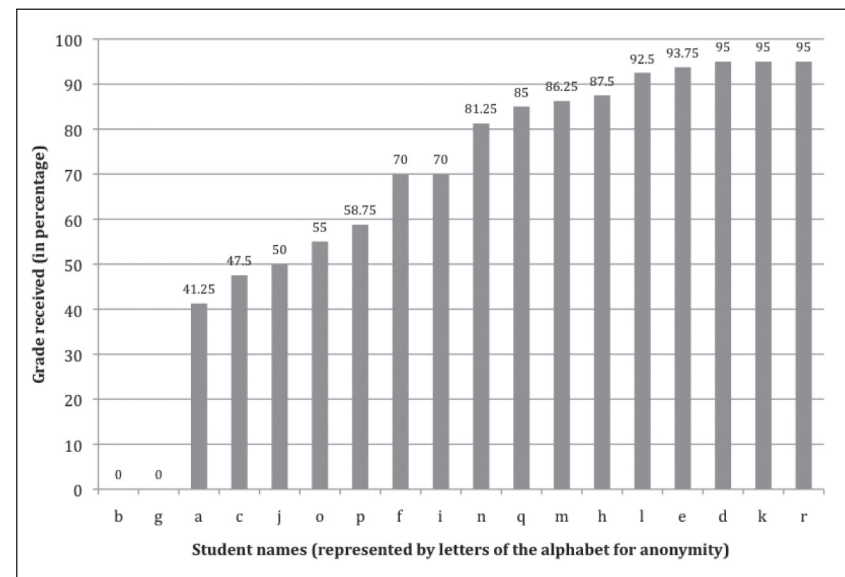


Figure 3: Students' grades in the essay assessment

#### Observations

Informal interviews were held with the group leader for Creative Arts and the Programme Coordinator for Music Production and Performance. Informal interviews were held with students throughout the term, and after the essay was submitted. Feedback was sought continuously and reflection between the two tutors, as well as with the Group Leader and Programme Coordinator was ongoing.

The Group Leader and Programme Coordinator reported on remarkable outcomes in comparison with previous years. The Programme Coordinator (L. Wing, personal communication, December 15, 2010) noted the following:

- improved results for students;
- support is available when students need it most and is in context;
- the Learning Advisor has worked with more students in our course than in previous years and has created relationships with students that have enabled students to achieve at a higher level and feel comfortable in asking for help;
- students do not always seek support on their own and the two tutors were able to monitor progress and students' learning needs on a regular basis;
- support for new staff member in team teaching of this course.

The Group Leader added that all the essays had a basic flow, logical ordering, synthesised information and argument development which few essays had featured in previous years. She continued to note that there were positive shifts in the



students' thinking (as shown in questionnaire comments above) (M. Stewart, personal communication, October 19, 2010). The feedback that the Group Leader and Programme Coordinator received from the students was positive and they reportedly enjoyed the course.

## The learning

The team-teaching initiative between an industry expert and an academic Learning Advisor proved to be relatively successful on Tioriori – Certificate of Music Production and Performance in 2009. The team-teaching allowed a better mix of academic skills and relevant, practical industry requirements. The students enjoyed the team-teaching scenario: as one student reported on a questionnaire, “having good input from Simon in terms of the way the music industry works and how to approach people. Berni helps put thoughts into structured sentences.” These findings may be generalisable to other students in the creative arts who have also been relatively resistant to developing their academic skills rather than enhancing their ‘art’. This includes students doing a Diploma of Art, a Diploma of Graphic Design, or a Diploma of Fashion. However, as attendance was particularly poor in this study, the study may first need to be replicated with another student cohort in the same programme of study. The findings may also have an impact on Learning Advisors' practice: the results may provide more evidence that collaboration between the classroom tutor and Learning Advisor and embedding academic skills in a programme is advantageous to the students' learning and their success and retention.

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## Collaborating with postgraduate supervisors

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### Abstract

Contrary to the commonly-held perception that learning support is merely a remedial proofreading service, Postgraduate Learning Advisors have the capacity to contribute impartial, institution-wide expertise as sounding boards throughout the doctoral journey. Currently, however, the confidential nature of our role means we frequently work in isolation, having to deduce whether a supervisor's comment such as 'meaning unclear' calls for simple rephrasing of a sentence or reconceptualisation of the entire argument. Moreover, students' needs often extend beyond the written draft itself, blurring the boundaries between 'learning support' and 'supervision'. By presenting a student scenario, the findings of a recent survey on postgraduate coordinators' attitudes towards learning support, and informal responses from ATLAANZ members, this paper investigates the possibility of collaborating more closely with doctoral supervisors in order to best support them support their students.

### Introduction

Helping undergraduate students succeed at university, in Kate Chanock's words, to make the transition from "mystery to mastery" (2002, p. 1), constitutes a significant part of tertiary learning advisors' roles. Learning support centres generally offer introductory workshops on everything from study routines and time management to writing essays and exam preparation. They also deliver customised programmes within core courses, and conduct one-to-one consultations on a regular basis (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001). Less well-known is the support Learning Advisors provide for postgraduate students, who – having successfully mastered the academy's rules on one level – are now embarking on a further journey with new mysteries of its own.

At Victoria, University of Wellington (VUW), between February 2008 and October 2009, a total of 2841 students attended 10235 one-to-one consultations with Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) advisors (Student Learning Support Service, 2009b). Of these, 130 Honours or Diploma students, 331 Master's students, and 77 doctoral candidates – in all, 538 postgraduates – attended 3078 appointments: 19% of our clientele taking up 30% of our time (Student Learning Support Service, 2009b). This demand, particularly at the doctoral level where candidates are expected to produce

original work, occasions a number of issues for Learning Advisors to consider, not least that our role may – over time – end up not dissimilar to that of a supervisor. Beginning with a postgraduate student-Learning Advisor scenario, this paper outlines a recent survey canvassing academics' understanding of what learning support entails, followed by informal feedback from ATLAANZ members on their experiences of the Learning Advisor/student/supervisor relationship.

### Postgraduate learning support

For many postgraduate students and academics, there appears to be a perception that 'learning support' is solely a remedial service (Clerehan, 2007). VUW currently has over 4000 postgraduate enrolments, the majority of whom complete their higher degrees without recourse to our services other than occasional workshops on topics of interest such as research proposals and the like (SLSS, 2009a). At best, postgraduates do not require learning support. At worst, they consider they should not require it, which places those referred to SLSS in an awkward position, as evidenced by the following scenario:

Subject: Meeting

I am a new PhD student at VUW, having started in March this year. This mail has reference to your conversation with my supervisor, Dr \_\_\_\_.

I wish to improve my writing skills, which is very essential for my thesis. So I was wondering whether we would be able to meet a couple of times and sort this problem out.

I understand that my writing is not very academic and this is a serious problem. I hope to rectify it as soon as possible.

Figure 1. Student email to Learning Advisor

The student<sup>1</sup>, whom I will call John, was not averse to the notion of "rectifying" problems per se; he was, however, mortified to have been referred for learning support. Moreover, at our initial meeting, it became clear that any attempt to improve John's writing would be complicated by his feelings about his supervisor: reluctant awe (in recognition of his international reputation in the field) coupled with resentment that his feedback, exemplified in Figure 2 below, seemed to make no allowance that this was John's very first attempt at a literature review:

<sup>1</sup> An International doctoral scholarship recipient, who had completed a Master's degree in his home country, entirely by coursework.

<sup>1</sup> Laurs, D. (2010). Collaborating with postgraduate supervisors. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevallano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp.18-30). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

<sup>2</sup> When we began keeping records online.

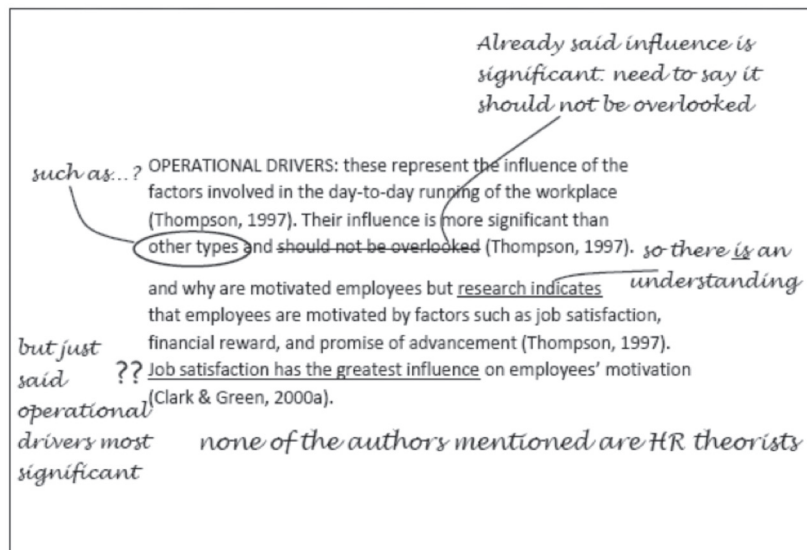


Figure 2. Supervisor's feedback<sup>1</sup> on student's draft

In fact, one could argue that the supervisory comments above demonstrate considerable appreciation of the writer's inexperience. The marginalia challenge John to clarify his statements, reinforcing the fact (as Learning Advisors well know) that making one's work "more academic" has as much to do with thinking as with writing. Accordingly, the supervisor seeks to initiate academic debate as a step towards helping the novice develop independence as a researcher (Dlaskova, Miroso, & Murachver, 2008; Grant, 2003). From the student's perspective, however, the barrage of (barely legible) notes<sup>2</sup> on every single page was totally demoralising.

The supervisor-student interaction has long been recognised as a power relationship (Grant, 2005; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003), one which often remains "uninterrogated" (McWilliam & Palmer, 1995, p. 32). Ideally, expectations should be negotiated at the outset of the candidature, yet cultural and interpersonal assumptions tend to remain "unknowable" (Grant, 2003, p. 185). In terms of the resultant potential for "obstacles and derailments [in] communication", Barbara Grant (2003, p. 184) awards both parties equal power. For example, in the scenario above, the first-time supervisor presumably considered he was providing "constructive criticism" (Dlaskova, Miroso, & Murachver, 2008, p. 3), with the decision to refer

John to SLSS an obvious next step to ensure satisfactory progress towards doctoral completion. Had the supervisor talked through his feedback, rather than depositing the annotated draft in the student's pigeonhole, resultant tensions might have been avoided. As it was, John regarded the comments as "rude" and his referral to SLSS a sign of disrespect for the educational standards of his home country.

As Grant (2003) notes,

In the delicate zone between encouragement and discipline that makes up much of supervision, the workings of identity and desire provide fertile ground for misreadings, resentments, confusions. (p. 187)

The dilemma for the Learning Advisor is how to negotiate a place within such a "differently positioned" relationship (Grant, 2005, p. 338). In attempting to serve both masters, Learning Advisors are akin to Wenger's concept of "broker", working on the boundaries" (2002, as cited in Loads, 2007, p. 242). Although not all situations are as complex as the scenario above, even everyday advice about how to structure an argument or when to begin revising segues into the realm of quasi-supervision. Yet learning support is confidential; supervisors only know of our involvement if students share that information. Of the 77 PhD candidates supported by SLSS during 2008-2009, three-way dialogue (student/supervisor/Learning Advisor) occurred in relation to only the six highest-users (who attended more than 40 individual appointments over that period). Similar interaction might well have benefited the further twenty students who attended between 20-40 appointments, and others as a one-off, in order to ensure we were on the right track. In this way, Learning Advisors could act as a further member of the supervisory team (Grant, 2003), serving as an impartial sounding board, and, if necessary, mediating between student and supervisor to facilitate understanding.

In this case, I suspected Dr \_\_\_\_\_ was oblivious to his student's reaction, yet John would not permit me to broach anything other than thesis-related matters such as "ratio of literature review to Research Proposal as a whole". Accordingly, I endeavoured to support John in isolation as best I could: focusing on how to refine the literature search, synthesise material and restructure the literature review to justify the proposed research project. By our next meeting, however, frustration levels had escalated: John reported that his revised literature review (not unexpectedly, to my mind) had received "just as many comments" as the first, and his supervisor was now being deliberately unhelpful, typically responding to questions about research design, for example, with, "It's your project; you decide." Despite my recommendation that John seek third-party advice from the Head of School or university mediator, academic records reveal that he "abandoned" his qualification shortly thereafter and presumably left the country, without further contact with SLSS.

<sup>1</sup> Content altered, but tenor representative.

<sup>2</sup> Not all of which are, in themselves, well articulated. Arguably, the top RH comment should read, "no need to say [influence] should not be overlooked". Moreover, only one, the directive to broaden the literature search ("none of the authors mentioned here..."), is of any relevance at this early draft stage.

## Collaborating with supervisors

In an attempt to foster greater awareness of how Learning Advisors can support academics to support their students, I undertook a survey of postgraduate coordinators in November 2009 via VUW's Faculty of Graduate Research mailing list (69 Bcc emails, 22 replies: a 35% response rate). The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee and all responses were treated confidentially. The questionnaire had three parts:

- Are you aware of existing SLSS support for postgraduates? YES/NO
- In which areas do you consider a learning advisor could support postgraduate students?  
(5-point Likert scale, ranging from '1: strongly agree' to '5: strongly disagree')
- Are you open to the possibility of collaborating with learning advisors? YES/NO.

## Academics' awareness of learning support

SLSS offers a range of postgraduate programmes: specialist seminars on topics such as Research Proposals, Literature Reviews, Ethical Approval, Qualitative and Quantitative Research, Relationships with Supervisors, Database Searches, and Academic Integrity; thesis-writing workshops; one-to-one appointments on two campuses; and PostgradLife, a student-centred website with online resources and links. Although 60% of respondents (13/22) knew about the research skills seminars series (its brochure disseminated via the postgraduate coordinators' mailing list), and 50% knew of the web-based support, less than a quarter were aware of our 'bread-and-butter', daily 50 minute one-to-one consultations. Representative remarks ranged from "Basically I've been unaware of these resources" to "very handy to now be aware of all the stuff you offer due to filling in this questionnaire!", while others advocated having an annual SLSS newsletter or "orientation session" to notify staff of available support. Comments expressing dissatisfaction with the delivery of tutor-training and academic writing courses revealed a further level of ignorance, in that SLSS is involved in neither. The general lack of academics' understanding (60% overall) may be a direct result of the confidential nature of our service; students know full well what we do.

The second survey question investigated academics' appreciation of the range of services Learning Advisors typically provide during one-to-one appointments, with the findings presented here in two parts: research skills and quasi-supervision.

### Skills-based support

As expected, the majority of academics regarded the prime function of Learning Advisors as providing "technical" linguistic and writing assistance (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004), particularly for non-native speakers of English, as illustrated in Figure 3 below:

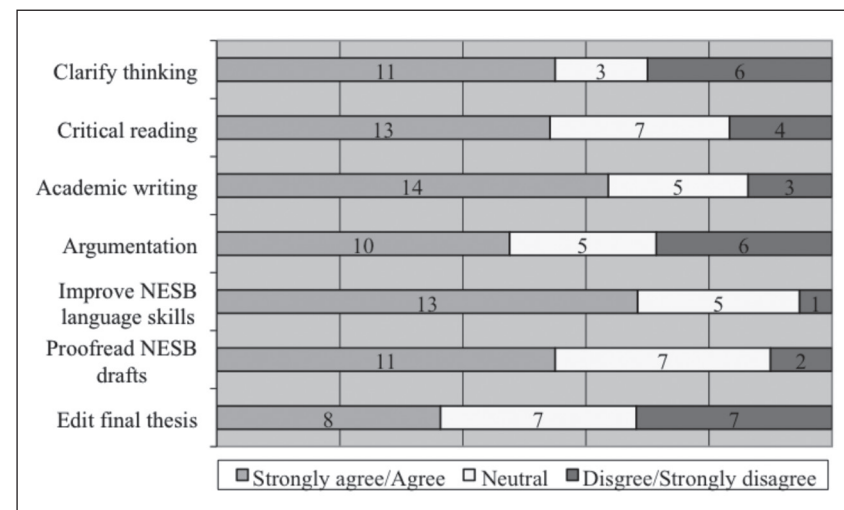


Figure 3. Research skills: 'I consider learning advisors could support PhD candidates in the following ways' [n=22]<sup>1</sup>

This remedial perception may, in fact, be largely self-inflicted, given the presence of 'support' or 'development' within many Learning Centre titles. As Chanock (2007) laments:

Frequently, our centres seem to be regarded as a form of crash repair shop where welding, panel-beating and polishing can be carried out on students' texts—an idea that makes sense only if you regard the text as a vehicle for the writer's thoughts, and separable from the thoughts themselves. (p. 273)

Pleasingly, however, despite the high proportion who expected us to proofread and improve language skills, respondents were less convinced that we should edit, recommending that we "instead support ... the student to learn to edit their own work." Nonetheless, in reality, supervisors often look to us at the eleventh hour to pull a thesis together<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, Learning Centres in New Zealand tend to align with service units such as Counselling and Financial Advice rather than academic development, a pragmatic focus that led two respondents to call our competence into question:

<sup>1</sup> Not all respondents answered all questions.

<sup>2</sup> The 'ethics of editing' merit a discussion of their own, in that Learning Advisors may feel tempted to undertake the task rather than having students resort to professional editors unfamiliar with the academic environment.

As the answers in part 1 indicate, I don't know what a 'learning advisor' is or what your office does. I looked at your webpage, specifically at the 'about us' link, and the only thing I learned about the training of staff members is that most of you do not claim a Doctoral title.

I certainly send undergraduates to SLSS, and indeed I think it's one of the university's best services, bar none. I have been less quick to send PhD students to SLSS, however. This may reflect my own ignorance, but in order to provide PhD students with effective advice, it seems that Learning Advisors should have PhDs themselves.

Such attitudes demand response. Clearly, we need to look to our image. SLSS's primary audience is undergraduates, hence the tenor of the "About Us" online information. Had respondents accessed our 'Info for Staff' page, they would have seen the following:

*The professional staff at SLSS can support academic staff to best meet the learning needs of all students throughout the university, for example, by:*

- Discussing student learning issues [plagiarism; Internationalisation]
- Assessing needs and providing on-going support for individual students you refer to us
- Working with individuals in the light of your feedback
- Advising students at each stage of the drafting process
- Facilitating regular Seminars and workshops

As part of good teaching practice, we do not proofread. Rather, Learning Advisors act as a sounding board, encouraging students to clarify their thought processes and organise their ideas (Student Learning Support Service, 2005).

The presumption that information reaches its audience is flawed. Not only did this survey reveal that SLSS needs to spell out that 'all students throughout the university' means 'all students, *including* postgraduates' and that 'we do not proofread' constitutes exactly that, we need to highlight our credentials.

Chanock et al.'s paper, 'Academic and/or general?' (2004), investigated the status of our counterparts, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) professionals, in Australia. There, the current budget-driven environment has seen a number of institutions reclassify formerly academic LAS as "cheaper" general staff (Chanock et al., 2004, p. 44). In New Zealand, status varies. An informal survey of delegates attending the 2009 ATLAANZ conference at Massey, Albany revealed that colleagues at Auckland, Massey, Palmerston North, Lincoln, Waikato, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and Unitec are classed as 'academics': some lecturers, others tutors. On the other hand, Learning Advisors at VUW are general staff, which – while relieving us of certain PBRF demands – potentially lessens our credibility within the academy. Academic qualifications are a significant marker of rank. Currently, on our website, the title 'Dr'

is the only indication an Advisor has any degree at all. In fact, alongside three PhDs (a fourth completing this year), all our team members<sup>1</sup> have teaching, TESOL and/or specialist qualifications, the majority at Master's level. This supports Katherine Samuelowicz's survey of Australian "learning skills counsellors" (1990, p. 100), which found 84% (48/57 respondents) held at least two (and, in one case, four) degrees. It would be interesting to conduct a similar study of ATLAANZ members. However, notwithstanding the need to enhance our status in the eyes of academics, a doctorate is not a prerequisite. Not all doctoral supervisors have PhDs (Faculty of Graduate Research, 2010), nor – given that our role is, by its very nature, generic and impartial – is having a doctorate necessary in order to be an 'intelligent reader'.

Overall, most survey respondents saw merit in Learning Advisors working with postgraduate students – albeit primarily in a skills-based capacity:

There is no one-size-fits all doctorate, so I am not sure that Learning Advice fits the more academic tasks, and might be best for the skills and general academic requirements. In my experience, candidates value having an extra pair of support hands, which is fairly labour intensive.

In fact, one could argue that Learning Advisors are even better equipped than supervisors, given our breadth of "perspective across the disciplines, across the various phases of higher education, and across the cultures from which our students come" (Chanock, 2007, p. 275), not to mention the sheer volume of postgraduates we encounter each year.

#### *'Supervisory' support*

The survey also sought postgraduate coordinators' views on Learning Advisors' capacity to contribute to the doctoral journey itself, as shown in Figure 4 below:

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<sup>1</sup> As at November 2009, five full-time and eight part-time staff.



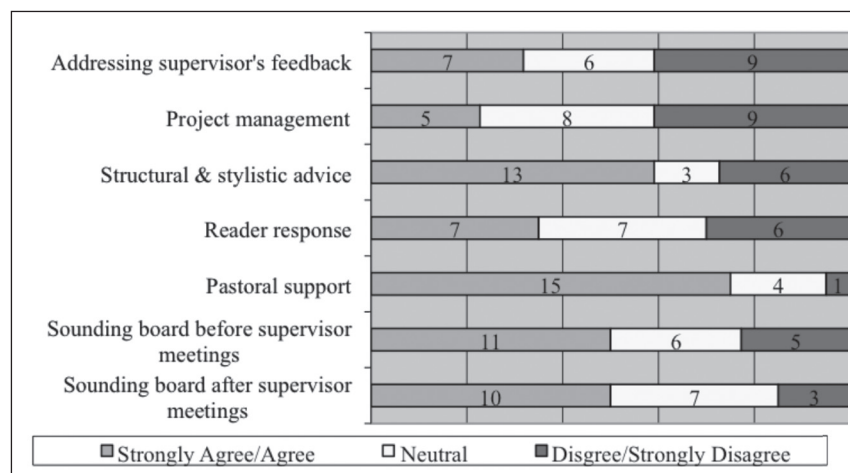


Figure 4. Doctoral journey: 'I consider learning advisors could support PhD candidates in the following ways' [n=22]

Academics felt much less comfortable with the thought that Learning Advisors were undertaking 'things a supervisor should be doing', with respondents reiterating that we should concentrate on 'teaching essential skills to students who may lack them, most importantly, writing skills'. Unbeknownst to them, it is exactly this (quasi-supervisory) ability to provide 'big picture' feedback that students value most, as the following comments reveal:

Through the improved writing techniques I learned at SLSS... I have been able to take my research analysis to a higher level — a kind of spiral effect of writing and analysis development (Domestic PhD candidate in Religious Studies).

I benefitted tremendously from speaking with the learning advisors at SLSS. I received feedback on my thinking process, shared and discussed my ideas and received valuable input. Although the advisor had no special training in my field I found that the questions she asked helped me to clarify my own thinking and even to think about aspects of the topic which I had not considered before (International PhD candidate in Law).

Acting as an impartial audience is one of our key roles, in which lack of 'special training in the field' is a strength, not a disadvantage. One student, for example, the recipient of an industry-related doctoral scholarship, had a pre-determined topic, but little idea of where to begin. After a single session with a Learning Advisor – brainstorming, drawing diagrams and 'thinking out loud' in order to explain her topic in layman's terms – she had several A3 sheets of ideas to discuss with her supervisor, ultimately resulting in a viable project. For other students, the 'spiral effect of writing and analysis development' develops into a long-term relationship: "Whenever I am

stuck with my thesis I approach SLSS to bounce ideas with someone who is 'external' in order to get some fresh insights" (International PhD candidate in Information Management). In this way, Learning Advisors play an important role in helping postgraduates clarify their thoughts, meet informal deadlines (and/or discuss why things have not gone as anticipated) and obtain a 'second opinion': basically sharing the postgraduate experience in general.

## Academics' openness to collaboration

The final section of the questionnaire asked whether supervisors already referred students for learning support, whether they might do so in the future, and – most importantly – whether they were willing to collaborate with a Learning Advisor in order to best meet individual student needs. Learning Advisors' potential to support supervisors as well as students is endorsed by the fact that nearly 75% (16/22) of academics who completed the survey were open to three-way interaction (student/Learning Advisor/supervisor) 'if appropriate'<sup>1</sup>, with a number actively welcoming third-party involvement: "there are times when help for supervisors to manage a supervision relationship is needed..." and "Hearing from SLSS advisors on common problems students come to them with would be useful for PhD supervisors, I reckon".

Of those unwilling to entertain such a relationship, only one<sup>2</sup> was patently averse:

I would react with suspicion if a 'learning advisor' attempted to insert him or herself as a partner in the supervision of a graduate degree.... I think your last questions, each appended with the clause 'if appropriate', are dishonest. The questions rightly posed should ask 'Do I consider it appropriate to refer candidates to SLSS?' and so forth. The answer, at the doctoral level, is essentially 'no'.

Others were less opinionated, but rightly advocated the need for careful negotiation of roles and responsibilities:

The 3-way student supervisor/s LA relationship is very tricky. I certainly think that if the LA is significantly involved with a particular student the supervisors should know about it. It is important for the LA not to second guess or undermine the supervisor. LAs are not always able to interpret supervisor feedback etc. in all disciplinary situations. There are also times when students attempt to manipulate this triangular relationship, as you will be aware.

These very reservations emphasise the desirability of working together; the way seems open for collaboration, should we choose to take it.

<sup>1</sup> The phrasing in the survey, intended to allow for individual circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> The same respondent who questioned our "claim to Doctoral titles".



## Learning Advisors' views

My ATLAANZ conference workshop presented these survey findings to colleagues: some academic, some general staff, actively involved with postgraduates or about to commence. Discussion centred on the perception that we exist solely to fix problems (often when a supervisor reaches desperation point); channels of communication with supervisors (largely individualised; occasionally via pan-university committees, newsletters, co-taught writing workshops or supervisor training); students' appreciation of our role as 'sounding board' – and academics *per se*. The session culminated in an informal SWOT analysis:

<b>STRENGTHS:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing students with alternative avenue of feedback &amp; support</li> <li>• Independent voice for students (can say things fearful to say to supervisor)</li> <li>• Can discuss what questions to ask supervisor next</li> </ul>	<b>WEAKNESSES:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of disciplinary knowledge/expertise</li> <li>• Perception of 'magic wand'; some supervisors think we can do everything.</li> <li>• Expected to proofread International students' language</li> </ul>
<b>OPPORTUNITIES:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expertise in data analysis, computer analysis, writing/language skills</li> <li>• Opportunity to develop own skills</li> <li>• Help students formulate process &amp; questions to which they need answers from supervisor</li> </ul>	<b>THREATS:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervisors protective of student/thesis</li> <li>• Some supervisors threatened by having another person in the loop</li> <li>• Different supervisors have different ideas about what is acceptable/right &amp; wrong</li> </ul>

Figure 5: Working with postgraduates and supervisors (feedback from ATLAANZ conference workshop, November 21, 2009)

It is perhaps inherent within Learning Advisors' nature that colleagues also considered the needs of other players, with supervisors' 'patch-protection' probably the hardest area to tackle. Not all postgraduate students require learning support nor is liaison with supervisors always appropriate. Nevertheless, for some students – and some supervisors – working with a Learning Advisor in possession of insight into institution-wide postgraduate issues might have significant benefits.

Currently, individual Learning Advisors at New Zealand tertiary institutions have strong relationships with individual supervisors<sup>1</sup>, yet wider networking is vital to counter the remedial label and promulgate the advantages of non-discipline-specific expertise. For the very reason that there is 'no one-size-fits all doctorate', tertiary Learning Advisors have the potential to provide learning support for all.

<sup>1</sup> I myself am a doctoral supervisor, currently co-supervising a candidate investigating how the application of certain management theories might contribute to postgraduate students' successful completion.

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**Postscript:** as a consequence of my 2009 survey of postgraduate coordinators, the 2010 SLSS workshops and seminars have, for the first time, attracted postgraduates from every School and faculty, students have been referred from a wider range of disciplines, and several academics have sought to establish collaborative relations.

## Many and varied roles: An inter-institutional project to evidence the impact of Learning Advisors on student achievement

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### Abstract

At the end of 2008, a number of Learning Advisors from different member institutions of ATLAANZ were successful in a bid for funding to run a two day 'Writing Hui'. The funding body, Ako Aotearoa, is the Ministry of Education's National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, and sponsors projects that strategically improve tertiary teaching and learning. The particular purpose of this successful application was to identify and report on student learning support programmes that demonstrate a tangible impact on student retention, pass rates, and/or completion. By collating success stories of programmes and initiatives from around the country that produce desirable results, information about best practice can be accessed and shared effectively, enabling academic support staff to incorporate appropriate elements to enhance student performance and address areas of concern.

The project team extended invitations to Learning Advisor colleagues from institutions in the upper half of the North Island, the area administered by Ako Aotearoa's Northern Hub, to which we reported. Sixteen ATLAANZ members attended, and over 30 programme summaries and case studies of success were produced, including accounts of one-to-one student support, study skills workshops, working with specific programmes and staff in interdisciplinary collaborations, and initiatives that have raised achievement among Māori and Pasifika students, international students, and foundation learners. This paper draws on the literature of writing retreats, communities of practice, and interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations which provided the theoretical foundations for this successful and productive professional initiative. It incorporates reflections by the organisers on the implications and opportunities that the project raises – for those in the Tertiary Learning Advisor profession, for managers and decision makers in the tertiary education sector, and for the learners in the learning environments that they provide. It is the authors' hope that by examining some of these

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<sup>1</sup> Fraser, C., Manalo, E., & Marshall, J. (2010). Many and varied roles: An inter-institutional project to evidence the impact of Learning Advisors on student achievement. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevillano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 31-44). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

issues in this paper, colleagues will be encouraged to take the necessary steps not only in demonstrating the impact of their work on student achievement, but also in more widely disseminating the impact and value of that work.

## Introduction

On 30th April and 1st May 2009, 16 Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) met at an Ako Aotearoa-supported hui in Tauranga. The TLAs were from the following institutions: the University of Auckland, AUT University, Unitec, Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec), Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, and Eastern Institute of Technology. During the two-day hui we wrote, and supported each other in writing summations of some of the instruction and support programmes we provide for students that clearly achieve tangible results. The guiding intention was fourfold: firstly, to share learning about successful ways of operating with colleagues; secondly, to demonstrate to those in our own profession and to others in the tertiary education sector that the work of TLAs makes a significant contribution to better retention and completion rates for students; thirdly, to enhance the standing of learning advising as a profession; and finally, to contribute to the development of the tertiary education sector and to be counted as a key stakeholder group in national planning and future initiatives.

This paper describes the way in which the writing hui project came about, establishing firstly the context and the work of the key protagonists, the TLAs and the centres in which they are based, and the lamentably low profile their work has typically received. Next the paper outlines background information about the formation of, and activities coordinated by, our national body, the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ), and how the successful application for a grant from Ako Aotearoa to run the hui came about. A brief description is then provided of the conduct and proceedings of the two-day hui, followed by an exploration of three strands of commentary identified in the literature which are particularly pertinent in accounting for the writing hui's success in achieving its immediate objectives. These strands are: writing retreats; communities of practice; and interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations. The paper then considers some of the implications of the hui and the work it produced for practitioners, institutions, the profession, and the wider tertiary education sector. We hope that examining these issues relating to the writing hui will provide helpful pointers and encouragement for others involved in supporting student academic success to likewise find appropriate ways to highlight the impact and value of their work.

### *The modern tertiary environment*

In order to contextualise the hui and its initiatives, the sector setting for its implementation is described briefly here. In the past couple of decades, higher education has become increasingly driven by the political imperatives of “massification” (Harris, 2005, p. 421) and accountability for student retention and achievement. When educational institutions are under pressure to operate as profit-making business enterprises, there is a real concern that the process of earning higher

qualifications is becoming a form of “transactional deals between traders”, and the providers little more than “a learning factory” (Keenan, n.d., Slide 3). Linked to this sort of financial platform for modern tertiary delivery, and also driven by the ideology of a knowledge economy (Madden, 2009) and almost open entry to university study, is the advent of large numbers of non-traditional students. Mature students, students from ethnic and cultural minorities, ‘second-chance learners’ who did not achieve well in their secondary schooling, international students and students with disabilities, including learning difficulties – all have the potential to challenge an institution’s statistics of successful graduations.

The cost of non-completion is high: the institution cannot resell the place on the programme; the government, and therefore taxpayers have funded a qualification that was not achieved; the student suffers a financial loss and is likely to feel some loss of confidence, and may never repeat the experience. In response to this challenge, most tertiary institutions have put in place a number of different strategies, including efforts at enhancing ‘teaching and learning quality’ and the provision of student support services, which usually incorporates academic skills assistance as one of the core components. The exact means of delivery of academic skills assistance varies between institutions: sometimes staff responsible for this work are part of a teaching and learning, or academic development unit; sometimes they are part of a library ‘learning hub’ or ‘information commons’; sometimes they work as part of a faculty; but mostly these TLAs are situated in a separate team, or Learning Centre.

### *The role of Learning Centres and the work of Learning Advisors*

The primary function of Learning Centres, as summarised by Morris (2008), is to “bridge the gap between the skills students bring to tertiary education and the skills required for successful participation” (p. 87). Work is typically either one-to-one or group work within the Centre or, increasingly, online. TLAs frequently collaborate with subject discipline instructors in the provision of class support and guidance, and embedded learning skills development. Pre-semester delivery of learning/study skills workshops, often as part of a transition/preparation for study programme, is another common role. TLA practice then is wide-ranging and varied; it is also a very reflective discipline, constantly questioning philosophy and pedagogy. Wilkinson, Bowker, Deane-Freeman and Rullan (2008) observe that there can be a tension between providing the assignment-focused assistance students request to address their immediate needs, and an appreciation of a wider culture of inquiry and knowledge generation. They note that where a decade ago, a core function of Learning Centres was to teach generic study skills, today it is possible to identify three co-existing student learning-related constructs addressed by TLAs. First, and for many students, foremost, remains the reactive response – what they need to do, or know, to pass. Then there is the developmental practice of academic socialisation - the culture and the expectations of the tertiary environment. The third construct, say Wilkinson et al. (2008), is academic literacies, an extension of both the former practices: it is about communication, relationships and dialogue, and above all, developing and empowering the student

voice. And as if this was not enough, Manalo (2008) argues that it is essential TLAs and Learning Centres are active researchers within their field in order to be truly effective.

### *Seen, but not counted*

As TLAs, conducting our own research is also important if our practice and contribution is to be fully appreciated. An education sector which focuses on accountability and economic sustainability has led to numerous studies to identify challenges and tipping points for student success and retention, and suggest strategies to limit and mitigate the impact of the negative aspects of the contemporary tertiary environment. In 2002, the Ministry of Education commissioned a best evidence synthesis of 146 research studies which looked at two key influences on student achievement: academic development programmes and the provision of student support services (Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Zepke, 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2005). Their findings were summarised as 13 “propositions for practice” (p. x), ten to do with students adapting to the institution, and 3 about the institution adapting to the students (Middleton, 2005). Almost hidden within both these strands is the work of TLAs: in a reference to “relationships between students and...support staff” and advice that “all staff must understand the support services and act as a reference point to them” (Prebble et al., 2005, p. 3). The authors note the “paucity of New Zealand studies” (p. 7) and do not directly comment on Learning Centre work, except to say, “Yet the idea of providing students with extra academic support to improve outcomes does not seem so alien” (p. 7).

We know that the uptake of TLA services is consistently high at around 15-20% of the student population in universities and often over 50% in polytechnics (based on student use figures reported in annual reports from Learning Centres at Auckland University of Technology, the University of Auckland (including the Faculty of Education programme at NorthTec in Whangarei), the University of New South Wales, and Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki. Thus, TLAs work with significant proportions of the tertiary student population (Manalo, Marshall, & Fraser, 2009). So how do we best identify, document, and promulgate the difference we make to the academic performance of the students we teach and support? While we are well aware of the fact that ‘use’ does not necessarily equate to ‘effectiveness’, we (and TLAs in general) are also cognisant of the real, tangible, positive differences that our day-to-day work makes to student academic performance. But knowledge about the impact of the services we provide appears to be mostly limited to our own ranks and to ‘the converted few’ within our institutions. Clearly, addressing this knowledge gap challenge is a priority for those in the TLA profession.

### *The ATLAANZ movement*

The questions of how to effectively demonstrate the impact of the work we do with students, and how to more convincingly demonstrate the alignment of this work with institutional and national aspirations in tertiary education achievement, have been discussed and debated quite extensively during the past decade in the TLA national

association in New Zealand, ATLAANZ. The Association was established at the end of 1999 when an earlier national grouping of TLAs took steps to formally establish ATLAANZ with its own constitution, later incorporated in 2003. The three key articulated functions of the association are: to facilitate communication and sharing of best practice amongst TLAs, to support the professional development and promote the professional status of members, and to disseminate relevant research findings (ATLAANZ, n.d.). The principal instruments utilised to facilitate the achievement of these functions have been an email discussion forum, an annual conference and, since 2006, a refereed publication of the proceedings.

As noted, a recurring thread of discussion within ATLAANZ has been to explore ways to evidence the value of our work and ensure our voice is heard at an institutional and national level – particularly in these days of ‘shifting sands’, reviews and re-structuring. TLAs are aware and wary of the fact that claims of student academic performance improvements following the provision of learning support programmes are subject to ‘criticisms’ about not being able to rule out the possibility that other factors (e.g., student self-selection, motivation, other learning experiences) could have caused the improvements. These difficulties with establishing concrete links between interventions and outcomes exist, certainly, but should not be taken as a reason to avoid exploring how what we do impacts on student retention, pass rates, and completion. It is outside the scope of the current paper to explore these issues in detail (for a more detailed discussion – and possible solutions – see, e.g., Manalo, 2009), but the need within the TLA profession to demonstrate what they know to be the day-to-day positive impact of their work with students was in large part the motivation behind the ‘writing hui’ that was conducted.

### **The Ako Aotearoa sponsored ‘writing hui’**

The ‘writing hui’ was supported by Ako Aotearoa, which is the Ministry of Education’s National Centre for Teaching Excellence, charged with achieving the best possible educational outcomes for all learners by enhancing the effectiveness of tertiary teaching and learning practices. Ako Aotearoa allocates funding, by region, to specific projects, with a preference for inter-institutional collaboration and outcomes which will identify and share good practice. Accordingly, a small group from within the ATLAANZ Executive Committee submitted a proposal to Ako Aotearoa’s Northern Hub, to run a writing hui to collect tangible evidence of the impact TLAs have on student achievement. In late 2008, we were notified that our application had been successful and that we had received a grant of \$10,000 to complete the project.

The two-day hui in Tauranga took place in a conference centre with sufficient table space to accommodate all 16 participants, who mostly wrote in the shared space, although withdrawal to private rooms was available for those who preferred a quieter writing environment. A facilitated introductory session ensured all participants were cognisant of the hui’s aims and objectives, and all were adequately prepared for the



exercise. Listening to one another's proposed outlines of what we would write exposed a number of synergies which were utilised during peer feedback and reflection sessions.

The hui concept required participants to write programme summations which described a range of initiatives and interventions to improve student outcomes. A template ensured all shared common foci, while allowing each summation its own voice. Twenty-two summations and 12 case studies described the value of one-to-one work with students, skills development workshops, and programmes that are integrated within specific subject disciplines (health, statistics, nursing, business, foundation learning, biology, electrical engineering). Peer tutoring and foundation skills programmes, and programmes to support Māori and Pasifika students were also profiled. Each provided not only tangible evidence of efficacy, but also critical success factors and action plans to facilitate replication and/or adaptation where the strategies employed in the programmes may be deemed helpful for other student groups.

On conclusion of the hui, the organizing team followed up with participants to collect and collate the programme summations into a report which will be presented to Ako Aotearoa and posted on their website for public access. It is anticipated that this document will facilitate shared learning amongst tertiary educators, to enhance understanding of strategies that make a difference to student learning, and to promote the use of methods that have been shown to effect better retention and completion rates for students in tertiary education.

## **Factors contributing to success, and discourse from the literature**

We considered the factors that contributed to the success of the writing hui, and identified three strands of commentary from the research literature that appeared to be pertinent: writing retreats, communities of practice, and interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations. Each of these is briefly discussed in the following subsections.

### *Writing retreats*

The word 'retreat' has historic connotations of monasteries and hermit dwellings, but simply means "the act of retiring or withdrawing one's self", or "a special season of solitude and silence" (Thinkexist.com, n.d., para. 1). In the academic context, writing retreats offer participants the time and space not easily found in day to day job performance (Bellacero, 2009), to focus on writing and overcome a raft of challenges: lack of momentum, self-censorship, low confidence, lack of external motivation, and a lack of specific writing-related skills (Moore, 2003). This last issue is particularly relevant to TLAs, whose profiles and backgrounds can be extremely diverse, since there is no formal qualification or pathway into the profession of learning advising. Yet, as academics, we are automatically assumed to be able to write at a scholarly level, although there may have been no previous requirement or opportunity to develop these skills. Belcher (2009) adds confusion of focus, a relaxed sense of timelines and

insufficient feedback to the barriers of solo writing efforts which can be redressed by attending writing retreats.

Barbara Grant (2006) has been running residential writing retreats for a group of academic women from around New Zealand twice a year since 1997 and writes about the ways in which this practice can be "transgressive" (p. 483), allowing participants to go beyond generally accepted boundaries. Although our two-day hui differed considerably from Grant's week-long, women-only retreats, a number of her observations are applicable. Like her model, the Tauranga hui was inter-institutional and collegial: Grant notes the importance of cutting across a national ethos of competition between higher education providers. It also attracted a range of participants not delineated by seniority or discipline, so that novice TLAs mixed with associate professors and career educationalists, able to share experiences and tips, and occasional "serendipitous cross-fertilisations of ideas" (Grant, 2006, p. 486). Two final areas in which our hui was transgressive were firstly, that it allowed us all to break from the dominant culture of writing in isolation, and secondly, that by simply making the commitment to attend, we were all putting ourselves first for the two days – ahead of demands from students, managers, and administrators.

Therefore, the act of 16 TLAs assembling in a single meeting place conducive to writing, to document some success stories from our practice, bore out many of the benefits noted in the literature. Whereas most writing retreats allow participants to select their own projects (e.g., a thesis or dissertation for higher qualifications, writing for scholarly journals or industry publications, creative writing pursuits; Grant, 2008), there are some studies which relate to more structured retreats with a shared purpose. Many are organised for teachers and consultants (Bellacero, 2009; Peterson, 2002) to develop resources or apply for grants; and there is some thought that a structured, or directed writing retreat increases learning through participation in a community of practice approach (Murray & Newton, 2009).

### *Communities of practice*

In 1991, theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger wrote about the social learning that occurs when practitioners with a common interest or domain meet and collaborate regularly to share ideas, resources, solutions and support (Smith, 2009). One of their most significant contributions was to point out that learning is not just something individuals do, with a measurable beginning and end. Rather it comes from participation and interaction with like-minded others, as the pursuit of a shared enterprise enables us to learn how to do things better (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2009). This type of community is something that ATLAANZ members are already fortunate enough to have, and over several years of annual conferences and online discussion, many of our participants have shared both relationship and trust, significant factors in cooperating to achieve successful resolutions to more complex projects than an individual might wish to undertake on their own.

From this established platform, the writing hui facilitators were easily able to draw in newer TLAs and offer any necessary direction to underscore the purpose of the gathering and the use of the supplied writing templates over and above the pre-hui communications that had been sent. In this way, the hui clearly demonstrated the way in which communities of practice can assist newer members to develop competence and move from “legitimate peripheral participation ... into full participation” (Smith, 2009, p. 4). With the successful completion of more programme summations than had originally been forecast, the approach of working together in a shared endeavour, also evidenced the “intimate connection between knowledge and activity” (Smith, 2009, p. 7).

#### *Interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations*

People, groups and organisations work together in one of five ways, according to Honeyfield et al. (2008), with an increasing level of formality: networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration. Collaboration is a mutually beneficial process which occurs when autonomous stakeholders engage interactively to achieve a common goal (Huxham, 1996). In an educational context, Czajkowski (2006) suggests collaborative partnerships may well be designed to address accountability and cost control pressures due to the current social and political environment. This was certainly a contributing factor in the writing hui discussed in this paper: mindful of the economics of student retention and success, not only did we wish to produce a document that provided tangible evidence of effective TLA practice to demonstrate value to our own institutions, we also saw the merit of establishing a professional stake in the future direction of our sector.

Rigby, Donovan, and Searle (2006) discuss six strategies for managing collaborative processes, all of which can be identified in the writing hui experience. The strategies are: shared understanding and trust, communication with participants, project team communication, time management, collaborative decision-making, and fun. Czajkowski (2006) adds three more, equally evident in the Tauranga hui: a common and unique purpose, clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, and adequate financial and human resources. With the funding from Ako Aotearoa, and a clear outwards-looking and stakeholder focus developed through the proposal and submission process, the writing hui was a planned and deliberate implementation utilising “self-interest” (Honeyfield et al., 2008, para. 3) which became a productive and satisfying experience.

According to Moran (1990), there are educational, fiscal, social and political advantages to inter-institutional and interdisciplinary collaborations. There is the potential for greater depth and breadth in the inquiry, more choice of pedagogical and technological strategies, and a greater range of quality learning and teaching materials. The focus becomes, “Discovery first, institution second” (Rigby et al., 2006, p. 17). This is certainly so in the programme summations report, where the summations are grouped according to content, and the organisation to which the contributing writer is affiliated receives a much lower importance.

The collaboration involved in this project provided opportunities for identifying new

and innovative approaches – not just in the actual summations reported, but also in the act of writing together. Rigby et al. (2006) note further benefits in benchmarking, professional development, and an expanded profile. The measurement of these as an outcome of the Ako Aotearoa-supported writing hui requires further investigation and follow up, and may be the subject of future research by members of the project team.

## **Implications and opportunities**

In recent years, ATLAANZ members have recognised that in a tertiary climate of continued restructuring and review, we not only need a strong sense of our own discipline, learning community, roles and identity, but we must also equip ourselves to “defend, justify and legitimize our practices” (Carter & Bartlett-Trafford, 2008, p. 39). A number of publications by our members have discussed strategies for proving effectiveness (see, for instance, Acheson, 2006; Manalo, 2008, 2009; Morris, 2008). The writing hui represents one initiative by a sub-group of TLAs to take a first step in a strategic shift from simply providing services for Learning Centres, to establishing a strong national profile for our profession. The hui project has a range of implications and opportunities for several interested parties. These are outlined below.

#### *For practitioners*

While no formal evaluations were collected relating to individual participants’ experiences of attending the hui, informal feedback attested to the sense of satisfaction and contribution experienced by all who attended. Comments made to different members of the project team referred to enhanced confidence in writing skills and a wider appreciation of the work, resources and purpose of the community of which they are a part. For participant TLAs, the final report can provide their line managers and institutions with evidence of their academic input to a national initiative that directly addresses the question of what can be done at the institutional level to improve tertiary student retention and completion. For colleagues who were not able to participate, the report can serve as a first introduction to a raft of proven programmes to assist learners, many of which will be transferable to their own Learning Centre or workplace.

#### *For institutions*

Work on the project has allowed insight into other organisations’ practices, and made it possible to identify new and innovative approaches that go beyond the boundaries and experience of each institution involved. Collaboration at a practitioner level is not only relatively low-risk for institutions, it is also a low-cost opportunity to rationalise resourcing and explore synergies (Moran, 1990). The resource created in the report of programme summations therefore offers Learning Centres and managers from across the tertiary sector, a blueprint for adopting and adapting tried and true programmes which have proved effective in improving student achievement outcomes.

In light of the effectiveness evidenced by the student-focused programmes described in the report, institutional management may also wish to consider investigating the presence or provision of similar programmes within their own institution, and whether



it may be possible to likewise discern the beneficial effects of such programmes on student academic performance. If similar benefits are discernible, it may then be prudent for such managers to reconsider resource allocation/prioritisation linked to such programmes and their development.

### *For the profession*

As noted in this paper and others by ATLAANZ colleagues, it is critical that our profession develop and promote criteria to measure Learning Centre effectiveness. We cannot talk about “quality standards” or “valuing excellence” (Sell, 1975, para. 1) unless we are first able to identify criteria and indicators of effectiveness. The programme summations which were the outcome of the writing hui detail ways in which different centres and institutions measure a raft of items: accessibility, relevancy, quality, learner outcomes, cost-effectiveness, impact and contribution to knowledge. Shared examples of good practice, such as these, directly reflect the vision of our association, of “communication, networking [and] exchange of ideas ... amongst professionals working in learning advisory roles within tertiary institutions” (ATLAANZ, n.d., para. 1).

### *For the sector*

The awarding of funding by a government body in itself sends a clear vote of confidence in the ability of TLAs to form effective professional partnerships to further the knowledge of strategies which can address student success and retention positively. The writing hui and its successful compilation of over 30 evidence-supported testimonies to the contribution made by TLAs demonstrates that universities, polytechnics, institutes of technology, and other tertiary institutions can overcome traditional inhibitions about competition and defense of their academic standards (Moran, 1990) in collaborative activity and division of labour. This type of good practice is not limited to the work of Learning Centres; the challenge for the Ministry is to identify other areas of tertiary delivery that can benefit from a similar fostered approach and follow the lead taken by TLAs!

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have outlined the context of tertiary learning advising in New Zealand, and the background that led to an Ako Aotearoa-sponsored project that we feel privileged to have been a part of. We also provided some details about the way in which the two-day writing hui was organised and conducted, our experiences as participants in the hui, and our reflections and views about the factors that likely contributed to the successful outcomes of that hui. Finally, we considered some of the implications of the writing hui and the resulting report on key stakeholders – tertiary learning support practitioners, tertiary institutions and their management, the profession of tertiary learning advising, and the wider tertiary education sector. Our hope is that, by sharing what we have learned through the project, other TLAs will be encouraged to take the necessary steps to document and evidence the impact of their own teaching and support work on student achievement. Wider knowledge about, and appreciation of,

the impact of tertiary learning advising on student retention and success is important on a number of different levels. It is crucial to the longer term survival and development of the tertiary learning advising profession. It is vital towards enabling tertiary institutions to more effectively and reliably meet their student retention and completion ‘requirements’. It is one significant factor in the attainment of national agendas on tertiary education outcomes. And – perhaps most importantly – it can play a pivotal role in the achievement or otherwise of many students’ aspirations in tertiary education.

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## Building strong writing foundations: An investigation into materials for teaching paraphrasing

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### Abstract

In 2008 we identified a concern around our practice in developing students' ability to paraphrase source texts effectively. We decided that a useful way to inform our teaching would be to critically review a range of resources aimed to help students develop paraphrasing skills and to evaluate these for clarity and comprehensiveness. This initial review of materials has become the first stage in an action research cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009) as we have continued to work on redesigning and trialling our own materials for teaching paraphrasing, based on the criteria that emerged through our investigation. At the 2009 ATLAANZ conference Catherine presented these materials to Learning Advisor colleagues for feedback and suggestions. This paper describes our process in detail and reports on observations about learning and teaching the complex skill of paraphrasing. We reflect on the purposes and challenges of materials design, and inevitably on our roles as Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs).

### Introduction

The ability to paraphrase others' words is a high stakes academic writing skill. Using the expectations of our institution as an example, most undergraduate and postgraduate writing tasks require students to base their assertions on evidence from sources, in at least one section of an assignment response. Routinely, university and polytechnic writing guidelines indicate that direct quotations can constitute only a small component of this source-based writing. Students who fail to paraphrase effectively will be likely to achieve lower grades for academic writing and potentially risk committing plagiarism. Thus, in our work with students as Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs), one of our roles is to provide appropriate and useful guidance in the areas of referencing and paraphrasing. Following work we undertook as part of an institutional project on anti-plagiarism strategies, we found ourselves well-placed to inform students about what they must not do. However, despite having taught workshops titled 'Introduction to Academic Writing' or 'Academic Writing Intensive', we were rather less confident about our success in outlining effective ways of using other writers' words and ideas in writing. Nor were we satisfied with the materials we had thus far developed for this work. While teaching the more overt techniques for citing sources is relatively

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, C., & Malthus, C. (2010). Building strong writing foundations: An investigation into materials for teaching paraphrasing. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevilano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp.45-56). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

straightforward, teaching the more subtle art of paraphrasing was an area we both identified as needing more attention. Given the complex language processes involved, students' interest in developing paraphrasing skills and the central nature of this skill to academic writing, identifying effective teaching approaches for paraphrasing seemed to be an important endeavour.

## Definitions and purposes of paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is defined in a variety of ways within the literature. According to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2010), when you paraphrase you “summarize a passage or re-arrange the order of a sentence and change some of the words” (p. 15). Interestingly, this brief definition points to a conflation of the terms ‘paraphrasing’ and ‘summarising’ despite the fact that the two terms are often described as separate, although related, concepts. Creme and Lea’s (2003) writing guide for students describes paraphrasing as a form of quoting which can be seen as being potentially confusing. They say that “there are two ways of using a quote from a reading: allow the quote to ‘stand alone’ or incorporate the gist of what the author has said more seamlessly into your own text – this is known as paraphrasing” (p. 64). In our view, a more accurate definition is given by Leki (1995) in a chapter titled ‘Summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting sources’. She explains that:

Paraphrasing is using your own words to report someone’s material or ideas. A paraphrase allows you to use another writer’s material to support a point you are making in your own work without using the other writer’s exact wording.... Unlike a summary a paraphrase is usually about the same length of the original, but both the words and the sentence structure of the original must be changed in a paraphrase. (p. 185)

Quoting can be contrasted with paraphrasing and summarising in that the wording of a section of text is not altered, but incorporated into a piece of writing exactly as it was written in the original text. Quotations are usually marked in a text by speech marks or are indented, separating them from other text. Whether paraphrased, summarised or quoted, all uses of source material need to be correctly acknowledged in line with the referencing system being followed.

One of the difficulties of paraphrasing is undoubtedly the lack of convergence around definitions of paraphrasing and the subjective nature of judgements about the extent to which a text has to be rewritten before we can be sure it has not been plagiarised, or whether the writer has accurately conveyed the intended meaning of the original. Higher education institutions have a wide range of rules and regulations that leave “considerable scope for confusion” (Zimitat, 2001, p. 11) about how plagiarism is defined and by association how paraphrasing is understood. Indeed, Roig (2001) describes the lack of a clear and consistent description of plagiarism and paraphrasing across the disciplines as a “highly undesirable state of affairs” (p. 321).

Some writing about paraphrasing suggests that there are clear objective criteria for what constitutes a good paraphrase, but this does not seem to be the case when studies have been done which ask students and staff to evaluate paraphrases, or to come up with a set of criteria themselves. Accounts exist of the difficulties groups of content lecturers have in coming to agreement about whether a given example of source-based writing is effective paraphrasing versus plagiarism (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). One study indicates that when asked to paraphrase, staff themselves plagiarised (Roig, 2001). Zimitat (2008) points out in relation to one such study, “there appeared to be a view that appropriate use of the text related to some difference between the original and rewritten text, though the mechanisms to achieve this were not clear” (p. 15).

## Evaluating ‘advice’ resources

Acknowledging that we were not pioneers in teaching paraphrasing as a component of academic writing, we decided to undertake a critical survey of recent materials, including books and web-based resources, which aim to teach students approaches to paraphrasing. On the basis of this survey we developed a set of guidelines to inform our own materials design process and undertook to prepare a set of resources that dealt with some of the complexities of understanding how to paraphrase effectively. We chose this path partly because it offered a direct route to solutions for a teaching practice issue we had identified, and also because we surmised that materials design might reflect current theory and research on the learning and teaching of paraphrasing skills. Materials design is an aspect of our learning development practice that does not receive sufficient attention, so we thought a good way to correct this would be to see what we could learn from the insights and effective practices of published materials designers.

We were aware that a lot of attention has been paid to investigations of the burgeoning plagiarism phenomenon, and many writers have ended dissections of the problem by concluding that academic writing is developmental and more should be done to assist student writers to avoid plagiarism (Dixon, 2006; Stefani & Carroll, 2001). We observed in the literature a certain amount of excitement around the topic of plagiarism (Davis, Drinan, & Bertram Gallant, 2009; Harris, 2001) and the sense of a growth industry around this hot topic evidenced by the number of articles, books, misconduct policies and plagiarism detection software packages. Given that ‘lack of writing skills’ has been given as one of a number of reasons for plagiarism (University of Alabama in Huntsville, 2007, as cited in Roberts, 2008, is a recent example), we had expected that writers of practical advice texts might have some good ideas to address the skill deficit. After all, it is usually identified that in the case of plagiarism, prevention is a more appropriate response than punishment (Angelil-Carter, 2000; Roberts, 2008; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Since there is not a sense that the plagiarism issue is going away, we expected advice or guidance to be readily available.



As TLAs, we normally see students prior to submission of assignments, and usually the inability to paraphrase seems a matter of lack of awareness or skill rather than will or intention to plagiarise. In this situation we often need to quickly unpack the complex notions around paraphrasing as well as suggesting effective ways of actually doing it. In reflecting on our work with students, we decided that the actual processes that are entailed in academic writing using source texts needed some demystifying as our students often asked for greater clarity, asking: ‘How much of this can I use?’ ‘How much do I have to change it?’ ‘How can I get better at doing this?’ We acknowledged that we needed to learn more about teaching this aspect of writing, and felt that we had not developed or located satisfactory resources. We had the feeling that developing clear criteria for what constitutes paraphrasing should make it easier for students (and staff) to analyse texts and evaluate their own efforts at synthesis, and to give feedback on these efforts.

Paraphrasing is clearly an important skill in academic writing. In the words of Barks and Watts (2001), “a crucial aspect of the reading-writing connection at Anglophone colleges and universities is the appropriate integration and documentation of other texts, or textual borrowing, in the light of the innately intertextual nature of academic practices in such settings” (p. 246). It is required in one form or another within all the disciplines we have worked with. According to Chanock (2002), tertiary education involves the recognition that “knowledge is made and remade by people” (p. 2), and students are learning to express their particular view of that knowledge. Certainly it is argued that “academic writing, with its focus on argument and evidence, takes time to learn through experience and feedback, across the continuum of undergraduate study” (Haggis, 2003, as cited in Zimitat, 2008, p. 12).

From her empirical study of reading-to-write interactions, Asencion-Delaney (2008) shows that the ability to paraphrase is shaped by a variety of factors. While effective reading and writing skills are important, paraphrasing skills, or what Asencion - Delaney calls ‘reading-to-write’ skills, are complex and distinct as they demand reconstruction of content and meaning with individual understandings and contextual requirements. We have used the work of Grabe (2001) and Asencion-Delaney (2008) to come up with a list of the skills involved in paraphrasing for student academic writers:

- understanding a writing task sufficiently to work out where and why use of sources might be required;
- information literacy skills to identify and evaluate relevant material;
- ability to read and comprehend the text structure of the original as well as the content information and ideas being expressed;
- synthesising prior knowledge of the topic with the information conveyed in the original;
- planning, composing, organising and editing the paraphrase and integrating it into the surrounding text;
- ensuring that the paraphrase both adequately conveys the meaning of the original source but does not plagiarise;

- citing the original text accurately, according to the conventions of the required referencing style.

Following on from our reading on plagiarism and the developmental nature of paraphrasing skills, we thought it would be interesting to observe the extent to which the negative (what not to do) and the more positive (what to do) was focused on. As descriptions of developmental stages in learning to paraphrase, the literature includes terms such as ‘patchwriting’ (Howard, 1995, as cited in Zimitat, 2008; Moore, 1995, as cited in Hinton, 2004;) and ‘plagiphrasing’ (Whitaker, 1993, as cited in Wilson, 1997) as both signs of the extent of the plagiarism problem and as transition phases. From those working with English as an additional language (EAL) students, there is clear recognition that writers with a more restricted range of vocabulary and a limited command of grammar will need to move through stages from near-copying to fully-realised paraphrasing (Williams, 2004; Wilson, 1997). We wondered whether these stages of learning would be emphasised in any of the published materials available.

Paraphrasing is not easy to teach, as it involves drawing attention to features of language, and teachers as well as learners may lack the linguistic tools to analyse lexico-grammatical aspects of text in detail. In reviewing the literature around source-based writing, Williams (2004) points out that teachers appear to view it from differing perspectives - writing, grammatical or lexical - “with none taking on the task wholeheartedly” (p. 248). In our local setting, paraphrasing is often not explicitly guided by content lecturers; we see it represented as a need to ‘avoid plagiarism’ or ‘write in your own words’ on assessment guidelines; and only in courses for EAL students or Foundation Studies (tertiary bridging courses) do we see exercises or tasks which focus specifically on paraphrasing. New academic writers seem to be expected to leap in and have a go at using their own words to restate an author’s idea, and clearly a certain amount of confidence is required. With its basis in close reading of source texts followed by rewriting of individual understanding of that reading, paraphrasing is clearly helpful to learning, as through it we can learn more about the subject of study, learn about the discourse of the discipline, and start to participate in this discourse.

Given the above range of considerations from learning and teaching perspectives, we felt eager to critically review a selection of recent materials directed toward teaching students about writing from sources. We hoped this survey of published good practice would provide the basis for our own learning resource development work.

## Method

As our goal was to learn from the work of other, more experienced practitioners, we chose to follow an action research or action inquiry cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The first stage involved gathering data about resources for learning to paraphrase that were currently available to students. A total of 31 print and web-based sources were selected for the materials review survey. This selection was non-random and items were chosen based on our knowledge of the field, references to

popular texts from colleagues, the availability of texts and their recency. All sources used in this study were published after 1995. We also focused on local texts which were written within the New Zealand or Australasian context, although sources were derived from English, Canadian and American publishers. All texts were targeted towards students rather than teachers of academic writing. Typically they were sections of longer texts on the development of effective academic writing, as indicated by their titles and the subjects listed in their tables of contents. Since summarising seemed to be used in some texts as a synonym for paraphrasing, both words were searched for in our critical survey of texts. We also searched under ‘referencing’ or ‘acknowledging sources’ to see if advice about paraphrasing was included under these headings.

Each source was examined for its content on the topic of paraphrasing through consulting the table of contents and index, and sections that seemed likely to deal with paraphrasing were reviewed. A photocopy was taken of the relevant section or chapter(s) that focused on developing learners’ paraphrasing skills. These selections were then examined for their discussions about paraphrasing, as well as the clarity and or comprehensive nature of the coverage.

## Findings

The survey revealed that most academic writing sources addressed paraphrasing or summarising, although we came across a number of texts that did not address the topic at all or dealt with it minimally (9 sources out of 31 in total). It was common to find material about paraphrasing under ‘plagiarism’ in tables of contents, indexes and page/section headings. We found it interesting that some sources seemed to quite deliberately avoid using the term ‘paraphrasing’ or used it very sparingly. For example, in Stella Cottrell’s *Study skills handbook* (2003), a useful activity is provided where students have to pick out the plagiarised, or correctly quoted or paraphrased sections, of excerpts of text, yet the term ‘paraphrasing’ occurs only once in these materials and is not defined or explained. It was particularly noteworthy that, although there were different levels of comprehensiveness in the explanations about paraphrasing across the materials we surveyed, and we found some texts that would clearly be helpful to students, for the most part the discussions of paraphrasing were quite brief. Also, to judge from the examples of paraphrasing presented, there is little common understanding among materials writers about what constitutes an effective and acceptable paraphrase. Often the discussion of referencing itself was extremely brief and, alarmingly, some examples of paraphrases did not include references to the source text. Moreover, even in sources targeted to second language learners, there was limited attention paid to identifying paraphrasing as a language issue, or to concrete ways of improving ability to paraphrase.

The lack of depth we identified in many of the texts available to students about paraphrasing fits with some observations in the literature. Barks and Watts (2001) note that “despite the complexity of textual borrowing in the ESL writing classroom many of its related issues and problems tend to be overlooked or insufficiently

addressed in ESL writing textbooks” (p. 252). Some texts provide extensive treatment of paraphrasing, such as Wilhoit’s (2004) *A brief guide to writing from readings, Writing from sources: A guide for ESL students*. However, no one source seemed to deal with paraphrasing in a comprehensive way and thus we argue, on the basis of the current survey, that more attention may need to be paid to this academic writing issue in materials development. One heartening aspect of our survey was the realisation that we were not the only academic writing teachers to be challenged with teaching paraphrasing.

As part of our review of paraphrasing sources we began to develop an understanding of what a comprehensive resource might contain. We identified a list of 14 criteria for in-depth coverage of paraphrasing which is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *List of aspects of paraphrasing to be covered in comprehensive materials*

Aspect	Further explanation
Discussion of the importance of paraphrasing	Why it is important, what other roles does it play, in addition to plagiarism avoidance
Definition of paraphrasing	Possibly in relation to other source-based writing such as quotation
‘Acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ examples of paraphrasing	With explanation as to why the examples meet or do not meet acceptability criteria
Qualities of a good paraphrase	Discussion of a writer’s key aims when paraphrasing
Information about whether to paraphrase	Discussion about when paraphrasing is appropriate and when it might be better to quote a source
An outline of the processes involved in paraphrasing	With examples for the different steps
Discussion of plagiarism	
Activities and exercises for students to practice paraphrasing	
Discussion about ‘how similar is too similar?’ and the extent of shared language	
An indication that paraphrasing skills are developmental	
Discussion about what can be regarded as common knowledge	
Glossary of key terms	
How paraphrasing is different from quoting and summarizing	
A list of additional resources	



Following our survey we realised that we had learned a great deal from looking into resources produced by others. We decided to take the next step in the action research cycle and respond to the challenges of designing and trialling our own resource for teaching paraphrasing.

Catherine presented our draft resource to TLA peers at the ATLAANZ 2009 conference for feedback and suggestions. She outlined the process of materials development and some of the issues that arose for us. Workshop participants gave us very useful feedback about the resource, challenging us to re-think some of our ideas and make amendments. For example, in the opening paragraphs we had stated that “lecturers prefer paraphrasing to direct quoting”. As was rightly pointed out, this is not always the case. This issue led to a valuable discussion about the nature of ‘voice’ in writing and how this could be addressed in materials for teaching paraphrasing. A key aspect of the feedback centred on some of our examples and whether or not we had written ‘acceptable’ paraphrases. Some of the participants voiced strong reservations about the paraphrases, while others appeared to view them as being appropriate. This lack of consensus mirrors some of the observations in the literature discussed earlier, reinforcing for us the situational nature, subjectivity and complexity of paraphrasing.

## Conclusions

As we have worked on the resources post-conference and used them in our teaching, some important considerations have emerged. We believe that our re-developed resources are helpful to students, but we are concerned that, realistically, only a few highly self-directed students would be likely to work through what has become a lengthy document. A further concern is that of the varied audiences and levels of understanding among the students we work with. For understandable reasons, published materials for students tend to convey the notion that ‘one size fits all’ and do not address the development of academic writing or different disciplinary expectations in a substantive way. To date, most materials on paraphrasing we have encountered, including our own, are essentially monologic, in that there are limited opportunities for interaction with the content and ideas presented. In written materials, feedback on completed paraphrasing exercises does not usually suggest that there is a range of appropriate ways in which a source text could be paraphrased<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, we questioned our own assumption that design and production of materials was the best approach to dealing with this important aspect of academic literacy. In this sense we closed one action research cycle, but opened another: we changed our own ideas and our teaching practices based on what we had learned, but we are now exploring ways of engaging students in discussion and negotiation of issues around paraphrasing.

<sup>2</sup> An exception is the very comprehensive text by Jeanne Godfrey (2009) which we became aware of at the beginning of 2010. See Godfrey, J. (2009). *How to use your reading in your essays*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

In reporting on their own teaching experience with postgraduate students, Abasi and Graves (2008) point out that approaches to teaching academic literacies need to be more dialogic and transformative. For this to occur, the options now are for us as TLAs to focus on face to face teaching, design of truly interactive online materials, and support of content lecturers to embed the teaching of paraphrasing in academic programmes. We have made some moves in each of these directions. We see the resources we have created as a toolkit that could be used, ideally adapted as appropriate, by content lecturers as well as students, and as a basis for discussions around classroom teaching of reading, writing and paraphrasing. This project has ultimately resulted in a shift in focus and we are now more than ever concerned about raising awareness among lecturers across the curriculum about this academic literacy issue.

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## Understanding the student self: Considerations for academic advising

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### Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the notion of the student self in terms of motivational and self-regulatory systems of study. In doing so, the present article examines students' narratives about their systems of study and considers the role of academic advisors in higher education and their systems for exploring the student self. The student self was examined by qualitatively evaluating 14 interviews from a diverse set of participants with different ethnic backgrounds. The participants in this research were able to voice their problems, determine their readiness for study and gain insights into their study and learning experiences. The interview narratives suggested that students experiencing academic difficulty tended to voice more problems, to be less ready for study and to be more avoidance-oriented than students not experiencing academic difficulty. Several conclusions in relation to the findings can be made. First, students who experienced academic difficulty may have stronger experiences of not coping than students who did not encounter academic difficulty, and have a stronger need to make judgements about their study-related behaviour. Second, students who experienced academic difficulty suggested they were less ready for study than more academically able students. Lastly, students categorised as being highly motivated generated more comments related to approach and internal thematic combinations than ambivalent students who tended to generate more avoidance and internal commentaries. This paper is pertinent to the theme of student retention and the role of academic advising, as it delves into students' notions of self, motivation and self-regulation.

### Introduction

Students in higher education often encounter difficulties in their study and academic advisors are a resource for assisting students in their academic journey (Bahr, 2008). The question that naturally arose, for the present author, was how to best make use of this resource to minimise attrition and promote retention. A crucial understanding of students' motivational and self-regulatory behaviours is mooted as one way academic advisors can improve their services. As an academic advisor himself at the time of completing this study, the author believes that the role of an academic advisor is

<sup>1</sup> Henning, M. (2010). Understanding the student self: Considerations for academic advising. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevallano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 57-71). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

not only to assist students who experience academic difficulties but also to promote motivational and self-regulatory aspects of learning.

Academic advising is usually a specialised facet of teaching that involves both individualised and group-based teaching. Essentially, academic advising tends to be an extension of faculty teaching and research, and is often seen as the assistive end of higher teaching praxis (Frost, 2000; Simpson, 1991). Models describing academic advising have utilised specific aspects of the academic advising role such as the learning development processes related to motivation and self-regulation (Covington, 2000a, 2000b; Covington & Mueller, 2001; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Pintrich, 1995; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000). Nonetheless, there appears to be a lack of integrated research that synthesises aspects of motivation, self-regulation, academic achievement, and the generic role of academic advising.

Hirsch's (2001) Multiple Intervention Model is a useful framework for academic advisors as it presents a systematic method for assisting students in higher education. This model further provides a holistic approach to diagnosing academic problems and developing intervention systems. In the model, three levels of motivation are suggested, thus promoting the idea of a three-stage theory of educational motivation. According to Hirsch, students who are categorised as motivation Level 1 are under-motivated. Hirsch considers several options for students of this type, the first being to challenge students' behaviours with the aim of increasing their motivation and second, if they cannot change, to consider an exit or change-of-course option. Level 2 students are more ambivalent with regards to their interest in academic advising, and are also encouraged to increase their level of motivation to Level 3. Finally, Level 3 students are highly motivated to succeed in their quest for academic proficiency and are likely to have clear ideas as to why they chose their academic programme. The model implies that students' levels of motivation are powerful determinants of change and willingness to learn.

Motivational and self-regulatory themes are seen as pivotal to the learning process, as they acknowledge the importance of the interplay between cognition and affect in learning (Hirsch, 2001). These facets of learning are determined by both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that constitute the notion of self (Cervone, Shadel, Smith, & Fiori, 2006; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Intrapersonal factors connote the processing capabilities of self, affect regulation, and motivational origins, which promote self-orientations related to issues such as self-concept, self-efficacy, self-worth, self-regulation, self-determination, and self-evaluation (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Marsh, 1990; McInerney, Dowson, & Yeung, 2005; Pintrich, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Interpersonal factors are related to aspects of social perception, the influence of culture, choice of tasks, and the utilisation of learning strategies and communication skills (Arnault, Sakamoto, & Moriwaki, 2005; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Markus & Wurf, 1987).

The purpose of the present research was to investigate qualitative differences between students perceived as being highly motivated and ready for study as compared with students who have lower levels of motivation and are less ready. In addition to this examination of motivational differences, the study also explored the issue of academic achievement. Interpreted in this manner, the interview data was seen as a means to illustrate fundamental differences between these student groupings and thus open the door to assisting academic advisors in their endeavour to ameliorate academic and motivational difficulties encountered by students.

## Method

### *Participants and sampling*

The study aimed to use a criterion sampling method, a method that involves identifying participants according to a predetermined standard and who are likely to be information rich (Cohen, Crabtree, & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). All participants were university students and had some experience in study related behaviour. Fourteen participants (10 female, 4 male) from a New Zealand university voluntarily participated in this research. The average age of the sample was 27.79 years (SD = 9.07). The participants who agreed to take part in the study were considered to be a diverse mix of students.

### *Procedure*

This study was conducted during the first half of 2006. Students from various faculties and degree courses were invited to participate in an interview about their study habits. Interviews were conducted by the researcher in collaboration with interviewees, before students' final examination period.

Ethics approval for the collection and use of data was obtained from the University Ethics Committee. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality of information, the researcher changed any identifiable features that could lead to detection but retained the veracity of the responses.

Using Hirsch's (2001) motivational categories (Levels 1 to 3), students were asked about their motivation for study and were classified in terms of being either under-motivated (Level 1), or ambivalent (Level 2), or highly motivated (Level 3).

This classification was computed by using students' response data based on an initial screening question. Motivation Level 1 students were classified according to the response options, 'Coerced into it by significant others (e.g., parents, friends)' and 'Did not know what else to do, or had nothing better to do'. Motivation Level 2 students categorised as having an ambivalent attitude towards their study checked the options related to 'simply required a qualification', or 'not given entry into the degree programme', or 'saw the course a 'second choice option'. Finally motivation Level 3 students considered as high in motivation checked options related to 'interested in the course of study', or 'considered it as a first choice option'. However, no students who could be classified as under-motivated (Hirsch's Level 1) volunteered for this study.



In addition, students' academic records were accessed at the end of the semester to identify students who were experiencing academic difficulty versus those who did not. Academic difficulty was defined by successful completion of papers at the end of the semester; if students failed one or more papers this was evidence of academic difficulty, however if students passed all their papers this was evidence of no actual academic difficulty. Similar definitions (failure or partial failure of a programme of study) with regards to academic difficulty have been cited in the literature (Cleland, Arnold, & Chesser, 2005; Rousseau & Drapeau, 2003; Sayer, Saintonge, Evans, & Wood, 2002), and this definition appears to be linked with the notion of successful completion of study or qualification and other retention variables (Scott, 2003).

With respect to the qualitative data collection, the researcher employed one-to-one (or dyadic) interviews as the main system for collecting data (Berkowitz, 1997; Burman, 1994; Lichtman, 2006; Polkinghorne, 2005; Urdan & Mestas, 2006). Participants were encouraged to talk openly about their perceptions regarding their study experiences. The duration of the face-to-face interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. A tape recorder was used to record the full dialogue and extensive notes were taken so that the accuracy of the discussion could be recorded.

Three domains of investigation were used to classify the elicitation of responses related to motivation and self-regulation. These consisted of students' descriptions of their study problems, perceptions of their readiness for study, and narratives about study and learning practices. These domains overlap, but are sufficiently distinct for the purposes of this study. The list of probe questions used in this study are shown in the following three paragraphs, and the researcher's rationale behind each probe is presented in parentheses after each question set; these themes were delineated following extensive discussion with two other researchers in this area.

To elicit students' descriptions of their study problems four probe questions were used: (1) Do you have any problems with your academic study? [GENERAL]; (2) Are you undergoing any distress with regard to your chosen study? If so, can you tell me about this? [EMOTION]; (3) What areas of study do you think you have problems with? [CONTENT]; and (4) Are you having problems with learning? If so, what makes it hard for you to learn? [PROCESS].

To elicit students' commentaries about perceived readiness for study, a further four probe questions were used: (1) Can you tell me about your readiness or motivation for your chosen course of study? How ready do you believe you were for university study? [GENERAL]; (2) Was it your choice to study in your programme? If not, who convinced you that it would be a good idea to study in this programme? [SELF OR OTHER'S CHOICE]; (3) Can you tell me about your motivational level? Do you feel very motivated in/with your study? [MOTIVATION]; and (4) Did you have any job experiences related to your course of study? If so, what were these? [PRIOR WORK EXPERIENCE].

Finally, to elicit students' narratives about study and learning practices, 11 probe questions were used: (1) Would you like to know how to change your study patterns? [MOTIVATION AND SELF-REGULATION - WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE]; (2) Do you feel there is anything you can do about your study behaviour? Are there any circumstances beyond your control affecting your study? [MOTIVATION AND SELF-REGULATION - LEVEL OF CONTROL]; (3) How do you feel when you are studying for your tests and examinations? [MOTIVATION AND EMOTION - ANXIETY]; (4) Can you tell me about your emotional well-being? [EMOTION]; (5) Can you describe your general willingness to do your study? [MOTIVATION - WILLINGNESS TO STUDY]; (6) Do you enjoy your study? Do you see it challenging? Are you interested in mastering the subject? Are you curious about learning? [MOTIVATION - LEVEL OF INTEREST]; (7) How do you study for tests and examinations? [SELF-REGULATION - TESTS AND EXAMINATIONS]; (8) How often do you study? (every night?) How many hours did you study this week? [SELF-REGULATION - STUDY TIME INVESTMENT]; (9) Where would you see your study strengths? [SELF-REGULATION - PERCEIVED STRENGTHS]; (10) Can you describe your learning strategies? Can you describe the ways in which you manage your learning process? [SELF-REGULATION - PROCESS]; and (11) Do you think about your successes or failures in your study? Do you constantly look to improve your performance? Do please explain. [SELF-REGULATION - CRITICAL REFLECTION].

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis concentrated on identifying content themes and patterns in the notes, which were checked against audio commentaries from the interviews. Data were collated with respect to the patterns that emerged in the interviews (Burman, 1994; Lichtman, 2006). Kvale's (1996) iterative process was employed, by first condensing the interview data into meaningful themes, following this by a categorisation process that required narrative structuring, leading on to interpretation and the use of ad hoc methods. However, the findings in this study were not discussed with the participants, but were discussed at length with two other academics working in the area of higher education.

In this study, Hirsch's (2001) central themes were used as a deductive map for the interview commentaries, so that connections between the interview data could be established. As such, to create meaning from the commentaries, data were condensed and coded as themes emerged in line with Hirsch's central themes. A 2 (high motivation; ambivalence) x 2 (no academic difficulty; academic difficulty) matrix was created to provide a meaningful categorisation process that guided the interpretation, and which was then considered in terms of sublevel orders of comparison. In addition, response indices ( $RI$  = number of meaningful comments/number of students) were generated to allow for comparison between combination options.



## Findings

Three domains of interest were scrutinised, namely students' descriptions of their study problems, perceptions of their readiness for study, and narratives about study and learning practices.

### *Students' descriptions of their study problems*

In general, the emerging themes from the raw data indicate that student participants were able to articulate problems in areas of motivation and self-regulation. The most problematic area articulated was time management with 13 occurrences (e.g., "Time management, I didn't put aside time to study. Get distracted by other things"), and the second was writing difficulties with 9 occurrences (e.g., "My essay, practically my essay gets muddled up, paragraphs not connected to each other, doesn't make sense").

From the original student commentaries, several main themes were collated and then considered in terms of students' ability to describe their problems. The results indicated students commented on self-regulation problems more (higher response indices) than motivation problems. Second, students who experienced academic difficulty generated more self-regulation themes than those students who did not experience academic difficulty. Third, ambivalent students who experienced academic difficulty generated the most motivation-related problems.

Consequently, ambivalent students (according to Hirsch's Level 2 category) who experienced academic difficulty generated the most self-regulation and motivation-related problems and thus voiced their concerns and had insight into the problems they were facing, but were unable (or unwilling) to implement suitable intervention strategies.

### *Students' perceived readiness for study*

In general, the most frequently cited theme in the raw data related to the notion of work-related issues with 15 explicit occurrences (e.g., "aim to contribute to family and community and had relevant work experience"). The results indicated more comments were made in relation to being ready for study than in relation to not being ready. Second, ambivalent students who experienced academic difficulty produced more 'not ready' comments ( $RI = 4.7$ ) than other combinations, suggesting a negative loading of comments.

Henceforth, the interview data indicated that students who experienced academic difficulty were less ready for study than students in other categories. Thus prior or existing knowledge allowed highly motivated students to focus on their study, and this is likely related to having some vocational frame of reference related to the course of study.

### *Students' narratives about study and learning practices*

The raw data tended to be diverse and non-specific ranging from strong external sources of orientation, such as incorporating assistance from classmates to internal

dilemmas associated with anxiety and self-doubt (e.g., "happy with status quo although nervous and afraid of failure"). The results further indicated students were generating more approach-related ( $n = 295$ ) than avoidance-related themes ( $n = 49$ ). Moreover, more internal-oriented themes ( $n = 297$ ) were voiced than external ones ( $n = 47$ ). Furthermore, students produced more self-regulating ( $n = 198$ ) than motivation statements ( $n = 146$ ).

The findings indicated that high motivation students who did not experience academic difficulty yielded the highest response index of 21.4 for the combination of approach and internal, and the lowest response index for the combination avoidance and external. Second, all students who experienced academic difficulty generated the highest response indices for avoidance and internal themes. The main point of note was that highly motivated students (Level 3) voiced more comments related to approach and internal thematic combinations than ambivalent students (Level 2) who generated more comments related to avoidance and internal themes. This finding tentatively indicated that the higher academic achievers in this study developed and implemented more comprehensive approach-related learning strategies.

## Discussion

This study was an exploratory investigation into the learning experiences of 14 students studying in a higher education setting and their use or non-use of motivation and self-regulation strategies. The study also investigated areas of difference between those students classified as highly motivated as compared with those classified as ambivalent. A further area of interest was students who did not pass all their papers as opposed to those students who achieved pass grades in all their papers. The interpretation of findings centred around three main interview focus points as adapted from Hirsch (2001), namely the students' descriptions of their study problems, perceptions of their readiness for study, and their narratives about study and learning practices.

### *Students' descriptions of their study problems*

The interview findings suggested that students having academic difficulty, regardless of whether or not they had high or ambivalent research-defined motivation, voiced more problems associated with self-regulation and motivation than those students categorised as not having academic difficulty. Furthermore, those students who experienced academic difficulty appeared to generate more problem-associated comments than those without academic difficulty, indicating that these students appeared to have insight into their academic problems. Consequently, with an appropriate intervention such as the one-to-one academic advising process, students experiencing academic difficulty could be assisted in bridging the gap between insight and action, thus gaining greater academic competency for those at risk students (Brooks & Ammons, 2003).

More specifically and consistent with self-concept theory (Cervone, et al., 2006; Kanagawa et al., 2001; Markus & Wurf, 1987), students appeared to be able to access and voice self-relevant information that were affective, motivational and regulatory

in nature. The sources of the self-representations were difficult to discern but were likely to involve areas of “self-perception, social comparison, and reflected appraisals” (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 305). Given this study’s sample and its cultural mix, strong cultural differences in the ways students presented themselves may confound the picture (Covington, 2000a). In this study’s sample, one female Asian student felt that a major part of her distress associated with her study came from the feeling of being pressured by her family (e. g., “I am here with my uncles and aunts. The way I think about assignments / exam ||<sup>2</sup> fear || thinking I might fail”).

Nonetheless, there appears to be a difference in this study’s sample in terms of how students voiced their problems related to their study. Students who experienced academic difficulty are able to access their cognitive and affective self-representations of how they considered their study habits. The data tended to present the idea that the students were making comparisons that are both intrapersonal and interpersonal in nature. This comparative development implies a dynamic tension between the different concepts of self – actual, ideal, and ought (Markus & Wurf, 1987) – and that students experiencing academic difficulty may have greater tensions and accordingly a greater need to voice these tensions. Hence, the students who encountered academic difficulty in this study had stronger narratives in terms of not coping than students who did not experience academic difficulty, and thus made stronger and more frequent judgements about their study-related behaviour (Barker, McInerney & Dowson, 2004).

#### *Students’ perceived readiness for study*

When students were asked about how ready they were for study, several themes emerged. The results suggested the most frequently cited theme related to the notion of work-related issues. Further to this, the data indicated that the students being interviewed voiced more themes related to readiness for study than to lack of readiness for study. However, ambivalent students who experienced academic difficulty perceived themselves as the converse of this general trend, suggesting a strong negative loading of comments. As such, the interview data tended to show that students who experienced academic difficulty were less ready for study compared with students passing all their papers. This finding has important implications with respect to beliefs about readiness for study and thus has a strong link with self-efficacy (Pintrich, 2003).

It is interesting that the predominant theme arising from the interviews related to work-related themes; students saw their readiness for study as an extension of their work-related goals (e. g., “Worked for 7 years in China exporting to African countries. Marketing. Have a goal. Have a desire (very important), I know what I want. I am fully ready to study”). Thus, prior or existing knowledge allowed students to focus on their study and self-relevant information therefore had strong motivational and regulatory aspects (Markus & Wurf, 1987) due to the availability of procedural

<sup>2</sup> Denotes omission of non-essential words

knowledge or having some vocational frame of reference related to the course of study. This focus can provide greater self-focus as the discrepancy between what students are doing at the present time and where they want to go in terms of career options and is likely linked to academic achievement. This implies that purposefulness and level of interest in the learning process are moderated by long term goals (Pintrich, 2003), and it appears those students in this study who had a clear vocational link had an approach-goal-orientation that embraced both potent intrinsic and extrinsic mechanisms (Covington, 2000a, 2000b; Covington & Mueller, 2001).

Markus and Wurf (1987) suggested that regulation is best optimised when students are concentrating on environmental aspects of action rather than personal characteristics. In this study, ambivalent students who experienced academic difficulty appeared to have a high negative loading of thematic representations in terms of not being ready for study and there appeared to be a strong influence from prior experiences with study and evidence of critical reflection and hindsight (e. g., “Actually I wasn’t ready. In beginning my expectation was different; I found it different to back home. ”). In contrast, other more successful students appeared to have a clearer focus on what they were doing, which implied they were more optimistic and realistic with regards to the commencement of their study (e. g., “With life experience very ready. I know what areas to concentrate on and business relevance”). The second student appeared to have a strong sense of self-completion as she had an apparent self-image with reference to her future self. As such, this student had a clear sense of what she really could be; henceforth she voiced a lucid sense of self-efficacy. This student had a belief about readiness that implied competence and clearly related this to her study option (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

#### *Students’ narratives about study and learning practices*

The two main motivation constructs used to contrive meaning from the data were related to the notions of internal versus external sources of motivation, and orientations to learning in terms of approach versus avoidance (Covington & Mueller, 2001). The present findings suggested that, as a whole, students tended to be more approach-oriented rather than avoidance-oriented when tackling their study and the source of their learning orientations tended to be internal rather than externally based. More specifically, high motivation students voiced more study strategies related to approach and internal thematic combinations than ambivalent students, and those ambivalent students who experienced academic difficulty generated more comments related to avoidance and internal themes. As a result, it appeared that the higher academic achievers in this sample developed and implemented more comprehensive approach-related learning strategies (Covington, 2000a).

Of further interest, is the relatively low frequency of external attributions across all groupings, although there were some differences in terms of thematic content, such that some students sought assistance from God, parents and friends, and other students were pressured by family, living conditions and financial concerns. These findings support the notion that the students in this study were more internally-focussed on solving

academic problems and thus the point of difference between academically successful and non-successful students centred on aspects of goal orientation (approach versus avoidance). Therefore, the present findings suggested that goal orientation appeared to differentiate the two groups more than source of the motivation (internal versus external) (Covington & Müeller, 2001).

### *Considerations for academic advising and higher education*

There are several considerations for academic advising that surface from this research. The first relates to the process of investigating and assisting the holistic educational journey and the problems faced by students, and more specifically by students encountering academic difficulties. It might be assumed that those students who do not achieve academically do not have insight into their use of motivational and self-regulatory strategies. Yet this research suggests that the students in this study did have insight and thus the problem may be the type of strategy they are using (being avoidant) or the type of academic advice they receive or an unwillingness to engage in an intervention. Treisman (1992) suggested that students can benefit from looking at their study strategies and academic resources, and the present findings suggest that academic advisors need to engage students and acknowledge them in terms of their unique history, both academic and non-academic. This is particularly relevant to students who come from cultures different from the mainstream (Otonuku & Brown, 2007).

Second, the evidence suggests that the students in this study who were less ready and more ambivalent about their choice of study were experiencing more academic difficulties than their more motivated and prepared peers, and that students' initial decision-making approach about study may be linked to their choices with regards to seeking academic assistance, namely engaging either avoidant or approach orientations. Even though students may be aware of their problems, or that they have a problem, this does not constitute action on their part in terms of seeking academic assistance. It may indicate that students who have lower motivations towards study in the first place will obtain significant benefit from encouragement to access academic advising as early as possible. These findings therefore affirm the implementation of prior study (or enrolment) information sessions and transition programmes that address both academic and non-academic areas of study (Bonassi & Wolter, 2002).

Third, several strategies include access to cost-effective study skills workshops and individualised assistance, especially if students experience academic difficulty, and these need to consider both cognitive and affective approaches. Nonetheless, it is crucial that the issue of access to academic advising services needs to be considered in conjunction with the notion of avoidance; students who experience academic difficulty may be in a state of denial (or confused) or do not value services that cater for learning development (Henning, 2009). To improve retention, academic advisors need to convey the value of their work to students and provide convincing evidence of the practical nature of their service in a manner that will attract the attention of high risk students (Holmes, 2004; Yarbrough, 2002). In this way students' sense of

defensiveness about seeking assistance and the perceived stigma associated with such a process could be minimised.

Finally, the findings suggest a strong sense of connection between the education environment and that of the workplace. According to expectancy value theory, students may identify task value when there is a definitive vocational link (Pelaccia et al., 2009; Rieber et al., 2009). Therefore, the workplace component is a powerful motivator for students. Consequently academic advisors can assist students in not only their existing study but by making cogent links with their future vocational or possible selves.

### *Feedback from ATLAANZ 2009*

The present paper was presented to the ATLAANZ 2009 conference on November 18 at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand. Subsequent to the paper delivery, the audience (primarily academic advisors working in tertiary institutions throughout New Zealand) were asked for their feedback in terms of, 'How can academic advisors develop motivation in their learners?' and, 'How can students with avoidant or self-handicapping patterns of learning be encouraged to seek and sustain assistance?' The following comments are summaries of anonymous feedback responses that were written down (after small group discussions) and given to the author at the end of the session:

1. It is important to establish relationships with students and engage curiosity for learning using appropriate communication methods such as phone contact for extra mural students.
2. Academic advisors need to be seen as neutral and advocate on behalf of the students.
3. Academic advisors can be integrated more with classroom teaching.
4. Use several strategies for developing engagement, such as one-to-one appointments (as a first step) followed by workshops and emails.
5. It is important to build confidence and make tasks applied, manageable and attainable.
6. It is important for academic advisors to know what students need to know. And to further develop awareness of relevant areas of knowledge and to build confidence through encouragement.
7. It is important to scaffold learning by building a suitable educational platform.
8. Connecting with students is important through sharing experiences and inculcating reassurance, encouragement, and empowerment and being a mentor.
9. It is crucial to listen to students' stories and consider their experiences and develop strategies that can enhance their learning according to their unique needs.
10. It is essential to encourage students and instil confidence by investigating areas related to study and in their lives outside of formal study.
11. There is a need to integrate whole life experience with the process of study

These ideas imply that this group of academic advisors advocated a holistic system of developing relationships with students by considering the students' intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of self. As such, students can be motivated and sustained in their learning through the development of meaningful relationships that integrate the student self in terms of affect, cognition and behaviour. Investigating academic advisors views on how to motivate students to attend their services and strategies to further sustain their learning through their academic career would be a pertinent future research area.

It is important also to acknowledge that when investigating complex and multifaceted areas such as academic advising and student learning, there will undoubtedly be different approaches to consider. The essence of this research was exploratory and thus certain limitations can be retrospectively deliberated upon. Nonetheless, the foremost perceived limitations of the present study are linked to the method of classification of levels of motivation and the operational definition of academic difficulty. It is also acknowledged that the findings are representative of 14 students and were classified according to a certain research rationale by the present author in line with collegial discussion. Thus, students were not asked to comment on the findings and, had it been implemented, this approach may have increased the validity of the statements and interpretations made. Moreover, the interviewee pool do not include students classified at Level 1, which was not surprising (Bennett, 2003; Mistler-Jackson & Songer, 2000), although this would be a fruitful area of study as students who are disinterested or do not know why they chose their course of study would likely be at higher risk for attrition and thus in need of more academic assistance than other students (Simpson, 1991). Lastly, the findings of this exploratory study emphasise the need for research in this area so that conceptual and professional based models of practice can be more usefully understood and applied.

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# The shifting sands of tertiary individual consultation

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## Abstract

Tertiary individual consultation entails teaching and learning at its most personally situated: two people engage in tailor-made learning. The closed-door practices of supervision have had an airing recently, yet the closed-door practice of general individual consultation remains for the most part just that, highly individual, with decisions about pedagogical practice occurring on the spot. A 2007 survey of Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ) provided some evidence of current individual appointment work practice and opinions. A follow-up survey in 2009 revisited opinion on some of the issues that emerged both from the earlier survey and my own reflection on the issues that it surfaced. Under the shifting sands of changing practice, guidelines might firm pedagogy. This paper teases out the ethical issues of individual consultation from a TLA perspective. It proposes that narrative therapy questioning practice can be useful in tertiary consultation. The TLA survey and discussion about individual consultation is framed as addressing an area that can be problematic for all academics: individual appointments and the ethics that underpin practice.

## Background

Some would argue that individual teaching in office hours barely warrants pedagogical theorising because individual appointments are simply that, highly individual. Academics can choose their own stance as to how they handle the ethical issues of confidentiality, equity, and the level of assistance they provide. Yet personal contact is underpinned by the need to maintain professionalism regarding how much help is offered, to whom, how often and in what form. Anecdotes from academics suggest that individual teaching can be fraught, perhaps extremely so, for example, with the student concluding ‘Can I drop this course?’ (Fish, 2008, p. 6), or the teacher thinking ‘I hope I never see her in class again’ (Lang, 2005, p. 125). For Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) professionalism is a pressing concern. TLAs are vulnerable to institutional change, a vulnerability that makes us a little like canaries at the mine face. We are also especially attuned to academic practice because this is what we teach: “Academic development is thus a doubly academic practice: it is an academic practice about academic practices” (Rowland, 2006, p. 75). If there is danger here amongst the

ethical issues of individual consultation (and I believe there are some tensions), we are most likely to be sensitive to it. This article opens the office door on the practice of individual consultation.

Open doors can inspire best practice; supervision gained attention (amongst others, from Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 1998; Denholm, 2007; Leder, 1998; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007) because good supervision is crucial to postgraduate and doctoral output, and research output is prized in what is perceived to be a knowledge economy (Barnett & Griffin, 1997; Rowland, 2006). Individual teaching outside of supervision remains, however, a relatively insignificant adjunct to classroom teaching and research. A brief discussion suggested that academics should commit to individual teaching and focus on students (Moore, Walsh & Risquez, 2007, p. 55). A recent guide illuminates some of the issues around good practice for supervising, coaching, mentoring and personal tutoring (Wisker, Exley, Antoniou & Ridley, 2008). Writing centre guides to tutors testify to concern about ethical behaviour without unpacking the complexity of some of the issues (a good example is that of Montreal College, 2002). Chanock (1995) perceptively opens the discussion from a TLA position (‘academic skills advisor’ in her terms), locating the ambivalences that cause TLAs to recoil from association with counselling because it seems counter to their own academic identities, yet showing how counselling’s interest in the whole patient, or in our case, the whole student, can contribute usefully to the pedagogy of individual appointments. Following on from Chanock’s anatomisation, I further investigate individual appointments.

This article first establishes TLA credentials for pedagogical critique of individual consultation, then reports on a 2007 survey of TLAs regarding individual appointments. A focus group was part of this survey. Then a second survey two years later gauged response to a set of four statements that emerged as relevant from the first survey, and a fifth that came from our Centre’s adaptation of the theory from narrative therapy. Next, given the negative ATLAANZ response to narrative therapy methods of questioning, the article explains how these might be useful in individual appointments. The article concludes with a summary of issues highly relevant to TLAs who teach individual students.

## The Tertiary Learning Advisor perspective

The area of expertise of TLAs is the facilitation of learning. Yet arguably our place within the university is trivialised (Alexander, 2005), our discipline almost non-existent (Mitchell, 2006), and our sense of identity uncertain (Rowland, 2006). Homi Bhabha’s ‘cultural displacement’ theory and the term ‘refugee’ have been applied to academic developer identity (Manathunga, 2007, pp. 26-27). Our very existence at times seems predicated on shifting institutional values (S. Rothblatt, lecture, March 13, 2008; Van Rij-Heyligers, 2005). We may feel subject to institutional scrutiny. Within the restrictions of what at times feels like a Foucaultian panopticon, that sense of being constantly audited (Foucault, 1995), TLAs nonetheless have the exciting task of teaching learning. Department-based academics also work hard to facilitate

<sup>1</sup> Carter, S. (2010). The shifting sands of tertiary individual consultation. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevallano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 72-83). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

student learning, but their central business lies in delivering the curriculum content of their papers; that of the TLAs is to look at the processing that makes any material meaningful (Biggs, 1988), to explicate the covert codes of academic practice that students may not have recognised, and to overtly equip students with strategies that will enable them to make sense of their topics and to join their academic discourses. We do this through workshops and through the provision of material, but also through individual consultations, where teaching is made-to-measure.

Although we should not define ourselves by what we do not do, namely teach within departments, our individual consultation is one situation when what we do not do is highly pertinent: we do not edit and proof students' work for them. Many students wish we did. But none of us want to be a botcher, a repairer of second hand goods, in this case, bad prose. We also do not want to be unacknowledged quasi-supervisors. Nor, as Chanock (1995) wittily notes, are we there to "'cure' some 'deficiency'" with the word 'remedial' from medical intervention now applying to literary constipation when writing is "all in there – I just can't get it out" (p. 33). However, while individual consultation means we sometimes have to fend off expectations of such services, some rich 'eureka' moments occur in individual consultations. Individual consultation is where many theories of learning are more likely to be found in practice (for example, a teacher or advisor might more readily make use of Kolb's (1986) individual learning styles, locate Vygotsky's (1978) proximal zone of learning and enable Meyer and Land's (2006) threshold transformation). For some, tailor-made is the only pedagogy that fits.

## Survey of TLA practice: methods

Hoping to glimpse current practice, I surveyed the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ) members on how they defined their boundaries when it came to individual consultation. The question was part of a questionnaire sent in 2007 to the ATLAANZ members list. ATLAANZ membership at the time was approximately 170. Participants were asked to identify whether they worked for a university or a polytechnic since it seemed possible that these specific environments may involve different working practices. Nine university workers responded and eight from polytechnics, a total of seventeen from the ATLAANZ membership. I raised the same questions in my paper at the 2007 ATLAANZ conference, where, rather than giving answers, I asked for responses to questions about TLA teaching, and the issues were discussed in groups.

Although discussion in person was vigorous and engaged, the response (approximately 10%) to the 2007 survey was disappointing given that the participants are a group that research shows have anxiety about their professional identity. Perhaps, however, this is telling in itself, and signals the difficulty of articulating teaching experience and practice. Seeking to "capture the multilayered complexity of what it feels like to teach," Brookfield (2006, p. 1) suggests a list of contradictory nouns: "passion, hope, doubt, fear, exhilaration, weariness, colleagueship, loneliness, glorious defeats, hollow

victories, and, above all, the certainties of surprise and ambiguity" (Brookfield, 2006, p. 1). Discomfort about discussing something as personally situated as individual consultation practice is understandable. Nonetheless those who did respond gave some indication of current practice across New Zealand in 2007.

## Survey results and discussion

The small survey described the scope of individual appointments. One participant noted that individual consultations "facilitate learning for the student that may not be possible in group situations." Another defined their working practice as "not merely proof-reading – teaching to identify patterns of errors"; those patterns can only be found individually and not in group sessions. Yet there were challenges identified with individual consultation.

Diplomacy and liaison skills were noted as being essential. One participant raised the fact that we needed to show "collegiality and respect for lecturers [and] must not undermine faculty." An important ethical issue was confidentiality, mentioned by seven participants, with "privacy" also cited and in a way that suggests confidentiality: "students may feel that their privacy is compromised by the data we keep or that they will be labelled 'remedial' by attending workshops and consultations." These concerns reflect the ethics of counselling. Chanock (1995) acknowledges TLA unease about the relationship between counselling and learning advising: participants here signalled some of the same reservations about the overlap that she identifies (TLAs trained as academics feeling uncomfortable when they were used as though they were counsellors), endorsing her observations. There was acknowledgement that TLAs set boundaries when "out of my depth—knowledge and skill"; "at boundaries like content, area of expertise e.g refer to counsellor; doctor; budget; disability coordinator/tutor; Whakarangimarie [a Māori support] service"; "out of my professional expertise, e.g. disabilities assessment or academic knowledge" or "once discussion becomes more of a pastoral than academic nature." Thus although TLAs are likely to get more counselling moments than staff within disciplines since they are seen as a source of help, those who replied showed that they were aware of boundaries.

An even more important ethical issue than confidentiality was the issue of ghost writing, or helping too much. One participant admitted to becoming "extremely anxious when students with very poor English need so much help that my input is giving them an unfair advantage." Most academics want to avoid allowing students to be passive recipients of knowledge-out-of-context (Applebee, 1996) and want active learning, but TLAs are particularly aware that they must not give content to passive recipients who will then be dishonest in claiming the reward of a good grade for what is not their own thinking. TLAs were highly sensitive to the ethics of integrity concerning the ownership of work. One participant spelt out:

We do not help with take-home tests or work for a course that is about writing. We do not help with CVs and reserve the right not to help with articles for publication. We felt it would be unethical to help there. We do not advise about content, but we

do point out contradictions and faulty logic and unsupported assertions. Students are expected to learn from our advice and become self-editing.

Concerns with “how much help is given” and “number of appointments per students” were also cited. Even though universities should be fertile places where ideas are shared, TLAs were aware that fairness is compromised if they contribute content.

There is evidence that the tension between the meritocracy of a liberal democracy, and the positive discrimination of a social democracy (giving more time to traditionally under-represented groups) is as contentious in individual appointment practice as it is elsewhere (S. Rothblatt, lecture, March 13, 2008). TLAs are often able to provide access into the conventions of academia for historically under-represented cohorts. A desire to ensure that, at a larger institution, “the needs of all students are addressed” was declared by a participant who felt that time should not be spent “primarily with international students.” Another participant affirmed awareness of “social/Te Tiriti” responsibilities (see too Smith, 1993), referring to the Treaty of Waitangi between Māori and the British Crown, a problematic and variously contested document establishing the rights and responsibilities of both parties and underpinning New Zealand society at every level. The principles of the Treaty are embodied in educational policy in New Zealand, so that providing access to education for Māori is a responsibility that tertiary institutions are obliged to take seriously. Another expressed the need to be “receptive to students channelled via Māori and Pasifika liaison.” Social democracy’s desire for a level playing field underpins support for Māori and Pacific people (Kerr, 2006; McKenzie, 2005); our institution has stated goals of fostering Māori and Pacific Islander achievement and need their success. So although TLAs are highly sensitive to boundaries, these also need to be flexible.

The survey also asked participants if they had boundaries at which they stopped helping individually, and if so, what they were. All participants showed awareness of tensions around setting boundaries and many cited their strategies for delineation. Students were generally not given unlimited access to help: one boundary was time. Time was viewed through not just a quantitative but also a qualitative lens: time had to represent improvement by the student. For example, “If a student continues to come back with the same problem, appropriate questions are asked of the student to source their confusion; the student will be asked to demonstrate their approach to the problem and approaches will be taken from that point.” Another TLA stated that “we explicitly wean students from higher usage in first year to less in subsequent years.”

Inherent in these limits is the sense that we should stop helping “when students are not prepared to make the necessary effort.” It was reiterated that “our aim is independent learning.” One TLA seemed rather too generous compared with others in refusing to see anyone “over one assignment more than three times.” Another participant explained, “I personally cease to point out areas which I’ve explained repeatedly in the past e.g ‘You know all about topic sentences, so you know what to do here, don’t you?’ Or move on to something different.” The word ‘personally’ is a reminder that TLAs continually evaluate when they are being used, ‘attend[ing] to the instinctive analyses

and responses that immediately suggest themselves as relevant’ (Brookfield, 2006, p. 7). Despite pedagogic theory and guidelines, a significant part of teaching involves those instinctive skills we apply to all personal relationships.

The ATLAANZ 2007 conference focus group comments on individual consultations reiterated the points above and additionally suggested that documentation provided some security: “agreements” and “work logs” could provide statistics and cover permission.

## Revisiting the key points

In 2009 I surveyed ATLAANZ membership again to revisit their ideas on some of the issues that emerged from the earlier study. Establishing the criteria of how strongly they felt (1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = indifferent, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree), I asked how strongly they felt about the following in the context of individual consultation, i.e. one-to-one appointments:

1. Tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) should preserve confidentiality about their professional consultation with students.
2. Students should have their access to individual appointments with TLAs limited by time, for example, to only one appointment per week.
3. Students should have their access to individual appointments with TLAs limited by productivity; for example, they cannot keep coming back with the same difficulties.
4. A set of guidelines for students to clarify the purpose of individual consultation, and the expectation that what is learned will be taken into their future work is essential for good practice.
5. Tertiary learning advisors should avoid giving students help with content by asking leading questions.

Response rate was considerably better, with 51 respondents from a membership that has dropped slightly to approximately 155 in 2009 (J. Marshall, consultation, August 21, 2009). Almost one third of the membership responded to the short snappy questionnaire. I later wished that I had not chosen ‘indifferent’ as the middle term since this word does not allow for the sense I got that when respondents were in between agreement and disagreement, they were not indifferent. They simply felt that the issue was more complex and nuanced than my statement allowed.

The least strongly endorsed statement was 5) above, scoring an average level of importance of 3, a response of indifference, with comments suggesting that content was “always a contentious issue,” and that there were too many variables to make this simple. I am grateful to a reviewer for pointing out that this question is ambiguous: it could be read as inferring that leading questions are to be avoided, rather than that leading questions enable the avoidance of content supply. My hunch, like the reviewer’s, is that TLAs do use questions and that the response reflects a poorly designed question. Questioning was seen as “difficult in practice,” of some benefit

but with the proviso that “it depends on the content and what the learning advisor is there for.” Clearly colleagues felt that there was more complexity than the simple and ambiguous statement allowed for. The mode for this statement was also 3, which shows that neutrality was the most common response. Perhaps the shortness of the questionnaire failed to allow for complexity: below I present a clearer case for the usefulness of this strategy.

Also sitting only just on the positive side of indifference were statement 2) above with an average endorsement of 3.1 and statement 3) just a little more positive at 3.5. Comments here suggested that TLAs continue to feel protective of students who have particular backgrounds (Māori and Pasifika, special needs groups, and “mature students who may come with bad habits that are difficult for them to unlearn”), and feel some specific needs justify more flexibility than to suggest that student appointments should be limited by time or as a result of student failure to progress. The modes for both statement 2) and 3) were 4, which shows that agreement was most common and that the average masked endorsement of the earlier survey’s findings that TLAs were concerned to limit individual appointments according to both time and student improvement.

TLAs generally agreed with statement 1) that confidentiality should be preserved. The average rating was 4.0, with comments varying from a strong “always!” to acknowledgement that the room layout of several TLAs consulting in one room prohibited confidentiality, and also that discussing students with colleagues could be a professional approach for ensuring that support was cohesive. The mode for statement 1) was 5, showing stronger endorsement than the average of the need to preserve confidentiality.

The most strongly endorsed statement was 4) above for which average endorsement lay between agree and strongly agree at 4.3 and with a mode of 5. A guideline for students, 4), was thus most strongly endorsed as necessary for best practice in the context of individual appointments. Since this article began, I have been involved with colleagues in producing a guide for students using our centre that emphasises their responsibilities. We agree that such a guide is helpful and one is posted on our website. Our guide to students can be found at:

[http://www.cad.auckland.ac.nz/content/files/slc/individual\\_consultations\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.cad.auckland.ac.nz/content/files/slc/individual_consultations_guidelines.pdf)

## Narrative therapy

The idea that TLAs should avoid giving students help with content by asking leading questions, comes out of narrative therapy theory. Just as counselling’s holistic theory can be useful to TLAs as Chanock (1995) shows, I propose that so too can the theory behind narrative therapy.

Currently at our institution TLAs are admonished not to supply content, but to work strictly with learning and linguistic issues. Sometimes, though, the problem is that,

like an empty envelope, an essay fails to deliver content. A steady barrage of questions might allow a TLA to draw content from the student: “But surely this question takes you to the issue of X; what did the lectures cover in terms of this issue; what material on your reading list raises this issue? How do you feel about X; tell me, do you think X is right or wrong? Or, what are the contradictions and tensions of X?” The questioning methodology of narrative therapy (White, 1988) allows questions to direct students to answers. The broad principle of narrative therapy is that if the therapist asks a string of questions, with each answer to one question directing the therapist’s next question, eventually they will lead the patient to the solution to their own problem. The patient themselves should articulate their solution, led to it by questions. The extensive narrative therapy literature that describes the process of helping through asking (Abels & Abels, 2001; Morgan & Centre, 2000; Payne, 2006) has helped me to let go of the desire to explain when I can see the solution so clearly. Chanock’s (1995) adaptation of Rogers’ (1942; 1989) counselling theory to learning advising use is similar to my adaptation of White (1988) here; I agree with her that despite TLA ambivalence about their overlap with counselling, counselling theory is useful. So despite the low level of TLA endorsement in my 2009 survey, I find that the method of asking is useful. Indeed, I believe that it is somewhat inevitable for TLAs if they are to avoid providing content when student work is superficial.

## Evaluation: Limitations

I do not address teaching via email here. The role of e-learning offers new varieties of snakes and ladders, with challenges both ethical and technical, yet with great opportunities too (Ribble & Bailey, 2004; Shelley, Thrane, Shulman, Lang, Belsser & Larson, 2004). Email is another venue for individual consultation, a helpful one for distance learners, but one that intensifies the risk of ghost writing if documents are attached and then written into by a tutor.

Another concern that remains unanswered is that we have little beyond student thanks to demonstrate the effectiveness of our work in individual consultations. Sometimes student acknowledgement that they have had threshold learning moments as a result of being personally shown something assures TLAs that the work is valuable, but how can we show this with more rigour? Measurement of teaching and learning is not easy (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). Some interesting attempts have recently come from ATLAANZ (Manalo, Marshall & Fraser, 2009) inviting thought to be given to this difficult and highly charged activity.

## Conclusion

Opinion about the value of individual appointments varies. Individual appointments are time consuming. To some extent they remain always unique: an exchange each time between two individuals in which teachers need to negotiate afresh the ethical as well as the pedagogical issues. Chanock (1995) wonders “what else the various theories of counselling might have to offer us in academic skills teaching” (p. 38); my



response is to add in the questioning practice of narrative therapy.

Tighter fiscal restraints are likely to mean that this work is always monitored for its effectiveness. Yet if students are retained who might otherwise give up, if traditionally under-represented students are fostered to completion, and if student progress is speeded up earlier through their tertiary education making it more likely that they might go on to research degrees, then it is worthwhile thinking about how we can retain individual work where it matters. Because some real threshold moments occur in individual appointments, enquiry into practice is worthwhile.

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## Raising the bar on Self-Access Centre learning support

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### Abstract

Tertiary Learning Advisors reflect on their 'good practice' through three key terms: utilisation, effectiveness and individual student support. We ask ourselves: Are the facilities and the advisory service support structures utilised fully? How effective is our learners' study? What is best practice regarding the way we support our students?

This article has two main sections. The first consists of a summary of individualised student support followed by two examples of practice in this area; these include an outline of three studies focusing on support for independent language learning conducted at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) from 2006 to 2009 (Dofs & Hornby, 2006; Dofs, 2009a; Dofs, 2009b), and an up-to-date description of independent language learning in the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) at Unitec. The second section comprises a progress report from a study about the current state of ILCs in New Zealand, the issues facing them, and how these might be addressed. The main themes emerging from both the research in progress, and from the authors' own experiences, fall into two main categories: the philosophical position of independent learning/autonomous learning in the ILC within the institute, and the implications of managing a centre to be of most benefit to students. The latter were evident in the utilisation of the ILC at one of the institutions where research led to the conclusions that it is not enough to simply provide an ILC; students also have to learn how to study independently, how to use self study materials, and how to plan for their self studies, and the ILC should provide this support, in liaison with classroom teachers.

### Introduction

Like many other academic learning support providers across a range of Universities, Polytechnics and Private Training Enterprise institutions in New Zealand, the authors have experienced 2009 as a year of uncertainty and shifting sands according to the winds of change, with regard to the nature of the tertiary education sector landscape, its

changing funding mechanisms and the restructuring of many organisations. Along with these shifts there have also been political and social pressures to promote vocational training in the younger age group, and the flow-on effects of the economic recession both within New Zealand and from external global influences. Underpinning all this there is an essential need for stability for our students and their learning, so they can progress successfully with as much appropriate and useful assistance as we can offer. In reality, the actual support utilised by the students varies, depending on such factors as the immediate goals of their current courses of study, the current state of their metacognitive and cognitive awareness, and the long term goals associated with their lifelong learning. In order to address some of these issues, one of the authors has been undertaking ongoing research into the use of ILCs and in particular, has been trialling and evaluating the use of learning strategy training modules by the students to help them understand the learning process and giving them the tools to use to enable them to reach their goals.

### Individualised student support

The aim of ILCs is to support both language learning and the academic endeavours of students who are enrolled in a range of international and foreign language courses, with a majority of them studying English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL). These ILCs have considerable commonality of purpose and services to the centres offering general learning support on campus, (sometimes called Academic Skills and Learning Centres; Te Tari Awhina Centres; Maia or Pasifika Centres; Student Learning Support Centres; etc). Whatever the name of the centre, the support offered is geared towards students either preparing for further study through Foundation Studies or its equivalent, or students already enrolled in regular mainstream programmes. Therefore ILC staff who work with language school students only, and those who work within general academic support programmes, may find that their students have similar study skills issues, particularly difficulties which relate mainly to learning strategies, academic writing and language use, often because English is these students' second or other language. It is important to reflect that each of our students is an individual who will bring with them a specific combination of their own cultural, personal, educational and social backgrounds. They all have their own array of life experiences, previous learning experiences, current living and working situations, aspirations, self-identities and beliefs, and their own range of abilities in both the cognitive and metacognitive domains.

A guiding principle of relating learning to the student's own background and culture enables better understanding and internalisation of the study skills, strategies and language to be learned. The importance of this aspect is pointed out by Newton (2009) in his suggestion that all ESOL teaching in New Zealand should adopt the Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching (ICLT) approach already well implemented in many parts of the western world such as North America, Australia and Europe. He describes this teaching as an approach where:

<sup>1</sup> Dofs, K., & Hobbs, M. (2010). Raising the bar on Self-Access Centre learning support. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevillano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 84-94). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

Culture is no longer ignored or treated incidentally through cultural anecdotes and casual observations or through transmission of cultural information. Instead an intercultural stance produces an integrated and consistent focus on culture as an inseparable part of all language and communication. (p. 10)

By according respect to and utilising the key factors that students themselves bring to their studies and combining this with the concept of individuality, educators can offer a powerful support for students. The authors of this paper suggest that this is in fact the main driver behind the ethos, development and success of our Independent Learning Centres.

## Individualised learning at CPIT

As an important first step in the process of improving the support for each student, the CPIT ILC (called the Language Self-Access Centre, LSAC) undertook a series of in-house action research projects. The first study was an audit of the use of the LSAC - how, why and when learners and tutors use the Centre, and recommendations to maximise its effective exploitation. The second study was a pilot project to implement these recommendations with the aim of increasing the level of support offered for students' independent learning. The third study explored the actual nature of the support itself in more detail, including the development of the Learning Facilitator (LF) advisory role and the supervised self study time in the centre. To develop the advisory role the LFs and tutors met regularly within a larger group for discussions with colleagues about any issues they were facing and sharing information about current literature.

The results of the first research project led to the recognition of the need to increase student utilisation of various services within the LSAC, using a two-pronged approach:

1. Raising student and teacher awareness of effective language learning strategies and skills practice techniques;
2. Improving support for students' independent learning in the classroom and in the ILC as they use the resources, so this becomes more effective.

The rationale behind both of these approaches is frequently discussed in autonomous learning literature. There are a range of views on what autonomy entails. For example, Benson and Voller (1997) provide five definitions:

- situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- an inborn capacity (to learn) which is suppressed by institutional education;
- the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. (pp. 1-2)

It has long been accepted that students benefit from learning independently (Black, 2007; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Mozzon-McPherson, 2001; Nunan, Lai & Koebke, 1999; Scharle & Szabó, 2000; Sheerin, 1997) and that successful learners employ effective learning strategies (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990). Wenden and Rubin (1987), Oxford (2002) and Brown (2002) all suggest that independent learning can be introduced and enhanced through learner strategy training. Therefore, with the aim of facilitating and fostering more autonomous learning, higher educational institutions should actively support developmental initiatives focusing on explicitly taught strategy training. The rationale is encapsulated succinctly by Cotterall and Reinders (2004):

By teaching your students about strategies, you are encouraging them to share responsibility for their learning ... because it promotes efficient and effective learning; it increases the amount of time your students actually spend using the language; and it helps students take control of their own learning ... The most important reason for focusing on strategies in your language programme is that students who use appropriate strategies learn more effectively. (p. 7)

As a way of implementing the recommendations arising from the first CPIT research (Dofs & Hornby, 2006), a programme was devised and trialled with five classes of Pre-Intermediate to Upper Intermediate ESOL students. This involved explicit language learning strategy training based on eight of the 12 units from the book *Strategies for success: A practical guide to learning English* by Brown (2002).

The outcome of the second CPIT research was that teachers learnt more about an individualised approach and students shared ideas for effective strategies as part of their classroom activities. Brown's (2002) method of using 'post-it' notes to share and gather student input and knowledge was developed to a 'What Kind of Learner Are You?' communication board in the LSAC which students added to throughout the course as each topic was covered. This board worked as a consolidation and important link between the classroom and the LSAC. It also provided a communication opportunity for drop-in students, i.e. students who studied in the Centre after class but who were not included in this pilot study. They could add ideas to the board, and write comments and suggestions for others to consider and reflect on, as well as work through the associated readings and question sheets on their own.

In 2008 there was an extension of the CPIT development initiatives, which included taking cognisance of students' individual studies and offering a more personalised service in the LSAC. To help increase the support for self studies in an ILC, language advising can be very beneficial (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). Mozzon-McPherson suggests that Learning Advisors can work with students to help them become self-aware and identify what areas they need and want to work on. Moreover, Advisors can then assist students to set their goals, select their learning paths and materials, monitor these, and then help evaluate the effectiveness of the chosen tasks and strategies, and reflect on their learning progress.

In the third study at CPIT, the lower levels were offered self study support and advice by the class teacher, whereas the higher language level students were provided with LFs for 1-2 hours per class per week in the Centre during their ordinary study time. At this time the LFs and teachers did not teach, but instead encouraged students' independent learning. These students used a planning document which gave indications about the particular areas in which support was needed, as a guide for themselves and to help inform LFs and tutors so they could better focus their support. Specific professional development for the LF and teaching staff members involved, coupled with student introduction procedures, was developed to meet a perceived need to raise awareness about independent studies amongst both groups. The LF role, which is a relatively new one, needed to be discussed and negotiated. This was accomplished in part at workshop meetings, and also through discussions of articles on independent learning which covered a range of relevant topics such as how to best support language skills practice within the self study time, and how to improve the support offered. Furthermore, a number of professional development sessions for the classroom practitioners throughout 2007-2009 focused on learning more about how to best carry out individualised teaching and learning with the aim of fostering autonomous learners. This was influenced by the premise that to foster autonomous learners, teachers themselves need to be autonomous, as experienced and outlined by Thavenius (1999):

Teacher autonomy can be defined as the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning. An autonomous teacher is thus a teacher who reflects on her teacher role and who can change it, who can help her learners become autonomous, and who is independent enough to let her learners become independent. (p.160)

Students were then scaffolded to work independently in the Centre through a thorough induction process involving self-study preparation in the classroom, a 'learn-about-the-Language Self-Access Centre' quiz during the first session, and one-to-one help with their planning during the following self-study sessions.

As part of the LSAC service, there were also Peer Students providing some useful functions within the Centre. Part of their job description was to meet and greet other students, to help find materials and resources, and to be positive role models. They were mainly recruited from the Japanese degree student body, as they clearly had firsthand knowledge about learning a language and therefore were able to understand how to give relevant and directly applicable study support. In addition, their presence in the centre and their personalised support encouraged other learners to feel ownership of the centre. From last year, students from the higher levels of English language courses have also been performing these duties.

## Individualised learning at Unitec

One of the co-authors of this paper works at Unitec, where there was a somewhat similar system, using what was termed Peer Tutors (PTs), now called Tutorial Assistants (TAs). These PTs were originally drawn from the general student body via

advertisements placed around the campus and through word of mouth. This worked well because the PTs' studies covered a variety of disciplines ranging from courses such as Fine Arts and Design, Osteopathy, Communications and Business, to trainee ESOL or primary teaching. Because of the diverse skills and experiences of this group there was also a need for a range of training, depending on the current levels of the PTs inter-cultural understanding, language awareness and their theoretical and background knowledge about teaching and learning. Most PTs therefore had to undergo some kind of relevant training before working with the students, so a series of ongoing workshops was set up and supplementary workshops were provided as requested by the peer tutors, or as needs arose within the particular groups of students being tutored at the time. Some of the PTs gradually became up-skilled and qualified in their own spheres, and subsequently left the institution for further work opportunities, while others chose to remain as PTs.

Meanwhile other members of the local community (some ex-teachers) expressed a desire for such work, and were very well suited to do it. Therefore, the word 'Peer' was replaced and the job title changed to 'Tutorial Assistant'. Since then there has been a solid base of both ex-student and CELTA (the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) graduates working in the Centre. The service was originally focused mainly on appointments with TAs (usually one-to-one but sometimes in small groups) and this evolved to include some drop-in sessions and special consultations, some focusing on learner advising and others on writing. The current format is a combination of booked conversation group sessions in the centre organised according to language level, and assistance in the classroom. The TAs are encouraged to attend the Professional Development sessions run for all teachers by the Department of Language Studies, those run by the institute as a whole, and PD sessions and workshops run by other institutions around Auckland. Also, classroom teachers sometimes offer, or are asked, to run one-off specialised sessions covering particular aspects of assistance that their students might be requesting.

It is a common view at Unitec that it is extremely important for students to have a graduated series of orientations to the ILC, and for the Centre to be truly successful, it is vital to engender close working relationships with, and have solid support from, classroom teachers. Providing excellent resources can then be a two-way process and students are actively encouraged to use the ILC both for the conversation groups and the other wide array of self-access activities and materials available.

There is an overarching need for support from both the Department of Language Studies management team and indeed, the institution as a whole, with regard to funding allowances, staffing support, space allocation, publicity etc. At Unitec, the ILC workers embed themselves productively within their institutions - the academic and administrative staff have close relationships with other staff in the Department and a personal knowledge of many of the students using the Centre. This enables useful conversations about students' needs, orientations, teachers' input and discussions about resources that need to be, or have recently been, acquired.



## On-going research

The current research project is to investigate three factors relating to ILCs in New Zealand: utilisation, support and effectiveness, and to produce a brochure and/or poster to serve as a guide to good ILC practice for other Centre managers and teaching staff. The validity of the information gathered is being strengthened by the triangulation of data from: personal observations and photos, interviews with centre managers and staff, and questionnaires completed by centre personnel.

The researchers travelled around New Zealand briefly in October 2009, and will be doing more of this in 2010, to find the answers to the Who, What, Where, Why, When and How questions about learning in ILCs in New Zealand. So far (November 2009), this research project has been piloted with five universities and polytechnics from both the North and South Islands and from the data and feedback gathered to date, twelve major themes and issues seem to be emerging.

### *The physical location of the ILC on campus*

These may be situated within the Main Library building, attached to a Learning Commons complex, attached or within the General Academic Learning Support area, within the Language School, or some distance away from the main student body on a separate part of the campus.

### *The philosophical location within the institution and overall management of the ILC on campus*

Due in part to the range of physical locations, there is also a range of management reporting lines for the ILC Managers, depending on the various management infrastructures of the different institutions e.g. Head of Learning Centre, Head of Language Studies, Head of Continuing Education, Head of the Library, Head of the Learning Commons or Hub, Head of Teaching & Learning, and Head of Foundation Studies. Underlying issues surrounding this are the threats associated with the continuous restructuring of tertiary institutions in New Zealand over the last few years, and the positioning of ILCs, General Academic Support services and Library services within this.

### *The guiding principles of the ILC*

These include implicit or explicit principles relating to fostering autonomy, strategy training and self-access study. They can also help inform decision-making about scheduled class use of the Centre versus drop-in time, what to purchase, the rationale for cataloguing and displaying resources, when and to whom access is made available etc. Some Centres also manage room bookings, the hardware and the software associated with computer labs, language labs and interactive classrooms (including the listening, speaking and visual components).

### *Maintenance of Language Learning ILCs as separate School entities*

ILCs that are kept separate from the General Learning Support functions of an institution seem to be able to offer a broader personalised service to learners. They can

maintain autonomy of such factors as management/funding/resource allocation and display methods and have more flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of users, such as learner advising, and holding relevant materials, etc.

### *The workload of Centre Managers*

While some institutions employ managers on an administrative contract, others are on an academic contract which may include a research component or may be only part-time. This can pose difficulties regarding financial and time allocations. Attention needs to be paid to 'system vulnerability', i.e. managers sharing information and responsibilities as well as involving other staff members in decision-making and other tasks.

### *Succession plan*

Associated with this is a need to consider a discreet 'succession plan' but this is evident in very few ILCs.

### *Usage of the ILC*

While records are kept of the head-count at certain times and the length of time students remain in the centres, this is naturally influenced in part by the resources available, how attractively they are presented and how readily and freely accessible they may be to find and use. The number of students and the actual usage of ILC services are also influenced by the amount of classroom teacher encouragement, Centre opening hours, staffing levels, student satisfaction, recommendations from stakeholders, advertising success rates, and the security systems in place.

### *Methods of publicity and orientations*

There is a range of different methods of 'marketing' to both teachers and students, e.g. programme-wide introductory talks, class talks, and individually-focused class visits with an associated worksheet led by teachers or ILC staff. Some ILCs also incorporate teacher orientation during Duty Days, as part of the Induction process or Professional Development sessions.

### *Keeping the Centre up to date*

Several ILCs are undergoing 'digitalisation', i.e. converting cassettes and videos to CDs and DVDs, and upgrading associated staff and student equipment. This requires a working knowledge of the technology used and of the Copyright Act, which may be the responsibility of the institute Library or of the individual ILC.

### *Student speaking opportunities*

This is seen as an important role for the ILCs and it comes in a range of different formats, e.g. peer student small group discussions, conversation groups with TAs or LFs, language exchange schemes, computer programmes such as 'Eyespeak' and 'Connected Speech', and external volunteer conversation partners.



### *Learner involvement in the Centre*

Different ILCs have a variety of ways of engaging their students in the Centre, e.g. noticeboard, posters, communication 'whiteboard', feedback forms, information brochures.

### *Desire for Centre Managers and staff to meet and discuss relevant issues.*

Many interviewees expressed a desire to maintain discussions with other practitioners in the field and enjoyed the opportunity to be part of this current project.

While the current research project follows on from previous studies, it should also feed into another forum initiated at the Independent Learning Association, in Hong Kong 2009, by David Gardner from Hong Kong University (HKU) and Marina Chavez Sanchez from Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) relating to developing a system for validating ILCs, for defining a set of standards for ILCs and a useful system for evaluating them.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

All the above major themes and issues interact and inter-relate to some extent, and no doubt more will emerge from the full research project, while existing ones will be further elaborated. As a way forward to continue investigating this field and to fulfil the aim of suggesting ways some of the issues could be addressed, there is still a need for more action research, data collection and feedback about the usage, focus and support offered at individual ILCs in New Zealand. This should also include gathering more information about the physical locations and characteristics of the ILCs, the management hierarchies, and the ideological structures underpinning the infrastructure surrounding the Centres.

Another useful development would be to involve and bring together Centre Managers to share ideas about the support networks they currently enjoy and to be part of an evolving 'Community of Practice' whether this is mediated through 'physical' regional group meetings (and/or perhaps a major hui) or by 'virtual' means. This could be via a range of communicative means such as blogs, wikis, Skype, twitter, re-igniting the currently dormant SACSIG national listserver, attaching Special Interest Group (SIG) meetings to relevant conferences etc. An extension of this could be for Centre Managers and staff to work together, both within and across institutions, to negotiate a set of guidelines for good ILC practice which in turn could lead to the establishment of a set of guiding principles for ILCs in New Zealand.

## Final thoughts

As a final metaphor, the researchers, who are ILC managers as well as learning support advisors, consider their learning development roles and the ongoing life-long benefits for the students, comparable to the strength and longevity of ancient aqueducts, weathered by the shifting sands of time, but still standing strong and supporting the 'necessities' of life. Our tertiary institutions offer academic development support to people in all their endeavours, whatever time it may be in their lives, whatever culture(s) they may find themselves part of and in whatever direction they may decide to go, despite the day to day swirling of sands affected by the local microclimate of their daily lives and the macroclimate of our national and international educational and economic situations.

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<sup>2</sup> The first invitation was proposed at the Independent Learning Association Conference in Hong Kong, 2009. More information on <http://innovationinteaching.org/blog/2009/12/> and <http://cad.cele.unam.mx/sac/index.php>

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## Cultural care as an integral component of Māori student success

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### Abstract

The university environment can be somewhat alien for many Māori students engaged with tertiary study. While Māori today are a very diverse group, programmes based on Māori cultural concepts can prove useful for many students to transition them into successful study by demystifying tertiary landscapes. This article looks at two initiatives that ran on Massey University's Albany campus in 2009. TipuOranga was a marae-based Māori student-led initiative (undergraduate and postgraduate) that sought to acknowledge the multiple components of student wellbeing to help students make better sense of the academic setting. The second initiative was evening workshops for postgraduate students in the Whānau Development programme in a setting that was more culturally Māori. There was an emphasis on the supportive elements of whanaungatanga (collective support) to enable students to successfully integrate into a university setting, and to successfully complete their papers. With both these initiatives, there is potential to create firm foundations from which the students can negotiate the shifting sands of their lives, in ways that better ensure their academic success.

### Introduction

Māori have been educationally disadvantaged from near the beginning of our conjoined history. Educational disadvantage has contributed to economic and social disadvantage, with the result that many Māori occupy the lower socioeconomic strata in New Zealand society. In the latter 20th century however, Māori endeavoured to regain equity within the education system through a variety of initiatives, including cultural components with university study. However, for many Māori students embarking on tertiary study, the university environment can be one that is somewhat alien. This can require a period of transition that proves challenging, and for some, impossible. Providing programmes such as TipuOranga and Whanau Development that not only demystify tertiary landscapes but also integrate components of Māori culture, have contributed significantly to the successful transition of Māori students. Notwithstanding the diverse experiences of 'being Māori', creating an environment that correlates more closely with lived realities helps to ensure a better 'fit' for these

<sup>1</sup> George, L., Allan, G., Barratt, M., Thompson, S., & Tatana, L. (2010). Cultural care as an integral component of Māori student success. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevillano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 95-105). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

students. In this way, continued commitment to academic study and successful completion are more likely to ensue for Māori students.

## Educational disadvantage

From the mid-1800s to the early 1980s, Māori were subjected to educational oppression through a system that sought to maintain the unequal balance of power in favour of Pakeha. Hobson's assertion of 'He iwi tahi tatou' (We are one people) has been echoed through the generations to mean (in this instance) a supposedly egalitarian educational system. However, the reality is that until recently, Māori were disadvantaged educationally, and therefore economically and socially. Through curriculum manipulation and other inherent forms of educational racism, the suppression of Māori culture and language has been the result of the drive for assimilation by education policy makers (Walker, 1991).

The resultant reality in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is that many Māori do not successfully complete college or education standards such as NCEA. Many are unemployed or underemployed; we make up 50% of the prison population, and are over-represented across a wide range of negative social indices. Many do not make it to tertiary study, encountering a range of barriers such as high costs, previous underachievement, negative role models (Jefferies, 1997), and a 'square-peg-round-hole' misfit between student and institution. It is no surprise then that only 0.6% of the Māori population make it to postgraduate level (Lambert, 2007). While gains have been made, and will continue to be made, there is a reality to contend with, and "poor retention rates for Māori in mainstream tertiary institutions...remains an issue of concern" (Gavala & Fleet, 2005, p. 52).

For many Māori students entering a tertiary institution, it is almost literally akin to entering a whole new world, where culture shock engendered by new environments and new behaviours can increase feelings of discomfort, so much so that many choose to leave. Raumati Hook (2007) considered that a major reason for underachievement in education was due to lack of Māori cultural content, resulting in "identity loss and disengagement" (p. 1). Hudson and Hughes (2007) also note "the severe shortfall in indigenous staff in the tertiary sector" (p. 36), adding to the alien nature of the educational environment for Māori. Yet effective education is of "fundamental importance" for Māori regarding development and in securing "an economic future that removes them from the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder" (Raumati Hook, 2007, p. 1).

Over the intervening decades, Māori have striven to rectify these educational disadvantages, and increase Māori access to education, including tertiary education. By February 2001, the time of the first Hui Taumata Mātauranga, Māori aspirations for education were very clear. One hundred and seven recommendations cited at the Hui resulted in three clear goals for Māori education: 1) "to live as Māori"; 2) "to actively participate as citizens of the world"; and 3) "to enjoy good health and a

high standard of living" (M. Durie, 2009, p. 2). November 2001 saw the second Hui Taumata Mātauranga, which acknowledged the integral involvement of education in all sectors and aspects of Māori development. At this Hui, "five platforms for educational advancement" were pinpointed. These included state educational, economic and social policies; Māori and Crown relationships; and Māori synergies and leadership (M. Durie, 2009).

Ensuring that tertiary education is sufficiently responsive to Māori educational and development goals is part of what A. Durie (1998) considers as taking "back responsibility and control over the provision of education for Māori" (p. 297). Initiatives such as kohanga reo, kura kaupapa and whare wananga (Māori-medium educational institutions) are "flourishing networks" that have "seen Māori emerge with the highest rates of participation in tertiary education of any group aged twenty-five years and over" (M. Durie, 2009, p. 9). TipuOranga and Whanau Development are two programmes within Massey University that endeavour to incorporate Māori cultural content and concepts, in order to ensure that "formal education is conceived of as an empowering rather than a subordinating process" (A. Durie, 1998, p. 297).

## TipuOranga

TipuOranga was a Māori student-led initiative that was marae-based and included six to 14 students across disciplines and levels, and their whānau. It arose initially from the desire of a few Māori students and staff to lose weight, and grew from there as an exercise to acknowledge the multiple components of student wellbeing; i.e. the spiritual, physical, family, as well as intellectual components of who they are (Te Whare Tapa Whā model; see M. Durie, 1994). Participants met once a month at Awataha Marae in Northcote – an urban pan tribal marae that also operated as an educational centre - from March to August 2009. Sharing personal and cultural experiences in this kind of setting helped students make better sense of the academic setting. Two Māori staff members (the authors) were there to support the students and contribute to the kaupapa (initiative).

According to participants, of most value was the whanaungatanga (strengthened relationships) and wider support networks that were engendered by participation as a group on the marae. Participants were also able to bring along family members, which included children, siblings, parents and spouses. Several participants were non-Māori. Eating, sleeping, singing and talking together while providing awhi and manaaki (support) to each other, was a benefit that touched on all levels of self and community. The students were supported in their study at university, in a way that is not always provided in a tertiary environment.

By meeting at a marae, students' shared cultural understandings provided unity in their diversity. The participants came from many different tribes, with urban and rural foundations, and a wide variety of experiences and expressions of being Māori. The effects of colonisation of people and land have been multiple, resulting in 'diverse

realities' for contemporary Māori, as noted by M. Durie (1995) and others. For some participants, tribal connections remained strong, and a marae setting was 'normal' and comfortable. Others, raised within an urban setting with little or sporadic connection to Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), were initially daunted, although reassured by the collective and supportive experience. For some of the participants, an overnight stay at a marae was a new experience. In these ways and others, the participants were a microcosmic reflection of wider society.

For those who had little knowledge of Te Ao Māori, Awataha Marae provided a gentle introduction to that world, in an atmosphere of safety and communal support. The noho marae demonstrated very clearly the purpose and function of a marae such as Awataha for urban Māori and non-Māori, as a site of cultural and cross-cultural communication and learning. Influential kaumātua and kuia (elders) at Awataha Marae had instilled philosophies of bicultural interaction into the development of the marae. As with the Te Mauri Pakeaka education programmes of the 1970s and 1980s, Awataha Marae provided a 'third space' where different cultural groups could come together for "dialogues, confrontations, accommodations, risk-taking and unplanned discoveries... [which] inescapably...engages with the development of something new" (Greenwood & Wilson, 2006, p. 12). TipuOranga participants took advantage of this 'third space', a space where cultural groups could share their uniqueness while seeking similarities and opportunities for sharing culture.

Participants usually met from Friday night to Saturday afternoon. They began with a shared dinner, then sang waiata (songs) or engaged in other activities. A kaumātua from Awataha shared some of the history of the marae with those present. This included stories of tribal interactions, as well as history relating to the development of the marae. Another night a friend of one of the students came to give manicures and hand massages. The next day usually began with waiata, and a variety of events such as meditation, massages, and a talk on nutrition followed by preparation of lunch by the nutritionist. In addition, a Māori language teacher took participants through some language instruction. So the activities were varied, but at their core was the building of whanaungatanga (collective support) in order to support the students more effectively in their studies. As one of the students noted:

...what i [sic] love most about TipuOranga roopu is that it is Māori-flavoured to the core. It has started a great foundation for fluid continuity for when the [university] marae is built. (personal communication, April 3, 2009)

Two of the students designed a logo for TipuOranga. The following is the dialogue taken from an email regarding the meaning of the logo, after group discussion on the philosophies underpinning their practice. While this is a long quote, it is worthwhile reproducing it in full as it articulates some of the philosophies TipuOranga participants were working within:

Essentially, the four leaves on the aka (vine) represent the four dimensions – te taha tinana (physical), te taha hinengaro (intellectual), te taha wairua (spiritual) and te taha

whānau (family). The double lines are the blood that flows through our whakapapa, connecting us to our whānau, and ultimately, to each other through our shared humanity. The lobule at the bottom of the aka is the kākano (seed) that represents the core of who we are, and that we are never lost because our origins began in Rangiātea, as per the whakatauki "E kore ahau e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea".

The three lines on the top of the handle represent the journey undertaken by our tupuna nui through Te Kore, Te Pō and Te Ao Mārama. This is a journey that we often undertake throughout our lifetimes, when crises and challenges occur in our lives. There are times when we feel like we are in Te Kore – the place of nothingness that is nevertheless the space of great potential. It is the latter understanding – that we have been gifted with the opportunity to reach forward into our potential...which moves us forward into Te Pō; the long night in which we are free to explore the worlds around us in new ways. This exploration brings light into the darkness, thereby moving us forward again into Te Ao Mārama – the world of light, of understanding, and eventually, of wisdom.

Finally, the logo is in the shape of a hoe (paddle), enclosing and encapsulating all of who we are as we paddle along the river of life, and in that process – exploring and then knowing the fullness of our selves – uplifting our wellbeing in all dimensions, and bringing balance to those dimensions; i.e. TipuOranga.

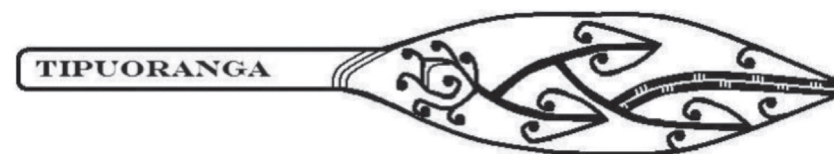


Figure 1: TipuOranga logo

The noho marae were also a space for conversation, of sorting out who the students were in relation to their study and all the other dimensions that make up who they are. Other conversations were around notions of whanaungatanga, raising questions such as What is whanaungatanga? How do we express it in our everyday lives? How do we want to express it within our group? Does it include non-Māori whānau? How do we reconcile and express internal whānaungatanga between all the different parts of who we are? Does it include tolerance and respect for all peoples?

Some of these questions arose as the result of a debate around the inclusion of a non-Māori student, and also the presence of non-Māori whānau in our group. The consensus following debate was that participants wanted to be inclusive, partly as an acknowledgement of the diverse ethnic make-up of all Māori involved.



Another issue to emerge was that some students were fluent in te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga (Māori cultural customs and practices), while others were just beginning to explore their Māori heritage. So participants came from ‘diverse realities’ (Cunningham, Stevenson, & Tassell, 2005), and finding ways in which they could share that space included stating these differences, and in doing so exploring further the similarities that drew them together. In this way, a collective balance of equality could emerge.

Here participants established the social dynamics of a cooperative environment, utilising shared space collectively as Māori as well as non-Māori, and drawing on shared strengths. The programme provided an expression of possibilities and potentials. It showed the students and staff involved that by embracing Te Ao Māori, the world of tertiary learning became demystified further. It showed how it was possible to be all of who they are in the tertiary environment. And it also showed the value and necessity of having a marae located on their campus, rather than having to leave campus in order to have what was such a valuable and necessary experience.

## Whānau Development programme

The second initiative was working within the Whānau Development programme. This programme was new to Massey in 2009 and is run from the Albany campus. It consists initially of the Postgraduate Certificate in Whānau Development, followed by a Postgraduate Diploma, and if students wish to continue with postgraduate study – and they are encouraged to do so – then there is provision to enrol in a Masters programme. Authors of this paper include one support staff member and a student.

The focus of the programme is on “positive outcomes for whānau with an emphasis on whānau potential rather than whānau deficits”, and it seeks to “create pathways for practitioners to advanced learning” (Te Momo, 2009). The foundation students involved in 2009 were those who were already out in the workforce, working in fields such as mental health and other social services, forensic nursing, and the prison service. The papers themselves were run in a kaupapa Māori way as block courses. For example, they began and ended with karakia, and included waiata and, of course, the sharing of food. And importantly, they provided the students with an environment where they could kōrero (converse) safely and work through issues that arose in the classroom in relation to topics under discussion (Te Momo, 2009).

Students made the following comments:

I want to give a big ups to Fiona [Te Momo – Programme Coordinator], she is tu meke in the way she models whanaungatanga as she teaches us. She gives us freedom to be ourselves, to be the diversity within a kaupapa whānau that we each are.

This paper is what I have waited for. Until whānau development came along nothing appealed to add to my kete of knowledge. I absolutely LOVE this paper,

so relevant to who I am as a person who is strongly connected to whānau hapū and iwi, one more word INVALUABLE.

Weekly evening workshops were run by the Māori postgraduate academic advisor where students were brought together on campus, but in a setting that was more culturally Māori. There was an emphasis on the supportive elements of whanaungatanga to enable students to successfully integrate into a university setting, and therefore to successfully complete their papers. The workshops always began with a shared dinner, and from there went on to discuss upcoming assignments, talked about individual projects and gave feedback to others. One student had this to say:

This paper is extramural, therefore when left to myself it can get extremely isolating. As a Māori I need opportunity to interact, the relational connection is very important.

Another said:

...what is meaningful is that we participate and connect together as a kaupapa whānau, karakia, waiata and of course to make it all noa - the kai!

The discussions, facilitated by the academic advisor, were often wide-ranging and lively. These were students with a huge range of experiences, and the lecturers and academic support staff were able to learn as much from the students as they may have been teaching (Te Momo, 2009). The age of the students ranged from 44 to 61 years, and their maturity contributed well to the relationship development that was engendered through the group over both semesters.

As part of academic support, students were also offered one-on-one consultations when necessary, and they were free to email assignment drafts for comment and proofing. One student – interestingly the only Pākehā student in the class – had this to say:

From my perspective, I think it’s been the most supported paper I’ve ever done. I’ve learnt more and done more reading in this paper due to the group work, and knowing I’d be meeting with [the academic support advisor] regularly. I think it would be amazing if more papers could offer a similar approach. I also think for me this paper was initially very intimidating, so having [her] support and wisdom has encouraged me to carry on, when initially I may not have. I’d consider doing another paper similar to this on the basis that this support was on offer, as I think it’s invaluable, and difficult to quantify.

Another student said:

The learning support is extremely vital. Without this person I absolutely know I would not remain on this course. She is our guidance, our tutor, an amazing teacher....

What can be seen is that the student response to a programme that offers all-round support was overwhelmingly positive. While the papers were by no means easy with a high level of analysis and writing expected, having the encouragement from lecturers and academic support staff who worked together for the benefit of the students meant that these students could feel more confident in their study, and therefore perform better than they otherwise would have. As noted by the academic advisor: “Imagine what we could achieve if all papers and programmes were run this way”. Nevertheless, of integral importance to the programme’s success was the inclusion of cultural components into the learning experience for these students, and for the staff as well. Feedback indicates that most participants – including staff – feel that they emerged from the experience having gained something very valuable from it.

## Educational transformations

M. Durie (2009) writes that New Zealand’s education sector has been transformed “to the point where a palpable indigenous dimension can be felt both within and beyond the sector” (p. 2). The Māori cultural renaissance has resulted in significant increases in Māori participation in and contribution to education on all levels (Lambert, 2007). There are now exponentially increasing numbers of Māori in tertiary education, both as students and as teachers. Māori seem poised to achieve a critical mass to seriously contribute to the positive and ongoing development of Māori society in all arenas. As noted by Jefferies (1997), “the importance for the success of an individual in modern society is often linked to the level of education attained” (p. 6). For Māori, individual success usually equates to that of whānau, hapū and iwi as well.

Gavala and Fleet (2005) conducted a study of 122 Māori psychology students at Massey University. One finding they reported was that students were more likely to achieve psychological well-being that supported ongoing enjoyment and motivation, if the academic environment was one that was “culturally-congruent”, and further, that cultural identity could be used as an “empowering resource” (p. 52). A kaupapa Māori tutorial group studied by Gavala and Fleet (2005) showed the effectiveness of a “whānau atmosphere, where everyone works, eats and struggles together” (p. 57). Their study added to the fundamental recognition that incorporating aspects of Māori culture into programmes and papers was effective in increasing the success rates of Māori students.

Lambert (2007) cites the scaffolding of students by Māori academic mentors with proven ability as one of the “key features of successful strategies” for Māori student success at tertiary institutions (p. 73). Extended interaction time with these mentors was also important, as was the input and support of communities around the students (Lambert, 2007, p. 73). M. Durie (2009) also considers then, that one of the tasks of Māori support staff is that of “being able to...mediate between Māori worldviews and the conventions associated with higher education” (p. 7) in order to lessen the discomfort and increase the well-being of these students. Linking to the Tertiary Education Commission’s Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-2012, Massey University

has also adopted the KIA MAIA (Key Initiatives for A Māori Academic Investment Agenda) Strategy, which seeks quality outcomes for Māori students by providing increased support while “building Māori professional capabilities, increasing Māori research capability and engaging with Māori communities and tribal organizations” (M. Durie, 2009, p. 14). TipuOranga and the Whānau Development programme can be seen as KIA MAIA in practice.

The TipuOranga programme ran for six months in 2009 until funding was no longer readily available. A limitation of the programme was the intensive support needed from the support staff to arrange and manage the noho marae. If the programme was to run for a longer period, it is likely that staff could ease back on involvement, and let students take more responsibility in arranging and running the programme. All participants would agree that this was a very worthwhile initiative. The Whānau Development programme continues in 2010 and of interest will be seeing how the learning support deals with students from years 1 and 2 of the programme. It is envisaged that support scaffolding can continue with 2009 students providing tuakana (elder ‘sibling’) support for those beginning in 2010. As with many learning programmes however, time provides lessons on improving current programmes, or signals new directions to take.

## Conclusion

Quite simply, culture is important to many Māori students. And more importantly, having culturally relevant programmes and initiatives can contribute positively to student retention and success. As noted by Gadd (1975), Māori culture is rich:

...with the sort of experiences that educate deeply and lastingly. The tangihanga, hui, ...arts and crafts, genealogies, traditional lore and history...all are interdependent, interrelated, inseparable aspects....Each draws powerfully together social, emotional, intellectual and sensory experience. Each is both functional and symbolic of Māori identity. Each establishes and maintains links with the past, and at the same time declares a promise to the future. (p. 18)

It could be argued that the inclusion of Māori cultural components also ‘declares a promise to the future’ for all peoples of this land. Success for Māori ultimately equates to success for the whole of Aotearoa New Zealand society. With initiatives such as TipuOranga and the Whānau Development programme, there is the potential to create firm foundations from which the students can negotiate the shifting sands of their lives, in ways that ensure their academic and life success.

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## Mathematics support at university

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### Abstract

This paper examines why mathematics support is necessary at universities and who should provide this support. The paper discusses the types of students who have difficulty with mathematics and provides a reflection of the author's own work in the field of mathematics support. The thesis of the paper is that mathematics support is required and that trained learning developers can offer this support in a friendly and supportive environment that is unaffiliated to other departments.

### Introduction

Educators from different countries find that many students do not have sufficient initial learning to support the mathematics used at university (Croft, 2001; Engineering Council, 2000; James, Montelle, & Williams 2008). Hearne Scientific Software (2002) reported in a newsletter that 52% of Australian lecturers they had surveyed believed that there was a decline in the mathematical skills of undergraduates taking engineering courses. The apparent decline in students' mathematical abilities is just one part of the problem in Australia. Hood (2010) refers to a review carried out by eight Australian universities that suggests that children are losing interest in mathematics and science at school, which is leading to fewer students taking courses with mathematical content at university. Walker (2000) believes that Britain is also suffering from a decline in mathematical standards at school level. Lawson (2004) cites a series of reports by professional bodies that raise concern about the mathematical competence of new undergraduates in Britain. He provides some objective evidence of this decline in the form of a summary of changes observed in the results of diagnostic testing in mathematics, using the same test, amongst new undergraduate students with the same mathematics entry qualification, at one university during the period 1991 to 2001. Scores in the test dropped considerably during this period. Lawson describes the use of mathematics support centres at a number of universities to address the problem. In his report on a joint conference held by The Institute of Mathematics and its Applications (IMA) and The European Society of Engineering Education (SEFI), Barry (2008) notes that one of the themes was the decline in mathematical preparedness, not just in Britain but throughout Europe and other parts of the world.

To counter this apparent decline in students' mathematical abilities many higher education institutions in countries such as Ireland, Britain and Australia have instigated large-scale drives to introduce mathematics support centres within institutions themselves (Barry, 2008; Croft 2000; Mac an Bhaird & O'Shea, 2009; MacGillivray, 2008). There is not a great deal of literature on mathematics support in New Zealand universities; however, there does appear to be a recognised need for mathematics support as some universities do have support centres. There also appears to be limited New Zealand representation at conferences. In 2007, a representative of Lincoln University attended a symposium on Learning Support for Mathematics and Statistics at the Queensland University of Technology (Australian Network in Learning Support in Mathematics and Statistics, 2007). In 2009, the University of Waikato had a representative at the ATLAANZ conference 'Shifting sands, firm foundations' in which a session was given on a new type of workshop that had been trialled by the staff of mathematics learning support at the University of Waikato. Although there is considerable literature on the decline of students' mathematical abilities and the causes for this decline in Europe and Australia over the last 10 to 15 years, there has not been the same flow of literature in New Zealand.

This paper discusses the types of students who may need mathematics support at university and includes a list of some of the more common types of mathematical errors students make, which raises the issue of who should try to help students to correct these errors. The paper offers an insight into the work of the author and the types of mathematics support offered at the author's university and recommends that appropriately trained staff carry out mathematics learning support in a supportive and friendly environment.

### Mathematics learning support

There appear to be two particular groups of students that are a cause for concern in universities. The first group involves students considered as non-specialist (students whose courses contain components of mathematics). The main problems these students encounter stem from an inability to transfer the mathematical skills they have learnt to their chosen subjects, and as Croft (2002, p. 147) points out:

The mathematical education of non-specialist undergrads has long been a bone of contention. ... The debate about the ownership of the mathematical education of these students may often be reduced to the level of a playground brawl. Decisions about ownership are not made on sound pedagogical grounds, but are often more to do with financial and political considerations, and sometimes to do with failure-rate control.

In the author's own university, the mathematics department offers support to mathematics students only, which until recently left non-specialist undergraduates seeking help wherever they could, until Student Learning began offering mathematics learning support.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, J. (2010). Mathematics support at university. In V. van der Ham, L. Seviliano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 106-114). Auckland: ATLAANZ.



The second group of students needing support are those who have weak mathematical backgrounds. The need for mathematical learning support as a separate entity is identified by Croft (2002, p. 146) citing Hunt and Lawson (1997), who believe “it would be arrogant and unrealistic of lecturers – many of whom have no formal teaching qualification – to assume that they have the expertise to put right the cumulative failures of school education.” They pose the question: “Who are the best people to teach mathematics at this level in universities given the nature of the problem?”

The level of mathematics that staff are required to teach to weak students is well below university standards. Schechter (2001) gives a list of some of the more common errors in undergraduate mathematics, which include the following:

- sign errors
- confusion about the square root symbol
- unconventional order of operations
- ambiguously writing fractions
- everything is undistributed cancellations.

Comments by Professor Stephen Joe (personal communication, 2009, June 22) on errors by first year undergraduates taking mathematics included:

- difficulty in dealing with negative numbers
- incorrect expansion of algebraic equations
- incorrect manipulation of indices and logarithms.

The above examples are simple errors caused by incorrect application or little knowledge of basic mathematics and can be corrected with a small amount of tuition. However, if these errors are left uncorrected they can cause enormous problems for students doing mathematics that is more advanced.

In considering how to deal with the above types of errors, Croft (2002, p. 146) cites Sutherland and Dewhurst (1999) who believe “The teaching needs are more akin to school teaching and university lecturers are not the best people to be carrying out this kind of work.” Croft further cites Larcombe (1998) who writes: “mathematicians have no appetite for what they see as unrewarding and often thankless work” (p. 146) which strengthens the argument that mathematics support would be better undertaken by a separate entity.

With the perceived decline in students’ mathematical abilities, it is imperative to take steps to retain students and help them complete their chosen courses. The literature on retention and completion rates for mathematics and mathematics related subjects around the world is particularly gloomy at present (Cuthbert & MacGillivray, 2007; Engineering Council, 2000), as is the drop in numbers of the students entering tertiary education to follow mathematics and mathematics related courses such as engineering and accountancy. In New Zealand, Scott (2009) reports on the decline of domestic, undergraduate enrolments in specific subjects since 2002. These include enrolments

in Manufacturing, Engineering and Technology (declined by 41%); Accountancy (declined by 20%); Mathematical Sciences (declined by 22%); and Teacher Education (declined by 15%).

In 2009, Student Learning Support at the author’s university began offering limited mathematics support to all students in the university to facilitate retention of students and completion of courses and the author of this paper, as a mathematics learning developer, began to offer one-to-one consultations, online resources and trialled two specialised workshops in Semester B, 2009. The nature of the consultation process is considered in detail below, but first a brief outline of the workshops and the online resources is provided.

### *Student Learning Support mathematics workshops*

The two workshops trialled in Semester B 2009 were designed for students who have difficulties with mathematical word problems. The author chose this topic as the reading of mathematical problems can cause difficulties for students at levels of ability, but especially for those students who have English as a second language (Neville-Barton, 2005). However, second language students are not the only ones who have difficulties. Clement (1982) describes how “science-orientated college students” (p. 16) were unable to do basic algebra word problems.

The workshops trialled in Semester B ran in a slightly different format from the standard mathematics workshops in that they were co-taught by the author, a mathematics learning developer and an English learning developer. The workshops were considered successful, based on attendance and evaluations carried out by the university’s Appraisals Office. The evaluation indicated that 100% of those who attended were satisfied with the overall content included in the workshops.

In Semester A, 2010, a total of ten mathematics workshops will be run, including the two word-based workshops run in Semester B, 2009. The ten workshops will be based on various mathematical topics, and include small amounts of theory. Examples given in the workshop are drawn from different content areas, such as economics and engineering. The workshops are designed to introduce students to the terminology of mathematics and to the terminology, as it is used, in other subjects so that students can see the connections between mathematics and the courses they are taking.

### *Online mathematics support*

To enhance the support offered to students with a mathematics component in their courses, Student Learning Support has produced its own online resources that students can access. Students are able to read about a topic, take tests and ask questions through forums. An example of such a topic is ‘Using Decimals’ which includes lessons and quizzes such as ‘Manipulating Numbers in Standard Form’. The on-line resource is still in its infancy and requires a great deal more added to it, especially in terms of interactive material. However, funding and staff are limited, as is the software capable of dealing with mathematics.

## Reflections

Over the years, in my role as a learning developer, I have seen many students requiring mathematics support. They vary in background, culture, age and the subjects they take. Some of these students have had poor mathematical abilities, while others have been more advanced. However, whatever their abilities they all have one thing in common: when they perceive they have a problem, they exhibit some degree of anxiety. Research shows that anxiety can inhibit learning (Metje, Frank, & Croft, 2007; Steen, 1999), and our first task, which is pastoral in nature, is to ensure that the students feel comfortable and confident within themselves (Wood, 2001). The problems students bring to consultations are not necessarily confined to mathematical problems. They can include problems associated with how they perceive their lecturers or tutors, personal problems, time management, and language problems, all of which can all impact a student's ability to learn. If the problem is not mathematical then I can refer students to counsellors or to their lecturers.

However, usually the problem is mathematical, so, our second task is diagnostic in nature. By discussing the problem with the student, we can usually unravel the reason why the student cannot understand what is required of them. This may be something as simple as misreading the question or copying down incorrect lecture notes, (a very common problem for second language students) or it may be a case of previous misconceptions coming to the surface as they advance in mathematics. In my experience the majority of students have problems because they have missed 'chunks' of basic mathematics such as fractions, or they are unable to connect what they did in school mathematics to the subject they are now taking. This appears particularly true where differentiation is concerned.

The first type of problem, missing 'chunks' of basic mathematics, can be addressed in several ways, but the overriding concern is to make sure the student does not feel 'stupid' or 'backward' because they do not understand a basic concept. The second type of problem is more difficult to counter. Many students seem to be unable to transfer their mathematical knowledge to other subjects (MacGillivray, 2008). Again, this may be due to some insufficiency in their mathematics but for many it is the 'jargon' associated with mathematics and the 'jargon' associated with the subject they are taking, they very often have nothing in common. Students can fail to make a connection between the different terms used and often become confused and unsure of their abilities. The inability of students to transfer their mathematics to other subjects can come as something of a shock to them. Students may feel that they have mastered mathematics when actually all they have done is use rote, formulaic methods of answering questions. When they come to apply this knowledge to other subjects, they have very little idea what the mathematics they learnt has to do with their new subjects and for some it can mean a premature end to their university study.

Once the diagnostic episode has taken place, the third task can begin which is to look at what skills the students need to tackle the problem and to make sure they do not face

the same problem again.

This 'three task' programme may seem rather mundane and repetitive, but it is not. Each student is entirely different in their learning needs, so even when students present with the same problem, the skills required to overcome the problem can vary greatly. It is therefore necessary to be able to understand where a student is 'coming from', that is, how they perceive the problem, and how capable they are of dealing with any new skills introduced. Overtaxing the student can add to the problem so careful thought is given to how to interact with each person.

The 'three task' method of offering mathematics support may also seem heuristic in nature but politics and economics dictate what resources are available for offering support to students in New Zealand universities. In the author's university there are no resources other than the author as a 0.5 EFT mathematics learning developer. There are no funds for computers or books to support learning and the programme is forced to rely on a few books provided by the author. Countries such as Britain and Australia have acknowledged that there is concern about the decline in students' mathematical abilities and have invested money, from governments and universities, into countering this decline.

## Summary

There is strong evidence from the literature that there is a decline in students' mathematical abilities in many parts of the world. Several countries have taken up the challenge to counter this decline by providing extra support for non-specialist students and students who have weak mathematical abilities. The author's own unit has begun to offer limited mathematical support for all students with the intention of helping to raise retention and completion rates. However, raising retention and completion rates is a long-term project and the benefits are not immediately apparent. Politics and money dictate resourcing and support centres are seen as a low priority because they do not generate an income. This is sufficient 'ammunition' for different departments, and even whole institutions to continue arguments over who teaches non-specialist undergraduates and undergraduates with weak mathematical backgrounds. Pedagogy and offering students as much mathematical support as possible are issues that appear to be of small concern and cutting costs by using staff unsuited to this level of teaching appears to be fairly common practice. However, if New Zealand is to maintain its integrity within the fields of research and manufacturing, intervention is required now to ensure the country has a sufficient graduate force to keep pace with the rest of the world.

The question of whether university is the right place to counter the perceived decline in students' mathematical abilities is outside the scope of this paper. However, while there is a problem, government and universities must explore all avenues and make resources available so that students have the best chance possible to graduate.

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## Teaching Management Mathematics

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### Abstract

Management Mathematics 166 is a paper taught at Bay of Plenty Polytechnic (BoPP) in collaboration with the University of Waikato (UoW) where it is offered to students of both Business and Science disciplines and is a compulsory component of the Bachelor of Business Analysis (Financial). In 2009 a small class of nine students with disparate mathematics backgrounds offered an excellent opportunity to work very closely with students to identify their needs and examine their learning patterns. Although this was a small sample, when the analysis of their results is linked to teaching pedagogy the findings may be applicable to a larger group. While all students passed, some had the potential to perform at a higher level but various factors impinged on their results. In reflecting on my teaching of this paper, I have drawn from over 30 years of teaching mathematics at secondary and tertiary level.

### Introduction and background to the study

Management Mathematics 166 is a University of Waikato (UoW) paper taught at Bay of Plenty Polytechnic (BoPP) in the first semester. It is compulsory for the Bachelor of Business (Financial Analysis) and optional for the Bachelor of Management. I taught this paper for the first time in 2009, coming from an extensive mathematics teaching background with some experience at supporting the students in this paper in 2008 and supporting business students for several years in Management Statistics. Although some concepts of economics, business and management were familiar to me in a superficial way, I was often dependent on the students' knowledge to interpret the applications of the mathematical results to the business context.

Traditionally, this Management Mathematics paper has been a difficult one for many students, with success and retention being variable. Students are studying in the mathematics area, which is not their chosen career focus, and they come with disparate mathematical backgrounds. Within the group of 2009, the last level at which the students had been successful in mathematics ranged from below third form level to sixth form level. Some students had external situations which had a major effect on their progress in the paper. These factors inspired me to reflect on the successful strategies which ensured that every student understood the content and passed.

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<sup>1</sup> Porter, S. (2010). Teaching Management Mathematics. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevillano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 115-127). Auckland: ATLAANZ.



In this paper I identify a theoretical framework for effective teaching and refer to my study in which data from an online survey, in conjunction with that of an annual student evaluation, highlights strategies for teaching a topic requiring dual discipline expertise. Analysis of the survey data and the evaluations is presented and discussed in relation to the effective teaching framework. I also suggest improvements that could be made and that may be of use and value to colleagues.

### *Theoretical framework*

Effective teaching at tertiary level has all the hallmarks of effective teaching at any level – whether pre-school, primary, secondary or tertiary. There are three factors to being a successful teacher of mathematics. The first is obvious: the teacher needs to know the subject content thoroughly. Without sufficient content knowledge, teachers will not be confident enough to seize the moment and capitalise on situations that arise spontaneously to present good mathematics teaching. According to Anthony and Walshaw (2007), “Low levels of content knowledge and the resulting lack of confidence about mathematics limit teachers’ ability to maximise opportunities” (p. 47). Although Anthony and Walshaw are targeting a school teaching audience, I believe their opinions are valid for the tertiary sector as well.

Secondly, the teacher needs to understand the theory behind the mathematics processes. Wood and Harding (2007) cite the list of ten areas of excellence in teaching used by the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics at the University of Pretoria for judging an award for teaching excellence. The first area is “Facilitation of mathematical thinking” with one of the sub-areas being: “Brings insight and understanding of mathematical topics to students of varying backgrounds” (p. 944). Teachers need to understand the hidden scaffolding that underpins the topic in hand; they also need to know where it is leading, the proofs of and reasons for the steps involved. Some students, in my experience, are happy to learn processes and take pleasure out of the ‘dance’, a term I used to identify that performing algebra moves is like performing dance moves of the mind and thereby enjoyable. Others really need to understand the thinking behind the facts before their brains will absorb the learning.

The teacher also needs to know how to teach. This involves understanding that the group of students is diverse and they have individual backgrounds, environments, needs, learning styles and rates of learning and they bring with them their own attitudes and self-belief regarding mathematics. Miller-Reilly (2007), in discussing teacher effectiveness, notes “the importance of teachers’ acknowledgement of students’ past experiences and current feelings about mathematics, dealing effectively with students’ differing background knowledge of mathematics, as well as the effective use of contexts in non-routine problems” (p. 891). The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC, 2008a) acknowledges that awareness has changed and “Current theories of adult learning reflect the understanding that adults learn in many different ways for many different reasons. Because of this, it is very important that adult-education programmes are learner-centred” (p. 8). Teachers need to know about learning styles; when to teach, when to hold back and let the students try for themselves; when to step in and

offer assistance; and when extra support is needed. Ideally, the teacher will connect with each student and understand their knowledge base and the steps required to lead them to the level of their course. This is difficult for a teacher with a large class but, at the very least, the range of learning styles can be catered for within a lecture; tutorials provide closer encounters and students can be directed to a learning support centre where their individual needs can be met. Some students need more time to absorb the concepts and it is vital that mathematics support is available. A succinct summary of the characteristics of the effective teacher is given by Anthony and Walshaw (2007) who note that mathematics teaching for diverse learners:

- demands an ethic of care
- creates a space for the individual and the collective
- demands explicit instruction
- involves respectful exchange of ideas
- demands teacher content knowledge, knowledge of mathematics pedagogy and reflecting-in-action. (p. iv)

The teaching skills required at school level are still necessary at tertiary level. Halcon (2008) advises that business calculus should be taught in “the most elementary manner” (p. 13), including the use of lesson plans. In my opinion, the language used must be carefully considered and any new words clearly defined, remembering that ‘new’ means new to the student, not the teacher. Many students suffer from mathematics anxiety and they need to develop confidence that together (teacher and student) their goal of passing is achievable. I have observed that for those who are struggling, this goal can change from ‘mere passing’ to ‘passing well’ as their confidence grows. When teaching mathematics to management and economics students, it is essential that the teacher has the mathematics skill base. It is also imperative that the teacher has some understanding of the applications to economics and business. The students can supply some of the links to their other papers and together it can be an enjoyable learning journey for both students and teacher.

### **Method**

The research study described in this paper examined the students’ perceptions of effective teaching and learning in this particular mathematics course which involved applications to economics and management. I taught this paper to a small class of nine students, a diverse group, with different needs and backgrounds. Since I also worked in the student learning support area, I was able to offer extra tutorials to those who needed them. In addition, I offered extra revision tutorials in the study weeks prior to examinations.

The paper was directed from the UoW with the text being a booklet produced by them. In discussions it was agreed that I would write the assessments and an examination which would be moderated by the UoW. The course was a mixture of pure mathematics with applications to the business and science disciplines and

contained algebra, coordinate geometry, trigonometry, graphs, matrices and calculus. There were ten assignments or quizzes to be delivered weekly, the best eight results of which formed part of the internal mark of 50%, along with the results of two tests. The remaining 50% was the examination. A second option was available in which the total mark rested solely on the examination result. The idea of quizzes was abandoned after the first week as the students were not ready to be tested after such a short time. Subsequently, ten assignments were completed. All nine students passed the paper with grades ranging from C to A+.

BoPP has a standardised student evaluation form which is presented to the students in the last two weeks of their paper before examinations are held. All teachers are evaluated at least once, but not all classes are evaluated. The teacher concerned receives a complete copy of the evaluations.

In the following semester, after the paper was finished and grades had been published, I sent an electronic questionnaire regarding the paper to the students. The questionnaire had seven sections with 26 questions overall. The seven sections were:

- mathematics background: last study level, feelings about mathematics
- learning needs and styles
- teaching style, possible improvements
- understanding and passing
- extra support
- assessment
- external factors.

Seven out of the nine students returned the questionnaires. The majority of the students (88%) were aged 20 or above, so most had some experience of life outside of school. One obvious limitation to this study was the small sample size, although the response rate was high at 78%. Interaction with the small class allowed for closer personal observation of the students. There could have been some response bias with such a small group as the students may have been wary of giving adverse comments in their online responses which clearly identified them. This was minimised by analysing the student evaluations which gave complete anonymity. The same opinions and messages were evident in both the evaluations and the surveys. There was no concern about adverse comments rebounding on marking as all assessment results had been delivered to the students before they were surveyed. It cannot be assumed that the findings would apply directly to a much larger class size, but this study does provide a baseline against which further studies can be measured. This is planned to be an on-going study and the classes for 2010 and 2011 will be surveyed so that results can be collated and compared with those reported here.

## Findings and discussion

This section of the paper contains analysis of the evaluations and the questionnaire, with links to the theoretical framework described earlier.

### Organisation

Sound organisation and preparation was noted. The students knew what was to be taught in a session and appreciated that this was signalled. Student 3 commented: “Lessons were extremely well structured. You knew what would be covered in a lecture and it was.” Student 7 said: “This is the most organised and prepared class I have taken in my three years here. I know exactly what I need to do to pass and [she] gets the information across very clearly”.

### Mathematical background

Five students reported that they were successful at the same level at which they last studied but in two cases, the levels varied (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Mathematical background of students prior to this paper (n = 7)*

Student	Level at which you felt successful	Last study level	Highest qualification level
1	at work, spreadsheets	Dip Sport Science (UK)	10 credits sport science numerical applications
2	NCEA level 2	NCEA level 2	NCEA level 2 geometry, algebra etc
3	basic, 3rd or 4th form if that	School Certificate	School Certificate
4	6th form maths	7th form	University Entrance
5	5th form maths	5th form (1995)	School Certificate
6	level 2 NCEA and basics	NCEA level 2	there was just one paper - mathematics
7	GCSE mathematics	NCEA level 1	NCEA level 1

The students had a wide range of feelings about mathematics. All seven students had enjoyed mathematics at primary school but only four of them enjoyed secondary school mathematics. When they reached the workforce, three were still enjoying mathematics. Two students loved all arithmetic topics (see Table 2). All students felt at least “okay” with basic addition and multiplication but five out of seven students were anxious about fractions, an important piece of information as some of the mathematics required an ability with algebraic fractions, which is underpinned by competency with arithmetical fractions.

Table 2. *Students' feelings regarding topics without a calculator, before taking the Management Mathematics 1 = 'yes, I love it'; 2 = 'I'm okay with it'; 3 = 'I'm a bit anxious'; 4 = 'I'm terrified'*

Student	Addition	Subtraction	Multipli- cation	Division	Fractions	Decimals	Perce- tages	Word problems	Multipli- cation tables
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	3
3	2	3	2	3	4	4	2	4	3
4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
5	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	2
6	1	1	1	1	2 – 3	2 - 3	2	2	2
7	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	2

No one felt confident with all six higher level skills: only Student 6 was confident with algebra which was the basis of the whole paper even though five other students had studied at 5th form (NCEA level 1) or above. Student 4 was confident with just measurement skills although she had been 'successful' at 6th form level; no one felt confident with powers which were also a vital part of the paper (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Students' feelings regarding higher level topics before taking the Management Mathematics. 1 = 'yes, I love it'; 2 = 'I'm okay with it'; 3 = 'I'm a bit anxious'; 4 = 'I'm terrified'*

Student	Algebra	Geometry	Statistics	Trigonometry	Measurement	Powers
1	3	3	3	3	2	3
2	3	3	4	3	2	3
3	4	4	4	4	4	4
4	3	3	3	3	2	3
5	3	2	3	2	2	4
6	1 – 2	2	3	1 – 2	2	3
7	3	2	2	1	2	3

It was essential that the teaching took into account students' feelings regarding basic mathematics skills. As Klinger (2007) states, "mathematics self-efficacy beliefs and early maths learning experiences are clearly related in their influence on the subjects' maths learning characteristics" (p. 203).

Students indicated in their evaluations that they realised there were different abilities within the class, that these were catered for, and that a clear understanding of the mathematics was communicated to them in a "simplified manner". This approach is supported by Andy Begg (2006), who, in his list of 'Rich learning tasks/activities' stated that the activities should: "approach the unknown through what is known to the

students - be accessible to all students at the start" (p. 8, modified from Ahmed, 1987 and Cox, 1998).

### *Extra support*

Five of the seven students made extra appointments through our support services, some for just a few sessions and some regularly. All five students stated that it was essential for them to have the extra tuition. Student 3 noted that she "Would not have passed without it. Increased knowledge and confidence [sic]." Gill and O'Donoghue (2007) also found that "a more individualized structure was essential to reach those who were, perhaps, lost in large group situations" (p. 157). Another student had illness in her family and was unable to attend most classes so she used the tutorial appointment system when it was possible for her. Student 4 appreciated the ability to use email contact when working on a problem between classes. The help may not have been immediate but it was a quicker response for the student than waiting until the next class. This idea directly links with Gill and O'Donoghue's (2007) proposal of having online help provided by student support.

### *Basics*

Students appreciated that the lessons were delivered in understandable language. It was important to analyse the vocabulary and skills utilised within problem-solving processes and remind students of these first. This was not a new idea. Shulman (1986) wrote, "Pedagogical content knowledge also includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult" (p. 9). As Student 3 wrote, "A better knowledge of basic maths would have been a huge help."

I observed that once these skills were revisited prior to travelling through the process of solving a problem, the students could concentrate on the flow of the steps and not become sidetracked. Recognising and embedding basic numeracy skills in courses has been identified as important to success: "Analysing problems... will help you to decide the nature and amount of scaffolding (guided support) you will need to provide for the learners" (TEC, 2008b, p. 6). The principle is the same with higher level mathematics; sometimes the underlying skills required are at a higher level but basic numeracy skills are also a cornerstone of a correct solution. A calculus problem requiring a whole page of processing can (and did) result in a wrong answer by using the calculator incorrectly in the final step.

### *Processes*

Students identified as effective teaching the slow build up in front of them of a complete solution with full explanations followed by plenty of practice with different examples. They liked moving at a pace that suited them rather than being confronted with a completed worked example. Felder (2002) comments on this 'traditional' deductive style of teaching, starting with the basics and processes and only then moving on to applications. He acknowledges that "many or most students would say that they prefer deductive presentation" (preface to p. 674). Student 1 wrote about how her learning needs were addressed with: "clear accurate examples, slow logical

progression which allows for some reflection, not too much information overload.” Student 6 appreciated “lots of examples shown step by step.”

### *Learning styles*

Only student 4 had a preference for a single learning style (visual). All the rest acknowledged they used a mixture of learning styles – visual, aural and kinesthetic. Because of this preference for a mixture, the content needed to be presented using all styles. Felder and Silverman (1988), when explaining how to teach both visual and auditory learners, comment, “Process flow charts...and logic or information flow charts should be used to illustrate complex processes” (p. 677). Kinesthetic styles can be catered for by giving students time to work on problems in class and in groups. Felder and Silverman (1988) agree with this as a good way to address this learning style.

### *PowerPoint*

PowerPoint was not a favoured method of learning mathematics. Some students had experienced PowerPoint presentations in other classes and, as Voss (2004) states, the teacher “tends to focus on the technology and ignore the audience” and “Power point should not be used simply to demonstrate that an instructor is using technology in his or her classroom” (p. 155). Students’ learning capacity was expanded by observing the physical process, with the understanding that they could stop the flow to ask for further clarification.

### *Class climate*

The atmosphere in the class was also considered important for students to absorb the learning. They particularly appreciated that the classroom climate was relaxed and they had the opportunity to ask questions. Student 2 commented that “it was pretty relaxed, anyone could ask questions in class without feeling embarrassed, was fun at times, nice small class size was good for learning.” Student 1 also felt “relaxed and not cause anxiety [sic].” Another student wrote, “...easy to approach and really understands when students are confused and how to clear any confusion.”

With consistent opportunities for questioning, the teaching became student-centred and discussion would often follow about applications to the business world. As a result of shared learning it became clear that the students felt that their contribution and how they delivered and achieved it was valued. This result supports Gill and O’Donoghue’s (2007) finding in their study in Limerick, that “students value personal interaction most highly” (p. 164).

### *Assessment*

Students were very pleased to see assignments take the place of the quiz. Student 1 wrote that “The quiz given after one week caused anxiety and prevented clear understanding of topic [sic].”

All students found the assignments were most useful in helping them gain understanding. Because of the small size of the class, the assignments were marked and returned to the students in the next class while the content was still fresh in

their minds. This made for effective feedback and formative as well as summative assessment and helped address any difficulties in understanding before students moved too far on in the course. As Flinders University (2004) state in their notes on feedback, effective feedback should be “Timely – so that students can use it for subsequent learning and work to be submitted.”

Opinions were divided as to which was the most fair way of assessing understanding. Some students favoured the tests and exam, some the assignments and some a mixture of all three. None of them mentioned the quiz as part of the fair assessment. Even though there were different preferences regarding the assessment types, all students liked the system of choosing the best eight out of ten assignment marks. Student 5 stated “I think it’s a good and fair system considering the length of the course and the possibility that there may be external things that may affect the marks of a couple of assignments (such as time commitments etc.).” Student 1 supported the system, commenting “I think it motivated me to make sure I completed the assignment as best I could. This then provided feedback for the exam, tests. It worked.” Student 2 also thought it was “great because you may not be as good on a few topics as others.”

The volume of assessment, at one assignment per week, was a demanding workload but all students thought it was fair, useful and manageable. Only one suggestion was offered for a different type of assessment: to have a group problem to solve. This could be a formative exercise and will be inserted into the paper next year.

All students liked having the option of 50:50 or 0:100 with internal and examination assessment credit respectively. Student 1 wrote “I think it was fair. It allowed students with different performance strengths to be measured accurately.” Certainly for the student unable to attend many classes, it provided the opportunity to demonstrate her ability in the subject although she had missed many of the assignments.

### *Revision*

For passing (and often well), students valued the revision classes run in the two study weeks before the examination. These classes had been planned when the schedule was prepared for the semester. Every topic of the paper was revised and this gave the students an overview of the content. Begg (2006) supports revision as a necessary part of effective teaching, advising teachers to “provide opportunities for constant review” (modified from Ahmed, 1987 and Cox, 1998). From my observation, parts that had been unfamiliar to students in the first instance were now taken for granted, previously new vocabulary was immediately understood and they could concentrate on the more difficult steps or sections. There was time for them to grasp the whole topic. Student 7 supported this, commenting that “The feature that helped me do well in passing was the time taken to ensure you had the understanding needed for the subject.”

### *External Factors*

Students, especially mature age students, often have many external factors to mesh into their study framework. These can take their toll on progress and level of achievement. Workload/work commitments, family illnesses and personal illness were challenges



to overcome. Students mentioned good time management, working hard and keeping on top of their assignments as strategies for lessening the effect of external factors. Having the backup system of one-to-one tutorials was vital in these circumstances as students were not left to catch up as best they could. The one student who did not take advantage of these tutorials did realise, upon reflection, that it would have lessened the impact of her illness if she had made an appointment. Student 7 reflected that “I tried to attend every class and if I wasn’t able to attend I tried my hardest to catch up on material. I could have gone to extra tutorials to make catching up easier.”

### *Improvements*

Most students had no suggestions for improvements, but one student suggested that using computer graphics could have helped them understand graphs better. Using appropriate technology is an avenue to consider, but with caution, bearing in mind that the students did not want PowerPoint slides.

There were some negative comments relating to the booklet provided for the course. The booklet was written more from a pure mathematics point of view, involving proofs of formulae, rather than from a business context. The language used was in some cases too sophisticated and obscured meaning for the students. Student 3 wrote that it “Would have been helpful to have a book that was simple to understand. Waikato txt [sic] seemed poorly written and difficult to follow.” In the evaluations, one student wrote, “The tutor is required to use the Waikato Math 166 Book which at times can be too theoretical and abstract for what we are learning. Booklet needs more management examples exercises [sic].” The booklet contained applications to science, medical and business disciplines and the students had difficulty with the applications outside their discipline because the context was not familiar.

## **Shifting sands**

A key reason for the success of this paper was that the teacher was an effective mathematics teacher<sup>2</sup> with a little business knowledge, rather than an effective business teacher with a little mathematical knowledge. It must be remembered that the focus of this paper was to provide sufficient skills in mathematics for the students to be able to cope with any business applications they encountered in their other papers. The emphasis shifted in each topic within the course from pure mathematics to applied mathematics. In one assignment in particular, the problems were written completely in context. The students had to adapt and some found this difficult because they had to recognise the mathematical procedures required to solve the problem. Experience with this type of problem increased their ability to solve problems of this kind.

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<sup>2</sup> Evidenced by the receipt of two peer-nominated sustained teacher excellence awards (2009 and 2005), one student-nominated exceptional adult educator award (2002) and consistently high ratings in annual student evaluations.

All students needed to be reached at their individual levels of mathematical expertise. This did not involve re-teaching the basic skills as topics but rather being aware of when they were embedded in the current topic and addressing them at the start of the class. As misunderstandings arose, these could be addressed and the foundations firmed. In one case, individual tuition was needed to address a problem area. By the end of the paper, all students were feeling much more confident. Student 3 felt: “more confident that if I’m shown how to solve a maths problem I can grasp it and apply it to other problems.” This student also stated that she had learnt she could tackle anything and, with diligence, could achieve. This was a revelation and a great mind-shift for her. Student 2 also commented: “I feel a lot better about them now, feel more confident, and refreshed heaps of basic things I had completely forgotten from school.”

Changing personal circumstances also required students to cope differently. It was fortunate that an alternative system of assessment - 100% on the examination - was available for the student who had on-going family illness to contend with. The system of eliminating the worst two assignments was also to the advantage of two students whose external circumstances impacted on their progress.

## **Summary**

Good organisation and preparation, along with the use of simple language, coverage of basic skills and a slow build-up of processes all contributed to effective teaching. Students came from diverse backgrounds which necessitated an awareness of the gaps in their knowledge and attention to those at appropriate times throughout the paper. Extra support was essential for the majority of students and readily used. Feelings towards mathematics also varied but by the end of the paper all students felt motivated and confident they could succeed.

A mixture of learning styles was favoured by most students and this was provided for by maintaining student-centred learning and responding to their expressed needs. Power Point was not required and students strongly rejected the suggestion of using it. A relaxed atmosphere within the classroom was recognised as important. The mix of assignments, tests and examination was well received, especially with the different options for grading.

Understanding was gained through effective teaching but passing required a good revision programme. There were many and varied external factors and these were able to be negotiated around within the flexible framework of the course. There is a need for a booklet with less abstract examples and simpler language.

Some business knowledge, linked with a sound knowledge of mathematical content, along with a deeper understanding of the concepts plus a teaching pedagogy developed from approximately 30 years of reflective teaching experience enabled this paper to be delivered effectively. Small classes allowed personal as well as group tuition. Following this study, it was recommended that the booklet be revised with less emphasis on abstract mathematics, simpler language and more relevant problems. It

was also suggested that a computer programme be used in the graphical section. These new amendments to the paper will be trialled in 2010, and the ongoing evaluation project will compare new students' experiences with those reported here.

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# **International students' experience of an internal pathway to postgraduate study: Recognising and applying writing strategies to their discipline specific work**

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## **Abstract**

International students comprise 76% of the coursework postgraduate cohort in the Faculty of Business at the University of Tasmania. The traditional pathway for students whose first language is not English has been to have an IELTS score of 6. However, we also have an internal entry pathway via DEAP (Direct Entry Academic Program) for international students, which is taught in the English Language Centre. This programme has grown in size and popularity and in November 2008 there were 138 students in 9 DEAP classes. While there has been research into the effects of intensive IELTS preparation classes, and investigations of other EAP courses, as yet there has been no published data about the outcomes for the DEAP students. This study aimed to have ex-DEAP students identify effective writing strategies and to evaluate whether they used those strategies effectively and consistently when tackling writing tasks in their discipline.

## **Introduction: A changing landscape**

Initially, as participants in the Direct Entry Academic Program (DEAP), the students are laying a foundation for academic literacy, with the focus of instruction being on language skills. Irrespective of background or experience, they are grouped in small classes wholly comprised of fellow international students, and taught by a small group of teachers. They have moved from employment or advanced study back to the basics of language and skill acquisition. Once they successfully complete the course and gain admission to their discipline specific course, the ground shifts again. Now they are part of a much larger cohort, comprising local and international students. Their courses of study are subdivided into subjects that are often very different from each other and are taught by a range of lecturers with a variety of styles and expectations. Those students who enrol in postgraduate coursework programmes are also moving towards becoming professional practitioners in their field, and then often into employment in Australia.

<sup>1</sup> Counsell, J. (2010). International students' experience of an internal pathway to postgraduate study: Recognising and applying writing strategies to their discipline specific work. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevallano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 128-138). Auckland: ATLAANZ.

This process of positioning themselves in relation to their learning, to the university, to the culture and towards the audiences for whom they write, is a dynamic and complex one.

## *Background*

We know some things about how international students tackle writing and the difficulties that they face. For example, Paltridge (2004) has provided a concise and thorough review of writing requirements at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study, described how writing is taught and how the various approaches have developed and also discussed assessment. Silva (1993) has investigated the distinct features of L2 writing and the practical implications. Hirsh (2007) has explored issues to do with the admission processes for international students and thus begun to identify ways to provide the most effective programmes of support. Storch and Hill (2008) have examined the factors which lead to an improvement in English language proficiency after one semester at an Australian university.

We also know some things about the predictive value of IELTS scores due to the work of Dooley (1999), Woodrow (2006), and Ingram and Bayliss (2007). We have been alerted to the limitations of generic skills courses by Leki and Carson (1997) and the positive attributes of content based EAP programmes by James (2006) and Baik and Greig (2009). We also have an investigation of the coping strategies of five ESL students at an American university (Leki, 1995) and a study of both faculty responses and those of 325 ESL students also at an American university by Zamel (1995). Goode (2007) has investigated the construction of what it means to be an independent learner among eight staff and 20 PhD students in a postgraduate course in a British university. Buckingham (2008) has examined the development of academic writing competence in English among a group of 25 Turkish academics and Spack (1997) conducted a longitudinal study (three years) of a Japanese student in an American university as she acquired academic literacy in English.

## *The study*

The study that I undertook uses a set of five categories to identify the strategies which students were taught in their intensive language course (DEAP) and attempts to find out which of these strategies were seen as useful and which were actually used by the students when they tackled writing tasks in their discipline specific courses.

Almost all of the international postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business are doing coursework masters. Almost half (47% in 2009) of our postgraduate coursework cohort comes to us after completing the DEAP which is a 10/15 week course run by the English Language Centre (ELC). The entrance requirements for the ten week DEAP are an IELTS score of 5.5, with no band below 5.5 and for the fifteen week DEAP, a score of 5.5, with no band below 5. Since the DEAP provides so many of our students, and we have no data to track their progress, this pilot research project was undertaken. It was important for us to know how effective the DEAP had been from a student perspective.

In Semester 1, 2009, ex-DEAP students represented 14.1% of the students who came to see me for individual or group assistance with their writing within the Faculty of Business. My position exists solely to provide academic support to postgraduate students within the faculty. I emailed fourteen students who had completed a DEAP course and subsequently enrolled in postgraduate courses in Business and who had been to see me for individual consultations about their writing; four expressed a willingness to undertake to fill out a questionnaire and to take part in a follow up interview. The follow up interviews were taped (using an MP3 player). The Director of Studies (DOS) in the English Language Centre and the DEAP coordinator were also interviewed and recorded in order to ensure that I understood how the programme was running and what kind of texts the students were asked to write. I also obtained a copy of the text book which all DEAP students use and examined that in the light of the questions I asked about writing. The four participants are all female and all Chinese and are all currently postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business. For reasons of confidentiality I will refer to them as Nancy, Cherie, Lucy and Jane, although these are not their names.

The questionnaire and follow up semi structured interview were adapted from the work of Congjun Mu, whose PhD thesis was published as *Second language writing strategies: A study of three Chinese post-graduate students* (2007). She was interested to explore the issue of the transfer of Chinese writing strategies into English writing, as well as documenting the strategies students reported using. My objective was much more modest and circumscribed. The 100 item questionnaire, which Mu used, was in turn adapted from a longer one designed by Victori (1995). I further adapted the questionnaire to suit the purposes of this enquiry. The follow up interview was intended to enable me to find out some background for each participant and to provide the opportunity to clarify the brief responses to the questionnaire. Participants were given a 5 part numeric scale to respond to the questions, from (1) I strongly disagree to (5) I strongly agree.

The classification of the writing strategies (see Table 1) into rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, communicative and social/affective categories was based on Mu's new and tentative theory. Her theory is in turn based on a combination of an understanding of the theories of contrastive rhetoric, cognitive development, communication and social constructionism (Mu, 2007, p. 26). The taxonomy of 17 micro-strategies for writing (see Table 1), which I have used, is also her work.

Table 1. *The taxonomy of ESL writing strategies (Mu, 2005, as cited in Mu, 2007, p.107)*

Macro-strategies	Micro-strategies
Rhetorical	O organisation ULI use of first language C coherence
Metacognitive	P planning E evaluation M monitoring
Cognitive	GI generating ideas B borrowing Ret retrieval CI clarification SA sense of audience Rev revision
Communicative	Av avoidance Red reduction
Social/Affective	Co cooperation Res resourcing RA reducing anxiety

## The problem

While we have mechanisms in place to evaluate units of work and the teaching of those units, we lack instruments with which to evaluate student learning strategies, particularly the transfer of those strategies from intensive language courses to their discipline-specific courses. We know that language learning continues, and this study, albeit with a small group of participants, was one way to gain some understanding of how some students manage their language learning in a discipline specific context. These students are a small sample, but they are representative of the international student cohort. From their experiences, teachers and language advisers can gain some insights which will inform our teaching practice.

## Rhetorical strategies

The students agreed that organisation was important in writing, particularly when producing content rich work, but it posed significant difficulties. One of those difficulties was the lack of sufficient flexibility to be able to express thoughts with precision. Often students used their L1 to express an idea when they could not find an equivalent in English. This created the additional problem of having to go back to translate. Jane eschewed the use of direct translation from her L1. She said that she realised that the Chinese pattern of thinking is different and the use of proverbs or as she calls them, "sentences from history", make exact translations impossible. Confidence in one's ability to write well in the L1 did not flow over into writing in



English, and at least one student said that her writing in English was better than her writing in the L1.

## Metacognitive strategies

All four students agreed that they had been taught to plan their writing and that they recognised it as being important. Lucy and Nancy made a particular point of explaining that they spent a lot of time analysing the question/topic, which most lecturers, who refer students to me, often mention as a strategy which students do not employ enough. Lucy also particularly mentioned reading widely as a strategy to improve her writing. When it came to evaluation of their writing, the students were clearly ambivalent about spending precious time on surface errors, compared with time spent on the meaning and structure.

Cherie keeps a list of the errors she has made in the past and checks her work to eliminate such errors. But she was quite clear that “I don’t quite care about grammar and spelling.” When asked to expand on this she explained that the content is the more important feature and corrections can be done later: “It does not matter to me if there are lots of mistakes in my writing as long as people understand what I am saying.”

Lucy and Nancy both maintained that they had learned a lot about writing in the last year and Lucy had confirmed this to her own satisfaction by taking another IELTS test and seeing her band score improve by 0.5. Jane also made a point of the need to recognise different demands depending on the subjects being studied. Writing a law paper demanded different skills from other business subjects. The students’ recognition that particular disciplines required a particular approach to writing can encourage us, as language teachers, to examine again the value of teaching students more explicitly to analyse texts and identify these particularities of genre.

## Cognitive strategies

All four students mentioned brain storming and mind mapping as strategies to generate ideas, and talked about experience and imagination being important, although Cherie pointed out that imagination is rarely required in business writing, which relies more on factual input. The importance of the relationship with the reader was acknowledged by all participants. Lucy pointed out that different lecturers had different expectations of written work and that it was important to follow their individual advice. When writing in English she claimed that she felt more responsibility for the reader and hence “I must write simply”, whereas in Chinese, she has confidence that the reader will understand her. Jane recognised the writer’s responsibility in English “to do the hard work”, and to make things clear for the reader. For this reason, she preferred reading the Bible in English, because the writing was so explicit. Nancy also accepted that the writer should assume responsibility for the reader’s understanding of the text, a point which is supported by the DEAP text book: “Essays are not mystery stories, in which the reader waits until the end to find out what it has all been about” (Summers & Smith, 2006, p.

70). This seems to me to be a crucial point which teachers/advisers could make more explicit in their instruction. Cognitive strategies, such as summarising and paraphrasing for example are vital to many of the writing tasks which the students undertake, and can be modelled and taught. An awareness of the audience, and the need to provide signals or links for the reader to follow, are also vital to good academic writing style, and again it is possible to instruct students how to do this, particularly by examining well written texts.

Both Nancy and Jane demonstrated quite a sophisticated understanding of the writing process in that, while recognising the general forward movement towards resolution/conclusion, there is also a recursive, repetitive aspect to academic writing. Silva (1990, p. 15) says “...writing is a complex, recursive and creative process or set of behaviours that is very similar in its broad outlines for first and second language writers.” Jane made the point in her interview that if she just wrote a ‘linear’ essay, she might pass, but if she wanted a higher mark she needed to write in a ‘circular way’ and ‘go deeper’ into things, since ideas were the most important thing when writing.

While the students recognised the value of drafting work and revising it, they also admitted that they often did not do this, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they ran out of time and simply submitted work which they had not read through. In the same vein, they supported the idea of leaving a piece of work for a couple of days and then coming back to it in order to revise it. However, they rarely did this in practice. Another reason, apart from shortage of time, was the risk of confusion. Once they began the revision process they ran the risk of becoming more confused about the purpose of the paper and the students wanted to avoid this. Even if they did produce more than one draft of a paper, the students were not clear about whether the first and the final draft were substantially different or not. Perhaps they were also unsure as to whether the drafts should be substantially different. This is also an important point for teachers to follow up on because editing and revision skills can be taught and students can become more adept at self editing their work.

## Communicative strategies

The questions asked in this area attempted to discover the strategies students used when they confronted obstacles to expressing themselves. The students recognised that sometimes they over used certain words and used a thesaurus to find a substitute word or wrote in their L1 and went back later to translate. Lack of a sufficient vocabulary to express ideas and opinions was a common problem. Sometimes these students simplified a complex idea because they could not find an acceptable way of expressing it and this was frustrating. While one of the four students had maintained a disciplined regime of vocabulary acquisition the others had largely given up, despite the fact that they all acknowledged the benefits of using the Academic Word List as part of their course in DEAP. Explicit encouragement to continue to acquire vocabulary would benefit students, as would some explicit teaching of vocabulary.

## Social/affective strategies

For these students, asking a classmate rather than the lecturer for clarification was the preferred strategy. This changed over time, and Lucy commented that after a semester, she felt more comfortable asking the lecturer for assistance. These students did rely on their classmates for support and encouragement although sometimes this could lead to a spread of inaccurate information. It was rare for these students to ask local students for information, partly due to the concentration of international students in Business subjects. Some students had contact with locals through church or sport and this provided both social and academic support for them. Our postgraduate coursework programmes are of short duration, so there is little opportunity to speak to past students, although the faculty has been pleasantly surprised by the willingness of students to volunteer support in particular units when asked via email. However, this support seems limited to content and none of these students asked peers to read their work to provide feedback on language. It is quite possible that this is also the case for local students too. This underlines the continued value of the feedback which advisors can provide to all students, not just international ones.

## Summing up and future work

Two of these students were progressing well, one was struggling and the other had renegotiated her major in response to an intervention strategy from the faculty, due to her poor academic progress.

Only one student specifically agreed that she had learned to write during the DEAP, but when interviewed, all four students attested to the value of the course. At least one of them (Jane) was aware of the shortcomings, which attend all such courses. They run for a relatively short period of time and while every effort is made to provide realistic texts and practice, it is still a skills programme as distinct from an authentic writing experience which students confront once they are enrolled in their disciplines (James, 2006; Leki & Carson, 1997). And of course, the particular demands of individual subjects, such as business law, had to be negotiated.

The items on which all four students agreed were in the rhetorical and metacognitive categories. The need and value of planning and organising writing was supported in the text book (Summers & Smith, 2006, p. 69), as was the value of clarifying your ideas and having a main idea to write about (p. 70). Varied sentence lengths and the importance of reading were also stressed in the textbook (p. 71). However, as these unanimously held views only constituted one quarter and one fifth of the items in the respective categories and, given the small sample size, it is not possible to draw any generalised conclusions. It was apparent that students adapted and developed their writing strategies based on experience and the demands of the particular subjects and lecturers. This is supported by the research. Volet (1999, p. 634) summarises several studies which indicated that:

...most CHC (Confucian Heritage Culture) students did anticipate on their arrival in Australia that what was expected of a good student at high school 'back home' was likely to be different in the Australian university context. Students were prepared for change and their expectations about study at university in Australia were found to be quite accurate.

Wong's survey of Asian international students in an Australian university (2004, p.165) also concluded that his research finding "seems to support those of Biggs (1996) and Volet and Renshaw (1996), that Chinese learners are highly adaptive for learning." Of course, the extent to which they did this successfully depended on more than the training that they had received in DEAP (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Watkins, 2000; Wong & Wen, 2001; Woodrow, 2006).

The interviews with these four students have indicated that they have accepted the need to adapt, with varying degrees of success. However, these changes and adaptations to the shifting terrain of academic study depend on their personal resources and the appropriate application of effective strategies. As Holmes (2004, p. 303) characterises it, "the onus is on these Chinese students to reconstruct and renegotiate their primary culture learning and communication styles to accommodate another way." In this process of reconstruction and accommodation these students often found themselves in unfamiliar territory. Sometimes they used the strategies which had been taught to them in the DEAP, but at other times the exigencies of time pressure, cultural unfamiliarity and lack of confidence undermined their position. A follow up to this brief snapshot of DEAP students would be a detailed, longitudinal study of a DEAP cohort to further unravel the strategies which enhance student learning about writing. Such a study, which investigated the teaching and learning in more detail could provide data which could be used as evidence to support closer alignment between the language skills being taught in DEAP and the assessment tasks required in the coursework masters degree in the Faculty of Business.

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## Bridging the cultural gaps: Collaborative and reflective practice

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### Abstract

Adjusting to study at university is difficult for all students as they find themselves in the 'shifting sands' of a new learning context where their existing assumptions and expectations of teaching and learning are challenged. However, for international students studying in New Zealand the adjustment is more difficult because they have to adapt to the different cultural and education context. This article describes the collaborative and reflective teaching practices that underpinned a series of school based, discrete workshops provided by Student Learning Advisors at The University of Waikato. The heterogeneous group of international students were studying at different levels from first year undergraduate, to postgraduate and masters degree and therefore had differing learning needs. A supportive and collegial learning environment developed as the series progressed and the student became familiar with the university and the educational context. That environment and the content of the workshops contributed to the development of 'firm foundations' in academic literacy and learning processes, and the development of graduate attributes.

### Introduction

"I know nothing about sheep". These words were uttered by an international student who had recently arrived in New Zealand to study at postgraduate level. She was almost in despair over the task of summarising academic journal articles, each rich in language, content, and culture. In the article that gave her particular trouble the author used the culturally-based metaphor of drafting sheep to introduce the idea that once the education system streams learners, their destiny is self-fulfilling. Culturally grounded literature was just one of the challenges that faced the group of students who attended the co-taught series of workshops. English was the second language for all the students who attended and most were studying at postgraduate but had not studied at tertiary level for some time, while others were first year undergraduates. The series was designed to steady the 'shifting sands' as they adapted to the university environment and the content focused on developing academic literacy and the transferable learning processes required for success in university study. Also, the graduate attributes that

would be applicable to their roles in the community when their study was completed were modelled and made explicit. This paper presents a case study of a series of co-taught workshops taught by two Learning Advisors and underpinned by reflective practice.

### Background

Although the concept of collaborative teaching tends to be contrary to the culture of individualism that presides (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001), we chose to co-teach in order to draw on each other's strengths and experience and because this approach benefits students. Our decision was fully supported within our unit despite the extra time involved in the collaborative process of planning, agreeing on resources and reflecting on each workshop in order to address the emerging needs of the learners. However, the content and resources developed are adaptable for future workshops and for eventual use in the eLearning environment our unit is developing. Because we were able to choose to work with a peer who shared our teaching goals and philosophy other possible disadvantages of co-teaching such as power struggles between the teachers or confused learners because of lack of consistency in planning and delivery, were avoided (Bailey et al., 2001).

Co-teaching the workshops provided opportunities for peer observation, self reflection and professional growth. Underpinning our presentation of the discrete workshops in the series was 'reflection-in-practice' with each workshop reshaped, while in process, in response to student interaction (Farrell, 1998; Schon, 1987). Following each workshop we met to 'reflect-on-action' which provided an opportunity to reframe content and presentation and to plan the following workshop in response to observed student needs. However, for reflective practice to be valid it must combine both 'experiential knowledge' gained during teaching practice, and 'received knowledge' based on theory and informed by research (Wallace, 1990). Co-teaching provided depth in each of these aspects as our strengths and knowledge were combined. Another benefit of this collaborative practice was that during the process of peer observation, the students' responses to the teaching style and the content was noted and then integrated into the teaching context as the series progressed.

Initially research into the series of workshops was not considered as a possibility. Our goal was to provide flexible and responsive learning development opportunities that would enable the students and assist them to bridge the cultural gap within their new environment. However, as the series progressed and during the process of planning, we recognised that we were critically combining reflection and practitioner research in order to improve our professional practice (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch & Somekh, 2008). That is, our case study fits the criteria of practical action research which Altrichter et al. (2008) describe as practitioners making opportunities to reflect and critique their work in order to make changes and to share their experiences with colleagues without grappling with underlying ideologies. Throughout the series we questioned our own and each other's practice in order to find better ways of assisting

<sup>1</sup> Strang, P., & Haines, A. (2010). Bridging the cultural gaps: Collaborative and reflective practice. In V. van der Ham, L. Sevillano, & L. George (Eds.), *Shifting sands, firm foundations: Proceedings of the 2009 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 138-147). Auckland: ATLAANZ.



the students to bridge the gaps and steady the 'shifting sands'. However, the central focus remained reflection-on-practice in order to respond to the emerging needs of the students and to empower them in their learning. The result was a series of discrete workshops that were responsive to the emergent needs of the multi-cultural group of international students.

### *The learners*

The majority of the learners who attended the workshops were from the Pacific and they were all mature, well qualified and experienced professionals in their field of study. However, because they had not undertaken study for some time or at this university, they faced social and academic challenges similar to 'first year experience' students (Grace & Gravestock, 2009). Further, students returning to study, after even a relatively short space of time, find there are shifts in the discipline content and in the academic literacy skills required for success. For instance, in the space of five years, the widespread use of information technology within courses at our university has led to the introduction of new literacy practices, procedures and new assessment methods, which are an added challenge for students (Henderson & Hirst, 2007). Also, although the students had attended a short and useful orientation course prior to entering university, it could only provide them with a generalised overview of the context in which they were to study and the requirements of the New Zealand education system. One of the benefits of the series of workshops was that there were opportunities to respond to the students as new challenges emerged.

Most of the learners were intrinsically motivated and well prepared for study in a foreign country but others were not. Through observation of the learners and their conversations we identified students who were initially disorientated by the differences between the new environment and education in their home country. Some were also distracted by personal and social factors involved in living in another culture and they appeared to progress through the stages of acculturation before adapting (Brown, 2000). As Barkhuizen (2004) states, there are numerous variables that contribute to the expectations a student has of the new country, including culturally based prior learning and Brown (2000, p. 183) identifies "world view, self identity, and systems of thinking, acting, feeling and communicating" as being disrupted when entering a new culture. These variables can contribute to miscommunication between the learners and lecturer (Reinders, Lewis & Kirkness, 2006), and further add to the learners' discomfort. The students' discomfort was exacerbated, within the university environment and socially, by the difficulties they had decoding culturally-based metaphors, colloquialisms, and native speaker body language. The workshops helped to reduce these effects by responding to academic literacy needs and providing a forum for discussion and supportive collegiality amongst the students. Indeed, one student shared with us that, although he found the content of the workshops helpful, his motivation for attending was because his study was fully on-line and he felt isolated from the academic community.

### *The teaching approach*

Given the mix of nationalities, genders, ages and levels of study, preferred ways of learning varied within the group and in response, our teaching style aimed to create a classroom environment where differences were recognised and valued. Rather than transmitting knowledge, the style was a mix of 'explainer': answering questions and providing students with insights; 'involver': using resources that encouraged opportunities for interaction; and 'enabler': responding to the classroom context and creating opportunities for the learners to learn for themselves (Schrivener, 1994). Most of all we endeavoured to build a non-threatening learning environment by drawing on three core teaching characteristics: 'respect' for the students as adults with previous experiences; 'empathy' through looking at the cultural gaps from the students perspective; and 'authenticity' by working as a co-adult rather than a teacher (Bailey et al., 2001; Schrivener, 1994). The combination of these attributes added value to the development of a collegial environment within the workshops, especially when combined with reflective and collaborative practice.

Our teaching model was an eclectic mix of 'complementary co-teaching' with each contributing to and complementing the other's practice, and 'team teaching' which included sharing the planning and presentation of the workshops (Nevin, Thousand & Villa, 2009). We also shared informal and continual assessment of the students' progress and of emerging needs identified through observation and reflection. Synergies developed as a result of bringing together our different perspectives, ideas, activities and knowledge (Conderman & McCarty, 2003), and enabled us to model transferable skills including, analytical and critical thinking and responding to and extending ideas. We also introduced and challenged different perspectives within the classroom. The non-evaluative observations that developed through our co-teaching relationship allowed us to "see again or see differently, the events of a lesson and reconstruct [our] understanding" (Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999, p. 19). In effect, a reciprocal mentoring and informal professional development relationship evolved, benefiting both the advisors and the students.

It is easy to suggest that motivation, intrinsic and/or extrinsic, underpins student success at university, but the constructivist view recognises there are underlying expectations that must first be met. That is, until students feel secure and identify with the learning context, their full potential will not be reached (Brown, 2000; Maslow, 1970). During a workshop discussion the students commented that they felt uncomfortable asking questions of the lecturer, and one student explained: "We don't know what we don't know so we don't know what to ask". He then added "... the lecturers don't know what we don't know so they don't know what to tell us". Johnson's (2008) findings were similar when international students reported that when they do not understand the lecturer, they ask a friend or another student for clarification rather than approach the lecturer. As students identified such difficulties our response was to emphasise appropriate processes to assist them to negotiate social practices within the university context (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004). Misunderstanding of the

university culture, lack of content knowledge and hesitancy to question are distinct barriers to learning development and once identified provided insights into the type of activities that would benefit the students in the workshops. One such insight was the realisation that one student had taken the concept of ‘independent learning’ literally to mean she must be self motivated and work without any assistance at all, which led to her isolation from academic stimulation.

## The workshops

A framework of topics for the workshop series was developed well in advance of the semester and in conjunction with the school’s international co-ordinators. The selection of topics was based on experience of student needs gained during individual meetings, previous workshops, the literature and gaps identified by lecturers. Student attendance was optional, although it was encouraged by the international co-ordinators; that is, students self-selected which workshops to attend and there was no assessment. As a result, attendance varied depending on the topic, although a core group of students met regularly with the consequence that at any one workshop there could be ten different nationalities represented, bringing a vibrant mix of culture and language. We found that through co-teaching within a subject area, rather than sole-teaching cross-discipline workshops in generic skills, we were able to tailor activities in response to the students’ emerging needs.

### *Active learning*

In recognition that people have different learning style preferences and to ensure that we did not merely teach in the way we preferred to learn, the workshop activities were varied (Grace & Gravestock, 2009). In particular, the focus was on actively talking and writing in order to explore ideas; for example, the students deconstructed and reconstructed texts to highlight embedded literary devices and to identify rhetorical contexts (Bean, 1996). These and other active learning opportunities allowed students to develop their academic literacy but also helped them, and us, identify their learning strengths and how these could contribute to academic success (Bean, 1996). This was evident in the simulated debate instigated to demonstrate the development of an academic argument. The Pasifika students presented a compelling argument in support of their position and showed their cohesive teamwork, oral fluency and the ability to respond spontaneously and effectively with little preparation. The same debate effectively provided a learning opportunity for those students who needed help in structuring arguments and orally planning and communicating within a group. The similarities between the debating process and developing an argument in a written academic essay were made explicit, thus demonstrating the transferability of skills and processes.

Another multidimensional outcome resulted from the SWOB (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and barriers) analysis, an adaptation of the SWOT analysis framework. This activity required students to reflect on the previous weeks of study and identify their strengths, the things that did not go so well, the opportunities there were for

improvement in the future and how to overcome any barriers to success they identified. The activity culminated in their setting goals for the coming weeks. Through this process each student made their achievements explicit and this provided them with reassurance at a time when assignment deadlines were pressing and causing some stress. Another activity included the evaluation of a seminar presented poorly by an ‘expert’. Using a framework, the students were encouraged to critique and thus break down the barrier of perceiving experts or published authors as being above criticism. Initially we observed that the students were uncomfortable and inhibited about providing this feedback, but with encouragement they found they had the knowledge and skills to analyse information and make judgments. The activity provided the opportunity to focus on the difference between criticism and being critical in an academic sense, and highlighted that the questioning of lecturers and academic texts is an integral aspect of academic study.

The underlying objective of the active learning activities was the development of transferable processes and attributes, especially the concepts of thinking reflectively, analytically and critically. Our teaching approach included modelling reflection and questioning, and encouraging students to become involved in the learning process in order to become more self-directed and independent, as is required for success in a western university environment. Consequently, we used every opportunity to make explicit the transferable skills that were being modelled and provide spontaneous verbal reinforcement that showed students their contributions were valued. As the students were from the same school of study, authentic resources could be utilised for each of the activities and they provided the students with opportunities for discussion and the development of content and contextual knowledge.

## Evaluation

As reflective practitioners we continually subjected our practice and intrinsic beliefs to informal summative evaluation based on reflection during and after the workshops and peer observation (Cunningham Florez, 2001; Farrell, 1998). This practice underpinned the evaluation of whether our collaborative approach was effective and led to the continual refocusing of content and resources to meet the students’ learning needs. As there were no assessment activities to evaluate students’ progress during the series, informal assessment was important in gauging the students’ responses to the programme. However, a strong indication that the content was useful and the environment comfortable, was that student attendance was regular. Alternatively, because attendance was voluntary if the workshops not met their needs they would have voted with their feet. Following each workshop PowerPoint slides were forwarded to those present, providing the students with a record on which to reflect independently and in their own time. A typical comment from a student in the official confidential summative evaluation was: “[In] the workshops I attended we did class discussions and activities, had a PowerPoint and were emailed the ppp which was great”. Another student also referred to the benefit of the handouts saying, “The notes are useful for current tasks and for later retrieval”.

Other comments gathered from the summative evaluation survey were positive. A student commented that “The workshops were important for my studies as I previously completed my studies 6 years ago”, reinforcing the benefit of the series for ‘first year experience’ students. With regard to the content, a comment was “It is useful for my assignment and I learn a lot on how to write a good critique”. Answers to questions about the teaching practice included, “The facilitators were always ready and gave authentic examples we could relate to”; and “The tutors are very helpful and good at explanation”. Another student commented “there was collaborativeness with the two facilitator [sic]”. Indicating the importance of the teaching approach to the students, comments included: “They were great, friendly and understanding of our needs”; and “They have time to listen and time to share knowledge and if not clear, after the workshop, we could ask questions”. Consequently, we conclude that this on-going workshop series provided a comfortable learning environment and a supportive learning community based on the commonalities of subject area, and English as a second language. The series also contributed to the students’ understanding of the university environment as indicated by the comment: “Yes, the work has helped very much to understand what learning is in New Zealand”.

The official evaluation also asked the students if there were any topic they would like included in the workshops and there were a number of suggestions which were introduced in the following series. One student commented “I would like individual time with the facilitator on my personal needs” and to counter this we instigated a drop-in session following each workshop where students can meet with a Learning Advisor for 15 minutes. We have noted that this time is also used for student to student conversations further encouraging collegiality and support among the peer group. In the future, evaluation and feedback could be gained through a focus group thus extending the opportunity for student input. However, at the time of writing this paper a colleague is observing during workshops and will interview students as part of a study of student engagement. This will provide research-based feedback and suggestions for future direction.

## Conclusion

Our practical action research indicates that the collaboratively and reflectively co-taught series of workshops assisted students to bridge the gap into the university community and to meet the institution’s expectations. The ‘sheep drafting metaphor’ is just one example of culturally-based content that created difficulties for the international students as they adjusted to studying in the university environment in a new country. This was countered by the flexibility of our approach which enabled us to respond to emergent needs and model the skills and attributes that are valued in a western institution. As Nunan and Lamb (1996) suggest, students are more likely to develop autonomy when teachers model that process and co-teaching provided opportunities for such demonstrations. In relation to our professional development, collaborative teaching created an opportunity for informal mentoring by a trusted colleague. Also, the combining of experiences and expertise with reflective practice contributed to

our on-going professional development as Learning Advisors. The conclusion is also drawn that the co-taught embedded series of workshops contributed to the steadying of the ‘shifting sands’ in the students’ new learning context and reduced the isolation of the ‘first year experience’.

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## Comprehending the always becoming and never is: The concept 'discipline' *in re*

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### Abstract

Meaning requires social participation and structure. Culturally and historically situated both participation and structure mutate. In consequence meanings and the conceptual frameworks in which each is embedded are neither nebulous nor entirely coherent. Although lack of discreteness creates an impression that related meanings and frameworks are independent and interdependent, the “overlapping and blurring need not be evidence that invalidates the classifications” (Peck MacDonald, 1994, p. 12). It is in the sense of disciplines as classifications of meaning that defining them requires scrutiny of the history of the act of classification itself. This explains why disciplines defy normative definition and why they can only adequately be apprehended *in re*, in the process of becoming. Why is it important to do so? Disciplines are the dominant principle around which universities currently are organised. From a contemporary perspective, therefore, they have an apparent permanence borne of familiarity. They are, however, relatively recent innovations: the oldest of Europe’s universities have not had disciplines for as long as they have had them. From this perspective disciplines might come to be considered simply ephemeral reflections of Realism. Ephemeral because classification, a necessary condition for human cognition, only works when the advantages of simplification outweigh the loss from view of complex interrelationships. It is in this context that the exponential elaboration during the twentieth century of the networks linking an increasingly fragmented yet interdependent global society served to destabilise established categories of knowledge (Smith & Jenks, 2006) and, in doing so, exposed the disciplinary exceptionalism of universities to interrogation.

### Relevance

Unlike the case in medieval universities where dialectic was both content and method or in eighteenth and nineteenth century modernist universities where scientism was also both content and method, content and method at contemporary universities have become fundamentally detached. There is no discipline specific methodology and no method without adjectives that is specific to any methodology. This means that Learning Advisors need to indicate their awareness of this development through the use in all disciplinary contexts of methodologically inclusive vocabulary. They need

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to be aware, for example, that the concept ‘argument’ is disputed on epistemological grounds by those who, instead, use the concept ‘conversation’. That the term ‘literature review’ is disputed by those who, instead, use the term ‘review of the discourses’ and that the word ‘problem’ connotes a bounded question and an encapsulated answer. As such it does profound injury to the open-endedness of complex research settings. Language, like knowledge, is not simply ‘transparent’, reflecting an objective reality: as an inevitable consequence of its socially constructed, communicative function, it is a constitutive force reflecting particular perspectives, as in the case of disciplines, in a continual process of becoming.

## Introduction

Disciplines are the dominant principle around which contemporary universities are organised and the research work undertaken in them legitimised. In this sense they constitute the sociology of academia: cultures and frames of reference defining sets of material practices designed to generate viable ways of knowing. But, reflecting a mere sequence of the more recent of the theoretical stances characterising Western intellectual history, disciplines are novel and evolving conceptualisations. They were not originally conceived as such. In the intellectual environment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they were regarded as accreted slices of knowledge legitimised by the laws of a rational universe. However, in an institutional setting, disciplines become destabilized when confronted with new understandings and different sets of social needs. It is thus no accident that the exponential elaboration during the late twentieth century of the networks linking an increasingly fragmented yet interdependent global society have led the purposes of research to become more diffuse and the number of legitimised ‘ways of knowing’ to increase (Newman, Ridenour, Newman, & DeMarco, 2003). It is, therefore, also no accident that qualitative, mixed methods and interdisciplinary research, individually and collectively, also reflect complexity and ambiguity. It is apparent, therefore, that disciplines are culturally and historically situated (Davies & Devlin, 2007). Although they have an apparent permanence borne of familiarity their evolution has impacted on their identity and cultural characteristics (Becher & Trowler, 2001). This explains why they defy normative definition and *post rem* (having become) taxonomic description. They can only adequately be apprehended, as befits evolving structures, *in re*: in the process of becoming (Frow, 2006).

## Scholasticism

It was, Kuhn argued, the dialectic exchange within and between schools of thought such as those of Plato and Aristotle in the 4th century BCE that resulted in a preliminary synthesis of ideas and assumptions about the nature and purpose of different ways of knowing. This was the process that marked the beginning of what would later become a disciplinary culture: by removing the need to constantly renegotiate who does what and why, it allowed a ‘community of practice’ to emerge thus facilitating an exchange of ideas about specific issues (Schoenberger, 2001). The motivation for both Plato

and Aristotle was a question that, as yet, remains unresolved: how does consciousness emerge from matter? Plato’s response was to argue that although matter obeys physical laws life, and thus consciousness, is a vital force beyond human comprehension infused into mere material (Lewin, 2001). This made Plato an idealist: Truth, because it is a product of consciousness, must be independent of us. This belief resulted in a set of philosophical distinctions, appearance – reality, mind– body that dominated Western philosophy until the mid-twentieth century. It was these distinctions that allowed Plato to provide the Socratic project of establishing universal claims with philosophic structure.

Thus, by demarcating a boundary between what he considered superior philosophic thinking and the partial view of other types of thought (Rumana, 2000), Plato took the first steps toward identifying a specific subject field. Plato’s influence was also fundamental in the early medieval church where his concept of pure and complete universals explained both the nature of the divine and the relation between body and soul: the former as shadow and the latter as eternal. It was to be expected, therefore, that Platonism underlay the medieval system of education in both schools and universities. Prefiguring the contemporary nature-nurture debate Plato believed life has a pre-bodily existence where knowledge of the Forms, distinct but mind independent, immaterial, eternal entities, (numbers, for example) provide the basis of innate knowledge. It is in this context that Forms, because of their role as referents or universal concepts, allow us by intellectual inference alone to make the phenomenal world intelligible. The process is what Plato called turning the soul around, so rather than being concerned with the body the ‘eye of the soul’, instead, will gaze upon the *eidos*, the immaterial Forms, the invisible world of universal truths (Fiumara, 1995). This visual metaphor has played a determinative role in Western intellectual history. In contemporary terms we refer to ‘insight’ and we use the word theory which derives from the Greek verb *teorein*, to see (Fiumara, 1995). Plato knew that the world of the senses is stable enough for us to describe, but he also knew that we mistake what changes slowly for permanence: “as far as any rose could remember, no gardener had ever died” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 101). In contrast to the eternal world of the Forms sensory descriptions, therefore, could only achieve the status of *doxa*, or opinions. This remains a contemporary issue: “universal change is hostile to stable understanding. Science must proceed by finding the permanent among the impermanent” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 99). Plato did not, therefore, doubt the existence of a reality, but for him it was extrasensory.

Learning, therefore, was a process of being brought to an awareness, of being reminded, of the Forms. This was the purpose of philosophic insight and could only be achieved if students were exposed to a hierarchically-sequenced series of studies progressing from sense perception through to intellectual intuition. For this reason, in medieval schools the trivium, a course in the study of the elements and use of language, was preparatory to the study in the *quadrivium* of mathematics: arithmetic (pure number), geometry (stationary number), astronomy (moving number) and harmonics (applied

number). On this basis grammar, logic and rhetoric developed an understanding of what is said and written and mathematics, because the apparent certainty of its pure logic leads the mind upwards from the mutable to the immutable, permitted an understanding of the Divine (*Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 1907). Thus, as in the schools of classical antiquity, there was no need to develop a clearly defined concept ‘subject’, the trivium and quadrivium were simply a means to an end. Because Plato considered the spoken word greatly superior to the written (Peters, 2009), dialectic was the principal teaching method in both medieval schools and universities. Thus, because learning was a process of noetic cognition there was no need for content or theme: dialectic was both method and content. The teacher’s task, therefore, was to prompt reminiscence of the innate Forms: to allow truth, in other words, to be reborn. So, in addition to being noetic, dialectic, in the sense in which it elicits intuitive wisdom through critical questioning, was considered ‘maieutic’ (from maievtikos, meaning midwifery) (Rowland, 2006). For this reason the most important academic exercise at medieval universities was not a written examination but the disputation, and degrees were conferred on the basis of a student’s ability to defend a series of arguments or theses in open, rigorous debate.

Although the modern concept of a discipline was only to emerge later it had its origin in medieval universities. The etymology of the word lies in Latin where broadly interpreted it embraced education, training, self-control and determination. But it also had a particular meaning: because she embodied *frugalitas*, *severitas* and *fidelis*, *Disciplina* was one of the favourite goddesses of the early Roman legions. It was appropriate, therefore, for the term to be applied in medieval universities in the context of the qualities of self-control and orderliness required of a scholar. It was also in this context that a student was a *discipulus* of a teacher while the set of principles around which the latter based his teaching was a ‘doctrina’ (Craig, 2003) (Canon Law only applied to males so early universities were entirely male institutions). In its early use in an academic context, therefore, discipline implied only practice and behaviour rather than, as it means today, practice and behaviour together with a set of abstract principles (Craig, 2003).

The term ‘faculty’ was originally a loose term for ‘ability in knowledge’. On this basis it was first used in the early medieval period to apply to those teachers in church schools who had coalesced into informal groups on the grounds of what they taught. But, together with the charters establishing universities, particularly those issued in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, went statutes permitting each faculty to regulate its own affairs. For the first time, therefore, clear lines of administrative demarcation were drawn between what had previously been informal groups of teachers (*Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 1907). To this extent early faculties were roughly analogous to contemporary academic departments. It is not coincidental that this compartmentalising development coincided with the twelfth century rediscovery by the West as a consequence of the Crusades of the works of Aristotle. The emphasis in his writings upon the need to study and categorise particular things in order to

explain the universal was, during the course of the thirteenth century, for the first time successfully synthesised into Christian theology by St Thomas Aquinas. As opposed to the fundamentalist concern with Revealed Theology and its emphasis on faith alone, his concern was with Rational Theology in order to make Christianity a greater force for social justice: God’s plan for humanity, he believed, was accessible to Reason (Rumana, 2000). This fusion of Platonic, Aristotelian and eschatological Catholic thinking into Scholasticism enabled new ways of thinking about the world.

## Modernism

The logical consequence during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when these new ways of thinking were applied outside the authoritarian framework of the church was Humanism: a belief that Christian faith required a commitment to the search for truth and morality not through tradition or authority but through the application of reason alone. In this sense reason was liberating for its application could free humanity from its passions and its history. The logical consequence was individualism: “man [sic] in the image of God” (Smith & Jenks, 2006, p. 59). There was also a less logical consequence: Realism. Reflecting their historical legacy of opposition to an absolutist theology, Realists sought with Foundationalism, the idea that knowledge must be founded on concrete certainty, to establish a new science which would permit the same level of confidence which medieval theologians had expressed in their belief in a reality ontologically independent of the senses. The application of reason, an essence fundamentally detached from its surroundings (Linn, 1996), to establish objective facts upon which incontrovertible knowledge could be built proved extraordinarily seductive for most of the next three centuries.

Perhaps the primary reason for the allure of the power of reason is the attraction of the concept of an ordered universe. One without the other would, in fact, make little sense (Linn, 1996). Mathematics is a language apparently capable of precise definition in a way not possible by ‘natural’ language and it was in this sense that Galileo, as in the case of Plato, spoke of mathematics as the language of the universe: phenomena can be decomposed analytically and treated mathematically as though they were not complex systems but the sum of their parts (Smith & Jenks, 2006). It was Newton, though, who through the powers of mathematical calculation and empirical observation, appeared in his 1687 work *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* to have deciphered God’s ultimate laws explaining how the universe functioned (Lakatos, 1978). Together with John Locke’s argument that the human mind is not contaminated by original sin but is a *tabula rasa* upon which external reality is the most formative influence, Newton’s work vindicated the belief that there is one science about one determinate world and that an individual is capable of objectively seeing that one world as it ‘really’ is. The heritage, therefore, of the cultural values of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe was a gradual but fundamental reformulation of the nature and purpose of knowledge. No longer was it idealist but realist: “each science studies a realm of distinct facts about one part of reality and aims to describe the quantities, qualities, properties and relationships of and between phenomena” (Hart, 2005, p. 198).

However even with this imperative in place the generation in the West of the abstractions upon which the new categories of knowledge could be based was slow. The reason lay in the limited array of conceptual tools available to individuals at that time. Concepts such as 'element', 'compound', 'culture', 'society' or 'economics', for example, are not obvious (Schoenberger, 2001). What can be stated depends, therefore, on the classificatory resources already present in language (Fiumara, 1995). For this reason much thought, time and work was needed to establish that there were such things as 'elements' situated within 'compounds' or 'cultures' positioned within but separable from 'society' (Schoenberger, 2001). It was, thus, only gradually that the Platonic system of training the mind gave way to imparting knowledge. In the emerging system subjects at universities were treated simultaneously, even eclectically, with little or no reference, as had previously been the case, to the careful gradation of knowledge as a systemic whole, lectures replaced the dialectic exposition of texts and the vernacular came to be used in place of Latin (*Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 1907). Under the influence of foundationalism these lectures, though, were of a special kind. Hilaire Belloc in 'Lines to a Don' expressed the essence of the difference:

... those regal dons  
 With hearts of gold and lungs of bronze  
 Who shout and bang and roar and bawl  
 The absolute across the hall. (Blackburn, 2005, p. xvii)

The discovery and elaboration of new concepts and empirically established scientific laws during the course of the nineteenth century served to make the power of Realist science unassailable for, with its unparalleled achievements, only it could claim to have successfully characterised reality (Sharrock & Read, 2002). Positivism, a philosophy most clearly enunciated by Auguste Comte in the 1850s, appeared to crown this achievement for it extended the methods and attitudes of Realist science to all fields of human knowledge: rationality and objectivity in both the sciences and the humanities are both desirable and achievable, cumulative facts are therefore what count as knowledge and the history of civilisation is a history of progress. Modernism had been born.

## Postmodernism

Ironically, though, the ideas of a number of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century were to disrupt this perception of Modernism. This should not have come as a surprise for from Romanticism's emphasis at the beginning of the century on subjective experience, to Nietzsche's 'will to power', to Darwin's blurring of the distinction between animal and human, to Marx's revolutionary socialism which replaced human rationality as the driving force of history with the rationality of economics, it is apparent that an assault upon Realism had been running as an undercurrent to its most dramatic scientific and engineering achievements. The dawn of the twentieth century provided additional impetus to these trends. On the one hand Freud, Adler and Jung showed that objectivity was not a personal attribute to

be set aside on demand: perception, instead, was unavoidably filtered by experience. Drawing a distinction between facts and values was, therefore, as Nietzsche had argued a fallacious dichotomy. On the other hand, Einstein's  $E=MC^2$  undermined Newtonian certainties: time was now relative and reality a function of the interaction of energy, mass and light. These new insights and exposure to the cataclysmic consequences of primal nationalism in two world wars undermined what little faith remained in humans as rational beings. It also made Modernism's claim to have lifted knowledge above the flow of history unsustainable. Clearly Modernism produced remarkable results, the problem was overconfidence in what could be represented and analysed (Richardson, 2005). Gone, therefore, were its theoretic foundations: an objective external world, a progress driven cybernetic and, perhaps most important of all, humanism. The replacement in importance of agency by structure led to the disappearance of humanism's central concept of the unitary-autonomous person (Craig, 2003). Such has been the change that a contemporary hypothesis proposes that humanity both uses and is used by cognition. Far from cognition making us the independent agents of modernism cognition as a self-organising agent might, therefore, merely be parasitical on us (Smith & Jenks, 2006).

Classification is a necessary condition for human cognition but classification only works when it is not seen as definitive and when the advantages of simplification outweigh the loss from view of complex interrelationships. It was in this context that the exponential elaboration during the twentieth century of the networks linking an increasingly fragmented yet interdependent global society served to destabilise established categories of knowledge (Smith & Jenks, 2006). This was also the context in which philosophic thinking during the second half of the twentieth century came to be dominated by the twin pillars of Post-positivism: Critical Realism and Constructivism. Despite their differences in other respects each of these perspectives were drawn together with the acknowledgment by the former and the embrace by the latter of the idea that observation is both interest and power laden (Mertens, 2003). Both the process of deduction and the concept of rules and facts became, therefore, either suspect or were rejected entirely and faith in the metanarrative of disciplinary study shaken (Rowland, 2006). It was in this environment of delegitimation where existing classifications of knowledge became open to interrogation that earlier claims by academics to exceptionalism because of the special significance of disciplinary knowledge no longer found a sympathetic audience (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

## Conclusion

The establishment of a discipline is both a social and intellectual project. The late nineteenth century emergence of sociology, for example, was a consequence of the need to integrate an array of issues ranging from medicine to statistics in order to resolve practical problems arising from culturally derived ethical concerns important to society as a whole (Craig, 2003). This is an ongoing process. In contemporary terms technical excellence is no longer an end in itself; it has to be kept in balance with humane consequences. Environmental impact and ecological consequences, for example, are

now important aspects of engineering (Lifson, 1997). Attitudes to ethics in medicine have also, for example, changed from what used to be the case:

To the extent that ethical questions arose in the practice of medicine, the doctors, as professionals, were expected to take care of them, and, indeed, took good care that it was they who took care of them. (Lifson, 1997, p. 1)

The relationship between disciplines and society, thus, is reciprocal: for the past three centuries, for example, science and engineering have not only been sustained by Western cultural notions they have also been powerful influences sustaining those notions (Craig, 2003). Disciplines, thus, constitute culturally embedded discourse practices that emerge, evolve and transform as a result of an exchange of ideas and practices within and between them and between them and society (Greene & Caracelli, 2003). They are, therefore, evolving postulates rather than factual descriptions (Smith & Jenks, 2006). It is in this context that the term 'emergentist pluralism', an ontology of continual becoming, is justified (Osberg, Biesta, & Cilliers, 2008).

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## **Firming foundations for doctorate education in a shifting global environment: Generic doctoral support.**

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New Zealand

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on generic doctoral support, the kind provided by Learning Advisors (LAs), locating New Zealand in relation to the recently established European Higher Education Area (Bologna, 1999). Paradoxically, the European Union Bologna process is firming up doctoral education in an increasingly fluid global environment by standardising degree credit ratings, promoting shared best practice and encouraging transferability of doctoral education across national borders (Bologna Process Stock-taking, 2007). In a position of relative geographical isolation, New Zealand has long been concerned to ensure that our doctorates compete internationally; what is happening in Europe as the sands shift there to redefine borders affects us. New Zealand is currently in a strong position regarding doctoral education. This paper proposes that New Zealand LAs who work with doctoral students might take advantage of the European Union Bologna Process discussion to discuss and theorise generic doctoral support.

### **Introduction**

Increasingly, Learning Advisors (LAs) are providing generic doctoral support. Sharing etymological roots, the term 'generic' allows that the doctoral thesis is a *genre* with convention regarding moves, structure and style. Those of us who provide generic support for doctoral students are part of a firming up of research education.

### **Global context: The Bologna process**

A declaration signed in Bologna in 1999 led to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a name with a geographic sound to it. However, the EHEA stakes out not so much a bordered physical terrain as a sharing of educational practice. The effect is to erase national boundary-lines that previously acted as barriers. In the case of the EHEA, the 'shifting sands' of the conference metaphor is promising, removing surface level obstacles to firm the foundations of pedagogy. The term 'Bologna Process' includes the Bologna Declaration (1999), and subsequent ratifications at Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005) and London (2007). The

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Bologna process is strengthening tertiary education in the European HE Area by standardising degree credit ratings (so that credits from tertiary courses anywhere in Europe will be transportable), promoting shared best practice and encouraging transferability of education across national borders (Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2007). In firming Higher Education foundations, the Bologna Process has energised the scholarship of teaching and learning.

EHEA reform is fiscally motivated, as nations and universities so frequently are. Doctorates produce new knowledge, a rich resource in what is perceivably a knowledge economy. The hard-nosed commercialism of neo-liberal doctoral education has been quite appropriately contested by academics (Barnett & Griffin, 1997; McNair, 1997; Rowland, 2006), as has doctoral massification (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2004). However, the Bologna process offers more than commercialisation: there is potential for real educational enhancement to come out of the Bologna process and the EHEA for students and for the practitioners who support them.

The Berlin Communiqué (2003) brought the doctorate into educational harmonisation, labelling the doctorate as education's 'third cycle' after the Bachelors 'first', and Masters 'second' cycles. Historically, doctoral practice has differed between countries (between European countries and also between the United Kingdom and the United States of America). Arguably, of the three cycles the third, with its research output, is the most crucial to fiscal motivation: "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). The Bologna process admits to the desire to flourish in a competitive knowledge economy, seeing that:

...enhancing provision in the third cycle and improving the status, career prospects and funding for early stage researchers are essential preconditions for meeting Europe's objectives of strengthening research capacity and improving the quality and competitiveness. (London, 2007, p. 4)

Whatever reservations might be held about knowledge's entanglement with economy, doctoral pedagogy has fallen under scrutiny as to which practices might be deemed 'best' for adaptation as the standard. Given the spectre of doctoral attrition as high as 50% in some cases (Bair & Haworth, 1999; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Mendoza, 2007), and tragic personal stories behind the figures, it is promising for individual students of the future that more thought is being given to doctoral teaching and learning. And, increasingly in the last few years, more thought is being given to the outcomes for those new doctors pouring from universities as knowledge producers in need of a livelihood.

At a government level, many countries are watching the Bologna process changes. As a recent Canadian report observes:

Observers from all continents are monitoring with much interest the major changes being implemented in Europe. Countries in Africa, South America, Asia, and North America are analyzing the reform process and trying to determine what influence the Bologna Process will have on their educational systems. (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, Quality Assurance Subcommittee, Committee of Postsecondary ADM, 2008)

As Australia's then Minister of Education, Science and Training, Bishop (2006) noted of the Bologna process: "Australia must remain abreast of these international developments" (Bishop & Poutasi, 2006, p. 1). Most countries intend to keep up with any improvements that emerge from the Bologna process.

Some pedagogues are cautious, observing that that the idiosyncrasies of individuals will always outweigh Bologna process standardisation (Rothblatt, 2008), and questioning whether post-Bologna education might be merely "the same dog with a different collar" (Geraldo, Trevitt, Carter & Fazey, 2009). Others applaud Bologna's potential (Gaston, 2008) and its demand for accountability (Adelman, 2008). This article emphasises that international interest in doctoral process is positive, and has potential to enhance practice. So, how does New Zealand relate to the recently established European Higher Education Area, and discussion of doctoral pedagogy?

## New Zealand and the Bologna Process

As I noted in 2006, because we benchmark so self-consciously against international universities, what is happening in Europe affects us (Carter, 2006). New Zealanders are self-conscious about what happens elsewhere because New Zealand sometimes feels a long way from Europe, with Pakeha identity arguably based on a sense of exile (see, for example, Bell, 2006, 2009; Pearson, 2001). To look for the positive side of this locative unease, an added advantage for New Zealand scholars is that academia collapses distance: disciplines have their own 'tribes' (Becher, 2001) and communities of practice across international boundaries.

New Zealand is currently in a strong position regarding doctoral education. At a national level, New Zealand's tertiary education system was found in 2008 to be:

...already comparable to the Bologna ideal. Our three-level degree structure [undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral], Register of Quality Assured Qualifications, quality assurance standards, efforts at increasing participation in tertiary education, and policies that promote institutional autonomy, all closely align with the key elements of the Bologna Process. (Sewell & Poutasi, 2008, p. 4).

At the level of government policy, we are ahead of many European countries (Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2007). New Zealand has benchmarked against Bologna: "The focus therefore, is not on ensuring compliance with the Bologna Process, but on ensuring that comparability mechanisms allow New Zealand's tertiary education system to relate to all major international models" (Sewell & Poutasi, 2008, p. 4).

New Zealand carefully ensures that its doctoral education is in line with all significant international systems including the Bologna manifestos. And although Bologna discussions occur first and foremost at governmental levels, and then at the next tier down, in the board rooms of universities, there is also a wide open opportunity for anyone who is interested to talk about practice.

New Zealand learning advisors who support doctoral students might join the international discourse. Academics as well as governments are responding to Bologna with interest (Carter, Fazey, Geraldo & Trevitt, in press): “The Bologna process and subsequent policy development have a wide-ranging effect in bringing doctoral education into a global conversation beyond the boundaries of Europe” (Boud & Lee, 2009, p. 8). LAs who support New Zealand doctoral students are well placed to join this global discussion.

## Generic Doctoral Support

There is not a great deal written on generic doctoral support, the kind provided across campus by Learning Centres. There is quite extensive literature giving advice to doctoral students about the process and the writing of the thesis (Denholm & Evans, 2006; Dunleavy, 2003; Manalo & Trafford, 2004). There is currently useful literature about supervision (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 1998; Denholm & Evans, 2007). Quite a lot has been written on globalisation, internationalisation (Chan & Dimmock, 2008; Naidoo, 2007) and on the experience of students writing up their research in English language when it is not their mother tongue (Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999; Woodward-Kron, 2007). Recent publications illuminate changing practice (Boud & Lee, 2009) and assessment (Lovitts, 2007; Maki & Borkowski, 2006). An excellent discussion of politics and practice is contextualised with the UK’s focus on what is called ‘Skills Training’ (Hinchcliffe, Bromley & Hutchison, 2007), but support reaches more widely than the drive from the UK. Around the world, increasingly, support that is generic rather than discipline based is being designed, instituted and developed: there is “continued pressure for their [core and generic skills training] effective delivery in higher education and employment” (Bennett, Dunne & Carré, 1999, p. 71). LAs increasingly are part of the doctoral experience.

## ‘Generic’ as applied to doctoral support

Currently generic support tends to be disdained as ‘bolt-on’, with a preference for the more expensive, tailor-made tertiary learning support that is embedded within disciplines (Wingate, 2006). However, I believe that there is a place for generic support of doctoral students and that the time to theorise more precisely about efficacious practice has come. The doctorate can be viewed as a genre. I define generic doctoral support as that which belongs to the genre of the doctoral thesis rather than to one specific discipline, to “when research is discussed generically, or across discipline boundaries” (Rowland, 2006, p. 10). Despite the contradiction when ‘generic’ means ‘general,’ and ‘genre,’ ‘coming from a specific family’, the words share Latin roots in

gens, genera, and genus: usage has widened the sense of ‘family’ yet both meanings are applicable to LA teaching.

Fostering generic capabilities in a generic doctoral programme typically entails teaching computer skills; information literacy; writing skills; discussing the moves to be made in introductions and conclusions, and in the literature review; and making explicit the generic implications of structure style and voice. These aspects of doctoral production affect most candidates, and “If particular skills are useful across a range of fields, then there may be efficiencies in regarding them as generic and teaching them as such” (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner & Whitehouse, 2004, p. 386). Generic support complements supervision, giving a different perspective, different insights and an additional community of practice complementing departmental and discipline sourced ones.

Borthworth and Wissler (2003) point out that “Many universities tend to interpret generic skills for postgraduate students as being to do with the research process....[yet] many (if not all) of these skills are in fact ‘transferable’ to the workplace” (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003, p. 17), although they observe that students seem unaware of the transferability of their skills. The word ‘generic’ can be applied both to the genre of the thesis (not just writing conventions but also the processes of research underpinning the written work) and to the transferable, employability competencies that the thesis-writing process develops.

‘Generic capabilities’ have also been linked to industry compared to ‘research training’ which belongs in the university domain (Craswell, 2007, p. 377). Craswell’s focus is on capabilities that outlast the doctoral experience. Increased doctoral numbers make it relevant that the support of candidates prepares them for employment outside of academia: bluntly, there are not enough academic jobs to support the sheer volume of new doctors. According to Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004), “There are too many graduates chasing too few jobs”; “[a] growing supply of knowledge workers does not mean that they will find knowledge work” (p. 23); and “[w]hile employees are free to change employers, they are not free from the need to make a living” (p. 27). Commonly, “doctoral students have a too-long transition period from PhD completion to stable employment” (Nerad & Cerny, 1999, p. 17). Current support for doctoral students “includes...interest in the whole student” (Borkowski, 2006, p. 21). The term ‘generic’ can apply to the thesis’s category of textual performance but equally to the whole person, including their employability, that doctoral research should develop.

Generic sessions that focus on the moves that the written thesis makes, the articulation of those moves, and the defensive signposting of this articulation are likely to also ensure that student develop and recognise the skills they will need after the doctorate. Generic insights empower the articulation of the research.

## Generic support advantage

I argue that there is benefit in complementing discipline-specific support with generic support. The suggestion to Arts students that they could overtly discuss methods and methodology can help them out of the opaque rhetoric (often their strength as essayists) to seeing what might be made helpfully explicit, even when their methodology is usually implicit. At the same time, science and engineering students frequently lack the narrative component that tells the story of the research project. Between lists of facts there should be connections. Before charts there needs to be the information that enables them to be decoded. Each section of the thesis needs its own introduction. My feeling is that the curiously defensive genre of the thesis is the one piece of writing that justifies the use of Science's straightforward categorisation and Arts' use of narrative. Research investigating doctoral examiners' questions shows how the questions about methodology must satisfy enquiry at a deeper level than the discipline-specific (Johnston, 1997; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004; Trafford & Leshem, 2002). Cross-campus enquiry enables strategies for organising writing from different disciplines to be available to others, but also enables the moves entailed to become clearer, able to be expressed.

Some literature endorses and sustains generic support. Barbara Lovitts (2007) has gathered descriptors of what makes an outstanding, very good, acceptable and unacceptable thesis. Her descriptors are useful for generic workshops' objectives in part because they are so similar across disciplines. Parry (2007) describes the doctorate as a complex game, the rules of which are sometimes covert:

...the idea that doctoral study is in a sense a game, or a meaningful social setting with rules, seemed bizarre at first...[but] many of the doctoral students interviewed appeared to identify very strongly with it....in fact, doctoral study does resemble the combination of written and unwritten rules in any complex game. (p. 6)

Some of the unwritten rules belong to the genre of the thesis rather than to the conventions of the discipline. LAs have a role in clarifying the expectations of the thesis genre.

Assessment of generic support is also a topic of interest to practitioners. The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID), a research project aiming to improve doctoral support, uses three sets of questions as tools to assess the doctoral programmes of participating universities:

1. What is the *purpose* of the doctoral program? What does it mean to develop students as stewards of disciplines? What are the desired outcomes of the program?
2. What is the *rationale and purpose of each element* of the doctoral program? Which elements of the program should be retained and affirmed? Which elements could usefully be changed or eliminated?

3. How do you know? What *evidence* aids in answering those questions? What evidence can be collected to determine whether changes serve the desired outcome? (Golde, Jones, Conklin Bueschel & Walker, 2006, p. 60)

These three questions are challenging; possible answers could add a new vein of literature to the advice manuals for doctoral students and for supervisors. CID also acknowledges the importance of non-supervisory support.

## Conclusion

Given global belief that we are in a knowledge economy, it is unsurprising that the relatively new practice of generic research support is burgeoning internationally (Hinchcliffe, Bromley & Hutchinson, 2007). This makes sense because there are many aspects of all doctoral work that are generic. LAs or their equivalent are working more often with doctoral students and in doctoral programmes. Our LA positioning offers perspectives only available fairly recently and generally absent from the literature. The last few decades have produced valuable thought on the doctoral process and supervision: there is something of a gap concerning generic support that could be filled by LAs. Our LA positioning offers perspectives only available fairly recently and generally absent from literature.

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## Appendix 1: Statistics relating to the refereed proceedings

A total of 36 presentations were included in the 2009 ATLAANZ conference programme. Subsequently a total of 17 papers were submitted to be considered for the refereed proceedings of the conference. 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	19
Accept with major revisions	10
Reject for refereed publication but accept with revision for non-refereed publication	4
Reject	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>

Of the 17 papers submitted for review, two were withdrawn for refereed publication but accepted with revision for non-refereed publication. The rest were accepted for publication once revision had been completed.

