Managing culture shock for First Year International students entering Australian universities

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Australia is a popular university study destination in the English-speaking world and currently more than 200,000 International students are enrolled in Australian institutions across all education sectors with many experiencing culture shock following their arrival. Some suggest that first year International students lack experience in reading critically, citing appropriately and understanding all the other rules of the academic game. This is contested by some but it is clear that entrance to university is an especially crucial time for those from International locations. Universities need to be prepared to provide support and guidance to many first year International students to enable them to acquire the necessary academic, social and cutural competencies to negotiate the challenge of culture shock. This paper provides a meta-anlysis of commentators on this range of issues.

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Both Australian and International first year university students' backgrounds of preparation for tertiary study have changed as noted by commentators for over a decade (Dobson, Sharma and Haydon 1997). This paper discusses the impact of culture shock on first year International students in managing transition to university. It suggests that acknowledging and addressing the unique difficulties of International students when entering Australian universities might avoid some of the difficulties experienced by many.

Bandura's 1995 psychological concept of self-efficacy and instrumental competence and the Spindlers' 1992 anthropological concept of repairing a perceived lack of instrumental competence through cultural intervention are relevant in any discussion of culture shock. Spindler and Spindler provide a model stressing the culturally-situated performance of students from 'culturally-dissonant' backgrounds (Spindler and Spindler 1992). The concept of self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1995), is also a useful model with emphasis on the power of a mind-set or the expectation to succeed in specific social and academic contexts. His notion of self-efficacy and instrumental competence emphasises the delicate balance between self-esteem and academic results at university. From this perspective, many first year students acquire deficits in self-concept if they fail to adjust to

the university culture, leading to teachers and other students viewing them negatively and in turn seeing themselves as lacking competence. This means that International students risk developing lowered self-esteem – a central issue in culture shock.

Defining Culture Shock

Culture shock is a transitional phenomenological experience encountered by individuals because they find themselves unable to use known and familiar cultural references to understand, convey and validate central aspects of their identity in a new culture. Milstein (2005) provides a useful taxonomy of culture shock related to the time and reason for a person's move to another country. *Tourists* are those who experience only a brief visit to foreign culture of usually less than six months and because they anticipate returning home soon may not experience much psychological disconfirmation. *Sojourners,* although temporary, may stay for much longer, varying from six months to five years. Many International students are in this category. *Immigrants* are volunteers who plan to stay in a foreign culture forever whereas *refugees*, forced are out of their home culture, may experience very severe psychological trauma in the shift between cultures. Issues of identity and assimilation, psychological, socio-cultural and economic adaptation can characterise the experiences of sojourners, immigrants and refugees.

Impact of Social Culture Shock

Spindler and Spindler (1992) see the self as multi-faceted, with three main "selves" the *enduring* self, the *situated* self, and the *endangered* self. The enduring self is deeply rooted in socio-cultural practices seen as culturally normative in a person's home country. The situated self develops during processes of adjustment to a new environment. If, however, the situated self is constantly threatened by unfamiliar demands for a prolonged period of time, the person may be unable to cope. The endangered or conflicted self may then take form, resorting to survival processes like resistance, hostility, or simply shutting down the psyche under deep threat. The student with an endangered self attempting to deal with a threatening new culture, may find they are unable to think clearly, to understand or to behave appropriately in some settings.

Nevertheless, this endangered self can be repaired through appropriate social support, cultural intervention and role modification in a process that Spindler and Spindler (1992 describe as making situational adaptations. Difficulties experienced by first year International students in their approaches to learning in Australia are discussed by Ward and Rana-Deuba, (1999) who also argue that language competence, length of stay in the new culture and the amount of contact with other students and staff, typically influence socio-cultural adaptation. Ward, Okura, Kennedy and Kojima, (1998) note the impact of several other background variables such as the degree of difference between the culture of origin and host culture, language proficiency, gender, age, education level, status, self-esteem and prior inter-cultural or university study experience.

International students who adopt an integrative acculturation strategy, valuing both the original and the new cultures and maintaining relations with both groups, will experience a much lower levels of adjustment stress (Li and Gasser, 2005); James and Devlin, 2001; Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson, 2007). Colvin & Jaffer (2007) note that International student groups offer key support for International first year students, but they also see the importance and value of the relationships they forge with domestic students too. The trick is

in finding the balance so that comfort in the company of those also experiencing cultural shifts does not prevent International students reaching out to domestic students. Krause (2006) and Kift (2009) suggest that any discussion of student engagement in first year must take into consideration contextual factors including students' socio-cultural background and experience. When students find themselves in a different cultural environment, this requires a strategic approach to positively engaging them in ways that help them to manage the pressures inevitably arising at this time. In addition to the many problems faced by first year International students in learning to adjust socially and culturally in Australia, they are also expected to manage a different academic culture, one with less formality in some areas such as relationships with teachers and more in others, in terms of writing academically. Any difficulties tend to compound and become more intense, especially as they approach submission times for their first assignments.

Academic shock facing International students

Zhang Sillitoe and Webb (2002 p.1) cites several previous studies, (Bradley and Bradley 1984; Burke 1986; Samuelowicz 1987; Ballard and Clanchy 1988, 1991; Burns 1991), who demonstrate that International students, especially those from Asian countries, face a range of unique challenges in their first year of study in Australian universities. Major (2005 p.85) however cautions against stereotypic perceptions of Asian students' learning styles and refers to the work of Hellstén and Prescott (2004) who, despite opinion to the contrary 'have claimed that International students, including Asians, actually value interactive teaching and learning'. Hellstén (2002) discusses the work of Biggs (2001) on International students and his suggestion that there is much misleading information based on stereotypes of incoming students' learning culture. Zhang et al (2002) also cite Biggs' view that there is evidence that some International students are in the top achieving range across many of the academic discipline areas. Hellstén (2002) found that although many International students may not be accustomed to the problem-based style of teaching and learning preferred in Australia, her students did seem interested in learning this way and showed 'particular curiosity and motivation in mastering it' (Hellstén, 2002 p 8). Even so some International students may find they are silent participants during a critical academic activity such as a tutorial-based discussion, regardless of their preferred learning style.

Writing appropriately for the academic context is another challenge for International and domestic students alike. Wilson and Lizzio (2008, p.2) point to 'the pervasive paradox that students often most in need of assistance do not seek it' and this means that many International students requiring extra guidance go unnoticed if it is presumed all are managing well. Cameron (2009, p.7) discusses the value of directly addressing 'self-efficacy and how becoming an engaged and responsible learner operates beneficially in students' lives'. This links to Pintrich (2004) and his view of the application of self-regulation to meta-cognitive, behavioural and motivational strategies that enable learners to control their own learning processes and actively manage learning outcomes. Of course, there is significant variability in students' capacity to effectively self-manage in the face of social, cultural and environmental challenges and it is advisable to avoid stereotyped responses to both International and domestic students.

Conclusions and recommendations

Students' capacity to self-manage or self-regulate their academic performance is a function of a complex array of interdependent cultural, social, personal and environmental variables

according to Bandura (1995). Students need to become engaged in discussion about self-regulation and self-efficacy, which are well-recognised principles in Western academic, workplaces and social contexts (Bandura, 1995). Cameron (2009) states that it is useful for first year students to be openly involved in discussions about self-efficacy and about more practical things like 'how to make use of online PowerPoint slides, how to download and print these in ways that provide room for note taking to maximise more active learning in the lecture and why this matters in terms of their academic results' (Cameron 2009, p.7).

Additional efforts by the host university for incoming International students is recommended to clarify what is expected of them but it is essential to acknowledge the unique cultural and academic difficulties of International students entering Australian universities. It is now well accepted that extended orientation programs are beneficial for all students in the transition to university but targeted versions of these for International students are strongly indicated. Universities need to be better equipped to provide accessible and relevant support to help students cope with the difficulties they may encounter while studying in Australia, both in terms of cultural change and in terms of the structure and expectations of the academic environment. The value of peer ethnic groups is obvious but International students also need to be encouraged to relate to domestic students through university-sponsored events. Finally encouraging a range of interactive learning situations where communication can occur without loss of ethnic identity, would benefit both International and domestic students.

Wider ethnographic intercultural studies of the adjustment of students from different sociolinguistic backgrounds pursuing academic studies in Australia are indicated to expand understanding of how socio-cultural differences impact the development of International students' instrumental competence and academic achievement. Studies of the rather tentative nature of self-concept and self-efficacy for International students in unfamiliar settings, as proposed by Spindler and Spindler (1992) and Bandura (1995), also have application in International education research.

Outline of Nuts & Bolts Session

1. Defining the focus - Input & key questions (5 mins)

2. Whole Group (5 mins) Own Understanding of Students' Experiences of Culture Shock Examples from own experiences

3. Small groups (10 mins) Your University's Strategies for Managing Culture Shock with International students: examples of approaches to lessen student's culture shock

4. Reports and discussion (5 mins)

5. Final Comments & Conclusion (5 mins)

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