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“A trouble shared ...”: Conversations for survival



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***Abstract:** Increasing numbers of overseas students are enrolled at Australian universities through twinning arrangements between Australian and Asian higher education institutions. These students usually study one or two years of their Australian degree at the twinned institution offshore and then come to Australia to complete their degrees. However, many of these students experience considerable difficulty surviving the transition to living and learning at their Australian university. This paper details a collaborative multimedia project based on conversations between university staff and international students making this transition. The result of this sharing has been the development of an interactive CD-Rom to better prepare future students. The project explores notions of culture and cultural transition and focuses on understanding and navigating differences between national cultures, and also between educational cultures so that students can better understand and meet academic expectations in Australia. Although the project focuses initially on the needs of overseas students entering the authors' university in the second or third year of a degree majoring in media and communication studies, it hopefully can be used as a model for the development of quality educational packages for international students in other courses of study.*

***Keywords:** international students, cultural transition, academic expectations*

Introduction

Because of a declining government commitment to Australian university funding, falling from 87% of total costs in 1986 to 57% in 1997, universities have had to become increasingly entrepreneurial in the past 15 years (Marginson, 2000, p.27). Consequently, profound transformations have occurred in the university sector, notably the merging of institutions, and the rise of corporate managerialism and global marketisation. Indeed, international education has become Australia's eighth largest export earner (Chipman, 2000) as all universities have explored new internationalisation strategies and the recruitment of increasing numbers of full-fee paying international students. The internationalisation strategies include the enrolment of international students in, amongst others, traditional distance education or external study, fully on-line courses, offshore campuses, twinning programs involving both offshore and onshore study, and full onshore or internal study.

The twinning model has become extremely popular but has not been extensively studied. Bennington and Xu (2000) conducted a questionnaire study of student perceptions of an MBA twinning program involving offshore study in China and 6 months study onshore in Australia. The students expressed clear preference for the twinning model, reporting many

expected academic and personal benefits such as being exposed to new ways of thinking, experiencing modern and excellent teaching facilities, experiencing a new culture, sightseeing and touring, as well as some benefits that they hadn't expected such as being able to focus on studies without home and work distractions, using library resources, developing independent living skills, and experiencing a friendly environment. Interestingly, although their expectations were mostly exceeded, the students' expectations were not met regarding improving English skills and learning from western curriculum.

The major issues of Bennington and Xu's study involved assisting students to adjust more quickly to their Australian onshore study situation. Many students wanted more assistance to develop English skills and greater opportunities to mix with the locals. The authors speculated on the apparent correlation between student adjustment and English language proficiency and previous experience with Western cultures. Zimmerman (1995) investigated the role of communication skills and adaptation of international students on US campuses finding that "talking with American students was the single most important factor in perceptions of communication competency and adjusting to American life" (p. 321). This is significant in the light of Australian studies by Volet & Kee (1993) and Smart, Volet & Ang (2000) who found not only that "some international students found the Australian classroom intimidating and had difficulty in participating in classroom discussion" (Smart et al., 2000, p. 29) but also that the international students were disappointed at their lack of social interaction with local students.

Not surprisingly given its economic importance, there is now a considerable literature examining the cultural transition of international students in western tertiary settings and how best to assist the acculturation process. Ballard (1987) and Samuelowicz (1987) both emphasise the differences between the educational cultures and traditions of many international students and those of Australian universities. Burns's (1991) investigation of first year overseas students corroborated the findings of previous studies identifying study methods, independent learning, language skills, participation and time management as the biggest problems and indicated that the overseas students "manifested significantly higher stress indicators than did local students" (p. 61). Luzio-Lockett (1998) similarly draws attention to the detrimental effects of the educational and cultural adjustments required of international students in the UK, especially on the student's academic performance, self-concept and overall educational experience. Bollag (2000) reports that many international students studying in Holland face educational challenges in adjusting to greater student participation, independence and critical thinking and lifestyle challenges in adjusting to differences in food, values and interpersonal relations.

Biggs (1999) and Watkins and Biggs (2001) have written extensively on the teaching and learning of international students, critiquing the stereotyping of Asian students as passive rote learners and 'blame-the-student' deficit models adopted by many Western academic staff. Biggs argues that teaching staff need to own up to their responsibilities "to engage students in effective learning whatever their ethnicity" (1999, p. 121) and adopt good rather than bad teaching strategies that will benefit all students, as the problems experienced by both local and international students in adjusting to the tertiary educational culture are fundamentally the same. Apart from language difficulties, the differences are in extent rather than kind.

Many authors similarly argue that becoming literate at university "involves becoming acculturated: learning to read and write the culture" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988, p.19).

However, the rules of the culture are seldom made explicit for students and the socialisation process is thus largely unconscious. Bizzell (1986) describes the epistemological shifts that are a necessary part of the acculturation process faced by all students entering the university discourse community. Students from minority groups, lower socio-economic backgrounds, and language backgrounds other than English experience the greatest degree of “culture clash”, of language or dialect, genres, and world view.

In short, in the whole area of international education and intercultural communication, we all need to develop a far greater awareness of and sensitivity to different educational and cultural values. As Pincas (2001, p. 40) points out, one of the challenges in using English for international education is that concealed beneath the surface “are the specifically different cultural values given to knowledge, cognition and educational processes, where criticality may be inimical to many cultures”. Both teachers and learners in intercultural contexts need to develop cultural literacy, which is “an ongoing dynamic process of negotiating meaning and of understanding differences of perspective” (Pincas, 2001, p. 41). The position we are advocating is similar to what Bizzell (1986) calls becoming “bicultural”, in which students acquire the western academic world view with its attendant values and attitudes, but not at the expense of their original world view and sense of self. We see the process of successfully navigating different educational and national cultures as something they learn rather than something that they have to become. Again as Pincas (2001) comments: ‘In most cases where students are working in an international context, they need to find a balance between adapting to different social and cultural interactions in English, while maintaining a secure sense of self as a member of their national culture’ (p. 42). This paper describes the background, objectives and design of our CD Rom to prepare offshore students for better onshore study and for successful biculturalism.

Project background

At Murdoch University, offshore undergraduate programs have been conducted since 1992 in Commerce, and in Humanities (Media, Communication & Cultural Studies) in various twinning arrangements with Asian institutions. Some students study their first or first two years offshore and then complete their second or third years onshore at our university while others complete their entire degree offshore. Various postgraduate offshore programs (MBA etc.) have also been conducted since 1995, with some programs being taught completely in Asian languages. Lyons’s (2000) review of Murdoch’s offshore programs made four major recommendations covering the need for a unified strategic approach, a consistent approach to formalising offshore programs, a recognition of “the implications of students currently enrolled ... [offshore] being Murdoch enrolled students”, and for staff development to enhance the quality of all teaching. The review gathered evidence from offshore students in Malaysia who were “anxious about ... the different expectations of an Australian university” and onshore students “who also had been unsure of Murdoch University expectations”.

Meanwhile, the following event became the catalyst for the present study:

A student is sitting opposite me in my office, sobbing quietly. In front of me are two essays, each from a different unit in the student’s programme of study, and in each unit I am her tutor. I know this student quite well, having met her at the college in Malaysia where she completed the first two years of her BA degree. She is at our university for the final year. Both essays contain a lot of plagiarised work. Whatever warnings I have given, and whatever she knows about the prohibitions on plagiarising, haven’t prevented her from doing it.

I'm thinking 'What am I going to do about this?' What had happened to this student that resulted in her doing something she knew was wrong, and could well have threatened the completion of her degree.

That any attempt to answer these questions would become more than a purely pedagogic matter became apparent very quickly. We assumed that this student's plagiarising signified much more than laziness or incompetence, and decided to apply for a Teaching Development grant to look into ways of improving students' educational adjustment to onshore study. Anita Pincas (2001) cautions that, in delivering education to international students: 'Learners' experiences, beliefs and expectations about different aspects of culture such as roles, interaction patterns, goals and outcomes of behaviours have not sufficiently informed either our pedagogy or our modes of assessment' (p.32). Added to this already complex set of issues representing the students' orientation are distinctions between the pedagogic styles of the twinned institutions. For whilst both teach the same content (with variations through the use of, for instance, local examples of materials) there are important differences in their teaching regimes and priorities, in staff conditions, in the relations between students and staff, and in what teachers think constitutes a 'successful' student. As Pincas (2001) points out:

Performance criteria can be defined in terms of expected learning outcomes when these can be expressed as precise knowledge. But when outcomes are defined in terms of attitudes to learning, and cultures differ as to what is worth learning, the criteria may not be based on universal conceptual categories. (p.37)

This perspective has a two-way dimension, which is likely to influence the sorts of problems with which this project is dealing. For example, a recent visit by three staff from the authors' university to one of the twinned offshore colleges in order to conduct staff workshops based on Problem-Based Learning met with some resistance. The offshore staff tended to see instruction and guidance in 'skills' from the visiting staff as valuable, but were less enthusiastic about establishing common and complementary pedagogic perspectives. For the purposes of this project, the critical point of contact with this complex nexus of practices and attitudes is clearly the student. Because it is the student who has to negotiate his/her way through the problems: adapt to changes, cope with the subsequent effects in both cultural and academic contexts, and maintain both an 'acceptable' performance level, and personal equanimity.

Project objectives

The authors were awarded a Teaching Development Grant for \$30, 500 to develop a CD Rom package for offshore undergraduate students studying in the School of Media, Communication & Culture (MCC) in Malaysia to help improve the transition into their final year study onshore. The project was tentatively entitled "Finding your way" and conceived as an "on-line package" accessible to students in Malaysia "which would make explicit... the differences in academic culture between their home and host institutions, and also provide assistance ... in the planning and implementation of their transition" (Grant Application). The primary objective of the project is to better prepare offshore MCC students for study onshore at our university, by providing an introduction to the following:

- ❖ Australian culture in general
- ❖ Australian university culture in general and our university culture in particular
- ❖ the discipline-specific cultures in MCC

Two further objectives, foreshadowed but not yet developed, are to better support these students once they arrive through peer-group mentoring and on-line discussion groups for new and existing students, and to develop materials and resources not only to improve the cultural and academic transition of students in the MCC program, but also for other international students in different programs of study.

Project design

The process of designing the project evolved through a number of stages. All stages involved on-going quality conversations between members of the project team, comprising academic and educational design staff of our university, and a range of students (both Malaysian students and local Australian students navigating the disciplinary and university cultures). Members of the project team initially brainstormed the major issues based on their experience of teaching and advising students in the past, floating a wide range of ideas for interactive tasks and useful materials to explore the major issues identified. The result was an initial explosion chart listing the major categories or areas of adjustment issues (see *Figure 1*). The issues seemed to be largely either lifestyle or academic adjustments, although some headings such as language and independence covered both types of adjustment.

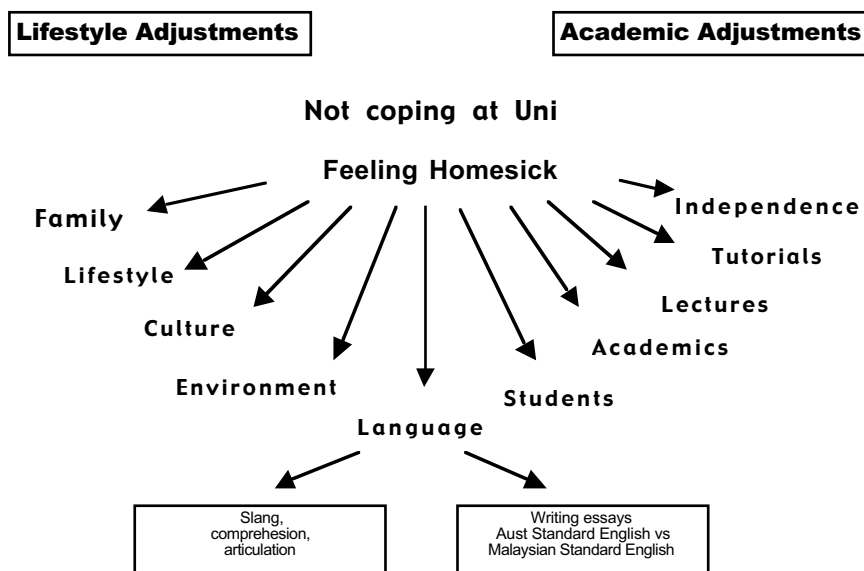


Figure 1: Initial Explosion Chart

The next stage involved a series of focus group interviews between the authors and six Malaysian students on three separate occasions (at the start of the second, fifth and final teaching weeks) of their first semester at our university. These were in-depth, free-flowing conversations focused on the categories and ideas in the initial explosion chart, and they were all recorded and transcribed. The timing of the discussions thus covered their initial settling-in experiences after introductory lectures and tutorials, their experiences at the completion of the first teaching block of the semester, and their reflections just prior to the end of the teaching period before the examination period commenced. We then had an extraordinarily rich amount of primary data, in the students' own voices, on which to base the materials.

For example, early in the semester, most students expressed concern with lectures and note-taking, and also reported feelings of being intimidated by the confidence and knowledge of other, especially older, students as the following quotations from three students in week 2 illustrate:

“It’s the studying bit which is a bit different. Lectures, in comparison to KL. I feel that we have been spoon-fed a lot back there and this has been a bit of a shock. I also find a lot more mature students, who are much more experienced than me, and this is so intimidating.”

“...sometimes [I] can’t catch up with the speaking and can’t write and listen at the same time.”

“It’s difficult. It’s hard with so many listening, writing.”

However, by the end of their first semester these same students reported that not only had their skills improved and they could take better notes but they also found the lectures and the lecturers to be very helpful and to have learned a lot from them. The following exchange about lectures took place in week 13:

“They have been good. So helpful.”

“I can take more notes now.”

“... I can’t compare with the first week, as now it is more comfortable”

Similarly with tutorials, these students initially found the tutorial experience to be quite traumatic and were very intimidated, especially by the other students, but by week 13, they had become much more confident as the following quotations attest:

“... last time it was too much for you to take, but now it is like you know that you are confident enough to go even further in and you are confident enough to make a mistake, as well learn.”

“... back home in tutorials the lecturer would be in front and we would sit there just listening, but here it is like we are sitting in a circle and looking at each other.”

“But I like the fact that some tutors around here they will come and question and sit there somewhere and let the students discuss what it means. Instead of having them conducting the tutorial, they have the students to do it.”

“... initially we mentioned that we were afraid to sound stupid, but now we are starting to speak out because we realise that we have something to say, no matter how stupid it is.”

In the third stage of the project, the transcripts were all examined carefully and the major issues identified and compared with the initial conceptions of the project team and our explosion chart. We then refined our ideas for materials and activities further and sought on-going input from the Malaysian students. All the students were very supportive and it was clear that the Malaysian students’ actual voices, experiences and perspectives were fundamental to the validity and usefulness of the project. We therefore decided to make extensive use of video interviews with a number of Malaysian students, local students and academic staff as key parts of the project. Because of this, it was decided that the project materials would best be realised as an interactive CD-Rom. We also invited one enthusiastic and articulate Malaysian student to attend later project team meetings and to assume the pivotal role of host or guide introducing each section of the materials. This student was given academic credit toward her degree by means of an independent study contract to research, write and record her introductory comments to each section as well as to write a comparative theoretical essay on theatre and video performance. The explosion chart was developed into a

working navigation map in consultation with educational designers and multimedia programmers.

Main – Finding Your Way – A Students Guide to Survival at Murdoch University

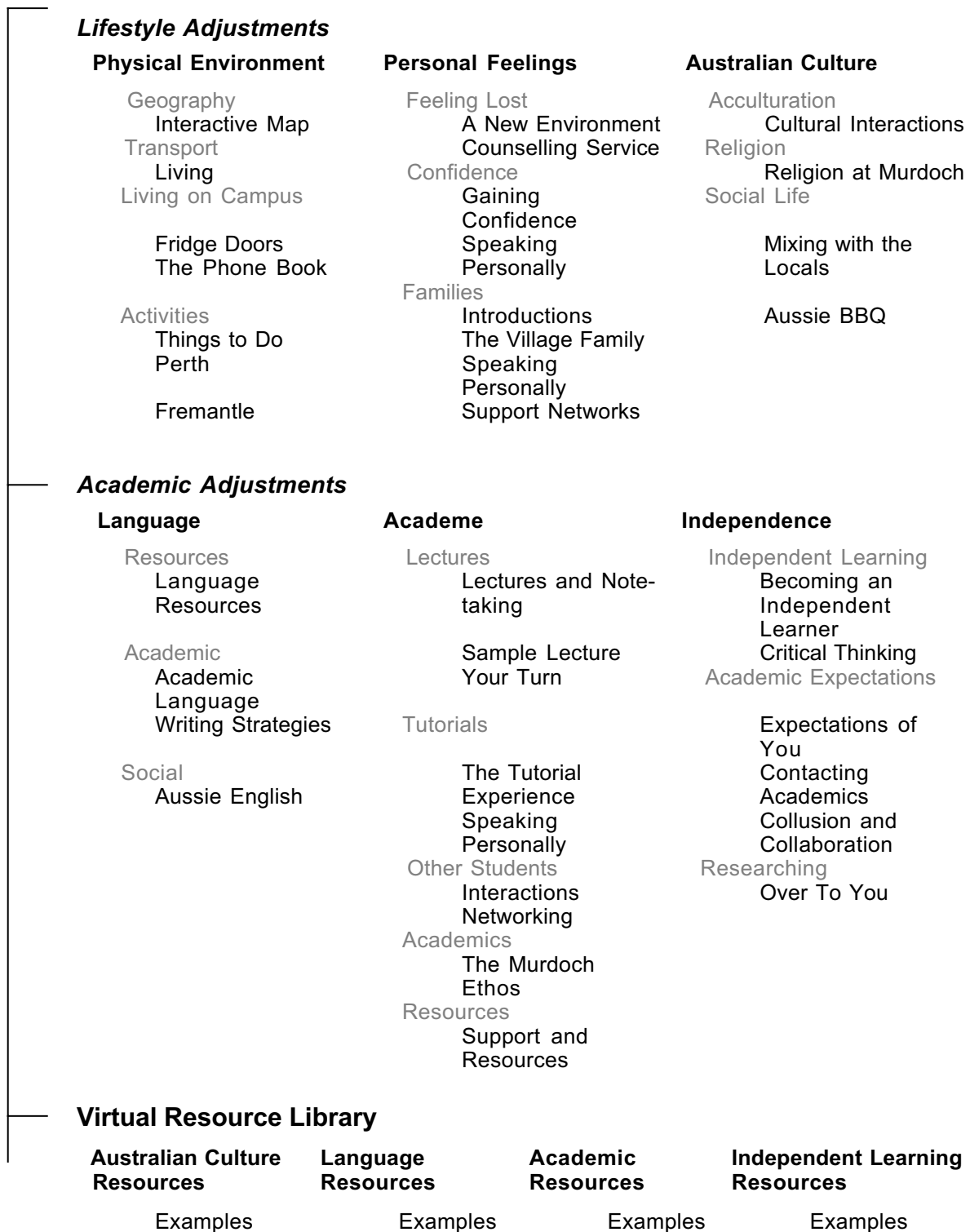


Figure 2: Navigation Menus

Figure 2 represents the end result of the design process for the CD-Rom, “Finding Your Way – A Student’s Guide to Survival at Murdoch University”. The program is now divided into

three macrosections: Lifestyle Adjustments, Academic Adjustments and a Virtual Resource Library. The Lifestyle and Academic Adjustments macrosections both have a number of headings, each with a number of pull-down menus, which have one or more pages which incorporate video, audio, still images and text in interactive and informational ways. The Virtual Resource Library macrosection contains complete articles or glossaries and brief descriptions of some useful print and video resources available at our university. The aim is to provide students with some useful background material and resources.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the project materials are nearing completion, and will soon be ready to be trialled with students offshore. We need to secure the on-going co-operation and goodwill of our offshore colleagues to ensure that the CD-Rom is both freely accessible to the students for whom it is intended and that these students are actively encouraged to utilise it effectively. Understandably, our colleagues in offshore institutions are sensitive to any reflections being cast on their teaching or any inference that their students have not been adequately prepared by them and their educational institutions offshore. Because of this, we have not included any comments from students in which explicit comparisons are made between educational practices offshore and at our university. For example, the comments such as the previously illustrated ones reflecting on different pedagogical styles between our institutions in lectures and tutorials, while valuable, could not be used in the CD-Rom.

Clearly, one of the benefits of international education (especially a combination of offshore and onshore) is that it enables students to gain a greater awareness of their own culture and its values and beliefs as well as an appreciation of another culture. The students in our study, despite initial feelings of intimidation, ultimately developed a strong appreciation of the different teaching styles they encountered at our university, especially in terms of tutorials and peer learning. Warner (1999) argues that when teaching students from language backgrounds other than English, Western academics need to operate from a “position of mutual respect” in order to help our students understand Australian academic culture, because “for our students to be able to unravel the complexities of our academic culture, we must first recognise them as scholars from a different intellectual tradition whose identity is influenced by their own culture” (p. 28).

One of the major lessons for us in this process has been the central importance, richness and power of having quality conversations with the students themselves to listen to their voices and learn from their actual experiences. Not only are the materials generated much more interesting, engaging and effective as a result, but they are also clearly much more relevant and valid. We feel that our project and its design represent an educationally sound model that could be adapted for other international students in other courses of study. However, these students would similarly need to be involved in a thorough and on-going way in sharing their stories and troubles in conversations for survival.

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