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Learning in a Time of Terror

By Peter Kandlbinder

with contributions from Anita Arvast, Barbara Grant, Catherine Manathunga, Craig Turnbull, Kim McShane, Peter Donnan, Tai Peseta and Trevor Holmes from the Challenging Academic Development (CAD) collective.

While meeting in a trendy inner city pizza restaurant to discuss the upcoming HERDSA conference with some CAD colleagues a few weeks ago, I raised the question of whether academic developers have anything to say about the truly large issues facing our time. Global warming, the water crisis, the invasion of Iraq, stem cell research are all part of our everyday discussions around kitchen tables but are they also something that academic developers ought to concern themselves with as part of what they do?

Despite my prodding, my colleagues expressed some unease at tackling such large social issues from the relative safety of academic development. Mostly they were adverse to the idea that we admit we are in a time of terror, a phrase taken from a book of discussions between Derrida and Habermas by Borradori. For some it felt disingenuous for a group of middle-class academics to suggest they are somehow engaging with terror in any meaningful way when we are all teaching on campuses well away from the daily concerns of kidnap and torture that face our Lebanese or Iraqi academic colleagues. At best, they said, it might help us to realise that we have become desensitised to the ongoing terror that many non-Western parts of the world have lived with for decades.

Nevertheless, it is almost certain that helping prepare our students to understand the state of fear that has come to grip western democracies

will become a real issue for university teachers. Terror is a psychological state created by a fear that one is in immanent danger. It is true that we are unlikely to ever experience the fear of extreme violence that a gunman in our classroom would generate. Yet, the pervasiveness of commentaries on terror that have come to permeate modern discourses does suggest that increasingly our students will come to us with a belief that life involves unending psychological violence. The signs of agitation, difficulty in sleeping, fatigue and feelings of worthlessness that dominate the popular media resemble the clinical symptoms of depression that one would expect from human beings who find themselves needing to cope with turbulent change.

Why this may become relevant to academic developers is that living with a climate of fear is likely to make learning itself pathological. There are some who will undoubtedly willingly embrace learning in a state of "supercomplexity" (Barnett, 2000). The response of many living with widespread fear, however, appears to be a "learned helplessness" (Petersen, Maier & Seligman, 1995) in which they believe that they have no control over the situation and, as any action is futile, the best response is to remain passive. It appears that in uncertain times we yearn for simple explanations, cling to oversimplification and superficial assurances that soothe our anxieties. One sees this most clearly

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From the Editor

The leading article "Learning in a time of terror" by Peter Kandlbinder and his colleagues is both topical and thought provoking. I hope it leads to some good discussion and translates into academic development programmes

The article on Learning Styles provides a simple tool for discussing with students their preferences for dealing with information and will give teachers useful insights into learners. I was amazed at the number of visits to the website each week showing considerable interest in this aspect of learning. I hope many members will try out the inventory in their teaching.

This brings me to ask whether readers would appreciate some short articles on teaching along the lines of the article on learning styles. Over the years that I have been editor the articles have been mainly more scholarly rather than tips for teachers but maybe there is a place for this kind of article. I should be pleased to hear from you about this.

We welcome a new team, based at the University of New England, to take over the editorial responsibilities of the societies' international journal *Higher Education Research and Development (HERD)*. One of the editors, Izabel Soliman, writes about the team in this issue. We are most grateful to the previous

team, based at the Australian National University, for their hard work which has firmly established the journal.

It is interesting that the change of editorial team coincides with the article in our series IT in Higher Education. Roger Atkinson explores possible future developments in publishing and finds some interesting observations about the attitude of traditional journals towards the free information movement. Given the rapid development of on-line publishing and the growth of blogs it is interesting to speculate how long the present structure of scholarly publishing will last. Since the quality of scholarly articles is so crucial to the measurement of research output and then to the distribution of funding any changes in the world of scholarly publishing could have far reaching effects on the academic world.

This naturally leads on to the forthcoming launch of the new HERDSA website which has been undergoing a redesign for the last two years. The new site should be more user friendly and provide more on line access to past conference papers and back issues of *HERDSA News*. Details of the launch will be posted on the HERDSA email list.

Roger Landbeck

News of Members

Kym Fraser

Recently Kym took up the post of Leader of the Teaching and Learning Development Group at Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory having spent 5 years in the UK at Oxford University and Warwick University. Kym was a member of the HERDSA Executive in the late 90's. It is good to welcome you back to Australia Kym.

Owen Hicks

Owen has recently been appointed as a Senior Consultant to the Carrick Institute. Owen was President of HERDSA from 1997 to 1999.

Please send news of members to the Editor.

Learning in a Time of Terror

from page 1

in the current political climate where suggesting answers to problems may be complex and require long-term thinking, is, in a word, unthinkable. Establishing the truth of a difficult issue is not as important as determining how a simple proposition can be presented in palatable, unthreatening ways.

This is troubling for those of us concerned with higher education as it undermines the importance of analysis and evidence that are the cornerstones of the liberal university. This was graphically illustrated in the call for immediate action following the attacks on the Twin Towers which resulted in little time for questioning the evidence that was presented as justification to go to invade Iraq. When life and death decisions are not based on evidence we need to be concerned that our students will also not understand our insistence on academic standards. Higher education has until now shared some intellectual traits attached to a spirit of inquiry. The concept of scholarship is based on knowledge being fallible and open to public questioning. Evidence collected by means that do not meet this minimum standard have, time and again been shown to be inherently untrustworthy. Global warming scientists may be in ninety-five per cent agreement about the state of our climate but they would never entertain giving the sceptical voices in the scientific community equal prominence in the debate because it is such an overwhelmingly minority view.

The same standards of analysis are not in evidence in our wider community and it is therefore no surprise that a renewed fundamentalism is growing within education. This is particularly the case in the school sector where politicians and parents are increasingly calling for greater conservatism in the curriculum and a return to more traditional methods of teaching. For fundamentalism to exist there must be a belief that the answers have been laid down somewhere and that these answers cannot be questioned. It is this same belief that leads some of our students to unquestioningly cut-and-paste answers from the Internet, looking for simple solutions to the uncertainties of their learning.

The enforcement of an educational fundamentalism requires increased levels of surveillance of academic work. We currently have a situation where certain students are no longer able to gain entry visas to attend conferences, certain research projects are no longer tolerated because they undermine a university's religious ethos and student activists are arrested using covert surveillance on Australian campuses. Union groups that they have set up have become so concerned by these attacks on academic freedom that it has set up an international network that identifies scholars who are at risk of having their research and teaching suppressed.

Democratic values are seen as providing the most legitimate challenge to educational fundamentalism. Particularly within the adult education classroom, the discourse of democracy has proved to be an effective method for countering the ideology of authoritarianism by allowing power sharing between teachers and students and self-directed student-centred learning. Michael Newman has championed the view that choice, dialogue and negotiation must also be central in higher education in his book "Teaching Defiance: Stories and Strategies for Activist Educators". Newman presents us with the challenge of thinking through the choices we make in working with others to facilitate really meaningful learning.

Fear is no doubt a part of our human condition and these themes will unquestionably influence how academics teach and students learn. Barbara Grant cautions us to consider the risk of linking a term like "terror" to the relatively safe practices of academic development. For example, a paper presented at the 2003 HERDSA Conference that tried to publicly articulate the assumptions a group of academic developers have about teaching academics received a mixed response from other academic developers. Rather than feeling empowered by revealing the assumptions of their practice the authors came away feeling alienated from their peers. Similarly, framing a discussion in the discourse of terror is just as likely to produce the effects that we are trying to be critical of by granting these ideas a focus

that keeps them in circulation. The last thing we would want to do as academic developers is feed the constructed panic culture but it has to be recognised that many development activities live with the paradox of being subversive and attempting to invert the dominant power relations through the work we do as developers. In this regard universities can be part of the problem of terror and the solution depending on how they support academic freedoms. Appeals to fear are quick and easy while building confidence in social and communal arrangements is hard and long term.

As such, the increased surveillance and enforcement that is facing universities provides an opportunity for the analysis and theoretical perspectives of the humanities. As the set of disciplines concerned with the human condition, the theme of "learning in a time of terror" draws a stark contrast between the value of critical and speculative perspectives, and the values embodied in technical rationalism. The academic development community has not yet developed a sustained theorising of these times, and yet it is precisely under these conditions that students learn, that academics teach and that academic developers draw attention to the need for pedagogical improvement and to reform the nature of the University. What is the obligation of the academic development community to stake out a position on larger questions of politics? Have we the theoretical and conceptual resources to do so? Are we schooled enough to lead these changes in the absence of a canon that appears to be silent on these questions? A response to these questions will no doubt influence how academics teach and students learn and the challenge for academic developers will be to counteract the slide into learned helplessness created by a global situation over which we have little control.

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The CAD Collective (Peseta et al., 2005) is a growing international scholarly community of people interested in critically engaging over theoretical and practical issues arising from the work of academic development/advising. If you

would like to visit the CAD collective go to <http://mailman.ucc.usyd.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/itl-cad>

Peseta T et al. (2005). The Challenging Academic Development(CAD) Collective. International Journal of Academic Development, 10(1), 59-61.

The CAD Collective is planning to present a symposium at the Adelaide Conference in July 2007.

Experiences of Learning in Timor-Leste

By Owen Hicks

I grieve for my colleagues and students from the Dili Institute of Technology, (DIT) Timor-Leste, who had so little and now have even less. In 2004 and 2005 I worked with Australian Volunteers International as a senior adviser at this small fledgling tertiary institution, providing assistance with strategic planning, curriculum development, staff development and a little direct teaching of students. While UWA, from where I'd come, must be near the extreme affluent end of the resourcing continuum, DIT was near the extreme of poverty. The contrast couldn't have been more striking. That said, DIT did show intellectual struggle and achievement, it was a place of learning, a little research was undertaken (usually internationally funded social or political survey research), students gathered and some progressive learning environments were created by enthusiastic local staff. My wife, an experienced librarian from an Australian university helped the Institute establish its library. It was a time of growth. The Institute was establishing a new campus. The first cohort of students, from the Schools of Business and Management, and Science and Technology, were looking towards a possibility of graduation. Sadly, now the Institute struggles for survival. With some of its buildings looted, many staff and students are afraid to come to the campus and others are looking elsewhere for a meaningful existence. Funds are

even scarcer, though some funding relief has come from supporters in Australia.

The following article is, however, a reflection on happier times, presented to show that some aspects of university life are universal, that the essential ingredients for an effective learning environment are not reliant on WebCT, or even a reliable power supply, and that student engagement and a thirst for learning remain vital.

Let me try to give you a flavour of the place where I worked, and my challenge to you is to look for the parallels and contrasts in your own current workplace. These comments were extracted from my regular emails home.

A Day in the Working Life

It's about 8:30am. First here again. The place is quiet. The door to the office corridor closed but unlocked. That's a start, no need to find the caretaker or his kids to let us in. We don't have offices as such, partitioned alcoves off an open corridor really. The "blue room", created by the light coming through thin shades on closed louvers, is already approaching a sweat box. Is the power on? Yes, it usually is at this hour, but let's be thankful. Light on. Ceiling fan at my end of the corridor on. Desk fan on. Curtains open, louvers open. Curtains closed again to the intense morning sun. These are not lined, reflective curtains. Back in the deep blueness seductively suggestive of cool, "Fli..., fli..., fli..., fli..., fli, fli, fli, fli"

- the fan quickens it's daily toil. I begin mine. The mossies below the desk think it's snack time. I'm keeping up the anti-malaria medication.

Lap-top on, and booting up - oh faithful friend, with built-in insurance against a sudden loss of power. What's to do? Things already structured into the day comprise a 9:30 meeting on getting a group of tourism students to Atauro Island for an excursion; 12 till 1:30 pm it's my "English for Staff" class - if they come! Tasks will be found to fill the remainder - emails to write, a bit of marking from my research methods class, I have photos of the students in the soccer final to give to one of the students, and prep for the next research methods assignment.

Outside my window, a hen and some chickens cluck past, a man wanders by selling mandarines, hanging in bunches from a pole across his shoulders. The local tap for washing and for collecting water is just across a little side road. And it sounds like someone has a piglet by the back leg - lots of squeaking. I'm close to life.

12 noon - Staff English - they've come! It's been a test of wills. The classes, begun at their request, are held on Tuesdays and Thursdays (two words many in the class initially found indistinguishable). They are fun, but difficult. For me they provide a great opportunity for interaction with staff who I might be able to assist in other aspects of their work. They'd seemed to be learning but I was told attendance was

unlikely to hold up. We played the word game "Boggle" as a warm up to each class and weren't those tongue twisters a hoot, but putting sentences together wasn't at all easy. Then there were not enough staff coming ... I had "pulled the plug" and waited. We'd missed three classes at least but today they had got themselves organised - a quorum, and the learning would go on.

Back in the "office". The sudden absence of electronic noise, the laptop darkens but doesn't die. The old PCs (a gift from a generous Australian bank) go down. The "F..." word is heard from down the corridor. "That must be Tetun you're using" I respond. Profuse apologies and a lot of laughter, from the young Timorese woman, who has just lost half of her preparation for a coming lecture. The laptop battery flattens keeping pace with my waning tolerance. "Loro-loron!" - every day! Give us a break. That's it. I'm out of here.

As I glumph down the pot-holed road in the taxi, I'm being tapped on the cheek by a translucent orange heart-shaped teething ring decoration hanging from the hand-hold (what do you call those handle things?) above the door. Bob Marley at force nine is in the cab with us of course. We're a "boom box". But it's more of a living experience than being stuck on the freeway between home and work in Australia. Maybe there will be sanity in Sugar's Internet cafe. That's his name, Sugar. He's really sweet (sorry just couldn't let that pass). A tall, young Chinese guy with a big smile. At least the power will be on. He has a generator. The cafe is cool. The internet re-connects me with an outside world.

Now walking home, an act of solidarity with the poor, maybe? They probably just think I'm quirky. It's a 20 minute walk from Sugar's. The pavements, pitted and dusty, don't trouble my legs as they did a year ago. I've perfected walking with rubber ankles, accepting the inevitability of an infrequent stumble. My friends on the street are offering the daily papers, phone cards, mandarins. The taxis slow and toot. Some call me by name. "Obrigadu, hau lao deit". (Thanks, I'm just walking.)

Teaching Research Methods

I encourage learning about research methods in between 18 and 23 Semester 6 students. A three-credit point unit, one

hour equals 45 minutes, three times 45 is 135, the class is supposed to run on a Saturday from 10:15am till 12:30pm. You work it out. I'd like to change that arrangement. There is a timetable, really there is, but finding the room free, the one data projector in the Institute available, the other two staff who assist, and the students - this can be a challenge. And don't mention "ahi mate" (literally "the fire is dead" in the local Tetun language), the power failing.

"Estudante iha klas nia aas halo nusaa?" I start by posing the question, "How tall are the students in this class?" I'm doing my best to teach in Tetun, trying to engage and involve the students. We're all on journeys from the known to the unknown (but soon to be discovered, I hope). I have a Timorese colleague who is supposed to be learning from me (both about my approach to teaching and learning and about research methods) while also there to help when the words just won't come. Alas, he spent most of his recent years in Sumatra and his Tetun's not much better than mine. There is a Malaysian volunteer too, who translates my slides (appearing in Tetun and English), into his Malaysianised bahasa, for the benefit of students in the class more fluent in Indonesian. My Timorese colleague intimates to me on the sly that they are translations with embellishments, which might explain why the translation takes five times longer than I do. It's a lingua-jumble-fest, with a Malaysian unable to understand any Tetun, a Timorese with a bit of each language, and me unable to speak a word of Indonesian. But most importantly, it seems this suits some of the students some of the time, while not all of the students all of the time.

So "How tall are the students in the class?" The answer is not, in fact, straightforward. How do you answer? Alternative responses are drawn from the students. Those present on the day measure their height to the nearest centimetre, except for Roque who insists on 162.5cm (we'll use that to talk about accuracy and rounding). We have a dressmaking tape attached to the wall with "green tac" - that's just the colour it is in this country. I have the digital camera. We do a line up, shortest (badak) to tallest (aas liu). Snap, and we have a great photo, proof of attendance and a way for me to put names to faces. We snap

a physical/visual histogram. That's where we'll start from next week - projecting the picture (if the power is on) and asking things about modes, means and medians, as our three languages slosh around in the learning environment. Sound like chaos to you? Contemplate texts, contemplate the students' written work. Contemplate assignments and examination papers!

The Excursion to Atauro

There were twenty of us, brave souls, on the Dili Institute of Technology tourism students' eco-tourism trip to Atauro, across the Wetar Strait. Many of the students, late teens through to late twenties, had never been on the sea before. Most were seasick some of the time, some for the whole four hour trip. From pitch black night, with just a few stars, to seeing the sun pierce the ocean horizon and declare a new day open. What an experience!

In the lead-up I had felt a little like "excess baggage", not one of the organisers, something of a "hanger-on", but I would have my uses. Teaching the students research methods, I was seen as giving some degree of authenticity to their journey of discovery and was to help put the report to the donors together. A Malaysian charity had given money for the event. We wanted them to do it again.

The students needed no encouragement. Wide eyed, all ears, they listened, they questioned, they took notes. They sponged up the new. They worked in small groups. They composed probing questions? And during breaks they played the guitar, sang, giggled, laughed, and frolicked in the sea.

The locals from the "Eco" tourist venture (all-natural aircon, mundi-style washing facilities, dry organic loos, rationed power and boiled water, simple food, but tranquility and comfortable beds) took us through the origins, purposes and future of this little pearl, flip charts and all. We toured the site. We visited the local village and market. Remote, isolated, these people were achieving something very special and they seemed to know it. It was theirs, owned and operated.

With my Tetun improving, it was a delight to chat to the students, in their language, at work and play. But I'm starved of humour in a foreign tongue, so I cherish a gleeful moment at the start of proceedings in the obligatory round-the-group introductions, many of us already

knew each other of course. I managed to come out with something just a little bit funny in my Tetun spiel, intentionally. And the company laughed.

Student Orientation

We've just had orientation for a new intake of students (about 100, with another 50 or so still trying to raise at least some of the money for fees) at the Dili Institute of Technology. A curious custom, also followed in schools here, sees the new students at the end of the first day, cleaning and sweeping the grounds and buildings with brooms and feather dusters they've brought from home. Could you see that happening in an Australian university? I've yet to get to the bottom of it, but I guess instilling pride in the place has something to do with it. Alas, the dust (there is so much dust!) will have settled on everything again by morning.

The four-day Orientation sees students wearing large A4-sized "name-tags" around their necks. The colour of the paper designates their group for activities during the program, including the "egg and spoon" and sack races! They giggle and laugh and do their best to get lost in what is really a tiny campus. It's a time of new places, new faces, and new friends. A bustle of love and hope. But aspirations of all sorts are fragile here in Timor-Leste.

On the evening of the final day the groups give a performance and have a ritual burning of their name-tags in a bonfire! The performances, beside the fire, in the half-dark, included a comedy-with-an-edge about domestic violence (all too common in Timor), a couple of singing groups, and another comedy about young love being thwarted by the parents. With the locals, including lots of little kids all standing round to see the

show, a microphone cutting in and out, a guitar struggling to hold tune, the ashes of the bonfire marking the passing of time, it was one of those days.

So why do we educate our young people? Why are you involved in higher education? Why are we concerned with quality in teaching and learning? This sometimes appears as a game, a competition, played by teams within the sector. But perhaps there is a higher purpose. Perhaps it has something to do with "lighting a candle or cursing the darkness" (*HERDSA News*, 28(2), 2006).

Owen Hicks has recently been appointed as a Senior Consultant with the Carrick Institute. Prior to his time in Timor he was Director of Organisational and Staff Development Services at UWA. He is a past president of HERDSA and was a member of the ICED Council.

Contact: ohicks@inet.net.au

Have You Heard the Change in "HERD"?

By Izabel Soliman

As of March 2, 2007, a new editorial team at the University of New England has assumed editing HERDSA's scholarly journal, *Higher Education Research and Development* (HERD). The editors are Dr. Izabel Soliman (Associate Dean Teaching and Learning) and Professor Ian Macdonald (Director of the Teaching and Learning Centre). We are committed to maintaining the international reputation of HERD achieved over 25 years of publishing, and the high standard of its content, assured through a double-blind review process. Additional members of the editorial team include:

- Associate Editors - Dr. Belinda Tynan, Dr. Henk Eijkman, and Dr. Robyn Smyth (Teaching and Learning Centre);
- Special Editions Editor - Assoc Prof Leo Goedegebuure (School of Professional Development and Leadership); and

- Dr. Peter Shanahan (Faculty of Education, Health and Professional Studies).

We thank the previous editorial team for their excellent work in editing four high quality issues per year, and we hope to build on their achievements.

We are keen to receive ideas from HERDSA members on any changes they would like to see. Please email these to HERD@une.edu.au. We would also like to hear from members who may be interested in reviewing for HERD, and if you are, then please email HERD@une.edu.au, attention Dr. Izabel Soliman, with your areas of expertise and contact details.

Your suggestions for Special Editions, of which HERD normally publishes one a year, and your interest in guest editing, may be also sent to [\[une.edu.au\]\(mailto:une.edu.au\), attention of Assoc Prof Leo Goedegebuure.](mailto:HERD@</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Book reviews on issues in higher education will be welcomed by emailing HERD@une.edu.au, attention of Dr. Peter Shanahan.

All submissions of articles and book reviews will still be made through the HERDSA office in Sydney, by emailing office@hersda.org.au, to maintain consistency in the address for submissions between changes in editors.

We will greatly appreciate your feedback, ideas and contributions and hope to meet you at the HERDSA conference this year where some members of the Editorial team will be offering a workshop.

Izabel Soliman

On behalf of the Editorial Team

The Nature of Alternative Entry Programs for Mature Age Students: A Snapshot

By Marguerite Cullity

What I was Interested in and Why

A research interest in "alternative entry programs" and "mature age students" stems from work I completed as an alternative entry program unit coordinator and lecturer at Edith Cowan University (ECU), Western Australia, from 1997 to 2000. The UniStart Program for Mature Age Students was implemented to assist Australian resident mature age (i.e., mature) students to obtain admission criteria to ECU and participate successfully in academic study.

Prior to the commencement of the UniStart program, a simple search of alternative entry program (AEP) characteristics was carried out. The search elicited individual program reports. It did not show, however, a study that examined a collective of AEPs for mature learners. A desire to understand what creates an effective AEP for mature students was the catalyst for this inquiry.

Alternative entry programs aim to improve the number of unmatriculated, return-to-study and/or equity group mature (21 years plus) students who participate at university. Typically, mature students who left school prior to completing their final year of secondary education, delayed their decision to attend university, or who come from a socially and/or educationally disadvantaged (i.e., equity) background participate in these programs. Alternative entry programs are both a social justice and lifelong learning strategy (see Dawkins, 1988; Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994).

Australia has a long history of accepting unmatriculated, return-to-study and equity group mature learners into undergraduate courses. Universities enrol mature students on the basis of, for example, their equity background, prior learning, work experiences, scores on a

mature age entrance test, or results in an alternative entry program. Many of the AEPs aim to advance the higher education opportunities and outcomes of Australian resident mature learners. Alternative entry programs for mature students are an important alternative admission route to university, yet prior to this study there was little information to illustrate a collective awareness of the nature and outcomes of these courses. As a unit coordinator within an AEP for mature learners, I believed that knowledge of these courses would advance my administrative and pedagogic practices.

Where was the Study Conducted

In 2002 a search of Australian university web sites showed that 13 of the nation's 44 universities were conducting AEPs for mature students. Eight of the thirteen AEPs targeted equity group mature students. In particular, these AEPs aimed to assist: learners from a low socio-economic status (SES) background; students who reside in regional or rural areas; students with a disability; and/or women in non-traditional fields of study. In addition, three AEPs were held for mature learners in general. Two AEPs aimed to advance mature student lifelong learning experiences. The thirteen AEPs revealed the aim "to introduce mature students to academic culture"; that is, the academic and social practices of university life. Without an alternative entry route to university, academic study may not be possible for some equity group and non-equity group mature learners.

Who was Involved in the Study?

Seven AEPs for mature students met the project's research criteria (see following).

Each program manager received a letter seeking permission to include the AEP in the study. Four AEP managers responded favourably to this request. The institutions which participated in the study include Central, Lake, Hill, and Port universities (pseudonyms). In total 25 students and 10 staff participated in the project.

A snapshot of the four AEPs shows that Central, Hill and Port universities aim to advance the number of low SES mature learners who attend university. The program conducted at Lake University endeavours to improve mature student lifelong learning opportunities. Hill University also focuses on increasing the number of students with disabilities who undertake study. Central, Lake and Port universities are research-intensive institutions, and Hill University mainly conducts vocationally-oriented programs. Three of the universities are located in capital cities.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the characteristics of Australian AEPs for resident mature age students and the outcomes of these courses as experienced by ex-AEP students and observed by staff.

What Data were Collected and Analysed?

A qualitative case study approach was chosen to examine the research topic (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995, 1988, 1978). Case study design provided a valuable and appropriate way to explore in-depth the characteristics and outcomes of the four AEPs for mature learners. The inquiry drew ideas from educational, sociological and psychological studies. Specifically, the study was informed by the works of: Ashenden, Milligan & Clarke (1997); Cantwell, Archer & Bourke (2001a, 2001b); Clark (1998); Collins & Penglase



(1991); Heath (1983); Hore & West (Eds., 1980); Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner & Barrett (1996); and West, Hore, Eaton, & Kermond (Eds., 1986). Writings that informed the inquiry's research methods include: Bazeley & Richards (2000); Berg (1989); Ezzy (2002); Merriam (1988); Miles & Huberman (1984); Patton (1990); Spradley (1979) and Stake (1995, 1988, 1978).

Research boundaries revealed the inquiry's units of analysis (Stake, 1995). These parameters included AEPs that:

- are conducted for Australian resident mature age students;
- assist mature age students in obtaining admission to university;
- are organised by Australian universities; and
- have each been conducted for five or more years.

Project data was collated and analysed over a two year period. The data was obtained by conducting document analyses, direct observations, face-to-face interviews and member checks (see Berg, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1990; Spradley, 1979). Data categories were then coded thematically (Ezzy, 2002) and the themes were compared, contrasted and interpreted to answer the research question. Finally, the inquiry findings were used to construct a framework that reveals, first, the relationship within and between AEP characteristics; and, second, the outcomes of the alternative entry programs for mature students.

What is the Nature of Alternative Entry Programs for Mature Age Students?

The nature and outcomes of AEPs for mature learners are determined by a complexity of student demographic characteristics; government policy; university management attitudes to mature learners; the philosophic values, beliefs and practices of AEP staff; the pedagogic values and practices of the academy; the willingness of general staff and counsellors to support mature learner needs; and, in some instances, local community attitudes. The individual nature and consequences of AEPs is largely a consequence of the importance or otherwise government policy, university management and university/APE staff

attribute to program rationale; specific aspects of a program (e.g., structure, content and delivery); and the students who enrol in a course. The project findings show that AEP management, design and outcomes are the responsibility of the higher education community not just AEP staff. Consequently, when tensions occur between the rationale of an AEP and the values, beliefs or practices of the relevant higher education community the attainment of AEP outcomes is diminished. On the other hand, when agreement occurs between all parties there is an increased likelihood of achieving program aims and objectives.

Many of the AEP staff interviewed in the study, argued the importance of providing mature learners with equitable access to higher education. Regardless of a program's equity or non-equity rationale, staff stressed the relevance of advancing mature student access to, and participation in, academic study. Staff beliefs reflected both the equity and lifelong learning ideals shown by social scientists and educators. The values noted by staff illustrate the Australian ideal of "fair go, fairness" (Secada, as cited in Sturman, 1997, p. 9). Program staff stated, that is, a firm commitment to:

- admitting to an AEP all Australians that have the reasonable prospect of coping with study regardless of "wherever they live and in whatever circumstances they are placed" (Karmel, 1975, p. 14; Dawkins, 1988).
- assisting all mature students to pursue their democratic right in determining their higher education path (Marginson, 1993, p. 18).
- having the same equality of "prospect" as each other to participate at university (McNamee, 1993, p. 35).
- providing alternative entry routes to university for mature learners (e.g., Baldwin, 1991; the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education & Training [SSCEET], 1990; the Higher Education Council/National Board of Employment, Education and Training [HEC/NBEET], 1992; National Board of Employment, Education & Training/Higher Education Council [NBEET/HEC], 1996; Nelson, 2003, 2002).
- implementing organisational, administrative, methodological and procedural measures that promote

lifelong learning (Candy & Crebert, 1991, p. 5).

A main finding within the study was an empirical awareness of program characteristics that either encourage or inhibit mature learners to participate in an alternative entry course. Results show that "staff respect" for mature learner backgrounds; "pedagogy" that considers mature learner needs; "program administrative practices" that enable staff to assist mature students; and "institutional procedures" that support mature learners' higher education experiences encourage mature students to develop as secure, engaged, confident, and active participants in an alternative admissions course.

Conversely, AEPs can inhibit mature student participation when: staff dismiss mature student concerns, impart information in a teacher-centred manner only; program administrative practices that ignore mature learner attitudes and backgrounds; and program procedures that limit mature student opportunities to explore university life. Programs that show these characteristics are more likely than other AEPs to inhibit student participation. Students indicated that they can become defensive, annoyed, anxious, and feel thwarted when AEPs conduct these types of practices.

The inquiry also highlighted the uniqueness of each program. To this end, the project illustrates why each university should maintain autonomy to decide the nature of its alternative entry course. There is no prescriptive formula to indicate the nature of an "ideal" program. Findings do suggest, nonetheless, that government policy should reflect the current needs of unmatriculated, return-to-study and equity group mature students. In addition, results suggest that the effectiveness of a course could be enhanced if the design of an AEP considered how:

- it mirrors the practices and expectations of the home university;
- it reveals an empirical awareness of participating student demographic characteristics, motives to study, and higher education needs;
- it can influence mature learners to complete or withdraw from a course;
- it matches program equity or non-equity objectives;

- program practices encourage or inhibit mature students from participating at university; and
- to develop effective monitoring practices that show and reflect ways in which to advance program outcomes.

In short, the study argues that government, university and, if appropriate, the local community, should collaboratively work towards developing an AEP that improves the higher education opportunities and outcomes of its catchment mature students. The study stresses that managing and designing an AEP for mature students is a concern for the Australian higher education community as well as for individual universities. The project also emphasises the significance of assisting equity and non-equity background mature students to advance their higher education opportunities and outcomes. The role, therefore, of an AEP should provide for equity group and non-equity group mature learners who require admission criteria to university and/or they desire to advance their understanding of university life.

Ways Forward

This inquiry provides a valuable insight into, and knowledge about, four AEPs for mature learners and the factors that affect mature student participation in study. During the inquiry, however, it became evident the project was limited in its opportunities to examine, for instance, the effect of government funding arrangements on program design and outcomes; AEP student completion and undergraduate progress and success rates; program pedagogic practices; and the outcomes that occur within discipline and study skills based programs. A further concern is the suggested high attrition rate of AEP mature participants. Smith (1987) and Ramsay et al. (1996) have examined mature student withdrawal from the AEP within their respective university, but there is no comprehensive understanding of the reasons why mature learners leave a program. The theoretical insights advanced in this study should not end with the completion of this inquiry.

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A Discipline Support Program (DSP) for Students from a Non English Speaking Background at the University of Canberra in Introduction to Management: A Work in Progress

By Anna Maldoni, Robert Kennelly and Doug Davies

It has been suggested in a recent study by Birrell (2006) that at least a third of overseas students completing their degrees at Australian Universities had an English "score below the level normally required for employment as professionals in Australia". Whether or not this finding by Professor Birrell is subsequently supported by other research, it is clear that universities face an ongoing challenge to support their second language students.

Anna Maldoni, Robert Kennelly and Doug Davies (herein referred to as "the authors") are currently trialing a discipline support program at the University of Canberra. The program aims to enhance the learning experiences of NESB students with insufficient academic and language skills for success in first year university study, in particular to improve competence in academic and critical literacy skills and at the same time build English language competence through the process of learning to read and write critically within the discipline. The program targets not only international students but also students from a non-English speaking background (NESB). Initial results from semester 2, 2006 indicate that this discipline support program is beneficial and endorsed by students and academic staff.

The program, funded by a grant from the Teaching and Learning Committee of the University of Canberra, is based on the authors' success at introducing a discipline-based English reading program into various University of Canberra College (UCC) pathway subjects in 2003–2004 aimed at improving student learning in the discipline and overall competence in English. The results of the project indicated that the reading program had facilitated comprehension

of discipline-specific content; improved proficiency in both reading and writing; increased confidence in participating in tutorials, and impacted positively on the ability of students to successfully meet the assessment requirements of their discipline units (Maldoni & Kennelly, 2005).

The literature (Reid 1998, Wilson 2003 etc) is clear about the difficulties of studying at university for international students. The technical aspects of academic language combined with the sheer volume of reading are significant impediments to successful study. Apart from the pedagogic and cultural factors, which may influence academic success, Feast (2002) has shown a positive correlation between English language competence and performance in English speaking universities. Despite the fact that NESB students have met minimum IELTS entry requirements, it has been noted that the English language competence of many NESB students has still been insufficient to meet the demands of their mainstream university programs (Pantelides 1999), another point Birrell (2006) makes in his recent study. The authors' study at the University of Canberra has found three main reasons for these difficulties with studying at university:

1. insufficient language skills;
2. insufficient familiarisation to Australian culture; and
3. lack of a perception of university study as the development of independent critical analysis skills (Maldoni & Kennelly, 2005).

Anecdotally, the authors found that students demonstrating a lack of these skills were most at risk (that is likely to fail the unit and/or drop out of the unit

or plagiarise) in a unit like Introduction to Management (ITM) where so much of the study relied on academic reading and critical analysis. In order to improve the learning outcomes for all students from a non-English speaking background the authors found a strong rationale for the integration of a discipline support program to be provided alongside a mainstream unit so that basic academic skills, such as critical reading are being developed within the language of the discipline.

Advocates of the Content-Based Model (see figure 1)

The content based model provides students with discipline content and academic/English language skills in the same class. Kasper (1995, 1997) has significantly advanced the knowledge about the effectiveness of content-based courses. She has reported on improved proficiency in English language skills and performance in mainstream content courses, specifically because content-based ESL courses use material derived from mainstream academic subjects (Kasper 1995, 1997). Bretag (2001) further affirms that "...integrated content-based ESL courses taught by appropriately qualified language specialists working within faculties, is a highly effective model..." for improving NESB students' learning in the discipline and proficiency in the English language.

Current Study at the University of Canberra

The authors sought and gained agreement from the unit coordinators to introduce the discipline support program (DSP) to Introduction to

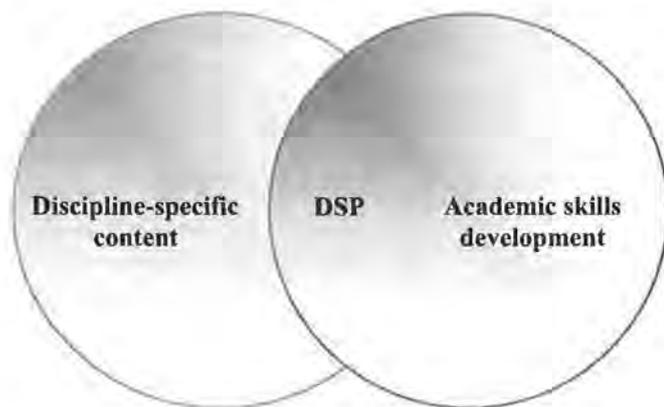


Figure 1: Discipline Specific Model

Management (ITM). The authors and the unit coordinators subsequently formed a "project team" and met several times during and after the semester. On the basis of early discussions with the coordinators and the authors' experience with UCC and mainstream students, a draft program consisting of academic skills enhancement within the content of the discipline was developed.

A potential cohort was identified by name and emailed. At the first lecture the authors explained the DSP workshops and asked 2nd language students to express their interest. The details of 17 students were taken. Tutors of Introduction to Management were briefed with emails, flyers and a visit, in some cases, to their tutorial.

The authors appreciated that second semester mainstream students were unlikely to respond in the same way as the University of Canberra College (UCC) students had done in the original study. UCC students are full fee paying international students whose English language competence is clearly below that required for University entry (IELTS 5.5). They participate in a small university formation program (with up to 6 contact hours per week, per unit) where their compulsory attendance is almost guaranteed by strict visa requirements. On the other hand, mainstream students taking ITM in second semester have better English language competence (IELTS 6.5), are not required to attend lectures, are older, more mature and are in at least their second semester of university. They have developed other avenues of getting help. Notwithstanding, the authors saw

this environment as an opportunity to develop a control group to compare progress of students who participated in the DSP with those who had not.

The DSP workshops ran on a Thursday afternoon, one hour after the lecture. The DSP workshop was made up of two interwoven parts: academic skills

within a discipline unit of study. The aims of the program were to explore content in the discipline area through the development and use of academic skills, which would enable students to become independent students in the long term. The academic skills consisted of students learning to skim, scan, identify main ideas, summarise in writing and discussion using content within the discipline. Deeper analysis of the management texts involved synthesising and evaluating through writing and collaboration with other students). These skills were applied to the content of the unit and included students studying case studies, theoretical passages of the text book, reading and answering Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) questions, short answer questions (for final exam) and essay preparation. The fact that this content was immediately relevant in both their tutorial program and assessment requirements, made the effectiveness of the program more transparent.

At each workshop students were provided with weekly worksheets to assist the development of their academic skills. The first workshop introduced an overview of academic reading. Eight students came to the first workshop. The authors were pleasantly surprised by the level of English reading and oral communication that was well above the standard of the average University of Canberra College student (subjective scale 0–3, where 0 = incomprehensible except for the occasional word; 1 = some phrases are comprehensible; 2 = half of what is said is comprehensible; 3 = all of what is said is comprehensible) (Maldoni & Kennelly, 2005). Out of the eight

participating students, 6 were subjectively assessed as 2 and two students between 2 and 3. In keeping with these results, there was a good level of participation in workshops.

The workshops usually began with: a clarification of issues arising from the lecture, followed by skill development using a particular part of a theory from the lecture that would be required to understand the case study in the following week's tutorial. In addition, both unit coordinators participated in one or more workshops and were impressed with the learning support offered. An average of seven students came to each of six workshops before the mid-semester break. Two students attended all six workshops, one attended five and three others attended four workshops.

Results

In order to evaluate the success of the program, the authors considered unit assessment results, participation in the program and survey data from staff and students. The results of the first MCQ test suggested that half of the attending students were not at risk. That is their writing, reading and speaking skills were adequate to achieve a pass grade. The other half whose attendance dropped were more at risk.

Participation decreased dramatically after the mid-semester break from an average of seven before the break to three after the break. Comparatively, lecture numbers fell from 80% in the first week to 30% by the break and then down to 20% after the break. Interestingly, after the break the students who did attend DSP did not attend lectures, did not submit written work and therefore were not prepared for the workshop. Workshops after the break focused on the second MCQ test, the assignment (essay) and then short answer questions (SAQs) in the final exam.

With only three students in the class the second test results were not statistically significant, however the most regular student improved her score. More generally the second test results allowed for a better identification of the control group (those who had not participated in the DSP). This group of about 20 students were at the same level of risk or greater than those in the DSP. Ten students of this larger cohort were tracked in terms of assessment and staff evaluation and it

was found that these students continued to do poorly. Despite the knowledge of their poor results, they declined offers of further assistance. Four out of ten students in the control group failed and the group's average final mark was 45.5%. Only one out of ten failed in the DSP group with an average mark of 57%. Put simply; students attending the DSP achieved higher results than a similar cohort who did not participate.

Evaluation of Program: Lessons Learnt from Staff and Student Surveys, the Authors' Observations and Analysis of Students' Assessment

- Students and staff identified the importance of the DSP in building student confidence for discussions in tutorials and for assessment tasks.
- The authors had the opportunity to trial a number of different teaching strategies, which allowed them to better prepare for future DSP programs.
- Team teaching, which has brought together the skills of the language specialist and the discipline specialist, allows for greater, more robust reflection on student learning and teaching. (for example, a language specialist will be aware of the cultural implications underpinning academic texts and the discipline lecturer will be able to explain the relevant theory. The international student must understand both).
- The program should be marketed to future students as an academic skills development program rather than a program for students with poor English skills.
- The DSP attracted students with a higher level of English than expected. Analysis of the research data suggests that those students most at risk were not in the DSP. The authors surmise that some students did not understand how the program might help or were intimidated by participating in another class, which would further expose their weaknesses in English language competence.
- In their surveys, students, tutors and coordinators endorsed the continuation of the program because it did provide students with an environment conducive to their learning needs which allowed

them to ask questions and improve their grasp of theories being explained and applied to case studies, while at the same time building essential academic skills.

- To more thoroughly brief and liaise with tutors was seen as crucial in identifying students at risk, referring them to the program and continuing to monitor their progress in tutorials.

The Future Plan: Notes on 1/2007

The authors are currently starting the DSP in semester 1/2007. The first step is to identify students who benefit from the DSP. As the cohort of students for 2/2006 were different from those at the College (refer earlier), so too are the students for 1/2007. The average age is younger, many students are school leavers (some have had a gap of a year from school to university), most will not have been to University before, some will literally have just arrived from overseas or have come straight from an English preparation class to increase their IELTS score. In 2/2006 the authors obtained 17 names from a total enrolment of about 200 with 50+ prima facie second language students at the first lecture, though only eight students were attracted to the first workshop. In 1/2007 the authors obtained 31 names from a total enrolment of about 300 with 50+ prima facie second language students at the first lecture. The authors await the first workshops with excitement.

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Learning Styles Again: VARKing Up the Right Tree!

By Neil Fleming with David Baume

This article first appeared in Educational Developments, Issue 7.4, Nov 2006. Educational Developments is a publication of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), which is based in the UK. The article is reproduced here through an agreement between SEDA and HERDSA to share articles from their publications.

Understanding How We Learn

Students and teachers need a starting place for thinking about and understanding how they learn. Self-knowledge is a good start. How to get that self-knowledge? Inventories can be useful. Initially, it doesn't much matter which inventory we use. Why not? Because a learning style is not a set of scores on some inventory, or a set of alphabetic symbols, or paragraphs of descriptors with labels. A learning style is, rather, a description of a process, or of preferences. Any inventory that encourages a learner to think about the way that he or she learns is a useful step towards understanding, and hence improving, learning.

VARK above all is designed to be a starting place for a conversation among teachers and learners about learning. It can also be a catalyst for staff development – thinking about strategies for teaching different groups of learners can lead to more, and appropriate, variety of learning and teaching.

One proviso should be made about the VARK inventory. It is, technically, not a learning styles questionnaire, as it provides feedback only on one's preferred modes for communicating. These "modal preferences for learning" are only a small part of what most theorists would include in a complete package deserving to be called a "learning style".

Some learners already know a lot about the way they learn, and need no help from any inventory or questionnaire. For others, doing the VARK questionnaire

again and again over time is a worthwhile exercise, even though – maybe because – the scores may vary. VARK works when people find it useful.

The Origins of VARK

For nine years I was one of Her Majesty's school inspectors in the New Zealand education system. During this time I watched some 9000 classes. I was puzzled when I observed excellent teachers who did not "reach" some learners, and poor teachers who did.

When I moved to Lincoln University to work in staff development, I decided to try to solve this puzzle. There are, of course, many reasons for what I observed. But one topic that seemed to hold some "magic", some explanatory power, was preferred modes of learning, "modal preferences". Some parts of a learning preference are comparatively difficult for an individual to change, or for an education system to respond to – for example, preferred time of day to study, or preferred time for food intake, or motivation. But attention to preferred learning modes allows flexibility for students and teachers to modify their behaviour, if not their preference.

It seems to me that our preferences are part of who we are. They inform how we approach things. We often have quite strong preferences for such things as cars, colours, food and partners. So why not look into our preferences for the ways in which we learn?

The main ideas and sources that informed VARK were my prior experiences and observations, and working with students and teachers at Lincoln University who provided my laboratory and practicum.

My main current ideas about preferred learning modes include:

Modal preferences influence individuals' behaviours, including learning.

Modal preferences are not fixed, but they are stable in the medium term.

Both students and teachers can reliably identify and provide examples of their use of modality preferences in learning.

Preferences can be matched with strategies for learning. There are learning strategies that are better aligned to some modes than others. Using your weakest preferences for learning is not helpful; nor is using other students' preferences.

Information that is accessed using strategies that are aligned with a student's modality preferences is more likely to be understood and be motivating.

The use of learning strategies that are aligned with a student's modality preferences are also likely to lead to persistence at learning tasks, a deeper approach to learning, active learning and effective metacognition.

Knowledge of, and acting on, one's modal preferences is an important condition for improving one's learning.

I could produce a similar list for teachers' modality preferences and their influence on students' learning. But, I am not a theorist.

The Development of VARK – and the Name

I noticed that, in response to a question such as "How do I get to ...?", people gave directions in different ways. I wondered if different people prefer to be told how to get there in different ways – being shown a printed map, having a map sketched for them, being told, being given written instructions, being physically taken there. So I began with a question about this.

Other questions came from my work with students. I tested these questions on students whose preferences I knew from

discussions and from examples of their note taking and learning patterns.

After a couple of years I had 13 questions. I called the questionnaire VARK. It could have been KRAV or VRAK. I learned much later that VARK is Dutch for pig, and I could not get a website called vark.com because a pet shop in Pennsylvania used it for selling aardvarks – earth pigs!

VARK is an acronym for Visual, Aural, Read/write and Kinesthetic. VAK inventories had been around for years. What was new in my work was a second “visual” modality for Read/write learners. From what I read and observed, it seemed obvious that some students had a distinct preference for the written word whilst others preferred symbolic information as in maps, diagrams, and charts. These two preferences were not always found in the same person. There is more acceptance of this distinction today than in the 1980s.

Using VARK

Users complete the questionnaire online or on paper. They can have more than one answer per question, so they get a profile of four scores – one for each modality. That begins a process of thinking about how they prefer to learn. VARK is a catalyst for metacognition, not a diagnostic or a measure. It is a short questionnaire (13 questions – maybe 16 in the new version). That prevents student survey fatigue. Also, it tries to have respondents reflect and answer from within their experience, rather than from hypothetical situations.

Over 180,000 have used VARK on-line from mid-March to mid-September 2006. Those who answer some demographic questions make up the group called “With Data”; the others we call “Visitors”. There is a big jump in use after the holidays when the UK and the USA go back to school. Figures will decline slowly from the August high through to next February.

Interestingly, twice as many women as men use VARK and supply data about themselves. Also, of course, the ratio of students to teachers is high – about 6:1. We know that just under eight percent are completing the questionnaire for a second (or third or ...) time.

When users get their results online, we ask if they think their results are a match to their own perceptions, or don't match or they don't know. Those figures run at

58 percent, 37 percent and five percent. I know self-perceptions don't rate highly in research, but I would be worried if those figures were in any other order.

I spend a lot of time answering emails; I enjoy that, and get ideas from what others contribute.

Using VARK for what?

I know, from the daily stream of emails from people asking for permission to use the copyright VARK materials, that it is heavily used. (It is free for use in schools and universities.) I wish I knew more about the uses people make of it. I have a file full of examples and testimonials – and a few criticisms, too. Here are three examples of positive feedback:

One teacher in the USA has been investigating the notion that maybe those students who are multimodal – that is, they prefer to use several modes to fully understand something – are missing out the most in our education systems. This teacher has tracked many of the students who are asking for help at her learning centre. A disproportionate number of these are multimodal, with scores such as 11, 10, 9, 7. Her theory is they don't get enough variety in their intake of information to confirm or “settle” it as new learning. Modal impoverishment?

A French professor revamped his Philosophy teaching and assessment so that it allowed for “visual” expressions of learning, and found that a different set of students excelled.

Some students take their VARK scores to the teacher and say, “Can you help me by teaching this way ...?”

I find all this fascinating. Much education is probably mono- or at the most bi-modal. Teaching often reflects the teacher's preferred teaching style rather than students' preferred learning styles. Managed or Virtual Learning Environments may not change that as much as we hope – they sometimes implement old teaching styles in new technology, although with a shift from speech to text (A to R!).

Various students are doing research on VARK, teachers have given papers on it and made conference posters. Some UK universities have placed the VARK software on their intranets, but I don't hear much from them. I run workshops on VARK and how to use it effectively, most recently in the UK and USA, and there is a lot of enthusiasm for VARK afterwards.

The helpsheets may be the most useful part of the package. There is no shortage of learning style inventories available. What made VARK different when it was launched in 1987 was that it

Table 1: Visits and Completions

2006	With Data	Visitors	Visitors Per Day	Visitors Per Week
March*	3813	13523	781	5467
April	4823	17178	573	4008
May	5320	20231	653	4568
June	9850	20509	684	4785
July	7396	15583	503	3519
August	16827	49502	1597	11178
Totals	48029	136526		

* Only the last 17 days of March are recorded here.

Table 2: Regions and VARK Visitors

(15th March to 11 September 2006)

Asia	Canada	Europe	Oceania	South America	UK	USA
3%	2%	2%	6%	1%	9%	77%

came with helpsheets rather than labels. Now students can get some help with the question "OK. I know what I am, but what do I do about it? How can I use knowledge about my learning preferences to help me to learn?"

Some Reservations and Cautions about VARK

Learning styles have had a bad press. It seems that they are lauded and then attacked on an almost cyclical basis. This is probably because it is very difficult to measure learning (in part because it is difficult to define learning in useful ways), especially if one wants to know when learning happens or to what it can be ascribed.

The critics of learning styles say things like: "Knowing one's learning style does not improve learning". That is just as true as that knowing one's weight does not help weight loss. However, knowing one's learning style can be beneficial if learners take the next step, and consider how and when they learn, as part of a reflective, metacognitive process, with action to follow. You don't fully understand how you learn with a learning style inventory alone. What happens afterwards has the potential to make a difference. Just as what you do after you find out that you are overweight makes a difference to your weight!

Dr Marilla Svinicki, Professor and Area Chair, Department of Educational Psychology (Area: Learning, Cognition and Instruction) at the University of Texas at Austin, tested VARK, and wrote:

We found that [VARK] was hard to validate statistically, including with several modifications we tried and several statistical strategies such as multidimensional scaling. We just couldn't get a good fit with the data.

This does not mean that the instrument itself is not valid or desirable, but it shouldn't be used in research; that is not its strength. Its strength lies in its educational value for helping people think about their learning in multiple ways and giving them options they might not have considered. The statistical properties are not stable enough to satisfy the requirements of research, but then, one of our findings is that no one else has been able to design an instrument along these lines that does. So VARK is in good company.

Everyone who uses the VARK loves it, and that's a great thing to be able to say.

So it is obviously striking a chord with almost everyone who uses it. We just have to recognize that the constructs of learning style are too varied to pin down accurately and every instrument I've ever considered suffers from this same issue.'

I sometimes believe that students and teachers invest more belief in VARK than it warrants. It is a beginning of a dialogue, not a measure of personality. It should be used strictly for learning, not for recreation or leisure!

Some also confuse preferences with ability or strengths. You can like something, but be good at it or not good at it or any point between. VARK tells you about how you like to communicate. It tells you nothing about the quality of that communication.

It's a pity that technology does not easily allow us to have the questionnaire in Visual, Aural and Kinesthetic modes.

Further developments with VARK

- We are in the middle of a five-yearly review of the questionnaire. We have modified some questions, removed some and added some. We are using the strong visitor numbers in autumn 2006 to test these so that we know who is choosing each option and who is not.
- We have a new subscription service where no software needs to be installed on your intranet. We store the numbers for you and give you access to your classes' results.
- Using people's VARK scores, I am writing profiles about learning for individual teachers and students.
- We are keen to add translations of VARK beyond the 14 languages we have at present.
- I starting to use learning preferences for sports, using VARK to help coaches, players and athletes. This work is mainly in elite professional sports, but VARK can also help amateur coaches and indeed parent coaches.
- I still enjoy visiting the UK and the US to run participatory workshops and development sessions on VARK (and other topics).

My own VARK score, and comments thereon

My last score was V=7, A=1, R=4 and K=3. My MA (Hons) in Geography fits with my strong preference for diagrams, charts, maps and visual symbols used in many situations. (My children, when they wanted help with their homework, would say, "Dad can we have the short version please and without any diagrams".) My R score indicates that I have some preference for Read/write input and output – this is evidenced in my publications and writing style. Embodied in that K score is a good dose of practical "just do it" preference. I pay little heed to Auditory input – at least, according to my family!

These scores are a good place to begin a conversation about how I learn.

Acknowledgements

My wife and family.

Heather Lander skilfully manages the VARK website for me.

Dr Charles Bonwell helped with the early VARK questionnaires, and is there when I need him.

References and contact

The VARK website at www.vark-learn.com has a useful bibliography.

The article that launched VARK to a wider audience was: Fleming, N.D., & Mills, C.E. (1992). Not another inventory, rather a catalyst for reflection. *To Improve the Academy*, 11, 137.

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This article was developed in conversations (face to face and via email) between David Baume PhD FSEDSA, Higher Education Consultant, and Neil Fleming, the designer of the VARK questionnaire and helpsheets.

INTERNATIONAL COLUMN EXCHANGE

One Approach to Student Engagement: Strengthening the Nexus Between Research, Teaching and Learning

By Julia Christensen Hughes

This article is part of an ongoing international exchange among the presidents of the societies for teaching and learning from Canada, Australasia, and the United States. What follows is an adaptation of a report written by Julia Christensen Hughes, President of STLHE, and Evelina Rog, following a Canadian "Roundtable on Research, Teaching and Learning," facilitated by STLHE and the Canadian Federal Government during 2006. Many of the recommendations generated are directly applicable to strengthening student engagement. The full report is available at www.mcmaster.ca/stlhe/projects/index.html

Last spring STLHE, Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), and the University of Guelph collaborated in organising a Roundtable for exploring the research/teaching/learning nexus in post-secondary education (PSE) and for identifying potential strategies for creating national, provincial and institutional contexts in which all of these essential activities might thrive.

At the Roundtable, participants expressed concern about the increasing polarisation of research and teaching in Canada, the desire of colleges to become more involved in research, and the need to provide more support for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Participants were also concerned about low levels of student engagement as well as the ability of the PSE system to meet the needs of students from traditionally underrepresented groups (e.g. Aboriginal students, students of immigrant families, students with disabilities and non-high school completers). Canada's

competitiveness on the world stage for dealing with these issues was also raised.

Participants concluded that there is a need to strengthen Canada as a learning society and to develop a comprehensive, national vision for PSE. To make the case for further government investment in PSE, we need research in at least three areas:

1. Current versus desired learning experiences and outcomes
2. Current versus desired participation rates in PSE, including those of under-represented groups
3. The potential to market an improved Canadian PSE system internationally

Further, participants suggested (1) that sources of funding and communities of practice need to be established for exploring these issues and (2) that the role of the granting councils and the Canada Research Chairs program (CRC) could be strengthened in this regard. Several institutional strategies were also suggested.

Institutional-level Strategies

1. Establish an institutional vision that includes the research/teaching/learning nexus and the institution's contribution to a learning society.
2. Implement curricular development and assessment approaches that explicitly support the development of critical inquiry skills and citizenship behaviours and encourage the integration of these learning outcomes across the curriculum.
3. Commit to the use of innovative and active pedagogical approaches (e.g., critical inquiry, problem-based learning, community service learning)

in both domestic and international contexts.

4. Develop a connected community of faculty, educational developers, learning and writing specialists, librarians, and learning technology staff etc. to support course development and the implementation of effective pedagogies.
5. Encourage greater collaboration and/or integration between teaching support departments and offices of research (i.e., both should be perceived as core services, and have similar prestige and focus).
6. Ensure tenure, promotion, and merit-based pay policies adopt a broad definition of scholarship, value teaching, and reinforce the integration of research, teaching and learning. Reward departments whose faculty achieve success in these areas.
7. Establish institutes or other formal structures to support faculty interested in pursuing the SoTL.
8. Provide professional development opportunities for faculty and graduate students; encourage and/or require their participation in courses on pedagogical theory and practice.
9. Profile and celebrate teaching and learning successes and its scholarship in institutional publications and events, and through awards programs (for individuals, programs and departments).
10. Foster collaboration between university and college researchers.

STLHE continues to advocate for the implementation of these recommendations.

I.T. IN HIGHER EDUCATION COLUMN

The New Media and Emerging Forms of Publication

By Roger Atkinson

The title for this column paraphrases the title of a section in *The Horizon Report 2007* [1], namely "The New Scholarship and Emerging Forms of Publication". In the past I've scanned *Horizon Reports* [2], which have published many interesting forecasts concerning "emerging technologies likely to have a large impact on teaching, learning, or creative expression within higher education". [1, p.3] As "emerging forms of publication" is one of my continuing interests [3], and the New Media Consortium originated *Horizon Reports* [2], a title for this column emerged by the time I finished reading *The Horizon Report 2007* [1] table of contents and executive summary! However, this section of *Report 2007* is concerned mainly with "the process and shape of scholarship" [1, p.21]:

Nontraditional forms are emerging that call for new ways of evaluating and disseminating work. Increasingly, scholars are beginning to employ methods unavailable to their counterparts of several years ago, including prepublication releases of their work, distribution through nontraditional channels, dynamic visualization of data and results, and new ways to conduct peer reviews using online collaboration. [1, p.21]

By contrast, my view of the impact of the new media upon scholarly publishing is concerned mainly with potential developments for traditional journals:

The great advances that we have obtained in computing and networking technologies ought to give us decreased costs for scholarly journals and easier, digital network access. However, in most cases, subscription charges for print delivery and network access are rising every year. [3]

To reinforce the pessimism of that perspective, Figure 1 provides an update on the version published in 2004 [3]. Contrary to the *Report 2007* vision about

non-traditional forms, and the hopes of open access proponents, Figure 1 seems to say "business as usual" [4] for these commercial journals. Not even the slightest hint of cost reductions enabled by the new media.

Whilst I found *Horizon Report 2007* disappointing on what I see as the big issue in the new media and scholarly publishing, are there any encouragements on other fronts? Yes, sifting through the references cited by the references in *Horizon Report 2007*, there is much interesting reading.

Let's consider just three examples noted from my *Horizon* related browsing. Firstly, under the heading "PR's "pit bull" takes on open access", *Nature* writer Jim Giles stated a current key issue succinctly:

Now, *Nature* has learned, a group of big scientific publishers has hired the pit bull to take on the free-information movement, which campaigns for scientific results to be made freely available. Some traditional journals, which depend on subscription charges, say that open-access journals and public databases of scientific papers

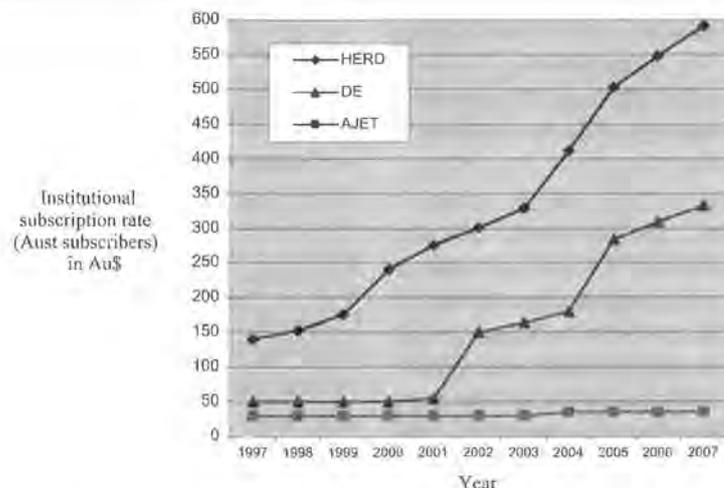


Figure 1: Institutional subscription rates, 1997-2007 (GST not included)

HERD Higher Education Research and Development.
<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/07294360.asp>

DE Distance Education.
<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/01587919.asp>

AJET Australasian Journal of Educational Technology.
<http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/>

Data sources: Rates quoted in printed copies of the journals and the publisher's website (GST not included). Prices include Internet access from an institutional local area network in the cases of HERD and DE institutional subscriptions (AJET is "open access", being unrestricted, free to the Internet, three months after publication). For more details, and a similar graph showing personal subscription rates, 1997-2007, see Atkinson and McLoughlin (2007) [4].

such as the National Institutes of Health's (NIH's) PubMed Central, threaten their livelihoods. [5]

Well, does Figure 1 suggest that T&F's livelihood is seriously threatened? Or perhaps scholarly journal publishing in science works on leaner, more reasonable profit margins than education journals? Here is a second example also from science, by Frank Gannon, Senior Editor of *EMBO Reports*, in an editorial titled "Ethical profits from publishing"[6]:

The past decades have seen an enormous growth in the number of scientific journals. Many of these have been founded by scientific societies that believe that the interests of their community are best served by having a journal focused on their area of research. Society members, volunteering to act as editors and reviewers, set the standards for quality and thus ensure that the journal reflects the ambitions of the society. However, these volunteered services do not convert accepted manuscripts into printed journals, and so many societies rely on a commercial publishing house to take care of the printing and distribution. There seemed to be no further consequences—after all, they were not "for profit". These societies relied on the professionalism of the publishers to get the sums right and market the journal gently. Sometimes, perhaps to their surprise, the journal not only satisfied the need to publish scientific works but also generated money for the societies' activities.

With time, however, there has been a shift in the world of learned publications, with commercial publishers increasingly dominating the market and changing the primary goal from the communication of high-quality science to the generation of high-level profits. [6]

Sounds to me like some scenarios that I know! However, after a balanced discussion on the topic of "an ethical way of making and using profits", the editorial concludes with a much more dramatic, even pugnacious, note [6]:

It is clear that many cornerstones of our scientific world would crumble if profits that are generated and used ethically were lost in the Messianic and ideologically driven movement to change abruptly the current business model for scientific publications. [6]

Again, if Figure 1's pattern is widely applicable, the world referred to is not crumbling. It is prospering, notwithstanding the challenge from open access publishing. My third example, also

from science, is due to Gregory Lamb, a staff writer for *The Christian Science Monitor*. Noting that "Publishing research to blogs and e-books is so easy", and going on to discuss the proposition that "scholarly journals and their controversial system of peer reviews may not be needed at all", he stated [7]:

At many elite scientific journals, fewer than 10 percent of the articles submitted are accepted. Many of the rejected articles eventually travel down the "food chain" to be published in a plethora of less prestigious (and less noticed) specialty journals. [7]

Travel down the "food chain"? What an interesting concept! Picture the publishers of the most prestigious journals as top order predators, very discerning in their tastes, ingesting only the finest pieces, and spitting out the rest for lower order scavengers to pick over? Well, I prefer to think that editors and reviewers are friendly facilitators who help develop an author's work, rather than being predators in a "food chain" hierarchy. Of course, we hope that authors will make the fullest possible use of facilitative advice from editors and reviewers, who typically are volunteers not charging for their time. But a small proportion of authors don't, hence the "food chain" problem is real, and it is prudent editorial and review practice to maintain a watching brief. With technology based aids, namely *Google* [8] searches and scanning of online tables of contents, I keep a file noting any instances of an article that has been rejected by *AJET* [9] appearing unchanged, or with little change, at a later date in another journal (author and journal identities never to be revealed). I have not searched in a systematic way, but I have noted four "food chain" cases in the last few years. Surprisingly, one of these travelled "up" the "chain" from *AJET*, not "down".

Debates within science journal publishing are spicier than in education journal publishing. Pit bulls, Messianic movements and food chains! Maybe in education we could spice up our game, though I concede that this hypothesis may require further exploration, and that perhaps the "spice" element is a luxury, not an academic necessity. So, enough of the "spice", back to the more serious matter of linking these examples to IT in higher education. To reiterate the four illustrations and their technology links:

- Educational technology forecasting, *Horizon Report* style, is very difficult. There may be more readers citing you for having got it wrong than for having got it right.
- If there is a real threat to the livelihoods of publishers of commercial journals from open access journals, the principal enabling factor is the technologies that have decreased publishing costs so much that making articles free to online readers is a viable option.
- If the online equivalents of "printing and distribution" in the journal production process are facilitated sufficiently well by computer and Internet based technologies, is there really a need for societies to employ a commercial publishing house that may have as its principal goal the "generation of high-level profits"?
- *Google* [8] searches and scanning of online tables of contents are truly wonderful aids for editing tasks such as tracking a particular author's work and checking references. The technologies enable editors to provide additional and valuable support for the traditional peer review process.

The concept of "emerging forms of publication" could imply a kind of continuous growth and development, always going forward. Not necessarily so, I regret, for HERDSA's own use of the new media has done a "de-emerging" recently. HERDSA's *Conference Proceedings* for 1998 and 2003, which were online free to the Internet, are currently off line. Sadly, a few days ago, I edited those years out of my look up page for conference proceedings available online [10]. To end on a positive note, HERDSA's Committee has indicated to me (I do apologise to the Committee about being a perpetual nuisance on these matters) that a new website will restore online availability by end 2007.

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Roger Atkinson retired from Murdoch University's Teaching and Learning Centre in June 2001. His current activities include publishing AJET and honorary work on TL Forum and other academic conference support and publishing activities. Website (including this article in html format): <http://www.users.bigpond.net.au/atkinson-mcbeath/roger/>

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Higher Education in the Headlines

April 2007

Compiled by Peter Kandlbinder

A summary of the top stories on higher education from the last 3 months of Australian Higher Education (www.theaustralian.news.com.au), Times Higher Education Supplement (www.thes.co.uk) and the Chronicle of Higher Education (chronicle.com) found that the following themes dominated the higher education press:

University Funding

The funding of universities remains the top issue for the higher education press. The Australian Education Minister announced a review of funding in December and was by February coming under attack in the Australian Higher Education as being wasteful and failing to acknowledge that current funding levels were inadequate. At the same time the US was reported to be putting a higher percentage of State budgets into higher education. In November the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that there has been a slowing in the rise in fee levels while the returns on endowments have begun to rise after a number of years of decrease. One of the key questions facing the US higher education system is what effect a new Democrat-controlled Congress will have on funding and it was clear by February that Democrats were going to pursue their own priorities. President Bush used the budget to increase the money given to students with the highest amount of financial need known as a "Pell Grant". The Chronicle reported that Bush planned to pay for the increase by decreasing subsidies for student-loan companies while the Congress signalled it wanted to shift funding away from programs that it described as "pork barrelling".

Research Quality

The contest to be recognised as a top research institution continues to be a major topic in Australian and the UK. In November, the Australian Higher Education reported that medical institutes

have begun to compete with universities for research students. Also in November, the University of Sydney announced that it had won the race for the prestigious United States Studies Centre and four Australian universities were ranked in the top 50 universities in the world. The Times Higher Education Supplement reported the Research Assessment Exercise continues to decide which research will be counted, putting UK academics under increased pressure with a number of them being bullied about their research, others being vilified by UK Ministers or being accused of academic fraud, plagiarism or research being for sale.

Changing Values of Younger Academics

In November the Times Higher Education Supplement reported on the effect the dramatic increase in academic workloads was having on UK universities ability to retain staff. Postdocs in particular are losing access to support infrastructure, which risks the UK losing its next generation of researchers. The new generation academics appeared to be embracing performance-based pay, driving reforms to academic salaries that have sparked pay rises, particularly among UK Vice-Chancellors whose pay rises have been twice that of other staff's. In January the Australian Higher Education reported that Australia has not been recruiting young academics although Group of Eight has a slightly younger academic staff profile, which positions them well for a large number retirements that are predicted to occur over the next decade.

Teaching Performance

On the eve of the announcement of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund in November, the Australian Higher Education was reporting widespread dissatisfaction with the Teaching prize

particularly because of doubts over the quality of the student survey data. At the same time the US was investigating the possibility of teacher accreditation as part of the Spellings reforms, which in December the Chronicle of Higher Education report were being fast-tracked by the United States Secretary of Education.

Affirmative Action

The newly elected US Congress reignited the debate on affirmative action in the US. In November, the Educational Testing Service argued in the Chronicle that it had developed a non-rationally based scheme for university entry which was being suppressed for political reasons. In January the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that legal proceedings had begun to prevent the use of affirmative action in universities. In February Harvard University made the historic choice of a women President, while the Times Higher Education Supplement reported that women in the UK will shortly make up fifty per cent of the higher education workforce but will need to wait another fifty years before they can expect parity among the professional levels of the workforce.

Peter Kandlbinder is a Senior Lecturer in the Institute for Interactive Media and Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. His main responsibility is for academic development in the area of assessment and over the past 15 years he has been providing similar support for problem-based learning, postgraduate supervision and other forms of small group learning at a number of universities in Australia and the South Pacific.

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DVD REVIEW

Learn to Lecture Like Me

Reviewed by Peter Donnan and Coralie McCormack

An Inner west Media production (<http://www.innerwestmedia.com/learn/>), this short DVD is described on the website as

a light hearted look at how to improve lecturing. The main target audience of this short 12 minute film is new academic staff but anyone who delivers lectures will find it useful.

The film grew from the frustration of the Producer, Head of School at an Australian University, with the lack of accessible material for new academic staff on lecturing techniques.

There are many good tips-type books that cover the points in the DVD but what one needs to consider is whether the audio-visual dimensions are better than a handout from one of these books.

Based on an extreme contrast in styles, the story is a triumph for Danielle Harris, an up-and-coming young lecturer who finally flies out from beneath the suffocating wings of Professor Patrick McRae, Dean, described in his student feedback as "simply the worst lecturer in the history of the world".

The film reflects strong inputs from producer, Peter Phibbs, an academic for twenty years, the last four as Head of a large School; the writer, Rick Kalowski; and teaching and learning advice from the Staff Development and Training Unit at Flinders University, and the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney.

Danielle Harris is finally applauded by students because she reverses all the tenets of poor lecturing that Professor Patrick McRae demonstrates in the film – turning up late to class, poor use of visual aids, boring delivery, unclear lecture structure, use of jargon without explanation, poor knowledge of teaching equipment, distracting habits etc.

The DVD cover lists the full members of the production team but it is the advice about lecturing at the core of the film that is of most interest to viewers. Staff with even limited experience in a teaching context are, however, likely to find it simplistic. This is because of the ham-fisted, Norman Gunston-type humour associated with the central character, Professor McRae. In the lecture theatre, one of his suffering students has a sign "Kill me please" plastered on his forehead and frequent student comments about his lecturing are interspersed through the film. In fact, the students and their authentic commentary are the quiet stars of this DVD. The logic of comedy writer Rick seems to have been that staff don't want a sermon on good lecturing so why hold back on a bit of farce and burlesque in the total mix: after all, serious points about engaging lectures reside behind the humour.

This DVD may be worth considering as a resource for staff who are new to teaching and need some immediate tips to survive the first few weeks but it clearly needs to be supported by a mixture of

activities, such as getting participants to write role plays, perform and reflect on them, organise visits to the lecture theatre etc. The DVD is not a stand-alone resource, and probably the authors did not envisage this either. There is no accompanying material to suggest active ways of using the film in a teaching context beyond simply viewing it.

Academics will polarise around this film in their reaction to the farcical components: some will be appalled by the crude contrivances and slapstick humour whereas for others this will be a catalyst for discussion.

Recipient of a 2006 Australian Writers' Guild Award for Documentary (Corporate & Training) Learn To Lecture Like Me! by Rick Kalowski is priced at \$39 for a personal copy; \$199 for a single user license which means it can be used for teaching etc.; and \$499 for a site license which means it can be loaded onto a secure University web server not accessible to non-University personnel. Further details, including how to download a trailer or obtain an inspection copy, can be accessed from the Inner west website.

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BOOK REVIEW

Groups Work! A Guide for Working in Groups

Jane L. Fowler, Amanda J. Gudmundsson & Leanne M. Whicker

(2006) Australian Academic Press, Brisbane. ISBN 1 875378 71 5. v +70 pages AUD29.70

Order online from www.australianacademicpress.com.au

Reviewed by Liz Jones

Universities are increasingly using group work as a method of teaching and many universities list skills in working in groups or teams as one of the core graduate skills to be acquired. *Groups Work* is a 70 pp workbook designed to equip university or college students with the basic skills needed to work successfully in groups. *Groups Work* is divided into 10 chapters that cover the key stages and issues associated with working in groups, with the final chapter addressing a series of "Frequently asked questions". The book begins by addressing the potential benefits or working in groups and of developing skills in working with groups. Topics include both forming and ending a group, goal setting, decision-making and conflict management. Each chapter provides some input on the topic of that chapter interwoven with a series of activities that groups can undertake. There are also a limited number of individual reflection activities.

A key strength of the book is that it focuses on generic skills for working in groups and can be used in any subject or course where group work forms part of the

design of the subject or course. Students will be able to use the skills learnt from this book when working with non-student groups. *Groups Work* explicitly addresses the challenges that people can experience when working in groups and provides information and, importantly, activities that develop the skills needed to address those challenges. The activities have clearly written and simple instructions and are suitable for groups to either self-facilitate or undertake with a trained facilitator. The book can thus be used either during class time or outside of class time. As a lecturer who has both taught courses on group skills and used group assessment I recognise many of the activities included as ones that students will find easy to undertake and useful in developing their basic skills. The book is presented in an attractive format with some (limited) space provided to complete activities in the book. Most importantly, *Groups Work* is also affordable at \$29.70. There is a reference list provided at the back of the book, but I would like to have also seen students provided with a list of additional resources that they could access

if they wished to pursue topics or skills at a more advanced level.

What *Groups Work* is not. *Groups Work* is about developing skills rather than looking at theories about how groups function. Thus it would not be as useful for subjects or courses on groups or teams unless accompanied by other readings. *Groups Work* is also an introductory book suitable for people who have little or no knowledge of group processes and is most likely to be useful with first year students. Finally, *Groups Work* is not written for non academic settings. While the skills covered in the book are those used by any group the book is written for a student audience undertaking a project or task and is presented in a way more suitable for students than, for example, employees.

Liz Jones is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology at Griffith University. She teaches in the areas of interpersonal skills, group facilitation and training, as well as social and organisational psychology. Her research interests are in intergroup communication.

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