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Abstract

Students from overseas are required to make many adaptations to the new learning situations confronting them in Australian universities. For those for whom English is a second language there are added difficulties. While most students are able to grasp concepts in their own culture, the lack of an adequate vocabulary places them at a considerable disadvantage and many suffer acute humiliation or even shame as a consequence. Many overseas students have a long way to go before their English is at a competent enough standard to deal with the subtler aspects of study here.

Lynn Brunet describes a program for overseas students which was offered for the first time last year in the School of Creative Arts. The program aimed not only to help overseas students deal better with the linguistic and learning differences they find at an Australian university, but also to encourage them to examine the process of cultural adjustment from an artistic point of view.

The Program for International Students in Creative Arts

by Lynn Brunet

Students from overseas are required to make many adaptations to the new learning situations confronting them in Australian universities. For those for whom English is a second language there are added difficulties. While most students are able to grasp concepts in their own culture, the lack of an adequate vocabulary places them at a considerable disadvantage and many suffer acute humiliation or even shame as a consequence. Many overseas students have a long way to go before their English is at a competent enough standard to deal with the subtler aspects of study here .

Equally as problematic are the cultural adjustments that they are expected to make. Many South-East Asian students are being asked to adapt to western concepts of learning which include a relationship between student and teacher which differs vastly from that in their own culture. Western tertiary learning requires that a student develop confidence in his or her ability to make critical judgements, to be able to read texts with a questioning and even challenging attitude and not to accept material verbatim. This critical stance is unusual for students from many other cultures.

The creative arts have languages of their own, and the theoretical milieu in which these arts are examined often employs the dense, discursive style of contemporary cultural theory. Processing such material is often difficult for Australian students, let alone for those of other backgrounds. Those students who enrol in Creative Arts thinking that they can avoid many of the difficulties of language or theory by working in the "universal" modes of creativity can perhaps be shocked by the demands of this course.

The School of Creative Arts caters for the particular needs of international students in this regard. I was employed by the School to co-ordinate additional subjects and small group tutorials to help students process lecture material at their own pace. This helps to overcome the barriers to learning that students feel in large lectures as well as what can be the intimidating situation of the standard tutorial group. The department has also employed student teaching assistants Kate Morris, Terrie-Lynn, Kathleen Bleakley and Gillian Haydn to work with me on these projects.

As part of this overall scheme the subject *CREA 105: Language in Creative Arts* was designed to focus explicitly on some of the issues concerning these students. It deals with the experience of crossing from one culture to another and how the artist uses this experience creatively. Much of the material relates to the search for identity, the marginalisation of subcultures within a dominant group, and the process of sharing or exchanging culture through the arts. It also examines the concept of racism as it is discussed in the arts.

The 1992 program was based on a series of lectures which included talks by visiting international artists as well as by Creative Arts staff. It also comprised a performance program in which the students were

required to attend a series of performances including the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Dance Company* and the *Kawasaki Sister City Concert* held in the Hope Theatre, contemporary Japanese art at the *Museum of Contemporary Art* and a multicultural festival held by the *Shopfront Theatre*. It also included poetry readings by Filipino poet Merlinda Bobis and various films on the theme. The program therefore spanned the major art forms; poetry, music, dance, theatre, film and the visual arts.

Those who studied this course were predominantly of South-East Asian background but included one Mexican and six Australian students. There were thirty eight students in all. Those who enrolled came not only from the Creative Arts faculty but also from Psychology, History and Commerce.

One of the intentions of the course was to provide a program which gave those students with English as a second language continuous practice with their English expression. By writing on a weekly basis about issues that were relevant to their own situation and to their feelings of displacement it was hoped that they would begin to build an awareness of the relevance of the arts. By studying artists' work that dealt with these ideas the students were being exposed to the creative expression of the exciting and also painful experience of crossing cultures.

They were also encouraged to be critical, and the weekly assignments were reviews of the performances they had seen. The reviews were based on their personal responses and their assessment of the performance's artistic merits. They were also asked to judge whether the performance achieved its declared intentions. For most of the South-East Asian students this was a difficult task, for the training that they had already received had not developed their ability to make such critical judgements. At first some of these students were inclined to look for published material on the general topic and reproduce a vague discussion of some of the 'themes' rather than make a critical response to the performance itself. These students were promptly shown that this is not what was required and that the text (the performance, the film, the poetry etc) while dealing with particular themes cannot be regarded simply as a treatise but makes

its own demands which go beyond the purely dialectical.

The use of small weekly assignments rather than the standard major essay and tutorial paper proved to be valuable in a number of ways. Firstly, it developed the students' written English through continual practice. As a matter of course, spelling and grammar corrections were made to the students' work. Secondly, it exposed the problems which the students were having and caught them before it was too late. Plagiarism is a common fault amongst Asian students because of cultural differences in regards to the use of "authoritative texts". The short weekly exercises exposed this problem and although the students who plagiarised would fail a particular assignment they would not need to fail the entire course once they had corrected their assignment strategy.

The students were prompted to give their opinions freely, although this was difficult for many. The ability to question and challenge authority which is seen as a positive attribute in the development of western learning is one of the major hurdles which confronts Asian students. The ability to criticise constructively was emphasised throughout the course so as to encourage these students. At the conclusion of the course students were asked to discuss the structure, content and presentation of the course so as to facilitate the planning of next year's program. These same students, who had initially been very shy and reluctant to voice their opinion at the beginning of the session were

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remarkably fluent by the end and offered many valuable suggestions and improvements.

Self-motivated learning, one of the main aims of western style tertiary teaching, was one of the more difficult aims to achieve. As with all students, international or otherwise, this is invariably a gradual acquirement. For Australian students tertiary learning involves adjusting to the increased emphasis on independence after the more nurturing experience of high school. However for Asian students the differences are multiplied. In many Asian countries the tertiary teacher takes on a much greater supervisory role, leaving the student little else to do other than what he or she is told. The Asian students in this group were very good at completing tasks, getting them in on time and working long hours to get over the hurdle of their language difficulties. However, until they have adjusted to the requirements of the western teaching structure they are often spending many hours on the wrong tasks.

The Australian students who studied this subject found that their perspectives had changed considerably over the course. They began to perceive many new cultural issues that they had not previously been aware of. For the four student assistants this experience was very rewarding and several of them are planning to become further involved in teaching overseas students. With the insights gained from this session's work they have a much greater appreciation of the hurdles confronting students from other cultures and have a genuine desire to communicate with them.

As a proposed continuation of this project those students who have studied this subject will be able to put their learning to use in a practical project

next year. They will be compiling a booklet which will contain creative expressions of their own experiences. This will effectively become a prototype of a "voice" for international students and possibly lead to a future inhouse journal for international students on campus. As many of the students are visual artists this booklet will be designed and illustrated by them. It will be launched along with a gallery exhibition of their artwork.

In conclusion, in dealing with international students, and particularly those who come from non-English speaking backgrounds, there are bound to be many frustrations, and these are going to be felt by both the students and the staff. The language and cultural barriers make communication difficult and the students are bound at times to feel uncomfortable or inadequate. It is important that staff take the situation of these students seriously not only because international students are going to be an inevitable part of the teaching situation in the future but for the students themselves. If these students have a fulfilling experience here rather than a humiliating one then they are more likely to take positive impressions back to their own countries.

The School of Creative Arts is investing time and funds into the welfare of international students and we hope this will prove highly rewarding for all concerned. The program is in its experimental stages but already there are obvious improvements. Once these students are given the encouragement and support to voice their own opinions confidently then they will be able to offer the staff more direct feedback which will further improve their learning experience here.

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