Cultural transitions: teaching, assessment and acknowledgement

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Abstract
This paper outlines the multi-strategy approach adopted in a post-graduate subject at an Australian university to develop graduate qualities in international students and to educate them with respect to acknowledged Western referencing conventions. The international student body in Australian universities has increased markedly in recent years with the corporatisation of the university sector. These students have different educational backgrounds and expectations with respect to their Australian student experience, and they face a range of difficulties in a new educational environment. Further, their understanding of plagiarism and correct referencing styles may be different to that of a student in a Western university. Concerned with past instances of plagiarism and the complexities faced by international students, the lecturer of the post-graduate subject sought assistance from an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) lecturer to review the assessment tasks in the subject. This led to a redesign of assessment tasks, with the aim to not only address the issue of plagiarism but also enhance the development of graduate qualities in the students. Emphasis was placed on the students’ learning environment and high quality outcomes, and explicit education on skills and protocols was provided by the ALL lecturer. Formal feedback from students on the revised tasks was evaluated and used to improve future assessment tasks and teaching. It was concluded that embedding academic language and learning within assessment tasks enhanced the educational outcomes of students and the development of graduate qualities.

Keywords
Cultural, transitions, teaching, assessment, acknowledgement

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Cultural transitions: teaching, assessment and acknowledgement practices for international students

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This paper outlines the multi-strategy approach adopted in a Masters level subject at an Australian university to develop graduate qualities in students and to educate them with respect to acknowledged Western referencing conventions. Students enrolled in the subject were all international students. Concerned with past instances of plagiarism by students enrolled in the subject, the subject lecturer sought help from an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) lecturer to develop strategies to tackle the issue. This led to an examination and redesign of assessment tasks, which would not only address the issue of plagiarism but which would enhance the development of graduate qualities in students that is consistent with university policy.

The issues affecting international university students are situated within the context of the corporatisation of the university sector, and the competing perspectives faced by university academics. It is well documented in the literature that the corporatisation of the university sector has exacerbated the conflict between the economic viability of courses and attention to the particular needs of international students. Academics, on the one hand, have to manage with increasingly limited resources, while on the other, offer a well-rounded education to a diverse group of students who are increasingly drawn from overseas.

One of the challenges facing academics is to educate international students in the conventions of a Western university, which are often quite different to that of their home country. The practice of plagiarism, in particular, may be seen as best practice in some countries, while in Australia it is usually considered as academic misconduct. Plagiarism is a contested concept, and strategies for dealing with it extend from whole of university approaches to those adopted at the subject level.

In a Master’s level subject at the University of Wollongong (UOW), the lecturer was motivated to design assessment tasks which minimised the possibility for students to plagiarise. After discussions with the ALL lecturer, it was decided that this could be achieved within the framework of the development of graduate qualities as encouraged by university policy. The UOW aims to develop students who are informed, innovative and flexible, socially responsible, connected and effective communicators. These qualities are seen to be essential in enhancing the future career prospects of graduates as well as supporting student’s contributions to society or their chosen field. The ALL lecturer suggested a multi-faceted approach to this endeavour, and accordingly assessment tasks were redesigned.

Three assessment tasks, in addition to the final exam, were incorporated into the subject in a scaffolded manner. The first required preparation of an annotated bibliography, the second, participation in a debate and the third, preparation of an essay. The ALL lecturer played an integral part in embedding academic language skills and graduate qualities into the assessment tasks. Further, she became an integral part of the teaching team, via dedicated workshops on assessment tasks, referencing convention and critical analysis. These workshops served the dual role of explicit teaching of skills and conventions, as well as familiarising the students with the ALL lecturer such that students were more confident in seeking help with various tasks.
Students were asked to provide feedback on the assessment tasks via a guided reflection. This contained open-ended questions on assessment task guidelines and marking criteria, support and their university experience. It also contained questions on specific assessment tasks and their effectiveness in developing the Commerce Graduate Qualities (developed from UOW Graduate Qualities). A five point Likert scale was offered for responses. Generally, the students were quite appreciative of the workshops provided by the ALL lecturer, although informal drop-in sessions were not taken advantage of. Guidance on correct referencing conventions gave the students the confidence to reference correctly, and this was evidenced in the assessment tasks submitted by students. The debate proved to be the most successful of the three assessment tasks. As well as improving students’ knowledge of contemporary accounting issues, the debate process developed skills in research, independent thinking and both written and oral communication. Having said this, some difficulty in understanding intercultural communication practices was still evident. The annotated bibliography was not effectively embraced by students, as students struggled with the concept of critical evaluation. Most submissions reflected reasonable summaries but limited evaluation, and only a few students demonstrated a broad research effort.

This study was limited by the small number of students. This limitation could be overcome by a similar study in a much larger class; however, this would almost certainly preclude the staging of a debate. Further, the study was limited in that it only evaluated the assessment tasks over one session; this could be overcome by embedding skills in assessment tasks and evaluating outcomes over students’ entire postgraduate degrees, or alternatively evaluating assessment tasks and outcomes over successive classes.

The literature has widely addressed the issue of plagiarism in general, and as it relates to international university students in particular. What has become apparent in this age of ready access to all manner of information is that universities and academics need a multi-level approach to address the issue. Academics are engaging in non-traditional learning strategies to avoid opportunities for students to plagiarise. In this particular study new assessment tasks were introduced that international students had not previously encountered, including an annotated bibliography and a debate. Literacy and academic skills were embedded within the tasks, and explicit education on skills and protocols were provided by the ALL lecturer. Favourable feedback from students suggested that this approach had achieved the original aim to reduce plagiarism but more significantly had provided the opportunity for international students to develop a number of other skills to equip them in their future studies and careers.