

# **Rethinking diversity: re-theorising transition as a process of engaging, negotiating and mastering the discourses and multiliteracies of an unfamiliar culture rather than as a problem of deficit.**

Jill Lawrence

Faculty of Arts/ Student Services, University of Southern Queensland

*There is a consistent theme woven through the literature documenting the experiences of students accessing and participating in higher education: that of deficit in dealing with diversity and difference. Inherent is the assumption that there is one mainstream discourse and that languages and literacies other than those of the mainstream represent a deficit or a deficiency on the part of students unfamiliar with them. This paper will argue that such 'deficit' approaches are not helpful for the diversity of students attempting to access, participate and succeed in the unfamiliar culture of the university. It will present an alternative approach by re-theorising transition: by arguing that a successful transition intrinsically involves gaining familiarity with, engaging, negotiating and mastering the discourses and literacies of the unfamiliar culture. The paper will also explore the responses to this re-theorisation - both for university practices and for the diversity of students negotiating their transition to the university culture.*

## **Introduction**

A recurrent theme woven through the literature documenting the experiences of students accessing and participating in higher education is one of deficit in dealing with diversity and difference. This paper will argue that such approaches are not helpful for students entering university. Firstly the contextual and theoretical contexts will be assembled to establish the potency and applicability of the role of multiliteracies, or a diversity of discourses, in the university context. These theoretical contexts make possible, even imperative, a re-theorisation of the transition to university. They also reveal the limitations of assumptions of 'deficit' currently underpinning many of the approaches to dealing with diversity, a consequence of the 'elite-mass' paradigm shift that has occurred in higher education in Australia since the 1980s. The paper will also explore the responses of this re-theorisation - for both the university and for the students negotiating their transition to it.

## **The Higher Education Context**

The move from elite to mass education in Australia saw a rapid growth in both student participation and diversity (Meek 1994; DEET 1995; McInnis and James 1995; Beasley 1997). McInnis and James (1995:ix) contended that 'the expansion of participation has increased the critical mass of identifiable subgroups that were formally significantly under-represented in universities,' thus flagging a corresponding and burgeoning interest in educational diversity and equity. This burgeoning interest is evident in research investigating differently delineated but often overlapping groups of students. While the primary focus for

this paper is that group of students labeled alternative entry students<sup>1</sup> it is important to recognise that this description also encompasses those subgroups of students identified specifically as equity groups. Developing interpretations about the equity groups of students demonstrates the ways in which these groups of students have been, and in fact largely remain marginalised, from university participation (see, for example Beasley, 1997; Postle et al., 1997). These discussions are also used to develop the ‘critical’ orientation underpinning the paper.

One of the responses to increased diversity was a corresponding and burgeoning interest in educational equity culminating in the document *A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education That’s in Everyone’s Reach* (DEET 1990), which provided a national and specific action framework for educational equity. The six identified disadvantaged groups included low socio-economic status students, students with disability, women, aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rural and isolated students and students from non English speaking backgrounds. The original thrust of the framework emphasised increasing access and participation but was extended to include the improved retention, progression and success of these groups within the system. Postle et al (1997:2) argued that the aim articulated was for access with success for the targeted groups leading to a student profile, which more fully reflected the diversity of Australian society.

How well have these initiatives succeeded? Postle, Clarke, Skuja, Bull, Barorowicz and McCann (1997) produced one study whose objective was to evaluate the status of educational equity in the Australian higher education sector. Their NBEET funded study, *Towards Excellence in Diversity*, found that the emergence of equity had ‘been influenced by and in turn has served to influence, the multitude of social, cultural, political and economic factors which have resulted in the massive growth in the higher education sector over the last half century and the growing diversity of the student body’. However, another of the conclusions reached by Postle et al (1997) was that ‘within the existing framework, a clear trend is the lack of progress of the socio-economically disadvantaged and people from rural and geographically isolated areas’ (Postle et al 1997:xii). While they noted that the causes of educational disadvantage in these groups were generally well appreciated finding strategies to address these remained problematic.

The increased diversity has led then to a growing need to develop ways to meet the educational needs of the larger number of students entering higher education. Postle et al (1996) however argued that there have been few studies completed in Australia dealing specifically with the needs of the range of students now accessing tertiary education. In order to rectify this need however it is firstly necessary to position the debates within a theoretical context.

## **A Theoretical Positioning**

This section assembles several theories which are used to position the students’ experiences as they negotiate their transition to university. These theoretical insights facilitate a re-thinking of transition, providing the grounds, the rationale and the impetus for its re-theorisation as a process: a process which intrinsically involves a negotiation and mastery of the discourses and multiliteracies of an often unfamiliar university culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Alternative entry students, who are also sometimes referred to as special admissions, non-traditional or mature age students, are those groups of students who are delineated by their method of entry to university. They comprise those students who have entered university and who are not full time Year 12 students.

Three theoretical frames are assembled: postmodernism, poststructuralism and critical theory. Each illuminates a focus which contributes to the re-theorisation of transition.

### *Postmodern Themes and Contributions*

The postmodern frame, for example, with its questioning of universality and meta-narratives, its focus on viewing reality and knowledge as socially constructed, its relevance for understanding the lived experiences of individuals in local situations, and its recognition of the role of story telling, of narrativisation, provides a backdrop against which to position the experiences of students. Postmodernism shares with critical social science the goal of demystifying the social world. Its approach is to deconstruct surface appearances to reveal the hidden internal structures. In fact Hatch (1997) argued that postmodernists often begin their analyses with deconstruction. In deconstruction, assumptions underlying arguments are revealed and overturned. The rethinking of assumptions opens a space for previously unconsidered alternatives, which themselves are left open to multiple interpretations and uses rather than being 'shut down again or refrozen' (Hatch, 1997:366). Used in this way the postmodern perspective is a means to overcome domination by one perspective or idea, with the focus shifting to one which advocates the use of knowledge to emancipate rather than to control. Postmodern critiques render the consideration of alternative ways of knowing a matter of public discourse (Hatch, 1997).

Postmodernism also conceptualizes knowledge as taking numerous forms and as unique to particular people or specific locales (Neuman, 1994:73). Kvale (1995) noted that while the dichotomy between the universal and the individual, between society and the unique person, was a theme of modernity, postmodernism understood the rootedness of human activity and language in their cultural and social contexts. Important in their own right are communal interaction and local knowledge, and prominence should therefore be given to local narratives. Kvale (1995:21) described a 'contextual relativism where legitimation of action occurs through linguistic practice and communicative action'. Kvale went on to argue that, with the collapse of universal systems of meaning or meta-narratives, a re-narrativisation of the culture could take place.

The idea of culture as a pivotal conceptual tool of postmodernism is a thread woven through public discourse on all kinds of issues: it is inseparable from the idea that there are lots of cultures—cultures, subcultures, and counter-cultures. Anderson (1995:16) called culture a 'sort of symbolic DNA'. Geertz (1973) asserted that there is no such thing as a human nature that is independent of culture, while Collins (1989) went further and argued that, implicitly and explicitly, culture has become 'discourse-sensitive', by contending that the way culture is conceptualised depends upon discourses. These discourses construct culture in conflicting, often contradictory ways. Also implicit in the idea of culture are the notions of cultural difference and the acceptance of difference. The New London Group (1996:88), for example, saw that the recognition of cultural differences was critical in education:

Teaching and curriculum have to engage with students' own experiences and discourses, which are increasingly defined by cultural and subcultural diversity and the different language backgrounds and practices that come with this diversity.

Another of the themes of postmodernism is that language is deeply involved in the social construction of reality. There is consensus that ideas cannot be understood apart from the language systems that produced them. In this way language and knowledge do not copy

reality (Kvale, 1995). Instead, language is seen to constitute reality, with each language constructing specific aspects of reality in their own way. The focus, then, shifts to the linguistic and social construction of reality, to the interpretation and negotiation of the meaning of the lived world (Kvale, 1995:21).

These postmodern themes weave a backdrop against which to frame the processes of adapting to university culture. This framework serves to tie together the notions relating to the importance of culture, cultural difference and diversity, and the pivotal role played by discourses. Using these notions it is possible to develop and defend the idea that, consciously or unconsciously, new university students, through their lived experiences, and whether they recognise it or not, are negotiating and constructing their identities out of the many cultural sources they are accessing. Included in the new culture, and intrinsic to it, are questions relating to multiple discourses, some of which may be conflicting or even abrading.

### *Poststructural Themes and Contributions*

The poststructuralist frame provides an additional lens through which to view the ways in which subjects are constituted and reconstituted through discourse. This frame emphasises the ‘telling of stories’ about equity and literacy- the production of a variety of texts exploring the connections between language, education and the construction of ‘a means of succeeding’ for new students. It makes possible a new signifying space from which to pose and debate several key questions. For example questions relating to how the stories of our culture become the ‘facts’ we learn; how to address inequalities of language opportunities in terms of access, space and power. As well, how to acknowledge that such access brings with it a new set of difficulties which in turn will need to be accompanied by a recognition of the limitations of existing language practices ‘in terms of naming experiences in positive and affirming ways’ (Muspratt, Freebody and Luke, 1997). Discourses provide different stories through which to read language practice. They make it possible to change the stories used as classroom resources but also the stories students might build and construct to position themselves differently. The poststructuralist view, developed through the work of theorists such as Foucault, Derrida and Bourdieu, thus identifies and reinforces the salience of language and discourse.

### *Critical Themes and Contributions*

The experiences of new students are further framed by the understandings provided by critical theory. Critical theory contends that language use, discourse and communication should be studied in their social, cultural and political contexts. A critical orientation, for example, can specifically identify and reveal the discursive practices that have hitherto constituted barriers for these groups of students. A critical orientation is also valuable in that it is not only enables and encourages social and critical awareness of these practices but is also able to facilitate and promote practice for change (Van Dyjk, 1995; Fairclough, 1995). Educational practices, developed for example in university contexts, serve then to constitute selections of practices, and these selections are not accidental, random, or idiosyncratic (Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997). Rather they are supportive of the organisational needs of the institutions of education and the stratified interests within social organisations. So it should ‘not be surprising that a good deal of institutional effort’ is put into making these materials and activities appear ‘natural’ and ‘essential’ characteristics of literacy. Muspratt, Luke and Freebody (1997:192) additionally argued:

In that sense at least literacy education and research about it can be viewed as political in that each entails choices among theories and methodologies that afford or reinforce radically different competencies and ways of engaging in social experience, all of which have significant material consequences for learners, communities and institutions. In another sense the materials and interactive practices of education are best seen as key sites where cultural discourses, political ideologies and economic interests are transmitted, transformed and can be contested.

Such a theoretical orientation has the capacity, then, to identify and reveal the prevalent and dominant discourses and the ways in which those discourses might not only be unfamiliar but which might also operate to marginalise students. In this capacity it provides a basis that can be utilised to re-position the experiences of first year students negotiating their transition to university study. It also serves to uncover the power relationships that constitute additional barriers for students as they move to access higher education. Fairclough (1995), for example, argued that not only is education itself a key domain of linguistically mediated power, it also mediates other key domains for learners, including the adult world of work:

But it is additionally at its best a site of reflection upon and analysis of the sociolinguistic order and the order of discourse, and in so far as educational institutions equip learners with critical language awareness, they equip them with a resource for intervention in and reshaping of discursive practices and the power relations that ground them, both in the other domains and within education itself. (Fairclough, 1995:218)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) extends the poststructuralist and critical focuses by synthesising the notions of the linguistics scholars (who analyse specific language texts) and the social theorists (who investigate the social functions of language and its functioning in contemporary society). See for example Van Dijk (1985) and Fairclough (1995). CDA utilises the poststructuralist view of the importance and role of discourse to contribute understandings about the ways in which knowledge, identity, social relations and power are constructed and reconstructed in the localised texts of, for example, a university. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged as that domain of study unveiling, in particular, the role of discourse in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society. CDA provides insight in the fact that not only is language socially shaped, but that it is also socially shaping or 'constitutive' (Fairclough 1995: 132).

Luke (1999) argued that CDA's emergence provides three important and interrelated implications for educational research. Firstly it provides the grounds for a retheorisation of educational practice. It recognises, for example, that the students' experiences of university can be interpreted as a 'constructed' phenomenon that are constitutive of educational and intellectual endeavour. Secondly CDA allows for an interdisciplinary approach, such as is utilised in this paper which incorporates philosophical, sociological, interpersonal and cross-cultural communication theoretical perspectives. As such it facilitates a flexible meta-language which can be utilised not only for the description of texts and discourses of the university, but also their interpretation, analysis and critique. Gee (1997:296) argued, for example, that the act of juxtaposing texts from different discourses, or juxtaposing texts from different historical stages of the same discourse, provides a way of exposing the limitations of meaning that all discourses effect and a way to open out new meanings. This is because the 'very act of juxtaposition always requires a meta-language, with accompanying meta-practices within an emerging meta-discourse, to enclose both texts in a more encompassing system' (Gee, 1997:297). Thirdly, CDA establishes the grounds for rethinking, as discourse, pedagogical practices and outcomes. It identifies, focuses on and analyses, for example, the

importance of the role of discourse in educational practice (Luke, 1999). If the primacy of discourse is acknowledged then it is possible to support the argument that mastery of discourse can be seen to constitute a principal educational process and outcome.

CDA identifies, then, the primacy of the role of language and discourse in educational practice. Secondly it reveals its impact on students' abilities to persevere and succeed in the new, and often unfamiliar, culture. Its application re-conceptualises their transition as gaining familiarity with and, ultimately mastery, of its unfamiliar discourses and provides the basis for the responses to this re-theorisation developed later in the paper. Firstly, however the paper will document the flaws and limitations of the assumptions of deficit, which underpin many of the responses to diversity.

### **Identifying the Limitations of the Deficit Approaches**

In the last decade there has been a proliferation in the higher education literature documenting the difficulties faced by the diversity of first year students as they navigate their transition to the unfamiliar university culture. (See, for example, Marginson 1993; Skilberg 1993; McInnis and James, 1995; Dearn, 1996; Cartwright and Noone, 1996; Crouch, 1996; Lee, 1996; Postle et al., 1996; Beasley, 1997). There were also a number of studies which are often referred to by those who wished to support claims for particular programs or services for these students. Postle et al (1996) argued that this literature has explored the difficulties from two main research focuses. The first concentrated on the determination of socially or culturally inappropriate curricular and teaching methods: how programs and services might be more responsive to the cultural academic needs of students (see for example NBEET, 1995). Other examples involved changes to curriculum and teaching approaches to better match the needs and backgrounds of the students. Cartwright and Noone (1996), Crouch (1996) and Lee (1996) represent researchers who, for example, approached the question by arguing that the development of a cogent pedagogy is necessary if students are to succeed in higher education.

The second attempted to understand how programs and services could assist students to better adapt to the demands of university education (Beasley 1997). According to Postle et al. (1996) these studies proceeded from the assumption that difficulties and problems could be explained in terms of student deficits or deficiencies. The answer, these studies argued, lies in moulding the student to fit the institution; in the determination of pre-requisite knowledge and skills necessary for success – such as those targeted by literacy, preparatory and enabling programs. A number of studies additionally found that while most staff in tertiary institutions acknowledged the benefits of having the diversity of students entering courses at their institution (altruism, social justice, student diversity) they demonstrated little knowledge about these students (Postle et al 1996 and Beasley, 1997). Postle et al's (1996) study, for example, revealed that the staff interviewed believed that these students should be treated no differently from other students and that existing academic support mechanisms should be resourced to provide any remediation that was deemed necessary. The ascendancy of the deficit approaches to dealing with diversity was also reinforced by the fact that the staff gave very little support and credence to value added teaching as an indicator of good teaching involving these students reinforced. As well, such attitudes reveal the unquestioned and unchallenged dominance of the mainstream 'elite' discourses resonating through such approaches.

The New London Group (1996, p.72) argued in fact that such deficit approaches involved 'writing over the existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture'. They were representative of models of pedagogy that had emerged from the idea that cultures and languages other than those of the mainstream represented a deficiency, a shortcoming, a deficit. The deficit approach therefore not only reflects a lack of questioning of the dominant 'elite' or mainstream discourse but, further, it also denies the implications provided by the existence as well as the potency of the concept of multiple discourses and literacies.

According to The New London Group (1996) the multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today called for a much wider view of pedagogy and literacy than portrayed by traditional approaches like the deficit approach. The New London Group recognised that there existed real deficits (such as a lack of access to social power, wealth, and the symbols of recognition). However, they also contended that the role of pedagogy was to develop an 'epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities' (72). In response they developed the notion of 'multiliteracies', widening the definition of literacy pedagogy to include the negotiation of a multiplicity of discourses. This, they saw as encompassing the objective of 'creating the learning conditions for full social participation', where the issue of differences becomes critically important (61). But, they also asked, how then do we ensure that differences of culture, language, and gender do not constitute barriers to educational success? The question of differences, of diversity, and how best to respond to them, is pivotal. According to this group the use of a multiliteracy approach to pedagogy enables students to achieve two goals: that of creating access to the evolving language of work, power and community, and that of fostering the critical engagement necessary for students to achieve success. The notion of multiliteracies, they argued, 'overcomes the limitations of traditional approaches by emphasising how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to the pragmatics of the working, civic, and private lives of students' (The New London Group, 1996:60).

## **Responses to Re-theorising Transition**

### *University Responses*

The re-theorisation of university transition necessarily demands responses. A possible first response is to challenge to the university and its practices. Such a challenge could result in a shift in focus from the deficit view to one involving a familiarity, or lack of familiarity, with the culture and its discourses and multiliteracies. This would then raise a number of questions about the nature of university practices. For example the potential 'blame' that is attached to students, who are considered 'deficient', 'inadequate' or 'under-prepared' by teaching staff immersed in the dominant 'elite' discourse, can be questioned. Such teaching practices can be challenged by the recognition that part of the responsibility must lie with the academics themselves, in particular in relation to their roles as educators, as communicators. In fulfilling these roles it becomes the responsibility of the academic to make their discourses explicit. To not only explain and make clear the rules, but also to make explicit the hidden agendas, the covert or hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations as well as the expected (but not stated) behaviours intrinsic to achieving success in their discipline (Benn 2000). As a professional educator it is vital to recognise that the key to teaching-learning is the 'process', rather than the 'content': that retention relies in part on what the academic does in the classroom, as a professional educator.

Educational theory supports these practices. Friere (1972), for example, speaks of the centrality of dialogic education to the purposes of the university, a collegial and egalitarian approach to education in which productive dialogue, sustained critique and participation is maintained between members of the community. This notion of dialogic interaction assumes more prominence if interwoven against Gee's notion of multiple discourses. Gee (1997), from both a cultural and a cognitive perspective, argued for 'a juxtaposition of differences in such a way that a commonness could emerge without obliterating the differences as lived and situated realities'. If each child was viewed as a network of associations formed by his or her socio-cultural experiences, a network from which specific ways of knowing the world emerged, then a classroom should be a network of such networks from which new, ever variable, and 'meta-level' forms of knowing emerge. According to Gee (1997:8):

These forms emerge from and transcend diversity without effacing it in any way, because each child's own continuing experiences contribute to the transformation of that common knowledge. A new Discourse is formed in the classroom.

A classroom with too narrow a spectrum of diversity is impoverished, because the generalisations that emerge are too narrow. A classroom, which utilises the diversity of its students to make connections, thereby acknowledges and integrates its cognitive, social, cultural, and political complexity. The notions of dialogic education and multiple discourses and literacies therefore merge to reinforce the driving impetus of this paper. That a negotiation of the multiple linguistic and cultural differences of the university is central to the students' abilities to persevere and succeed in a new and, often unfamiliar, university environment. An important thread can therefore be woven into the philosophy of university teaching. It lies in recognizing, participating in and facilitating the processes by which students learn to negotiate and integrate a number of competing discourses and multiliteracies - the university, faculty, department and discipline discourses they are engaging. Mezirow (1991:354), for example, stated that adult education becomes 'the process of assisting those who are fulfilling adult roles to understand the meaning of their experience by participating more fully and freely in rational discourses to validate expressed ideas and to take action upon resulting insights'.

### *Student Responses*

Many academics, however, raised in the dominant mainstream 'elite' culture and succeeding amongst a cohort of homogeneous like-minded students, may be unable to understand or grapple with the implications raised by diversity, even possessing an antipathy towards it.<sup>2</sup> If students are to succeed it then becomes important, even imperative, for them to recognise, identify and voice their needs and requirements. This understanding lies at the heart of the second set of responses to re-theorising transition. These responses involve the students' interpersonal communication, or socio-cultural, competencies. The paper will finally argue that it is the use of these key interpersonal communication competencies which can facilitate the students' abilities to engage, negotiate and master the new culture. In short, become more familiar with that new culture, its multiliteracies and discursive practices.

Fundamental to their survival and success at university is students' and staff members' conviction that students need to develop the appropriate communicative and professional competences that will empower them to move with comfort and effectiveness within the new culture. These include the development of academic literacy and intellectual integrity, as well as a capacity for both critical and self-reflection. Intrinsic are the abilities to study and reflect on the social, cultural and educational practices of their first year experience at university, to

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'elite' and 'dominant' emerge from the critical theory. They are not meant to be as pejorative as they appear to be to scholars unfamiliar with critical discourses.

engage in a consistent monitoring of them, and as a consequence, accumulate new and better understandings of them. Giddens (1994:90) argued that this involves the goal of ensuring that the social practices in which students were engaged are 'constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character'. In this way students might not only achieve new understandings about the ways they had been constrained by cultural and social forces but also, by doing so, empower themselves. Postle et al (1996) and Padilla (1991) argued that the use of such critical reflection enables students to provide heuristic knowledge of the higher education culture that would be valuable to both staff and students.

Interpersonal communication theory also contributes insights valuable to students as they negotiate their transition to the new university culture. Communication is, in essence, a foundation for building relationships, involving individuals in the mutual creation of meaning. The insights provided by communication theory contribute, then, to the recognition that effective communication is intrinsic to facilitating a means of connecting with and succeeding in the unfamiliar university culture. It is seen to be essential in building a strong foundation of interpersonal interaction, interpersonal relationships, interconnectedness and community. Interpersonal communication theory reinforces the role of dialogue, participation and interaction, emphasising the importance of interpersonal communication and the establishment of personal relationships. Both are considered to be crucial to the development of first year students' abilities to access, negotiate, participate in, master and articulate the university discourses and multiliteracies.

Specifically, interpersonal communication and the establishment of personal relationships evoke the use of key interpersonal communication competencies. For example the ability to make social contact and social conversation, in socially and culturally appropriate ways, and the ability to participate in a group or class. These abilities are crucial as they facilitate the development of study groups, writing groups or learning circles, as well as study partners, mentors, friends, and the support of a significant other. The literature surveying student retention in Britain for example argues that isolation is the key factor determining student withdrawal. Benn (2000), for example, maintained that research documented that the 'presence of a significant other' was the most significant variable facilitating continued perseverance at university in Britain. Specifically, the ability to participate in a group or team can generate feelings of confidence and belonging in a classroom setting and contributes to the critical and questioning engagement essential to academic success.

In the transactional model of the communication process feedback is integral. Crucial communication competencies include the two-way feedback process. This hinges on the ability to both solicit constructive feedback and give negative criticism, and conversely give constructive feedback and solicit negative input. For example students need to be able to ask a lecturer for advice on how to improve a draft plan or the structure or body of an assignment. At the same time they need the skills of explaining the difficulty of anticipating the lecturer's requirements in the absence of a Marking Criteria Sheet. Or being able to ask for guidance about research sources, while providing, in a socially and culturally appropriate way, negative feedback, for example in relation to the quality of the learning environment - illegible transparencies, lack of constructive feedback on assignments or the use of unexplained technical language. The ability to give and receive feedback is integral to perseverance at university

Also pivotal is the ability to seek help and information. Students need to be able to canvass a wide range of resources and be able to determine which one will best meet a specific need. They need to be able to access for themselves, locating, utilising and assessing, for example, information gleaned from study skills booklets and web sites, as well as discipline specific assistance such as peer assisted learning programs, consultation with tutors and lecturers, and library and computer support services and programs. They also need to know that learning enhancement support and study skills sessions, personalised coping mechanisms and help negotiating the bureaucratic infrastructure are available from counsellors and can make the difference between retention or withdrawal.

Another key competency relates to the ability to express disagreement or to 'say no'. This is vital, for example, in organising a timetable, in maintaining discipline, in being assertive and in preventing stress.

These particular interpersonal communication competencies are, however, also the socio-cultural competencies prioritised in a cross-cultural program called *Excell: Developing Sociocultural Competencies for Success* (Barker, Westwood, Ishiyama and Mak, 1998). *Excell* is an experiential, skills-based, practice-focused program, which 'enables people who have recently arrived in a new culture to be competent and effective in dealing with members of the host culture' (Barker et al., 1998:4). It prioritizes the socio-cultural competencies of seeking help, participating in a group, making social contact, feedback, expressing disagreement and saying 'no'. Though developed specifically in relation to international students these competencies are just as applicable to alternative entry students entering the unfamiliar culture of the university, reinforcing their relevance as sources of engagement.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has challenged the assumptions of deficit which underpin many of the responses to the increasing diversity of the student body. By re-theorising transition, instead, as a process of gaining familiarity with the unfamiliar discourses of the university, the paper challenges both the university and the students. It challenges universities to identify and make explicit their discourses. It challenges students to recognise that to demonstrate mastery of these discourses the use of key interpersonal communication competencies must be evoked. It is these competencies that enable the students' negotiation and engagement with the new culture and its multiliteracies, facilitating their transition and empowering them to master the discourses intrinsic to their perseverance and success at university.

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