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Addressing diversity in higher education: Two models for facilitating student engagement and mastery

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***Abstract:** This paper introduces new ways of thinking about diversity in higher education. The 'deficit-discourse shift' challenges the deficit approaches that perceive the increasing diversity of the student body as a problem, or deficit. The shift conceptualises the university as a culture encompassing a multiplicity of sub-cultures, each with its own discourse or literacy. Students' transition to the new university culture can then be seen as the processes of becoming familiar with and engaging these multiple literacies and discourses, and perseverance as the processes of mastering and demonstrating them. These processes are illustrated in a model, the 'Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery'. An additional model, the 'Model for Student Success Practices at University', presents three practical, dynamic strategies that assist unfamiliar students to achieve this engagement. The three practices include reflective practice, socio-cultural practice and critical practice. Used together, the two models aid students to more effectively engage and master the multiple discourses and literacies they encounter in the university culture.*

***Keywords:** diversity, critical discourse theory, first year experience*

Introduction

This paper introduces a theoretical shift to re-think the first year experience for the diversity of students now participating in higher education. The broadening meanings of diversity are first explored along with the largely deficit responses to dealing with diversity. An alternative approach, the deficit-discourse shift, drawing on critical discourse theory and constructivism, is then described as well as two models that stem from the shift. The models present strategies to assist students to more effectively engage the multiple discourses and literacies they encounter in the university culture.

The broadening meanings of diversity

Before the 1960s in Australia, researchers found it relatively easy to characterise diversity. Such students were viewed negatively, encompassing all those who had not entered higher education directly from secondary schools, were not from the dominant social groups, or were not studying in a conventional mode (James & Beckett 2000). An implicit assumption of the elite era was that the student cohort had roughly comparable levels of preparedness and 'ability': that HE students possessed consistent and high levels of socio-cultural, economic, academic/linguistic capital.

These traditional and elite views have been challenged by the growing diversity of the student body. The early perceptions of diversity focussed on race, mature age and international entry. In the 1980s these views were broadened in response to the access and equity and the social justice debates, reflecting the diversity emanating from the inclusion of students previously marginalised from mainstream HE participation (James & Beckett 2000). In Australia, these groups included the targeted equity groupings (Postle et al. 1996) as well as the students identified as alternative entry students (AES).

These understandings of diversity have been broadened. Kantanis (2001, p.3), from the first year experience literature, argues that the focus of diversity could be any one of a multitude of student cohorts created by either a single variable, or any number of a cluster of variables. These could include gender, prior school experience, liability status and attendance type and mode. There are also differences in students' personal situations. Kelly (2003) nominates different levels of students' learning skills and attitudes: variations in academic language skills; study skills; confidence to participate; English language skills and numeracy; motivation to study; and prior knowledge and skills in discipline. Kelly (2003) also notes the importance of personal circumstances and skills, degree of adjustment to university and number/level of external commitments, including family responsibility and work, health, and trauma. Kantanis (2001) suggests that the range of individual qualities encompasses personality type, state of mind, coping strategies, interpersonal skills and communicative competence, and such factors as intelligence, preferred learning style/s, prior academic achievement, maturity, flexibility, motivation, commitment, and desire to succeed.

The critical literacy and multiliteracy areas, with their focus on socio-cultural diversity, have further widened the scope of diversity. This literature acknowledges the new diversities related to new organisational, technological, professional and multi-modal cultures and discourses (New London Group 1996). There is the recognition of differences in identity and affiliation, for example, in terms of gender, ethnicity, generation and sexual orientation.

The diverse groupings a student may belong to thus reinforce the complexity in the student profile. Challenges arise from how this diversity is perceived and managed? One response has been the so-called 'deficit' approaches, approaches that focus on the problems generated.

The deficit approaches to diversity

The deficit approaches conceptualise differences as 'deficits', effectively blaming students for their lack of 'preparedness'. Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002, p.73) maintain that increasing diversity has 'provoked an initial discourse of language deficiency, and this discourse quickly settled into a general conception of educational deficiencies needing remediation'.

The literature confirms the pervasiveness of the deficit approaches in Australia. McInnis' (2000) study of 2,609 academics in fifteen universities reports that 'high proportions of academics held negative views about the calibre of students, with 69% of respondents considering the provision of academic support a major cause of the increase in staff-hours worked (p.24). The fact that there were 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' was delineated as 'a problem' (p.24). Asmar et al.'s research (2000), meanwhile, suggests that academics are reluctant to become involved in facilitating the learning experiences of 'under-prepared' students', designating their transition to HE as a matter only for the Student Services Department and as quite unrelated to the teaching and other activities that they themselves engage in. Postle et al. (1996) found that, whereas most staff in tertiary institutions acknowledge the benefits of having a diversity of students entering courses at their institution (altruism, social justice, student diversity), HE staff demonstrate little knowledge about these students.

The New London Group (1996, p.72) argue that such deficit approaches involve 'writing over the existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture'. They are 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. With this mindset, staff may label students who do not succeed or who have difficulties in mastering and demonstrating mainstream academic discourses as being under-prepared or intellectually deficient; revealing a 'sink or swim' approach to the issue of diversity. Such staff may accept that it is the students' responsibility if they fail – with staff perceiving that they have little role in, and therefore little responsibility for, students' engagement and perseverance in HE. An alternative to these approaches emerges from the theoretical contributions of critical discourse theory and constructivism.

The perspective provided by critical discourse theory

Critical discourse theory identifies and analyses the role of discourse in educational practice. Van Dyik (1997) explains that discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and reading, both verbal and nonverbal. Luke (1999, p.67) argues that critical discourse theory establishes the grounds for rethinking as discourse, pedagogical practices and outcomes. Luke maintains that 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.

Critical discourse theory also reveals the role of discursive practices that operate as power relationships in educational contexts and focuses attention on the role of discourses in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society (Fairclough 1995). The notions of cultural difference and the acceptance of difference become pivotal. The New London Group (1996, p.88) argue that the recognition of cultural differences is critical in education:

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

The perspective provided by constructivism

Constructivism also contributes insights into the first year experience. Constructivism developed from the Piagetian individual development paradigm to accommodate the Vygotskian paradigm of cognitive development within a social setting (Plourde & Alawiye 2003). Vygotskian forms of construction not only place learning in a social setting, they also promote education for social transformation. Shymansky et al. (1997, p.572 cited in Plourde & Alawiye 2003, p.4) suggest that:

Teachers orchestrate experience and discourse opportunities and social context to produce cognitive conflict in students who progressively resolve these problems by integrating new knowledge into prior knowledge structures.

The social setting and culture influence the individual cognitive process and thus meaningful learning. In this form, the educational context is viewed as constituting a community of learners. Learning occurs through peer interactions, student ownership of the curriculum and educational experiences that are authentic for students (Azzarito & Ennis 2003).

The application of CDT and constructivism to HE challenges the assumptions of deficit underpinning traditional responses to diversity, generating new ways of thinking about the first year experience. The deficit-discourse shift is one such response.

The deficit-discourse shift

The deficit-discourse shift characterises the university as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of subcultures, each with its own discourse or literacy. Students' transition to the new culture is reconceptualised as one of gaining familiarity, and ultimately mastery, of these discourses and literacies. These understandings are diagrammatically represented in a model, the Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery at University (see Figure 1).

The framework for student engagement and mastery at university

The Framework visualises the first year experience as a journey of engagement with the university's multiple discourses and literacies. Students' transition is symbolised as the processes of negotiating these discourses and literacies and perseverance as the processes of mastering and demonstrating them.

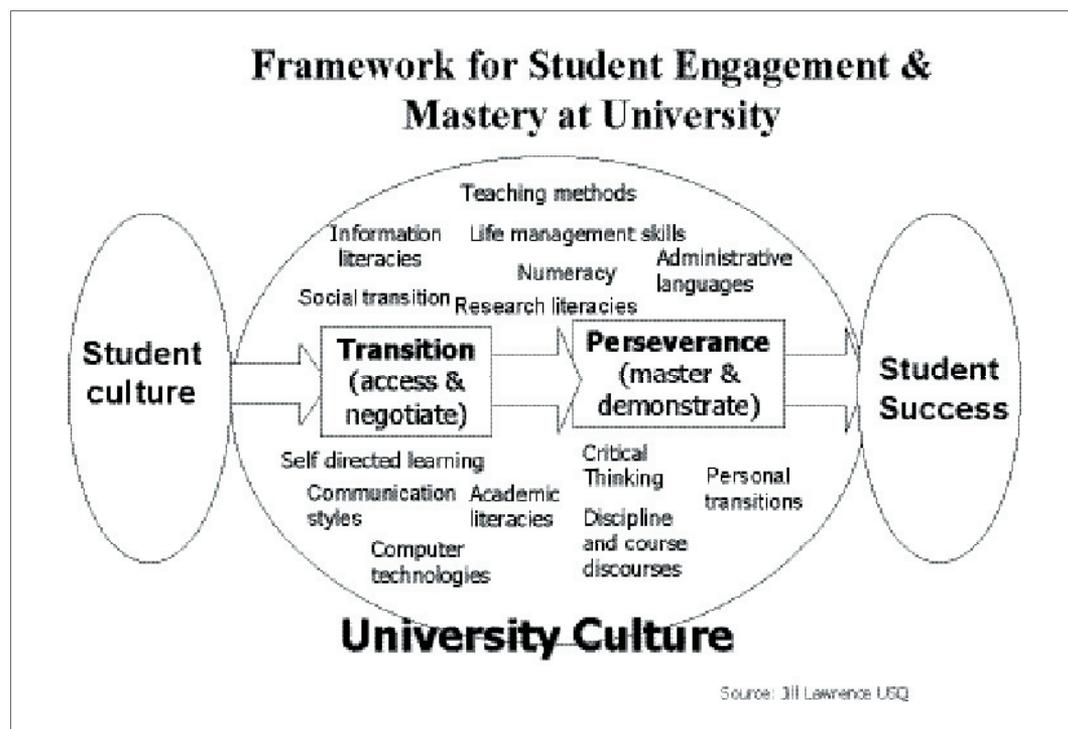


Figure 1: The Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery at University

The shift and the *Framework* emerged from the author's PhD research (Lawrence 2004). This research investigated the experiences of alternative entry students as they strove to access and participate at a regional Queensland university (USQ). The methodological structure of the research comprised a collective case study design, encompassing critical ethnography and action research. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 participants over the duration of their degree studies, with the interviews audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using a thick layered approach. Student quotes in this paper stem from the qualitative data analysis conducted for the study.

Each subject has its own discourse

Among the first, and most critical, of the discourses students need to engage and demonstrate are their first semester subjects – each of which encompasses specific cultural knowledge and practices. Each subject has its specific prerequisites and/or assumed entry knowledge; subject matter (content or process orientated, text-bound, oral or computer-mediated); language; texts (study packages, lecture notes, PowerPoint notes, web CT documents, CD Rom); cultural practices (ways of dressing and showing respect – Professor, first names); attendance (lectures, tutorials, practical sessions, clinical sessions, external/internal/online); behaviours (rule-governed/flexible, compulsory/optional attendance, consultation times, electronic discussion groups); class participation (passive, interactive, experiential); rules (about extensions, participation, resubmissions, appeals); theoretical assumptions (scientific/sociological); research methodologies (positivist/interpretive/critical, quantitative/qualitative); ways of thinking (recall, reflective, analytical or critical, surface or deep); referencing systems (APA, Harvard, MLA); ways of writing (essays/reports/journals/orals); structure (particularly in relation to assessment); tone and style (word choice, active/passive voice, third/second/first person, sentence structure, paragraph structure); formatting (left/right justified, font, type, spacing, margins); assessment (exams, assignments, orals, formative/summative, individual/ group).

To pass the subject, students need to engage, master and demonstrate the subject's discourses.

University culture: a multiplicity of discourses

The university is made up of a multiplicity of such discourses – with each subject, discipline area, section, faculty, group of students and staff group possessing their own discourses. These can include: administrative discourses; academic and/or tertiary literacies; research discourses/paradigms; computer systems (at USQ these include USQConnect, USQAdmin, USQAssist); communication and information technologies; library and database literacies; faculty, department, discipline and subject discourses; learning and teaching environments; student discourses (school leaver, mature-age, international, on-campus, external, online); learning styles (independent and self-directed learning styles); and study/work/family/life collisions (which are often critical in terms of students' perseverance). There are also time and stress management practices as well as a range of 'life's demands', including the need to engage and to learn to balance work, social and personal demands.

The Framework makes explicit the multiple discourses students need to engage if they are to pass. It also acknowledges the complexity of the first year experience. A nursing student reflects:

I found learning to use computers, the web, and referencing, technical jargon (anatomy and physiology), academic writing, medical calculations and maths so overwhelming that I wanted to leave. It wasn't helped that I had to get along with many younger students and get used to different methods of learning and teaching.

The Framework: challenges

The visualisation of transition personified by the *Framework* challenges university practice. First, there are the challenges of inconsistency and fragmentation. The requirements and expectations inherent in the discourses that students need to master differ across faculties, disciplines and subjects. There are different referencing, writing and reading systems, research paradigms, knowledge (theory) systems and teaching and learning styles. In negotiating these multiple demands students therefore need to accommodate differences. They need to demonstrate flexibility.

A second challenge is time. Students are under pressure to gain – simultaneously and rapidly – the necessary, technical, interpersonal and self-presentation skills central to their success. Kantanis (2001) contends that students:

...have to adjust simultaneously to the environment, teaching and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and disciplines of the university...[and that]...due to the nature of the course structure students do not have the luxury of adjusting to the new culture over an extended period of time.

The third challenge is unfamiliarity. Transition is more difficult for those students whose capital may not be in tune with mainstream university discourses. Their parents or friends may de-value education and its benefits; have an aversion for getting into debt; have negative experiences of school/poor study facilities; and may lack family/peer reference groups which have knowledge of and are familiar with university. The Framework embraces the notion that each student, as they enter university, embodies their own socio-cultural, academic/linguistic and economic capital and these may not be in tune with mainstream university discourses. Gee (1999) comments:

The ways of communicating within an academic setting are not easily grasped and are often difficult for students whose backgrounds differ from, or even conflict with, the ways of writing, knowing and valuing favoured within a university context.

Responses: university teachers

The Framework also challenges university teaching practices. It underlines a shift in focus from the deficit view to one acknowledging the importance of facilitating students' familiarity with the culture and its discourses. The potential 'blame' that is attached to students, who are considered 'deficient' or 'under-prepared' by teaching staff immersed in the dominant 'elite' discourses, can similarly be questioned. Staff need to accept their responsibilities in relation to their roles as educators and communicators. In fulfilling these roles it becomes the teachers' responsibility to make their discourses explicit. Academics need to explain the rules and to make explicit the hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations as well as the expected (but not stated) behaviours intrinsic to achieving success in their discipline. Boud (2001) argues that academics have expectations, but fail to articulate them and then make judgments about students who fail to demonstrate them. It is also vital for teachers to recognise that the key to teaching/learning is the 'process', rather than the 'content'. Retention relies in part on what teachers do in the classroom, as professionals.

Whereas the Framework generates new ways of conceptualising the first year experience, revealing its complexity, it also has implications for students. For example, while it is able to identify the (often less explicit) discourses in institutional/organisational communication, it is not able to provide a recipe for actively empowering students.

Model for student success practices at university

A second model, the Model for Student Success Practices at University may be able to provide a means by which these aims can be accomplished. The Model incorporates three interrelating, dynamic practices: reflective practice, socio-cultural practice and critical practice (see Figure 2).

Reflective practice

The notion of reflective practice emerges from both educational (Schön 1983). Reflective practice gives emphasis to students' capacities to observe – to watch and listen – to the cultural practices occurring at the site. An arts student verifies its efficacy:

I basically asked a lot questions. I talked to other people I knew out here and I also just listened and figured it out.

The model's understanding of reflective practice also encompasses the concepts of 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' (Schön 1983) as well as 'reflection before action' (Boud & Walker 1990). Through the processes of reflecting in, on and before practice, practitioners continually reshape their approaches and develop 'wisdom' or 'artistry' in their practice. An education student describes its benefits:

Each semester, I further refined my method of attack to succeed in my studies. I analysed what my weak points were and worked on them to improve. I discovered that the transition is a continual on-going process throughout the degree on a daily basis.

This anecdote supports Ethell and McMeniman's (2000) assertion that the purpose of reflective practice in respect of learning is to become more knowing, and becoming more knowing requires learners to make their own decisions and judgments regarding their own practice.

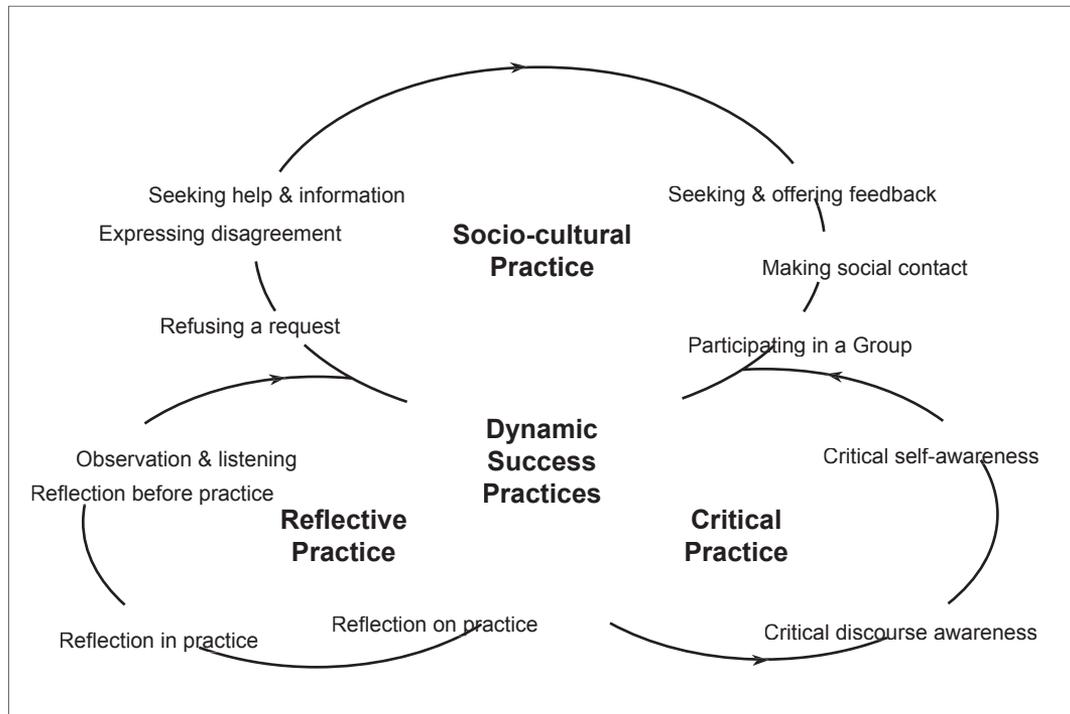


Figure 2: The Model for Student Success Practices at University

Socio-cultural practice

Socio-cultural practice stems from cross-cultural communication theory (CCT). CCT is usually applied, in a university context, to international students adjusting to an unfamiliar host culture (Badley 2000; Bandura 1986). CCT contends that, to reap maximum benefits from an unfamiliar educational system, students need to communicate effectively with mainstream students and staff (Hofstede 1997). Boekaerts (1993) suggests that adjustment incorporates the learning processes by which an individual acquires knowledge and skills, essentially enlarging their personal resources to cope. Integral to these

learning processes is an individual's self-efficacy, the belief that he or she can successfully perform social behaviours in academic situations (Bandura 1986). Bandura's (1986) social learning model is used as the basis of a cross-cultural communication program, Excell: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program (Mak et al. 1998). Excell 'enables people who have recently arrived in a new culture to be competent and effective in dealing with members of the host culture' (p.4).

Excell's significance is twofold. It not only emphasises the role of socio-cultural competencies in helping students adjust to university, it also prioritises specific socio-cultural competencies: seeking help and information; participating in a group; making social contact; seeking and offering feedback; expressing disagreement; and refusing requests. The competencies function in a dynamic relationship with each other, combining as socio-cultural practice.

An essential feature of the competencies is that they are socio-cultural: that they are socially and culturally fine-tuned to the particular discourse being engaged. The specific verbal and nonverbal means of asking for help or refusing a request differs from subculture to subculture. For example, in terms of verbal communication, students need to consider the appropriate words to use – for instance whether to ask directly or indirectly or include explanations or reasons or not:

It's not a good idea to just walk in and say 'look this is crap'. You can't bulldoze your way through you have to be tactful about it... 'Look, I agree with this, but I think I've been hard done by with this bit for this reason. (Nursing student)

The use of the competencies is also more complex than at first appears, dependent on the capital and belief systems each student embodies. Seeking help, for example, may not be 'culturally' valued, for example in individualist self-reliant cultures. Students may feel they do not have the right to ask or equate help as 'remedial, sucking up or uncool':

I don't feel confident enough to speak to my tutor about the essay question because they might think I am stupid or something. (Psychology student)

The socio-cultural practices of seeking and giving feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request are 'risky' in that there is a potential for offence (in relation to a high status lecturer) however they remain vital means of facilitating success. A student reflected:

If you disagree with the marking of an assignment, it is necessary to have skill in approaching the assessor and presenting your case for disagreement with the marks. If I was too shy to approach the assessor or had no skill to express my disagreement, then my marks would have remained unchanged and my overall results would have suffered. (Arts student)

Students nevertheless prioritise the benefits of socio-cultural practice.

I asked the lecturer for help. Am I on the right track? It helped to a ridiculous degree, to the point that ...is this all it takes to do well? Is all I need to do is ask for help and ask questions...a big epiphany. I asked for and got help and things were clearer. (Arts Student)

Every single time I have been involved in a study group, I have achieved a distinction or high distinction. Just talking about the objectives or an assignment for an hour a week reinforces key points and examples in your memory. They are definitely well worth the effort. (Education student)

Critical practice

The Model's understanding of critical practice encompasses twin capacities: people's capabilities for a self-awareness of their belief systems and cultural practices (critical self-awareness) and their capabilities for language critique including 'their capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself' (critical discourse awareness) (Fairclough 1995).

Kelly (2003) argues that critical self-awareness requires a 'continued attention to the place from which we speak' whereas Gee (1999) describes it as the need to make visible to ourselves, who we are and what we are doing. It incorporates people's capacities for unpacking their belief systems (their socio-cultural capital), as well as their readiness to challenge these and to transform them if the need arises. Critical discourse awareness differs from critical self-awareness in that it concentrates on the power configurations operating in the context or setting and underscores the role of social/cultural critique of the discourses operating at the educational site. Students stress the importance of critical practice (of both self and discourse):

It doesn't matter what the student wants, the student must adhere to what the lecturer wants and must submit the assessment accordingly. You cannot try and reinvent the wheel to suit yourself. (Arts student)

I found the first week at university so deflating – every lecture contained substantial time going through the people who fail the course. I can tell you as a result of failing a course myself, not everyone who fails is a "failure and does not put in any effort". There are many reasons people fail courses. (Education student)

Dynamic success practices

The Model reflects the dynamic inter-relationships that exist between the three practices. That the use of one of the practices often depends on the use of another and that, implemented together, they are more effective in assisting students to achieve their goals. For example observation and reflection are prerequisites for fine-tuning the socio-cultural competencies to the particular sub-culture being engaged. The capacities of students to challenge and, where it is possible, to transform unhelpful practices operating in the university context also rely on students' use of expressing disagreement and refusing a request.

Responses: university teachers

Teaching staff can actively facilitate students' use of the three practices, assisting them to become enculturated into the educational and cultural 'modus operandi' of the university (Kantanis 2001) by providing supportive learning environments where it is 'safe' for students to exercise the practices; encouraging students' use of the practices by establishing their credibility and linking them to students' capacities to pass; and by ensuring their own accessibility, for example through the use of consultation and feedback loops. Teachers can also facilitate interaction in tutorials, foster dialogue between different cultural groups, and encourage students' utilisation of group work and discussion groups, study groups, study partners, learning circles and mentors.

Conclusion

This paper has applied critical discourse theory and constructivism to challenge the assumptions of deficit which underpin many of the responses to the increasing diversity of the HE student body and to establish the potency and applicability of the role of discourses and multiliteracies in the university context. This analysis made possible a re-theorisation of the first year experience. It provided the impetus for its re-theorisation as the processes of gaining familiarity with mainstream university discourses: the

deficit-discourse shift. The paper then outlined the two models that stem from the shift, the Framework for Student Engagement And Mastery and the Model For Student Success Practices at University. Used together, the two models assist the diversity of students now participating in HE to more effectively engage and master the multiple discourses and literacies they encounter in the university culture.

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