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*Curricula and pedagogic potentials when educating diverse students in higher education: students' Funds of Knowledge as a bridge to disciplinary learning*

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**Curricula and pedagogic potentials when educating diverse students in higher education: Students' *Funds of Knowledge* as a bridge to disciplinary learning.**

**Abstract**

With the massification of higher education in a knowledge-driven economy, Western universities have struggled to keep pace with the cultural, linguistic, educational and economic diversity of university students and the complex realities of their life-worlds. This has generated systemic inequities for diverse or 'non-traditional' students, and left academics with pedagogic uncertainty. This paper reports on action research that examined curricular and pedagogic practices that made elite academic codes explicit, and utilised students' *Funds of Knowledge* as assets for disciplinary learning, in an Australian University. The action research confirmed the potential of creating bridges between the cultural practices and literacies of diverse students and the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge, facilitating their negotiation of multiple literacies and the successful participation of all students. Institutional arrangements - governed by economic, cultural and socio-political conditions – that enabled and constrained these potentials were highlighted, suggesting areas for negotiation for the pedagogies' ongoing and wider use.

**Key words:** higher education; diversity; curriculum; pedagogy; equity; Funds of Knowledge; code-switching.

## **Introduction**

Policies of massification and internationalisation in Western universities have challenged both students and their educators, particularly the divide between the literacy practices of diverse students entering higher education and those required for success in academic and professional worlds (Rai and Lillis 2013; Northedge 2003). Many diverse students are unfamiliar with the tacit assumptions and expectations embedded within a university system where their own literacy practices are unacknowledged (Devlin 2013; Northedge 2005). This unfamiliarity has often been perceived as inherent deficits in students that lower their ability to meet academic standards and/or require enhanced learning and teaching (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Haggis 2006), rather than as cultural differences in literacy practices, with associated social status and power implications (Ivanič et al. 2009; Lillis 2003). This paper maintains that barriers to meeting academic standards are not inherent in diverse students' basic abilities to undertake university courses, but in the disparities between their socio-structural positioning and the elite university systems they enter (Devlin 2013).

Bourdieu (1977,1984) argued that education is a vehicle for selection to succeed or fail based on inheritance (or not) of tacit familiarity with dominant cultural codes. Using Bourdieu's (1977,1984) concept of *cultural capital* – defined as 'proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices' (Aschaffenburg & Mass 1997, 573, cited in Devlin 2013) - Devlin (2013, 2) argues that 'non-traditional' university students are educated and assessed on a set of assumptions, values and expectations that are not always made explicit, which selectively advantages students from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds who acquire implicit familiarity with these privileged assumptions, values and expectations over a lifetime. Zipin, Sellar and Hattam (2012, 180) suggest that cultural capital is 'coded in the educational

“message systems” (Bernstein 1975) of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment’. Delpit (1988, 282) wrote that the codes inherent in predominant linguistic forms – ways of talking, writing and interacting – are supported by a ‘culture of power’ in learning environments, and ‘success in institutions is predicated upon acquiring the culture of those who are in power’. In this sense, traditional university curricula and pedagogies predominantly operate from literacies based in privileged social-structural positions. Research indicates that many diverse and ‘non-traditional’ university students experience barriers, and struggle with the cultural shifts and unfamiliar academic expectations required for their successful participation (Meuleman et al. 2015; Thomas 2014; Reay et al. 2010). This suggests that higher education privileges students with relatively elite cultural capital, and excludes the democratic participation and literacy practices of diverse students in its curricula and pedagogies.

More recent university entrants are sometimes referred to in the literature as ‘non-traditional’ students; that is, students who are the first in the family to attend university, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, Indigenous, of mature age and/or with a disability (Funston 2012; O’Shea, Onsmann and McKay 2011). The term has raised questions about the dominant groups who have constructed ‘traditional’ beliefs and practices in universities, potentially ‘othering’ students of difference, and reinforcing such constructions (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003). It is used in this paper with the terms ‘diverse’ or ‘new’ students to refer to students who have followed routes to university other than the ‘traditional’ one - that is, an uninterrupted, linear path from school to university (David 2010).

Teaching methods in universities have adapted little to meet more recent changes in student profiles (Marr, Curry and Rose-Adams 2014; Arkoudis and Tran 2010). Transition pedagogies to support the transition of diverse students in the

vulnerable first year have had some impact (Kift 2009; Cuseo 2010); however ‘assimilationist’ approaches to student diversity seem to predominate. Students are encouraged to fit into the existing codes, values and practices of universities – which can be construed as ‘colonising’ - rather than have their own knowledge and experience valorised and utilised as assets for their learning (Armstrong and Cairnduff 2012; Zepke, Leach and Prebble 2006).

This action research was prompted by the pedagogic challenge of educating diverse students in a Bachelor of Social Work course in an Australian university, who potentially bring cultural, linguistic and experiential assets to the profession, but who struggled with the unfamiliar literacy demands of academic and professional worlds. The practitioner action research designed and enacted curricula and pedagogies to bridge socio-cultural divides that disadvantage diverse students, while amplifying learning for all students, in two cycles (over two semesters) in 2013 in an Australian university. The research aims were to examine curricular and pedagogic possibilities and constraints when elite academic codes were made explicit, and students’ literacy practices (cultural and linguistic inheritances) were utilised as assets for disciplinary learning. The findings confirmed the potential of such practices to facilitate the successful participation of all students, in spite of institutional arrangements which sometimes operated as constraints.

This paper commences with a review of relevant literature, providing a brief overview of the conceptual contributions that have preceded and informed the action research and its curricular and pedagogic approaches. The next section outlines the research design and examples of the curricular and pedagogic practices. This is followed by the research findings, discussion and implications for higher education pedagogies and future research.

## **Literature Review**

### *Pedagogies in Widening Participation*

Australian research emerging from the post-Bradley (2009) widening participation strategies recommends a number of ‘critical interventions’ to encourage more equitable access, effective participation and completion of ‘non-traditional’ students (Naylor, Baik and James 2013; Measor, Wilcox, and Frame 2012). Among these critical interventions is the ‘consideration of student disadvantage in course structure and curriculum design’ (Naylor et al. 2013, 35). Gale and Tranter (2011, 43) argue that simply creating more places is insufficient for social justice in higher education and recommend the creation of curricular and pedagogic spaces for ‘epistemological equity’. This means deeper university recognition and inclusion of the knowledges, values and understandings that diverse students bring to university, enabling what Gale and Tranter (2011) call ‘recognitive’ justice, i.e. recognition of students’ cultural knowledge and identities in curriculum and pedagogy, which they argue is typically missing in the tertiary education policy landscape. Such epistemologies do not fit an ‘expert’ model of education, which privileges selectively elite forms and sources of knowledge, thus reproducing the socio-structural power relations that underpin them. Despite the economic and socio-political agendas besetting contemporary universities, the educational needs and aspirations of ‘non-traditional’ students require alternatives to simply applying traditional curricular and pedagogic practices that select for structurally privileged learners to succeed (Teese 2007).

### *Academic Literacies*

Research indicates that students in higher education are required to switch between many different types of written text and oral genres in disciplinary and workplace settings, juggling different department and academic staff expectations (Lea 2008).

Unfamiliarity with university literacy practices is made more complex as literacies evolve and change in global, professional and every-day contexts (Kalantzis and Cope 2012). More recent conceptions of literacy have moved beyond simply emphasising technical skills of reading, writing and calculating, towards a multi-literacy concept which recognises that literacy practices are embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures (UNESCO 2004, 6). Literacies are therefore considered as far more complex and intertwined than singular skills which are easily transferred from context to context. ‘New Literacy studies’ scholarship developed in the 1980s, reconceptualised literacy as consisting of a set of practice arising from value-driven contexts, rather than as a set of asocial, acultural apolitical ‘skills’ (Boughey 2007, 140).

Building on this scholarship, *Academic Literacies* scholars have argued for some time that communication, including literacy, is integral to the learning and teaching of all subjects in higher education, rather than a discrete set of skills to be learnt alone (Lillis 2003; Lea and Street 1998). *Academic Literacies* research has explored the nature of power and authority in academic writing, examining meaning-making, identity, and the power invested in particular literacies and discourses (Lea 2008, 231). They have argued that making elite codes explicit in disciplinary learning redresses the inherent power imbalance in privileged academic codes and assumptions that excludes some learners (Lea 2008; Davison 2006). This has led to questioning the prevalent practice of removing ‘struggling students’ from the discipline to undertake generic ‘study skills’ in centralised university support services in universities, maintaining that it is the responsibility of all educators to consider the communicative aspects of pedagogic practice (Ivanič et al. 2009, 36). Literacy is considered central to learning and teaching:

Language is at the heart of teaching and learning. It is the medium through

which concepts and skills are learned and assessed, social relationships and identities are formed, and increasingly deeper and more complex disciplinary understandings are constructed over time (DiCerbo et al. 2014, 446).

Whilst such scholarship has had some influence in higher education, Lea (2008, 235) maintains that the challenge remains as to ‘how to make these research findings more relevant and central in pedagogic contexts’. This action research was a tentative step toward articulating these literacy dimensions more centrally in higher education pedagogy to enable what Morrow (1993) describes as ‘epistemological access’, and more effectively support student learning in higher education.

### *Funds of Knowledge*

The linguistic and cultural divide between more resourced and selectively privileged students, and those marginalised within compulsory education systems has been researched by Moll, Gonzalez and associates, initially with Latino students in the USA (Moll et al.1992; Gonzalez and Moll 2002; Gonzalez 2005). This research found that marginalised students’ *Funds of Knowledge* - the knowledge and skills that have gained useful meaning over generations, in support of family and community well-being and identities, which tend to be ignored in the education of power-marginalised students – could be utilised to inform curricula and pedagogy (Moll 2014), leading to significantly more engagement and success of traditionally marginalised students in mainstream compulsory education.

The *Funds of Knowledge* approach, later researched with marginalised school students in South Australia (Hattam et al.2009), owes much to Vygotsky’s (1987) theories of the social origins and cultural basis of individual learning that underpins socio-cultural theories of learning. Vygotsky (1978) argued that meaning-making in the educative process develops through a dialectical interaction between everyday ‘spontaneous’ concepts and the formal ‘scientific’ concepts encountered in discipline

learning (Moll 2014, 35). Students' everyday lives and experiences can provide the leveraging point for the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1978) - the proximal 'zone' that extends from what learners know through life-based engagement, into further and more systematic understandings and associated capacities of disciplinary learning. Instructional scaffolding, and assistance from instructional others in this proximal zone, acts as a bridge to new disciplinary learning.

In spite of its curricular and pedagogic potential, the concept of *Funds of Knowledge* has attracted minimal influence and scholarship in higher education (Rios-Aguilar and Marquez Kiyama 2012; Van Niel 2010). Using students' familiar life-worlds as assets to bring into learning connection with academic and disciplinary knowledge created possibilities to address the collision between the socioeconomic and culturally diverse realities of many students' lives, and the mono-cultural and class-based institutional structure of the university. Using students' *Funds of Knowledge* to inform curriculum and pedagogy, and making elite codes explicit, sought to *both* enable students to value their life-based cultural-historical traditions and conventions, *and* redistribute the privileged academic codes (without valorising these as 'superior'). These dual approaches, complemented by critical pedagogy, informed the curricular and pedagogic approaches in the action research. The notion of students learning to 'code-switch' between the different discourse communities they are newly inhabiting builds on the work of Delpit (1988, 293), who illustrated education for 'code switching' in an isolated Alaskan Native American community. In this community, school students were explicitly taught the codes necessary to negotiate dominant institutions - 'the explicit and implicit rules of power' - but were not assimilated into these, as they were encouraged simultaneously to retain and value their own native literacies, as well as to contrast the codes of both, and critically to understand the power differential between

them. Priest (2009) refers to ‘code-switching’ between discourses in the United States – when African-American students are encouraged not to passively adopt an alternate discourse or code, but instead to understand the value of the discourses they already possess, as well as to recognise the value of powerful discourses associated with, for example, academic writing.

### *Critical Pedagogy*

Freire saw the task of education and literacy as understanding and challenging unequal power relations: ‘literacy only empowers people when it renders them active questioners of the social reality around them’ (Freire 1970, 1973, 1985, in Gee 2007, 62). He argued for respectful discussions that value diverse perspectives, engage students’ questions, explore problems and invite critical analysis (Freire 1970). Writing more recently about pedagogies for diverse students in universities, Haggis (2006, 53) recommends ‘collective enquiry’ or *dialogue* (Freire 1970) that sees students’ positions and perspectives to be just as integral to the educational process as the discipline content itself. Giroux (2011,10) argues that the current policy contexts encourage instrumental teaching practices, limited to transmission and the passive absorption of knowledge; and he advocates for pedagogic approaches that enable students to read texts as objects of interrogation rather than ‘unquestioning reverence’.

Critical pedagogy gave room for us, in disciplinary dialogue with students, to explore the power dimensions of text and discourse in the action research, so that the relationship between the different discourse communities that students inhabit, might be explored. This clarified avenues of proximal access to discourses that students needed for success, without necessarily valorising the new disciplinary discourse as a final authority, but rather a resource always open to judicious use and further question.

## **The Action Research**

### *Research Design*

Action Research provided the methodological framework to examine the pedagogies in the higher education context through repeated action, reflection and change in the real-world context of the university setting (Herr and Anderson 2005). Noffke (2009, 8) argues that action research includes three purposes: to generate knowledge and understanding for personal and professional development; to critically challenge unjust power arrangements, and to bring about practical and socially just change. The active and reflexive components of action research facilitated exploration of unchallenged normative curricular and pedagogic practices in higher education, into which practitioners can easily be drawn. It was guided by the following research question: what possibilities and constraints emerge when enacting pedagogic approaches to social work undergraduate programs that acknowledge and build on the literacies of ‘non-traditional’ students in an Australian university?

The research was approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 12/145) before the pedagogies were designed and enacted in two Bachelor of Social Work units of study over two cycles, in first and second semesters of 2013. The unit coordinator of the two units was the practitioner researcher. Collaboration with Academic, Language and Learning (ALL) support professionals and other senior educators were included in the design and enactment of the pedagogies. The research methods included open-ended interviews with educators; surveys and focus group interviews with students; the researcher’s field journal, and review of course documents. Research conducted from cycle one informed the design and enactment of the second cycle.

### *The Present Study*

The participants in the study were the students and educators in the two BSW program units, Social Work Theories (78 students) and Introduction to Social Work (75 students). Publicly available demographic data of students in each unit of study indicated a student profile that included ‘non-traditional’ students, as previously defined, to a significant degree, particularly in terms of a large majority being first in family to attend university and a high proportion being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. All students were invited to participate anonymously and consent forms and questionnaires were administered by persons other than the lecturer/researcher. The large majority of students completed the questionnaire and smaller numbers nominated for the focus groups. Focus groups were undertaken by the researcher after assessments had been marked and returned, to ensure the research and assessment processes remained separate. This provided more in-depth exploration of students’ experiences of the units and allowed different perspectives to emerge (Liamputtong 2013).

Educators involved in the study (tutors and an ALL expert) were briefed about the study before the project, and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to explore their perceptions in some depth. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Questionnaire responses were collated into table form and examined alongside the verbatim recorded data, coding similar themes and identifying additional ones. Journal entries were added to this analysis, identifying related and additional themes. Course documentation, including retention rates, student results were examined, with recognition of the limitation of these within the scope of this study.

Limitations of this small-scale action research include its restriction to two cycles and a particular discipline and university context. The nature of action research is such that it has a focus on change at the site of study, so critics challenge its transferability (Herr and Anderson 2005). The action research in the project did not intend to provide definitive outcomes assumed as directly transferable to other contexts. Rather it sought to change practitioners' practices, understandings and the conditions in which they practised (Kemmis 2009) and to gain significant insights which may have application to other sites in tertiary education.

As the sole practitioner researcher, all the sources of data were interpreted through the one lens, although multiple voices were represented through the data, with direct quotes significant in the data reporting to minimise researcher partiality. The methodology relied heavily on participants' perceptions, some of which might have been influenced by inherent power relationships in the educational setting, in spite of the researcher's efforts to minimise the impact of these through raised consciousness to them.

The following section provides a brief overview and examples of the pedagogies enacted in the action research, seeking to make elite codes explicit and drawing on students' *Funds of Knowledge* as assets for learning, in the two social work units.

### **Pedagogies in the Action Research**

#### *Funds of Knowledge*

Through dialogue in safe educational spaces, we encouraged meaning-making of new discipline concepts and terms by linking these to students' cultural, linguistic and lived experience. Dialogue, experiential exercises, and student writing were the vehicles to identify Funds of Knowledge that might be used as assets for

learning; creating opportunities for students' existing literacy practices to be made more explicit, so that they could be explored pedagogically, validated or challenged and connected to the new disciplinary values and literacy practices. A range of accessible literacies (newspaper clippings, videos, visual representations, music, popular literature) were used as a bridge between students' familiar, 'every-day' literacies and the disciplinary knowledge and literacy practices, to encourage meaning-making in diverse students' life worlds. Further insights into these pedagogies, are elaborated in the research findings below.

### *Making Elite Codes Explicit*

Making elite codes explicit while teaching the discipline involved multiple facets. In recognition of the tight interconnection between literacy and disciplinary learning, an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educator was embedded into the units of study to integrate literacy into the discipline focus. She attended all discipline lectures and tutorials, was involved in weekly reflection and planning, co-taught explicit academic literacy practices, contributed to classroom dialogue, and provided frameworks and resources on how to approach the assessment tasks. She was also available for individual student consultations to resource them around their academic writing. Discipline teaching integrated explicit segments, for example, on how to read academic articles for meaning; how to structure an essay, reflection or report, in response to assessment requirements; how to structure a good academic paragraph; students were encouraged to maintain a glossary of new terms, and new (discipline) discourse was introduced with every-day examples or experiential exercises to enable meaning-making.

We identified the intersection of discipline and language themes and designed exercises to raise students' consciousness about language (how it functions in different

contexts, with differential power) while learning the discipline. For example social construction theory in the *Social Work Theories* unit invited discussions around the social construction of language, its relationship to power and how dominant discourses silence and potentially ‘other’ minority groups. We used Northedge’s (2005) table analysing the differences between ‘tribal’ (every-day), ‘professional’ and ‘academic’ discourses, and identified the purposes and interests these serve and implications for social work practice. We would refer back to these differences (and their ‘codes’) in future discussions, and used them for student feedback on assessments (for example, how might this ‘every-day’ expression be replaced to make it more ‘academic’). On another occasion we examined three extracts from different texts on Feminism (a text book, a feminist tract advertising a demonstration and a novel) and elicited the differences in language, purpose, audience, while exploring discipline themes (Feminism). These and other dialogues reinforced themes about the role of language and power in disciplinary knowledge, and in broader socio-political structures where vested interests of dominant social groups are perpetuated through language. Students’ own cultural and literacy backgrounds could be valorised in these conversations, and the role of ‘code-switching’ to access these dominant and powerful codes could be gently explored.

### **The Research Findings**

The research findings highlighted both possibilities and constraints to the introduced pedagogies in the higher education context. The possibilities are presented in terms of how students and educators experienced the explicit attention to multiple literacies, the embedding of the ALL specialist, using *Funds of Knowledge* as assets for learning and how the approach supported student learning. The constraints that emerged in the research relate to institutional norms, accountability and administrative systems,

diminished resources, and the complexity of the contemporary teaching space, which sometimes competed with the pedagogic intentions of the action research.

### **Possibilities of the Pedagogies**

#### *Using Funds of Knowledge as Assets for Learning*

Using students' *Funds of Knowledge* as assets for learning was incorporated in week-by-week planning, but often surfaced more spontaneously as students volunteered their vernacular literacies in safe and conducive learning environments, in which educators were alert to the emergence of cultural assets for learning use. It was apparent that, as students' less privileged lifeworld literacies were invited into the educational space and connections to the new disciplinary learning were made, learning was activated on many levels. In student questionnaires in the research, their responses to the question, 'what helped your learning?' were typified by the following comments (from different students):

1. *The teacher giving me the opportunity to discuss and question and explore.*
2. *By hearing other people's thoughts and opinions it opened up my mind to a lot of different beliefs.*
3. *The group work definitely helped me to be more open. The discussions were very clear and allowed me to think more critically about issues.*
4. *The hands-on tutorials are really stimulating and push me to think 'outside the box'.*

The students were learning from each other's experience and world views, which were, according to them, supporting their learning of the discipline. Dialogic relationships were exposing students to new ways of thinking and being, while they negotiated new disciplinary learning, as expressed in student focus groups (with pseudonyms):

*Matt: Hands on, sitting with us and totally explaining concepts. Letting discussions flow and sometimes guide the class...and explained things if needed. ...engaging and not intimidating...welcome questions and comments...*

Pia: *Definitely different from other units in that it is much more interactive and tailored to our needs. We can stop and ask questions.*

Joseph: *...communicating – both ways. We are all teachers – and learners.*

Rumi: *I like the approach to involve everyone in the lecture to make sure that things were understood.*

Duy: *The level of warmth and comfortable environment created by the teachers enabled me to feel comfortable sharing myself with the rest of the class.*

The research highlighted rich examples of the cultural practices and spontaneous ‘systems’ inhering in students’ life-worlds, and their use for mediating the development of disciplinary and professional understandings, as well as supporting the gradual build-up of capacities to code-shift and identity-shift. For example, a student asked if she could use her hand puppets to illustrate narrative theoretical approaches in her assessed class presentation. This was willingly agreed to, and it became a stunning and creative presentation where she drew on her *Funds of Knowledge*, related to her expertise in puppetry, to connect to the new knowledge and effectively engage other students in learning through the process. Another student used photographs and elements from her family history to effectively illustrate social construction theory in an engaging and thoughtful way. Another student presentation connected her new learning about cognitive-behavioural theory with her personal experience of its enactment at a time of personal anxiety. These students explored their new learning through the ‘funds’ of their experience and literacies from their lives outside the university context in quite high-stakes assessment activity. It is possible their doing so was supported by educators’ privileging of *Funds of Knowledge* and valorising their expression in the meaning-making process, thereby reducing the judgementalism usually associated with high-stakes assessment.

### *Explicit Attention to Multiple Literacies in Discipline Curriculum*

There were compelling indications in the research findings that the dual focus on literacy and curriculum, with an explicit attention to multiple literacies and their differences and codes, supported the 'epistemological access' (Morrow 1993) of diverse students in the two units. Significantly, student focus groups and staff interviews testified that integrating explicit attention to literacy differences and codes worked well in the curriculum, particularly when it was connected to students' own motivations and interests, and time and space for this attention was prioritised by the educators in the timetabled spaces available. Students' understanding about language and how it works was particularly evident in student focus groups where they were able to articulate how language is used differentially according to context, and highlight the relationship of language to power, while considering implications for social work practice. One student reported in the focus group:

*Pia: If you can't build rapport with someone straight off then you lose them ...[in] part of my community there is a lot of disadvantage, a lot of people that are using drugs and if I walk in and talk to them like I talk around here on campus [they] wouldn't have a bar of me straight off, so it is important for me to not have language as a barrier. There is enough other barriers.*

*Interviewer: So have you experienced ... academic or professional language as a barrier?*

*Pia: I think initially probably ... until I ... got a grasp of it and then yep. It is almost like I interpret things in my head ... now ... with the correct language... ... it is almost like it is shorthand language now because I have got friends that are also studying Social Work ...elsewhere and...our conversations are shorter now ... because we have that shared language which is important ... it is about*

*discourse isn't it? That is what we need to be able to communicate with other Social Workers...and funding bodies....and ...for grants and everything else. ...It is shorthand, but it is not really shorthand because it is so loaded.*

The student recognised that individuals often 'code-switch' in and out of language systems to suit different purposes and contexts, and that their vernacular literacies may engage clients more readily, reducing 'barriers' in the professional relationship, and have inherent value. She is also recognising the significance of the acquisition of professional language in social work practice, using the examples of how its formalities (and power) enable access to the professional discourse community, and can serve the interests of clients through the acquisition of government funds.

There was evidence in the research findings – through classroom interactions and in focus groups – of students' growing critical approach to language, texts and broader social discourses. Students explicitly noted how they were increasingly looking beyond the surface of what they were hearing or reading in their every-day lives, to consider underlying agendas and power relationships. Students in the focus group discussed their growing critical awareness when watching the news or reading newspapers:

*Paulina: You are so much more aware of what is going on in the background.*

*Daniel: You start to question them. Where is this coming from? Where is your evidence?... that is something that I've really noticed is that I'm so analytical and critical of things when I watch them and ...going, "well that is actually serving a purpose for a certain entity" ...*

Given these were first year social work students, this growing awareness was promising preparation for the ensuing years of study in critical social work, as well as future social work practice.

### *The Embedded Model*

Data from students and educators indicated that the embedding of the ALL educator into the discipline content teaching effectively supported efforts to make unfamiliar academic and disciplinary assumptions, values and expectations explicit and enhanced student learning. Students universally affirmed the value of having the ALL support specialist in the discipline context:

*Paulina ... I used the (ALL) guidelines online and I think it was very helpful too, especially with the reflection piece...to look at the guidelines and realise, okay, so it's not a diary entry but it is not an academic essay, it is sort of an amalgamation of the two. I have got clear guidelines that I can work upon. I think, for someone who is just starting out that is very helpful.*

The research indicated that academic genres and discipline and professional discourses became less intimidating for students when they could recognise their codes and, over time and through their own intellectual labour, learn to apply them in different genres. This was evident in progress in students' academic writing, expressed in progressive assessments (the subject of future research) and in focus groups. Students were starting to 'code switch', as an international student expressed in a focus group:

*Chang: [In] Academic discourse ... I can't say what I want or ... provide examples from personal experience. ... [it needs a] statement and together with the evidence to support it ... it is academic like structure ... you can't provide your personal opinion. So you always mention about ... more books [you have read] to provide any evidence to support ideas or argument.*

Interviewer: Do you think that spilt over in any way to other areas of your life?

*Chang: Yeah, way of thinking is a big one. For example if I am trying to negotiate with ... the Insurance company ... back then I used to say, "I feel like*

*this and that”, but now after I have learned the academic discourse how to be aware of the language I use you know ... or evidence to support ... your claims ...I try to delve into things more and try to understand them. Before I was probably more accepting of first view, now I am really critical of everything which I hear.*

The student is explaining how he has learned to ‘code-switch’ to his advantage in academic literacies and is transferring this to everyday situations that might benefit from a different language genre. The student is developing awareness of the differences in every-day register (a personal tenor and using written language that is close to self and to familiar experience), as opposed to an academic essay that displays specialised knowledge (‘more books you have read’), enacting an expert tenor (‘evidence to support your claim’) and written language relatively distanced from self and others. There was evidence of students successfully moving between vernacular and discipline literacies, as indicated in a focus group when reporting on a recent conversation with a friend about the care of her elderly mother:

*Ly ....and I was talking to her about self-determination. And I would never have known what self-determination was 12 months ago but I was saying to her maybe just give her all the options and let her make up her own mind. And she said that had really helped her...” Since you’ve told me that I have been taking a step back and I am telling her what the options are and if she doesn’t want to do it that is up to her.*

The student is moving with ease between the two literacies – vernacular (‘just give her all the options and let her make up her own mind’) and the discipline or professional (‘self-determination’). She is using this language in the context of friendship and not only academic or professional settings. These shifts were significant for ‘non-

traditional' students who were making multiple transitions (in terms of social class, language and culture) in a university system that subordinated their values, culture and literacy practices to dominant and elite norms.

*Supported the learning of all students*

Conclusive claims about academic success are difficult to make when so many domains of practice and factors external to the study can contribute to student academic success. There were some indications from the composite data that suggested students in the two research units were supported toward academic success, although this cannot be conclusive because of the many unknown contributions. For example, all but three students passed SWT (and of those three, two did not attend classes). Comparison of these results with the more traditionally taught unit in the previous year are difficult to make, as it was taught by different educators. In ISW two students failed, one of whom did not attend classes and the other had extenuating personal circumstances that prevented the submission of her final assignment. Similar complexities relate to retention rates as data, as students leave units for a range of reasons beyond curriculum and pedagogy. We did, however, find that significantly less students left the SWT unit before its completion in the year of the action research (15% of students), compared with the year before (24% of students). No such comparisons could be made for ISW, as it was taught for the first time in the year of the project. These findings flag room for future research on changes in result patterns of individual students (for example between first and second year) and analysis of participating students' writing developments.

## **Constraints of the Pedagogies**

We were working within prescribed pedagogic structures and institutional norms - ‘practice architectures’, as expressed by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014) - that did not always support the design and enactment of the new pedagogies. Lea (2004) states that course design will always be limited by specific institutional and wider quality assurance procedures. We were operating in an environment where prescribed pedagogic times and spaces - lectures, timetables and class sizes – were significant elements of institutional norms configuring our practices, whether they were supportive of our pedagogic intentions or not. For example, the University’s extensive and protracted course approval system (designed to meet compliance with external accountability systems) had to be negotiated in the early design stages, which meant that substantial curricular changes were undertaken with time-consuming administrative burdens. This potentially vied for time and constrained innovation around assessment design, as indicated in the following extract from the researcher’s journal in the curriculum design stage:

*I inherited a curriculum to which I made minor changes – once you start changing assessments there is a lengthy and cumbersome process of course approval. Making ‘major amendments’ to courses, invokes this process. There is therefore little incentive to make innovative changes to assessments or curricula that is already set....*

The theme of time and resource constraints echoed throughout the research data. The ALL educator observed this in both cycles in her interviews. For example she reported in her interview:

*The focus in the first few weeks on the importance of language and discourse became lost throughout the course due to the presentations and*

*lack of time to revisit literacy work... We were also very mindful of students' obligations and the need to be flexible. We needed more class time to prepare for the essay and drafts – to make the essay more central.*

We were designing the curriculum at a time when the University's student learning platform was out-dated and in the process of being replaced due to its limited capacities. Innovative ideas for assessment in the early stages of curriculum design, such as engaging literacies through collaborative work with WIKIs, making podcasts of interviews with SW students or SW graduates on literacy/language themes, and exploring the possibility of the 'flipped classroom' (i.e. where didactic components and related tasks are delivered online and student contact time is focused on interactive pedagogies), were abandoned, partly due to the limitations of the student learning platform and time demands. What we did in practice was not always based on our preferred pedagogic choices, but the availability and compulsions of material resources and historic and established pedagogic structures and practices, in which we were often complicit.

We became aware of the central role of the university educator in supporting 'non-traditional' students' navigation of multiple texts and new literacies in the pedagogies. It is educators who are sanctioned to loosen the boundaries between the literacies of 'non-traditional' students and the discipline. In this porous, 'hybrid' teaching space, students' diverse *Funds of Knowledge* are mediated through an attendant discourse that 'must occur in the right places, the right times and the right ways' to position 'non-traditional' students as experts of related and applicable knowledges, and generate the scaffold to new literacies (Barton and Tan 2009, 52). This requires expertise and commitment from university educators, not always available in a resource-stretched system that has historically entrenched ways of operating. In a

casualised workforce with conditions that do not invite such commitment, nor necessarily expect or develop such expertise, this educative opportunity was sometimes compromised by the complexities associated with a casualised workforce.

Constraining the pedagogies to some degree were the students' own demands and anxieties in the study as they juggled multiple roles to fund their studies, often entering tertiary education at different stages of their life-cycle with associated loads. The research found that in some cases it was foreign for students (and their educators) to value their own literacies and 'codes' even if encouraged to do so, as they and their educators (including the researcher) were so oriented to the new (academic) codes for success. Also, there was often sensitivity about exposing cultural 'otherness' to public attention. This was compounded by the pressures of limited timeframes, graded assessments and internalised anxiety about these. These factors competed for time and pedagogic attention to develop sufficient trust for 'non-traditional' students to reveal life-worlds that they sensed were alien to the university. In spite of these challenges, students responded well on many occasions to the invitation to bridge between their own literacies and those of the discipline, as it deepened their disciplinary learning and valorised their own cultural heritages and literacies.

## **Discussion**

The research confirmed that pedagogic practices that made unfamiliar assumptions, values and expectations explicit, and valorised students' own literacy practices and life-worlds, reduced students' anxiety - particularly 'non-traditional' students - and resulted in richer pedagogic dialogue that encouraged productive meaning-making for all students, enhancing disciplinary learning. Students' vernacular literacies constituted assets for learning when they represented rich elements of lived-cultural use and meaning, such that engaging with them curricularly and pedagogically struck strong

identity resonances which offered scaffolding grounds for bridging to new learning (Vygotsky 1978; Moll 2014). Such engagement became pedagogically potent because it drew on students' ways of knowing and being that inhered in their cultural life-worlds beyond educational institutions. We found that such connections facilitated meaning-making that could bridge between life-world knowledge and practice, and the learning and practicable use of disciplinary knowledge (Zipin 2013).

The discipline of Social Work provided a natural alliance with the *Funds of Knowledge* approach, as students' experience and histories were woven into who they became as Social Work professionals, and therefore became curricular in Social Work education. While the findings were limited to the particular University and the Social Work discipline, results from this small study were sufficiently compelling to encourage wider application and further research across a broader range of disciplines in higher education to further inform their value.

The extent to which practice architectures influenced pedagogic practices was an important aspect of learning from the research. It became apparent how these practice architectures - expressed in the material-economic, cultural-discursive and socio-political arrangements in which higher education teaching practices are situated – interacted with practice decisions (Kemmis et al. 2014). These practice architectures sometimes enabled the pedagogies in the research. A clear example of this was the ways in which the scholarship of the Academic Language and Learning field had taken root in the cultural-discursive foundations of the Academic Learning Support centre, which facilitated the University's commitment to ALL resources and relationships, and resulted in very real resources to the project. Embedding the ALL educator into the discipline was a resource-intensive initiative. However, given the research results, consideration of targeting this resource toward select, challenging units of study in early

years in higher education curricula to maximise the impact of this precious resource in discipline teaching is warranted.

At other times, institutional practices drove us to compromise our designs, and subtly drew us into the safety of the known and familiar, which induced us to miss curricular and pedagogic opportunities. As Kemmis et al. (2014) suggest, if the language inhering in students' *Funds of Knowledge* is not frequently and pervasively spoken at the practice site, the practice of pedagogies that build on students' *Funds of Knowledge* are less likely to take hold. If there are insufficient material resources, in the forms of time, place, texts, and expertise, the practices are less likely to be sustained. If the appropriate social relationships, for example, between educators, discipline teams, ALL educators and governance personnel are not in place, the practices are less likely to adhere. Further action research cycles could help to further the new language and attitudinal dispositions of the *Funds of Knowledge* pedagogies, and making elite codes explicit, to infiltrate the cultural-discursive and material-economic dimensions of the practice environment, and, with the commensurate socio-political change, strengthen the pedagogies' potentials in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

In the new frontiers of widening participation and internationalisation of higher education, the findings from this study are timely as universities struggle to adjust to new student cohorts, public pressure to support students' educational success, and economic pressure to do so 'cheaply', with current funding models tied to student choice and retention. Both newer students and their educators grapple with competing priorities in this globalised, corporatised and complex contextual environment, putting pressure on effective and socially just curricula and pedagogies, particularly for 'non-traditional' students. This study located the role of negotiating multiple literacies as a

significant ‘solution’ in terms of retention and success and confirmed its importance in disciplinary learning acquisition, as universities teach culturally, linguistically and educationally diverse students, and prepare them for multiple textual and global life-world contexts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, these approaches prepare students for academic success while counteracting current tendencies for acculturation or assimilation into dominant university literacy practices (which succeed with few rather than many). While the claims of this small study are modest, it has ventured into and illuminated challenging areas, highlighting possibilities for further collegial discussion, research and ongoing scholarship.

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