A holistic approach to international students, institutional habitus and academic literacies in an Irish third level institution

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Abstract This qualitative study examines the interplay between academic staff and international students with regard to developing academic literacies at university. Higher education has traditionally responded to increasing student diversity with the expectation that students will conform to institutional norms or habitus. In this context international students arrive with cultural capital which may not fit such norms, and would benefit from developing their academic literacy, as indeed would home students given an increasingly diverse student body in Irish higher education. Findings reveal a gap between academics expectations and international students' capabilities. Academic staff remained within the remit of the research in contrast to the 22 international students who were interviewed. They did not separate the totality of their campus experience from academic literacy practices. These ranged from uncertainty around writing in another language to a mismatch between diversity management in class and students' own expectations. International students found difficulty to making friends on campus which could benefit their integration into the academic literacy practices of their respective disciplines. Findings point towards a whole institution response to student diversity which transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords Academic literacy · Diversity · Cultural capital · Institutional habitus · Intercultural classroom · Intercultural friendship

Institutional approaches to student diversity and academic literacy

As universities have become more diverse institutions there has been significant research interest relating to diverse student populations (Asmar 2005; Green 2007; Johnson 2008; Sherry et al. 2010; Thomas 2002); this includes the academic literacy needs of both home and international students (Lea and Street 1998, 2006; Larcombe and Malkin 2008; Lillis 1997). Universities have tended to take an assimilationist perspective (Zepke and Leach

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2005) to student diversity: students are expected to fit into an institution's existing practices, to its habitus (Bourdieu 1989). There is, however, a critical discourse regarding such an institutional stance which considers diversity should, for example, be evident in course content and teaching methods as any student arrives into a third level institution with specific cultural capital. Bourdieu considers that there are three aspects to cultural capital (1986:47): firstly, that acquired by an individual over time; secondly, that manifest through cultural goods, and thirdly, its institutionalized state where, for example, it confers legitimacy to educational qualifications. In essence, cultural capital is the relationship between individual agency and the influence and legacy of family and institutions. Such capital includes linguistic knowledge, speech patterns, conceptual knowledge, informal interpersonal skills, habits and manners and educational credentials so that cultural capital contains a mix of personal, social and academic elements.

Educational research, debate and critique rooted in Bourdieu's work (Kingston 2001; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Reay et al. 2001; Thomas 2002; Yosso 2005) has argued that educational institutions are not neutral establishments. Reay et al. (2001: 2) note, institutions are also slow to change as 'by dint of their collective nature are less fluid than individual habitus'. Habitus is the internalised mental structures through which an individual views and engages with the world (Bourdieu 1989) and is generally reproductive rather than transformative. This is not to say that individuals cannot change as through interaction with the norms, practices and rewards of an institution, expressed as institutional habitus. However, the concept of habitus implies that individual change is not easy. International students, arriving with their own particular cultural capital gained and ingrained over time, thus engage with their new higher level institution which has its own practices and expectations around teaching and learning. Where these fit into the existing institutional and disciplinary culture, a student achieves personal goals. Clearly, increased levels of student diversity imply a lack of such comfortable fit for some students leading to a gap in the relationship between parts of the student body and academics' expectations in the context of their higher level institution.

As a response to greater levels of student diversity, practitioner-led research has also emerged in the area of academic literacy (Lea 2004; Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 1997, 2003; Lillis and Turner 2001). In this case the response was to the numbers of 'non-traditional' students entering tertiary level education. As Lea (2004: 740) states, this work firstly drew on New Literacy Studies which grounded its methodological and theoretical frameworks in the fields of linguistics and social anthropology. This approach premises that reading and writing, hence literacies, are cultural and social practices, as opposed to the learning of a set of skills which are applicable across all contexts. Research in Academic Literacies is grounded in this perspective but concentrates on higher education, particularly on the gaps that exist between lecturer and student in relation to academic literacies. A university becomes a site of "discourse and power" with "the literacy demands of the curriculum involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines" (Lea and Street 1998: 159). In essence, this perspective relates to the acquisition of cultural capital in relation to institutional habitus.

Lea and Street (1998, 2006) have proposed an academic literacies model which consists of three overlapping theoretical perspectives: study skills, academic socialization and academic literacies. Of these the study skills approach takes the view that literacy, and writing, is an individual cognitive skill where the formal features of writing are learnt and easily applied across different contexts. Such features would typically be a focus on sentence structure, creating a paragraph and punctuation. The academic socialization model takes a more complex view of knowledge as being socially constructed and that

writing is a process of acculturation into a community of practioners in a particular discipline. A student acquires the discourse practices, that is, spoken and written discourse and the approved expression of thought in a discipline or subject. In effect it implies learning the underlying rules which govern such discourse, with some researchers moving towards a critical stance (Braine 2002; Canagarajah 2002; Ivanič and Camps 2001; Tang and John 1999). Academic socialization also relates to science subjects such as computer science or engineering (Duff et al. 2006; Holvikivi 2007). By implication such subjects may be removed from discourse on the sociocultural implications of academic literacy practices. However, Duff et al. (2006) hold the concept of plagiarism to be culturally constructed and so have academic implications for engineering students.

The third model, the academic literacies approach emphasises the role and influence of higher level institutions as it is:

Concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context … it views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes (Lea and Street 2006: 369).

For Lillis (1997: 191) this becomes a contested terrain around who one is, what one is allowed to say and how to say it so that students find it empowering not only to know the conventions, but also *how* to know. Lillis comments:

Student-writers are not familiar with what are often considered to be standard academic writing conventions, and the fact that they need to ask these questions many times, over the year, makes it clear that hearing or reading about the conventions on one occasion is not sufficient to enable them to understand, follow or challenge them (Lillis 1997: 187).

The process of transition to academic literacy takes time and requires reinforcement. If habitus is considered, then it is clear that this process involves considerable effort for the acquisition of such capital with challenges for international and home students alike. The academic literacies approach, allied with the concept of cultural capital in relation to institutional habitus offers a rich, innovative perspective through which to view the experiences of international students as part of a diverse body of students.

The Irish higher education context

The Irish Council for Overseas Students (ICOS) and Christle and Godley (2008) note the challenge of assembling a coherent picture of international students studying in Ireland. Information is found across a variety of sources, notably the annual statistics provided by the Higher Education Authority on international students by gender and domiciliary of origin and the complex set of data provided by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) which are also summarised by ICOS.[1]. Education Ireland (2010) has published a report on international students which again notes a difficulty with figures but provides the figure of 28,893 international students in higher education in Ireland in the 2009/10 academic year. The report states that two-thirds of all international students are found in the university sector and that they generated €151.4 million in income for the universities. The main countries of origin for international students in Ireland are: the USA, China, France, UK, Germany, Spain, Malaysia, India and Canada. 30% of international students study Humanities and 28% business related subjects so that the issue of academic literacies gains considerable significance in relation to these two discipline areas.

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[1] Available at: http://www.icosirl.ie/eng/student_information/student_statistics.

An international student here is a student whose home country is not Ireland but who studies in Ireland Dunne (2009: 222). Here, this deceptively straightforward categorisation includes students who may not have the 'traditional' difficulties of English as an additional language, such as students from the USA, but who do arrive in Ireland with cultural capital that has different aspects to their Irish peers. It also includes students who speak English across a range of formal contexts in their home countries, as in India, but where the local variety of English differs from the dominant discourse practices of Irish society. It can also refer to students from migrant families who speak another language at home as there are complex issues around residency in Ireland so that families who are resident discover that they have to pay international student fees for their children (Irish Times 2010). Overall, Irish higher education presents a complex picture of diversity where international students are considered as a minor group in relation to the 67% of Irish secondary students who go on to participate in higher education Education Ireland (2010: 2).

In the Irish context Cleary et al. (2009) note that writing support for the range of writing needs of the main student body has been on an *ad hoc* basis against a background of increasing recognition of its benefits. Academic literacy is an issue, however, that spreads beyond a designated group of 'international' students (Green 2007; Johnson 2008) and Larcombe and Malkin (2008) caution against considering that only international students would have academic writing needs and that institutions 'adopt measures that assess the communicative skills of all commencing students' (p 320). How then do academic staff and international students negotiate such practices when academic staff may also have received no training in developing their own academic literacy (O'Farrel 2005).

Methodology

A search for participants

Following approval by the university Ethics Committee, a questionnaire was circulated to selected academic staff across the university at intervals during semester 1 of the academic year with the aim of capturing disciplinary differences and practices (Becher 1994). There were 17 responses with 14 completed questionnaires; one stated that the research was not applicable and two specifically reported no experience as yet of students with English-language difficulties. Responses came from all the university faculties though not all the departments in the faculties are represented.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were carried out with undergraduate and postgraduate international students from all faculties in the university. The semi-structured format allowed for students to voice the concerns that were meaningful in their lives (Josselson and Lieblich 1993). Students were selected at random, and asked to contact others in a snowball effect providing a total of 22 interviewed students. Individual faculty departments are not identified in order to maintain strict confidentiality. All students were made aware of the nature of the research and its outputs from first contact and were sent the questions and consent form in advance of the interview for information purposes. The interviews were purposely not taped but notes were taken (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Sheridan and Storch 2009) as this made the process less intimidating and international student participants could speak candidly of their experiences and concerns.

Data analysis

Analysis of the data was from a constructivist grounded theory perspective (Charmaz 2006). Constant comparison of data and refinements allowed for refocusing of questions in consecutive interviews as international student participants began to lead discussion into new directions. Data was coded following Strauss and Corbin (1998: 5) including researcher experience with international students on campus. First, codes across the data were drawn into 12 categories; then sorted into three inter-linked conceptual areas: the academic, social and emotional aspects of international student transformation to a new environment. This approach highlighted the role of the institution, so pointing towards a widening of theoretical perspectives, as it drew out the nuances in the gap emerging between the institution of the university, academic staff and international students.

Limitations of the research

This is a small-scale study even though it adopts a cross-campus perspective. Collaboration with the research was also more heavily weighted to Humanities and Social Science students despite the fact that the greatest levels of diversity exist in other faculty areas. In addition, using a snowball sampling technique may easily have missed students. However, this project can provide the opportunity for further investigation.

Findings

Academic Staff perspectives: expectations and problems

The questionnaire results confirm the range of academic discourses that international undergraduate and postgraduate students are expected to use and the suitability of the literacies approach; they are listed in Table 1 in descending order of frequency. The first two on the list, namely the essay and the use of oral presentations were cited by virtually all respondents and this is an interesting finding in itself as international students have to be as confident in their spoken ability to convey their arguments as in their written expression for assessment purposes. There is an expectation of preparing for and interacting with different audiences: presentations can be made to peers or restricted to a panel of academics. Employing both verbal and written modes also indicates communication cannot be relegated entirely to an 'academic' sphere as oral presentations can contain jokes, anecdotes and references to contemporary culture. An international student's store of cultural capital will need rapid expansion to be able to understand, let alone deliver such discourse modes particularly if the institution favours an assimilationist perspective.

Table 1 List of academic discourses used in undergraduate and postgraduate courses

Long essay, oral presentations, individual research, group projects, individual project, problem-solving exercises, using the library, accessing databases for research, take lecture notes, use Moodle (virtual learning environment), write a research proposal, literature review, dissertation writing, interviewing in a qualitative context, questionnaire design and implementation, producing tables, producing graphs, lab experiments, lab report, writing a journal article, reflective journal, portfolio, contributing to Moodle news forums, seminar presentations, conference abstract, conference poster

Also, contained in some of these discourse modes such as a dissertation, a reflective journal or a portfolio, are explicit uses of either a personal or impersonal voice. These depend on context, again validating an academic literacies approach, and relate to negotiations around voice and interpretation. An academic staff respondent describes this as a balancing act which, at postgraduate level, includes "*playing with illusion of objectivity … with their subjective interpretation*". Such nuance and play with convention requires an immersion into the cultural practices of academic disciplines. These in turn may be assumed and understood as part of the institutional habitus accompanied by anecdotal evidence of student deficiencies. Returned questionnaires also contained general references to language difficulty and lecturers highlighted: grammar, vocabulary, writing style, inappropriate register in a formal text, a highly informal tone for e-mails. Finally, lecturers reported some students had problems understanding colloquial usage in lectures and seminars, potentially hinting at some distance of international students to sociocultural norms in everyday communication practices.

Programme expectations of undergraduate students are evident:

> Students should be able to effectively organise their own learning, that they have a reasonable standard of IT skills for Moodle, PowerPoint presentations, typing projects and dissertations and using the internet.

Coupled with such expectation of autonomous and academically literate learners in tune with academic literacy practices are numbers of international students:

> It is a very recent phenomenon to have more than a couple of non-native English-speakers on the _____ programme so their specific issues with writing have not been researched as of yet.

It may be inferred that international students are not spread evenly across disciplines and that an ad hoc approach would be taken depending on individual lecturer's interest and concerns.

The cross-campus approach reveals some differences in academic literacy practices across the faculties, evidence for the acculturation model referred to by Lea and Street (1998). It relates to referencing systems used, with both Chicago and Harvard mentioned, though the majority use Harvard or recommend it. One respondent noted that the choice was left up to individual students, a situation which could need clarification for all students. The questionnaire also reveals the range of academic or student support-led activity surrounding both academic and information literacies. For instance the referencing system in use is clarified for students through library information sessions, dissertation workshops, research methods modules, by individual lecturers and in some departments explicitly in student handbooks.

One outstanding matter has been concern with plagiarism and one lecturer states:

> There is huge cultural variation to what is considered 'plagiarism', this is often associated with authoritarian states, where students at undergrad level are effectively required to produce a very limited range of texts/views, but I find it is a wider problem and students can be unfairly penalized. This is why we go to such excessive lengths at the start of semester one on this issue.

Here there is clear sympathetic engagement with the type of issue that could arise with international students engaging with the discourse practices and conventions of their new learning environment. Overall, these findings indicate that there should be relatively few

issues of concern for international students from the academic staff perspective, an assumption challenged by findings from the interviews held with the 22 students.

The international student voice: differences in expectations and discourse practices

Firstly, the approachability and helpfulness of lecturers at the university was commended by the majority of students and is a very positive aspect of international students' experience. Additionally, all the students were aware of academic discourse practices in relation to plagiarism and referencing from workshops targeting international students. Also, students who had completed the university's Foundation Certificate course felt they had overcome many of the problems of new academic practices:

> No idea about the system … I was a little panic … Fortunately, I spent my first year in Foundation … [if] I didn't go through that process I'd be in a panic …Got used to system, to using the web, Moodle, exam regulations …

This student specifically refers to 'the system', to institutional and academic ways of knowing and doing, that is, with skills, acculturation and institutional habitus.

However, a level of mismatch emerges between staff expectations and the level of discourse skills students may actually have. For instance, there are students who are expected to write long essays, which features heavily as a discourse type in Table 1 whereas the home country education system may focus on examinations. This excludes experience of the writing process (Ferenz 2005) with the different stages of planning, drafting, editing and referencing as well as prior information literacy activity. Writing sustained pieces of prose that discuss complex ideas is challenging and creates underlying anxiety as the following statement indicates:

> I'm afraid my ideas is too naïve, I can't write a sentence that include my important ideas, it's difficult for me to do that, I have to think and think for one sentence so the progress is slow … I hope someone can help me, oral and writing, it's the most important … If I can't communicate with the other[s] fluently I can't express myself effectively and I'm afraid the other people don't know what I talking about … But I think communication problem is not just in academic but in general oral skill because it very difficult

This student exemplifies aspects of all three models contained in the academic literacies approach in relation to institutional habitus. The student has a level of skill, realises that more is needed and feels helpless in relation to the institution.

The voicing of such uncertainty or anxiety around the activity of academic writing is an important finding in this study. This student describes the *process* of adapting to write academically in a second language and struggling to find an academic 'voice' that can express complex meanings in the second language, in effect an academic literacies perspective.

Language matters entangled with academic literacy

Regardless of all existing training on offer, twenty out of the 22 interview participants considered that they still needed assistance with English. There was also the impression that a greater level of service could be provided given the level of fees international students pay:

I pay the full fee… I think it should be included … I think that there's not enough for the foreign students to get mixed, to help with the language, to improve my language, writing, reading, speaking

In support of this need, students employed a range of compensatory strategies regarding their academic writing which they acknowledged as being imperfect. As many felt that they could not afford to pay for assistance in addition to fees, findings include: asking someone at a part-time workplace to glance over a piece of written work, asking English-speaking friends or asking Irish students in the same module for similar assistance. Students in the study also encounter problems with note-taking and said they relied on lecture notes being placed on Moodle prior to a lecture so they can prepare by checking vocabulary beforehand.

Finally, from the interviews, it is clear that lecturers also comment on academic literacy matters:

If like I want to use a word but there are many similar words in English but I use the same word again and again Lecturer gave a mark and a comment better get somebody who speaks English to read it first

The consideration here is, however, not simply a matter of proof-reading a text but falls into the domain of becoming academically literate: a writer has to make conscious choices and have command of a range of expression. This point is missing in the interaction between the lecturer and the student. Also missing is the individual who could meet this student's needs so revealing a gap between student and institutional habitus. Consequently, language issues exist but do not lead to a formal solution being available at a point of need in the institution. Socialisation on campus could aid such development and this is discussed in the following section.

The intercultural classroom: mixed up in groups

From the interviews, undergraduates note some lecturers allow students to 'ghettoise' into cultural groupings in class:

All the international students sit in the front and all the Irish students sit in the back.

Students in the study had no desire to remain separate but point toward a desire for intercultural engagement:

Each semester we always have a group presentation … we prefer to be mixed up, we want to get ideas from different people … we're in Europe so it's good to get different ideas, it's better to be mixed up … I tend to like that international way

Inclusivity, that is, moving between the culture of origin and the new academic culture is desired and not resisted by the students in this study. They are aware of diversity but clearly not all lecturers are, as indicated by the uneven spread of such students across disciplines.

Working collaboratively in groups appears to present an opportunity for the development of inclusive practices which have the potential to benefit all students (Dunne 2009). However, group work surfaces as being more complicated than presenting a good opportunity for collaboration. Some international students in this study feel they put more effort into the work than other team members:

> I was grouped and I like the situation when you have projects, I like to do it on time … I tried to get everyone together … I ended up doing it alone and I put their names on but I was pissed off about it

Strong comments surfaced several times in relation to this issue. Irish peers also receive criticism as not being serious about their studies. Such perception also relates to friendship and the difficulty of crossing the border between being an 'international student' to being a 'student' on campus.

Integrating into university life: a holistic outcome

The students interviewed represent the mixed nature of the body of undergraduate and postgraduate international students: some are mature, some studying with families present and some are young students. However, almost all note difficulties of mixing with Irish students and with making Irish friends. Some older students are under pressure because of family concerns such as interpreting for spouses as well as feeling that they have to do everything precisely because of language pressures. Older students with families are also under different time constraints and may not be able to socialise because of domestic priorities such as childcare. A very small number do present positive friendships. In contrast, other students in the study experience isolation and struggle to widen their friendship group:

> The most difficult I think is the social activities in the university because I don't have any friend here, because after the class I nowhere to go … I think the social activity is important for a student because if they miss their country, their home, they won't feel comfortable, if they stay here I think this will affect their study

Unfortunately, the majority of the international students in this study state that they have found it difficult to make Irish friends beyond a superficial level and that their main source of friendships occurs either with compatriots or other international students which hinders their development of academic literacy by an absence of communicative interactions.

Though international students may not make friends on campus they do so in their place of work where they meet other Irish people as well as workplace diversity. However, students note the short–term nature of these friendships as Erasmus students stay for one semester and there is a high turnover of personnel in their workplace. Having to work to pay towards their upkeep can also cut across the process of joining clubs or taking part in other social activities:

> They can have enough time to join a club or society but we go to work … that is the difference

Annual fee increases also affect the social sphere and enjoyment of university life which becomes non-existent:

> No social life … not asking for social life …I really like what I'm doing … if the college can give me a little bit more space … I went to the canteen 2 years ago, lunch is €5, even a muffin is expensive … now I'm not having anything, I just go home for my dinner.

Such a situation fosters isolation and limits the opportunity to fully develop academic literacies through full participation in university life.

Conclusion

Peelo and Luxon (2007) consider that a holistic approach should be taken where skills are embedded in course content and that a cross-disciplinary approach is needed. Calls for collaboration also come from the professional librarian (Ishimura et al. 2007) with regard to information literacy and international students. However, the rich potential of cross-faculty collaboration may not arise as there are issues of territoriality or views that 'it does not apply' to take into consideration when approaching disciplinary cultural practices (Ylijoki 2000). However, academic literacy concerns all students. After consultation with academic staff, student support and students themselves, a whole-institution approach could result in co-ordination the timing of support mechanisms as well as retaining a flexible approach to specific points of need.

Student voices reveal engagement with all levels of the university: these affect the totality of their experience in terms of academic, social and emotional well-being. Again this points towards a consideration of a holistic approach to international students. Here, it would be useful to firstly consider them as part of the student body rather than as a group set apart. They too express such a desire in the classroom and this could be easily achieved by academics making sure that all work groups are representative of classroom diversity. Additionally, students questioned the level of fees they had to pay, particularly significant annual increases which made financial planning hard or impossible for those who abandoned studies: here they are indeed separate from their peers. This separation should also be acknowledged in the range of support services offered to international students. Students easily become aware of supports enjoyed by peers elsewhere through global friendship networks, a part of their cultural capital which can easily be overlooked by an institution.

Policies also need to be developed regarding academic and intercultural issues (before they occur) in relation to pre-existing ones regarding the equal treatment of all students. Internationalisation of the student body will continue as universities seek new talent and revenue from international student fees. Consequently, faculties will continue to experience the effect of diversity on campus, a situation which could lead to greater interfaculty cooperation across traditional disciplinary divides. Changing institutional habitus is a lengthy process, but in a globalised context home students can expect to work in increasingly diverse workplace environments; with migration flows, home students will increasingly include students who speak another language at home. Therefore, this study supports the whole institution approach to the management of student diversity. Otherwise, international, and other students, are left reliant on the interests and concerns of individual lecturers who may or may not have expertise in the area of academic literacies.

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