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ACADEMIC LANGUAGE, POWER *and the* IMPACT *of* WESTERN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION *on* INDIGENOUS STUDENT LEARNING

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◼ Abstract

This paper explores the prescriptive, distancing and separating qualities that exist in Western systems of knowledge production. It examines scientific language and how discrimination takes place in the university setting and explores the ways in which academic knowledge production affects the learning experiences, participation and completion rates of Indigenous students. It suggests improving teaching and learning strategies to enhance unacknowledged learning processes towards providing inclusive learning practices, and to strengthen educational outcomes for Indigenous students with the prospect of improving their completion rates at universities.

◼ Introduction

In academic knowledge production there is a "scientific" approach in which an observer assumes a distance and separation between self and subject. This position is influenced by and is derived from the invention of writing. The scientific language which prescribes, distances and separates is the language of the university. It has been suggested that writing and print are ways of making knowledge, of creating information and of objectifying "data" (Rollison, 1992, pp. 14-16). Writing, however, is not impartial; it is deeply imbued with meaning which creates opportunities for powerful groups to ensure that the unequal power relationship will be maintained through the use of academic language, writing and print. It is through these channels that the wielding of political power and social distancing will carry on. Because of the prescriptive nature of academic language, an inequitable situation will remain unless appropriate measures are put in place to change it.

There are two theoretical propositions put forward here to identify and clarify the elite nature of academic language and to provide a framework for examining how academic discourse works against Indigenous students in tertiary education. The first is Laurillard's (1993) theory that teaching in higher education is a rhetorical activity, that is, that the discipline within the university system rigorously controls and faithfully reproduces its own meaning which students are required to understand. Laurillard describes this rhetoric as the "language of the discipline" (Laurillard, 1993, p. 51). The second theory is that academic language determines status through wielding terminology that is complex and difficult to understand and is described as "high lexical" language (Corson, 1993). Such discourse creates a distance between academic knowledge production and the students who are required to understand it. These ideas are largely influenced by Michel Foucault's thinking on institutions. Foucault advocates the critical analysis of the machinations of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent (Caputo & Yount, 1993). The analyses of Laurillard and Corson offer an understanding of the inherent inequitable practices of

Western knowledge production in higher education institutions. In drawing out the elite features of academic discourse their analyses provide a framework for my search for a teaching and learning strategy to overcome the rhetoric, exclusivity, distancing and institutional violence present in high lexical language. In developing an inclusive strategic approach, my research has a twofold purpose. Firstly, it explores the role of study guides in upholding the rhetoric of academic discourse. It highlights the control of knowledge production that is present in study guides that claim to "assist" student learning but only reproduce and uphold the same rhetoric as the university. Secondly, it proposes the development of an inclusive teaching and learning strategy. My aim overall is to draw attention to the impact of Western knowledge systems on learning processes and outcomes for Indigenous students, to challenge the existing control of knowledge production and to develop an inclusive strategy for drawing in unacknowledged learning which will privilege the voices of Indigenous students and include their world views in university learning processes.

■ Teaching as a rhetorical activity

Laurillard's theory explores how much meaningful knowledge is actually generated in the academic sphere (Laurillard, 1993). It describes a process of teaching at the academic institution that is a rhetorical process which hinders, rather than facilitates student learning, by seeking to persuade students of an elaborated way of looking at the world they already know through their own experience. This "world view" if it is accessible might hold great potential for the learning process (1993, p. 51). One of the main issues addressed in this analysis of teaching as a rhetorical activity is how much "meaningful knowledge" is actually generated in the academic sphere. It maintains that the process by which understanding in learning occurs remains an impenetrable domain. In this approach, an emphasis is placed on the "private world of someone coming to an understanding of an idea" and examines how students arrive at an outcome (1993, p. 51). The study identifies a number of ways of finding out what happens during the cognitive process and by examining precisely what it is that happens during learning. This information is then related to the learning outcome. An approach which will allow a "deep level of description of what is happening" and meta-level monitoring was suggested but so far attempts fathom out what "understanding" is were not successful (1993, p. 51).

Laurillard identifies facets of learning such as apprehending structure, integrating parts, acting on the world, using feedback and reflecting on goals. These facets of learning are referred to as "key aspects" of an integrative whole. Most important to my study of the impact of Western knowledge production on Indigenous learning is the proposition that academic

learning involves not understanding the "world itself" but others' views of the world (Laurillard, 1993, p. 51). This kind of learning is often carried out at university through students attending lectures, from private reading sessions and during supervised discussion. In this context, and in most situations, it is usually the lecturer who articulates "knowledge" while the student remains a passive observer. In this way, the process of teaching at academic institutions is a rhetorical activity seeking to persuade students of an alternative or elaborated way of looking at the world they already know through experience (Laurillard, 1993, p. 51). To access knowledge, a student must first come to terms with, or pass through the complex linguistic barriers set up by the academic discourse of a discipline, all of which bear a specific meaning, and all of which must be interpreted in a predetermined way – this is the language of the discipline. To achieve the level of knowledge required, students must firstly understand the implicit structure of the discourse. This concealed *agenda* or *language* of the discipline *must* be understood for effective learning to take place (Laurillard, 1993, p. 51). Phenomenographic studies which focus on content and meaning have identified the "deep" and "surface" modes of understanding in the process of learning. The "deep" approach is where students look for "meaning" and the surface approach where the student perceives key words or phrases. For deep learning to take place, however, the language of a discipline must be understood (Laurillard, 1993, p. 51). Given the exclusive and distancing nature of academic language how likely is it that students will experience the more desirable kind of "deep" learning as described above?

■ Power, institutional violence and academic language

The second theoretical approach in examining the impact of Western knowledge productions on Indigenous student learning is Corson's model which examines the ways in which political violence is wielded in institutions and how high lexical language may be used to distance and change the status of people. In this approach, academic language is regarded as a "high status determinant" which wields complex vocabularies and discriminates against speakers of a non-dominant language (Corson, 1993). It is suggested that though institutions appear to be neutral they use language to determine status. This is especially true of educational institutions where there is a powerful wielding of complex vocabularies. Corson claims that such complex vocabularies and high lexical usage operate exclusively, and they discriminate against speakers of a non-dominant language. Moreover, high lexical use is difficult to investigate systematically, unlike racist and sexist terminology. However, these vocabularies are used extensively in higher education

and there is a need to bring about a change in the power relationship in the university by finding ways around the use of academic language as a distancing agent. Corson suggests that there is a clear boundary drawn between everyday and high status vocabularies and that the use of high status language can mean the difference between educational success and failure (Corson, 1993). This issue is even more pertinent to the academic sphere of Indigenous students who face many difficulties in tertiary education (Christie, 2006, p. 78; Howard, 1992; Malezer, 1993; Martin, 2003, p. 2; Nakata, 2003, p. 8).

The process of understanding the language of the discipline will cause problems for all students but the challenge will be even more difficult to overcome for Indigenous students and non-English speaking students unless adequate interventions are put in place to challenge or overcome the problem. Academic knowledge, must be available, must be learned and must be articulated so that students may competently argue, test and improve their knowledge. Because academic knowledge is essentially knowledge through description, it follows that action on that knowledge has to be in the form of further descriptions using language or symbols, or manipulations of language and symbols. The actions are entirely contained in the use of language or other forms of representation. This is the reason why written examinations are the preferred form of assessment of knowledge (Laurillard, 1993, p. 51). Knowledge, it seems, must be rigorously controlled, but are examinations an accurate reflection of students' understanding, and in view of this evidence is a formal examination an appropriate way for Indigenous students to communicate the extent of their knowledge?

■ Academic language, writing and institutional violence

The paradox that exists in academic learning is well illustrated by the rhetoric of Western knowledge systems that is present in student study guides. Manuals for writing may assist with formal *presentation* of students' work but as an aid to *understanding* or *knowledge* they are less useful. Too many guides suggest that though our thoughts are transmitted by speech at university, most thinking is carried out through writing, with the essay as the most important form of writing. Summarising this outlook is E. M. Forster's view of "how do I know what I've thought until I see what I've written" (cited in Clanchy & Ballard, 1981, p. 3). Students are not novelists. It is likely that they do know what they are thinking but the available avenues to communicate their thoughts are narrow and writing is a rigid structure which restricts communication. While speaking is an important form of communication, within the rhetorical confinements of the academy, an emphasis upon linguistic "understanding" also means less *control* of learning. In the business of learning, if a

student "understands" and can communicate the basis of such "understanding" then is it always necessary to communicate that understanding in a written form? What measures may be taken to improve the process of understanding? The academic preference for high lexical rhetoric ensures that this situation will continue because there is far less control over speaking than there is over writing. It is proposed that "it is by writing, even more than speech, that you actually master your material and extend your own understanding" (1981, p. 3). Many of the issues raised in study guides resound with the academic rhetoric described by Laurillard and Corson, for example, "a good place to start might be to find out what your lecturer really expects you to produce in your essay" (1981, p. 3). How useful is it to know what your lecturer is thinking? How much "deep learning" is taking place if students have to reproduce what they think is required? Is this kind of learning actually inhibiting the process of "understanding" by placing restrictions upon the levels of communication and knowledge? It is recommended that students "read with a questioning mind" (1981, p. 3). How can a student "question" or read with a "questioning mind" when "learning" is already prescribed? The object of knowledge is a fortress armored with linguistic obstacles and the journey to knowledge is difficult with the student first having to slay the dragon of "having to know what you think your teacher wants you to know" before they reach the destination of acquiring knowledge. Is it encouraging students to achieve deep learning when they are asked to write an essay they are faced with having to relate a body of information to make it match with what the student thinks a teacher wants *before* they can begin to think, speak or write?

The levels of *understanding* are already prescribed by the restrictions of academic discourse. The journey between the abstract "thought" and the concrete "word" is long and complex and this "journey" is often taken without the knowledge of the facilitator and there are few guides to assist students to grapple with an effective transition from thought to word. The emphasis is always made on writing. The permanence of writing as a memory aid, and for preserving a logical argument make writing an important tool in the world of learning but it is not necessarily the *only* way of communicating knowledge, neither is writing the most appropriate way of effecting communication and knowledge in academic institutions.

▨ The impact of Western knowledge production on Indigenous students' completion rates

Indigenous students, when they attend university make an acknowledgment to some extent of the values of that institution and they may find themselves at cross-purposes with their "world view" the minute they engage in tertiary level education (Malezer, 1993). It has been suggested that in order to challenge the

practices of colonial, Western worldviews and the inherent knowledges, methods, morals and beliefs. Indigenist research must "decolonise existing colonial, western research practices" (Martin, 2003, p. 2). It would be useful to extend this Indigenist perspective to teaching and learning processes in university. In spite of the research carried out and the many changes implemented in higher education, the situation remains complicated for Indigenous students. While the intake of Indigenous students into university programmes continues to rise, the completion rates are less successful. For example, research demonstrates that between 1989 and 2001 the figures of Indigenous students in higher education have doubled and between 1996 and 2001 there was a 15.8% rise (DEST, 2002, p. 9). However, the rising number of Indigenous students experience lower progress and completion rates than their non-Indigenous peers (DEST, 2002, p. 10). The study found that although improving access for Indigenous students has improved, the completion rates of Indigenous students are poor when compared with the non-Indigenous students. One of the 10 points recommended to improve equitable and appropriate outcomes for Indigenous education is the suggestion of "incorporating Indigenous knowledge and practice into mainstream education" (DEST, 2002). In view of this finding, one way to include Indigenous knowledge and practice would be to challenge the use of complex high lexical language which is by nature not inclusive and is not conducive to producing equitable and appropriate outcomes for Indigenous students. Despite the implementation of various long-standing Indigenous student support programs, Indigenous student completion rates have declined. Strategies to overcome the restrictions of academic language have not yet been implemented at universities where policy change is difficult to achieve. It is clear that there is more to be done to incorporate teaching and learning strategies to overcome the problems of the distancing effects of academic language to improve Indigenous student retention and completion rates.

▓ Strategies to draw in unacknowledged learning

Some potential ways for improving the academic experience for students and for improving completion rates might include a review of teaching and learning processes to consider a step in between thinking and writing to facilitate the process of student learning more efficiently, by taking into account the rhetorical nature of academic language. One way to achieve this would be to implement small-scale consultations with Indigenous students to support teaching and learning processes with individual learning programs and a personal development initiative throughout the term of the degree. The formulation and application of inclusive linguistic strategies of teaching and learning to improve the flow of the communication of knowledge between

student and academic holds some potential to access more efficiently the world view of Indigenous students and for teasing out the "unacknowledged learning" potential of each student. The flow of communication between the facilitator and the student would be enhanced further by the introduction of small-scale consultation with students where discussion and a range of techniques to surmount the difficulties of academic language might be implemented through the creation of an individual learning and personal development plan tailored to the needs and learning style of each student. The small seminars and group discussions facilitate an improvement in the flow of academic language between student and teacher with tape recordings of discussions of small group sessions. Experimentation with "speak-and-write" as opposed to "think-and-write" teaching and learning processes will replace private study. In this context, knowledge may be shared and constructed "orally", as opposed to "privately" and written individually. This process may be a mediatory step towards the formalisation of what is understood, spoken and communicated, as opposed to understood but miswritten and hence misunderstood (Zoellner, 1993). The small group discussions and the use of tape recordings of these sessions will help to reduce the distancing effects of academic language – a process which begins in formal lectures. This method of facilitating student learning will enable Indigenous students to express their understanding "orally" by allowing their own individual "world view" to emerge. By accessing an Indigenous student's "world view" it is more likely that a facilitator will gain a better understanding of how Indigenous students observe the world of learning. This approach holds some potential to address some of the difficulties and the outcome would be likely to empower students and encourage students to continue and complete their studies.

▓ Conclusion

It is clear that further change is required at the intersections of Indigenous knowledge and the Western knowledge systems of the academy if Indigenous students are to complete their studies successfully. This paper has briefly explored the use of high lexical language, power and academic rhetoric as it is experienced in teaching and learning processes in the tertiary education sector and its effects on Indigenous students. If language is a vehicle which may manipulate and change power relations between people through the language of academic discourse, then through increasing awareness of the "world views" of students and through enhanced teaching and learning processes which take these views into account, it may be possible to change the function of academic discourse to provide more effective and inclusive forms of communication. These changes will have to take place within the academic system if

it is to be inclusive and if appropriate outcomes for Indigenous students are to be achieved. It is clear that more assistance is required if students are to transcend the problems posed by the use of high lexical language in university.

It has been suggested that "anything that assists Indigenous students to use language to understand and give expression to their position, their view of the world" is useful (Nakata, 2003, p. 15). If appropriate learning outcomes are to be achieved, universities and educators have not only to attend to the outcomes presented by political violence and implicit racism wielded by academic discourse, but also be aware of the rhetoric of high lexical language present in academic discourse that functions as a determinant of success or failure in tertiary education. As it stands, Indigenous students suffer the consequences, and while they appear to be failing at university studies, the reality is that universities are failing Indigenous students.

◼ Acknowledgements

◼ References

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