

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND LEARNING SUCCESS PROGRAM

Academic Culture

Aim:

1. to recognise formal learning cultures in different contexts and/or countries
2. to explore the different learning cultures, identifying elements of Australian university culture
3. to discuss some strategies to help you make a transition to university life here at CDU.

Reflection 1: What is academic culture?

Students at CDU come from diverse backgrounds and studying at this university may be very different from your previous experience of learning at school, in the workplace or overseas.

Compare and contrast some of the academic cultures you have experienced.

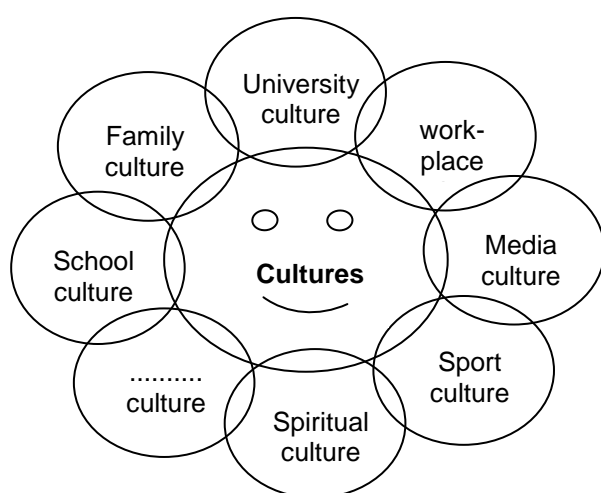
1. Write a comment in the middle column of the table below to describe your experience of academic culture.
2. After you have worked through this document, return to this table and make notes in the last column to reflect what you have learnt about the differences in academic culture in an Australian or other Western university.

Expectations, beliefs and values	Your experience of academic culture	Academic culture in an Australian or other Western university
1. Academic freedom: Freedom to teach or communicate ideas or facts as part of your education without fear of repression, job loss or imprisonment.		
2. Critical thinking: The capacity to question, challenge and evaluate information.		
3. Making comments and asking questions in class and on Learnline discussion boards.		
4. Disagreeing with the lecturer's or author's opinion.		
5. Making appointments to talk to your lecturer or tutor about study related matters.		
6. Using referencing in academic writing (acknowledging and giving credit to another author's work).		
7. Independent learning (the ability to research, discover knowledge, develop new skills and fulfil your study commitments).		
8. Life-long learning is encouraged.		

Expectations, beliefs and values	Your experience of academic culture	Academic culture in an Australian or other Western university
9. Learning and applying new knowledge.		
10. Learning is considered to be empowering to the individual as well as the community.		
11. Transmission of new knowledge by publishing research results.		

Thinking about our cultures

There are many cultures that influence us



Each culture has a set of beliefs, values, practices, rituals, language and artefacts that identifies and typifies that particular culture.

Each culture is dynamic, learned and transmitted.

Which of these cultures has been most influential in shaping you as a learner?

(Silburn, 2008)

Sharing our experiences of formal learning cultures

Each of us has a diverse set of learning experiences. Much of our learning is informal, such as when we learned to ride a bicycle, prepare a meal or use a photocopier, and we may have learned them through trial and error, by following instructions, or from family, friends and others in our personal or professional community. More formal learning might include professional development in the workplace, community college courses in an area of interest such as photography, competency based courses such as operating a forklift or university.

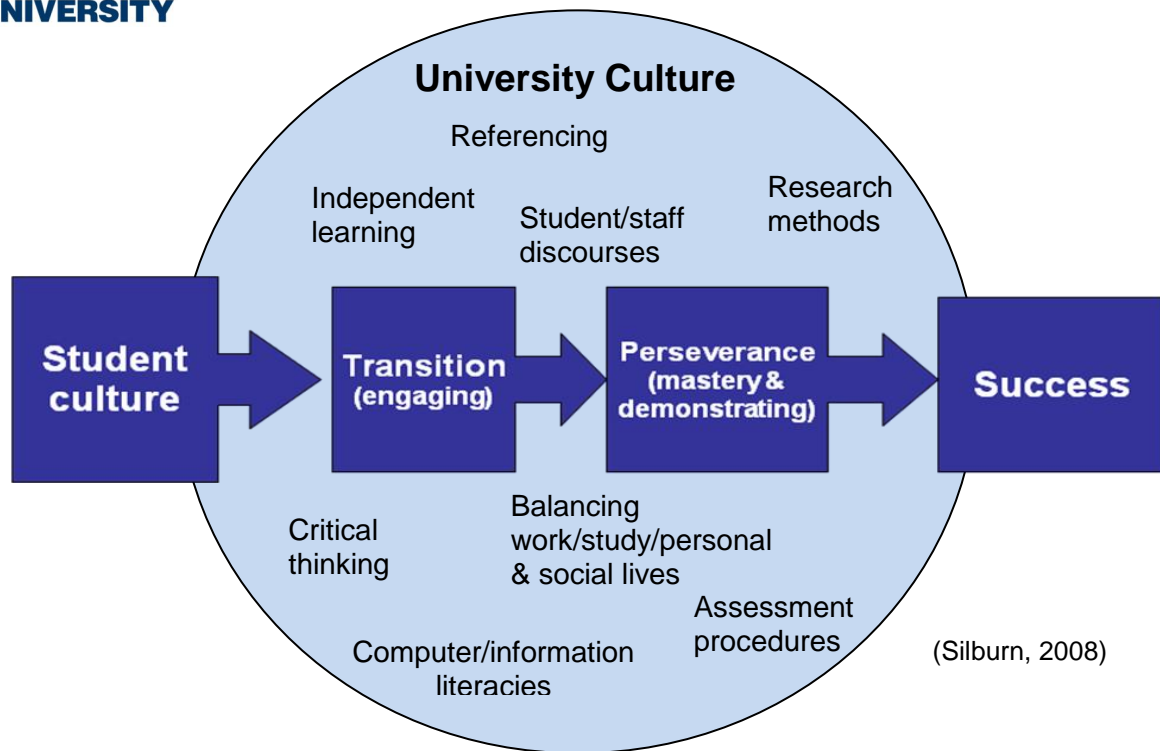
Formal academic culture has certain conventions, ways of doing things, rules and expectations for those who enter it. Academic culture varies in different contexts and countries.

Reflection 2: About yourself

1. Where you are from? If you are from another country, how long have you been in Australia?
2. What are you studying?
3. Have you been to university before, here or in your own country?
4. If not university, what other formal learning have you undertaken?

New students have to learn new knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and ways of behaving, that is, they have to learn a new academic culture (Brick, 2006).





Students will bring their culture and experience to university. As they engage with Australian university culture and make the transition into university culture, persevering to master western academic skills and demonstrate their understanding of their discipline through their assignments and discussions, they will gain success. The minimum level of success involves passing assignments by fulfilling assignment tasks and exams to enable a pass in the unit by satisfying some, if not all, the elements in the bubble above. Optimal success is to be gain high competency in the areas detailed in the bubble above, which requires a good understanding of and participation in western academic culture.

In an Australian university culture you attend lectures and tutorials, sometimes in an online classroom, participate in other activities such as online discussion forums, conduct research, do extra reading, complete assignment tasks and submit work for assessment as an independent learner or in groups. Most importantly, you are expected to think critically, form your own opinions on issues and support them with proof.

There are many different disciplines within academic culture, for example, health sciences, environmental science, creative arts, business, engineering and education.

Reflection 3

1. Do you think that all disciplines share the same cultures?
2. What can we do to bridge the gap between the different cultural experiences and contexts?

Bridging the gap

In order to reach your study goals, you need to understand and comply with the conventions, rules and expectations of Australian university academic culture. Based on your understanding of the sections of this document that you have covered so far, insert the word in the gap that most ,....?

What can students do to increase their success at university?

1. Attend _____ and _____ on campus and online.
2. Have productive _____ and _____ with peers in class, online and on discussion boards.
3. Interact with support staff, for example, _____, _____, _____, IT Helpdesk and on Learnline.
4. Participate in _____ - _____ activities such as university sports teams, social clubs and BBQs.
5. Use _____ resources (online resources including library resources).
6. Think of the university as a _____ you belong to, not just as a campus or website you visit, or as course you are doing.

Activity: Scenarios and strategies

Look at these scenarios and think of how each person could make the transition to academic culture in an Australian university easier.

What can this person do to become familiar with and be active in Australian academic culture?

Scenario A:

Josie has qualified and worked as a nurse for almost 30 years. She left school at the age of 16 and trained on-the-job. Now she is upgrading her qualifications and although she gained Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) to enter her course, she has never written an academic essay at tertiary level, has very basic computing and word processing skills, has not studied using online course sites such as Learnline before, and is not familiar with twenty-first century library databases. She has completed some professional development workshops in the past, is used to teamwork in her profession and is managing a busy schedule.

Scenario B:

Ric, aged 25, has just arrived in Australia to study and has been here 2 months. In his home country, students listened quietly in class and were expected to absorb and memorise the knowledge taught by the lecturer, hence, Ric has great memory and recall skills. Students who questioned the teacher and/or literature were considered disrespectful. There were very few computers available to students and internet connections were very rare. Ric has worked part-time for many years and has good time management skills.

Scenario C:

Matthew has just completed high school. He is confident using computers for many tasks such as word processing, social networking on Facebook and playing multi-user online games. He also loves exploring new apps on his mobile phone. At high school, if he didn't attend a class or complete his assignments, school staff would contact his parents to check on why he was absent. Also, if seen outside a classroom during class time, teachers usually told him to go to his class. He is used to googling when he needs to research a topic and has never searched large library databases such as those found at university.

Scenario D: Your scenario: write a brief description of your situation

What can you do to become familiar with and be active in Australian academic culture?

Scenario A: possible responses

Experience & Challenges	Resources & Solutions
Josie probably finished her nursing training in the late 1970s. Students who trained around this time were expected to do what they were told, never to question teachers or authority, and to obey the many rules for behaviour and dress code. Computers and internet were not available. Assessment was mostly through exams or demonstrating competence to an assessor in the hospital.	As an adult learner, Josie is expected to manage much of her own learning: getting to lectures, scheduling study time, asking questions and seeking assistance when needed. Her long professional experience has helped her develop time management skills and the ability to identify and get the help she needs to perform her duties.
Hospital training, learning on-the-job in an apprenticeship model with more experienced colleagues, would have started with simple, basic tasks and assisting or observing experts doing more complex, critical tasks. Assessment was mostly through exams and demonstrating real work competence to an assessor. Josie could attend ALLSP workshops and read academic texts to become familiar with these skills.	She may be used to concise, specialist reporting at work, but will need to learn about and develop academic writing skills, for example, essay structure and format, academic sentences and paragraph construction, editing strategies, critical analysis, effective reading and note making skills and referencing skills. Josie could attend ALLSP workshops and read academic texts to become familiar with these skills.
Medical technology and computer based record keeping has changed a lot over the years. Early in the apprenticeship she would not have been encouraged to challenge authority/senior colleagues, but probably would have been able to ask questions when she needed help or answers. Writing tasks would have involved keeping patient records, filling in forms and other operational tasks. Josie's studies are reliant on her computing and internet skills to succeed.	Josie could undertake any training available to develop the skills she needs, for example, tutorials on searching library databases and using Learnline. She should also attend Academic Language and Learning Success Program (ALLSP) academic writing workshops.
She will have access to her professional work colleagues as she is still working part-time.	Josie should also into her professional work networks, especially if she is studying externally.

Scenario B: possible responses

Experience & Challenges	Resources & Solutions
Ric is very new to Darwin and may not have any friends or family here. He will probably feel lonely and not know where to go to do or buy certain things he wants and needs.	It would be a good idea for Ric to go to the CDU International Support Services to see what services are specifically available for international students who have 'away from home' issues. Ric could also go to the Darwin Visitor Information Centre to gather information about Darwin and its facilities, shops and events.
Ric will bring his academic culture and habits with him to Australia and to his studies. His great memory and recall skills will benefit him greatly. However, in Australia, students are expected question literature and participate in classroom and online discussions.	Ric needs to participate in tutorial discussions and not hesitate to ask his tutors questions when he doesn't understand something related to his readings and assignments. This may be uncomfortable for him at first as it will be new to him but practice will increase his confidence and ability. Ric could attend ALLSP workshops to practice discussion skills.

The academic writing style or requirements in Ric's home country may be very different to what is expected in Australia. If Ric does not follow academic writing requirements in Australia, he will have a high risk of failing his assignments. Ric's good time management skills will help him to manage his study and life commitments

In order to avoid failing assignments because of poor academic writing, Ric could learn about academic writing requirements and develop academic language skills. He should attend workshops conducted by ALLSP to develop skills in essay structure and format, academic sentences and paragraph construction, editing strategies, critical analysis, effective reading and note making skills and referencing skills. It is also a good idea to read academic work to become familiar with academic style.

Ric is disadvantaged with his lack of computer skills as students are required to submit assignments online and participate in online discussion boards.

To develop the computer skills necessary for tertiary studies, Ric needs to ask fellow students to show him some basic skills. He could also access the many free tutorials available online or buy a 'teach yourself' book from a book shop such as 'Computers for Dummies'.

Scenario C: possible responses

Experience & Challenges

At high school, Matthew's teachers monitored his attendance and reminded him of assignment deadlines. Hence, Mathew is not used to managing his lecture and assessment schedules.

Using Google and Wikipedia for research might be useful for gaining an overview or foundational knowledge of his course and its topics but his lecturers expect him to locate authoritative, academically credible sources from library databases and from approved texts such as journal articles, books (online or hard copy) and authoritative websites and organisations.

Collaborating and communicating with people online is a valuable skill, so he may already have confidence and be comfortable with both reading and writing on the internet. He may already have a blog and invite comments from friends and others who share his interests. Online games often require effective teamwork to achieve difficult goals, so his leisure time activities will have given him some excellent advantages. He may have built a good social network this way.

At school and in his home community, Matthew had a strong social network of family and friends. He has moved to a new town and, apart from feeling lonely, can't tap into the support and resources he is used to.

Resources & Solutions

Matthew will need to develop his self-directed study habits and the skills needed to succeed as an independent learner.

He will need to learn to locate scholarly sources and use appropriate referencing techniques. In order to do this, he will need to download the CDU referencing guides. He could do library tutorials and ask librarians for help until he feels confident. He could also do an ALLSP referencing workshop and make appointments with ALLSP lecturers for the first few assignments in his course.

He should be able to transfer his skills and confidence with online collaboration and communication to any group work activities required in his units, such as posting to a wiki, keeping a reflective journal and working with others to achieve a task/goal. However, he may not be used to composing academic style posts which need to address specific academic tasks or questions. He should explore some examples and check the lecturer's guidelines and announcements before he posts on unit sites.

He could actively join in the tutorial discussions and extra-curricular social activities so he can start to build new social and professional networks. He can also maintain his previous social ties through the internet.

Possible responses to Bridging the gap, fill in the gap activity.

What can students do to increase their success at university?

5. Attend lectures and tutorials on campus and online.
6. Have productive discussions and interaction with peers in class, online and on discussion boards.
7. Interact with support staff, for example, those in Academic Language & Learning, Support & Equity, Library staff, IT Helpdesk and on Learnline.
4. Participate in extra-curricular activities such as university sports teams, social clubs and BBQs.
5. Use learning resources (online resources including library resources).
6. Think of the university as a community you belong to, not just as a campus or website you visit, or as course you are doing.

List of helpful services

- Advocacy Officer (for disagreement with grades received): advocacy@cdu.edu.au
- Darwin Visitor Centre: info@tourismtopend.com.au or (08) 8927 7071
- Equity Services: equity@cdu.edu.au or (08) 8946 6288
- Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS): tracy.santiago@cdu.edu.au or (08) 8946 6479
- International Student Support: vibeke.foss@cdu.edu.au (08) 8946 6288

References:

Brick, J. (2006). *Academic culture: A student's guide to studying at university*. Sydney: Macquarie University.

Silburn, J. (2008). *University Culture*. Perth. WA: Murdoch University, Teaching and Learning Centre.