In their own words: A practical guide to helping the migrants in your TAFE class based on the experiences of successful migrant students.

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May 1999
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Annette Sharma
Edited by Marie Zuvich

Canberra Institute of Technology 1999
Firstly I would like to thank my colleagues at the Canberra Institute of Technology, especially Marie Zuvich, Lyn Singleton, Rhonda Daniell and Mary Miles. They have encouraged and supported me through this particular project as well as in my work for migrant students at CIT over the last three years.

I would also like to thank Steve Foote from the Canberra Institute of Technology for helping to organise the printing and publishing of these materials. And Gosia Orzechowska, a graphic design graduate of the CIT, who designed the front cover and general layout.

Tan Le, Young Australian of the Year, 1998, deserves special acknowledgement for giving freely and generously of her time in what was an exceedingly busy year for her.

These materials would not have been possible without the cooperation of the migrant students who put aside time to participate in interviews and to write their perceptions of studying in Australia whilst coping with demanding study schedules. It is an indication of their faith in the need for materials such as these that they did so. Many thanks to Elvira, Pradeepa, Lilia, Magaly, Van, Thien, Jaicy, Yang and Lulu.

Finally a huge thank you to my wonderful family whose support for and belief in my work allowed me to spend so many hours on refining these materials.

Annette Sharma

May 1999
When I first arrived in Australia as a refugee at the age of four, there was:

• a sense of welcome,
• a sense of people in the community wanting us to succeed and
• a community that valued our contribution.

This set the scene for a future which I created with the same positive attitude. For many students, entering the TAFE system is like a ‘second migration’ to a new learning environment and these three essential elements are just as crucial to a positive start and to their success.

Unfortunately, cuts in education funding and, more recently, racist attacks have meant that support work in this area is often viewed as an unnecessary luxury and migrant needs have been reduced to the narrow field of language proficiency. These materials open a window in the mind and offer a refreshing understanding of the migrant experience in education, expanding and exploring the real needs of migrants as mature learners with a great deal to offer our society.

We need to document and explore some of the most crucial determinants of success of migrant students through their eyes and to ensure that this wisdom is passed on. These materials do just this and represent a comprehensive and insightful manual for teachers and students alike ensuring that every student who feels a victim in this new environment can become a survivor and more importantly a victor!
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Experience with academic support was revealing a growing number of migrant students who were failing assessments or experiencing frustration at the prolonged periods of time required to succeed in assessments despite their having adequate levels of English proficiency. And for those students who were managing to succeed it was becoming apparent that the main determinants of success included:

- a clear understanding of the underlying cultural expectations of the course and their teachers
- knowledge of appropriate strategies to fulfil these expectations
- an environment where these strategies could be modelled by and practised with a support teacher
- the confidence, motivation and time management skills to implement these strategies.

Success was not therefore purely a matter of language proficiency. Failure did exist within the parameters of proficient language ability. The skills that were determining success outside language proficiency were not only largely undefined but also disappearing as a bank of understanding with each successful student who graduated from TAFE.

In 1997, funded and supervised by the Student Equity Officer for Migrants at the Canberra Institute of Technology, I set out to discover what these determinants of success were so that they could be recorded and shared with new migrant students at TAFE. Focus groups were run with ten successful migrant students who were in their final stages of diploma courses at CIT. Their cultural backgrounds varied from South East Asian to Latin American and Northern European, and their courses included Information Technology, Civil Engineering and Office Administration. Students were also asked to complete a questionnaire, write freely about their experiences of studying in a different educational culture and take part in both individual and group interviews which were taped.
To add further to our understanding, I interviewed an extremely successful migrant student, Tan Le, Young Australian of the Year (1998). A transcript of this interview is included.

These materials have been designed to be used by classroom TAFE teachers, by academic support staff and counsellors, and by TAFE students whose first language is other than English. This package is therefore divided into sections, each with an introduction outlining the intended audience and suggestions for use.

So as to avoid any confusion, I have defined the following terms as I have used them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support teacher</td>
<td>One who is involved in academic or language support or counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teacher</td>
<td>The subject teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant student</td>
<td>Migrant &amp; refugee students whose first language is other than English. However many of the issues &amp; strategies dealt with in this package could equally apply to international students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spend a few minutes walking in my shoes

...a visualisation exercise to increase understanding of how many of our migrant students experience the Australian TAFE system.

**Intended audience:**

teachers, counsellors, anyone who is interested in “experiencing” our education system through different eyes.

**Suggestions for use:**

personal reading for TAFE staff; staff diversity training.
Section 1: Spend a few minutes walking in my shoes

I’d like you to consider a scenario for a moment keeping in mind that all the events described are drawn from real life experiences of students who I have worked with. Imagine yourself in this situation. You have been awarded a prestigious scholarship designed to enhance cross-cultural understanding of tertiary teachers and you will be attending a large university in central Thailand. You are competent in the Thai language and all that is required is for you to successfully complete two years of study and write a report. Your family will accompany you.

At the beginning of the course you are issued with a textbook and, after three weeks of commencing, you sit your first exam. To your horror you find questions in Thai which read:

"Which of the following statements is an exact quote from your textbook?" and

"On what page of your textbook does this quote occur?"

You had no idea the system was so different and you fail. You have never failed a major test in your life. You have always prepared well and excelled in exams.

You are shocked not only because you had no idea you would have such questions but also because you fail to see how this style of assessment could be of any value to the students or teacher. You decide there must have been a misunderstanding and put more effort into the next assessment task, but you still fail. You approach the teacher to clarify the situation but the teacher doesn’t seem to share your concern or understand what you’re trying to clarify. Subsequent meetings with the teacher seem to reinforce an image in the teacher’s mind that you lack intelligence. You now avoid contact.

You discover that there are other Australian students in another class, so you decide to change classes. You are keen to discuss the vastly different style of learning but to do this at the required speed and with the required level of sophistication you need to speak in English during class. The teacher becomes concerned that you are not developing the necessary language skills and repeatedly moves you away from the Australian students to a group of high achieving Thai students in the hope of assisting you. You sense that the group of Thai students resent this as it slows them down. When you work with the Australian students exclusively, the class appears irritated as it is a generally known fact that you are in Thailand to learn the culture. You continue to fail assessments. Even though you understand better what is required, you just can’t develop strategies for memorising such large slabs of information.

The teacher strongly recommends that you improve your Thai language skills. You join a support class even though it is difficult to fit in the extra hours, given your family demands and the extra time you are spending in memorising your textbook. You notice that many people in the class seem much younger than you and also do not have your educational
background. This worries you. You have worked with literacy students in Australia and while you consider yourself extremely tolerant, you can't help feeling offended that you also are being categorised as unskilled as a result of your poor academic performance.

Your language skills improve but you still struggle with your mainstream course and the amount of time it draws from your personal life. Tensions build at home and your health is suffering, constant headaches and colds plague your progress. Your self esteem is plummeting for the first time in your life. During a class you find your emotions lead to uncontrollable crying. You are comforted by the teacher and referred to the counsellor. You are now beginning to doubt your mental and emotional stability for the first time. You also feel anxious because you have never had to handle this type of problem.

On the news the next morning you hear that hundreds of people have been killed in a natural disaster in southern Thailand and your first thought is that you wish your classroom teacher had been visiting that particular location at the time. Suddenly you are intensely aware of the depth of anger and frustration that you have and how you have projected it onto the classroom teacher who is continually failing your assessments. You try to assess the situation rationally but you feel that the teacher is victimising you and deliberately making it difficult for you to pass.

Pause for a moment and ask yourself—what type of student service would be required to assist you in this transition? Would an editing service be of great value at this point?

You decide to ask the other Australian students how they manage and are referred to a TSL (Thai as a Second Language) teacher. You cannot afford to spend any extra time on your studies but decide to give it one last go. To your surprise you are given:

• precise information on the differences between the two learning styles (Australian & Thai)
• an opportunity to develop principles (through interactive activities) which allow you to structure information appropriately
• explanations from a cultural perspective as to why it is structured in this way
• strategies to accelerate the development of necessary skills an opportunity to practise these strategies on a one-to-one basis.

Everything starts to make sense and for the first time you have passed an assessment with relatively little effort.

After a period of time you find that information and skills acquired in Australia can be incorporated into your course to your delight and that of your teacher and the other students.
Your respect for this particular learning environment has increased markedly along with your ability to use specific skills in this context. You realise that your teacher was keen to see you achieve and the exaggerated impressions were due to stress.

A TSL coordinator decides to set up a support program to support NTSB (non Thai-speaking background) students to avoid the prolonged period of frustration and misunderstanding for them. Early intervention is introduced to bridge the divide between the cultures and coordinate access to assistance.

You are asked to produce materials on the difference between Australian and Thai styles of learning to benefit other Australian Scholarship holders. This instils a sense of pride in your ability to function successfully in two vastly different modes of learning and to utilise your existing skills.
The nine stages of transition

...a detailed explanation of the nine stages that migrant students can pass through in coming to terms with a different educational culture.

Intended audience:

teachers, academic support staff, counsellors.

Suggestions for use:

background reading; material for staff development.
Section 2: The nine stages of transition

As a result of interviewing and working with successful students we were able to identify nine stages which appeared to be common to the experience of many students. We were also able to articulate the dynamics of each stage and some strategies to assist students to progress through each stage. An understanding of these stages fundamentally altered our teaching approach and led to distinctive teaching strategies which have been included in these materials.

Naturally, not all students experience all the stages and students often report that even when they have transcended one stage, a trigger can often send them back to an earlier stage for a period of time. The time scale also varies greatly with some students progressing through to the final stage in a matter of months and some students remaining in a stage of denial for a number of years.

To discuss the nine stages I am relying on a modern day metaphor of a computer system. I do this, not because I feel it realistically represents the incredibly versatile processes of human learning, but because it can act as a tool to discuss aspects of a process which has no specific vocabulary that I am familiar with. I am fully aware that it is a crude metaphor and very inadequate, but like Kaplan's simple line drawings representing differences in rhetorical organisation in various languages, it offers a starting point for further exploration.

For the sake of simplicity we can suppose that the hardware of the system relates to the individual's make-up in terms of emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual components. By the time we are dealing with adults this is relatively stable. Next we come to the operating system which refers to the processes which have been installed in the learner as a means of culturally appropriate strategies within a specific context (I choose the term 'culturally' as opposed to 'ethnically' to take into account the learning environments of subcultures as well). Each operating system has its own coherent programming logic as a reflection of its own coherent cultural logic. The software in this analogy represents areas of information which need to be known or 'run' on the operating system, for example a diploma course or practical skills in a traineeship.

Stage 1: Lack of Awareness

At this stage students are completely unaware that an alternative way of operating exists in the new learning environment. They can be told several things about certain differences but unfortunately this will not alter their understanding as their perception of the differences is not yet clear enough.
Section 2: The nine stages of transition

Stage 2: Shock and Denial

Analysing the first stage it is quite obvious that there is a two way confusion over the cultural operating system being used by both the teacher (representing TAFE education) and the student. If both student and teacher have used only one operating system, both will assume that theirs is superior. In fact if you have not been exposed to a different operating system, you may not acknowledge the other person's as valid or even existent.

At this stage there is obvious incompatibility between the operating system of the student and the software that the teacher is attempting to run. They are not designed for each other because the context in which they were developed differ and they were even designed for particular requirements. The result is a 'crash' (withdrawal) or jumbled output which needs decoding (what support teachers see every day). At this stage there are two options:

• to begin the process of installing a new operating system
• to continue the process of decoding throughout the student's education (which involves intensive re-writing).

It may so happen that effective editing (or decoding) over time will gradually allow the student to acquire this new operating system but it is an extremely laborious process. Some students I have known have presented their work for decoding across campuses and services in order to have their work 'edited' so that each layer of the previous teacher's work is built upon by the next support teacher. This will finally result in the piece of work being changed beyond recognition but the student's operating system remaining unchanged.

At this point it is also important to realise that we are very emotionally attached to our operating system and see it as an intrinsic part of ourselves, especially if we have been richly rewarded by it academically and socially. Positive conditioning over a period of many years means that it is not something we will willingly discard.

Stage 3: Desire to change learning approach & loss of confidence when the student realises the scope of what is involved

At this stage it will become obvious that hard work within one operating system will not necessarily create success in the terms of another. Change is essential. The fear is: “If it took so many years for my original operating system to be installed, can I install a new one in time?” Many ESL teachers have asked themselves this same question on behalf of their students and out of a genuine commitment have embraced accelerative learning methods. For good ESL teachers it is not so much a choice as a requirement.

For students who are not given strategies for developing a new operating system it is difficult to discover them independently, although in some rare cases students have worked out their own extremely effective strategies. For students without support or the ability to discover their own strategies, the task appears overwhelming and virtually impossible and withdrawal is likely.
Stage 4: Loss of self-esteem and ability to value existing skills

When the operating system that you consider a part of you is immersed in a culture where it is not considered appropriate, relevant or valuable in any way, every message direct or indirect seems to be saying "discard it". In some cases the attempts by teachers to actively do so may be with the 'best interests' of the student at heart, that is, "we will never get around to teaching the valuable stuff until their misconceptions are removed, especially if they are permanent residents and have to operate in this country for the rest of their life". It is a common phenomenon for people to view an alternative operating system as inferior. For example a teacher may say: "Rote learning is not considered a valuable part of learning in Australia". Ideally they could rephrase this to say: "Memorising a lot of information is not necessary in Australia but memorising the main principles of what you understand is!"

Treating your own style of education as automatically superior is a type of 'educational-centricty' and it is important to pause for a moment to analyse the implications of this attitude by making a comparison with brainwashing. Studies have shown that brainwashing is achieved by:

- demoralising the person and making them feel that whatever they do won't work
- introducing something that works through a powerful person
- encouraging the person to forget the past and look forward to a better future

Some educational experiences for indigenous and migrant students in mainstream courses come uncomfortably close to a form of educational brainwashing.

It is also valuable to reflect on the logic of our own operating system to consider objectively what appears to be so irrational to other cultures. For example:

- Confusion is the beginning of learning. Migrant students often ask: "Wouldn't it be better to offer some basic understanding first?"
- Trial and error for prolonged periods of time will lead to valuable insights as long as you have guidance. Migrant students ask: "If you have guidance available to you, why waste so much time finding the wrong answers?"
- Insights gained by this process of trial and error will to some extent be recognised as 'yours' at the level of a learning outcome, but because you were guided by a teacher who knows who the source of these insights, you must acknowledge the source or else suffer punishment for plagiarism. Migrant students ask: "Why wasn't I told about this in the beginning?"
- There are lots of wrong ways to get the wrong answers to questions and there are lots of right ways of getting answers but there are no right answers. Migrant students ask: "Why isn't it the right answer if I got it the right way?"

It is obvious that there are specific assumptions built into this approach as a result of notions in mainstream education about the value of discovery in learning, whether right and wrong
answers exist as opposed to right and wrong processes and about the value of wrong answers. These notions are often not perceived as valuable in other cultures and therefore an operating system which builds them into its logic does not appear sensible or worthy to many migrant students.

It is not an unusual leap in thinking for students to go from the notion that their operating system is useless to feeling that they are totally useless. One student at this stage wrote a full page repeating "I am stupid" for a class assignment. It is easy for a group learning environment which doesn't recognise alternative operating systems to reinforce this notion either directly or indirectly.

Students often experience a loss of faith in their original operating system, a loss of faith in their ability to learn a new one and a loss of faith in themselves as contributors to life. The situation at this point can appear truly hopeless.

**Stage 5: Overt Expression of Emotion**

Under this type of continued pressure and loss of a sense of self it is not surprising to find students expressing powerful emotions of grief, anger or anxiety. This outlet of emotion is often recognised by the host culture as a problem with the student's 'hardware', that is, with them as individuals, and they are referred to a counsellor. This will allow the student to rebuild their sense of confidence in themselves, but the relief is short-lived when they find themselves experiencing the same issues within a group learning environment because the issue of alternative operating systems has still not been resolved. This may in fact lead to doubts about oneself which eventually do damage the stability of a student's psyche.

From my observations successful students are those who can protect an intact sense of themselves as a valuable contributor (having valuable hardware) and allow criticism of their operating system to positively enhance an understanding of multiple ways of operating successfully, cross-culturally.

I believe this process is easier for overseas students for obvious reasons; the changes demanded of them are only temporary as compared to the migrant who faces a lifelong challenge.

When I visited India for the first time as the wife of an Indian, I was aware at every point that this involved connections that were permanent, profound and would span generations of time. I was visiting as a new family member, not as a tourist. I was also aware that people were forming a type of 'myth of collective impressions' around me, accurate or otherwise, that would probably remain basically unchanged through time. For migrants, I believe there is this same sense that a host culture perception is formulating itself around them. The burden for migrants is therefore immense. The need to 'save face' and create a good self image in the host culture often prevents migrants from exposing alternative modes of operating in case this is interpreted as ignorance.
Stage 6: Exaggerated Anger and Frustration

If the situation remains unresolved and the student is pressured to continue studying for whatever reason, the anger and frustration will mount to such an extreme that it needs to be projected onto whoever is perceived to be responsible. Often this is the classroom teacher, particularly if they have been active in deconstructing the student’s operating system. This became obvious to me when a student, on the morning after the Port Arthur Massacre, openly stated that they wished their teacher had been a victim. It appears that the attacks on the student’s operating system are interpreted as an attack on themselves personally. Most common at this point are the accusations of racial discrimination but the issue becomes less complicated when we ask:

• Is the discrimination against the student as a person? Is the teacher attempting to discourage the student from attending class? Is it an attack on their person - ‘hardware’?

or

• Is the discrimination against the student’s mode of operating both educationally and in social interactions? That is, does the teacher have the student’s best interests at heart but is actively attempting to replace their operating system?

Stage 7: Orientation

During these stages it is important to tell the student that:

• what they have been experiencing is common to many students

• what they have been experiencing does not imply that there is something fundamentally wrong with them

• their operating system is valuable and aspects of it will be useful in the acquisition of a new operating system installing a new operating system can be much easier than they think.

How do we actually support students at this point?

It is at this point that many support teachers find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Support teachers can’t expect migrant students to know what is culturally appropriate; that is, we can’t tell them all the answers (run the course’s software on our own operating system) as this is unfair to other mainstream students and only temporarily solves the problem. The only valid choice is to assist with the accelerated installation of a new operating system. To avoid this option means that the classroom teacher will be reluctant to refer students on the basis that they are receiving inappropriate help, and the support teacher will find themselves burdened by doing the course work on behalf of the student.
**How do we install new Operating Systems?**

This section explores the strategies that were found to be effective while delivering support in the area of Communication modules at the Canberra Institute of Technology. Communication modules represent an interface between culturally distinct operating systems. An important principle emerged from attempts at installing new ways of operating; this was the use of culturally universal metaphors. Universal metaphors are those which can be readily understood because of similar associations across many cultures (See Section7).

**The universal metaphor**

These metaphors need to reflect principles you are attempting to teach and be familiar to all students at an experiential level. Section 7 contains an example where a 'journey' with its relevant stages is compared to the structural parts of essay writing. This was found to be effective not only on the level of the parts of the essay itself but also in terms of the need to determine purpose and audience.

What seemed to occur when these universal metaphors were used was a process similar to what occurs when genetic engineering is conducted. To introduce a permanent genetic change the new piece of DNA is placed on a courier (usually a microbe) called a vector. This vector has similar features to the host and in a sense "tricks" the host into allowing it to enter on the basis that it has familiar characteristics (a type of Trojan Horse principle). If this is done in such a way that the new DNA is also present in the sex cell, the new gene will be permanent (passed on to future generations).

A universal metaphor in this sense acts as the vector presenting familiar material from a student's experiences into the new cultural context of their studies. If the installation of this new understanding is effective it will be reproduced in future writing. This is what appeared to occur each time appropriate metaphors were used with students individually and in small group work.

The journey metaphor was utilised not only for written work but for oral presentations as well. Before using this metaphor, I found that students consistently omitted a statement of purpose at the beginning of both written and oral presentations/interactions. No amount of explanation would result in them generating this section independently (even though when reminded, they were happy to comply).

I decided to change my approach. I started to write down the relevant parts of the written or oral task as they dictated them to me, with one difference: I would leave large blank gaps for the missing sections (eg. a missing statement of purpose). Then I would introduce the metaphor and come back to the gaps asking such questions as "Would you go on a trip if you didn't know why the tour guide organised it? Then how can you expect a client to listen to you on the phone if they don't know why you're ringing. You're in charge, you're taking them on a communication trip and you're responsible for your client".
By doing this there is an acknowledgement of the student’s operating system (they initially generate the sections that need to be covered), then the metaphor is used as a vector to install new information into the physical gap on the page (and hopefully their understanding) and finally the relevance to the task is reinforced.

New findings in the area of memory are also pertinent to what seems to be occurring in “cross-cultural engineering”. According to Antonio Damasio, remembering is not a passive process, assembly is required. “Memories must literally be re-membered, put together again from pieces found in various parts of the brain.....The brain does not file polaroid pictures, memory depends on several brain systems working in concert across many levels of neural organisation”. This theory emerged out of research attempting to pinpoint a location for long term memory. Strangely this eluded researchers who finally concluded that it was a much more dynamic process than originally thought with synaptic connections flowing “like a river whose tributaries constantly flow into new configurations.”

This process seemed to reflect what I saw students experiencing in the process of installing new information into long term memory. Culturally ‘alien’ or disrespected items were consistently omitted until they were connected to an emotionally favourable or familiar experience creating a ’new configuration’ of understanding.

Metaphors are used in a range of areas to achieve this result. A speech therapist and ESL pronunciation expert I know uses the metaphor of the tongue as a gymnast. Students and teachers, she claims, need to be made aware that pronunciation does not rely on the part of the brain devoted to language but instead relies on the same part of the brain that a gymnast uses for training. This metaphor of the tongue being like a gymnast assists the student to bypass expectations of immediate accuracy and avoid embarrassment (created by inaccurate attempts) so that they can ‘train’ their tongues effectively.

I believe that universal metaphors work not only because they reflect reality but because they help create new understanding and facilitate long term memory.

The need for respect for a student’s educational operating system

The need to have a positive regard for a student’s culturally distinct operating system is crucial for many reasons. Preserving a student’s operating system means that the teacher can:

• preserve the student’s self esteem
• use it as a basis for inserting new information
• use it as means of analysing variation for the benefit of extending the group’s understanding in a broader range of purposes and contexts.

It also means the student can:

• use the knowledge and skills within it, in an innovative way

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I often make it clear to students that the roles of teacher and student would be reversed if I were studying in their native country. This is an important acknowledgement of their operating system and its value within a different context. I also make the point that the skills from one operating system are transferable to another even though they may be used in a different manner.

It seems that for universal metaphors to be successful in creating new understandings the individual's personal mode of operating needs to be endorsed or activated rather than ignored or destroyed.

Stage 8: Restoration of Self Esteem and Integration of Previous Skills

This stage is obvious to both support teachers and classroom teachers and requires little explanation other than to recognise one important feature. Often when a question is asked of a student skilled at running dual operating systems from their first and second language backgrounds simultaneously, more time is required to process the answer. Both classroom and support teachers should allow more time for students to answer, keeping this feature of the process in mind.

For example, I recently asked a Kashmiri friend this simple question after she informed me of the fact that she knew of only one other Kashmiri family in Canberra: "Does knowing so few Kashmiri families make you feel isolated?". She had a great deal of trouble answering the question. In fact she was speechless and agitated for quite some time. On reflection I could later recognise what was causing the dilemma. Firstly, an important feature of her culture is loyalty to friends, so to admit to a sense of alienation would be to deny the value of our friendship and betray loyalty. On the other hand she knew me well enough to know that honesty featured highly in my culture and if she claimed not to feel isolated it would appear dishonest and would probably provoke further questions. She was in fact trapped between two cultural operating systems and by expressing the thoughts of one, she offended the other.

Migrant students often feel that the normal resolution for this kind of dilemma (an explanation) is not possible because of the lack of understanding of their culture. In an educational context students find themselves exposed to such dilemmas constantly (especially in communication modules) and an empathy for the complexity of what is occurring should result in patience and additional time being given to the student.

Stage 9: Extension of Personal Understanding to a Wider Audience

There is a genuine desire on behalf of successful students to assist other students in bypassing the first six stages. This proactive approach appears to help in their own healing processes if they have experienced hurt, and restores their self esteem.
But what can I do?

...strategies for classroom teachers to support migrant students through each of the nine stages of transition.

Intended audience:
classroom teachers.

Suggestions for use:
simple & practical strategies for the busy classroom teacher.
Van and Elvira, two of the students who were interviewed for this book, are seen here with the author practising telephone communication as preparation for an assessment in Client Interaction, a compulsory module in the Diploma of Information Technology. "Speaking about how a culture operates is not enough; students need to be role-playing at every opportunity," Annette Sharma.
Section 3: But what can I do?

In the early stages, learning in a different culture can be likened to a computer system expected to run a software package on an incompatible operating system where neither the operating system nor the software has been designed for each other. The resulting ‘crash’ or need for decoding becomes very obvious. Increasing the information inputted into the system will not solve the problem; an additional operating system needs to be installed.

Students often realised that fundamental changes in their mode of operating were needed before they could effectively process the information given to them by teachers. At least parts of the ‘Australian operating system’ needed to be ‘installed’ (actively understood) for effective learning to take place. This section outlines practical strategies that classroom teachers can use to assist students to begin to operate in a different educational culture.

Strategies for Stage 1 (Lack of Awareness):

The student is unaware at this stage that their new educational institute operates in a different manner, or that teachers have different expectations to teachers in institutes in their home country. Often students from backgrounds where text books are central to learning will request the names of appropriate resources from the library again and again even if it is explained that they are not central to the course. For many students it is difficult to let go of the security that a text book offers. This is the key stage where, if sufficient preparation is given, the student can be accelerated through (or even bypass) the first six stages.

1. As many students (particularly those from Asia) have been educated with a teacher and text as the main authority, it takes some adjusting to develop the confidence to independently extract or apply their personal experiences, in order to come up with an opinion or solution.

   • Encourage students to build up this confidence by utilising scenarios where the student has prestige; for example, when role-playing, allocate the part of employer to them.

   • Also take care to affirm and extend even the most limited responses in order to encourage them in this new process.

   In many Asian countries psychology is just beginning to emerge as an area of interest for the average person, so theoretical subjects in Australian courses which involve elements of this will be interesting but initially difficult for migrant students to discuss.

2. Understanding the pronunciation of Australian teachers is a primary concern of students at this stage. For teachers who may be working in situations with substantial background noise there are some important considerations:

   • Most recently arrived students have been exposed to the visual appearance of English rather than the sound of Australian English.
• A natural process for Australian speakers called ‘Linking’ interferes with the level of understanding eg. “Take it off the table” is actually said as “Tay ki toff the table”. The stress in the statement means that the student Elements hears “ki” and “toff” and becomes confused.

• The best solution is to make separate words as distinct as possible in your speech. This is easy to do once you are aware of it and explains the common advice to slow down which has the same effect. It is possible to speak at the same rate and volume but remove the link-ups to dramatically improve the comprehension for migrant students.

3. If break time permits, take a moment to ask about a student’s background. The more knowledge you have of their previous experience and skills, the less chance you have of developing a bias based on their poor English language proficiency.

4. If you have a number of migrant students in your class, you could try putting aside 5 minutes at the beginning or end of a class to explain your expectations and why they are important in this culture (See Section 7 for summaries of the differences in learning styles). You can make this explicit by handing out copies of this information to allow time for reflection and questions.

5. It may also be necessary to alert students to the level of effort and personal responsibility expected at TAFE in Australia. In some countries (eg Japan, Korea, Thailand and Vietnam) a great deal of effort is required to gain admission to a reputable institute, but the first year is relatively relaxing and secure for the student as far as passing is concerned.

Strategies for Stage 2 (Shock & Denial):

At this stage there is an obvious incompatibility between the ‘operating system’ of the student and the information that the teacher is trying to get across to the student. If both the teacher and the student have been exposed to one cultural ‘operating system’, both may assume that theirs is superior because they understand its peculiar ‘network of logic’ so well. Positive conditioning (through academic rewards) over a period of many years means that a mode of operating will not be easily discarded. That is to say, students will not be prepared to admit that their way of doing things is inappropriate and they will defend their methods by continuing to use them even though the environment here will not provide any rewards.

1. Avoid making judgements about a student’s level of commitment if they miss the first lectures. For many students, negotiating the new environment in a second language results in misunderstandings which require more time for resolution.

2. Affirm a student’s mode of operating by such comments as: ‘If I were living in your country, I would be asking your advice on how to ..........’

3. Encourage students that previous skills can be utilised but may need a different application; for example, recall may need to be applied at the level of procedure or principles rather than to actual information.
Strategies for Stage 3 (Desire to change learning approach & loss of confidence when the student realises the scope of what is involved):

Many students feel that if it has taken them so many years to develop a system of learning, it is impossible to invest the same amount of time in learning a new way to learn!

1. Encourage students to trust the student services provided for them and inform students that support needs to come from TAFE teachers who are familiar with the area of study rather than relatives and friends who may have good intentions but not be on track with what the teacher really expects.

2. Encourage students that a range of accelerated learning methods have been developed for adult learners which are very effective.

Strategies for Stage 4 (Loss of self esteem and ability to value existing skills):

When the operating system that a student considers a part of them is immersed in a culture that may not value the skills inherent in that system, it is not long before the student feels a total failure as a person.

1. Encouragement for students at this stage involves:
   - affirming the achievements of students in the past and encouraging them that the same skills are relevant, valuable and transferable
   - encouraging the student to identify strategies appropriate to themselves through support services and to find new strategies through meeting others who are studying in the same area
   - encouraging students to incorporate past skills in new ways in their present studies.

Strategies for Stage 5 (Overt expression of emotion):

Continued pressure and a loss of self esteem can lead to powerful emotions of grief, anger, anxiety and fear. Migrant students in particular face these dilemmas in terms of a long term commitment to living in Australia.

1. It is best to refer students that have reached this stage to professionals in the institute, eg Counselling or Student Equity.

Strategies for Stage 6 (Exaggerated anger and frustration):

If the situation remains unresolved, the anger and frustration of the student will mount to such an extreme that the anger will either be:

- projected onto the person seen to be responsible for any failure (often the teacher if they are failing the student’s assessments)
• projected back onto themselves (often resulting in the student withdrawing or returning to their home country)

1. Again, refer students to Counselling.

**Strategies for Stage 7 (Orientation):**

At this point the student is installing parts of the 'Australian educational operating system' so that information is utilised in a meaningful way and is also processed appropriately even under stressful conditions. We have found that many students reverted to their culturally comfortable method of processing information when under stress, particularly during written and oral assessments.

1. Try using the metaphor of a 'two storey house' to represent the two modes of operating from the different cultures. The second storey representing the new learning environment in Australia and the building of new skills. This affirms the original learning skills as foundational to the new learning skills and reinforces the idea of extending skills rather than returning to the beginning. This provides an excellent opportunity to encourage students that their efforts will result in a substantial increase of their existing skills. If the student is able to understand the significance of this metaphor to their own personal life, it can be built upon by introducing the notion of a 'staircase' which allows students to understand the notion of transferring skills between both worlds, that is, old skills being able to be used in the new environment and new skills being used if the student returns to their old environment.

2. Put aside five minutes at the beginning of a class/session to explain:
   - where the skills or information fit in the overall picture
   - why you think it is important
   - what the real life application is

Linguistic confusion increases when the context of new information is not known.

3. Encourage students to process new information and vocabulary in interesting and effective ways to build confidence and understanding. One method is to use three different coloured highlighters: 1) to identify unknown vocabulary, 2) to identify key concepts, and 3) to identify less critical but still important information. Margins can be used to summarise key points or use mnemonics. This makes learning materials welcoming to revise and develops a sense of achievement for students.

4. Attend to migrant students' questions after other students have been dealt with. One migrant student reported that this made her feel more comfortable in that she didn't feel that she was keeping other students waiting.

5. Create cards for new terms and their definitions and ask students to match terms and definitions at the beginning of a class/session. Place definitions on a table and hand out...
the original terms to students. Ask students to place the definition on top with the original term not visible. The students, after checking final answers with the teacher, need to recall the original term at the completion of the exercise. This promotes discussion and active problem solving while students are arriving and is effective for revision. These cards can become a reusable teaching resource.

6. Use culturally universal metaphors (See Section 7) as a method of introducing new information. Our experience is that the student's personal or familiar experiences need to be endorsed or activated for new information to be successfully introduced.

7. Be cautious of symbols which you may assume to be universal; for example, the owl, far from representing wisdom, is a symbol of stupidity in some parts of Asia, but a symbol of evil in parts of Africa.

8. Use modified role plays. Students can be interviewed regarding their responses to a typical scenario. This avoids the acting role but still allows for discussion of a real life situation. This works best when the student is given a positive and powerful role.

9. Elicit information from students and write it up with any missing information indicated by drawing distinct blank boxes using coloured markers. The teacher can then fill in the missing information, explain its significance, why it may have been left out and its cultural significance. This method affirms the existing knowledge of students while visually reinforcing new information.

Strategies for Stage 8 (Restoration of self esteem and integration of previous skills):

At this stage the student can successfully use both their original and new modes of operating in their learning environment. This often results not only in the creative use of previous knowledge but often in a novel use of skills eg memorisation used for principles behind the information rather than the information itself.

1. Teachers need to recognise that students able to successfully operate in different cultures need extra time to answer. It is a much more complex process to discern what is appropriate in any given situation when you have a variety of perspectives. Furthermore the tutorial style of discussion is not common in many countries where class sizes are large. This means that the ability to respond with personal opinions instantly has not been cultivated.

2. Let students know that you expect them to answer impromptu questions in class. The shock of being asked such questions and the fact that this is often an unfamiliar part of the learning environment usually jumbles or blocks speech in English.
Strategies for Stage 9 (Extension of personal understanding to a wider audience):

There is often a genuine desire on behalf of successful students to assist other students in bypassing the first six stages. This proactive approach further restores their self esteem.

1. Encourage or provide opportunities for migrant students from diverse cultural backgrounds to meet socially to discuss course work etc. Starting a meeting with students will often create enough momentum for socially isolated students to meet together again.
In their own words

...a student perspective on the seven factors that were most important in helping them to succeed. This section includes relevant strategies for support teachers.

Intended audience:
support teachers, counsellors etc.

Suggestions for use:
lists of practical strategies that support teachers can utilise; background reading.
Section 4: In their own words

4.1 Motivation

Students felt that motivation levels were maintained by setting goals and having a sense of mission. Successful students realised that the real issue was not language proficiency itself but how students went about creating strategies to solve their study problems. Students needed to recognise that by doing their best, without comparing their performance to other mainstream students, they ultimately achieved their goals.

Migrant students often assumed that the English speaking background students automatically understood the concepts being presented in a class simply because of their language proficiency. This initially lead to a sense of inadequacy and a loss of confidence. However, as students matured, they realised that their previous skills and commitment allowed them to succeed despite their language limitations, and that, conversely, good language skills didn't necessarily equate to clear understanding of concepts.

The extent to which students felt the skills acquired during their education outside Australia were valuable greatly determined their success rates. Those students able to recognise the relevance of their previously acquired learning were able to persevere and succeed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for Support Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Reinforce the importance of valuing existing skills (even non-academic ones such as running a business) in order to create a positive self esteem in students who may be focussed on language proficiency as the only determiner of success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• For mature-age students, transfer your personal view clearly to them that their studies are an extension to an already rich life/study experience (rather than allowing them to view it as a poor attempt at working in an area that is beyond their language abilities).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Assist students in clarifying long-term and short-term goals and designing practical strategies that can be realistically incorporated into their life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enquire whether students have an opportunity to discuss issues related to personal problems or study problems with peers, support staff, counsellors, classroom teachers etc and help to organise options.</td>
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</table>
4.2 Time Management

Most students felt that the number of contact hours with a teacher in class needed to be reinforced with the equivalent number of hours at home for a successful outcome (especially when studying in a second language). This guideline needs careful consideration when planning the number of modules selected for the semester's load, particularly when part-time employment and family responsibilities need to be built in to the equation.

Students also needed to clarify specific dates as teachers often used terms such as “Monday week” or “Monday fortnight” while discussing assessment and other important dates. Students also felt that time management involved “assessment management” which was a process of:

• working out clear priorities
• creating a list of tasks
• carrying out the most difficult tasks when they were feeling the most positive.

**Strategies for Support Teachers**

• Assist students in mapping out a timetable where an equal number of ‘self-study’ and ‘teacher contact’ hours are incorporated with other responsibilities.

• Teach students the appropriate language for clarifying or requesting specific dates when idiomatic terms have been used.

• Assist students to create lists of priorities.

• Encourage students to map out assessment dates clearly so that the relationship between tasks, the amount of time available for tasks and times of increased stress are apparent.

• Encourage students to read in advance and access relevant books early during holiday time.
4.3 The Independent Learning Style

Students were able to recognise that the independent learning style in Australia requires students to become decision makers. In many countries where facilities for personal research are limited, students are not required to be so actively engaged in locating information, scanning information for appropriate material, organising information and often providing personal reflections. All of these stages involve making decisions in response to these questions:

- where can relevant information be found?
- what information is most appropriate?
- how should it be organised? and
- what are my personal responses to it?

Consequently, students need to perceive themselves in a new light regarding their education, not only as an independent learner but more importantly as a decision maker, actively moulding the form that their learning will take.

Support teachers need to constantly encourage this change in perceptions by affirming student input in the decision making process. Confidence can be immensely improved if support teachers assist students by treating the student’s decisions and ideas, no matter how simple, as:

- potentially valuable
- often representing only a fraction of the overall picture of the student’s understanding
- in need of probing to establish the depth of the issue
- in need of appropriate language to give the decision or idea credibility

This may be seen as an overly positive approach for a student who lacks motivation, however in most cases this show of respect and faith in the student’s ability to make appropriate decisions is sufficient to motivate a student who may be suffering low self esteem as a result of language bias.

### Strategies for Support Teachers

- Encourage students to perceive themselves as capable decision makers responsible for moulding their own education
- In role play exercises, always give students key decision making roles which have a high status
- Probe and develop responses respectfully to develop the student’s confidence in becoming more independent and more able to make appropriate decisions.
4.4 Confidence

With classroom teachers

Students felt that in order to build up confidence in communicating with their classroom teachers they needed a 'go-between'. This was often a support teacher who acted as a gauge of how effectively students were communicating before the classroom teacher was approached. The confidence gained in this setting readily translated to the class environment.

For high achievers

For students that were high achievers before migrating to Australia a great deal of anxiety was created by trying to achieve outcomes at the same level of success. They often experienced shock and a loss of confidence when they found they were no longer 'on the top'. This dilemma was resolved to some extent by realising that:

- By focusing on improvement rather than achievement, loss of confidence could be avoided. Students came to realise that everyone including Australian peers were involved in a process of improving themselves.
- It was counter productive to take on too much, or accelerate the rate of learning in order to try and catch up to their previous language level and/or previous status in the learning environment.
- Perseverance and a realistic step by step attitude was the most effective way of avoiding a loss of confidence.

In day-to-day communication

Group discussions revealed that most students felt an exaggerated responsibility for any communication breakdown. All students automatically assumed that a failed communication or a negative interaction was a direct result of their personal language weaknesses. On no occasion did students recognise that the other partner in the communication process could have contributed to difficulty in understanding or a negative attitude for a whole range of possible reasons. This oversensitivity often makes the student feel self-conscious which in turn contributes to any discomfort or lack of confidence the other partner in the interaction may be experiencing. Some students while previously quite extroverted in their own culture found that they were becoming more and more introverted due to failed interactions resulting in loss of confidence.
Strategies for Support Teachers

• Be extremely aware of your personal responses to poor communication attempts. Often concern, discomfort or impatience will negate your role as the bridge in confidence between students and teachers. If you can act relaxed in even the most difficult circumstances, improvement is likely to be assured.

• Suggest that students spend as much time as possible speaking to people in the community (eg shop assistants) to refine skills.

• Advise students that effective communication with teachers and peers is crucial to their success.

• Encourage previously high achievers to constantly reflect on their achievements to date and to focus on improvements in their skills not on any failures. Students may need to accept that some failures may be a valuable part of the process of clarifying differences in learning styles and expectation.

• Encourage high achievers to avoid making the mistake of taking on too much in too short a period of time in order to catch up.

• Encourage students to take a step by step approach resolving small problems systematically rather than focusing on a whole set of difficulties.

• Advise students that they are not always responsible for failed communication and that factors other than poor language skills can play a part.
4.5 The Importance of Questions

Successful students recognised that English is not a permanent hurdle; a great deal depends on how you construct solutions. Central to this process of constructing solutions is the ability and confidence to ask questions.

The skill of being able to pose questions while retaining self respect and dignity was seen as fundamental. A recent graduate, now employed in the Public Service, expressed this sentiment: “Don’t be embarrassed about telling the teacher you don’t understand. In Australia intelligent people have the confidence to say they don’t understand.”

Students also felt that by openly acknowledging to the teacher that they were not accustomed culturally to a particular task, teachers were more willing to answer and assist them eg: “In my country I have never done xyz. Could you explain the best way of .....?”

The practice of answering a question with a question was also viewed by students as frustrating or unprofessional rather than as an opportunity for the teacher to probe an assumption or extend thinking further.

Students saw the function of asking questions as solely to clarify class information that is not clearly understood and at no time discussed the role of questions as a means of:

- receiving feedback on reflections
- determining the scope of an application
- making predictions ("what if.....?")
- making connections with related areas
- and generally impressing the teacher by doing any of the above!

Students do recognise that they are expected to ask questions as part of our education culture. “In my country we are mainly expected to answer questions; but in Australia we are expected to ask them as well!” However it is not generally understood why teachers employ this technique. This limited view of the functions of questions meant that students usually assumed that a teacher actually did not know an answer when they replied to a question with “Well what do you think?”

Another reason for the students’ reluctance to ask questions is their insecurity of not knowing whether the question being asked targets the whole class’s confusion over a difficult concept or is the result of their own linguistic misunderstanding. The difference is crucial; the former creates class and teacher respect while the latter usually results in their irritation.
Strategies for Support Teachers

- Explain the different functions of questions especially those that aim for an extension of understanding rather than just clarification.

- Explain that teachers answer questions with another question to encourage this extension of understanding. Suggest some typical language structures for each of the functions listed above, eg “Do you think there is any connection between........and........?”

- Encourage the questions of migrant students by indicating their significance, eg “Many students ask this question and it’s a very important one. I’m glad you asked.”
4.6 The Importance of Reading

Many migrant students recognised that reading was an important part of an Australian student's social development as well as their intellectual development, that is, many Australian students read widely for pleasure on topics of interest as well as for studies. The notion of reading books for pleasure does not exist to the same extent for many migrant students. This is significant in that reading widely for research was often viewed by many migrant students as a serious and demanding task rather than a relaxed and enjoyable activity.

Students also needed to be told the difference between skimming (a surface read to determine relevancy), scanning (to find information) and reading (for personal meaning and note taking). This is particularly important for students who come from countries where library resources are not readily accessible.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for Support Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Provide opportunities to practise and differentiate between skimming, scanning and reading.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encourage the practice of reading important material before and after classes even if it is a case of scanning the sub-headings in a section of a book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encourage students to work out their own opinion first and read materials that support their opinions as this can increase their reading enjoyment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encourage students to rewrite the assessment question so it can be easily understood and to continually assess whether the material being read is relevant to what you are trying to achieve (this assists with skimming, scanning and reading).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encourage students to recognise that books are records of someone else's opinion and that their own opinion is also of great value to the teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage students to link up the material being read with their personal experience by asking “Is this my experience of what happens in life?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encourage students to value and document the areas in which they disagree with the materials being read.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4.7 Isolation and Anger

Migrant students coming from very competitive educational environments were often unaware of the fact that competency based assessment meant that students could assist each other by working in a group rather than in isolation. For example the burden of collecting research information could be alleviated by dividing up tasks among a group.

Isolation was identified as contributing greatly to stress levels, in turn affecting motivation. All students recognised the need to communicate to peers in order to resolve personal problems and clarify concepts in their subjects. The support teachers were often seen as a bridge in this process. As students gained the confidence for interactions, they then were able to relate to classroom teachers and students.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage students to work in groups, for example, where research can be divided up into books, journals, the internet, experts and teachers etc, with each person in the group sharing the information from one area with the others in the group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Warn students of the disadvantages of choosing classes that fall on a Monday as it is far more difficult for migrant students to catch up work missed as a result of public holidays. Missing these classes can have the effect of isolating students from the mainstream and making them feel further disadvantaged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Link students to student services or student groups to avoid isolation and anger.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
This is what helped me!

...a student perspective on eight factors that were important in helping them to succeed. This section is designed to be used by students.

Intended audience:
all students whose first language is other than English.

Suggestions for use:
these notes are designed to be given to students either as a whole package or separately where needed.
5.1 Motivation

- Studying in a new country is like building a second storey on a house. You may feel at times that your previous learning and experience is of no use here in Australia because things are organised in such a different way. But you don't have to demolish the first storey before you can build the second one; you can use it as a foundation. In fact the most successful students not only recognise that learning in a new country is a wonderful extension to their life but also understand the importance of building a link between the two areas in their life (like having a staircase). They actively look for ways they can use past skills and experience, and create life goals that incorporate the things they value from their home country.

- It is really important to have a sense of mission when you are studying. If you don't have clear goals in your life and aren't sure why you are doing your studies it is very difficult to keep motivated. If you are having doubts about what you are studying and whether this course suits you as a person you need to talk to a counsellor or migrant coordinator. They are able to give you advice and accurate information on how to create a career pathway and not just choose subjects.

- Don't worry when you compare your English ability to other students in your course. Often just because your English is not as good as theirs, it doesn't mean that your ability to achieve is less. Your previous skills, commitment, hard work and perseverance will always be rewarded, especially if you can get some help with your studies through academic support or counselling.

- Be positive about the skills you have learnt and the work experience you have had in your home country. How much you recognise them as valuable and relevant to your life will change how much others see them as important (especially teachers and employers). By continuing to value what you've learnt and done previously, you can create new options for projects of study or even employment.

- Start reading early; the holidays are a perfect time. This will create a way to understand ideas that will grow as more and more information is added during the term. It also helps you to feel on top of things psychologically rather than feeling behind other students in the class because of your English.

"Persevere and proceed step by step." Lilia
5.2 Time Management

- Keep in mind that the extra time it takes for English language work usually means that you need to spend the same amount of hours studying at home as you do in class. Successful students felt that it was important to work out a realistic timetable with this in mind as well as your other responsibilities (family and part-time employment). Being a successful student was not only a case of achieving a diploma or certificate but organising the time in your life so that there is some harmony between all the different responsibilities and your personal goals.

- Choose the right time to do your most difficult assignment. Try it when you are feeling the most confident and when you have the most time. If you start a tough assignment when you're feeling 'down' or in a rush, you can end up losing confidence. It is then hard to get motivated again. If possible, avoid choosing classes that are on Mondays. Public holidays mean that you can miss a class and be a week behind other classes. It is also difficult to 'catch up' by reading extra information in English when a class is lost.

- Make sure you ask teachers for specific dates for tests and assignments especially when they say: “This assignment is due Monday fortnight”. You can ask: “Do you mean Monday 16th or Monday 23rd?”

- Prioritise by making lists of things you have to do and then rewriting the list by putting them in order of importance, or in groups of important things. This avoids the situation where you spend too much time on unimportant work and run out of time for the more important things.

> “*Four hours of study in class means four hours of study at home as well.*” Lulu

> “*Work in advance and take books out in the holidays.*” Lulu
5.3 The Independent Learning Style

- Many teachers will tell you that you need to be an independent learner. If you grew up in a country where the teacher was responsible for knowing all the answers you needed and it was their duty to tell you and your duty to remember them, then the idea of being an independent learner requires many changes in the way you think about learning in Australia.

- Being an independent learner doesn't mean that you have to solve all your study problems by yourself and not share your problems with other students and teachers. It doesn't mean that you are on your own and have to cope with doing everything by yourself.

- It does mean that you need to see yourself as a “Decision Maker”!

- When you feel confident and relaxed with this new way of seeing yourself you will realise that there are many decisions to make for every assignment that you do, even though you may not be aware of it.

Decisions like:

- Where can I find information beside text books or even library books?
- What information do I feel is the most useful?
- What information do I agree with?
- How should I organise it?
- How does this information link up with my personal experiences?
- How important is this assignment for my course and my career?
- These decisions don’t have to be made as often in other countries where the teacher may take responsibility for these decisions.

- Academic support can encourage you in becoming confident decision makers in your studies and show you how to include your personal views in assignments in a clear, meaningful way.

"You have to become a decision-maker." Lulu
Section 5: This is what helped me!

5.4 Confidence

- If you were achieving at a high level in your previous home country and now find yourself struggling to understand the English in your course, you may experience what some students call the “drop from the top!” It is extremely difficult to adjust to this experience when you are used to being an excellent student who has always done well and now find yourself working hard just to pass modules.

- Some students take on a great deal of extra work so they can catch up to the same level and status they enjoyed before coming to Australia. But many students realise that by doing this they are placing too much pressure on themselves and often their families (and some even return to their homeland).

- A group of successful students realised that you need to focus on improvement not achievement and that everyone including Australian students and teachers are involved in the same process of improving themselves.

- By keeping in mind that you are improving your skills in a second language you will value your progress more.

- Try imagining a person you admire in your home country watching you do a task in English (giving an oral presentation or writing a long report). Wouldn’t they be impressed with your achievements!

- Take the opportunity to practise speaking with a range of people in your community to improve your English. Shop assistants and parents at school gatherings give you an excellent chance to talk in a relaxed environment. Remember, there are other ways to improve your English besides studying a grammar book.

- When you find yourself in a difficult situation while talking to someone who may feel irritated or upset, it is important to realise that it is not automatically because of your English. They may be upset because they had an argument with their boss that morning or any other reason! So don’t take responsibility for everything that goes wrong. Relax and you will find that people will feel more relaxed speaking with you.

- Make an effort to see your problems as a collection of small things for you to be working on. Find step by step solutions. Don’t try to solve everything at once.

“Everyone is in a state of improving - Australians as well.” Yang

“Don’t be embarrassed about telling the teacher you don’t understand. Intelligent people have the confidence to say they don’t understand.” Lilia
5.5 The Importance of Questions

- Education in Australia is all about solving problems both in your studies and personally. The real issue for many successful students is not how much English you know but how you solve problems; how you create solutions! One of the best ways to create solutions is having the confidence to ask questions.

- You don't need to feel embarrassed about asking questions. In Australia intelligent people have the confidence to say that they don't understand.

- In Australia questions are used for more reasons than just to understand something which doesn't make sense to you. Questions are used to:

  - get feedback (some useful ideas) from the teacher on how you have understood the work: “If I understand this correctly, it means that you should do X? Is that right?”
  - work out how something is used in a real life situation: “Is that also necessary when you do Y?”
  - make predictions: “What if I ..........?”
  - make connections to related areas: “Would that be true in a situation where you.....?”
  - impress the teacher by asking any of the questions above.

- Students found that if they told a teacher first that they were not familiar with a particular task because they had not done it in their country and then asked a question, the teacher was much more willing to answer the question and spend time explaining.

When a teacher answers a question by asking you another question (eg “What do you think?”), it is not because they don't know the answer. It is mostly a way of encouraging you to give some more thought to the topic and come up with an idea that may be valuable.

“Be active and ask! Communicate your needs and admit that the task is different to what you are accustomed to and teachers will be helpful.” Pradeepa

“It is not common in Korea to ask questions - student have been trained to resolve questions on their own at home.” Jaicy
Section 5: This is what helped me!

5.6 The Importance of Reading

Probably one of the first things you will notice is how much Australians enjoy reading for pleasure as well as for their studies. Often courses will have “further reading” lists as it is expected that interested students will enjoy extra reading on a topic they find interesting. Reading broadly for a topic being researched is therefore quite an enjoyable task for many students. Developing an attitude that reading for your course is an enjoyable and relaxing activity rather than a serious and boring task is really important. Try reading course work when you are relaxed and feeling positive eg on a beach, bus, picnic etc. You’ll be amazed at how much more meaningful it will become.

- There are 3 different types of reading depending on what stage you are at in your assignment:
  - Skimming which is just looking very quickly at the headings and some words to work out if the information is useful
  - Scanning which is finding useful information
  - Reading which is used to take notes, to improve your understanding and develop an opinion.

- Successful students often read course work before and after a lesson, even if it is only a quick skim or a quick scan of the section headings. This helps to give you some basic ideas about the topic so that you can more easily understand new information discussed in class.

- If you choose books or materials which support your opinion when you are doing an assignment, you will enjoy the reading more and probably end up reading more on the topic.

- Value your opinion when it is different to that of a book and ask yourself: “Why don’t I agree with this?” Explaining the answer to this question is very valuable in your assignments because your opinion is very valuable in our educational culture.

“By reading again and again, the meaning will penetrate your mind.” Van

“Memorising is important in El Salvador but in Australia it is different - reading is encouraged because information is so accessible.” Lilia
5.7 Isolation and Anger

- Students coming from countries where education is very competitive find it difficult to understand the concept of competency-based assessment. This means that you are not competing against other students but all aiming to reach a standard where you have developed all the necessary skills for a successful career. So in one year many students may pass a module if they are all competent, and in another year many students may not pass.

This means that if you are able to work in a group and share time and information, it will benefit everyone. One example of this is doing research in groups. One person can check the internet, another person find books in the library, another journals and another person can speak to experts in the area. When you share this information, you have all saved time. You then work independently to study the information and make your own decisions. Even at this stage, forming a discussion group to talk about your joint research findings can give you a deeper, broader understanding and be less isolating.

- If you feel isolated, especially if you do not have the support of family, friends and other students it is very easy to feel angry in this situation. What happens to this anger?
  - It is usually directed at a person who you may feel is making life difficult for you (someone living in the same accommodation as you, or even a teacher).
  - Or it can be directed at yourself, making you feel angry or disappointed with your ability to achieve what you would like to.

It is therefore very important to avoid isolation and its resulting feelings of anger. If you don't have a group of students to share your problems with and to share the load of work, then contact a counsellor or academic support person who can help you work out solutions.

"Isolation increases stress - you need a social network." Elvira

"Consult people in the area - they can explain more than the dictionary the meaning of things." Van
5.8 Assertiveness

Assertiveness means different things to different people. For example it can mean:

- A way of communicating with others which allows you to be strong about what you believe is important, while at the same time showing respect for others
- The right to say what you need in order to have some control in your life
- A way of being honest with yourself and others and so develop personal integrity
- The confidence to express what you believe is right when you are being pressured to do something else

For migrants this is a much more complex issue. Many migrants come from a culture where there are very strong traditions and expectations of how to live. But living in Australian society means that there is often tension between the two cultures.

How can you be assertive in a situation where, for example, relatives arrive and require your time just when a major test or assignment is due? Traditional values expect sacrifice as a demonstration of love but personal goals demand time and concentration to do the required study. Do you:

- betray your traditions and spend time on your studies?
- fulfil your traditional duty and risk your studies?

From the experience of many students there are two ways to deal with this situation:

- Prevention is better than cure, so make sure everyone knows the busy times in your study schedule. Tell everyone weeks or even months in advance, and keep on telling them when you are going to be having exams etc so the message "sinks in". Put messages in public places like the family calendar.
- Remember it is how you say what you need to say that makes all the difference. You can say 'no' with respect for a person and their feelings. Express the desire to do what you aren't able to do because of the situation ("I would really love to take my cousin around Canberra if I didn't have my exams tomorrow"). Don't let your irritation of being caught in a difficult situation be directed at the people involved. Keep your feelings about the situation and the people completely separate.

"Get support from appropriate sources - be active and ask - communicate your needs to someone." Pradeepa

"English is not a permanent hurdle. Success depends on how you construct solutions." Lulu
Transcript of an interview with Tan Le

...transcript of an interview with Tan Le, Young Australian of the Year, 1998

Intended audience:
anyone who is interested in hearing about this person's story of hard work and achievement.

Suggestions for use:
background reading for teachers, counsellors and/or students.
Section 6: Transcript of an interview with Tan Le

A This is an interview with Tan Le, Young Australian of the Year, recorded on the 16th September 1998. Thank you for being prepared to take the time out to be interviewed.

T That's okay.

A And you said you were happy to have this recorded. The purpose would only be for students who might get some encouragement out of hearing what you have to say.

T Yes.

A Is that okay?

T Yes that's fine.

A All right then I think we might get started.

T Okay.

A I understand that you arrived as a refugee at the age of four.

T Yes.

Identity

A Can you tell me how you came to terms with your identity while you were growing up in Australia?

T I guess it was very easy for me, coming to Australia as a four year old because I had not yet established an identity as a person of Vietnamese origin. I suppose I grew up being an Australian. Nevertheless that identity was challenged time and time again as I was growing up because whilst I saw myself as an Australian, other people did not. Other people saw me as a Vietnamese, and many called me names, some even said, you know, “Go home” and I considered Australia as my home. So whilst I never really had an identity problem within myself, often there was a lot of external pressures which made me really think about what my identity really was. And I suppose I’m very lucky to have a very supportive family and a supportive community of people who have come from many different cultural backgrounds who are still finding their way in this new country and that made things a bit easier. I often felt that I wasn’t on my own. So yeah there were always difficulties in finding out who I really was and what my identity was and then coming to appreciate my heritage as well, my Vietnamese heritage. And that has always come as something that is very important to me and I’ve retained the
Vietnamese language as a part of my heritage and I think that is very important as an expression of your culture, the language and being able to communicate in your own language is very important. Those are the things that I ..., that's my personal experience.

A I see. And did you ever think about other issues contributing to your identity apart from your ethnicity, both Australian and Vietnamese?

T Always. I think my role has always been as a conduit in a sense, in bridging the two communities and in that sense my being aware of my identity as an Australian and also my heritage as a Vietnamese also helps in that regard because as I grew older there were a lot of opportunities that came to the front that allowed me to give emphasis to that. Opportunities that gave me the opportunity to really show my identity as an Australian and get recognised this Vietnamese heritage of mine. And I often organised multicultural days, for example for the Bulldogs. I also organised a lot of multicultural festivals in the area which celebrated my heritage but also invited other communities to sample that part of my culture which was special to me and the community.

A So then obviously both the Australian and Vietnamese parts of you have merged quite thoroughly do you think?

T They have merged very well. In fact I think it's hard now for me to determine which part of me is Vietnamese and which part of me is Australian because the two have... I think I have struck a very good, and a very nice balance between the two of them and I don't think you need to actually lose one to embrace another. I think that your identities exist in layers and instead of many people saying that you have to actually discard one identity to embrace another I think that you can actually have them all existing concurrently and coexisting and because they actually make up different layers of your identity. Like my heritage is one layer of me and my Australian identity makes up another layer of me and being a young person also comes into play as well, so I think that's something that's very important for people to realise that you don't actually need to lose any part of your identity in order to be something, you can actually have a combination of everything that will make you essentially a unique person.

A And do you think that one and one adds up to be more than two in this case?

T Yes I think that because identity and culture is so rich, by having two or three, the understanding and the things that you gain from it can actually result in much greater things than just them each separate. Separately they may only be worth one, but when you put them together I guess the synergies would result in them being more of greater value than them just being separate entities.
Training and education needs for migrants

A Okay, now I understand that you've been involved in a Vietnamese community organisation since you were fifteen.

T That's right, fourteen in fact.

A Fourteen, okay, and you've been responsible for setting up training for employment programs?

T That's right.

A I wanted to ask you because we're in a similar field ourselves here at the CIT,

T Yes,

A Do you think that training needs are different for migrants?

T I think training needs are definitely very, very different for migrants. I think that one of the things that we need to realise is that migrants and refugees are two very different groups of people as well because of the nature of them actually coming to settle in ..., the circumstances are different in which that has led them to come to settle in Australia. And being able to understand that difference in the circumstances helps to make training and re-training a lot easier.

The other thing is people who have come from such a background of migration in any form, they've always experienced some form of dispossession and in that sense it's the training needs and their particular training needs very unique. For instance in my own experience, training needs have always been a matter of not only providing the training program but also a whole host of support services that come into play as well because I think the situation is a lot more complex than just providing the actual training and the delivery of the course itself, but the delivery has to come also with support, with understanding, with interaction and with assisting the person to actually feel a part of the community so that they feel that they actually matter in this new world.

And the other thing that I found is something that's very effective in our training programs is that the fact that it's bilingual, it takes into account some of the difficulties, some of the initial difficulties that people face when they first come to another country being forced to learn a new language. Often their ability to absorb language to one hundred percent is very difficult and, irrespective of how slow you deliver your training courses, it's much more effective and efficient if you can deliver part of the course in Vietnamese and I found that that's always been a huge bonus that we have with our training programs, being able to deliver all of it bilingually.
A. Okay and do you think do you see the emotional support as part of that process?

T Yes definitely and that's what I mean by support over and above the actual delivery of the training because emotional support for people who have come from another country is very, very important and I think that comes in to making people feel that there is a place for them, making them feel welcome, making them feel that they do matter and that there are people out there who care for them, who want them to successfully integrate and who really want them to be a part of something. That emotional support is vital. I think it's essential for people who have come from other countries and that's been the case of my own family.

When we first arrived I think it was very, very important to us and I guess when you come to another country you come with this awareness and this fear of whether or not you will be accepted, whether you will be really embraced as a part of the community or whether you'll feel like you're on the edge or that you're not a part, as an outsider, and that sub-consciousness, that fear within our family was quickly dissipated because of the fact that we were so warmly welcomed. When we first arrived in Australia, we had a place to live, we had English programs delivered to us, we had food, clothing and then people warmly welcomed us. That package, that whole thing, that whole framework in which that was there made our settlement easier. And I think when you're thinking of training programs, I think that it is also very important that being able to make people feel that there is a place for them that ... you're going out of your way to make things easier for them will give them a lot more motivation.

A And I think you've struck a very important chord there when you say that it's important for students to feel that someone wants them to succeed.

T That's right.

A. Do you think that's been important in your experience?

T Well I've always been a very ..., I guess from being the eldest child of a refugee family, it's always been of primary importance that I do very well at school and the support that you have is very important. I know that when I was in primary school the teachers, the support of the teachers, the fact that my teachers recognised my potential and accelerated me made me feel very warm inside. I knew that they cared for not only the fact that I would do well in my own school environment but also that I get the best opportunities to go to my full potential, to excel to my very best. And I think that having that supportive environment makes a big difference for everyone not just newcomers, for every young person, for every person who's going through study, to feel that their teachers or their peers want them to succeed, their families want them to succeed. Although there's a bit of pressure there, I think it's positive pressure, it's something that makes people feel even more motivated and gives them a drive that makes them want to do even better.
A. Okay and you talked about teachers being a support/mentor in the earlier part of your life...

T Yes.

A ...in tertiary education, did you find that there were people there who could act as mentors?

T For sure. I think the ability to relate to your teachers..., if you have an opportunity, (and I think at tertiary level it's definitely more difficult to establish a personal relationship with your lecturers or tutors), but I've been very fortunate to be able to establish relationships, fairly good relationships with some of my lecturers and tutors and that's made the teaching part of it a lot more enjoyable. Being able to relate to them, being able to approach them at a more personal level and being able to feel their support and being able to feel that they understand you, not just as a number, as a student number, but as an actual person that they can put a face to a name, makes things even more special. I know that for particular subjects where I know the teacher knows me by name and knows me as a person that's always made me feel a greater drive to do well because I don't want to let them down. I think that's very important to have that rapport with your teachers and that encouragement from them constantly is very important.

A How do you actually start a relationship with a teacher? Have you ever thought about how it's happened or what steps you've taken?

T Well for a start, smaller classes facilitate that. I think for a larger lecture theatre with five hundred or so students it's very daunting to approach the lecturer unless you have a specific problem that you come to them for. But in some of the smaller lecture groups it's a lot easier. And I found that the teacher who..., actually my teacher went out of her way to learn our names and that made things a lot easier. When she learnt our names, we knew that she knew who we were and from that you can actually..., because I knew that she took an active interest in us, I also took the initiative to go up to her more often, to talk to her and the relationship just started from that. But I think it makes it a lot easier; really smaller classes make such a big difference. I know I wouldn't go up to a lecturer to have a chat if I was in a lecture theatre of about a thousand students. It would just be too difficult.

**Personal struggles**

A Sure. And another area we were interested in is: Have you come across any obstacles in your life, things that you've had to, personal struggles or struggles in your studies that you've had to resolve?

T Always. I think no one goes through life without obstacles and I think I'd be fooling
myself if I said that life was an easy road. I mean it's always difficult; you meet constant obstacles along the way. Many of mine and I think my most, my greatest obstacles have always been personal because I find that the academic obstacles that come along the way, I've always accepted that, that life, in life you can’t always have exactly what you planned for. Often if …, I always believe in you reap what you sow. If you put in the hard work, that's what you'll get in the end. You'll get returns only if you put in the hard work and no achievement will come without putting in a lot of effort and consistently over a long period of time. But yet, even when you put in a lot of hard work, you still have to be knocked back often. I mean I often experience times when I've put in so much hard work but it doesn't seem to get anywhere, doesn't seem to bring any returns. But I accept that, that’s a part of life and you move on, you have to be able to accept failures in order to learn from them, experience them and that’s a part of growing and learning. That’s a part of the learning curve and until you appreciate that, and that all the flavours of life that will enhance your experience and your ability to deal with more things, I don't think you can be a full person until you accept that life poses a lot of challenges.

Yes of course I've been through a lot of obstacles and many of them now. At the time, yes, they were difficult but one thing that I think that people should all remember, and I heard this from a speech of a very inspiring person, he said “Tough times don't last but tough people do.” And often when I go through life and I'm going through a rough patch, I think, “These tough times are not going to last but if I'm tough and I can get through it this time I'll be able to get through anything.” And it's really true. I mean now with the benefit of hindsight I look back and think “It's great that I've gone through that because I've learnt so much from that experience and it's made me a better person.

A So the negatives have actually enriched your life?

T For sure.

A In retrospect …..

T And I often say to lots of people that my life and my experiences and the way in which my family circumstances were was equally a recipe for failure as one for success and achievement. It’s how you look at it and it’s your attitude to life and it’s how you deal with the hard times and your hardships that will take you through.

A Well you’re obviously a very confident person and a very positive person. How do you think you've kept up that confidence? Have you ever lost it?

T There are times that I think I have but they haven’t ever been …. I suppose in my teenage years they were the hardest times in my life, when I was growing up, when I was challenged on all different fronts and growing up and trying to come to grips with
my own identity and pressure from the family to do well and then my own pressure, my own self-imposed pressure to do well. Those were tough times. But then they weren't really tough. They were only tough at the particular point in time and given my age and having to deal with so many different pressures but, um, no it's been a rough..... Can you repeat the question? I've kind of ...

A Yeah., I was just wondering how you keep up the confidence and the positive attitude?

T Well I must say that yes there's been hard times but I suppose because I've always accepted that life, you know, good times come part and parcel with hard times and difficult times. I mean I go through life smiling a lot and waking up in the morning and if the sun's out I'll be happy again. And the other thing is that I've got a very supportive family and I think that comes a lot into the equation. It's very, very important. My family has always been there for me both my mum and my younger sister have been there for me all the time. Every single time I've had a rough patch I've always been able to turn to them and talk to them. Friends have always been supportive. I've always had wonderful teachers.

And my mum in particular has been a very strong role model. She's always, I mean, for me, she epitomises the human spirit and the human will being able to move mountains. Really I mean it. It sounds like a cliche but I do believe the human will can move mountains of loneliness, mountains of hurdles, barriers, obstacles, anything. And for her, often when I look at her life I think "Oh what have I been through that's so life-threatening? What have I been through that's so challenging that I can't come to terms with?" So it just gets me through. I think "Well mum's been through it and she's been through harder times and yet she's still up there and still forging ahead, so I have to be able to go on." And it's the small things that when you look around you and you think "Hey, everybody started from humble beginnings. If people can do it, you can too." So I just keep going. I never say "Oh no." I never let a hard, you know a failure get to me.

Often many young people say "Oh no I failed that test, I didn't do well, I'm going to fail overall." And then they let one small thing depress them. Often, even when I get thirty something, and I have gotten thirty something for a test before, a mid semester test and thirty something percent is really bad and yet I still say I want a D for this subject. People think I'm mad. But hey it's achievable. You just have to put in a lot more work, but it's not impossible. If you want to do it, you can, irrespective of how impossible it seems. Even if you set yourself a goal and you don't achieve it, it doesn't hurt me. It just makes me feel that,"Hey, I've got to try harder next time"

And the other thing is that I often think you can't compare yourself to others. That's something that's very important. Often in our society we seem to measure people's success and achievement in terms of an absolute sense. The person who gets the top
VCE mark we would say that that person is the winner, that person's the best student. The person who wins the gold medal at the Olympics, that person is the best person because they're the winner. We don't think about people's achievements and how hard they had to work to get there. For me I don't measure success in that sense. I always have a private meaning of success and my own meaning of success is dependant on how much work I put in. I only accept personal goals and when I've put in my best even though it may not be ..., I may not have done as well as my friend, if I've put in the hard work I feel very satisfied and that's good enough for me. And until we, when we set goals to beat other people or to be competitive, we'll always feel depressed because everyone's got different talents, everyone's got different abilities, everyone has different circumstances. And it's only when we set our own goals based on our own standard. And we can only be disappointed if we don't put in the hard work. But if you've put in your 100%, I think if you set personal goals they're always achievable and you'd only be disappointed when you don't put in your best. And I think that's something that we should all remember - not to compare ourselves to others but to compare ourselves to ourselves and that way you can keep growing as a person.

A I know many students compare themselves to Australian students who they imagine are finding the work a lot easier and that they're getting a lot more out of the unit than they are and they lose confidence very quickly when they start comparing themselves to other students in the class.

T It's very difficult to say that but until you feel it within you and until you let it grow within yourself and let yourself believe it wholeheartedly that you can only compare yourself to yourself and to believe in your own achievements because they are great. Often I think, the person who wins the gold medal may not have been ..., that achievement may not have been as great as a person who works hard to even be in the Olympics in the first instance. Just to be in the race in the first instance that person may have worked so much harder and to me that person is equally successful. You can't compare people's achievements and until we all recognise that... And in my own family, my younger sister and I are totally different people. We don't compare ourselves to each other. We respect each other and we appreciate each other for our differences. I enjoy the academic pursuits, I enjoy the, you know, studying like mad and doing all sorts of things. My sister enjoys having an enjoyable time and having a comfortable and great social life and we're different. And I think it's important to recognise that everyone's different. We all come from different circumstances.

I mean I remember when I first started at school I was a terrible student. I couldn't cope when I first started. I couldn't understand what was happening. I was new to the school and every one had made friends and I had no one to play with but slowly I made friends and then I paid attention in class and often it was very hard and I couldn't... I remember the first time I played tables races. I was so bad. I used to cry after class because I was so terrible at them and everyone used to know what 2 times 3 was and I
just couldn't get it into my head and I remember studying every night tables races without fail. I would memorise it and practise it and practise it and every day I would just be the same and one day things started to change and I don't know what point it did but by the time I got to grade six I was a champion at tables races but I put in heaps of work. I put in more work than most of the other students, I'm sure.

A. So sometimes you think that when you reap what you sow, it may be a little way down the track?

T Yes, it's something that, exactly you reap what you sow but you don't exactly reap it straight away. You've got to appreciate that things take time, especially studying. It's an accumulation of knowledge, it doesn't happen overnight and that's the most challenging thing about studying. It's something, especially languages and things like, especially languages, I think that's the hardest thing to learn. And it's not like maths, it's not something that just hits you one day and you understand, it's something that takes a lot of time and a lot of polishing and a lot of work.

I remember I used to get terrible marks for English, and I remember feeling devastated getting a horrible mark for English and I thought "If I'm going to get this mark for English, how am I going to cope in Year 12?" My friend used to do her English essay at 9.30 at night the day before it was due and always get an A+ and I would do six, seven drafts, spend fifteen, sixteen hours on an essay and get C- and I kept doing it. And it doesn't matter how hard it was, it didn't matter how many drafts I had to do, I kept doing it. I kept going to the teachers and saying "What's wrong with my essay? Can you help me? Can you conference this for me?" And they helped me and by the time I got to Year 12 that friend of mine who consistently got A+, we ended up getting the same VCE score for English. And I say it never came easily. It was a lot of hard work but I achieved it in the end. And you've got to accept that, you know, it's hard work but it's achievable.

And I've met some wonderful students who I admire so much, people who've come to Australia and only, say in four years, and they've put in tremendous amounts of work to be able to grapple with the language and yet by the time they get to Year 12, yes they are mature age Year 12 students but they do so well because they've put in so much work and those are the people I truly, truly, truly admire. Their inner strength, their character, their ability to never let things go, to just keep going regardless of how hard it is. And you've got to have that feeling within you; you've got to feel that desire and when you've got that desire, I think things will happen.

A So it's really the perseverance that you're talking about during these studies. How do you think people can keep that up? What strategies have you used personally that have helped you?
T My thing is, I often think, I often say to myself, “I’ve got a long way to go. Life is a long road. I’m only 21 now, but often I think life is a long road.” Back in those days when I was young I used to think I’m not going to stay in this one place. Unless I put in hard work, I’m not going to move ahead and people will go on, life will go on and life is long. I’ve got to put in the hard work and I’ve got to keep going because irrespective of how much I’m failing now and how much times are difficult right now, things will improve and I’ve got a long way to go. I guess I’ve never feared failure. I’ve never had this fear that life will always be this way. I never think that “Oh I’m in this pit and I’ll never get out of it.” I always think “My goodness, life is a long way to go.” And you can keep going and you’ll never stay the same, you’ll constantly improve. I don’t know; it’s my attitude I suppose.

A Having such a long view of success, do you still find that you have to manage your time very carefully?

T For sure, time management is the one thing I learnt out of Year 12. I think it’s been very important and I think it’s come in handy for anyone. And this year has been particularly difficult managing an honours thesis on law, my commitments in community service as well as commitments in relation to the award but I’ve been able to manage, juggle all three. And lots of people think you must be crazy to do full-time law, your final year and do an honours thesis and all of these things. I mean people just do an honours thesis and their degree and that’s enough to stress them out. But I mean if you want to do it, you can do it and somehow, I don’t know, I don’t know what my strategy is. I’ve never said no to anything so I will accommodate anything.

A So it’s a desire to do it, a determination?

T I think people ... often if you say no to things too often, you shut yourself out from opportunities. And I often think people say you have to create your own opportunities and opportunities never come. And lots of people say “Oh I never get any opportunities to do anything.” But opportunities aren’t usually huge things and opportunities don’t really show themselves to be opportunities otherwise they wouldn’t be an opportunity. They often don’t show themselves and don’t manifest themselves as “Wow this is a wonderful opportunity, let’s grab it!” They often seem to not have any benefits at the end. But it’s an accumulation of doing a lot of small things that results in much bigger things. And I know for my life, it’s always been that way. I’ve never done anything for a short term reward. I’ve always done things because I think at least if I’ve done it, I’ll get an extra experience and it’ll be worth it, worth it for its intrinsic value to me. And it’s worth it for what it will do for an extra experience or what it will do for the next person that I’m helping. It’s never been “Oh I’m going to get this out of it or that out of it” because often it doesn’t show itself in that way. But if you do it often enough, something will happen at the end and it’s just like the things that happen to me in my life.
Section 6: Transcript of an interview with Tan Le

Often lots of people say “How did you know that you wanted to do community service?” Well I never knew that I wanted to do community service. I just did things, never with the intention of getting anything in return. It’s just a desire to do things. And even with things that people invite me to do this year often I don’t see any immediate reward. But you never know, maybe ten years down the track, that person that I said yes to, I may ring them up one day and they may remember me and say yes to something else. Or who knows what could happen? No, anything can happen. Life is a long road. Just keep on sowing lots of seeds and you’ll reap what you sow at the end.

A Sort of embracing the richness of it without feeling you have to restrict it?

T No. Lots of people say “Oh, are you getting any money for it?” Or “What are you going to get out of it?” Why do you have to get something out of it in order to do something? I mean why isn’t there any intrinsic value from doing it from the outset. I don’t know, some people, I can’t understand but for me I just enjoy doing lots of things. I suppose my mum’s always taught me to be the best person that I can be and to take as many opportunities as I can possibly take up. I suppose it comes from my background, having so little to begin with and not taking anything for granted. So even though something might seem small to other people it was still something, an opportunity. Because for me, when someone invites you to do something or someone gives you a responsibility, I believe that that is a sign of trust, them trusting and having confidence in you and why would you turn that down? That should be a great compliment. That should give you a great boost in confidence and energy and enthusiasm and yet people think of it as a chore and I don’t understand that. Often when my mum said “Could you do this for me? Why don’t you go clean the dishes?” I don’t think “Err that’s a chore.” I think “Hey my mum relies on me to do this. She must feel that I clean the dishes properly or my sister might be busy or something.” Okay, young people don’t think that way but I do. It’s all those things that... it’s your attitude and how you view life and how you view “opportunities” in inverted commas that makes a big difference.

A Well it’s certainly a very positive way of viewing every opportunity.

T Yeah.

Migrant women

A Mm. And you’ve often spoken about your mother and what a strong influence she’s had on your life. Do you think there are issues for migrant women as distinct in themselves that need addressing or special attention?

T I think migrant women are in a particularly difficult position because in the Australian
society the drive and the need for financial stability is very important for every family. And women often need to go out into the work force and often that challenges the cultural norms. I suppose I'm fortunate in the sense that my mother, while we struggled very, very much in our initial years, my mum, being a single parent family, didn't have to undergo that tremendous pressure of challenging that cultural norm, of having a husband there who said "No you can't work." And having that tension within the family. And that made things easier. And I suppose I've grown up with a belief of girl-power. You can do anything you want because my mum has done everything that a man has to do in the family and she's taken on dual or more roles and that's been quite important. But for migrant women I think their situation is very difficult and quite sensitive because you have to both balance the family and your role as a mother, as a wife, as well as your role within society and societal expectations of you. And I think that's definitely an area that's very difficult for many migrant women.

And I know within the Vietnamese community, migrant women often feel trapped within the homes, within their homes and it's only now they are starting to work outside the home. And there's still tension, there's still a lot of tension and I think often... And the other thing is that it's something that's self-imposed as well. Often migrant women think they'll sacrifice..., their life is over, they want to sacrifice their lives for their children. But I think my mum has a different attitude and perhaps by sharing this it might help some other migrant women. My mum never thought of her life as being over. My mum thought it was important for her to have a job so that she could create a life for us. But by the same token she thought it was important to give herself a future. Because by giving herself a future and by believing in her own future we would in turn believe in ours and I think that's very important. Many women just lock themselves in either the homes or their own working environment but don't embrace the community as a whole. They don't feel, they feel that their life is over. So all their energy is driven towards their children and they put a tremendous amount of pressure on their children. And so much expectation on their children to do well, their children don't necessarily perform in that way. I think it's very important that the child gets a positive role model. I don't want my mother to not have a life. I want her to enjoy her life. I want her to be a person. I don't want her to be someone who thinks her life is over. That's terrible. That's a terrible role model for me. I want my mother to know that she wants a life for herself, that she's got a drive, that she's enthusiastic about the future. She's got to put in whatever it takes to give us a future but also to give herself a future. And look at what my mum's done: she's worked extremely hard, she worked in a factory then she studied at night, every single night she would go to study. I mean what a positive role model to me. Yes it was hard and I love my mum all the more for it and that created more of a desire within me to not let her down because I knew that what she was doing was not only for herself but for us. And I think that positive role model for her, that drive within her had a lot of positive impact on me and my younger sister.
But a lot of women don't feel that way and a lot of people think, “My life is over. All I’ll do is I’ll create the best ... I’ll send my children to the best school.” But what they don't realise is that the school is only part of the way; the family environment has a major impact on how the child ... What kind of guidance can you give your child, if you don't understand the Australian society and what is expected of them? You will be imposing your own views and your own cultural expectations on your child and that may not fit in with the Australian views and the Australian philosophy of life. And I think that's very important. It's something that not many people are willing to say out loud. And I know I’m quite radical so I’ll say whatever I believe, and I’m not the kind of person who holds my views within myself and are not willing to articulate them. But I think that will challenge a lot of people's views but it’s true, that’s my own beliefs. Some people won’t agree with me but I think that is very important and that comes from my own experience.

A  I can understand what you're saying - that basically the importance of a mother to create a life, a valuable life for herself in order to not only be a role model for her children but to pass on the wisdom of how to create it

T  That's right and that’s very, very important. And often I meet many women who ask me why has their child been an under-achiever although they were very bright but why are they under-achievers? And I ask them “What do you do when you’re at home? What does your child see you do when you’re at home?” And there’s a breakdown in communication because the mothers only work at home doing either sewing or some other domestic duty. And often they ..., there’s a communication breakdown because of the language problem and then on top of that, that’s compounded by the lack of understanding of how the child is brought up in this society. I think it’s very difficult to strike a balance but you can. And often I think that my mum’s done very well in saying that she needs a life too and she recognises that in order to provide guidance for us, she too has to make something of herself.

A  And you've spoken about your mother. How about friends? Have they been important in the area of study?

T  My friends have been important but nowhere near as important as my family.

A  Right.

T  And the same with my teachers. They are a very important part of my learning but I think the greatest shaping factor in my life ... I mean, okay in terms of my academic studies and all of my academic pursuits, my teachers and my peers have had a significant impact on it but I’d say the greatest force that shaped me as a person both my drive and my enthusiasm and my desire to do things and to keep going has been shaped by ... all of it has been really ... I think by far the greatest amount of it has been shaped by my family. And my mum is the driving force in that.
Mm, so you've never ever felt isolated?

No I have not felt isolated. I think that's strange but the only time I would have felt isolated is when I was in Year 7 when I went to a school that was totally unsupportive of me and I experienced a lot of discrimination and a lot of ... It was very hard; that was a very hard year and yes I felt very lonely, I felt like an outsider. I felt very isolated but that was only one year in my life. And it was a good year to experience that, to wake up and think “Hey people aren't all friendly and not all nice!” Yeah I guess you've got to see that side of life as well. And it was a good year in the end because towards the end my mother realised that I was going through a really rough time and had a really hard school and a very, very hard environment but still it didn't affect my academic marks or anything like that. I actually did very well that year because I suppose everything else was external and the only thing I could control was my school work and how well I did at school so I did very well.

Taking responsibility for learning

Well this leads me to another aspect of being educated in Australia: how students have to take responsibility for their own learning. Do you think that's a good thing?

I think it's a very good thing. I think it's very important that we all take responsibility for our own learning because I think that there is only so much that you can do to help a student. The student must recognise and must realise within themselves that they must have discipline and motivation and take responsibility for their own lives. I mean you can't impose that; it's something that must come within. And I know all the times that I've studied, it hasn't been because my mum has forced me to. Yes I've seen her role and know that she's had a lot of expectations of me. Much of it was self imposed. All of the times when I forced myself to study because of course mum worked very hard, she studied at nights and no one was really home to say “Tan you have to study hard.” No-one just sat there to force me to study. All I knew was that my mum expected me to study so I studied. And I think it's very important to take responsibility for yourself because it's your life. How can you expect someone else to do things like that? You can't. You've got to take responsibility for yourself, for your own life and be responsible about it and when you fail it's your own fault. You can't blame it on others either. When I don't do well, I never say “That's because the teacher was bad.” I don't say “That's because of whatever!” I always say “That's because I didn't put in enough work or my priorities were divided.” And I have to re-look at my priorities and head down and ...

Do you think the ability to ask lots of questions is another critical aspect of learning in Australia?

I think yes it is a very critical aspect but I must say I'm not the type. I'm too shy to ask
questions in class. I've always been a very quiet student and I think that was my greatest downfall and made learning much harder for myself. Everything that I've learnt has always been through sheer hard work at home going through the pages of the book, reading it ten times if I don't understand it and reading it ten times again if I don't understand it. Leaving it and reading it again. So I go through it the hard way. But I think if you are able to ask questions, it makes life so much easier. But asking questions can only come when you also have the confidence to ask questions and have an assertive attitude to studying. And I know only in the latter years of my schooling have I developed that. And I must confess all through primary school, all through high school and in the first years of tertiary education, in that sense my participation has been very poor and all through my reports my teachers have always said "She's very quiet, a very good student but she's extremely quiet. She should participate more in class." And I think that's something that I've had to really overcome and has been my greatest weakness. And being forced to do public speaking often now I get huge nerves but I force myself to do it. And I think it's just a matter of ... and I say to people, people say "You're so confident, you come across so well." And I say "Well I'm not like that." And I was never that way. I've forced myself to really create that ability within myself and I think everything's achievable if you have the will power to do it.

A  And do put your shyness to ask questions down to cultural...?

T  I think part of it is cultural. I think lots of people don't realise that we in the Vietnamese culture, for example, children are not encouraged to be assertive. They are encouraged to just listen and to not ask questions, to not challenge opinions, to not challenge the norms. And I think it's quite different when you get home and that's what's expected of you and then when you go to school it's the opposite is expected and demanded of you as a student. So they conflict a bit. But I guess I'm lucky that my family was not really like that.

A  That's interesting, so you've managed to walk the fine line between showing respect, asking some questions as well.

T  Yeah but no it's been good. Yes I must confess, I've been very bad but that doesn't mean that you're not a good student. I mean some people participate a lot in class but generally don't put in the hard work at home to be able to translate that understanding and that knowledge into being able to do the exam. So I know there's a lot of students who are interactive in class but their results are not necessarily as good as the ones who are quiet. I guess there's a fine balance there, but I've always been willing to go up to the tutor after class to ask questions. And I've always asked friends and I think that being able to work with friends, and to share ideas, and to discuss ideas and to moot different ideas and opinions is very important as well.

A  And you said that you read a lot for study?
T  Yes before and after.

A  *Before and after, okay.*

T  Okay I'm a very weird student. Every student says you can't be bothered but I see that it makes a big difference. You don't have to read a lot, just skim through it. Even if you just read the contents page, the summary page or even the page where it has the headings. Just reading the headings will give you a structure as to what it is about and then when you go to class you will at least have some sort of mental framework in which to work with and I think that makes it easier and then after class I tend to read the lecture notes again that I've jotted down or I read the textbook. And often I don't have time so I'll skim through the lecture and often that will just settle in my brain for a little while and then before the exam I will do my summary.

A  *Mm that's a great tip. Do you have any other tips to help students with their studies that you feel have worked well?*

T  That has worked very well. And doing summaries at the end of every topic, if you have time. That's very useful. Particularly in law you have to do a lot of, you cover so much, especially in university, you cover so much that you do need to do that.

A  *Right well I think we're down to our last question. Now Tan, I really wanted to ask you, you've achieved a lot - a commerce law degree and an honours thesis and you've been awarded a scholarship and Young Australian of the Year and you've been very instrumental in projects in your community. You've been very successful. If you had to analyse the one thing above all else that has helped you reach those goals how, what would you say it was?*

T  Just determination.

A  *Just determination?*

T  Nothing more. And I think with my determination, it encompasses a lot of things. I've always accepted that anything I want to achieve has to come with hard work and being able to accept that and being able to say “Yes I'm willing to put in the hard work and I'm willing to put in the effort irrespective of how hard times get.” And having that determination to succeed will get you places.

A  *Mm now that's very inspiring. I've enjoyed your interview immensely.*

T  Thanks Annette.

A  *And I'm sure other students will find it equally as valuable and inspiring.*

T  I hope so. I hope I didn't speak too quickly.

A  *No it was marvellous. And I'm very appreciative of the amount of time it's taken. I consider*
that a gift in itself that you're prepared to give so much of your time and I know how little you have when you're so busy but I suppose that you've demonstrated once again that you never say no and that you will take on any challenge.

T Yeah, no that's right. Well thanks Annette.

A No thank you. And I'll be in touch to let you know the final...

T Yeah if you have any feedback from it, I'd love to hear from you.

A That would be great. I'll send something in writing to you and we'll be able to see...

T Okay, fantastic. Thanks so much for that I've enjoyed it a lot.

A I'm very, very grateful to you and I look forward to showing you what's come out of it.

T All right then thanks a lot Annette. I'll talk to you soon then.

A Thanks.

T Bye.

A Bye.
Some teaching materials

7.1: The journey: a guide to writing in Australia
7.2: Diagrams illustrating cross cultural differences in teaching and learning

Intended audience:

support teachers.

Suggestions for use:

for use when supporting migrant students; background reading; materials for staff development.
7.1: The journey: a guide to writing in Australia

Introduction

One of the easiest ways to bring out what is important in any area is to make an analogy. By comparing the process of writing to something we can all understand - a journey, the main parts become more real and the relationship between the parts more obvious. In this brief guide, writing is compared to a journey with a tour guide and passengers - with some interesting similarities!

Packing up (Purpose)

Imagine a situation where you have been successful in getting a job as a tour guide. The director of the company has given you the responsibility of taking 10 passengers on tour to any country you choose. You will have a meeting with the director soon, but at the moment all you have been told is:

- the meeting is strictly 10 minutes
- you will be given $100,000 to cover costs
- the money left over from the trip is your personal profit
- the director will be leaving to go overseas and won’t be able to be contacted
- no one else in the company knows anything about the tour

List the question you would like to ask the director before he leaves. Discuss this with your teacher or role play the interview with your teacher.

Firstly, as an experienced tour guide you should have a clear idea of why you are going on this journey. If not, you will not know where to go or what to focus on. If, for example, your purpose is to educate your passengers, you may focus on trips to museums or historical sites. So what you choose to do is strongly linked to why you are going on the trip. It is the same with writing. The ideas you choose to include in your essay are strongly linked to your reason for writing (the purpose).

Only an inexperienced tour guide would refuse to prepare for a trip and it would also be harder to gain something valuable from a trip if you haven’t set goals about what you want to achieve.

Although it is not as easy for the writer as for the traveller, it is very wise to answer this question first: “What am I trying to achieve both generally and specifically?” This makes it easy to understand the main purpose for your writing.
The passengers (The reader)

No experienced tour guide would organise a trip and leave on tour without knowing anything about their passengers. Similarly a good writer stops to consider their readers - their age, knowledge of the topic, cultural and educational background etc. These considerations change the amount of jargon (technical language), the style and also how formal the writing needs to be.

Being able to see things from the point of view of the passengers is one way of guaranteeing the success of a trip. Similarly being able to see things from the point of view of the reader is one way of guaranteeing the success of the writer.

How often do you consider what the reader of a document needs to know rather than what you want to say?

Think of an important letter you have written in the past. Put yourself in the place of the person you were writing to and list the information that person needed to know and nothing else.

Road maps (Mindmapping)

Looking at a map is essential at two stages of travelling:
• before you leave to determine the best route
• while you are travelling to make sure you are on track.

Similarly in writing mindmapping is used to create your own map of ideas to:
• list ideas and see how they are related to each other
• decide on the order of the ideas (usually the strongest arguments come first)
• make sure that your writing is balanced (the most important ideas should take up most of the space)
• have a plan to make sure you are structuring your writing well.

A road map ensures that you visit all the towns in a region before you leave so that you are not travelling back and forth and also that you visit the most important places first in case you run out of time. Similarly having a mindmap and thinking ahead in this way means that you group related subjects together in your writing and prioritise.

Select a topic and ask everyone in the group to write down one point. Arrange the ideas into a mindmap and number each ‘branch’ according to how important the group feels it is.
The itinerary (Introduction)

A set order of events and destinations makes people feel relaxed on a trip. Similarly writing an introduction that tells the reader what you are going to say makes the reader feel more comfortable. A good tour guide will usually tell his passengers:

- the main reason for the trip and what they hope you will gain
- where you are going (usually in order)
- why it will be interesting.

A good writer in the same way prepares the reader in the introduction by:

- stating the main idea of your document
- stating the issues that are important in your document (usually in order)
- creating interest, that is, a desire to read on.

The journey (The body)

If you were told that you would be travelling to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide by your tour guide but instead went to Brisbane, Sydney then Melbourne you would probably feel confused and annoyed. We have the same expectations as readers. If the writer has promised to deal with certain subjects in a certain order then we expect to see this reflected in the body of the writing.

Rest stops (Paragraphs)

A good tour also recognises the need for regular breaks. Paragraphs give space and ‘rest’ between the main groups of ideas, or each branch of the mindmap, both to the eyes (visually) and to brain (mentally). They also make the structure of your essay dearer.

Look at the mindmap you have constructed and decide where you would place your paragraphs.

Home at last (Conclusion)

At the end of the journey it is natural to discuss the main highlights (the best parts) of your trip. If you are asked why you felt it was important you can answer by talking about the trip as a whole and why you felt it was valuable or you can talk about the importance of some of the main parts of the trip. In writing you are expected to do the same:

- summarise your main points
- say why they are significant (either as a whole or as separate parts)

Construct a conclusion based on the ideas you have collected in your mindmap.
Diagrams illustrating cross-cultural differences in teaching and learning

The following two pages are diagrammatic representations which I have used to illustrate the differences between our current education system and more traditional, teacher-centred systems that many of our students were used to in their countries of origin. These pages can be made into overhead projections for use in staff development sessions, or for discussions with students especially in orientation workshops.
Transfer of knowledge

Western Culture

- How to find info
- How to structure info
- How to present info
- How to understand info

- Teacher encourages independent learning
- Teacher encourages questions
- Teacher models analytical approach
- Teacher’s viewpoint is one of many

Other Cultures

- Teacher demonstrates skills
- Teacher’s knowledge is always true
- Teacher closely supervises and is responsible for learning
- Teacher is only source of knowledge
- Only teacher assesses student
- Student does not usually ask questions
Assessment

Western Culture

• plagiarism (copying straight from text books) is not acceptable

• Student collects, analyses and structures information which comes from many sources

  Reduces information to main point

  Applies knowledge and skills to a new situation

  Presents information appropriately (e.g. oral presentation or report)

  Develops personal understanding, new or creative ideas

  Develops an understanding of study skills, exam techniques

Correct or Incorrect

Teacher

Other Cultures

• student should memorise and recall information
• student should expand details

Student should recall all information
Information is from teacher or text book
Testing at end of year
Annette Sharma has worked with migrants in TAFE for the past 16 years. Her commitment to adult migrant education has evolved both from being a daughter of migrant parents who arrived in Australia in the 1950s and from being married to a more recently-arrived Indian. This has taken her to the heart of other cultures and sensitised her to the needs of migrants to master both the English language and the cultural dynamics of Australia. She was motivated to write this book by the desire to have migrant students recognised as a rich resource within learning environments – a resource which mainstream students and teachers can draw upon for a clearer understanding of their own cultures.

Since her first teaching experiences in Sydney in 1977, Marie Zuvich has been involved in migrant education and currently works in the Student Services Centre of the Canberra Institute of Technology as Student Equity Officer for Migrants. Marie coordinates a program which offers subject-specific support to migrant students, particularly in areas where their success rates have been lower than those of their English-speaking background peers. Using strategies as described in this book and the experience and sensitivity of teachers like Annette, this program has dramatically increased the success rates of migrants at the CIT.