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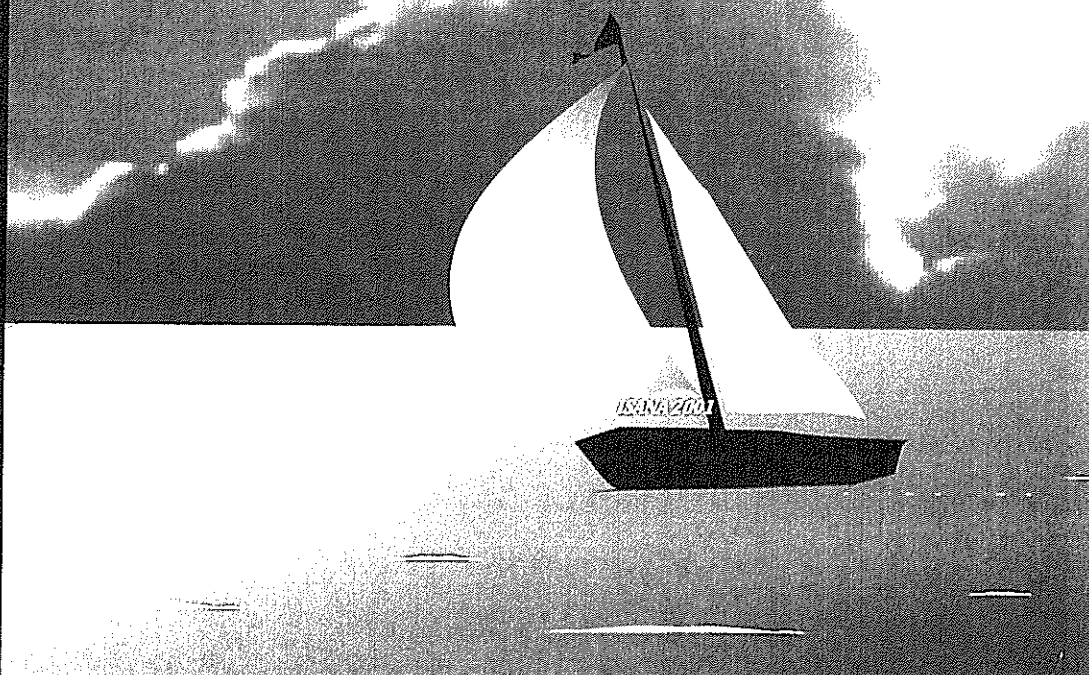
# ***HARNESSING THE POWER***

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**SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
COMMUNICATION SKILLS DEVELOPMENT:  
WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T AND WHAT MIGHT**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Many international tertiary students studying in Australia require English communication skills support to help them achieve their full potential in what, for many, is a second language. This involves not only support with continued development in English language, but related issues such as:

- understanding local academic expectations/ conventions
- learning required referencing systems
- understanding and acquiring local conventions for interpersonal discourse
- understanding cultural contexts impacting on communication, and so on.

Another major issue remains the sensitising of teaching staff to better understand the needs of international students generally, and in regard to English communication skills in particular. The Curtin Business School (CBS) Communication Skills Centre was established for the purpose of providing support to its student population, both local and international, and also to assist staff to be better equipped to deal with student needs. Now in its third year of operation, the Centre has provided student and staff support in a variety of ways and using different strategies. This paper examines some of the strategies developed by Centre staff and describes those that have been more successful. It also discusses some of the issues which remain in this area and examines some possible solutions.

**Background**

The CBS Communication Skills Centre was established early in 1999. A CBS Working Party for the 'Professional Skills Project' (1998), comprising staff, student and employer representatives, had identified communication skills among the five 'professional skills' that were considered essential for Curtin commerce graduates. These skills were: communication, information literacy, computer literacy, decision-making and working in teams. As can be seen, communication skills were not only clearly identified in their own right, but could arguably be said to permeate all the other skills listed. The Working Party recommended setting up a language support service that would help to develop commerce students' communication skills to high levels and assist academic staff to better support student communication skills development in the course of their teaching.

Extensive staff and student consultation was undertaken in the establishment phase of the Centre, in order to ensure that the adopted model would best meet perceived needs. Those consulted included Heads of School and unit controllers from all CBS Schools, and representatives of student groups. As well, the Consultant appointed to establish the Centre had previously undertaken a Curtin-based study of '*Non-English speaking background students' perceptions of their linguistic and educational needs*' (Briguglio, 1998), which provided valuable background information.

## OPERATIONS OF THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS CENTRE

The Centre operates in a culturally and linguistically diverse environment (2001 statistics indicate that 56% of all CBS students are international students) and its services are geared not only to take this into account but also to enhance cross-cultural understanding among students and staff. Our Division-based model<sup>1</sup> of communication and study skills support has the following advantages:

- language support can focus on the discourse of the business disciplines;
- support is located close to the student population near a main student thoroughfare;
- Centre staff (a full-time coordinator and a 0.6 lecturer) are a part of the Division and this facilitates interaction with other CBS staff;
- the operations of the Centre support teaching and learning developments in Schools in the Division;
- students feel more at home with a Division-based service than with a centrally-provided service;
- Centre staff more easily become familiar with and to students in the Division.

The Centre operates chiefly in the three following areas:

- student support
- staff support
- promotion, coordination and leadership in the area of communication and study skills development.

### Student Support

The Communication Skills Centre is available to all students in the Division and provides communication and study skills support in a variety of ways to meet a wide range of student needs. The operations of the Centre are based on the belief that all students can improve their communication skills in order to achieve their full potential in university studies. The services of the Centre are promoted and publicised in a positive light avoiding any connotation of failure or deficit. Students see the support offered as a very valuable service, as some of their testimonials indicate:

[By using the services of the Communication Skills Centre] not only am I improving my communication skills but also I'm applying the best communication skills that I can for my study (...) Through the support given by the staff, our writing, speaking, presentation, referencing and other skills can be improved (e-mail from Suzana Hermawan, 2000 international undergraduate student).

The student support component operates chiefly by offering students:

- one-to-one support
- small group consultations/ tutorials; and
- communication skills seminars/workshops on a range of relevant topics.

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<sup>1</sup> Curtin Business School (CBS) is a Division of the University comprising six Schools: Accounting, Marketing, Management, Information Systems, Business Law, Economics & Finance and the Graduate School of Business

### *One To One And Small Group Consultations*

One-to-one consultations address individual needs in the specific context of the student's course/ unit. Such consultations involve providing students with:

- suggestions for improvement in their writing or oral presentation
- an analysis of common errors in their writing and suggestions for editing
- concrete exemplars (eg example of a media release)
- advice on particular assignments
- advice on preparation of CVs/resumes and job applications
- the opportunity to practice, for example, an oral presentation
- general advice in regard to study skills
- encouragement.

One-to-one consultations are scheduled to fit in with student availability, including late afternoon/ evening meetings for part-time students. One-to-one meetings generally address individual linguistic/ study requirements of students and are particularly useful since they provide tangible, in-context support at point of need.

Students make appointments to see staff from the Centre several days ahead and must submit a copy of their written work at least 24 hours beforehand. Draft assignments are read and problem areas underlined but not corrected. This is important, because students are made aware that Centre staff are not there to 'correct' their work, but rather to help them improve the quality of their writing. Areas for improvement are then discussed with the student in an individual consultation which lasts anywhere from 20 to over 60 minutes, although the average time spent with students is between 30 and 45 minutes. Although these sessions are time consuming, we feel they are very effective and have noticed visible improvements in the written English and assignment structure of students who consult us regularly.

A group consultation operates in a similar fashion, with the emphasis often on editing to standardise the assignment and discussion of possible group issues. Students may also consult Centre staff for oral work, to discuss/clarify an assignment topic or to obtain advice on study skills.

### *Student Workshops/Seminars On Communication Skills*

Seminar topics were developed with student and staff input and are modified according to ongoing feedback. A list of some fifteen topics has been developed over the last three years, including a series of workshops on various aspects of academic writing, oral presentation, working in groups, resume writing and job interview skills, and examination techniques.

Initially seminars of different time duration were offered: three hours, two hours and one and a half hours. It was found that students could attend the three-hour seminars only during inter-semester break and one and a half hours was often not quite enough to undertake practical tasks. In 2001 the two-hour sessions have been adopted as the norm. Seminars are repeated at different times and on different dates to allow as many students as possible to access them and all seminars are held in a convenient location in one of the business buildings. They have a very practical, workshop focus and are interactive, with students often working in pairs or in small groups.

### **Collaboration With Academic Staff**

Another aspect of the service involves working collaboratively with academic staff to enable them to better address the communication skills needs of students in the teaching and learning context. Current research indicates that student support is most effective when related to students' learning context and closely linked to support strategies from content lecturers (Hattie, Biggs & Purdie, 1996; Hicks & George, 1998). Collaboration with staff includes:

- input into units in the form of guest lectures/tutorials tailored to unit requirements;
- joint planning to build into units a requirement that students consult staff from the Communication Skills Centre, for example for group assignments; and
- informing staff regularly of the support available to students and staff.

This part of the operation will gradually be expanded to include more staff development and joint planning of units so that support is even more 'embedded' within course content. We also hope to encourage staff to participate in joint classroom-based research in the area of communication skills.

### **Promotion Of Cross-Cultural Understanding Among Students And Staff**

The lack of interaction between Australian and international students has been identified as a more recent problem in Australian universities (Volet & Ang, 1998 & 1999; Hawthorne, 1997; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000). The Centre aims to promote interaction between local and international students and to raise staff awareness of cross-cultural issues.

This is done in a variety of ways. In regard to students, a weekly English conversation class (with local volunteers) has been established to encourage mixing between local and international students as well as to develop conversation and facilitation skills. As well, a requirement has been built into the CBS Plus Certificate program for a 'communication plus'. The CBS Plus comprises a series of extra-curricular activities, for which students acquire a series of 'pluses'. For the communication 'plus' students must attend at least 4 communication skills seminars and carry out and write a brief report of an interview with a student from a cultural background other than their own.

In order to promote cross-cultural understanding among academic staff and to raise staff awareness of student needs in the communications area, the Centre coordinator organised a seminar on the topic 'The implications for CBS of a student population which is, increasingly, more culturally and linguistically diverse'. Other staff seminars have been planned on teaching and learning issues in a cross-cultural context. The Centre coordinator has also successfully promoted the establishment of a CBS cross-cultural teaching prize to be awarded for the first time in 2001.

### **Other Developments**

A self-access reference section for student and staff borrowing has been developed and continues to be expanded. This contains books, videos, CDs and other suitable materials. Of particular importance to students is the availability of exemplars for reference which we hope to build up.

A Communication Skills Centre web page is being developed and will be ready for semester 1, 2002. The web site will provide:

- information about services available and a link to Centre staff
- exemplar documents which can be downloaded

- links to other useful web sites
- a frequently asked questions component
- an interactive element for students
- an information/ support element for staff, with suggestions for teaching and learning.

The website will provide 24-hour access, making the services of the Communication Skills Centre more accessible and flexible for larger numbers of students and staff.

### **Monitoring The Content And Quality Of Our Programs**

The work of the Centre is evaluated on an ongoing basis through gathering formal and informal feedback from students and staff.

Statistics are kept for all consultations, workshops, guest lectures and seminars and any other related matters and reports are provided to CBS Executive every semester. This is very important since a service such as ours bears a cost for our Division. Tight record keeping has proved very useful in justifying the need for extra staff and in making a case for other resources. The work of the Centre is also aligned very closely with the Division's Strategic Plan, showing how we contribute to the achievement of CBS goals and how we add to the 'quality' dimension.

## **ISSUES FOR STUDENTS**

After three years, the Centre is operating very successfully and fulfilling a much-needed function in CBS. However, several issues remain for staff and students, some directly connected with our service, some more broadly related to English communication skills, particularly for international students. The following are some of the more pertinent issues for students.

### **Academic Expectations**

Tertiary students are not given explicit instructions upon enrolment on how to write at university (Jessup, 2001). For local students, the leap can be big enough, but international students must grapple with so many more factors: an additional language, different cultural assumptions, culture shock, feelings of isolation, and so on. To write academically, students need to take on the identity of a learner of academic discourse. Many of them are not given the rules to do so, and are expected to acquire the academic code as if by magic. The series of workshops that we offer aims to provide some of the rules of the academic code which are not made explicit and opportunities to put them into practice with immediate feedback.

### **Reluctance To Speak Out**

Many international students find it extremely difficult to participate confidently in tutorials and class discussions. The reasons for this are many and complex and not just due to so-called 'cultural differences'. For example, international students have indicated that apart from 'cultural differences' in teaching and learning approaches, other reasons might be that they:

- were used to being 'spoon fed' in their home country
- are shy about speaking up
- feel their English is not as fluent as that of local students
- are not used to the Australian tutorial system
- cannot understand some of the slang/jargon of local students (Briguglio, 1998).



Academic staff often express their frustration at the lack of international student participation in class discussion. A study conducted by Ferris & Tagg (1996) indicates that academic staff may not be effective in responding to international students' needs since they "often assumed that 'cultural inhibitions' were the reason for ESL students' 'shyness', when perhaps adjustments in their own lecturing or discussion-leading style might cause non-native speakers to comprehend more and gain confidence in their listening and speaking abilities" (Ferris & Tagg, 1996, p 314).

In our student seminars and workshops we try to encourage maximum student participation, emphasizing pair and group work and building up student confidence to speak out. The need for Centre staff to work more closely with academic staff to raise awareness in this area remains a challenge.

### **Confusion And Fear About Plagiarism**

With recently widely publicized cases of how Australian universities have dealt with plagiarism and claims of soft marking, this year there has been even more confusion and fear amongst students about referencing conventions and avoiding plagiarism. The Communication Skills Centre runs student workshops on Harvard referencing and developing and expressing ideas in academic writing. These workshops are well attended.

Not only does the concept of referencing not exist in many countries, but some students may be struggling with language issues. Students can generally pick up the technical rules of using the Harvard system far quicker than their level of English can improve. The result is an assignment which is a jigsaw of pieces of texts that are referenced correctly but which remain largely unchanged from the original texts, and with little of the student's 'own voice'. This makes it very difficult to gauge student understanding of the topic. The ability to paraphrase is extremely limited if one's comprehension of the original text is poor, or if one's vocabulary is very limited.

If students are to develop an academic voice, they need opportunities to try it out with a fluent conversation partner, and preferably a non-threatening one, in an effort to communicate about something they really need to utter (...) They are the conditions that one-to-one teaching provides, when it is focused on work that students are doing for their disciplines (Chanock, 2000 p 2).

### **Relationship With Teaching Staff**

International students often encounter some difficulty in adjusting to the student/teacher relationship that is expected in Australian universities. A study of Chinese and Western-trained teachers in Hong Kong by Kelly and Ha (1998) suggests that while both groups have similar concerns about student-teacher relationships, they tend to express these concerns in different ways. Western teachers tend to keep what is often termed 'a professional distance', presenting themselves as caring but usually within the boundaries of class time, and wary of becoming too close to students in order to maintain an unbiased approach to assessment. Chinese teachers, however, were more likely to relate to students informally out of class time and were not concerned that this could affect assessment.

Given the increasing time pressures on teaching staff in Australian universities, it is no surprise that they are finding it increasingly difficult to be available to students when needed. Newly arrived international students are unlikely to understand the reasons for this and often interpret the difficulty in meeting with their tutors as unwillingness to offer support. It is not uncommon to hear comments about lecturers being 'unapproachable' or 'too busy'. It may



well be easier for students to make an appointment to seek academic support from staff at the Communication Skills Centre than it is to see their own lecturers and tutors. Whilst we often suggest that students see their tutors for advice on content and expectations, we can provide suggestions on how to approach an assignment and offer language support. In this sense, we fulfill a need for many international students.

Students sometimes express a reluctance to clarify task requirements with their lecturers for fear that they will appear stupid. They are less hesitant to ask us, as assessment is not involved. Thus, we provide a less threatening source from which advice/clarification may be sought.

### **Group Work**

Group work continues to be a problem for many students, both local and international, with complaints about group members doing unequal amounts of work, interpersonal problems and other issues. Nevertheless, for some students, group work provides an enforced opportunity for cross-cultural collaboration, which although not always easy, is often a valuable learning opportunity in which stereotypes and assumptions may be dispelled.

There are numerous strategies that group participants can use to minimize some of the problems encountered in group work, most successfully with the cooperation and support of their tutor. The Communication Skills Centre runs workshops on group work skills which have proven popular, but again, Centre staff feel that working in collaboration with teaching staff on this topic would be most successful.

### **Postgraduate Students**

Approximately 20% of the students we see are postgraduates. Most of them come regularly for language support with assignments but occasionally we are asked to read a whole thesis. We have declined to do the latter, not only because of the huge demands this would make on our time, but also because we do not provide an editing service and do not see this as part of our role. We have developed a policy that we will read critically a maximum of 30 pages or a chapter of any postgraduate thesis to provide linguistic advice. In addition to the service we offer, students may be referred to the Postgraduate Study Plus Program run by Curtin's Centre for Educational Advancement, which provides a series of seminars for postgraduate research students.

### **Levels Of English**

We occasionally see international students whose skills in English are not adequate for independent tertiary study. This can cause severe stress for the student and for all concerned. The University has a policy that undergraduate international students in their first year on the Bentley campus may undertake the unit Intercultural Studies free of charge. This unit is designed to improve international students' English skills and to assist them to make the transition to tertiary study in a second language. Postgraduate students can also avail themselves of the unit Cultural Literacy which has similar aims but is geared towards postgraduate study. As well, the School of Languages and Intercultural Education has recently developed an English Language Bridging (Postgraduate Research) program, which international students may undertake concurrently with or prior to commencing postgraduate studies.

Within the parameters of our operation we can do little, however, to help international students dramatically improve their fluency in written and spoken English in a short time frame.

## ISSUES FOR CENTRE STAFF

A number of issues have arisen in the course of our work; some we feel we have addressed well while others require ongoing attention. These are described below.

### Publicising Services Available

In order to reach the CBS student population there is a need to publicise available services in a variety of ways, through different media and in an ongoing way. Such publicity thus far has included the following strategies:

- areas of high student traffic in the two business buildings at Curtin are targeted for distribution of fliers advertising services available and the semester seminar program;
- posters advertising the service have been placed in busy student thoroughfare areas;
- copies of all fliers are sent to each CBS School for display in the School foyer;
- regular e-mails with the semester seminar program are sent to all staff encouraging them to inform students of services offered and informing them of other relevant developments;
- some 150 overhead transparencies advertising the service were distributed to Schools in the Division in 1999;
- copies of relevant documents are sent to the central University Counselling Service and to student associations;
- Centre staff visit many classes each semester to advertise services available. Staff are also involved in student orientation and induction programs where the services of the Centre are publicised;
- guest lectures/ tutorials are also used to advertise the services of the Centre.

A brochure advertising services to students was developed in 2001 and the launch of the Centre web page in early 2002 should prove an excellent way to publicise its services as well as providing easier access to greater numbers of students. As well as the above, all marketing documents and media for the Division now include information about the services offered by the Centre.

In spite of all the above strategies, there are still cases where third year students, for example, exclaim that they wish they had found out about our services sooner. Publicity about available services needs to be ongoing. In 2002 it is planned to undertake a marketing survey (possibly through the School of Marketing) to establish the level of awareness of our services among the CBS student population. Based on the results of this survey, other strategies may be developed.

### Promoting Collaboration With Academic Staff

It is important to ensure that the work of the Centre is not isolated but continues to be part of developments within the Division. Working more closely with academic staff is likely to produce better results for students, providing in-context support at point of need, thus creating greater relevance. However, it is not always easy to promote joint work with academic colleagues who are extremely busy and focused on subject content. In CBS, where we have a large professional skills program, collaboration has been fostered particularly with those lecturers engaged in emphasising communication skills within particular units. Such collaboration has produced encouraging results, with pre- and post- questionnaires indicating that students perceive they have improved their communication skills in those particular units. We need to become more expert at selling the message that greater collaboration with us will mean better student assignments and learning in the long run.

In order to keep staff abreast of developments and services, a series of e-mail bulletins are posted during the year to all CBS staff. As well, written feedback is provided to staff when they refer students to us with particular problems. This ensures that staff are reminded of the existence of the service and that they refer students to the Centre on an ongoing basis.

Much more remains to be done in the area of raising staff awareness of the language and learning needs of international students and other ways of engaging academic staff will need to be explored.

### **Managing The Flow Of Work**

It is very easy in this type of role to be inundated with student demand to the point that the demand becomes unmanageable. The flow of work is not always even: there are times, such as mid-semester and towards the end of semester, when most assignments are due, when the demand for consultations increases dramatically.

We have attempted to set aside certain times for student consultation and other times where we can attend to other professional tasks such as: reading and analysing assignments; preparing for seminars/workshops; following up staff requests; attending relevant committee meetings (eg the CBS Teaching and Learning Committee), working on Divisional issues such as the CBS Strategic Plan; undertaking research; and attending to our own professional development. On the whole, we feel we have been reasonably successful in achieving this balance, except perhaps in the area of research, described below.

### **Obtaining Research Evidence**

In our sphere of work we feel it would be very valuable to gain some research evidence about the effectiveness of our work with students and the sorts of support they find most useful. We find, however, that the ongoing student demand on our time leaves little time and energy to engage in research. Nevertheless, this is an area that needs to be attended to in order to provide evidence of the effectiveness of our program and to explore new and creative ways of assisting student communication skills development.

## **CONCLUSION**

The CBS Communication Skills Centre has, in the three years since its establishment, proved to be a very valuable service for all CBS students, but particularly for international students, who form the majority of our clientele. Since its establishment, a variety of approaches and strategies have been tried, implemented and modified in a continuing effort to better meet the needs of students. The Divisional model we have adopted brings with it all those advantages described above, and other areas of the University are considering establishing a similar service, the only restriction being financial resources. We are fortunate that the demand for its establishment came originally from staff within the Division, so that it is perceived as meeting an identified need. We continue to ensure that staff and students in the Division are informed of the services provided by the Centre and that both groups have the possibility of input through formal and informal channels.

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