



## Academic conversations in cyberspace: A model of dialogic engagement

**Teresa De Fazio**

Research Fellow

Open Universities Australia

In the past three decades, the move towards mass higher education in universities has resulted in an increase in “non-traditional” students (defined as part-time, adult, without a strong academic background). Concurrently, there has been an information and technology revolution which has had a profound impact on approaches to teaching and learning in higher education. This study was located at the intersection of these two forces. It focused on distance non-traditional and traditional students who received online academic learning support (ALS). The research was informed by the understanding that ALS faces new challenges in an online environment. This paper reports on an action research study that investigated experiences of non-traditional and traditional students as they focussed on the development of written discourse competencies and their teachers in an online distance learning course. These students looked to the curriculum and conversations with lecturers to facilitate understanding and their acquisition of the required literacies, however, this was unrealistic given the heavy teaching loads of their lecturers who also had little expertise in this area. By contrast, contextualised academic support interventions provided an effective response. As a result of the research, a model that suggests how ALS might be embedded within the delivery of online programs was produced.

Keywords: non-traditional students; distance e-learning; academic support; dialogue; academic literacies

### Introduction

The move towards mass higher education in Australia has resulted in an increase in the enrolment of non-traditional students. This term encompasses a range of characteristics as outlined in this paper. In addition the information and technology revolution is having a particularly profound effect on education in terms of student profile, teaching delivery and student and teacher expectations. The popular argument is that online delivery provides increased access to learning for students. However, online delivery has implications for what it means to be a student and for teaching practices. This paper outlines an action research study which focussed on the struggle of traditional and, in particular, non-traditional students in attaining a proficiency in academic discourse and the conversations that needed to occur between academic learning support and discipline lecturers to facilitate student progress in a distance online learning situation. A model is proposed for virtual learning environments (VLE) that engage all three participants in a dialogic interaction that aims to enable both effective learning and teaching to take place.

### The literature

Over the last 30 years there has been a marked increase in the number of students who would otherwise not have attended university courses, namely non-traditional students (Armstrong 2002). Generally studies that the non-traditional student may be: first generation university students (first within their family to attend university) (CERI 1999; Bron and Agelli 2000); female; part-time<sup>i</sup> adult<sup>ii</sup> indigenous; of a language background other than English (LBOTE) and who may not necessarily have entered university by traditional entry processes at a later point in life (OECD 1987; McInnis, James et al. 1995; Pargetter, McInnis et al. 1998; Urban, Jones et al. 1999). While other studies indicate that non-traditional students, particularly adult learners, who have not entered university via customary access processes, feel inadequate and unworthy of their place (Collins 2000). Furthermore, a sense of the problematic nature of entering academia the learning experience is gained through the literature on the first year experience (FYE) (McInnis, James et al. 1995; McInnis, James et al. 1995; Krause, Hartley et al. 2005). This literature suggests that a student brings “intellectual capital” from school to a higher education

environment and that previous academic success seems to be an additional variable for success at tertiary level (Long, Carpenter et al. 1995). Without this capital which embodies knowledge, discipline understandings and study skills in themselves, it would seem that students may find academic success problematic.

Academia represents a particular “collective” (De Fazio 2007) with its own language, practices, value system and elements that identify it. Academic disciplines have been described as “tribes” (Becher 1989) characterised by their own discourse sets, paradigms, knowledge bases and practices that he terms “academic territories”. The ability to demonstrate learning through academic discourse is one way students are obliged to prove their participation in the academic “tribe”. If students are new to the higher education context in the first instance, and distance learning in the second, the study experience may turn out to be quite complicated - for the student and the teacher. Distance learning often assumes that students are equipped with an awareness of study processes and their own skills. Yet for students who are entering university for the first time such learning may prove problematic (Clarke 2000).

Online delivery has attracted much interest as it is viewed by some as facilitating more equitable teaching and learning practices by permitting access to courses for all (Gubernick and Eberling 1997). ICT are hailed as facilitating a range of learning and teaching opportunities for distance learning that take it from a didactic study situation to a more dialogic one; one based on discussion with peers and teachers through computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Brown and Duguid 1995).

A number of studies note how the distance learning experience needs to be facilitated. Tinto’s (Tinto 1975) model of student progress has been supplemented by Kember’s Distance Education Study Progress Inventory (DESP) to reflect the particular situation of the adult, part-time, distance learner (Kember 1995). His study using the DESP Inventory indicates three likely elements that may contribute to successful student progress in a distance course. Of interest to this study is the third component “academic integration”. It takes into account approaches students use for learning, specifically student motivation, reading habits, language proficiency and a general evaluation of the course. Kember (1995) proposes that certain students are able to participate successfully. Thus, satisfying academic requirements and demonstrating academic integration.

Educational institutions often look to specific interventions to facilitate “academic integration”. Academic learning support is charged with an interventionist role, that of providing relevant, specific learning strategies to support student attainment of skills and understandings to enter into academic discourse facilitating academic integration. A few researchers recognise the need for such a role to be included in online delivery provisions, however, course materials often gloss over learning support including it briefly in administrative support features of the Web-based delivery (Inglis, Ling et al. 1999) - or do little more than explain technical features and basic usage of Web-based education (Joliffe, Ritter et al. 2001). A review of the literature reveals that academic learning support is often omitted from discussions on the provision of providing quality teaching and learning experiences, particularly regarding e-learning (Lehmann 2004; Palloff and Pratt 2007; Macdonald 2008; Mason and Rennie 2008).

## **Background to the study**

At the time of embarking on the study it seemed that there were no models for embedding ALS in the growing number of online courses in higher education. The study set out to investigate issues that non-traditional and traditional students faced in accommodating academic discourse requirements in a university level VLE and where academic support might be of assistance. This paper reports on findings pertinent to written discourse elements in particular. The study also sought to investigate how a collaborative approach between subject-lecturer, student and ALS might provide an effective way of harnessing conversations in a three-way dialogue that would ameliorate the situation for students.

This study was set in one of the very few such programs set up in the Australasian region to address vocational needs. The course has not been identified to protect participant anonymity, however, it should be noted that participants undertook an Award university level postgraduate online program in the area of health sciences.

## **Methodology**

The study evolved out of a situation where the academic support lecturer was brought in by discipline teaching staff to deal directly with students on learning issues. Content lecturers were concerned that students did not demonstrate a capacity to engage in their learning tasks due to poor academic literacy,

particularly written discourse (evidenced in discussion list postings and assignments). Lecturers felt that due to time pressures and their lack of expertise in the area this work was best facilitated by an ALS lecturer. This study draws on Kember's (1995) work as a useful framework to investigate elements of how students approach writing as part of the academic integration process.

Action research was selected as the most appropriate approach. The study is constituted by two action research cycles drawing on Lewin's cyclic model (1952). In identifying strategies for the amelioration of practices (Stringer 1996; Atweh, Christensen et al. 1998; Grundy 1998; Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998) for all participants, the action research model provides a methodological approach that permits a diverse group "to come together over one 'thematic concern' in order to reflect on and engage in appropriate interventions" (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, p.9). In the context of this study, the thematic concern centres on how the content lecturers and the ALS lecturer could enter into an effective dialogue to improve their respective and collaborative practices to ensure the learning processes are more sensitive to online non-traditional students. The method involved designing appropriate interventions, formalised as a model that would facilitate improved dialogic interactions leading to knowledge sharing.

This study draws on both qualitative and quantitative data to come to understand the research situation and consider the research objectives. Quantitative data were collected via surveys as an approximate of participant views, whilst the qualitative data collected via interviews, open survey questions and transcripts of communication permitted more detailed analysis of participants' viewpoints, situations, events and experiences which made up the culture of the research situation (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998). Students were invited to respond to a precourse survey (as either a new student or a continuing student) and a post course survey at the end of the semester. These were administered during the two research cycles. Teaching staff were invited to respond to a survey during each cycle.

## Results and discussion

The following presents the results of the study together with a discussion of major findings on aspects of student profiling, student educational background and student participation in their studies through written discourse before presenting a model that emerged from the study's findings.

### Profiling the students

For the purposes of this particular study non-traditional students are defined as adult students (at least 25 years old (Krause et. al 2005; Shuetze and Slowey 2000) and as fulfilling at least three of the following criteria to clearly establish the "classification": part-time; distance; LBOTE; with no previous university-level study experience and female. "Traditional" is used in this study to discern those who did not demonstrate three or more of the above characteristics. Table 2 indicates the number of both non-traditional and traditional students who responded to each of the surveys.

**Table 1: Non-traditional and traditional student respondents:  
Frequencies and within group percentages**

		Action research cycle one						Action research cycle two			
		New students		Continuing students		Post-course survey		New students	Post-course survey		
		NT*	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	NT	T	
N		35	3	8	15	80	51	2	42	7	
Study status	Part-time	n	35	3	8	14	80	51	2	42	7
		%	100%	100%	100%	93%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	Full-time	n	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
		%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Gender	Female	n	19	0	4	7	32	21	1	16	22
		%	54%	0%	50%	47%	40%	41%	50%	38%	52%
	Male	n	16	3	4	8	48	30	1	26	20
		%	46%	100%	50%	53%	60%	59%	50%	62%	48%

\* Key: NT= Non-traditional students; T = Traditional students.

Table 1 provides an overview of demographic data on the participants of the study and, as can be seen, most students were part-time and with a generally even representation of male and female students

overall. Further, non-traditional students involved in the two action research cycles were somewhat older, average age of 31-35, than their traditional peers whose average age was 25-30 years.

### Student educational background

Items were included in the surveys to investigate students' previous academic qualifications as educational background was a significant distinguishing feature between both the traditional and the non-traditional student groups (Table 2). Whilst all of the traditional students had a university degree prior to their current studies, none of the non-traditional students had such qualifications, instead completing TAFE-level qualifications.

**Table 2: Profile of students' educational background**

		Action research cycle one						Action research cycle two		
		New students		Continuing students		Post-course survey		New students	Post-course survey	
		NT*	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	NT	T
N		35	3	8	15	80	51	2	42	7
Previous TAFE qualifications	n	24	1	3	6	28	25	2	23	10
	%	69%	33%	37%	40%	35%	49%	100%	55%	14%
Previous matriculation level qualifications	n	8	3	1	15	52	40	1	25	7
	%	23%	100%	12%	100%	65%	80%	50%	60%	100%
No response	n	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	%	9%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Previous university qualifications	n	0	3	0	15	0	51	0	0	7
	%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0	100%	0%	0%	100%

\* Key: NT = Non-traditional students; T = Traditional students

### Participating through academic written discourse

Written discourse competencies, as elements of academic literacies, were a focus for both students and teachers involved in the study. The following presents data on this area, specifically: student self-perceptions of their skills and understandings and conversations arising on this element between students, their mainstream lecturers and ALS.

As part of their portfolios, students were expected to submit different documents representing a range of genre and text types: essays (argumentative, informative, analytical); a case study; project proposal; submission to an association board; discussion list postings (formally assessed and informal); an annotated bibliography and a report. Comments regarding writing competency reflected student self-doubt at the level of argument development skills rather than any technical writing issues from both student cohorts:

I have never been comfortable with writing tasks. Because of this I have to spend a lot more time than is allocated to complete each weeks work requirements ... This is frustrating as I feel I am always falling behind. (C1, T:76 Post-course survey)  
 Assistance needed... Writing skills, and learning to develop ideas rather than just state facts. (C1, NT:91 Post-course survey).

Table 3 presents an overview of student responses to survey items on the aspect of written discourse. The students were required to demonstrate competence in academic writing as evidence of their ability to structure and present a thoughtful argument based on critical analysis of a topic.

As seen in Table 3, there was a difference between non-traditional students and their dislike of writing compared to their traditional peers who disagreed more strongly that they disliked writing, as indicated on the post course surveys in the first and second action research cycles respectively. However, there was no notable difference between the two cohorts on feeling uncomfortable with relying on this skill as the main form of communication during their studies. Academic written discourse skills proved to be something that took time to develop, with students in both cohorts in the post course surveys reporting that they were

**Table 3: Summary of survey items on developing competencies in elements of academic written discourse**

		Action research cycle one						Action research cycle two		
		New students		Continuing students		Post-course survey		New students	Post-course survey	
		NT*	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	NT	T
	N	35	3	8	15	80	51	2	42	7
A. I don't enjoy writing	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.61	2.16	N/I	2.60	1.88
B. I felt uncomfortable relying heavily on writing as the primary way of communicating during my studies	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.49	2.45	N/I	2.45	2.93
C. I found writing for the assignments quite easy in this subject	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.77	2.75	N/I	2.71	2.88
D. I tended to write a lot to help me organise my thoughts for the assignments	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	3.58	3.32	N/I	3.29	3.44
E. I tended not to write out a plan for my written assignments	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.39	2.68	N/I	2.50	2.69
F. I tended not to draft my assignments for this subject	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.04	2.36	N/I	2.43	2.31
G. Assistance need in writing	m	3.23	2.00	3.00	3.00	N/I	N/I	2.50	N/I	N/I
H. This subject improved my writing skills	m	N/I	N/I	4.33	4.50	3.67	3.54	N/I	3.83	3.33
I. No change on writing skills after completing the subject	n	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	5	N/I	N/I	4	1
	%	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	7.5%	N/I	N/I	10%	6%
J. I felt I wrote as I spoke rather than used an appropriate tone for the assignments in this subject	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.70	2.41	N/I	2.64	2.31
K. I did not find the learning guides of value	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.06	2.33	N/I	2.21	2.69
L. I needed help with doing assignments	m	0	0	3.44	2.55	2.72	3.11	0	2.79	2.69
M. I felt I needed assistance with how to use research to support my own ideas	m	N/I	N/I	N/I	N/I	2.94	2.41	0	3.14	2.44

\* Key: NT = Non-traditional students; T = Traditional students; N/I = Item not included on survey. Mean scores range 1-5

uncertain on whether they found the writing easy (mean scores ranging from 2.71 to 2.88 for both cohorts) with no change between the two cycles. Comments provided more detail on student perceptions:

still trying to get grasp of assignments, what is expected and studying again after a lot of years. (C1, NT:16 Post-course survey)

Three items explored student approaches to writing: organising thoughts, planning and drafting and these indicated no distinction between the two groups. Mean scores demonstrated that both groups tended to agree slightly with the self-perception that they wrote a lot to organise their thoughts. Also, they tended to disagree slightly regarding not planning their assignments. Responses demonstrated that students self-assessed their efforts and strategies on these three aspects of written discourse in a similar way. Both cohorts disagreed with the statement regarding not drafting their assignments indicating that they were aware of the importance of this process in crafting their writing.

General writing assistance remained an area of uncertainty as students in both cohorts progressed in their studies. New traditional students, in the first and second cycles respectively, felt writing assistance was not required. However, both cohorts in the continuing student surveys indicated they were unsure of any writing assistance needed through ALS (mean=3.00) and new non-traditional students echoed this uncertainty through such comments:

I have only just started studying again this year after 7 years, ... I was wondering if I could get some feedback from you regarding my annotated bibliography ... I just need to know

that I am on the right track. Be brutal, I'm not fragile and having not done an annotated bibliography before, not in a position to argue. (T: Email to ALS May M7)

Continuing students agreed that their writing skills had improved. The post-course surveys in both cycles indicated that traditional students tended to indicate lower levels of agreement on this item in cycle one and uncertainty in cycle two. Whilst the drop was evident in non-traditional student responses, it was not as dramatic. This might indicate that non-traditional students perceived a greater level of gain, whilst traditional students did not feel their gains were as striking. A percentile breakdown of students responding that they felt there were no changes supported the earlier finding with more traditional students indicating there was no change in their writing skills in the first cycle post-course survey. This response was tempered by the end of the next cycle when the difference between the two cohorts was not so dramatic. In addition, traditional students indicated a stronger level of disagreement with the aspect of difficulties in achieving the appropriate academic register (the term tone was used as it was more familiar to students than register, as demonstrated through working with students) than their non-traditional peers in the post-course surveys. In practice, it was evident that students were not sure about how to support claims made in their written argument often drawing on personal experience and anecdotal evidence gathered through conversations with peers instead of material gained through the literature.

The qualitative data suggested that both groups of students were aware that they needed to enter into academic discourse through the adoption of its writing conventions. However, some students were unsure of how these conventions were reflected in the different genres and specific text-types demanded by the various assignments and by the discourse that typified the field as represented in an academic setting. Discussions with lecturers on these aspects evolved so that lecturers began to understand elements of academic written composition and the difficulties that students might face. The issues of genre, text-type, register and voice were *leitmotifs* throughout dialogic interactions between ALS, content lecturers and students.

Student queries to ALS regarding academic writing issues often spurred a flurry of information sharing opportunities between the mainstream lecturers, ALS and the student(s). Indeed, the interactions became a learning collaboration for the three parties. The issue remained however, of how to disseminate the knowledge gained from the three-way dialogic interactions with other students and staff. Thus, highly customised learning guides attached to brief discussion list postings were devised that reflected general issues and concerns (student and subject-lecturer) as one way to address specific issues in a form that all could access efficiently. The contextualised learning guides proved valid as they provided a detailed explanation of assignment structure, an explication of the text-type, strategies students might adopt in preparing the assignment (based on taking students from a superficial approach to a deep-level one), objectives for the assignment, research directions and critical thinking strategies. The objective for the guides was to provide an extra scaffolding strategy to facilitate learner construction of knowledge about academic discourse. However, as the study evolved, lecturers were inserting more scaffolding strategies and links about critical thinking and writing strategies into their lectures. ALS became more embedded into mainstream delivery also.

Expectations from our teaching experiences were that non-traditional students, rather than traditional students, would have felt they required assistance with the written assignments. The reality proved this assumption invalid. Mean scores (represented in Table 3) on the continuing student survey suggested that non-traditional students' responses varied from those of their traditional peers with non-traditional students tending to indicate agreement and traditional students disagreement. However, on the post-course surveys non-traditional students in cycle one indicated slight disagreement whilst their traditional peers were now more uncertain on this issue. Both indicated slight disagreement in the second cycle. Responses on assistance required in using research to support their own ideas on the post-course surveys tended towards ambivalence for non-traditional students and disagreement for traditional students. In reviewing the assignments, aspects of written discourse that were identified were structuring of assignments according to discourse conventions, clarifying the difference between text-types, unpacking assignment expectations, referencing, unpacking new concepts in readings, the research process and developing an argument. The following comment is indicative of traditional student ALS concerns:

i beleive I have miss interpreted what this involves. I have been asked by [Peter] to resubmit. My question is, Can you in layman's terms tell me what an annotated bibliography is? (C2, T: Tr13M13)

Grammar and punctuation issues did not arise from student work nor from student and teacher queries to warrant any general ALS interventions. Instead language issues were addressed on an individual basis as they arose in the context of a piece of work.

### **Online conversations: Student-teacher-ALS**

Sometimes there was a strategic collaborative communicative approach by teachers providing interventions that responded to learners' concerns. These interventions were based on constructivist principles as the teachers brought together their areas of expertise and questions to respond to learning and teaching issues. Students acknowledged this collaborative dialogic exchange:

I believe that the learning partnership is there ... in my experience it was a partnership between myself, the subject lecturer, the learning support lecturer and the other students. (C1: NT:83 Post-course survey)

The effectiveness of these interventions support a call for "the importance of embedding support for student writing within the mainstream curriculum" (Lea and Stierer 2000, p.2).

One student reflected that the inclusion of ALS in course delivery demonstrated a sense of working with "colleagues" and this instilled student confidence in the value of student-ALS conversations (C1, T:9 Post-course survey). A collaborative approach permitted a convergence of expertise that facilitated intervention design and implementation. As a result, teaching became more collaborative and "seamless" for both ALS and the content lecturer. The lecturers and researcher found that such opportunities allowed us to bring together our various areas of expertise and review issues through the eyes of the learner. Teachers noted the value in such dialogical occasions. It was on these occasions that we felt a triadic approach occurred:

I found the support material provided extremely useful and beneficial for the students and for my own teaching/assessment. Also having access to a learning support person greatly eased the pressures on me as a lecturer with large numbers of students across 4 different subjects. (C2, Teacher survey-5)

For a collaborative dialogue to function, all the teachers needed to be able to understand each others' pedagogical paradigms in respect to written discourse elements. In a sense, we had to scaffold each other, constructing bridges across discipline areas (health sciences and academic learning). For instance, it was important that lecturers made explicit what was meant by: "the student has poor written expression". It was also necessary to understand what the teacher regarded as evidence of low and high level written discourse, and which elements were considered as important in a written assignment for each text-type. The teachers initiated the researcher into their discourse world so as she could understand *why* students had problems in attaining an appropriate academic register, in understanding the difference between acceptable and unacceptable jargon and the difference between text-types as interpreted by that field of the Health profession.

The teachers who did participate in the project expressed a wish to understand strategies for developing their students' academic literacies. They felt they needed to "unpack" the lectures and readings to avoid making assumptions about student learning and knowledge. One lecturer commented on the value of a collaborative approach to working with ALS in his debriefing interview:

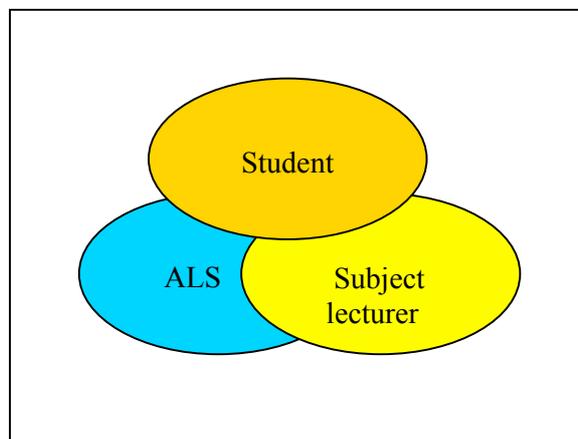
I was teaching (and still do) in a completely a theoretical framework as I don't have any sort of formal education training. The opportunity to reflect on my teaching with a supportive and non judgemental colleague was valuable for me personally. (C2, Peter, Debriefing interview Tr27M2).

Each of us also needed to understand our students, who they were, what made them "traditional" or "non-traditional", their expectations and the implications for our respective and collaborative teaching roles. The student voice was equally important for effective conversations to occur.

### **Implications for the study: An emerging model of engagement**

The model for triadic engagement represented in figure 1 draws upon the triadic interaction between the three participants: the content lecturer, the student and ALS to organise relevant and contextualised interventions to ensure the realisation of the core work of the University – learning and teaching.

The model recognises the notion of conversation as the means by which dialectic engagement evolves. The model adopts a broader view of “dialogue” than that represented generally by the literature as between the student and the content lecturer. The model for triadic engagement that emerged in the study did not rely on sustained dialogue which proved to be impractical in this study. Rather, it permitted moments of dialectic engagement that underscored an integrated and collaborative approach to addressing teaching and learning issues.



**Figure 1: Model of triadic engagement**

The teachers worked towards designing specific transformative interventions, investigating avenues for all students to interact with each other and the teacher. Although these avenues did not necessarily evolve out of the “personalised” nature of the online environment as suggested in the literature (Duggleby 2000), the moments of triadic engagement permitted participants to initiate conversation and begin an iterative dialectic process. The triadic engagement provided the context for a partnership approach between ALS and the content lecturer to respond to students as a powerful space where learners were engaged in critical questioning, discussion and argument. Importantly, triadic engagement did not deny the two-way conversations pivotal to the teaching and learning process: between the student and content lecturer, the student and peers, and the student and ALS.

There was no second guessing of teacher expectations by ALS and students; the content lecturer was able to make these expectations explicit. ALS was enabled to facilitate interventions that developed learners’ cognitive and metacognitive skills to meet these expectations and students were enabled to enter into conversations specific to their learning needs. From a critical perspective, the model recognises and accepts that “transformations of social reality cannot be achieved without engaging the understandings of the social actors involved” (Carr and Kemmis 1986).

Through the model of triadic engagement the researcher was able to address the misperception that ALS was “remedial” work with students (Hicks, Reid et al. 1999). Further, the ALS role that was not deemed peripheral to the main research and teaching activities of the higher education context but an integral support service that provided a context for investigating teaching and learning questions. The findings in this study suggested that ALS was able to facilitate students in maximising their learning opportunities (Hicks, Reid et al. 1999) best when this was part of contextualised conversations.

## Conclusion

The distance mode did fulfill the rhetoric of anytime/anywhere delivery by permitting students access to the course – this opened up opportunities for adult learners to pursue vocationally important studies. However, delivery mode alone was not sufficient to ensure students’ participation in their studies. Both traditional and non-traditional learners sought a strategic response to understanding expectations of them. Reviewing obstacles to successful learning necessarily involves a consideration of the student but also the learning situation. ALS work *per se* involves analysing and developing students’ academic literacies so that they are able to fulfill academic requirements. It is here that the model for triadic engagement proved itself a powerful instrument. Content lecturers and ALS were able to introduce interventions that maximised learning in response to students and with students. The occasions of triadic interaction provided by the model provide a powerful way to address teaching and learning issues specific to online distance learner needs in the area of academic written discourse.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Long, Carpenter and Hayden (1995, p. 6) define full-time students as those who enrol in “75 percent of the nominal full-time study load” while part-time students include those enrolled “in less than 50 percent of the full-time student load”.

<sup>ii</sup> Research tends to accept that adult learners area defined as 25 years of age or older when first accessing higher education (CERI 1999) whilst in the UK the age is 21 or over (Bron 2000).

**Author:** Dr Teresa De Fazio, Open Universities Australia, 131 Queen St., Melbourne 3000. Dr. De Fazio joined Open Universities Australia as a Research Fellow on secondment from Victoria University in 2007. She is responsible for managing a range of research projects in areas of academic support, online learning, pathways, transition and retention. She has published widely in the area of online learning, academic support, languages education and multiculturalism. Email: [teresa.defazio@open.edu.au](mailto:teresa.defazio@open.edu.au)

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